

Study finds nearly 90% of NYC transit workers have been harassed or assaulted

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The COVID-19 pandemic brought an increase in crime to New York City's subways and buses. The transit system's employees—especially female workers—have frequently been on the receiving end of attacks,

according to [a new study](#) published in the *Journal of Urban Health*.

The study, led by researchers at the NYU School of Global Public Health, found that 89% of public-facing transit workers in New York City experienced harassment or violence on the job during the pandemic (2020–2023).

"Transit workers are our city's unsung heroes—they kept New York City functioning during the COVID-19 pandemic, but it came at a cost to these frontline workers," said Robyn Gershon, clinical professor of epidemiology at the NYU School of Global Public Health and the study's senior author.

"They not only experienced high rates of COVID-19 infections, hospitalizations, and even death, but throughout the pandemic they have experienced very high rates of victimization. We hope that providing evidence of the harassment and violence that workers face can lead to better data on transit worker safety and improved policies protecting this vital workforce."

Since the start of the pandemic, frequent news reports have shed light on the violence against New York's subway and bus workers, but there is little data on the rates at which these incidents occur. Moreover, while [crime on the subways has substantially decreased](#) this year—due to efforts by the state, city, and Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA)—attacks against bus drivers and subway workers [persist](#).

Since 2020, Gershon and her research team have been collaborating with the Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 100 to study the impact of COVID-19 among New York City's transit workers. As part of this research, Gershon and her colleagues surveyed 1,297 public-facing New York City bus and subway workers in late 2023 and early 2024 about their work experiences during the pandemic.

Given the spike in crime on [mass transit](#) during this period, they asked workers whether they had dealt with harassment or violence on the job. Specifically, workers were surveyed about their experiences with verbal harassment or intimidation (e.g., offensive language, insults, threats), [physical assault](#) (e.g., punching, hitting, spitting, pushing), [sexual assault](#) (e.g., groping), [sexual harassment](#) (e.g., catcalling), or having something stolen from them.

Nearly nine in 10 transit workers—89 percent—reported experiencing some form of victimization on the job. Almost half of all workers surveyed reported verbal harassment or intimidation (48.7 percent) or physical assault (48.6 percent). One in five (20.6 percent) had experienced theft, while 6.3 percent reported sexual assault or harassment.

"The proportion of public-facing transit workers who have experienced violence or harassment is remarkably high, and far exceeds the rates of attacks against other workers. For example, [health care workers](#) are often subject to similar threats of violence, but by comparison, 58 percent of this workforce reports experiencing it," said Gershon.

Notably, female transit workers experienced a higher prevalence of physical assault, intimidation, and sexual assault or harassment than did their male counterparts. Physical assault was more frequently reported by female bus workers, while sexual assault or harassment was more often reported by female subway workers.

"Our findings point to the need for greater attention to recording and reporting victimization against workers in both buses and subways," said David Vlahov, professor at the Yale School of Nursing and the study's first author. "We need to better understand the frequency and risk factors related to this violence and harassment, especially for [female workers](#)."

The researchers note that the survey results may be influenced by volunteer bias—meaning those who have experienced [harassment](#) or assault may have been more likely to complete the survey—which could have led to a higher rate of incidents than would be found across the overall transit workforce.

In addition, the survey captured workers' experience during the pandemic, when rates of violence on New York City's mass [transit](#) were higher than they currently are.

In response to the increased crime, the state, city, and MTA took steps to improve safety and support the workforce, including increasing the police presence, [deploying the National Guard](#) to support bag checks, [tougher criminal charges](#) for those who [assault](#) workers, and adding cameras focused on conductor cabins on subways to protect workers.

In addition to advocating for safer work conditions for its members, TWU Local 100 introduced [relaxation and yoga classes](#) in an effort to support the mental health of workers.

"Despite important strides being made to protect the health and safety of this vital workforce, much more work remains to ensure the safest possible workplace for these dedicated and essential workers," said Gershon.

In addition to Gershon and Vlahov, study authors include Daniel Hagen, Michael Cziner, and Alexis Merdjanoff of the NYU School of Global Public Health, as well as Martin Sherman of Loyola University.

More information: Association of Victimization by Sex among Public Facing Bus and Subway Transit Workers, New York City, *Journal of Urban Health* (2024). [DOI: 10.1007/s11524-024-00912-5](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11524-024-00912-5)

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