

# 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**

Cornell ILR School, Class of 2013  
**Angela Lu**

#### 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**  
[ba193@cornell.edu](mailto:ba193@cornell.edu) | 607.255.4454

## The Experience of Being Targets of Street Harassment in NYC: Preliminary Findings from a Qualitative Study of a Sample of 223 Voices who Hollaback!

#### Abstract

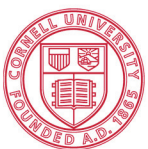
Street harassment is an under-researched but likely prevalent experience for many New Yorkers. In partnership with Hollaback!, Cornell-ILR researchers sought to better understand how street harassment is experienced and the factors that influence its short- and long-term outcomes for those targeted by implementing a grounded qualitative study of descriptions of experiences of street harassment taking place in New York City submitted to the Hollaback! website between 2005 and 2008. In our report, we describe our findings and present a preliminary theoretical model of how street harassment is experienced, as well as suggest some possible hypotheses for future study.

#### 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.<sup>2</sup> 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 Prevention report on the results of the 2010 National Intimate Partner and Sexual

Violence Survey (NISVS) found that non-contact unwanted sexual experiences, which include street harassment, "were the most common form of sexual violence experienced by both women and men."<sup>3</sup> The NISVS results showed that

**"I feel very privileged to live in a city that hollers back. The October hearings against street harassment were inspirational regardless of the public backlash. What really gives me hope is the idea that very young girls will follow our example and no young girl will ever have to bear street harassment in silence if she does not want to. This idea that women of all ages can start a movement and impress upon very young girls just what it can mean to be a woman has started to guide me more and more in my actions."**  
**- Hollaback! user**



Cornell University  
ILR School

over 33.7% of women had experienced some type of non-contact unwanted sexual experience in their lifetime, equating to over 40 million women. For men, these experiences were reported by over 12.8% 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 targets of harassment receive when the behavior is reported.<sup>4</sup>

In partnership with Hollaback!, a movement dedicated to ending street harassment using mobile technology, researchers at the Worker Institute at the Cornell University School of Industrial Labor Relations designed and implemented a grounded qualitative study of descriptions of experiences of street harassment submitted to the Hollaback! website from 2005 to 2008.

### **The purpose of the study was:**

- a. to better understand how street harassment is experienced and the factors that influence the short- and long-term outcomes for those targeted; and
- b. to build a theoretical model of how street harassment is experienced, in hopes that the model can be used to contribute to theory and future research.

Founded in 2005, Hollaback! is an organization that utilizes grassroots and social media strategies to contribute to the movement to end street harassment. In keeping with Hollaback!'s assertion "that what specifically counts as street harassment is determined by those who experience it", the study design used the "voices and experiences" of internet users in order to understand the experience of street harassment, its impact on those targeted, strategies of response and future expectations. This report will highlight the study methodology, provide a snapshot of 223 randomly selected "hollas" and present an explanatory model of how street harassment is experienced.

## **II. Methodology**

The researchers were provided with a database of scenarios submitted to Hollaback!'s website. A random sample of 223 cases was selected from the scenarios that identified the harassment as occurring in New York City, representing 25% of the total New York City sample. The researchers then created a standardized coding scheme using a grounded, iterative process. Specifically, the researchers selected a random subset of the sample, read each scenario, and coded each using in vivo coding, which attempts to capture the nature of the situation using the actors own words where possible. To establish our coding scheme, we added to the compendium of codes as we reviewed each scenario until the scheme was "saturated," meaning the codes we had established encompassed all of the phenomena we encountered. Once this was completed, we analyzed additional scenarios using the consolidated codes to calculate inter-rater reliabilities. The reliabilities were acceptable (i.e., over 80% agreement) which allowed us to move forward with coding the remainder of the scenarios in the selected sample. Each individual coder then aggregated the qualitative codes into themes and, together, researchers created an overall theory / model of how street harassment is experienced.

## **III. Analysis and Key Findings**

In our analysis of the scenarios submitted to Hollaback!, we focused on the physical context, or where the street harassment was described as taking place; the interpersonal context, or who was present and their perceived characteristics; and the kinds of responses targets of harassment described having to the experience, both short- and long-term when discussed, and including both their emotional responses and the strategies they utilized to deal with the harassment.

After examining the quantitative summary of the data, we followed a modified grounded theory approach in which we allowed the qualitative and quantitative data to guide us toward constructing a generalized model of the experience of street harassment.

Below, we summarize our initial findings in two sections: 1) a limited quantitative analysis of the data; 2) the qualitative themes that emerged from the data.

## Quantitative Analysis: Snapshot of 223 “Hollas”

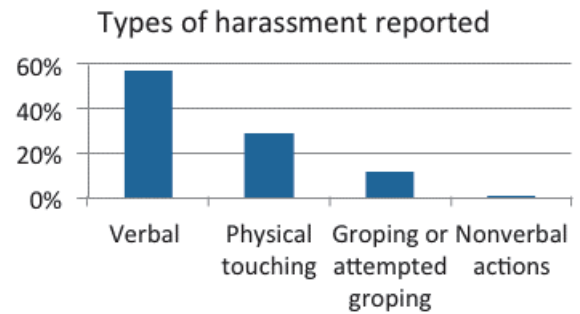
### Physical context

Within our sample, 55% of the reported street harassment happened in the street or park; 16% on public transportation; and 14% in other public places such as bars or stores.

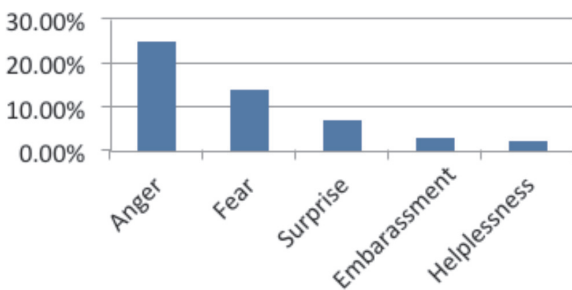
### Interpersonal context

At least 75% of all scenarios clearly described a single female target and male actor or actors. Specifically, 43% of incidents included a male actor and a female target; 19% included a male actor, a female target, and bystanders; 13% included multiple male actors and a female target; and .5% included a male actor and male target or a female actor and male target. An additional 11% included multiple female targets and multiple male actors.

Bystanders were present in 31% of reported incidents. Of those incidents that included a bystander presence, bystanders had a positive effect 26% of the time, a negative effect 22% of the time, and took no action 19% of the time.



Emotional responses reported in descriptions



### Types of harassment experienced

57% of scenarios included verbal interactions, with the majority being sexual and including comments on appearance, solicitations, and threats; 29% of scenarios included physical touching; 12% of scenarios included gropping or attempted gropping; and 4% of scenarios included nonverbal actions such as staring or taking photos

### Responses

Many of those reporting street harassment described an emotional response to the experience. 20% reported experiencing anger, 14% feeling fear, 7% feeling surprise, 3% feeling embarrassment, and 2% feeling helpless. 50% of those reporting experiences of harassment also offered descriptions of the strategies they used to deal with the harassment or strategies they would use in the future. Of that 50%, 16% described having an expectation for an institutional response to their experience, most commonly focusing on law enforcement or other city employees (such as transit workers).

### Qualitative Themes

The researchers found that a number of themes emerged from the anecdotes as we reviewed them. While we hope to expand on each of these at a later date, here we will focus on the three themes that appeared most important for moving the field forward. They include:

- a. the violating nature of all types of street harassment;
- b. the positive influence of taking action on a target’s emotional response to the experience of street harassment; and
- c. the influence, both positive and negative, of bystander presence

## Violating Nature of All Types of Street Harassment

The anecdotes that we reviewed indicated that the severity of one's emotional reaction to an experience of street harassment varied, but that any type of harassment (i.e. verbal, groping, assault) could produce extreme feelings of fear, anger, shame, etc. This indicates that it may be the violation of being harassed, rather than the specific behavior, that is one of the main drivers of a target's emotional response. Thus, an "outsider" might deem a situation "minor" or "not a threat" but the reaction of the target is likely to be just as severe because of the experience of vulnerability and the latent threat of escalation.

**"Thankfully I didn't have to go to court myself, the cop testified for me. My initial decision directly after the incident was to just pretend it didn't happen, but I'm glad I took action."**

**-Hollaback! user**

(e.g., anger, surprise) whereas more passive responders described emotions that focused inwardly (e.g., embarrassment, helplessness, fear).

In terms of taking action, targets who responded to harassers utilized a number of different strategies, including directly addressing the harasser, addressing bystanders, and contacting authorities.

Importantly, those who contacted authorities came away with varying levels of satisfaction with the responses they received. Some felt supported by authorities, while others expressed frustration in pursuing justice through these channels. Among both groups, there was a perceived need for broad-based system-wide level of accountability.

**"Don't we all inadvertently condone acts like these when we just sit by quietly? i'm not pissed because my friend and i were sexually harassed - i'm disgusted with those new yorkers who witnessed a crime and just let it be... what the \*uck, new yorkers?"**

**- Hollaback! user**

In contrast, in cases where bystanders failed to act, their presence tended to compound other negative emotional responses to the experience. Those posing their descriptions generally felt this inaction by bystanders was highly unacceptable.

## IV. Developing an Explanatory Model of Street Harassment

Given the lack of research on this topic, this exploratory study largely aims to describe what occurs when someone experiences street harassment based on the sample of anecdotes we analyzed. To help make sense of the data, we've offered a quantitative snapshot of our findings as well as a qualitative analysis that seeks to infer some testable hypotheses about what is taking place.

### Positive Influence of Taking Action on a Target's Emotional Response to the Experience of Street Harassment

Targets who chose to take action, whether while experiencing street harassment or afterwards (i.e. taking a photo of the harasser, reporting the harassment to an official), appeared to experience less negative emotional impact than those who did not. For example, those who responded assertively to their harassers tended to describe emotional responses that were targeted outward

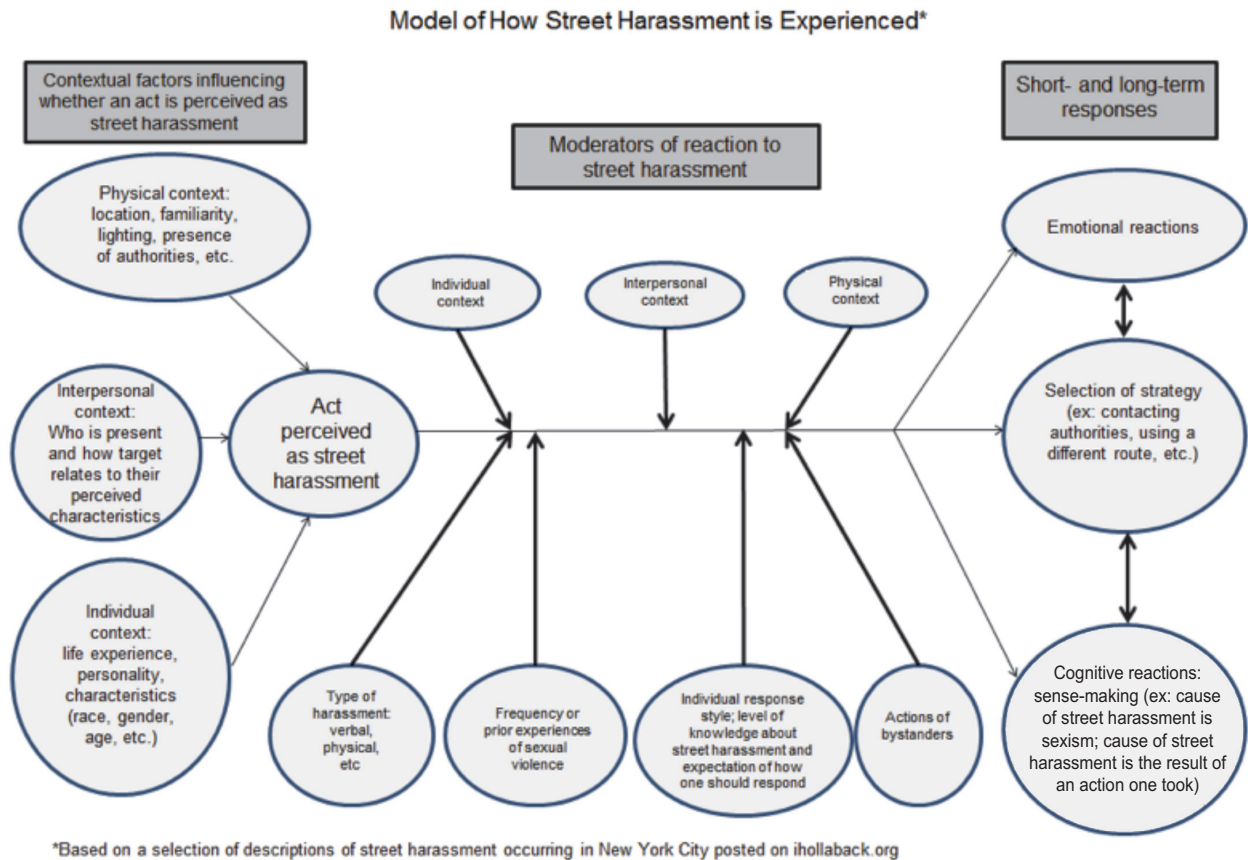
**"What upsets me more is that I had to insist before the security staff took any action and, worse, the security staff seem to have had previous reports about this man but never ever followed up because who knows why. Is it really too much to ask to be taken seriously when reporting an incident of sexual harassment?"**  
**- Hollaback! user**

### The Influence (Positive and Negative) of Bystander Presence

In reviewing descriptions of street harassment, we were surprised that a number of those that featured bystanders described their presence negatively. However, in further investigating the bystander role, it became evident that it was not bystander presence that was perceived negatively, but rather the lack of intervention by the majority of bystanders. In fact, in cases where a bystander took action by confronting the harasser, the harassment was more likely to cease. Importantly, bystander interventions that had a positive influence on the target of harassment could be as simple as a knowing look or empathetic statement that showed support.

Moving beyond summarizing and analyzing the data with which we were provided, we have begun constructing an explanatory—and testable—model of street harassment that is informed by our findings, the current literature, and the expertise of the researchers. This model serves to predict when individuals (left side) are likely to perceive street harassment and what moderating effects (middle) will modify the reactions (right side) to perceived street harassment.

We ran a preliminary version of this model by a number of individuals who were not involved in the data analysis process in order to ensure the most comprehensive, testable model. The model presented below is still preliminary and will be modified once it has been quantitatively tested, but we present it here in order to frame our preliminary findings.



## V. Insights and Possibilities for Future Research: Building an Actionable Theory of Street Harassment

Created from qualitative data, this model can help practitioners to create policy to address street harassment. Additionally, it's our hope that this model can be used to develop testable hypotheses that can be used in future research. In building this field, our aim is to provide further clarification as to the effects of street harassment and the best way to manage this growing problem. We hope that testing this model will allow us to demonstrate the true depths of this issue, as well as indicate the short and long-term effects of harassment on its targets, and proactive strategies of a civil society to include preventive education for targets, bystanders and potential street harassers.

Below are further insights drawn from the anecdotes as well as the literature and the researchers' expertise:

The experience of street harassment appears to mirror that of other types of gender-based violence. Street harassment, like other types of gender-based violence, often induces a fear-blame-powerless cycle of emotions for those it targets, and there are very few systematic approaches made available to them. Our hope is that we can model anti-street harassment efforts after those that have been undertaken to combat sexual harassment at the workplace. There is the possibility that if street harassment is more readily named and combatted there can be both a cultural shift and an increase in resources and training

that will make a difference in the prevalence of street harassment, and how targets respond and bystanders react when confronted with street harassment. It's likely that targets and bystanders can utilize similar strategies as have been used to deal with other types of sexual harassment, such as empowering targets with methods for responding and encouraging those in authority to create systematic responses to reports of street harassment. Due to the similarity in emotions and experiences described by Hollaback! commenters and targets of workplace and other types of harassment, it's likely these sexual harassment strategies will also be effective in confronting street harassment.

It's important to note that punitive approaches (i.e., arrests) may be ineffective given prevailing attitudes toward street harassment. For instance, verbal street harassment is still often seen as merely "annoying" or something that oversensitive women perceive. Additionally, punitive approaches could lead to profiling in ways that does not effectively solve the underlying problem of street harassment—that is, gender-bias and a discomfort with those who challenge traditional norms of gender and sexuality. Thus, institutions may need to develop new strategies to help targets feel safe on the streets.

**An important step in combatting street harassment is training for institutions, including schools and service providers.**<sup>5</sup> Raising awareness of the sources of and consequences of harassment can lead to prevention. For instance, discussion of street harassment could be included in the anti-bullying and sexual education curriculums. Organizations, especially those without a governmental affiliation, can work to claim this issue and create space for open conversations about how this behavior comes about, how targets can deal with it, and how we might work to prevent it by focusing on prevention and education. This should include a space for straight men, even those who have engaged in street harassment; there is much to learn both from those who have never engaged in the behavior and about the motivations that drive those that do. Work on peer influence and ally behavior from domestic violence issues has demonstrated this by illustrating the connection between involving men in efforts to combat gender-based violence with cultural change.

**We must work to provide tools not only for targets of harassment but also for bystanders who witness harassment but don't know how to take action.** While it is important to understand how street harassment is experienced, given the influence of bystanders on those targeted by harassment, it is extremely important to explore what motivates bystanders to take action and how we might encourage increased support from bystanders. One way to do this may be to explore the connection between social psychological research on bystander behavior and why many choose not to take action, and use that body of work to develop interventions that would target bystander behavior. We should also implement public information campaigns and programs that encourage bystanders to see themselves as unwitting actors in street harassment and can encourage taking action as well as model successful strategies. For example, Hollaback! has recently inaugurated a program called "I've got your back" to encourage bystander to upload their own anecdotes as witnesses to street harassment in collaboration with Green Dot. These efforts are consistent with national efforts on violence prevention to influence ally behavior, and community engagement by using institutional, peer and social influence to impact social change.<sup>6</sup>

---

1 Lead researcher Beth Livingston, Assistant Professor of Human Resource Studies, Cornell-ILR, with KC Wagner, Director of Workplace Issues, Cornell-ILR, Sarah T. Diaz, Graduate Social Work Intern, Hunter College School of Social Work, and Angela Lu, student research assistant, Cornell-ILR. With acknowledgment to Kathleen Lilly for her outstanding contributions to the initial coding and coding schema, and great appreciation to Emily May, Co-Founder of Hollaback!, for her vision and vitality.

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

3 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)

4 To help contribute to this field, Cornell-ILR researchers plans to publish an executive report in late 2012.

5 See Wagner, Livingston, Diaz. (2012) "When Street Harassment Comes Inside – An executive summary of service agencies unions respond to report of street harassment by constituents and employees. Cornell ILR and hollaback. (April).

6 See Green Dot. Green Dot a violence prevention initiative, often located on college campuses, which focuses on relationships, connection on a personal and community level and cultural change and to create a safe space for individuals to embark on a new set of behavior. This is set within a historical and interdisciplinary knowledge and skill based framework to spark new methodologies and skills.