

# The Worker Institute at Cornell

## Equity at Work

### Report

#### Project partners

The Worker Institute at Cornell, part of the Cornell University ILR School ([www.ilr.cornell.edu](http://www.ilr.cornell.edu)), advances worker rights and collective representation nationally and internationally.

***hollaback!*** ([www.ihollaback.org](http://www.ihollaback.org)) is a movement dedicated to using mobile technology to end street harassment.

#### Researchers <sup>1</sup>

Cornell ILR School Assistant Professor  
**Beth A. Livingston**

Cornell ILR Workplace Issues Director  
**KC Wagner**

Silberman School of Social Work  
at Hunter College, Class of 2012  
**Sarah T. Diaz**

#### Related research

[www.ilr.cornell.edu/news/WorkerInstitute\\_42712.html](http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/news/WorkerInstitute_42712.html)

#### More information

**KC Wagner**  
[kcw8@cornell.edu](mailto:kcw8@cornell.edu) | 212.340.2826  
**Beth Livingston**  
[bal93@cornell.edu](mailto:bal93@cornell.edu) | 607.255.4454

## When Street Harassment Comes Indoors: A Sample of New York City Service Agency and Union Responses to Street Harassment

#### Abstract

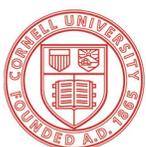
Street harassment is an under-researched, but likely prevalent, experience for many New Yorkers. In partnership with Hollaback!, researchers from the Worker Institute at Cornell sought to better understand how often New York City-based social service providers receive reports of street harassment, and how they respond to those reports. In a survey of 110 service providers, we found that more than 86 percent of respondents had received reports of street harassment from a client, constituent or consumer, and that 92 percent of respondents felt there was a need for increased training and resources for both their staff and those they serve. In our report, we explore these findings further and offer some possible steps for taking action on this important issue.

#### I. Study Purpose/Background

Street harassment is a form of gender-based harassment that occurs in public spaces and can target straight women and men, as well as members of the LGBTQ community. While there has been little research done that documents street harassment's prevalence, there is some emerging evidence that it is one of the most pervasive forms of gender-based violence in the United States. For example, the recently released Centers for Disease Control and

**How often do organizations receive complaints about street harassment? How do their staffs respond? What kind of support do they need?**

Prevention report on the results of the 2010 National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey found that non-contact unwanted sexual experiences, which include street harassment, "were the most common form of sexual violence experiences by both women and men."<sup>2</sup> Survey results showed that more than 33.7 percent of women had experienced some type of non-contact unwanted sexual experience in their lifetimes, equating to more than 40 million women. For men, these experiences were reported by more than 12.8 percent of those surveyed, equating to 14 million men who had experienced non-contact unwanted sexual experiences in their lifetimes. Therefore, experiences of street harassment are likely a reality for many New Yorkers, but there is little research on their prevalence and the types of responses harassment targets receive when the behavior is reported.<sup>3</sup>



Cornell University  
ILR School

While many targets and witnesses of street harassment have spoken out about their experiences and how the harassment experiences have influenced feelings of safety, self-worth and self-objectification, further research is needed to establish the extent to which street harassment is experienced and whether those who deal with reports of street harassment are sufficiently trained to handle them. In partnership with Hollaback!, a movement dedicated to ending street harassment using mobile technology, researchers at the Worker Institute at Cornell administered a survey to staff members of New York City-based social service, advocacy and labor organizations. Given the lack of research on street harassment, the aim of this exploratory study is to begin assessing:

- the extent to which these organizations receive reports of street harassment from their clients, constituents, consumers and/or staff.
- the mechanisms that staff use to respond to reports of street harassment.
- the extent to which there is a perceived need for further training and methods for responding to reports of street harassment.

## II. Methodology

Through a combination of snowball sampling, in which study subjects recruit additional subjects, and Internet research, we identified 282 staff members of New York City-based social service, advocacy or labor organizations. We distributed our electronic survey to these contacts and received 110 responses.

The sample was drawn from a cross-section of a variety of types of agencies in each of the five boroughs of New York City. Respondents included organizations offering therapy and counseling, houses of worship, substance treatment programs, afterschool providers, schools (both kindergarten through twelfth grade and colleges and universities), and unions. Staff responding ranged from interns to board members and directors.

For the purposes of the survey we defined street harassment as a form of gender-based harassment that occurs in public spaces and can target straight men and women as well as members of the LGBTQ community. There are specific behaviors that are classically associated with street harassment, such as unwanted sexual comments or groping. However, in agreement with Hollaback!'s assertion "that what specifically counts as street harassment is determined by those who experience it," we chose not to describe a specific set of behaviors that qualified as street harassment and, instead, let respondents self-define.<sup>4</sup>

The survey included questions about the frequency of reports of street harassment made by clients, constituents and staff members; the ways in which staff receiving reports of street harassment were most likely to respond; staff levels of confidence in dealing with reports of street harassment; the extent to which dealing with street harassment is a part of the respondent's organizational mission; and the level of desire for further training and resources on responding to reports of street harassment.

## III. Key Findings

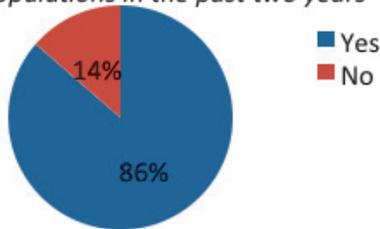
Survey responses indicated the following:

- i. New York City-based social service, advocacy and labor organizations receive a significant number of complaints regarding street harassment from clients, constituents, consumers and/or staff, and believe street harassment is an issue of importance for employees and/or those they serve.
- ii. When receiving reports of street harassment, staff members of New York City-based social service, advocacy and labor organizations are more likely to utilize informal (rather than formal) responses in dealing with them.
- iii. Staff members of New York City-based social service, advocacy and labor organizations indicate having some confidence in dealing with reports of street harassment, but desire increased training and resources for staff and clients, constituents and consumers.

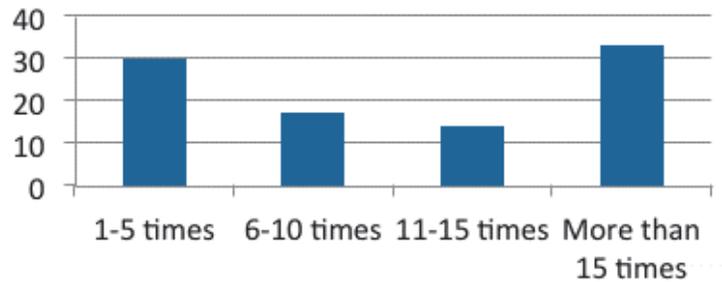
i. New York City-based social service, advocacy and labor organizations receive a significant number of complaints regarding street harassment from clients, constituents, consumers and/or staff, and believe street harassment is an issue of importance for employees and/or those they serve.

More than 86 percent of respondents had received a complaint regarding street harassment from a client, constituent or consumer in the past two years. Of those who received complaints, 35 percent indicated receiving more than 15 individual reports, 15 percent received 11-15 reports, 18 percent received 6-10 reports and 32 percent received 1-5 reports.

**Fig 1.** Percentage of organizations that have received reports of street harassment from their client/constituency/consumer populations in the past two years

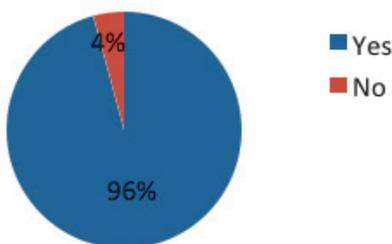


**Fig 2.** Number of times respondents received complaints regarding street harassment from clients/constituents/consumers

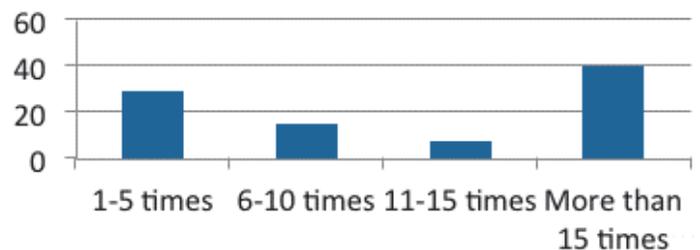


Ninety-six percent of respondents reported that they or a colleague had been a target of street harassment. Of those who responded positively, 44 percent indicated that they and/or their colleague had had more than 15 experiences of street harassment, eight percent reported 11-15 experiences, 16 percent reported 6-10 experiences and 32 percent reported 1-5 experiences.

**Fig 3.** Percentage of respondents who reported that either they or a colleague had been a target of street harassment



**Fig 4.** Number of times respondents reported either themselves or their colleagues had been targets of street harassment



Seventy-seven percent of those who had received reports of street harassment stated the issue was either “important,” “very important” or “extremely important” for their clients, constituents, consumers and/or staff. For those who had not received reports of street harassment, this number was only slightly lower at 75 percent.

ii. When receiving reports of street harassment, staff members of New York City-based social service, advocacy and labor organizations are more likely to utilize informal (rather than formal) responses in dealing with them.

For those who received complaints regarding street harassment, the majority reported using more informal strategies in their responses. Ninety-six percent indicated they responded by listening, 88 percent provided emotional support and a number of respondents applied knowledge they had about harassment and gender-based violence in their correspondences with complainants, including 62 percent who applied knowledge about sexual harassment, 54 percent who applied knowledge about rape and 48 percent who applied knowledge about street harassment. Importantly, this suggests that those receiving reports of street harassment locate the experience on a continuum of gender-based violence, rather than as an isolated phenomenon.

In contrast, respondents were less likely to utilize more formal responses, which we identified as those responses that required engaging colleagues and/or government agencies. Fourteen percent of respondents called a colleague for advice, 20 percent referred the complainant to another colleague or agency, nine percent called another organization for advice, five percent called security and a small number contacted a city authority; five percent called 311 and three percent called 911.

Lastly, more than 13 percent of respondents reported not knowing what to do.

**iii. Staff members of New York City-based social service, advocacy and labor organizations indicated having some confidence in dealing with reports of street harassment but desire increased training and resources for staff and clients, constituents and consumers.**

While only a small number in either group reported being “very confident” in dealing with complaints of street harassment, the majority of staff from all responding organizations (both those who had and hadn’t dealt with complaints of street harassment) reported having some confidence. For those who had previously received complaints, 82 percent indicated being “a little confident,” “somewhat confident” or “pretty confident” in their knowledge of how to respond. For those who had not received complaints, that number was only slightly lower at 74 percent.

Despite having some confidence, more than 92 percent of respondents reported an interest in receiving increased resources for staff and clients, constituents and/or consumers on how to deal with street harassment. For those responding positively, 75 percent expressed an interest in website resources, 69 percent in hard copy resources, 56 percent in in-person or online trainings, 55 percent in email alerts on street harassment prevention and resources, and 35 percent in an application for smartphones or other electronic devices.

Additionally, while only six percent of respondents reported that street harassment was included in their organization’s mission statement, vision or values, 14 percent felt these documents should be expanded to include street harassment. An additional 70 percent felt that their mission statement, vision and values should not be expanded, but that their clients, constituents and/or consumers should be provided with information and resources for dealing with street harassment.

**More than 70 percent of respondents felt that their clients, constituents or consumers should be provided with information and resources on how to deal with street harassment, regardless of organizational mission.**

#### **IV. Next Steps**

Our findings show that, despite a lack of research and training on street harassment, the behavior appears to be greatly affecting New Yorkers and those who serve them. The vast majority of our respondents report dealing with a large number of complaints of street harassment, as well as a need for enhanced training and resources for both themselves and their clients. Their reported responses to street harassment also suggest that formal systems or responses for dealing with complaints of street harassment are either unknown or unavailable, indicating that street harassment is being dealt with on an individual, rather than systemic, basis.

#### **Taking Action**

There is a need for policymakers and service providers to ensure that there are resources available to help targets of street harassment. This can be done in a number of ways, and importantly we don’t have to reinvent the wheel. Just as those we

**The collective harm caused by street harassment is unknown, but its prevalence and the fact that it is being widely reported indicate that it is an active force in the lives of many New Yorkers.**

surveyed recognize the connections between street harassment and other types of gender-based harassment and bullying, it's our belief that we can build upon existing tools and curricula that seek to prevent these phenomena. For example, anti-bullying curricula can include a street harassment component, as can sexual harassment trainings. As new resources and curricula are developed, we can draw from what we know about harassment prevention. While this does not eliminate the need for further research and resources on street harassment, it does provide a rich platform to build on.

We recommend that policymakers and service providers invest in the following solutions to combat street harassment:

- development of a comprehensive resource guide for service providers.
- making available and engaging consultants (such as Hollaback!) who can help guide organizations as they institute policies and practices regarding street harassment.
- providing routine trainings and webinars for those on the front lines including non-profit and faith-based community based organizations; teachers and school-based employees, including crossing guards and security guards; and MTA workers and police officers.
- the institution of harassment-free zones around schools, which would provide a coordinated awareness campaign aimed at ending street harassment in those areas so that targeted students would not experience intimidation as part of their educational experience (as advocated by New York City Councilperson Julissa Ferreras).
- Holding community safety audits, a United Nations-recognized best practice for assessing the level of safety from gender-based violence in a community. To conduct an audit, you gather teams of 5-7 community members from a variety of backgrounds and who can offer unique perspectives about safety and inclusion issues. The teams survey high-risk areas, assessing factors such as the gender make-up of those in the space, how those present are using the space and lighting levels of the space. Community safety audits result in increased community engagement and recommendations of concrete improvements.
- Engagement of the local business community to train their proprietors and staffs about street harassment and how to respond to reports of harassment, and the establishment of "safe zones" within their stores.
- The incorporation of an anti-street harassment curriculum into anti-bullying and sexual education efforts (as stated above). A primary barrier to ending street harassment is the lack of awareness that the behavior does not have to be accepted, and that we can work together as communities to counteract it. Public education is a vital piece of the battle to eliminate street harassment and gender-based violence more broadly.

## **Reporting**

Our findings also show a need for more formalized, systematic responses and research. The lack of a formal reporting system makes it challenging to collect the data needed to invest in potential solutions and target limited resources. In addition, it makes it difficult to evaluate the impact of our proposed solutions and make smart, strategic decisions about interventions. To address this problem, we argue that the following be implemented:

- 311 and 911 operators should be trained to respond to and effectively track reports of street harassment.
- Existing reporting mechanisms, such free iPhone and Droid applications provided by as Hollaback!, should be connected to 311 to allow for increased ease of reporting.
- Questions on the prevalence and impact of street harassment should be incorporated into existing measures, such as the New York City Department of Health's annual Community Health Survey.
- Investment in in-depth research on the impact of street harassment on community members' decisions related to work, housing and education.

Ensuring that systems are responsive to complaints will both validate the experiences of those targeted by street harassment, as well as provide important resources for both targets and those who serve them.

## Raising Awareness

Given street harassment's prevalence, New York City officials and nonprofit organizations should work to raise awareness of street harassment as being a part of the continuum of gender-based violence. This can occur in a number of ways, including, but not limited to:

- Neighborhood speak-outs designed to encourage community members to share their stories and build awareness that they aren't alone.
- Public service announcements that work on educating both targets of harassment and bystanders to encourage engagement and reporting. These announcements should be featured in high-traffic spaces, including bus stops and subways.
- Public hearings that work to raise awareness and educate the public about the issue.
- Workshops on street harassment and how to intervene safely if you witness street harassment. Importantly, these workshops should include both community members and officials and their staffs, so that those who act as liaisons with community members are prepared to respond to complaints of street harassment.
- Email blasts that educate community members who provide resources on how to respond to harassment and information on organizations addressing street harassment.
- Editorials and opinion pieces that denounce the behavior. One of the primary barriers to ending street harassment is the lack of awareness that the behavior does not have to be accepted, and that we can work together as communities to counteract it. Public education is a vital piece of the battle to eliminate street harassment and gender-based violence more broadly.

## V. Conclusion

Street harassment may be one of the most prevalent forms of gender-based harassment in New York City, but until now, knowledge about how frequently it's reported or what we might do to combat it has been scarce. It is our hope that reports like this one, as well as the presence of organizations like Hollaback!, can help build knowledge on this topic and assist those who wish to combat gender-based violence by offering clear ways to take action.

---

1 Lead researcher KC Wagner, Director of Workplace Issues, Worker Institute at Cornell, with Beth Livingston, Assistant Professor of Human Resource Studies, Cornell University ILR School, and Sarah T. Diaz, graduate social work intern, Silberman School of Social Work at Hunter College. With acknowledgment to Sarah T. Diaz for her outstanding contributions to the study design, implementation and report writing, and great appreciation to Emily May, co-Founder of Hollaback!, for her vision and vitality.

2 Black, M.C., Basile, K.C., Breiding, M.J., Smith, S.G., Walters, M.L., Merrick, M.T., Chen, J., & Stevens, M.R. (2011). The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS): 2010 Summary Report. Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (p. 20)

3 See Livingston, Wagner, Diaz and Lu. (2012) "A Qualitative Study of a Sample of 223 Voices who Hollaback! The Experience of Being Targets of Street Harassment in New York City. Cornell-ILR and Hollaback!

4 <http://www.ihollaback.org/about/faqs/>