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Women’s Safety on AC Transit: How Environment Affects Women’s Daily Commutes

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Background

Women in the United States account for the majority of transit riders.² However, women on public transportation face disproportionate levels of harassment compared to male riders, with some studies indicating that [twice as many women](#) riding public transit face sexual harassment, compared to men riding public transit. This [harassment only grows](#) for Black, Indigenous, and women of color, or women who identify as LGBTQ+. Women are also less likely to have access to different forms of transportation, often relying on public transportation and leaving them [“transit captive”](#). This leaves many women no choice but to use public transit, despite the heightened risk of sexual harassment.

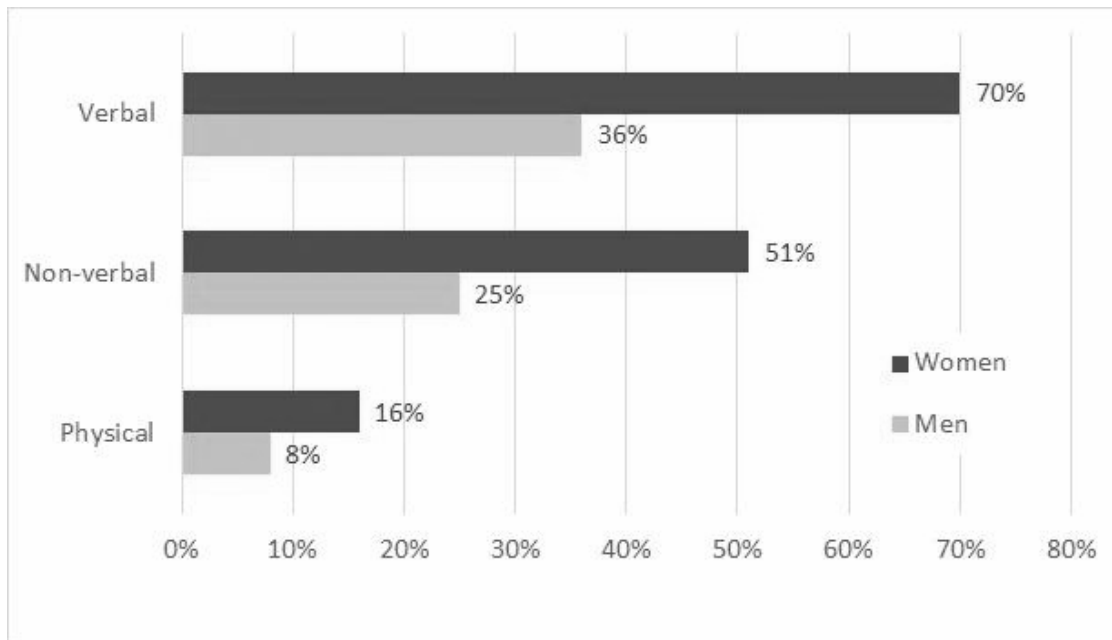


Figure 1: Types of Harassment Experienced by Female vs. Male Bus Riders³

¹ Based at UC Berkeley’s Institute of Governmental Studies, the Cal-in-Sacramento Fellowship Program sends approximately 30 Cal students to the state’s capital every summer for eight-week public service internships. The Jo Freeman Women in Politics Fellowship supports Cal-in-Sac Fellows whose individual research projects focus on women in politics, including research on public policies that affect women.

² Criado Perez, Caroline. *Invisible Women: Data Bias in a World Designed for Men*. Abrams Press, 2019.

³ Agrawal, A. Weinstein, and A. Loukaitou-Sideris. “Sexual Crime and Harassment on Public Transportation: A Study.” *Metro Magazine*, 14 May 2020, www.metro-magazine.com/10111994/sexual-crime-and-harassment-on-public-transportation-a-study.

The largest source of funding for public transportation comes from local funds, with a [report](#) from 2018 finding that 47% of funding sources are local. Because transit is substantially funded with local funds and opinions on best safety practices differ both regionally and culturally, it is imperative that local women’s experiences and suggestions are accounted for when considering how to improve public transit. When it comes to public transit in the greater Bay Area, many studies have been done on San Francisco’s Muni system or the Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) and how these forms of public transit can improve safety for their riders. However, little research has been done into the Alameda-Contra Costa Transit District, better known as AC Transit, which operates buses in the East Bay, including in cities such as Oakland, Richmond, and Berkeley. AC Transit’s ridership has been [on the decline](#) since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, leading to vital bus service cuts, including in the city of Berkeley where thousands of students have access to free bus rides. In order to boost its declining ridership, AC Transit must listen to one of its most prominent groups of riders: local women.

AC Transit in Berkeley

According to [on-boarding surveys](#) administered over the past 22 years, women have historically represented the majority of riders on AC Transit. However, in more recent years, men have overtaken women as the predominant gender on AC Transit by a slight margin. AC Transit isn’t the only California-based transit system that has experienced a drop in female ridership. Los Angeles’ Metro buses saw [female ridership drop from 53% in early 2020 to 49% in 2022](#). It is well documented that women who use public transit will [alter their travel habits](#) if they perceive a situation to be dangerous or if crime is present.

Rider Demographics: Gender

Based on Onboard Passenger Surveys

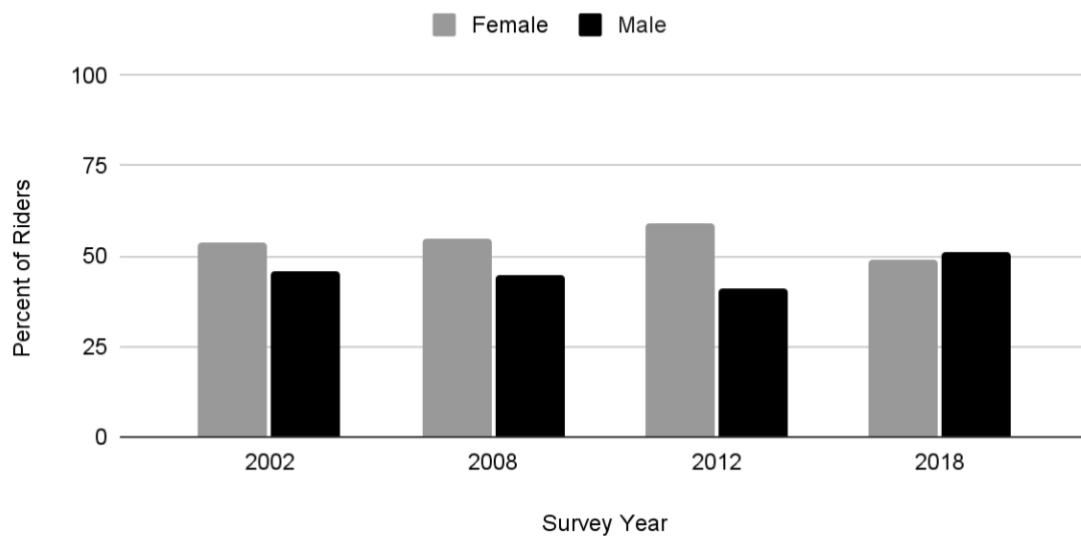


Figure 2: Gender of AC Transit Riders, Based on AC Transit Onboard Surveys (2002-2018)⁴

Interviews with woman-identifying students attending the University of California, Berkeley who frequently ride on AC Transit revealed that they have previously avoided taking the bus due to their perceptions of safety, particularly at the bus stop they were waiting at. When asked if she had ever avoided riding on AC Transit, one participant said if the area is dangerous she tries to avoid it, noting the lack of people at the bus stop and whether the people at the stop are loitering or causing trouble.

Current Bus and Bus Stop Strategies

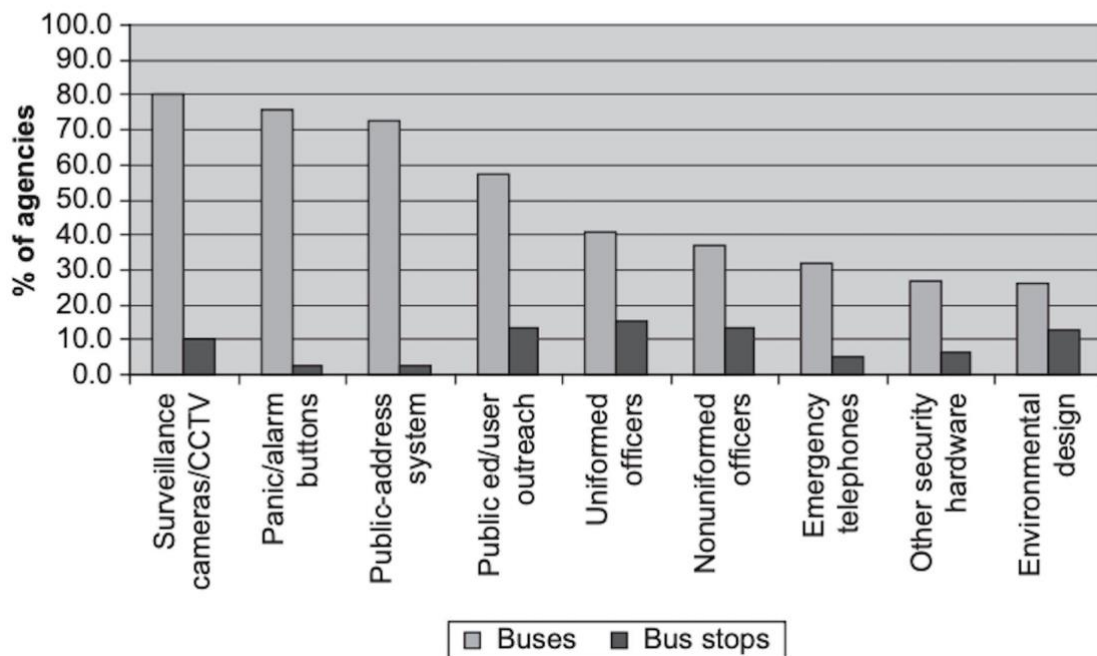


Figure 3: Bus and Bus Stop Strategies in the U.S.⁵

Although AC Transit has made efforts to create a safer environment on their buses, the bus service has failed to collaborate effectively with the city of Berkeley to improve safety at their bus stops. AC Transit isn't the only public transit system that has a visible gap between safety measures at bus stops versus buses; a [survey](#) done on U.S. transit agencies revealed a lack of safety measures at bus stops across the country. This gap is shocking considering the [well-documented data](#) that women feel higher levels of anxiety and fear while waiting at bus stops compared to actually riding the bus. My study's participants agreed that they typically feel safer when on the bus; however, during instances where they feel unsafe, it is usually at the bus stop.

⁴ <https://www.actransit.org/reports>

⁵ Loukaitou-Sideris, A., & Fink, C. (2008). Addressing Women's Fear of Victimization in Transportation Settings A Survey of U.S. Transit Agencies. *UC Berkeley: University of California Transportation Center*. Retrieved from <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/23t2q2gc>

One participant noted security cameras and extra staff on the bus at times that contributed to feelings of improved safety, but she could not recall seeing any security cameras on or around the bus stop. Another participant revealed she has even resorted to walking to another bus stop or calling a car service to avoid perceived danger at a particular bus stop.

Policy Recommendations

AC Transit and the city of Berkeley should focus on implementing three changes to buses and bus stops in the Berkeley area to promote safety and increased ridership of women.

(1) AC Transit should administer onboard surveys on a more consistent and frequent basis. AC Transit's last onboard survey was in 2018. An onboard survey has not been conducted in 6 years, since before the COVID-19 pandemic, and commuting patterns have changed; as mentioned earlier; fewer people are riding public transit post-pandemic. A recent bill passed in the California Legislature, [SB 434](#), requires AC Transit and other transit systems in California to administer surveys with the goal of identifying harassment riders may fear or encounter. This bill specifically focuses on Black, Indigenous, and women of color, as well as LGBTQ+ identifying riders. By sending out regular surveys, AC Transit will better identify key sources of harassment and areas for improvement, leading to higher transit ridership in the future.

(2) Panic or alarm buttons can be placed at bus stops. AC Transit and the city of Berkeley can install panic buttons that, upon being pressed, alert local authorities such as police officers or crisis intervention specialists. The alarm buttons could also include emergency phones that connect to 911. Multiple participants brought up alarm buttons as a means to promote safety at bus stops. One participant mentioned the [Blue Light emergency phones](#) on the UC Berkeley campus, suggesting that AC Transit could do a similar system at their bus stops. Panic or alarm buttons at bus stops would allow women to request emergency assistance discretely and allow a third party to de-escalate the situation safely.

(3) Better street lighting around bus stops in Berkeley would allow women riders to feel safer as they wait for their bus. Every participant pointed out the lack of proper street lighting at bus stops and in the city of Berkeley in general. They also noted feeling safer during the daytime, and some participants admitted to avoiding transit at night time due to a heightened sense of danger. This is not uncommon for women, with women riders being [more likely to avoid traveling outside of daytime hours](#). Inadequate street lighting prevents many women from taking public transit after daytime. By adding more lighting, AC Transit and the city of Berkeley will foster safer environments citywide for women looking to ride the local bus service.