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SEARCH

## Survey sheds light on CTA harassment

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After leaving campus one night, a man started bothering senior Martha Malonda while she was waiting for the Red Line.

"He followed me and was saying bad things to me," she said. So she ran to the CTA employee at the turnstile who called for backup, but the offender ran away before anyone got there.

Fifty percent of CTA riders have been sexually harassed in transit, according to a survey done by the Young Women's Action Team, a group of teens and young women in Rogers Park who started researching and combating street harassment in 2003.



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A female rides the CTA red line. According to a survey conducted by the Young Women's Action Team, 50 percent of CTA riders have been sexually harassed in transit.

The YWAT study cannot profile the "average" victim of sexual harassment.

"There is no discrimination when it comes to getting harassed," said Daphnee Rene, a member of YWAT. "People expect that if you're in a certain part of the neighborhood, it increases your chances of being harassed. But what we found out is that everybody gets harassed."

In September 2008, YWAT began researching sexual harassment and sexual assault on the CTA because members said they were personally affected.

"A couple of our girls came in and were complaining about being harassed on the CTA," Ronnett Lockett, member of YWAT, said via e-mail. "We were looking for another research project to get into and we chose that one. All of our projects stem from a problem that goes on within our communities with our girls personally."

YWAT surveyed 639 CTA riders regarding whether they had been sexually harassed or assaulted on public transit. Fifty percent of respondents reported that they had experienced sexual harassment on the CTA, and 13 percent reported that they had been sexually assaulted. The survey showed that men and women of varying ages and ethnicities were victimized.

Out of the survey respondents who reported sexual harassment or sexual assault, 91 percent did not make a complaint to the CTA or Chicago Police Department. YWAT believes that riders are uninformed on how to react when they are victimized. Senior Marian Hernandez said if she was sexually harassed, she would "fight him, I guess."

It's hard to get away because "the CTA is a confined space," Rene said, "and if you want to get where you are going, you have to stay on."

Based on the survey, YWAT gave a number of suggestions to the CTA to improve safety. Among other ideas, the group recommended creating a hotline where riders can report incidents of sexual harassment or assault, developing a protocol for employees on how to respond to these crimes and increasing the number of emergency intercom systems.

The group compiled their results and suggestions into a report, and then met with Amey Kovalan, the CTA's vice president of Safety and Security. Kovalan had two meetings with the group, and helped them prepare to present their findings at a Chicago Transit Board meeting in July.

"She was very helpful in making sure our voices were heard at the board meeting," Lockett said of Kovalan.

The CTA has made policy changes in response to YWAT's suggestions.

"Much of the discussion addressed ways in which the CTA can increase awareness of sexual harassment and assaults," said an e-mail from CTA Media Relations.

As a result, the security tips brochure was revised "to stress the importance of reporting assaults and harassment" and the CTA plans to "launch a visual campaign — using available advertising space on buses and trains — that will address harassment on the system," according to Media Relations.

Although there will not be a hotline or system announcements that YWAT suggested, the protocol for how CTA employees respond to sexual harassment or sexual assault did change based on YWAT's recommendation.

Previously, employees were instructed to keep an eye on the situation or tell the offender to move and call the control center if they needed immediate help. Now the policy is to tell the offender to stop and to call the control center if the harassment continues.

If a rider is sexually harassed or assaulted on the CTA, he or she should tell the bus driver or train conductor or call CPD.

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