Street harassment matters for Safe Routes to School programs. Because street harassment can undermine the goal of getting kids to make walking and biking a permanent, safe, and healthy habit, Safe Routes to School programs have a strong vested interest in taking on street harassment. Safe Routes to School programs can take action to reduce street harassment, give kids tools to respond when they experience or witness harassment, and work to help kids not become harassers in the first place.
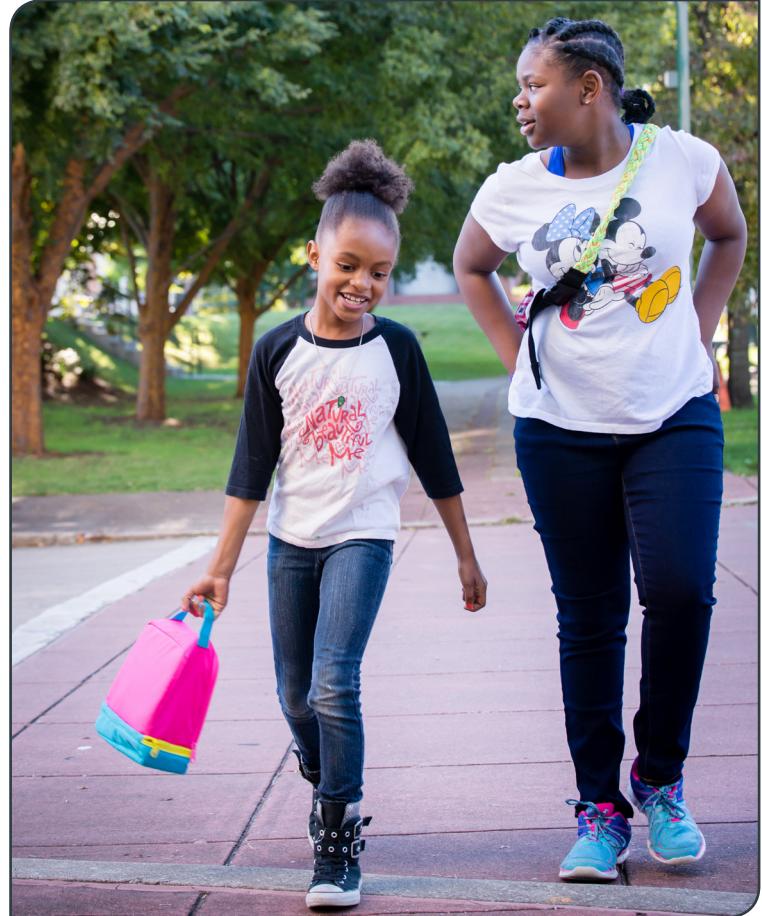
Street Harassment Discourages Students from Walking and Biking

A 2014 nationally representative telephone survey in the United States found that 65 percent of women and 25 percent of men reported experiencing street harassment.[1] Studies of Canadian women found that between 85 and 91 percent had experienced some form of street harassment after age 16.[2] The most common form of street harassment identified by the American survey was verbal harassment, but 41 percent of women reported physically aggressive harassment, including having their path blocked, unwanted sexual touching, being followed, and sexual assault.

In a survey of young women conducted in Chicago in 2003, 86 percent reported having been catcalled on the street, 36 percent said men harassed them daily, and 60 percent said they felt unsafe walking in their neighborhoods.[3] Harassment commonly begins when youth are in their teens, with one survey showing that 50 percent of those harassed reported that such harassment had begun by age 17.[4]

What Is Street Harassment?

Street harassment occurs when someone experiences inappropriate and unwanted comments or actions that are sexual, homophobic, or racial, ethnic, religious, or gender-related in public spaces, such as streets, parks, or mass transit.

Street harassment can have a strong negative effect on students who are trying to get to school or home on foot, by bicycle, or on public transit. How do these unsolicited and often threatening comments and actions affect students? Harassment can have major effects on students and the trip to school, especially for tween and teen girls, LGBTQ youth, and youth of color. Experiences of street harassment can cause students to miss school, and can affect readiness to learn and academic success. Harassment can cause students to not want to walk, bicycle, or use public transportation. It can also lead students to change their routes to ones that are more inconvenient or more dangerous in terms of traffic. Street harassment can affect students mentally, resulting in negative self-esteem and depression. Larger scale effects can include students avoiding taking on new independence and responsibilities, instead feeling ashamed, alone, and threatened as they go through puberty.

What Can Safe Routes to School Programs Do About Street Harassment?

Safe Routes to School programs have a powerful role to play in addressing street harassment. Safe Routes to School programs can take action to help students who may be harassed in understanding and responding to harassment in a way that protects their health and safety; discourage harassment by harassers; and train students to respond helpfully and safely when they witness harassment. Although Safe Routes to School programs have limited authority over students and have little or no authority over other street users, they have a strong role to play in this arena, and can partner effectively with other entities to create larger societal change around this issue.

Safe Routes to School programs can:

1. **Provide targeted anti-harassment workshops and trainings for students as part of Safe Routes to School education efforts or as stand-alone opportunities.** Potential venues include PE classes, afterschool events, classroom curricula, and assemblies. For schools that have a strong social emotional health curriculum, this training may be easily integrated and will likely reinforce other lessons. Trainings should be age- and experience-appropriate, and should be tailored to students' underlying levels of exposure to street harassment. Sample curricula exist and may provide a strong starting place for trainings.[5]

2. **Support students' needs & offer options for additional resources.** Programs can work to understand and support students' needs. They can provide students, especially those who have experienced harassment, with connections to youth-oriented nonprofits that may address these issues, and can also provide or encourage opportunities to learn and experience self-defense and assertiveness training.

3. **Ensure that Safe Routes to School personnel are equipped to assist students in understanding and processing street harassment.** Provide training for walking school bus leaders or other Safe Routes to School volunteers and personnel to educate them about how to address street harassment if they witness it while escorting students, and how to talk about the issue generally. Encourage personnel to make it clear to students that harassment is not the fault of the person being harassed and that it is important to tell a trusted adult what happened when harassment occurs.

4. **Establish a reporting system and make sure that students know how to use it.** For a school-based Safe Routes to School program, following Title IX reporting procedures may minimize duplication or confusion. A system for reporting should help students understand what to report and when, should help identify the scope of the problem and potential solutions, and should make it clear who is engaging in the harassment and what alternatives may exist for addressing the problem.

5. **Create public relations campaigns to let people know that harassing students on their way to school is unacceptable.** Campaigns can be low-budget, student-run affairs, or can be professionally developed and promoted. Campaigns can occur in school buildings, on the streets, on transit, at parks, or elsewhere.

6. **Explore whether students need additional access to safe spaces on the way to and from school to avoid harassment or violence.** For example, in Arizona, concerns about harassment of LGBTQ students and others led to the establishment of Safe Streets AZ, an initiative where local businesses identify themselves as safe spaces with gold stars so that youth and others can take refuge in the businesses to escape harassment.[6]

7. **Consider safety and harassment audits on school routes and in school vicinities.** School or Safe Routes to School personnel can work with students to conduct safety audits or hotspot analyses of areas near schools and on school travel routes. Identify if there are locations that are accounting for a high percentage of harassment, and explore solutions– e.g., seeing whether trained adults, police officers, or security officers may be available to ride a problem bus route during school travel time; fixing broken lights; stationing school personnel on a corner near school where harassment is common immediately after school; or working with local businesses to train them to interrupt harassment.

References

1. Stop Street Harassment, "Unsafe and Harassed in Public Spaces: A National Report on Street Harassment," June 3, 2014, http://www.stopstreetharassment.org/our-work/nationalstudy/.

2. Harmony Sullivan, Tracy Lord, and Maureen McHugh, "Creeps and Casanovas: Experiences, Explanations, and Effects of Street Harassment," from Michele Antoinette Paludi, Florence Denmark, eds., Victims of Sexual Assault and Abuse: Incidence and Psychological Dimensions, 2010.

3. Amaya N. Roberson, "Anti-Street Harassment," Off Our Backs, May-June 2005, page 48.

4. Stop Street Harassment, "Unsafe and Harassed in Public Spaces: A National Report on Street Harassment," June 3, 2014, http://www.stopstreetharassment.org/our-work/nationalstudy/.

5. See, e.g. Mariame Kaba, The Rogers Park Young Women's Action Team Street Harassment Curriculum, www.rogersparkywat.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/Street-Harassment-Curriculum.pdf. See also Hollaback! Anti-Street Harassment Curriculum.

6. Safe Streets Arizona, https://safestreetsaz.wordpress.com/get-support/safe-sites/.