



Experiences of women and girls on transport

March 2022

Introduction and next steps

Transport for the West Midlands (TfWM) has been selected as a Transport Champion in the 'Tackling violence against women and girls' strategy. This report details some findings from Transport Focus regarding the experiences of women and girls using transport to provide insights of user experiences for TfWM.

The TfWM briefing in November 2021 outlines that there is 'limited data with regards to violence on transport systems and how it affects women's welfare and mobility decisions'.¹ In order to provide some contextual information about different experiences Transport Focus conducted a survey using our Transport User Panel. Invitations were also extended to those outside the panel through social media, the Transport Focus website and by encouraging participants to forward invitations to other women.

"Being safe means being able to go about without hinderance or harassment on a day to day basis. To be treated civilly and to treat others civilly. Not to feel intimidated or threatened by the behaviour of other people." 65-74, North East

"Safe means feeling confident that my journey will be free of harassment or abuse or potential violence. Usually I feel safe because most people behave themselves. Less alcohol on trains, and possibly more employees, makes me feel safe." 35-44, South West

This is a quick preliminary piece of work but we have identified several themes and possibilities for future activities. This includes:

- an omnibus study among the general population to understand the incidence of negative experiences on transport
- further investigation into open survey responses to understand experiences in relation to personal transport and active travel
- case studies of experiences of women and girls.

¹ This briefing can be found on the Transport Focus website.

Summary of key findings

Transport Focus has undertaken research among women about their experiences using transport in relation to safety. This was a nationwide survey which we did for Transport for the West Midlands. In total 1282 women responded to the survey which was publicised using Transport Focus communication channels and sent to our Transport User Panel.

Some of our participants expressed that feeling safe (in terms of personal security when travelling) was about freedom and feeling at ease. However the behaviour of other people on transport meant that this was not always something that could be enjoyed.

Most participants said they felt 'very' or 'reasonably' safe across different modes of transport (other than cycling). Those who felt 'very' safe ranged from 15 to 30 per cent. This is in comparison to 59 per cent of people saying they felt 'very' safe using a car.

We found 85 per cent thought about their safety when planning or making a journey. The types of mitigations that were taken included travelling at particular times of day, using specific routes, avoiding certain types of transport or travelling with others.

Negative experiences when travelling had stayed with some participants for decades, but many also talked about more recent experiences. Incidents described included sexual assaults, intimidating/predatory encounters, being physically assaulted or threatened and feeling unsafe due to antisocial behaviour (which included fighting, verbal abuse and vandalism).

Good lighting, visible staff who could be relied on to help and dependable transport could all contribute to a feeling of safety on public transport. Being able to have personal space that is respected and in your control is of utmost importance. However, many women who took part in the survey were keen to emphasise that the behaviour of others was the issue at hand and that was what needed to change.

Feeling 'safe' when travelling

In the research we focused on whether our participants personally felt 'safe' when using transport. We also asked what being 'safe' when travelling meant.

Basic text analysis reveals that the factors mentioned by a significant number of people include 'staff' (or 'guards'), 'light' and 'police'. However there are many elements to feeling safe that were mentioned, including travelling with a companion. Covid was a safety issue for some participants with mask wearing, ventilation, crowding and the behaviour of others all causes for potential concern. The following table describes the types of responses our participants gave which were mainly in relation to public transport².

² There were separate questions relating to active and personal travel which will be explored in more detail and reported on separately.

Feeling safe is feeling free to travel without worry	This could be not having to be 'on guard', 'looking over my shoulder' or thinking about who is behind you, where to sit or who is getting on the carriage. Being able to fully relax and enjoy the journey and not thinking three steps ahead. Being able to listen to music, wearing footwear of choice and sitting where convenient rather than where has the easiest escape route.
Safety is about being confident that your journey will be free of abuse/harassment or assault	Respondents talked about 'being left alone' and having their personal space respected. Having an 'uneventful' journey.
Being safe is about appropriate behaviour from other people	Expressed as a sense that women should be able to travel without fear from others rather than measures to make them feel 'safe'.
Having clear rules/standards about acceptable behaviour	Prohibiting alcohol consumption or not permitting people to use transport when drunk. Announcements about what constitutes acceptable behaviour, clear rules/policies/codes of conduct.
Availability and visibility of staff could contribute to a feeling of safety	Being able to rely on staff to both reduce the chance of something happening but also to be able to intervene. It is key to know where they are available and feel confident that someone could help/take charge/be summoned if needed. This could be announcements, notices, walking through trains/being on platforms/stations. Bus drivers were mentioned as having the potential to be reassuring.
CCTV could aide a feeling of safety	However, CCTV on its own may not be sufficient – would need to know someone was 'watching'.
Environment could contribute to a feeling of personal safety – particularly light levels	This could be street lighting, lighting at stations and bus stops. The key factor is being able to see those around you.
Space was an important factor with several different dimensions	Overcrowding had personal safety implications – being too close to others and not being able to easily move away or have control of your space. Having a quiet and calm area to be in was important for some people although to others this was also problematic.
Journeys that were familiar or that had no unexpected issues were more safe	Having a reliable, plannable journey with no unexpected or unexplained waits could reduce risk of feeling unsafe. For example not having to wait two hours for a bus with no-one around at night.

Safety could also be related to particular types of access needs	There were particular issues with safety for some respondents in terms of infrastructure. For example, those with access needs in relation to physical barriers mentioned having a clear labelling of their space (to reduce conflicts) and knowledge that ramps were available.
Quality of infrastructure, rolling stock and signage could help a feeling of physical safety	This could be cycle lanes, safe and clean trains or trams, signs and lanes on roads and so on.

“Knowing what to do and who to contact if I feel uneasy. Trains [sic] often say ‘speak to a member of staff’ - how? Where are they?” 25-34 South West

“Safe means feeling at ease, comfortable, not needing to keep an eye on what’s going on around me.” 55-64, Yorkshire

“Being able to travel with the same confidence as men i.e. being able to wear headphones, shoes that I want not just shoes I can run in, not having to check for the nearest safe person or safe space wherever I am, not having to change my route to avoid poorly lit areas.” 45-54, East Midlands

“That my personal space is not threatened. Very difficult to say what contributes to feeling safe as there will always be those whose behaviour creates anxiety for travellers. Currently even being on transport where people are unaware of giving you space because of Covid can be unnerving.” 65-74 Yorkshire

“No threat of harm from others. Alcohol free environment. No swearing or loud voices. Enough space to move away from such behaviour. Well lit areas. Ready access to help e.g. driver, alarms.” 55-64 Scotland

Our research participants were also given the option to say what ‘how safe they feel’ depends on and in total 15 per cent provided that answer. Factors that varied the levels of safety for these respondents echoed the open responses. These were:

- number of people (85 per cent)
- level of light (80 per cent)
- location (79 per cent)
- travelling alone versus in a group (68 per cent)
- events such as football matches (48 per cent)

- time of year (44 per cent)
- staff (38 per cent).

How safe different modes of transport were perceived to be among users (regular/occasional)

Our research participants were asked how safe they felt each mode of transport was that they used either regularly or occasionally. The data is shown in the table below (order is based on the number of participants using each mode). Please note that while this is useful contextual information this is not a representative study - it represents the views of our participants and not the general population.

With the exception of cycling, responses of ‘very safe’ and ‘very or reasonably’ safe tended to be slightly lower at off-peak times. The biggest difference was for walking which 15 per cent fewer respondents rated as ‘safe’ at off-peak versus peak (72 per cent versus 87 per cent).

Mode	Number of participants answering	Peak: very safe (%)	Off-peak: very safe (%)	Peak: very or reasonable safe (%)	Off-peak: very or reasonably safe (%)
Walking	1248	28	23	87	72
Train	1119	31	25	88	83
Bus	1022	32	30	88	85
Licenced taxi	764	36	32	93	90
Driving a car	744	55	59	93	97
Tube/Metro	674	19	15	80	75
Uber/mini cab	447	25	21	87	83
Cycling	310	7	17	57	73
Tram	243	25	19	78	76

At peak times the proportion of those feeling ‘very’ or ‘reasonably safe’ for each mode (other than cycling) ranged from 80 per cent for using the Tube/Metro to 93 per cent for using a licenced taxi or driving a car. There was a broader range for those rating a mode as ‘very safe’ with 19 per cent for Tube/Metro to 55 per cent for driving a car.

Experiences of participants when using transport

Again, our sample is self-selecting and not representative of women overall. The percentages are based on participants and not the general population.

Around half (49 per cent) of our participants said that they had felt threatened when making a journey on public transport. Over two in five (42 per cent) had been subject

to verbal aggression and 14 per cent said they had been physically threatened or assaulted when making a journey on public transport³.

Which of the following apply to you	%
'I have felt threatened when making a journey on public transport'	49
'I have seen women or girls being subject to verbal aggression when making a journey on public transport'	46
'There are ways of travelling which I avoid where I can because I don't feel safe'	44
'I have been subject to verbal aggression when making a journey on public transport'	42
'I have seen women or girls being physically threatened or assaulted when making a journey on public transport'	17
'I have been physically threatened or assaulted when making a journey on public transport'	14
None of the above apply to me	25

Total answering: 1282

Two in five participants said that 'there are some ways of travelling which I avoid where I can because I don't feel safe'. The modes that they avoided are listed in the table below. Walking was the most common mode to avoid followed by Tube/Metro and bus. Driving a car was the least likely to be avoided (six per cent). Licensed taxis were half as likely to be avoided as Uber/mini cabs (17 per cent versus 33 per cent).

Which ways of travelling do you avoid?	%
Walking	50
Tube/Metro	39
Bus	36
Train	33
Uber/mini cab only available by pre-booking	33
Cycling	30
Taxi – licenced	17
Tram	12
Driving a car	6

Total answering: 568

Participants who had used public transport were asked: 'When using public transport, have you ever had an experience or seen something happen which made you feel unsafe?'. The majority of participants named an occasion or a type of incident or journey. For some women this was several years ago and they noted that they had subsequently changed their travel habits. The fact that incidences could

³ Most participants answered regarding public transport, however the five who did not use public transport answered when travelling around more generally.

have been a long time ago but still kept in mind when travelling now shows how unpleasant the experience must have been.

“...I was groped by a man. He put his hands on my legs and groin. I squirmed away, but was too embarrassed to tell him to stop or tell the driver. I told the police later and they laughed at me. This was in Lancaster in the mid 80s, but the experience still haunts me.” 55-64, North West

It is worth noting that the perception of what made participants feel unsafe did vary. What on paper may seem a similar type of incident could be described by some women as ‘uncomfortable’, ‘annoying’ or a ‘nuisance’ while others may describe it as a situation that makes them ‘wary’ or as something very unpleasant. Participants also talked about the action they took to avoid them feeling/being unsafe such as moving to another carriage.

An issue frequently described by participants related to unwanted advances from men. This had either happened to them on public transport or they had seen it happening to other women or girls. This could be attempting to engage in conversation, invading physical space or intimidating behaviour in relation to physical space and inappropriate touching. More detail is included in the table below.

Using inappropriate language	Asking questions about sex life, making sexually suggestive comments, cat calls.
Unwanted contact	Man/men being overly friendly, being ‘pestered’, harassed, photographed.
Sexual non-contact aggression	Exposing genitals, masturbating, looking at pornography.
Feeling threatened by intrusion into personal space or being followed	Being unnecessarily close. Examples given frequently were when other seats were available but a man elected to sit next to them. Moving seats and being followed. Being followed when exiting transport and going home.
Being physically assaulted	Being groped/touched/other type or physical assault.

“A group of three men sat around me and started to make sexual comments towards me. I had to get up and move carriages and had to be careful not let them see what stop I was getting off.” 55-64, Yorkshire

Although not necessarily behaviour directed towards them, an issue identified by participants as making them feel unsafe was other passengers being drunk. This was described as people being ‘rowdy’, ‘out of control’ or ‘obnoxious’. Being

surrounded by groups of men⁴ or younger people could also be unpleasant experiences. Verbal abuse from other individuals was also mentioned.

Unpredictable behaviour could cause participants to feel unsafe	Being around individuals or groups who were thought to be inebriated, thought to have mental health issues or were on drugs was concerning. Participants referenced being crowded by groups of football supporters or race-goers and finding this worrying.
References to unwanted advances linked to alcohol consumption	As already described, participants talked about men attempting to engage them in conversation. Some expressed a concern/experience that rejecting advances could result in verbal abuse.
Fights, arguments and hostility between other passengers or from passengers towards staff	Even if not directed at them these types of behaviours made some participants feel unsafe. This could be concern about being caught in the crossfire, worry about intervening and not being able to easily leave the area.
Racist or homophobic abuse either directed at them or others could leave participants feeling ‘terrified’ and there were other types of verbal abuse or intimidating behaviour that some participants had been exposed to	They may have witnessed someone else challenging behaviour that has made things ‘worse’ or had a negative experience themselves. Participants gave examples of verbal abuse, being shouted at, heckled, taunted or bullied. This may have been individuals, groups of adults or teens.
Less common than verbal abuse but unfortunately some participants had experienced physical violence	These incidents ranged from shoulder barging, being punched, being mugged and being held at gunpoint.
Some participants talked about being ‘trapped’ or unable to move away	This might be because they were ‘hemmed in’ by a crowd or concerned for their safety if they did move away.

“I was on the Piccadilly line night service. A group of drunk men started fighting on the platform at Hyde Park Corner and when the tube doors opened they got into the train and started fighting inside the carriage. I was extremely scared because I was standing in between carriages next to the opposite door, I got stuck and was unable to move. It was really frightening and I seriously feared getting injured.” 25-34, London

⁴ Not all incidences were related to men but where the gender was referenced it was more frequently men than women.

“When international competition is on, it is worse. I have been trapped on a bus, surrounded by a baying mob, rocking the bus, followed by them boarding, jumping on the seats, spraying beer and chanting in the faces of terrified passengers. I have also experienced being left at an isolated bus stop, on a winter evening in a high-crime area, on several occasions because the driver was running late and curtailed their route ‘to get back on time’. It was the last bus of the day on a route that is only served by one bus.” **45-54, North West**

Some participants reported being put in difficult situations through ‘being left stranded’, ‘having to wait for two hours’ and cancelled services meaning they needed to ‘walk three miles home in the dark’. There were examples provided of where they had to unexpectedly disembark and no provision was made for them to get home, leaving them feeling unsafe.

A lack of staff presence or other people around them could heighten a feeling of vulnerability. For example, where a man came to sit next to them on an empty platform or a large group of drunk football supporters came into their carriage. Texts to the British Transport Police had not always resulted in a response. And there were examples given by participants where they felt staff were unwilling to help when they were in a situation that had made them feel unsafe.

“Yes. At Waterloo station a drunk male reached out and grabbed me on the escalator. I firmly and loudly told him to leave me alone. There were many people around yet no one came to my help. At the top of the escalator I found 2 members of station staff and went to tell them what had happened. They did not appear to be that interested. Despite this, I remained next to them until I saw the offending male had left the platform.” **55-64, South East**

Conversely, when situations were managed carefully this contributed towards a feeling of safety.

“Sometimes, especially on match days, when there are people on Cardiff station (and other stations/trains) who are drunk or over excited, these are dealt with quickly, efficiently, but with kindness by the British Transport Police which is one of the reasons I feel very safe travelling by train.” **55-64, Wales**

For some participants, not feeling safe had been from overcrowding and feeling concerned for their physical safety. And issues related to Covid-19 such as mask wearing examples were given by some participants, sometimes in conjunction with other antisocial or threatening behaviour.

“Someone drunk or causing friction between other passengers due to not wearing a mask.” **55-64, South East**

Attitudes to journey planning

A large majority of participants (85 per cent) agreed that 'I think about my personal safety when planning and making a journey'. Two thirds agreed that 'I plan journeys around times of day when I think it is safer to travel' with the same proportion saying 'I avoid travelling alone when it is dark'.

Statement	Agree strongly (%)	Agree strongly or slightly (%)	Disagree strongly (%)	Disagree strongly or slightly (%)
I think about my personal safety when planning and making a journey	48	85	5	15
I plan journeys around times of day when I think it is safer to travel	32	66	14	33
I avoid travelling alone when it is dark	31	65	16	34

Total answering: 1282

Participants who agreed with 'I think about my personal safety when planning and making a journey' were asked to indicate from a list of possible options relating to what they did when travelling. 'Let people know my plans' was selected by seven in 10. Around two in five participants would 'only travel at certain times' (45 per cent) 'only select particular routes' (43 per cent) and 'travel with others' (39 per cent). Around a quarter said they would 'use a different type of transport' (28 per cent)⁵ and 'get met at destination' (24 per cent).

Actions taken when travelling	%
Let people know my plans	71
Only travel at certain times	45
Only select particular routes	43
Travel with others	39
Use a different type of transport	28
Get met at destination	24
Carry alarm	7
Other (please write in)	14

Total answering: 1089

⁵ See page 7 on types of transport likely to be avoided.



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