

The effects of assault and harassment on travel by disabled people

Roger Mackett

Centre for Transport Studies

University College London



What do 'assault and harassment' include?

- Hate crime
- Discrimination
- Anti-social behaviour
- Verbal harassment
- Offensive questions
- Questioning of disability status
- Behaviour designed to humiliate
- Non-consensual photography and filming

The term '**abuse**' will be used to cover all of these.

Methodology

- The National Travel Attitudes Survey (NTAS) is based on a subset of respondents to the National Travel Survey (NTS) which is a rolling survey of households in England about their travel in the previous year.
- Wave 8 of NATS was on attitudes and experiences relating to personal safety when travelling. It was carried out online and by telephone in March and April 2023.
- 18% of the 1,963 responses analysed were from disabled people.

Percentage of respondents who have used public transport modes in the previous year

- Disabled people made fewer trips by four public transport modes than other people in England in the previous year, despite many of them being unable to drive cars.

Public transport mode	Disabled people	Non-disabled people	All	Difference
Bus	63	64	64	-1
Train	40	69	63	-29
Metro	27	44	41	-17
Tram	9	12	12	-3

Percentage of non-users of public transport modes who do so deliberately

- More disabled people than other people avoid using public transport modes deliberately (not just because they have better alternatives available).

Public transport mode	Disabled people	Non-disabled people	All	Difference
Bus	42	31	33	11
Train	26	17	19	9
Metro	17	10	10	7
Tram	11	6	7	5

This shows that 12% of the population and 16% of disabled people deliberately avoid travelling by bus.

Top 2 reasons for non-users purposely avoiding travelling by bus (ranked in order of the difference between people with and without disabilities).

- The top reason why many disabled people avoid travelling by bus is because the behaviour of other passengers make them feel unsafe.

Reason for non-users avoiding bus	Disabled people	Non-disabled people	All	Difference
Behaviour of other passengers makes me feel unsafe	57	28	35	30
Accessibility concerns	26	4	9	22

Top 2 reasons for non-users purposely avoiding travelling by train (ranked in order of the difference between people with and without disabilities).

- Accessibility concerns are the top reason why more disabled people than other people deliberately avoid travelling by train.
- The next reason for deliberately avoiding using the train is the behaviour of other passengers making them feel unsafe.

Reason for non-users avoiding train	Disabled people	Non-disabled people	All	Difference
Accessibility concerns	30	13	20	17
Behaviour of other passengers makes me feel unsafe	33	29	30	5

The proportion of people who have personally suffered assault or harassment on public transport.

- Many more disabled people than other people have been assaulted or harassed while travelling.

	Disabled people	Non-disabled people	All	Difference
All who have been physically intimidated, assaulted or harassed	16	5	7	10
All who have been verbally threatened, harassed or discriminated against	29	15	17	15
One or both	33	17	19	16
Neither	67	83	81	-16

Why didn't you report the assault or harassment incident? (top 3 reasons in terms of difference)

- Many disabled people didn't report the incident because they didn't think that they would be taken seriously.
- Many were concerned that the perpetrator might seek revenge.

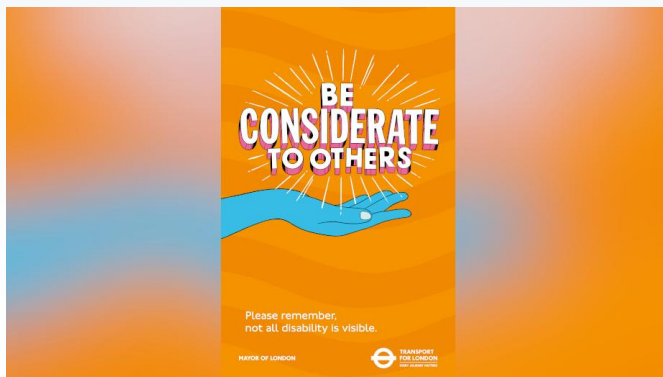
	Disabled people	Non-disabled people	All	Difference
Didn't think that the person or authority I reported it to would take it seriously	78	37	48	41
Afraid that the person or people who assaulted or harassed me would seek revenge	43	18	25	24
Didn't think that the person or people would get caught or punished	77	67	70	10

Possible causes of harassment and assault of disabled people

- Disputes about spaces designated for wheelchair users and seats designated for use by disabled people.
- Delays caused by use of the boarding ramp for wheelchairs on buses and trains.
- Bus drivers becoming impatient with people with communication difficulties.
- Unscrupulous people taking advantage of crowded conditions to touch other people deliberately and choosing people who were less likely to make a fuss or complain.
- Frustrations with slow, overcrowded, hot, poorly ventilated buses being taken out on the nearest vulnerable person.

What can be done about it?

- Legislation to address hate crime – but
 - Difficult to identify and prove motivation
 - Many abuse incidents are not crimes
- Campaigns, such as
 - Considerate Travel Campaigns in London
 - DfT's 'it's everyone's journey' campaign



Source: Transport for London



Source: Department for Transport

What else can be done about it?

- Better staff training
- More staff on board (but they may be the abusers...)
- More surveillance (even more CCTV?)
- Signs on board



- Badges and lanyards (but do disabled people want to be 'labelled'?)

Source: Transport for London



Source: Hidden Disabilities Sunflower Scheme Limited

- **But** do any of these initiatives actually work?

Conclusions

- Many disabled people do not travel by public transport because the behaviour of other passengers makes them feel unsafe.
- Disabled people are targets of physical assault and verbal harassment on public transport much more than other people.
- Many of them feel that their complaints are not taken seriously.
- These incidents make them feel unsafe when travelling on public transport.
- The main issues seem to be on buses.
- Various initiatives can be used to try to address the issues but their effectiveness is not known.
- Feeling unable to travel has implications for their lives and may mean that some of them are unable to leave home.
- This also has revenue implications for transport operators.