

# **HEY CUTIE, CAN I GET YOUR DIGITS?**

*A Report about Street Harassment by the Rogers  
Park Young Women's Action Team (YWAT)*

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## ***Acknowledgements***

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## **Letter from YWAT Members**

Written by Rogers Park Young Women's Action Team members, Tsering dolkar, Farheen Fatima, Christine Rene, Renee Martin, Suliat Oluwa, Jackquette Smith, Joyce Taylor.

During this summer, Friends of Battered Women and the Rogers Park Youth Net collaborated to sponsor a six-week youth-led research project about street harassment.

The project is known as the Rogers Park Young Women's Action Team. Street harassment has become a serious issue nowadays especially in our Rogers Park area -- that's why we feel we need to address it. In our group, there are eight girls.

The first two weeks we were in training. Friends trained us on how to work in teams, on how to conduct interviews, and on photo-journaling. For the rest of the weeks, we learned about the different types of street harassment and how it affects girls in our community. We specifically focused on street harassment towards girls. We took pictures of the danger zones where street harassment usually happens such as the parks, beach, alleyways, train stops etc...

After the first two weeks of training, we made up interview questions about street harassment and how and why it affects women and girls. We conducted focus groups including girls from Centro Romero, Metropolitan Asian Family Services, Howard Area Community Center, the Rogers Park Youth Net and Family Matters. We also made up a survey and passed it out to girls in the community to see how they felt about street harassment.

The responses that we got were very helpful in doing our research. We want to use all of the materials that we got from our research to help other young girls.

From this whole experience, we learned a lot. We learned to come together and work for a common cause that is affecting all women. The way the media is degrading women is very wrong. In

the music videos and magazines, they personify women as just sex objects. Every Thursday, a young woman from Community TV Network, has been teaching us about video production so that we can direct our own 3 to 5 minute movie promoting our ideas of being girls.

We also learned that stopping street harassment is nearly impossible because there are always going to be some guys disrespecting women and calling them names. But what we can do is to reduce street harassment. As a community we can educate boys and girls about it. We have to make our streets safe for all of the women and girls to walk on without someone trying to "holla" at us.

Peace.

## **ABOUT THIS REPORT**

Over six weeks this summer, we had the pleasure of working with eight bright and committed young women from our community. Friends of Battered Women and Their Children has been committed to eradicating violence against women since 1991. In February 2002, we co-sponsored a forum of students from Sullivan High School along with the Rogers Park Youth Net. We learned a lot about the concerns that the youth in Rogers Park had about their school, families, and community. One issue that was expressed by many of the girls who attended the forum was that men and boys on the streets constantly harassed them. The girls shared stories of being grabbed and catcalled. One girl told her assembled peers that she “literally runs home from school” in order to avoid the harassment.

From that moment on, we at Friends decided that we needed to work with these young women to address the specific issue of street harassment of girls in Rogers Park. We put out the call for interested youth, partnered with the Rogers Park Youth Net and the Young Women’s Action Team (YWAT) was born.

What you are about to read is a result of a lot of hard work, commitment and effort by eight amazing young women. Unfortunately our group shrunk to seven girls halfway through the project because one of our members became very ill. We wish her a speedy recovery and thank her for her contributions.

Three of the authors of this report are heading off to College this fall. We thank them for their contribution and wish them all the best. It has been our great honor and pleasure to work with these amazing young women. Through this experience, we have learned so much more about the effects of violence in girls’ lives, we have learned that patience is indeed a virtue and finally, that our world is in good hands with such incredible young women ready to take on leadership positions.

We hope that you will read these young researchers’ words and learn something about the state of girls’ safety on the streets of Rogers Park. The YWAT also hopes that young women in our community will feel more empowered to take action on the issue of street harassment after reading the thoughts of their peers.

In Solidarity,

*Mariame Kaba, Prevention and Education Manager  
& Mia Wallace, YWAT Coordinator.*

## **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

The Young Women's Action Team (YWAT) found that girls in Rogers Park felt that street harassment was a very serious issue. Girls said that they felt 'afraid' and 'uncomfortable' about walking in front of individual or groups of men on the street. Most of the girls who we interviewed felt that they could not do anything to stop the catcalls and groping. They felt pretty powerless.

## **INTRODUCTION**

For three weeks from late July to mid-August 2003, eight of us interviewed and surveyed girls in Rogers Park about the problem of street harassment in our community. We wanted to hear about other girls' experiences.

We started with the following research question: "*Do other girls in Rogers Park feel that street harassment is a serious problem?*" We also wanted to know: "*How much street harassment actually happens in Rogers Park.*"

To answer our first question, we had focus groups of girls from five community organizations (Centro Romero, Metropolitan Asian Family Services, Rogers Park Youth Net, Howard Area Community Center, and Family Matters).

We talked to a total of 34 girls. They ranged in age from 10 to 18 years old. 35 % were African American; 47 % were Latina; 6 % were Asian; 12 % identified as "other."

To answer our second question, we went out into the street with a survey that we asked other girls in the community to fill out for us. We did not have time to analyze the results of the surveys this summer. *The following report is based only on our focus group interviews.* Friends will analyze the survey results for us later in the fall.

## I.

**We started our interview by asking the girls to define street harassment. One girl said, “To me street harassment means that you are walking down the street minding your own business, someone comes up to you and starts bothering you and you tell them to leave you alone.” Others girls said that street harassment includes:**

- Guys following you around.
- Guys calling you names.
- Violence towards women.
- Racial and sexual comments.
- Disrespecting girls and touching them.
- When guys say stupid stuff.
- When someone touches you.
- When someone stops in his or her car.
- Someone constantly trying to talk to you.

**Our own definition of street harassment based on our experiences includes:**

Verbal and physical violence, name calling, renaming (making it seem as though ‘bitch’ and ‘girl’ are the same thing), “hollering”, touching you without permission, whistling, and putdowns.

## II.

**We wanted to know if the girls thought that street harassment was a serious problem in our community. All of them agreed that it was. One girl said that she felt that it was a serious issue because “many people are affected by it.”**

**Some of the responses that we got from girls show that this is a serious problem:**

“It is a serious issue because girls get hurt over it.”

“One of my friends got punched in the face for not responding to this man who was trying to ‘holla’ at her.”

"Yes it is very serious, because you can't walk down the street without someone bothering you."

**Girls mentioned that they are afraid to walk in their own neighborhood because they never know what's going to happen.**

### **III.**

**We asked girls to tell us what kinds of things happen to them when they are walking down the street. They told us:**

- 1) Boys follow girls.
- 2) Boys stare at girls.
- 3) Boys touch you or grab you.
- 4) Boys call you names.
- 5) Boys make sexual comments about our bodies.
- 6) Boys ask for your number.

### **IV.**

**Girls have been called a lot of names on the streets. Some are meant to be positive and some are negative. Some examples are:**

- Hey beautiful!
- Bitch.
- Ho
- Skinny ass.
- Fat ass.
- Sexy
- Hey Shorty!
- You thick!
- Slut
- Tramp
- Stuck up
- Retarded
- Big Lips
- Stupid

**They also shared examples of some of the lines that they've heard from men and boys on the street:**

- Hey girl, do you smoke or do you drink?
- Boys will touch your hair and say, "is this real?"
- Come kick it with me. We can smoke and drink.

**We've also heard a lot of these same catcalls and comments ourselves. We wanted to add ours to the list:**

- Hey girl come here!
- Hey Mama.
- Hey Ma.
- What's in those jeans?
- What up cutie?

**V.**

**We wanted to know what some of the reasons were for street harassment. Girls gave us many reasons for why they thought that street harassment happens, for example:**

- The way you look.
- The way you dress.
- Some people do it for fun because they have nothing to do except hang out on the corner.
- If you look vulnerable and shy, people sometimes feel that they can take advantage of you.
- Guys are sometimes smoking weed and drinking alcohol on the corner and they start harassing you.
- Maybe because of the girls' racial background.
- Because they are dumb or mentally ill.

**VI.**

**We asked the question "*Do you think it's in men's nature to do this to women.*" One girl summarized some of what we heard when she told us: "I don't know, I think boys are going to be boys. Some boys act that way and there is nothing we can do about it." Some girls mentioned**

that “men should have respect for women” and that “men should be able to control their thoughts.”

But most of the girls said that it is not in men’s nature but that they learn it from their elders and the environment they grew up in. They said it depends on how they were raised and what type of people they hang out with. Girls added that peer pressure also plays a part in making boys harass girls. They felt that sometimes boys were just trying to ‘front.’

## VII.

Some girls believed that what girls wear influences what men say to them on the street: “Yes, the way you dress encourages guys to make comments.”

One girl told us “if a girl is wearing really short shorts or tight shirts, she should know that a guy might disrespect her, especially in our neighborhood.”

Another girl said: “I feel like if I wear a tube top or something and I walk down Howard, I better be prepared to get hollered at because that’s how they be on the street anyway.”

One girl from the Rogers Park Youth Net shared: “Sometimes in the summer I like to wear tube tops because it’s hot but I think that some guys think: ‘Oh I guess she’s easy’.”

Finally a girl added, “sometimes it’s the girls’ fault for what they are wearing, if they wear revealing clothes they are just asking for attention.”

Some girls agreed but wished that things could be different. One girl expressed this best when she said: “We should be able to wear anything we want but we can’t because someone is going to try to take advantage of us.”

Other girls felt that what they wore shouldn’t affect what men said to them on the street:

"What I wear should be no one else's problem but mine. If my Mama says I can wear it, then that's it."

"Boys have no right to comment on our dress because girls should have the freedom to dress like they want to."

**A few girls mentioned that it didn't really matter what girls wore because "they would still get 'hollered at'."**

### **VIII.**

**We asked girls how it made them feel to be harassed on the street. Most of them said that it made them "angry, mad, and scared." One girl told us that she wonders, "Why boys do that?" She felt confused about it.**

**Some girls said that they didn't get angry. They felt that it "happens too much to get annoyed."**

**We asked if they sometimes liked being "hollered at" on the street. Specifically we asked: "*Do you like it when someone tries to talk to you or 'holla' at you on the street? Why or why not?*" Almost all of the girls responded that they did not.**

**Many expressed "anger, fear and anxiety." For example, one girl said: "I am afraid of them but I know I shouldn't be afraid of them."**

**Overall, girls said that they often feel 'uncomfortable', 'nervous', and 'scared' walking in front a group of men on the street.**

### **IX.**

**We asked the question: "*Have you ever tried to talk back when someone catcalled at you?*" Many girls told us they did "not say something back" to the men who catcalled and groped them. They said that it was better to "just ignore them" because "they might be dangerous." One 11 year-old girl that we interviewed said: "men get really mad when you do that." Another girl told us: "I want to respond to catcalls but I am afraid I might get hurt." We were really sad when one girl told us "I tried but I**

didn't have enough courage." We thought that this showed how powerless girls feel about what's happening to them on the streets.

Many girls told us that they felt it "makes no difference" if you try to speak up because the men and boys won't stop making comments no matter what you do.

Some girls said that they did try to say something back to the harassers. For example, one girl said that she's told boys: "you're stupid, mind your own business." Another girl told us that she responds to catcalls by saying: "I'm not a dog, don't whistle at me."

Overall though, most girls just tried to "ignore" the comments and the touching. One girl told us that she just "doesn't take it seriously." Some girls told us that the best policy was to "just walk away." Another girl said that instead of talking back and risk getting hurt, "I treat them as strangers and don't talk to them." Finally, one girl summed it up by saying: "I am not scared, I just don't respond."

We also asked the question: *"When someone tries to talk to you on the street and you say no, how far do they try to take it?"* One girl responded: "If you ignore them or say no they get mad and start saying things like, 'You ain't all that anyway,' and call you names." A girl from Centro Romero responded, "They call you the 'b' word." A girl from Metropolitan Asian Family Services said that the men "would continue and try to follow us." One girl from Rogers Park Youth Net agreed and told us that they will follow you "until they know where you live, then they'll leave you alone because they'll come back the next day." She told us a story about coming out of her apartment to find the boy who had been harassing her the previous day on her doorstep. She turned right back around, went into her house, and called the police.

We also asked the girls this question: *"What strategies/ways have you come up with to escape catcalls and touching?"* Girls gave a lot of different answers:

- I run home from school.
- I keep walking as fast as I can.
- I ignore them.
- I walk with someone.

**A couple of girls say that they carry pocketknives and pepper spray for protection and to feel safer on the streets. One girl said: “Unless we gonna have police follow us everywhere we go, boys are going to be rude. We need to carry some mace and maybe a pocket knife, but then we would be in the wrong.”**

**X.**

**Girls said that they were most likely to experience street harassment in the following places:**

**Alleys, Parks (Touhy, Warren, Pottawanamie, Gale), Bus stops, El stops, In front of stores.**

**Clark Street, Devon Street, Howard Street, Morse Street, Jarvis, Mason on the West side, Bosworth, Bell, Jonquil, Marshfield, Ashland, basically all around Rogers Park.**

**One girl summed it up when she said “if you’re a girl, you’re basically harassed everywhere you go.**

**In the back of this report, we have included a map of Rogers Park and our pictures of some of the places in our neighborhood where girls are harassed.**

**XI.**

**We wanted to know if girls would ever date a man who “hollered at” them on the street. Many girls said that they wouldn’t date him because they don’t know what kind of person he is.**

**Other responses that we collected were:**

*“No, I don’t know them.”*

*“No, you never know what kind of person he is. It would be stupid to talk to them.”*

*“No, I wouldn’t date someone that I just met on the street.”*

**However a few girls said that they would consider dating someone who “hollered” at them on the street:**

“I would want to make sure that they are not just hollering at everyone, it depends on the way they approach me.”

“I would try to get to know them after a while. I’d consider it but after a while.”

**Overall, most girls said that they would not date someone who “hollered at them” on the street. Some girls did say that they would if the boy was “cute and looked nice” and “approached [them] the right way.” However even those girls said that they would try to get to know the boy a little more before going out on a date.**

## **XII.**

**Overall, most girls felt that there was nothing they could do to stop street harassment. One girl said it best when she told us, “Just like racism, you can’t end it.” We kept asking for their solutions to the problem though and some girls did offer their ideas:**

- Walk in a group so that you can fight back.
- Walk in a group so that you can feel safe.
- Dress properly.
- Wear the hijab.
- Neighborhood watch, more police.
- Pepper spray men and run fast.
- Boycott and Demonstrate against street harassment.
- More fines for harassers.
- Stop wearing tight clothes.

**One girl tried to offer this piece of hope: “Maybe once they have a daughter maybe then they’ll change.” Unfortunately her friend quickly reminded her, “You know up on Clark there’s a lot of men with their children and they still tryin’ to holler at a girl.”**

Overall, most of the girls that we talked to felt like they couldn't do anything about this problem. They feel very powerless. The girls that we talked to seem to feel like street harassment will never end. They feel like they just have to "accept it" or "deal with it."

XIII.

Our feelings, as the YWAT, are that street harassment can never be completely stopped because the problem is so big. There are always going to be guys that are disrespectful towards women and harass them. But we can reduce this problem by being more aware, condemning it and educating boys and girls about street harassment. We also found that there are lots of young women who feel that this is a serious issue. Most women and girls are tired of being harassed.

## **OUR RECOMMENDATIONS.**

We believe that the following solutions should be implemented.

- 1) More street lights so we would see better and feel safer while walking in the evenings (especially on Howard and Morse).
- 2) More trained police on watch.
- 3) Have more jobs and after school programs for teenagers like Youth Net, so boys wouldn't be hanging out on the streets.
- 4) Have weekly neighborhood meetings to improve and make our community safer.
- 5) Educate teenagers about respecting girls, and how street harassment affects girls and that it is wrong.
- 6) Let girls know where they can go to get help if something like this happens to them.