

Under Siege Under Ground >>

Feature Article

Below street level and with nowhere to run, many LGBTQ New Yorkers are finding themselves victims of harassment on the subway. Is the city doing enough to secure our safety?

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Every day, more than half of New York workers commute using public transportation—including the five million people who ride the subway. The average commute—39 minutes—is enough time to read the newspaper or a chapter of a book. Unfortunately, it's also enough time to be subject to harassment, sexual assault or other attacks. And while traveling through New York—by subway, bus, train, walking, cab or on foot—can be dangerous, it's particularly so for the city's LGBTQ population, who find themselves disproportionately affected by harassment and bullying.

Often, those affected by harassment keep silent; inappropriate actions go unreported and harassment continues. But activists are fighting to prevent harassment and to change how people perceive it in order to create a society where offenders don't get a free pass.

Oraia Reid, co-founder and executive director of RightRides for Women's Safety, agrees that there's a problem with how people view harassment. "Especially for the mass transit environment, there's this sense among survivors that the problem is so overwhelming that you can't really do anything about it. We're trying to challenge that. We're trying to challenge social norms," she explains.

Reid has made it her personal mission to fight harassment through RightRides for Women's Safety since she began using her own car and cell phone to offer rides in 2004. RightRides now offers free car rides home to women and LGBTQ people in 45 New York neighborhoods on Friday and Saturday nights between midnight and 3am. Through the organization, she has helped stop harassment, raised awareness about the pervasiveness of harassment while traveling, and helped many people travel safely. "I'm proud that we've served thousands of people who are at risk," says Reid. "It's really empowering to be doing this work and to hear how much of a difference we're making in people's lives."

RightRides has been instrumental in preventing late-night abuse against LGBTQ people and women in certain areas, but it doesn't address the problem of harassment that occurs during the day. So Reid gathered other activists in New York to start a coalition to fight against subway harassment. In 2009, with the hard work of Reid and others, including Emily May, New Yorkers for Safe Transit (NYFST) was born.

During the early stages, the community organizers that would form NYFST faced a huge hurdle, followed by a

substantial win. The MTA was considering putting up anti-harassment ads in the subway but the ads were pulled because “they thought that anti-harassment ads would encourage more harassment,” May says. The organizers told the MTA they would have a press conference if the ads weren’t put up; the MTA chose to avoid the negative press. The ads stated: “Sexual harassment is a crime in the subway, too—A crowded train is no excuse for an improper touch. Don’t stand for it or feel ashamed, or be afraid to speak up. Report it to an MTA employee or police officer.”

May started her journey with a focus on fighting street harassment before NYFST was formed. After experiencing considerable street harassment, she co-founded Hollaback!, an organization focused on creating a movement of people fighting street harassment in their everyday lives. Hollaback! encourages those affected by harassment to “hollaback” about verbal or physical assaults by snapping cell phone picture of the offenders (or the location of the incident) and posting it online. The victims can feel empowered—and it can potentially embarrass or even ward off offenders.

On the Hollaback! website, May says that harassment “has nothing to do with sex, and everything to do with power.” While harassment typically affects women more often than men, gay men and other LGBTQ people are often the target. “[They] have less power than straight folks,” May asserts. Gay men, she says, “are at a really high risk for sexual and homophobic harassment on the street.”

Hollaback! also has iPhone and android apps, allowing people to easily share their pictures and stories. By utilizing new technologies, Hollaback! has grown exponentially from its beginning in New York City to now being in 15 cities around the world. May describes “the tremendous expansion” as one of her biggest accomplishments with the group.

Organizations founded to fight harassment aren’t the only forces behind the movement to stop it, though. Gay Men’s Health Crisis (GMHC), an organization focused on ending the HIV/AIDS epidemic, is working toward a similar goal—they recently launched a campaign that indirectly combats subway harassment. In October 2010, their “I Love My Boo” campaign put posters featuring black and Latino gay men in 1,000 subway cars and 150 stations. According to the GMHC, the campaign “promotes acceptance and understanding in a climate where gay men of color are seldom represented favorably in the media.” Derrick Briggs, Community Health Specialist at GMHC, points out that “harassment of LGBT people happens everywhere, [creating] a need for more educational campaigns that raise awareness about anti-gay bullying and other forms of homophobia. Eventually this [advocacy] work will knock down the walls of ignorance.”

The city also recognizes that harassment is a serious issue and that bullying, harassment and hate crimes disproportionately affect LGBTQ people. In response, City Council Speaker Christine Quinn and Mayor Michael Bloomberg launched the “Love love. Hate hate.” campaign. Begun in October 2010, the campaign put up posters in 100 bus shelters and 100 phone kiosks in the five boroughs—and is airing a video on two TV channels and on television screens in New York taxis.

The posters read: “Our diversity is our greatest strength. When any New Yorker is attacked for who they are, what they believe or whom they love it is a crime against all of us. Keep our City strong. Love love. Hate hate.” The posters draw attention to the fact that LGBTQ people are particularly likely to be targeted in hate crimes and are sometimes at risk solely because of their perceived gender identity or sexual orientation. “New York is a state where we value diversity. We need to continue our message of acceptance and love for all New Yorkers,” said Speaker Christine Quinn at the campaign’s launch.

The “Love love. Hate hate.” campaign not only draws attention to important problems in the LGBTQ community and the dangers that we face, but it also highlights how transportation and commuting outlets can be used to send a message to New Yorkers and raise awareness about important issues.

In light of all of these victories, harassment still occurs. It happens on subways, buses and on the street; in the very places where people should be getting the message that it isn’t acceptable. So what defines success for May, Reid, Briggs and other anti-harassment activists?

“I think that when we ignore harassment because we think it’s our fault or because we feel there are bigger issues that need to be dealt with in the world, we really pave the road for gender-based violence to continue

on a broad level," May says. "[We should] ultimately be looking to prevent a broader culture where gender-based violence is seen as okay."

May stresses that everyone should share their stories to help educate others about harassment. Reid also thinks that raising awareness and educating others is an important next step. Ultimately, though, Reid says: "I would love to put myself out of a job. I would love to make gender-based violence stop."