

# Study shows US lags behind in transit safety programs for female riders

December 3 2009, By Minne Ho

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(PhysOrg.com) -- A new study by UCLA professor Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris documents the gap between women's transit safety needs and programs in the U.S. that respond to them.

Desolate bus stops and train cars, dimly lit parking structures, and overcrowded mass transit vehicles all represent stressful settings for many women. In a new study, UCLA's Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris examines the gap between women's well-documented transit safety needs and programs in the U.S. that respond to them.

"The perception that a bus station, train car, parking lot or particular neighborhood is dangerous forces many women to alter their travel patterns," said Loukaitou-Sideris, a professor of urban planning at the UCLA School of Public Affairs. "This limits their access to the most basic of rights — to move freely in the public sphere. The situation is worse for low-income and [minority women](#), who may reside in high-crime areas, travel back from work at odd hours and lack the resources for private transport such as cars and taxis.

Loukaitou-Sideris' report, "How to Ease Women's Fear of Transportation Environments: Case Studies and Best Practices," recently published by the Mineta Transportation Institute at San Jose State University's College of Business, includes the results of a survey of 131 transit agencies and cities throughout the United States, interviews with representatives of U.S. women's interest groups, and case studies of innovative safety-program models in Mexico, the United Kingdom and

Japan that are specifically designed to meet the needs of female riders.

"I am always looking for cues to establish if the environment is safe," said the Rev. Della Fahnestock of the Alliance of Faith and Feminism, who was interviewed for the report. "Does the parking lot have lights? Are the street lights on? Is there anyone else entering the elevator? There's definitely a need to be aware of all that whenever I am walking from my car to the transit station."

"We found a serious mismatch between the existing safety practices in the U.S. and the needs of women passengers," Loukaitou-Sideris said.

The study found that although female transit passengers have distinct travel needs — planning around situations in which they may be the victims of harassment or assault, traveling with small children, etc. — these needs are not well addressed in the U.S., where only a handful of transit operators have specific programs in place targeting the safety needs of female riders. In fact, of 131 survey participants, only about a third believed that transit agencies should put specific programs in place for women, and only three had initiated programs addressing women's security needs.

In the U.S. and Canada, the report shows, a number of independent, community-based programs have emerged to fill this void, including:

[Rightrides](#) (New York): This grassroots nonprofit offers female, transgender and queer individuals a free, safe ride home Saturday nights and early Sunday mornings. The program serves 45 neighborhoods in four New York boroughs and has provided nearly 2,000 rides since its launch in 2004.

[Holla Back NYC](#): This website allows victims of sexual harassment or assault to document incidents online. The group was founded in 2005 in

the wake an incident in which a young woman posted a cell phone picture to the Internet of her harasser in the middle of a lewd act as a means of warning other women. The site receives 1,500 hits a day and now has branch sites in Boston, Chicago, Miami, San Francisco, Seattle, Washington, D.C., and Toronto, among other cities.

[METRAC](#) (Toronto): This community safety program was founded in response to a series of sexual assaults and rapes in public parks. METRAC has created "safety audits" as a tool for individuals to evaluate the safety of their environment and reduce the risk of assault. The program has worked with the Toronto Transit Commission to conduct a safety audit of the entire system.

Other countries and municipalities have adopted specific measures and policies in response to women's transit safety needs, including:

**Women-only transportation:** In Mumbai, Tokyo, Rio de Janeiro and Mexico City, women-only subway cars and buses were implemented as early as 1992 and have been successful in making female passengers feel safer in their travels. Mexico City's women-only transportation service has provided more than 5 million rides. Similar programs exist in Egypt, Taiwan, Belarus and the Philippines.

**Action Plan for Safety:** In London, Transport for London, the city's largest transport operator, initiated a Women's Action Plan that calls for "hub stops" (stopping between regular bus stops at night) with safe waiting areas, additional police presence and a "secure stations scheme," which accredits stations that achieve higher standards of safety.

"Many of our current security programs center on enclosed spaces — buses, train cars, station platforms — but women passengers are more fearful of the more open areas, such as parking lots and bus stops," Loukaitou-Sideris said. "We need to take a closer look at the passengers'

experiences at each part of their travel patterns and include their voices, as well as the perspectives of grassroots organizations that are working on this issue, in the planning process."

The report may be downloaded at [www.transweb.sjsu.edu/MTIportal ... ocuments/Sideris.pdf](http://www.transweb.sjsu.edu/MTIportal/documents/Sideris.pdf) .

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