

## Sexual Harassment on Public Transport in England: Prevalence, Experiences and Barriers to Reporting.

Lorna Fielding<sup>1</sup>, Dr Calli Tzani<sup>2</sup>, Dr Maria Ioannou<sup>3</sup> & Dr Vasiliki Artinopoulou<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1,2,3</sup>School of Human and Health Sciences

Department of Psychology

University of Huddersfield

Queensgate

Huddersfield

UK HD1 3DH

<sup>4</sup> School of Social Sciences, Sociology Department,

Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences

136 Syngrou Avenue, 17671 Athens, Greece

### Emails:

L.Fielding: [macfielding4@gmail.com](mailto:macfielding4@gmail.com)

\*Corresponding author: [Kalliopi.Tzani-Pepelasis@hud.ac.uk](mailto:Kalliopi.Tzani-Pepelasis@hud.ac.uk)

[M.ioannou@hud.ac.uk](mailto:M.ioannou@hud.ac.uk)

[vasiliki.artinopoulou@panteion.gr](mailto:vasiliki.artinopoulou@panteion.gr)

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At the time of writing **Lorna Fielding** was a Graduate of the MSc in Investigative Psychology, **Dr Calli Tzani-Pepelasi** was a lecturer for the MSc Investigative Psychology at Huddersfield University, **Dr Maria Ioannou** was a full Professor in Forensic Psychology, all at the University of Huddersfield, **Dr Vasiliki Artinopoulou** was full Professor of Criminology and Head of the Sociology Department at Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences, Athens, Greece.

**Introduction**

Sexual harassment can have detrimental effects on individuals' lives, such as mental health problems, post-traumatic stress disorder, low self-worth and feelings of anxiety. In spite of the high rates, the creation of a universal definition of sexual harassment has not been straightforward, while what constitutes sexual harassment differs broadly across society and cultures (Gardner, Cui & Coiacetto, 2017). Sexually unwanted behaviours can vary in severity and are further distinguished between verbal harassment (i.e., inappropriate and offensive sexual comments or whistling), non-verbal cues (i.e., staring or leering sexually) and physical behaviours, (i.e., ranging from groping, touching to assault/rape). Types of behaviours witnessed or perceived to contribute to sexual harassment are reliant upon everyone's relative awareness of sexual harassment and knowledge of their associated legal standing surrounding sexual harassment.

***Prevalence of Sexual Harassment on Public Transport***

The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2014) interviewed 42,000 women across the EU and found that an estimated 83-102 million women had experienced one or more incidences of sexual harassment since the age of 15. Regardless, not all public transport agencies release specific information of incidents of sexual harassment or in a format that is standardised across agencies. For example, in the UK, bus operators do not have a dedicated transport police service, while outside of London it's not mandatory for bus operators to report incidents.

YouGov (2012) revealed that 43% of young women in London had experienced public sexual harassment in the past. It is estimated that prevalence rates range from 15% to 95%. On the Paris Metro, a survey of 150 women revealed that 94% of women had experienced some form of harassment, while in New York City it was found that 63% of respondents experienced sexual harassment and 10% had been sexually assaulted on the

subway. In Japan, estimates suggest that between 28% and 70% of women have experienced unwanted sexual behaviour on the rail networks. In India, there is evidence that there are high rates of what is known as ‘eve-teasing’, which typically refers to unwanted sexual remarks or advances by a man to a female in a public place. Likewise, in Delhi 50% of respondents had experienced harassment, while using public transport and 42% had experienced unwanted sexual behaviour when waiting for public transport.

Specifically, young women aged 16- 24 are more likely to be targets. However, men are at higher risk of being a victim of other crimes while travelling on public transport, with increasing rates. Nonetheless, consequences are similar for both genders, although, men are more likely to experience PTSD, depression, shame and self-blame.

### ***Experiences, Situations and Consequences***

Many respondents to surveys report higher experiences of non-physical sexual harassment such as catcalls or whistling. Previous studies found that the most frequent sexual harassment experiences include staring, inappropriate touching and verbal comments, which typically took place between the hours of 5-11pm on the bus, in comparison to other means of public transportation. There is evidence to suggest that sexual harassment most commonly occurs on crowded public transport, during commuting times. This high-density environment provides an opportunity for perpetrators to act away from witnesses and without consequence. Moreover, due to past experiences and consequences, some victims may adapt their behaviour to avoid future victimisation (Gekoski, et al., 2015).

### ***Barriers to Reporting Sexual Harassment***

Research has consistently shown that despite the prevalence rates of sexual harassment increasing, few people report incidents (Ball & Wesson, 2017). However, there is emerging evidence that underreporting of incidences of unwanted sexual behaviour occurring on public transport, is often related to the variation in perceptions of whether

victims have indeed experienced such incidents as harassment, therefore, normalising the behaviour and chose to consciously decide not to report the incidents.

Ball and Wesson (2017) indicated that from the bystander's point of view, blame was directed to the perpetrator and that incident severity was linked to the likelihood of reporting an incident, which was also influenced by passenger density within that transport setting. Often victims and bystanders fail to inform authorities of such incidents as they feel embarrassed, or consider the incident was 'too trivial'.

Some victims and bystanders are also accustomed to daily incidents of sexual harassment. Moreover, frequently, males interpret sexual harassment differently to women. Therefore, it is anticipated that amongst the implications for ignoring or normalising unwanted sexual behaviour, is the under-reporting of such crimes. Often, although such behaviours are taken lightly, still fear of being followed by a stranger, touched, groped or have their pictures taken without consent remains prevalent (Ball & Wesson, 2017).

### ***Present Study***

From the review of the literature, the prevalence of sexual harassment within the context of public transport remains largely unexamined in the UK. The purpose of this study was to explore the prevalence rates, clarify the context in which it occurs and investigate why so few victims report their experiences.

### **Method**

In this online survey 145 (n = 145, 110 females, 32 males, 1 transgendered, 1 other) participants took part, who were recruited via social media (age 16 – 50). Most of the participants were Caucasian (84.1%), followed by Asian/ Asian British (10.3%). Of the total sample, the majority described themselves as heterosexual (92.4%), followed by bisexual (4.1%), undecided/questioning (2.1%) and homosexual (1.4%). Most participants were born in the UK (73.1%) and lived in the UK (89%). Finally, participants were asked what played a

role into not reporting the incident, while the final part of the questionnaire asked respondents whether they had ever witnessed unwanted sexual behaviours.

## **Results**

### ***Prevalence of Sexual Harassment and Gender Based Differences***

Of the total sample ( $n = 145$ ), 43 female participants (29.7%) reported that they had experienced sexual harassment while travelling on, waiting for or heading to or from public transport at some point within their lifetime. Moreover, 31% of the sample reported experiencing at least one recent incident of sexual harassment on public transport, during their lifetime, out of which 1.4% was a male victim. The most frequent sexually harassing behaviours experienced by participants were non-verbal sex cues (51.8%) and verbal harassment (44.6%). Sexual assault (4.2%) was experienced the least amongst the sub-sample ( $n = 45$ ). On average, participants who had experienced sexually harassing behaviours, were aged 25 years old ( $M = 25.39$ ,  $SD = 7.90$ ) at the time of the last incident. The minimum age for experiencing sexually unwanted behaviour was 8 years old, whilst the maximum age was 49. Comparatively, participants who witnessed sexual harassment reported that the most common sexual harassing behaviours were verbal harassment (51.7%) and non-verbal sex cues (46.2%). Witnessing sexual assault came the second lowest (6.3%) to witnessing someone taking or sharing sexual pictures or videos (4.9%).

### ***Conditions, Experiences and Consequences of Sexual Harassment***

The majority of participants were found to use public transport less often than once a month (27.6%), with the next highest percentage using public transport once a month (17.9%). This contrasted with more frequent users at more than five days a week (13.1%), while 3.4 % said they never used public transport. Many of the respondents (20%) reported that their last victimisation experience occurred over ten years ago (completion of the survey took place in May 2018), followed by 10% of the respondents who experienced unwanted

sexual harassment within the last three months. In many cases where the gender of the perpetrator was reported, the perpetrator was a male (43.4%) and unknown (54.5%) to the victim. Respondents commonly reported incidences of sexual harassment occurring in cities, with London (16.6%) being a prevalent geographical location, followed by Bristol (9%) and Cardiff (2.1%). Prevalent appeared the sexual harassment incidents that had been experienced or witnessed whilst travelling on the bus (23.4%) during the afternoon hours (12pm and 5pm,  $n = 14$ ). Similarly, respondents who had witnessed unwanted behaviour were on the bus over the course of one day ( $n = 24$ ). On the other hand, witnesses travelling on the train had the highest frequency of witnessing such incidents ( $n = 13$ ) during the evening hours (5pm-11pm). For the participants that travelled by train and experienced sexually unwanted behaviour (s), this mostly occurred in the evening (5pm-11pm,  $n = 12$ ). Overall, higher frequencies of harassment occurred during the busier hours i.e. morning, afternoon and evening as opposed to the time periods 11pm-2am and 2am-7am.

At the time of the last experience of victimisation, respondents were asked to indicate what action they took during the incidence, most respondents (42.8%) chose to ignore the behaviour whereas 28.3% chose to move elsewhere, few respondents (4.1%) confronted the behaviour, and even less (3.4%) of respondents said that a bystander intervened. With regard to the impact of experiencing sexually unwanted behaviour, the victimisation left many respondents feeling uncomfortable (43.4%), followed by fear (24.1%), feeling angry (20%), embarrassed (17.2%), shocked (16.6%), humiliated (12.45%) and traumatised (11%). Very few respondents reported that the incident did not affect them (5.5%). Only 0.7% of participants who had witnessed sexual harassment while travelling on, to or from public transport reported the incident. From the bystanders, who witnessed victimisation, 35.2% did not do anything after the incident. Whereas, 11.4% of bystanders chose not to report incidences because they felt that it was none of their business and didn't want to get involved.

Finally, many bystanders left the decision to report the incident to the person being harassed (10.8%) (see Table 1 and 2 below).

Table 1. *Prevalence of sexual harassment whilst travelling on, waiting for or heading to and from public transport by victim, bystander.*

		Frequency (%) Victim (n = 145)					Frequency (%) Witness (n = 145)				
		Never	Once	Occasionally	Regularly	Don't Know	Never	Once	Occasionally	Regularly	Don't Know
1	Unwanted physical contact (patting, cornering, touching, kissing)	73.8	11	13.1	0.7	0	66.2	6.9	7.6	1.4	0.7
2	Non-verbal sex cues (i.e. staring or leering in a sexual way)	46.6	8.3	35.2	8.3	0.7	36.6	7.6	32.4	6.2	0.7
3	Verbal harassment (i.e. whistling, honking, making kissing noises, making sexual comments, using sexist slurs, talking about body parts inappropriately or offensively)	51	9	30.1	5.5	0.7	34.5	6.9	34.5	10.3	0.7
4	Someone physically following or stalking you without your permission	79.3	9	8.3	2.1	0	73.8	4.1	4.1	1.4	0.7
5	Someone groping or touching you in an unwelcome, sexual way	80.7	11.7	4.1	0.7	0.7	72.4	5.5	5.5	0.7	0.7
6	Someone purposely rubbing/brushing up you in an unwelcome way	72.4	15.2	9	2.1	0.7	68.3	5.5	8.3	2.1	0.7
7	Public exposure or flashing	82.8	13.8	1.4	1.4	0	71	7.6	4.1	1.4	0.7
8	Public masturbation	89.7	6.9	0.7	1.4	0	78.6	6.9	0.7	0.7	0.7
9	Someone taking and/or sharing sexual pictures or videos of you without your permission	91	2.8	1.4	0.7	0	80.7	2.1	2.1	0.7	0.7
10	Sexual assault	95.9	2.8	0.7	0.7	0	82.1	3.5	2.1	0.7	0.7

Table 2. *Prevalence of sexual harassment on different modes of transportation – “Whole Journey Approach”.*

	On Public Transport	Travelling to / from Public Transport	Waiting for public transport
Bus	23.4	15.9	18.6
Train	9.7	7.6	2.1
Tube	9.0	1.4	2.8
Tram	0.7	0.7	1.4
Taxi	0	0.7	0.7
Other	2	0	0
N/A*	55.2	73.7	74.4

\*N/A = Never occurred or not applicable, participant can't remember or missing value.

## Discussion

This study took into account the limited research on the issue of public transport sexual harassment and examined prevalence rates and other important related aspects in the UK. The present report is predominantly descriptive. The aim of the current research was to explore current prevalence rates of sexual harassment occurring while travelling on, to and from public transport in the UK. Secondly, the study examined the experiences and conditions in which sexually harassing behaviour occurs and finally explored the potential barriers to women reporting unwanted sexual behaviour to the authorities. First, regarding overall prevalence rates in sexual harassment on public transport, the study found that approximately a third (29.7%) of participants reported they had experienced sexual harassment while travelling on, waiting for or heading to or from public transport. However, when respondents were asked to provide further detail about the behaviours involved, a small number of males (1.4%) revealed that during their lifetime they had encountered at least one incident of sexually harassing behaviour.

From the participants who experienced sexually harassing behaviours, the mean age was 25 years old. This finding on age demographics also accords with earlier observations, which showed that younger women tend to experience higher frequencies of sexual



harassment. The most common harassing behaviours were reported to be non-verbal sex cues and verbal harassment with most incidents not being reported, akin to the findings of Ball and Wesson (2017) who looked at the severity of behaviours that impact reporting. The prevalence of verbal sexual harassment could support the normalisation of such behaviours and this could lead to under-reporting of crimes.

In most cases, the offender was male and unknown to the victim. London appears as the most prevalent geographical location for sexual harassment in public transportation. Moreover, previous research has suggested that rail-based public transport is primarily thought to encompass higher levels of crime. One explanation for this is due to the lack of surveillance from the presence of the driver, as is the case with buses (Gardner, et al., 2017). However, this study has been unable to demonstrate that prevalence of sexual harassment is higher on rail networks. Instead, findings from this study found rates of unwanted sexual behaviour to be higher on buses.

However, in comparison with previous studies (5pm-11pm timeframe), for this study, the data pointed to afternoon 12pm-5pm. This result was surprising, given that previous studies have found commuting hours to have a higher prevalence of sexual harassment. Having knowledge of harassment on all modes of transport, rather than focussing on one mode, which previous researchers have tended to do, raises significant implications for transport providers and the police. For example, gaining insight into the types of transport and typically when harassment is likely to occur on, allows providers of transport services and the police to base safety and security plans as well as developing campaigns warning vulnerable individuals to be vigilant. It should be noted that only a small fraction of the sample confronted unwanted behaviour and it was observed that even less claimed that bystanders intervened. In this study, most people either chose to ignore the unwelcome behaviour or move elsewhere to avoid it due to fear of involvement.

Consequences from experiencing sexually unwanted behaviour were summarised as principally feelings of being uncomfortable, scared, angry, embarrassment, shock and humiliation. Still, it shows the severity of this problematic behaviour, considering the majority of recorded sexual harassment instances were over 10 years ago. In addition, investigating the ‘whole journey approach’ indicated the problem of sexual harassment in the context of public transport, is not solely centred within the environment of the mode of transport itself but the journey to and from the public transport mean.

This study confirms that sexual harassment on and around public transport is a vastly underreported. The most commonly cited reason for not reporting experiences by victims was viewing the incident as not being serious enough (25.5%) and that they didn’t think it was that important (22.1%). Whereas, bystanders to incidences of sexual harassment, chose not to report incidences because they felt that it was none of their business and didn’t want to get involved (11.4%), many bystanders made the decisions to leave reporting up to the person being harassed (10.8%).

### **Conclusion**

When interpreting the results of this study it is important to consider that this was a relatively small representative sample, thus presenting difficulties in terms of generalisability. Future research on the area of Sexual Harassment should also include samples from the transgender and non-binary groups, in order to compare sexual harassment rates. By recording the barriers to reporting for individuals an understanding can be developed as to what mechanisms can be implemented to prevent, reduce or eliminate sexual harassment events in the future. Owing to the serious nature of the offences, it can be considered a highly valuable exercise to raise the level of awareness of sexual harassment behaviours, so they are increasingly likely to be challenged. By conveying sexual harassment as a shared problem this could increase the likelihood of reporting / intervening amongst society. There have been

numerous efforts to raise awareness of sexual harassment on public transport, encouraging victims to report crimes to the authorities. Victims should be further encouraged and motivated to report their experiences, while governments and public transport organisations should advertise this right.

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