

# Asian Women's Experience of Fear of Crime on Public Transportation in Metro Vancouver

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**ABSTRACT** There is an absence in the current criminological literature of peer-reviewed studies examining fear of crime on public transportation in Canada. More specifically, few studies have examined fear of crime on public transportation governed by TransLink in Metro Vancouver. This qualitative study involved 12 semi-structured, in-depth interviews to explore how Asian women experience fear of crime on public transportation in Metro Vancouver. The data were analyzed and coded inductively with three key themes emerging from the data. First, the majority of the participants indicated that they overall felt safe on public transportation. Second, participants explained various factors that increase their feelings of safety on public transportation, including transit locations with strong visibility and lighting, the presence of Transit Officials, and the transit station itself. Participants noted specific factors that decrease their feelings of safety, including travelling at night and being female. The findings provide key policy recommendations for TransLink: first, to improve their safety features on buses to be more aligned with SkyTrain safety features; and second, to improve visibility and lighting at SkyTrain and bus stations in accordance with Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design principles.

## INTRODUCTION

Existing studies have documented differences in people's experiences of crime and their fear of crime, with the majority of these studies having been conducted outside of Canada (e.g., in Australia (Currie et al., 2013); the United Kingdom (Cozens et al., 2003, 2004); the United States of America (Loukaitou-Sideris & Fink, 2009; Yavuz et al., 2007); Mexico City (Vilalta, 2011); and Nigeria (Badiora et al., 2015)). Further, very few peer-reviewed studies have examined fear of crime and public transportation use within Metro Vancouver, a metropolitan area within British Columbia, Canada. Thus, the current study fills a gap in the literature by examining fear of crime on public transportation within Metro Vancouver. The current study also contributes to the existing literature by examining how the intersections of gender, age, and, race and ethnicity influence Asian women's experiences of fear of crime on public transportation in this jurisdiction.

In a study on neighbourhood safety, Loukaitou-Sideris (2006) defined fear as a diminished feeling of safety that may be real or perceived and may influence an individual's actions or behaviours. Perceived fear of crime and actual crime may have an indirect relationship where fear of crime may adversely affect people's lives despite an absence of a likelihood of victimization (Cozens et al., 2003; Currie et al., 2013; Yavuz et al., 2007). Existing research has examined how people experience fear of crime on public transportation. For example, Delbosch and Currie (2012) found that fear of crime influences public transportation users' feelings of safety, which are "believed to have a significant influence on public transport ridership" (p. 302)<sup>1</sup>. Public transportation systems create an environment where large clusters of people – including "a large proportion of demographically high-crime risk people [such as] teenagers, unattached males, [and those of] lower socioeconomic status" (Brantingham et al., 1991, p. 93) – come together and are forced into spaces for finite periods of time, providing "an opportunity structure for offenders to take advantage of" (Gallison & Andresen, 2017, p. 95). Fear of

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<sup>1</sup> The researchers used the terms "public transportation users", "light rail riders", and "transit users" interchangeably throughout this paper to reflect the terminology that was used in the studies they referenced.

crime on public transportation increases due to the unpredictable nature and exposure that individuals experience in large clusters of people (Brantingham et al., 1991). Further, fear of crime on public transportation increases due to the belief that the presence of a rail station will compromise the safety of the surrounding areas and increase offender mobility, thereby transporting crime to nearby neighbourhoods (Billings et al., 2011; Ihlanfeldt, 2003).

Various researchers (Currie et al., 2013; Isom Scott, 2018; Pain, 2001) have identified the importance of examining the intersectionality of certain demographic variables when studying fear of crime on public transportation. The three most common categories of variables studied in the existing literature are: previous victimization, psychological factors, and demographic variables. An individual's perception of safety can be affected by past experiences of victimization, "observations of crime occurrences, or experiences that one has recounted by others" (Currie et al., 2013; Yavuz et al., 2007, p. 20). Currie et al. (2013) suggest that psychological factors such as familiarity with one's environment can influence feelings of safety. For example, feelings of anxiety and discomfort related to travelling on public transportation and the presence of unfamiliar passengers were found to be the "most influential factor driving negative feelings of personal safety on public transport" (Currie et al., 2013, p. 15). The literature has also suggested that fear of crime in public spaces may be higher for certain groups of people when considering demographic variables such as age, gender, and, race and ethnicity (Currie et al., 2013; Kim et al., 2007; Loukaitou-Sideris, 2014; Loukaitou-Sideris & Fink, 2009; Pain, 2001; Smith, 2008; Yavuz & Welch, 2010).

The impact of gender on fear of crime has been well-documented with several studies indicating that women report being more fearful of crime, including on public transportation (Pain, 2001; Vilalta, 2011; Yavuz & Welch, 2010). As a result, women may alter their travel patterns or utilize precautionary or risk-avoidant strategies (Loukaitou-Sideris & Fink, 2009). Studies have also documented the influence of race and ethnicity on people's experiences of fear of crime (Isom Scott, 2018; Pain, 2001; Yavuz & Welch, 2010). For example, Yavuz and Welch (2010) studied individual characteristics and discovered that ethnic minorities are "more likely to have lower perceived train safety" (pp. 2504-2506). However, studies have produced less knowledge about how the intersections of these variables influence experiences of fear of crime. Intersectionality can be understood as the convergence between social identities or characteristics such as racial and ethnic lines, gender, and age that may influence people's experiences of fear of crime and experiences of crime (Isom Scott, 2018; Pain, 2001). Isom Scott (2018) found that female youth of colour were more likely to report "experiencing or witnessing more threatening or violent encounters than their White counterparts" (p. 719), lending support to the notion that the intersections of multiple variables (i.e., age, gender, and, race and ethnicity) influence experiences of fear of crime.

## METHODS

The present qualitative study fills a current gap in the literature by exploring how Asian women experience fear of crime on public transportation. Specifically, the study examines their experiences using the public transportation system in Metro Vancouver, which is governed by TransLink (TransLink, n.d.a). TransLink's public transportation system and accompanying Transit Police serve over 22 different jurisdictions, including 79 km of SkyTrain tracks, 69

km of West Coast Express tracks, and more than 1800 square km of bus service (TransLink, n.d.b; TransLink, n.d.d). Bus services are also overseen by the Coast Mountain Bus transit security team (TransLink, n.d.b). TransLink offers many security features on their SkyTrains, such as "the on-train passenger silent alarm, the on-train speakerphone, the in-station designated waiting areas, the in-stations emergency cabinets, and CCTV," in addition to employing SkyTrain attendants (STA) to assist in emergency responses and customer service (TransLink, n.d.b).

The 12 semi-structured interviews were conducted in English in early 2020. The data were inductively coded and analyzed for categorical codes that the researcher then grouped into emergent themes.

## Sampling Procedure and Design

This study utilized criterion, convenience, and snowball sampling. Criterion sampling required participants to meet pre-defined inclusion criteria which stipulated that participants must be: 19 years of age or older, identify as female, identify as an ethnic minority, and currently use public transportation in Metro Vancouver. Semi-structured interviews were conducted so the researcher had a guide for each interview with the flexibility to deviate from the pre-determined interview questions when participants' responses led to additional avenues of exploration (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Hesse-Biber, 2017; Stuckey, 2013).

The sample was comprised of various ethnicities including Chinese, Filipino, Vietnamese, Indian, and more broadly Asian. Participants (N=12) ranged from 21 to 28 years of age and included full-time students, full-time workers, and students working part-time. Participants primarily utilized the bus and the SkyTrain, "a fully-automated, driverless, rapid transit system" (TransLink, n.d.c), with a single participant citing infrequent usage of the SeaBus. Participants used a mixture of the Canada Line, Expo Line, Millennium Line, and Evergreen Extension SkyTrain with no participants indicating regular or frequent usage of all four SkyTrain lines. Participants used bus lines in various cities such as Vancouver, Surrey, Richmond, and Burnaby.

## Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were uploaded to NVivo 12 to assist in organization for analysis and coding. Participants were ensured confidentiality and assigned pseudonyms to anonymize the data. The data were inductively coded line by line, where a line was treated as a complete sentence or thought. The researcher assigned categorical codes to each line by creating a new code or assigning a pre-existing code and coded twice for accuracy before reviewing the codes to identify larger themes that emerged from the data. The researcher grouped similar codes together to assist in the identification of emergent themes. For example, codes such as lighting, police presence, presence of others, and STAs were grouped in the emergent theme "*factors that increase my feelings of safety*".

## RESULTS

Three main themes emerged from the data focusing on participants' feelings of safety and the factors that increase and decrease feelings of safety on public transportation. The first theme

that emerged from the data was *“I feel pretty safe while on [public transportation]”*. Most participants described feeling safe on public transportation. Jenna explained, “for the most part it’s pretty safe. There [are some negative experiences I’ve had, which] I guess [are] really unavoidable with anything that’s available to the public, but for the most part it’s pretty safe”.

The second theme that emerged from the data was *“factors that increase feelings of safety”*, including enhanced lighting and visibility, the presence of Transit Officials, the presence of others, travelling on the SkyTrain, and the structure and composition of the station. The first subtheme was *“lighting is a key factor in visibility, [it] changes my [feelings of] safety”*. Melany explained:

*I think that lighting is a key factor in visibility, [it] changes my [feelings of] safety a lot [and poorly lit areas create a concern that] people aren’t coming to check on that area as often... Also [sometimes] you just don’t know [what could happen when] it’s not as well lit.*

Notably, participants identified feeling safer in the presence of Transit Officials, including STAs and Transit Police, in the subtheme *“[when] Transit Officers come in you automatically feel a bit safer”*. Sara described how the presence of STAs increased her feelings of safety by having “someone to go to directly” while Jenna indicated that their visibility made her feel safer. Most participants also indicated feeling safer on the SkyTrain than the bus in the subtheme *“you just generally feel safer on the SkyTrain”*. For example, Raman stated, “I just feel like you [are] just generally safer on the SkyTrain. [There are] more security measures in place”. Further, Jasmine explained, “I feel a bit safer when I’m at the SkyTrain station or on the SkyTrain rather than waiting at the bus stop or being on the bus”. Additionally, participants noted that their feelings of safety were impacted by the composition, layout, and structure of SkyTrain stations and bus stops. Raman discussed how the appearance of older SkyTrain stations impacts her feelings of safety, stating:

*[At] Surrey Central they’ve done a lot of construction there and it looks a lot nicer [whereas] King George is such an old station and they never try to make improvements at all and it’s kind of become an attraction for violence.*

The last theme that emerged from the data was *“factors that decrease feelings of safety”*. Participants noted that factors such as travelling at night, past negative experiences, the neighbourhood they were travelling in, and their gender decreased their feelings of safety. Notably, Sara discussed avoiding travelling at night in the subtheme *“I don’t really take [public transportation] at night”*, stating, “it’s always really unnerving...I don’t really take [public transportation] at night unless I have to, like for exams, or if I suddenly have to go out, but it’s very rare for me to take it at night”.

A few participants also noted that their gender decreased their feelings of safety in the subtheme *“[maybe] it’s because I am a woman that I’m a little bit afraid”*. Shelby described how her fear is increased due to her gender, stating:

*I feel like as a woman when you are engaged in [negative experiences with men such as unnecessary*

*touching and repeated attempts at conversation] you have to be more conscious about how you are projecting to your surroundings. Rather than [for] a dude, I don’t think when a guy is getting talked to [they just think of it as] an experience because there is no threat of anything happening to them. But, for a woman, I think that any experience where you don’t know the person [it becomes about] how much information [you] share, [and] do they think I’m trying to flirt with them? I think that even when you’re being nice to someone, they will take it as something else.*

## DISCUSSION

The study explored how Asian women experience feelings of safety on public transportation in Metro Vancouver. Current literature has not adequately evaluated transit users’ utilization of “precautionary measures” or how travelling alone versus travelling with others influences feelings of safety (Scott, 2003). Although some findings suggest female transit riders have an aversion to travelling alone at night (Kim et al., 2007), most of the support for this notion is found in campus safety literature that suggests individuals increase their usage of precautionary measures and behaviours, such as locking their car doors and not walking by strangers when travelling alone (Baker & Boland, 2011; Fletcher & Bryden, 2007).

Moreover, there is little known about how intersectionality (e.g., demographic variables such as age, gender, race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and previous victimization) influences experiences of fear of crime despite the literature acknowledging its importance. Interestingly, none of the participants identified their ethnic minority status as a factor that decreased their feelings of safety despite previous literature that suggests ethnic minorities and women experience higher rates of fear of crime compared to their counterparts (Pain, 2001; Vilalta, 2011; Yavuz & Welch, 2010). However, four participants identified feeling less safe as a result of their gender which is consistent with previous literature that has suggested women are more likely than men to report being fearful of crime (Pain, 2001; Vilalta, 2011; Yavuz & Welch, 2010). The finding that no participants identified their ethnic minority status as decreasing their feelings of safety may be partially explained by the fact that while all the participants visibly appear and identify as ethnic minorities, none of the participants wear religious clothing that would identify them as a minority. Additionally, it is possible that the level of ethnic diversity in Metro Vancouver influenced participants’ experiences of feelings of safety in relation to their ethnic minority status. That is, given the ethnic diversity surrounding them, they may not have seen their ethnic minority status as an influencing factor that decreased their feelings of safety on public transportation.

Consistent with previous literature, participants indicated a greater fear of crime when travelling at night compared to travelling during the day (Badiora et al., 2015; Currie et al., 2013; Loukaitou-Sideris, 2006; Scott, 2003). Further, participants reported feeling safer in the presence of Transit Officials and in public transportation structures that followed Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design principles, as such features increase visibility by utilizing designs that promote natural surveillance in the structure of the transit system (Badiora et al., 2015; Billings et al., 2011; Cozens et al., 2004; Gallison, 2016; Gallison & Andresen,

2017; Ihlanfeldt, 2003; Loukaitou-Sideris, 2014; Vilalta, 2011; Yavuz & Welch, 2010). Participants indicated feeling safer on the SkyTrain compared to the bus, which is contrary to previous studies that have found higher levels of perceived bus safety (Currie et al., 2013; Yavuz et al., 2007) and studies that suggest feelings of safety remain consistent across different modes of transportation (Vilalta, 2011). It is unclear whether the train systems in studies conducted outside of Canada are comparable to the SkyTrain system in Metro Vancouver. Further, it is possible that bus systems outside of Metro Vancouver have stronger safety measures than trains, hence explaining the difference in findings.

## CONCLUSION

The findings from the current study provide valuable insights into Asian women's feelings of safety on public transportation in Metro Vancouver, an understudied area of research. Considering the multiculturalism and ethnic diversity in Metro Vancouver, it is important to understand how an individual's gender or race and ethnicity may differentially impact their feelings of safety. These findings point to several key policy implications to improve transport users' feelings of safety and may be reflective of specific experiences and factors that influence feelings of safety for female and Asian transit users.

The policy implications resulting from this study are mainly directed at TransLink as this agency governs the majority of public transportation in Metro Vancouver. Participants indicated that their fear of crime was greater on the bus compared to the SkyTrain which may be partially explained by the presence of Transit Officials and the availability of different safety measures on SkyTrains, including the silent alarm. Combined, these findings suggest TransLink would benefit from increasing the presence of their Coast Mountain Bus transit security team and Transit Police along bus routes and strengthening the security features offered on buses to be similar to those on the SkyTrain. TransLink would further benefit from future research considering the specific factors or security features that promote feelings of safety (e.g., silent alarm). Future research should also explore how the intersections of gender, age, and, race and ethnicity impact fear of crime and experiences of crime on public transportation. This will lead to a better understanding of how one's race and ethnicity may differentially impact their feelings of safety in efforts to increase our understanding of the fear of crime and public transportation usage. Specifically, further evaluation is necessary to determine how the convergence of demographic variables influences experiences of fear of crime in comparison to individuals without intersections of gender, age, and, race and ethnicity.

The current study is not without limitations. Fear of crime was not examined in relation to specific bus routes or SkyTrain lines (e.g., Millennium, Expo, or Canada Lines) in Metro Vancouver. As such, the findings are limited due to data referring only generally to the SkyTrain, buses, and public transportation. The current study is also subject to methodological limitations. Due to time constraints, this study did not utilize triangulation, a method that can enhance the sincerity and credibility of research (Golafshani, 2003; Hesse-Biber, 2017). Further, the use of non-probability sampling makes the results non-generalizable. Nonetheless, this study provides an exploration of an under-researched area with thick, descriptive responses, providing a valuable contribution to the existing literature examining fear of crime on public transportation in Metro Van-

couver. Insights from the Metro Vancouver transit system allow researchers worldwide to better understand how the intersections of gender, and, race and ethnicity influence Asian women's feelings of safety on public transportation.

## CONFLICTS OF INTERESTS

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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