

**Public Sexual Harassment and Assault of Women and LGBTQ and Gender Non-Conforming Individuals in the District of Columbia:  
Scope, Impact, and Proposed Solutions**

**About the Authors:**

Julia Strange is the Programs and Policy Director of Collective Action for Safe Spaces (CASS). Zosia Szytkowski is the Executive Director of CASS. Founded in 2009, CASS mobilizes the community to end public sexual harassment and assault in the DC metropolitan area. We do this through both online and offline activism, including workshops, innovative direct services, timely policy advocacy, and community outreach. CASS has worked with such institutions as the Metropolitan Police Department (MPD) and the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) to improve system responses to public sexual harassment and assault, including advocating for the Sexual Assault Victims' Rights Amendment Act (SAVRAA) of 2014 and assisting WMATA with the launch of their online harassment reporting portal and public service announcement (PSA) campaigns. CASS has also collected over 900 stories of street harassment, submitted by DC residents to our website: [www.collectiveactiondc.org](http://www.collectiveactiondc.org).

**Public Sexual Harassment & Assault: Why the Issue Matters**

Public sexual harassment and assault, also referred to as “street harassment”, can be described as “any action or comment between strangers in public places that is disrespectful, unwelcome, threatening and/or harassing and is motivated by gender, sexual orientation, or gender expression. It ranges from leers, whistles, honks, kissing noises, gender-policing, and non-sexually explicit evaluative comments, to more insulting and threatening behavior like vulgar gestures, sexually charged comments, flashing, and stalking, to illegal actions like public masturbation, sexual touching, assault, and murder.”<sup>1</sup>

The impact of public sexual harassment and assault reaches far beyond the initial feelings of fear, anger, or annoyance it can elicit in those who experience it. Research shows that

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<sup>1</sup> Stop Street Harassment. <http://www.stopstreetharassment.org/>

experiences of harassment cause “insidious trauma”<sup>2</sup> and lead to heightened anxiety over physical safety, especially among African American women, who also report more harassment experiences.<sup>3</sup> An Urban Institute study found that girls growing up in high poverty face risks to their health because of their gender, including the “demoralizing effects of omnipresent and constant harassment”.<sup>4</sup> In the following section, we will review what the research shows about the prevalence of this public health issue and the ways its effects are felt collectively in our city.

## Data

In 2014, a landmark nationally representative survey by the organization Stop Street Harassment found that 65% of all women and 25% of all men had experienced some form of street harassment.<sup>5</sup> Young people, members of the LGBTQ community, people from communities of color, and people from low-income communities experience more frequent and severe harassment. According to the study:<sup>6</sup>

- 86% percent of women and 79% of men who reported being harassed said they had been harassed more than once.
- Women were more likely than men to say it happened “sometimes, often, or daily.”
- Around 50% of harassed women and men experienced street harassment by age 17.
- 68% of the harassed women and 49% of the harassed men said they were very or somewhat concerned that the incident would escalate into something worse.

This study also examined the impact of street harassment on the daily lives of women and men.

For example:

- Forty-seven percent of women and 32% of men said they began assessing their surroundings after experiencing street harassment.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Miles-McLean, H. et al. (November 2014). “Stop Looking at Me!” Interpersonal Sexual Objectification as a Source of Insidious Trauma. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*.

<http://pwq.sagepub.com/content/early/2014/11/03/0361684314561018?papetoc>

<sup>3</sup> Watson, L.B., et al. (2015). “Understanding the Relationships Among White and African American Women’s Sexual Objectification Experiences, Physical Safety Anxiety, and Psychological Distress.” *Sex Roles*, 72(3-4), pp. 91-104. <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11199-014-0444-y>

<sup>4</sup> Urban Institute

<sup>5</sup> Kearl, H. (2013). *Unsafe and Harassed in Public Spaces: A National Report on Street Harassment, Executive Summary*. <http://www.stopstreetharassment.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/National-Study-Report-Executive-Summary.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Kearl, H. (2013). *Unsafe and Harassed in Public Spaces: A National Report on Street Harassment, Executive Summary*. <http://www.stopstreetharassment.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/National-Study-Report-Executive-Summary.pdf>

- Thirty-one percent of women and 15% of men said they began going more places in a group or with another person rather than alone.
- Four percent of both women and men (but numerically, nearly three times as many women as men) made a big life decision like quitting a job or moving neighborhoods in order to avoid harassment.

This year, advocacy group Hollaback released the results of opt-in surveys about street harassment that were distributed in urban and rural spaces throughout the country. In the nearly 5,000 person sample<sup>8</sup>:

- 35% of respondents experienced harassment for the first time before they turned 13.
- 77% of women under 40 reported being followed by a man or group of men in a way that made them feel unsafe in the past year.
- Half were groped or fondled in the past year.
- 57% of women under 40 feel distracted at school or work due to street harassment.

In addition to collecting stories from DC residents, CASS seeks to understand the big picture impact of street harassment in the DC context. In 2013, CASS reached out to the community to gauge transit safety concerns, utilizing a 23-question online survey disseminated via social media and email.<sup>9</sup> While walking, biking, riding public transportation, or taking a taxi or car share late at night (12am or later) in DC, 83% of respondents experienced verbal harassment, 71% experienced leering, 39% experienced following/stalking behaviors, and 20% were rubbed up against. 80% of respondents indicated that they felt safe using transportation late at night “some of the time” (40%), “hardly ever” (30%), or “never” (10%). Of the 276 respondents, 72% used public transportation (Metro train or bus) 12am or later on Fridays and Saturdays, 66% took taxis or car services, and 13% “often” and 29% “sometimes” walk or bike late at night because they cannot afford a taxi or car service. People who often experience street harassment pay a premium for their safety by taking taxis or rideshare services—if they can afford it. The “safety tax”, as we call it, is an overlooked economic justice issue. And as news reports of allegations of sexual assault against taxi drivers and Uber drivers demonstrate, paying the safety tax does not necessarily guarantee safety.

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<sup>8</sup> Livingston, B., Grillo, M., & Paluch, R. (2015). *Hollaback! International Street Harassment Survey Project*. <http://www.ihollaback.org/cornell-international-survey-on-street-harassment/#us>

<sup>9</sup> Collective Action for Safe Spaces. (2013). *DC Transit Safety Survey*.

CASS recently concluded an informal online survey of sexual harassment and assault experienced at nightlife establishments in 2015. Of the 54 responses received, over 80% experienced someone making sexually suggestive comments, noises or gestures, and nearly 78% experienced someone persistently requesting their attention after they said “no” or ignored them. Experiences in bars and clubs are not limited to verbal harassment. Over 66% also experienced someone purposely rubbing up against or touching them in a sexual way.<sup>10</sup>

CASS is planning a larger-scale online survey with in-person elements such as focus groups to better understand how and where harassment is experienced by people in DC, specifically while using various forms of transportation (Metro, bus, rideshare, and taxis).

Though the surveys and studies described above differ in their scope and methodology, the numbers converge in a way that demonstrates a clear pattern: street harassment is experienced by a majority of women in DC and a large number of men, especially those who are young and/or come from marginalized communities, including the LGBTQ community. It seriously impacts peoples’ perceptions of personal safety and their physical and mental health. People who experience harassment pay a premium to avoid it if they can; if they can’t, they knowingly risk their health and safety. Fundamentally, harassment limits these individuals’ access to public space and important economic, educational, and social opportunities that should be available to everyone.

### **Experiences of Public Sexual Harassment and Assault**

The experiences collected by CASS via the website or our surveys occur at all times of day, in all parts of the city and surrounding area. They illuminate the complexity of the issue and the trauma experienced by targets of harassment. Often they describe writers’ thwarted experiences seeking help. Here are just a few examples:

#### *On Public Transit or in Taxis/Ridesharing*

“I was sitting by the window and a man sat next to me. He sat close enough to make me uncomfortable, but I thought he just had no idea of personal space and pressed myself against the window. I felt a tug on my skirt, but he hid his right hand with his left arm so I was unsure if it

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<sup>10</sup> Collective Action for Safe Spaces. (2015). *DC Nightlife Survey*.

was intentional. I shifted to try and adjust my skirt. After that, he slipped his hand beneath my skirt, pressed his hand against my bare leg, and rubbed it before quickly getting up and exiting the car at the gallery place station. I did not have enough time to process what had just happened and react before he was lost in the sea of people on the platform. I'm more angry I didn't get to call him out and worry he will harass others."<sup>11</sup>

"Something terrifying happened to me on Friday evening, September 26th, around 10:30 pm, after taking a taxi to Cleveland Park. After repeated personal questions and inappropriate comments that made me uncomfortable (eg 'I like you,' 'will you go on a date with me?'), the cab driver stopped in front of my building, looked me in the eyes, intensely, and told me I was locked inside his cab until I handed over 'enough' cash. (He had not turned on the meter for the trip). I was trapped inside and scared, so I complied with his request to hand over cash."<sup>12</sup>

"For the fourth time since I moved to Washington, D.C. 5 years ago, a man has pulled out his private parts on the metro and proceeded to masturbate or expose himself to me while I am headed home from work. I am a lawyer & work late hours. I only ride in the front of the first train because I'm worried that one day one of these psychos may actually try to touch me. It is disgusting and makes me fear for my safety, Women shouldn't have to be subjected to this type of treatment just because they use public transportation. The fact that it's the fourth time is so sad that even I can't believe it."<sup>13</sup>

"Taxis are often my only option, but have had a couple of experiences with drivers hitting on me, making the ride very uncomfortable, but I am more scared of asking him to stop since it's late and I'm not wanting to get back out on the street. But once I really needed to do it, not wanting him anywhere near my apartment."<sup>14</sup>

"The cab came pretty quickly (it's the Yellow Cab company) and I got in. My driver seemed friendly and I sat in the front to make sure he knew where I was going and to talk...Our conversation was fine until we neared where I lived. At this point, he slowed the cab down to almost a crawl and asked when he would see me again...And he asked me if he could at least have a hug. This is in the middle of the night in an empty street so I thought it was better to

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<sup>11</sup> Collective Action for Safe Spaces, Blog Submission, "Kelly Uthoff." (5/19/15).

<sup>12</sup> Collective Action for Safe Spaces, Blog Submission, "Katie Watkins." (10/2/14).

<sup>13</sup> Collective Action for Safe Spaces, Blog Submission, "MW." (4/14/15)

<sup>14</sup> Collective Action for Safe Spaces. (2013). *DC Transit Safety Survey*.

oblige him than to potentially escalate the situation, so I briefly gave him a four-point hug...and drew back quickly. Before drawing back I felt his breath close to my face and he laughingly admitted that he tried to kiss me... Honestly, this is only the most uncomfortable instance out of a number of such situations I've encountered this summer."<sup>15</sup>

### *In Public Spaces*

"I have been stalked, cat called at, touched, leered at, spoken to in horrible terms, followed, harassed, and rubbed. I am 15 years old. That is not only illegal, but it's not right. My friends all deal with it too - but there isn't anything we can do. I don't talk back to harassers because I am \*scared\* of getting hurt. Something needs to change."<sup>17</sup>

"I was walking on L St, just past 13th, when I heard a hiss. I looked toward that direction and saw a naked man standing in the window of an apartment building. He flashed his genitals at me. I quickly turned and walked away. It seems like he was standing there for quite some time waiting to flash any woman who walked by."<sup>18</sup>

"I was walking east on Rhode Island and was almost to 9th street when I saw a man quickly approaching from behind. Something seemed off, so I ran across Rhode Island to give myself some distance. He ran immediately after me so I knew I had to get away. I ran the two blocks until I got to 11th and Rhode Island and got to the liquor store on the corner. I told them someone was chasing me and asked them to lock the door, which they immediately did. He got there about 10 seconds later and started beating on the door so they told me to call the police. He proceeded to beat on the door and hung in front of the store for the entire 20 minutes that it took the cops to arrive.

...One of the officers comes in to talk to me. He says 'did you not notice that he was mentally unstable?' I replied that I did not because he had been behind me the entire time. I proceeded to tell him how the man had chased me two blocks and had banged on the door and had remained outside the store for the 20 minutes that it took the police to arrive. He said 'oh it took us that long? Did he really run because, you realize he was barefoot?' (he did)....It turns out the

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<sup>15</sup> Collective Action for Safe Spaces, Blog Submission, "Cecilia." (7/18/12)

<sup>17</sup> Collective Action for Safe Spaces. (2013). *DC Transit Safety Survey*.

<sup>18</sup> Collective Action for Safe Spaces, Blog Submission "DW," (5/1/15)

police just let the guy go with a ticket. I find this very unsettling as I was lucky enough to get away from him before he made contact but what if the next person isn't so lucky?"<sup>19</sup>

### *In Nightlife Establishments*

"I politely indicated that I didn't want to dance with a man at Wonderland bar and he proceeded to repeatedly brush by me on the dance floor throughout the night, touching my back, hair and butt, all "by accident". 3 or 4 times I told him to back off and give me space until finally I was forced to leave. I felt victimized with no control over my space or body."<sup>20</sup>

"I was groped by a man while standing at the bar. When I turned around he laughed and high-fived two other men with him. To the bar's credit, the bartender had those men removed from the bar very quickly when I told him what happened."<sup>21</sup>

"I was out on Halloween night at [Grand Central](#) with some friends. A middle aged man started following me through the dance floor asking me to dance. I refused politely but he grabbed my arm so he could continue trying to "persuade" me. I pulled free and waited for my friends by the door. On his way out to leave he stopped in front of me and started saying something I couldn't understand, then when I looked down at my phone, he kissed me on the lips and ran out the door. While I was standing there looking shocked and disgusted, the bouncer at the door just laughed and said 'is that how you roll?'"<sup>22</sup>

"To be honest, it happens so frequently, it's hard to keep track of what happened and where."<sup>23</sup>

## **Current Strategies for Addressing Street Harassment in Washington, DC**

### *Sharing Community Stories*

For over six years, CASS has provided an online community forum for sharing stories of public sexual harassment and assault, receiving over 900 stories from every corner of DC. Story-

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<sup>19</sup> Collective Action for Safe Spaces, Blog Submission, "Anonymous." (8/11/14)

<sup>20</sup> Collective Action for Safe Spaces. (2015). *DC Nightlife Survey*.

<sup>21</sup> Collective Action for Safe Spaces. (2015). *DC Nightlife Survey*.

<sup>22</sup> Collective Action for Safe Spaces, Blog Submission, "APL." (10/26/12)

<sup>23</sup> Collective Action for Safe Spaces. (2015). *DC Nightlife Survey*.

sharing is a powerful way of raising awareness about the personal and community impact of public sexual harassment and assault. It is a highly accessible form of participation in the movement against street harassment—due to the prevalence of the problem, almost everyone has a story to tell. It helps individuals find community in their experiences and reduce the sense of isolation that harassment can cause. Because CASS runs many other volunteer-run community programs, in this case, submitting a story also provides an opportunity to get involved in work that improves public safety conditions. Moreover, there is evidence that speaking out about sexism online can increase women’s wellbeing.<sup>24</sup>

### *Leading Community Workshops*

CASS provides trainings to community groups, organization, and schools, including the Washington Area Bicyclist Association, Latin American Youth Center, American University, N Street Village and more on how to respond to street harassment as targets or bystanders, and how to build micro-cultures in a school, organization, or neighborhood that don’t tolerate violence. CASS also provides technical assistance to these and other entities in establishing anti-harassment policies and practices for prevention and response. In 2013, in partnership with Defend Yourself, CASS created the Safe Bars Program, which trains and empowers staff at alcohol-serving establishments to recognize and respond to incidents of sexual harassment and assault among staff and patrons.

### *Transportation Justice Advocacy*

Since 2012, CASS has worked with WMATA to improve the transit authority’s awareness of and response to public sexual harassment and assault. Together with collaborator Stop Street Harassment and concerned community members, CASS pioneered a three-pronged approach to addressing harassment on public transit, including: (1) a multi-year anti-harassment PSA campaign, (2) the creation and launch of an online sexual harassment reporting portal, and (3) comprehensive sexual harassment training for all WMATA employees. WMATA implemented all three recommendations and now collects data and responds to reports via their website and has launched two of three phases of the PSA campaign. It is also in the process of training all of its employees on how to recognize and appropriately respond to sexual harassment and

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<sup>24</sup> British Psychological Society (January 2015). “Tweeting About Sexism May Improve a Woman’s Wellbeing.” Press release available at [http://www.eurekalert.org/pub\\_releases/2015-01/bps-tas013015.php](http://www.eurekalert.org/pub_releases/2015-01/bps-tas013015.php)



assault on or around public transit. This three-pronged approach is serving as a model for transit agencies around the world, including in London and Mexico City. CASS has provided technical assistance to organizations in Canada, Nepal, and Chicago who are working with their local transit agencies to institute similar solutions.

Additionally, CASS is partnering with Lyft to update its anti-harassment policies and driver trainings. CASS has also engaged with Uber and the DC Taxicab Commission to request partnerships.

### *Providing Safe, Free Late-Night Rides*

To lessen the safety tax incurred by people who experience harassment, CASS launched RightRides DC, a free, late-night safe rides program in 2014. Run by trained volunteer drivers, navigators, and dispatchers, who become community leaders in their own right, RightRides DC serves women and LGBTQ individuals in all areas of the city on major holidays. This fall, CASS will increase the frequency of service dates from once per season to once per month, with the goal of expanding capacity to provide this service over the weekend and at other times as needed.

### *Reclaiming Public Spaces with Activism*

CASS has worked with several local artists to conceptualize, create, and distribute street art that draws attention to the impact of street harassment in the public spaces where it occurs. This approach has been used by artists and activists in other cities as well, including Philadelphia-based artist Tatyana Falalizadeh's "Stop Telling Women to Smile" campaign.<sup>25</sup>

### **Gauging the Need for Better Systems Response**

The issue of public sexual harassment and assault is deeply complex. The areas of public safety, health, built environment, transportation and education all intersect here. And unlike more established anti-violence movements (intimate partner violence, etc.), only in recent years has the movement to end public sexual harassment and assault begun to gain traction. While

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<sup>25</sup> Falalizadeh, T. (n.d.). *Stop Telling Women to Smile* (2012-2015). <http://www.tlynnfaz.com/Stop-Telling-Women-to-Smile>

CASS has identified some areas where systems response can improve in the short term (described in “Policy Solutions to Consider”, below), we strongly recommend gauging community need as a concurrent step toward finding impactful solutions for the long term. Here are three ways we believe this need can be gauged:

### *City Council Hearings*

Only two major cities on the east coast have held city council hearings on street harassment. In 2010, New York City hosted the first city council hearing on street harassment, with 18 women and men testifying about the impact of street harassment on people and the community at large. As a result, New York City Council pursued a city-wide study on street harassment and vowed to launch an anti-street harassment PSA campaign. In 2013, Philadelphia City Council followed suit and hosted a street harassment hearing in which nine people testified and a video of teenage girls sharing their experiences of street harassment was viewed by those in attendance. The primary ask of those testifying was for City Council to provide assistance with organizing community safety audits.

CASS’s expertise in community-driven policy advocacy will ensure that a DC Council hearing on public sexual harassment and assault will garner a great deal of testimony and public attention, raising awareness of harassment as a public safety and equal access issue. More importantly, the hearing will give community members an opportunity to share how frequently and in what ways this issue impacts their daily lives as a way to lift up opportunities for intervention.

### *Data Collection*

More can be done to understand and study this issue in partnership with the DC Council and city agencies. CASS has already conducted a variety of informal surveys to gauge the prevalence and impact of public sexual harassment and assault in a variety of settings, including on and around public transit and in nightlife establishments. However, as a very small organization, we do not have the capacity to conduct a representative city-wide study of the prevalence and experience of harassment. As a first step, we suggest that such a study be undertaken in partnership with CASS. We also recommend linking this study to a comprehensive expert review of the many entry points for city agencies to prevent and respond

to street harassment. In so doing, DC would have the opportunity to pioneer an integrated solution to street harassment that can serve as a model for cities across the world.

### *Technology*

The anti-violence movement has found technology to be an impactful way to connect people to resources; CASS believes that technology can also help collect data about public sexual harassment and assault, identifying “hot spots” and tracking patterns over time. We are working to develop an app that would represent a real-time version of our website, where people who experience harassment can submit the story immediately and be connected to resources that can serve them. Though there are precedents for this, the apps that have been released in New York City and around the world haven’t fully responded to the nuance of the issue. Coupled with the growth of CASS’s programming in the community, we believe that the work done in the past few years to improve the 311 service is an excellent opportunity to pioneer a more nuanced response in DC.

### **Policy Solutions to Consider**

CASS’s expertise in the area of public sexual harassment and assault prevention and assault, as well as our experience implementing solutions that have already had an impact in the Washington metropolitan area, has illuminated several areas where we think systems response can be improved in the short term, making the city safer for everyone.

### *Education & Training*

There are a number of agencies that are in a position to respond to public sexual harassment and assault. With the right tools, these systems can help prevent public sexual harassment and assault before it happens. For example, the Alcoholic Beverage Regulation Administration (ABRA) could require all establishments with a liquor license to ensure that a majority of their staff have received sexual harassment and assault prevention training.

Some individuals who experience public sexual harassment call on the Metropolitan Police Department (MPD) to intervene; however, not all of these interventions are perceived as helpful to the victim (for one example, see pages 6-7 above, story submitted by “Anonymous” on

8/11/14). Police officers should receive educational workshops or brown bag lunch discussions to learn more about the issue and how to effectively intervene.

Public sexual harassment and assault is a learned behavior, supported by harmful social norms that excuse or deny it. Educating key stakeholders in how to safely address public sexual harassment and assault and prevent it from occurring can help support healthier social norms rooted in respect.

### *Environmental Management*

Though not a solution to ending public sexual harassment and assault, per se, improving environmental factors can help support safer physical environments while the long-term work continues. For example, supporting a women-led safety audit to assess whether public transportation services take into account the specific needs of their female-identified passengers. Such safety audits would raise awareness about the gender differences in use and experiences of public transportation by male- and female-identified individuals, identify priority areas for improvement, and measure progress towards safety goals.

Additionally, simple interventions like making available more real-time information about bus or metro arrival times, having more staffing at Metro stations, having cab vouchers available to low-income women and LGBTQ individuals for use in emergency situations, and even ensuring better lighting around bus stops can make a difference. The best way to arrive at the interventions that will make a difference is by involving women and LGBTQ individuals in the planning process.

### *Finding Non-Criminal Solutions*

There are many different strategies and approaches to fostering safer communities, of which engaging with the criminal justice system is just one. CASS believes that the police department and police officers can act as important interveners in incidents of public sexual harassment and assault. In cases in which victims of harassment or assault choose to engage with the criminal justice system, CASS is committed to ensuring that its responses are victim-centered and trauma-informed. However, CASS does not support further criminalization of public sexual harassment and assault as a strategy to end public sexual violence because of the criminal

justice system's history of perpetuating structural and interpersonal violence against women and LGBTQ individuals, especially those who are people of color. CASS encourages DC Council and the community to look outside the criminal justice system to address the entrenched structural and cultural aspects of street harassment.

## **Conclusion**

The struggle to end street harassment is a struggle to change the culture that supports it. As community leaders, the DC Council is in a position to set an example for the rest of the city and demonstrate that street harassment is a problem—and that there are solutions. In partnership with community organizations like CASS, the DC Council can help close the gap in understanding of one of the most prevalent forms of gender-based violence, a public safety and health issue experienced by a majority of DC residents. DC is growing and changing in myriad ways; however, if these residents' voices are not heard, then any picture of DC's future will be incomplete. CASS strongly urges the DC Council to consider the steps described in pages 9-13 of this paper, and to move forward on envisioning a Washington, DC where all people feel safe and supported in public space.

## **Resources**

*Collective Action for Safe Spaces (CASS)*. <http://www.collectiveactiondc.org/>

*Kearl, H. (2014). Unsafe and Harassed in Public Spaces: A National Report on Street harassment*. <http://www.stopstreetharassment.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/National-Study-Report-Executive-Summary.pdf>

*Hagerty, T., et al. (2013). Know Your Rights: Street Harassment & the Law*. <http://www.stopstreetharassment.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/SSH-KnowYourRights-StreetHarassmentandtheLaw-20131.pdf>