

**Our city,
our space,
our voice:**



A report on street harassment in Ottawa

July 2013

Acknowledgements

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In solidarity,

Hollaback! Ottawa Team

What is Hollaback! Ottawa?

Hollaback! Ottawa is the local chapter of an international movement dedicated to ending street harassment. Since 2011, we've been collecting people's stories of street harassment through our website, mobile app and via social media. We do public education outreach through workshops, speaking engagements and information fairs.

We are a volunteer-run organization.

What is street harassment?

Street harassment is defined as “Unwelcome words and actions by unknown persons in public places which are motivated by gender and invade a person’s physical and emotional space in a disrespectful, creepy, startling, scary, or insulting way.”¹

¹ Stop Street Harassment (website). <http://www.stopstreetharassment.org/resources/definitions>

“Started from the bottom, now we’re here”: Report backgrounder

This report is a first of its kind in Ottawa. And how we got here is an interesting journey.

This spring, we celebrated our second anniversary. In setting our goals for the 2013-2014 year, we decided to scan the stories we’d collected to see if there were any themes or ‘hot spots’ around the city that should serve as our focus. We noticed quite a few stories, through our website, social media and in doing outreach, related to harassment on public transit. When we approached transit authorities about our findings, they were not exactly keen to work with us on this issue. Far from deterred, we decided to take it to the streets and ask residents of Ottawa about their experiences of harassment and, equally as important, their recommendations for creating change.

We decided to capture not only stories of harassment on transit, but all experiences of street harassment.

We hosted a community forum for transit riders to share their experiences and recommendations. We also developed a survey that allowed us to quantify experiences of harassment in all types of public space in Ottawa.

This report includes data from both Talking Back!: A community dialogue about safety on transit and our survey.

We hope it will serve as a launching point for increased dialogue about the prevalence and severity of street harassment in Ottawa.

Talking Back! A community dialogue about safety on transit

We held our open forum on Wednesday, May 15 from 6:30pm – 8:30pm at the Bronson Centre. It was a free, bilingual event open to everyone. It included a panel, a presentation on bystander intervention campaigns, an open mic, an anonymous story drop off and a photo booth.

Panelists:

- Elsy David, WISE: Women's Initiatives for Safer Environments
- Émilie Jabouin, Sexual Assault Support Centre of Ottawa (SASC)
- Catherine Gardner, transit rider
- Julie S. Lalonde, Hollaback! Ottawa



Cats against cat calling! : Lisane Thirsk from Hollaback! Ottawa at our photo booth

Survey results

Who responded to the survey?

- 84% of respondents identified as woman
- 54% identified as LGBT2QQI*
- 38% identified as low income
- 19% identified as a person of colour
- 17% identified as being a person with a disability
- 10% identified as immigrant/refugee/newcomer
- 4% identified as indigenous

What are we experiencing?

- More than half of respondents had experienced leering (62%), honking (58%), sexist comments (58%) and/or comments about one's body (58%) in the past year
- 21% had been stalked or followed
- 9% had been grabbed or touched in a sexual way
- 4% had witnessed public masturbation
- Other experiences included clear invasions of private space (particularly on transit) and being flashed

“From the time I was 11 years old, I have been the target of unsolicited comments on my body, and many have scared me. No one has the right or the inherent privilege to harass/scare/stalk/ or make sexually charged comments to women in Ottawa.” – *Survey respondent*

How does it make us feel?

The most common responses were **angry (72%)** and **irritated (68%)**. Interestingly, the most common response listed under 'Other' was **disgusted**. Only **7%** respondents indicated that they were 'indifferent' to experiences of street harassment.

Where are we being harassed?

- **97%** of respondents had experienced harassment on the street in the past year
- **44%** had experienced harassment on an OC Transpo bus
- **29%** had experienced it at a shopping mall (The Rideau Centre being a common culprit)
- **12%** had experienced it at school
- **3%** had experienced it on the O-Train²

The most common location listed under 'other' was a **bus station**. This leads us to conclude that many people do not associate what happens at a bus stop as being within the jurisdiction of OC Transpo.

Other locations included **public libraries and public parks**.

² The O-Train was not operational during the time of the survey.

What are we doing about it?

When asked to define our most common responses to street harassment, **80% of respondents responded 'simply kept going about my business'**. Only **26%** indicated that they responded directly to the perpetrators by yelling or verbally responding in some way.

When we're harassed, do we report it?

Sadly, the answer is no. **90% of respondents indicated that they had never reported an incident of street harassment.** Not to the police, not to OC Transpo authorities, not to Hollaback! or to the security personnel of a private establishment.

This is in line with what we already know about sexual violence. In Canada, **approximately one in ten sexual assaults is reported to police**, according to the 2004 General Social Survey (GSS) on Victimization. **Sexual assault was the violent offence least likely to be reported to police.**

Pervasive discrimination against indigenous women, women with disabilities, racialized women, immigrant women, women living in poverty, women who identify as LGBT2QQI*, elderly women, and other marginalized groups contribute to low levels of reporting.

Are people intervening on our behalf?

Bystander intervention has been identified by many in the community as a key element to reducing incidents of street harassment. Unfortunately, the current rates of intervention are staggering low.



Hollaback! Ottawa, through our ‘I’ve got your back!’ campaign³, advocates for a societal shift where the entire community responds to incidents of violence. We support a bystander intervention model where bystanders are equipped with the tools to intervene directly, to delegate to someone else or to create a distraction. Proper bystander intervention is safe and effective. And we’ve seen it work! ⁴

When we asked respondents to share their stories of bystander intervention, **only 6% had had someone intervene on their behalf.** However, it’s clear that there is a desire for a bystander intervention strategy in Ottawa.

“I was appalled that people around on the street seemed not to notice that I was yelling at a man to stop following me home. That was worse than the original, creepy incident of being followed; knowing that no one would intervene if something had happened.”
– *Survey respondent*

In addition to the repeated comments throughout the open forum on the importance of bystander intervention in the context of harassment on transit, several survey respondents responded to this question with **“Nobody has intervened for me, but I wish they had!”**

³“ I’ve got your back!” <http://ottawa.ihollaback.org/ive-got-your-back-2/>

⁴ “Taking back the 95: Commuters stand up to harasser on OC Transpo bus“

<http://www.ottawacitizen.com/Taking+back+Commuters+stand+harasser+Transpo/8287329/story.html>



What are the impacts?

As a result of street harassment, **38%** of respondents indicated that they were 'fearful of going out' by themselves.

32% indicated that they had changed their route or final destination because they were being harassed. **21%** felt that harassment made them afraid to visit the neighbourhood again. As a result of harassment on transit, **14%** of respondents were fearful of taking transit again.

Several respondents and forum participants expressed frustration at the pervasiveness of street harassment and the way it impacted their lives.

One survey respondent summarized it thusly:

"I feel like I always have to watch my back, watch what I wear, watch how I act, watch where I go, watch where I sit on the bus, and watch everything around me. Even though I think I'm a strong, young woman who refuses to let that kind of narrative dictate what I can and cannot do, those considerations are always in the back of my mind. [My boyfriend] doesn't have to think about any of that."

Recommendations

To address harassment on public transit, we recommend:

- Creation of a public education campaign that clearly identifies the issue of street harassment so that transit riders are better equipped to spot the problem
- Creation of a public education campaign that focuses on *tangible* ways that people can safely intervene
- Creation of a public education campaign that visibly lays out existing services and reporting mechanisms
- Increased training for drivers, Special Constables, maintenance staff, etc to respond appropriately to incidents of street harassment
- Creation of an anonymous reporting mechanism to encourage reporting to OC Transpo

Throughout Talking Back! : A community dialogue about safety on transit, participants were adamant that a partnership between community organizations and OC Transpo and Ottawa Police Service was vital. Seeing a visible partnership would send a strong message to the community that safety is genuinely a priority on public transit.

To address street harassment in various public spaces across the city, we recommend:

- Creation of a safe(r) spaces public education campaign, led by Hollaback! Ottawa, that raises awareness about all forms of street harassment with a focus on *tangible* ways that bystanders can safely intervene
- Creation of an anonymous reporting mechanism to encourage reporting to Ottawa Police Service

Conclusion

It is important to remember that Ottawa is not alone in its issue with street and public transit harassment; in fact, it is an overwhelming problem that plagues both urban and rural areas internationally. But, with the assistance of public officials and private citizens, it is a problem that can be conquered in our nation's capital. Street harassment is not an inevitable part of our society but rather one we have been conditioned to think of as such. It is not normal and it is not okay; two facts that are evident by the growing number of residents speaking out against it. **We have the power to end street harassment and the time to end it is now.**

“Our community is strong and we will empower ourselves and others to holla’back. **We can and do create the community we live in.** Let's never forget that.” – *Survey respondent*

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