


# DERRIÈRE LES APPARENCES

#5

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## Window on the platform



Security on public transport is a regular concern for operators and transit authorities alike. While the feeling of safety is often intensified - fed by a collective imagination largely shaped by fiction - it contrasts with a statistical reality: public transport remains far less deadly than the roads. And yet, violence does exist, particularly in large metropolitan areas and for the most vulnerable groups, especially young women. This reality, which should be neither minimized nor dramatized, coexists with another, lesser-known facet: that of a space for sociability, encounters and shared life. 



A SPACE  
FOR  
SOCIALIZING,  
MEETING PEOPLE  
AND  
SHARING

KEO  
SCOPIE

IMAGINING TOMORROW'S MOBILITY

## A fictional imaginary that links public transport and violence

Violence on public transport, as seen in literature and film, reveals powerful representations that fuels our images. In Bertrand Blier's *Les Valseuses* for example, the train scene in which Jean-Claude (Gérard Depardieu) and Pierrot (Patrick Dewaere) playfully provoke a shy passenger to the point of humiliation perfectly reflects the use of confined space to accentuate intimidation and psychological violence. Blier builds this sequence to a crescendo of palpable anguish, amplifying the passengers' embarrassment at the provocative and violent behavior of the two men.

A decade later, in *Subway*, Luc Besson uses the Paris metro as a metaphor for a marginalized underground world of violence and mild anarchy. Right from the film's opening, the escape of Fred (Christophe Lambert), pursued by armed men after stealing compromising documents, immediately sets the metro in a dynamic of menace. The deserted station, the labyrinthine corridors and the speed of the chase turn the metro into a parallel universe where violence suddenly erupts. Anonymous passengers, passively observing the assaults or indirectly participating through their silence, reinforce this sense of collective abandonment.

Films about the New York subway system left their mark on the collective imagination of the 1980s, as in *New York 1997* (Escape from New York) in which abandoned and dilapidated public transport systems serve as the backdrop for institutionalized and systemic violence. The subway, represented here by dark, debris-strewn tunnels, becomes the site of a brutal struggle for survival. The film's harsh, raw imagery of violence reflects the total abandonment of the authorities. Walter Hill's film *Warriors* (1979) is another strong reference, presenting New York's subways as an arena where gangs clash violently. Here, the brutality becomes almost ritualistic, a tragic spectacle of youth left to its own devices in a hostile urban setting.

This repeated staging of violence underlines a certain collective perception of public transport as a place of growing insecurity, a place of transit where anonymity sometimes encourages impunity.

## The paradox of young people: victims and troublemakers

Young people are at the heart of a paradox: while they are recurrent victims of violence and incivility, they are also perceived as troublemakers by some passengers. As the majority of regular users, they represent a population particularly exposed to risk, while at the same time playing a central role in the dynamics of public transport. Yet this dual reality is often overlooked or ignored.

Young people are more likely to use public transport than the rest of the population, and are therefore logically more likely to be victims of violence. In the Paris region for example, 65% of under-25s use public transport to get to school, work or for leisure, compared with just 40% of adults over 35. In other regions, the over-representation of younger people on public transport may be much higher. Their constant presence on the network automatically increases their exposure to risk.

Nearly 45% of young people say they have experienced fear on public transport in the past year, well above the national average of 30% (Fabrice Lollia. The feeling of insecurity in public transportation. 2022.)

These data are corroborated in our surveys and have an impact on behaviors : 25% of under-25s say they avoid taking public transport because of insecurity or a feeling of insecurity. This is twice as much as for the over-35s

(source Keoscopie Nov 24).

12% of them report having been the direct victim of incivility or aggression, twice the average for other age groups, although this gap needs to be put into perspective because young people are over-represented in public transport.

Young women are also confronted with specific aggressions. Testimonies reveal a high prevalence of harassment, unwanted touching and inappropriate comments. Young women are the victims of 49% of sexual assaults on public transport, even though they represent only 14% of the population. These traumatic experiences lead some women to avoid public transport altogether in the evening, at the cost of the loss of mobility and freedom.

Despite their vulnerability, young people are often perceived as a source of insecurity by other road users. This perception is reinforced by certain behaviors deemed uncivil, such as loud music or loud discussions. Around 30% of passengers associate groups of young



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Kévin, 17, high school student



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Amel, 19 years old

people with a feeling of insecurity, particularly in the evening or in little-frequented spaces (Fabrice Lollia. *The feeling of insecurity in public transportation*. 2022.). "When I take the metro with my friends, we have a few laughs, but never excessively. Still, people look at us as if we're going to do something wrong," explains Kévin, a 17-year-old high school student. This mistrust contributes to the young people's sense of isolation. They find themselves both stigmatized and inadequately protected. Tense interactions with other users or security guards can exacerbate this situation, creating a vicious circle in which young people feel both suspicious and abandoned. "Once, a group of adults criticized me for taking up too much space on the bus, even though it was almost empty. It made me feel uncomfortable, and I preferred to get off before my station," says Amel, 19.

This negative perception is nonetheless based on a reality: although they represent 20% of the population, the under-29s commit 80% of non-violent thefts, 92% of violent thefts, 67% of assaults and 47% of sexual violence, according to data from the French Ministry of the Interior. Their over-representation as both victims and perpetrators makes them key players in the fight against violence.

## 100% of women already victims: a form of house arrest

In 2015, the french high council for equality rang the alarm: 100% of female public transport users have been victims of sexist harassment or sexual assault at least once in their lives, whether or not they are aware that this is part of the phenomenon. Young women are particularly affected. In over 50% of cases, the first assault occurs before the age of 18. Ten years on, little has changed.

Young women, especially on public transport, are at high risk of violence and crime. According to the Institut Paris Région (2019), 56% of the criminal acts they encounter are of a villainous nature, while acts of sexual violence account for 95% of the cases involving them. These realities force young women to adopt preventive strategies to avoid the attention of potential aggressors. As Salma, a 20-year-old law student, explains: "When I come home late from class, I do everything I can to avoid attracting attention. My phone stays in my pocket, and I always choose cars where there is people" (The feeling of insecurity in public transportation, Institut Paris Région, 2019).

Women are more likely than men to apply preventive strategies to make themselves feel less vulnerable. According to a Keolis survey in November 2024, 52% of women have already given the impression of being busy in the past year, compared with 33% of men; 50% have told someone close to them about their journeys, compared with 34% of men; 47% have adapted their clothing, compared with 31% of men; and 39% have avoided taking public transport, compared with 29% of men. These strategies are particularly marked among women aged 15 to 29.

Clara, 22, says: "One evening, a man followed me out of the station. I felt so vulnerable that I decided not to take the metro after 9pm". These fears are heightened during the night, with 45% of transport users aged 15 to 29 preferring other modes of transport or giving up their journey, a figure twice as high as that for men of the same age (Keolis survey November 2024).

Young people are particularly targeted by real-life incidents, such as non-violent thefts. A 19-year-old student explains: "I saw my phone disappear in a second while I was holding it in my hands. No one reacted, and I felt completely alone" (Keoscope).

One in every three women reports having experienced sexual danger, particularly in the evening when ridership drops (Vécu et ressenti en matière de sécurité 2023). These assaults account for around 15% of reported acts of violence on public transport, a proportion that remains stable despite awareness campaigns. Élodie, a 23 years-old student, explains: "I always take the metro with my headphones on to avoid attracting attention, but sometimes that's not enough. A man followed me to the exit, talking inappropriately to me. It's like we're not allowed to be quiet."

Certain specific features of the transport system are conducive to such violence, notably trains that are busy or, on the contrary, very lightly used. Over 50% of sexual assaults take place in spaces with little surveillance (Insecurity and victimization on public transport, 2017). Clara, 22, recounts a traumatic experience: "It was in a suburban train. There weren't many people around, and a man sat down next to me and touched me. I was paralyzed, unable to move or scream" (Keoscopie, 2024).

Faced with this systemic problem, a number of initiatives have been taken, but remain insufficient. Devices such as emergency buttons or reporting applications (e.g. HandsAway) still lack information for users. The Angela system, inspired by the British Ask for Angela model, enables people who feel in danger to discreetly request help from partner establishments.

Human presence is a crucial safety lever, as Salma points out: "When I see security guards, I feel safer. But sometimes there aren't enough of them, especially in the evenings". Campaigns like "Respect in Transport" aim to raise awareness and encourage bystanders to take action, but require ongoing efforts and greater visibility of sanctions to be fully effective. Clearly, a coordinated and ambitious response, involving all the players concerned, is essential to achieve lasting improvements in public transport safety.



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Clara, aged 22

## Public transport, a generally safe space...

**Despite a justifiable feeling of insecurity, particularly among women and young people, public transport remains one of the safest means of transport. With millions of journeys made every day, serious incidents represent a tiny minority. Modern networks are also equipped with sophisticated safety features such as video protection, rapid intervention teams and signalling applications.**

Sexual and physical violence, although affecting only a minority of travelers, have a profound psychological impact on their perception of safety. These incidents, amplified by striking media or personal accounts, feed a sometimes disproportionate fear, to the point of redefining travel behavior and habits. The data show that women, particularly young women, are the first to adapt their journeys, to avoid certain times and places, to adopt avoidance strategies that restrict their freedom of movement.

However, putting this insecurity into a broader context puts its scale into perspective. Risks on public transport are much lower than on the roads or in the home, where mortality and serious injuries remain significantly higher. Paradoxically, spaces perceived as safe, such as the home, account for a large proportion of physical and sexual violence. This comparison sheds light on the gap between perception and the reality of risks, underlining the importance of making users aware of this relativity.

Nevertheless, these facts should not minimize the importance of the solutions required for improved safety. Increasing human presence, improving technical systems and encouraging better communication of actual data are all ways of restoring confidence in transport. Public transport is much more a place for encounters, including romantic ones, than for violence and sexual assault.



## ...which is also a vector of social cohesion

In a survey carried out by Keolis in January 2025 among a representative sample of 1.000 people, public transport revealed a more subtle and unexpected dimension: it is also a privileged place for social interaction, human encounters, even romantic ones. Nearly 17% of users claim to have experienced a romantic encounter thanks to a shared ride. This figure, far from being minor, perfectly illustrates that the mobile public space can rival digital dating platforms such as Tinder or Meetic.

Why is public transport so conducive to these romantic encounters? Firstly, because they create a daily context, a regular space in which faces become familiar, habits cross and silences are easily broken by delays or incidents. Here, every journey offers the opportunity to break the daily monotony with a smile, a glance, a casual remark or a simple gesture of courtesy.

The bus appears to be the big winner of these chance encounters, with no less than 27% of romantic relationships having started in its narrow aisles and close seats. There are several reasons for this strong preference. The slower pace of the journey encourages spontaneous exchanges, the physical proximity creates a natural intimacy, and the length of the journey invites extended discussion. Conversely, the metro, with its faster pace and often overcrowded trains, is less conducive to such spontaneous exchanges, although stories can also be born of chance and the daily grind.

One might imagine that, in a society where the gaze is often lost on cell phone screens, spontaneous human interaction would have disappeared from public transport. Yet the results of this Keoscopie survey show the opposite: 65% of the love stories mentioned by respondents are very recent, dating back less than five years. This clearly indicates that direct human exchanges continue to resist digital habits. This openness to the unexpected is all the more interesting in that it is favored by the repetition of journeys and the familiarity they induce. Regularly taking the same line at the same time transforms yesterday's strangers into familiar faces, naturally facilitating the transition from a simple exchange of glances to a conversation, and then to a deeper relationship. The commute thus becomes a daily ritual, not only for getting to work or school, but also for nurturing social and emotional ties.

Another key finding of the survey is that these love stories are not limited to ephemeral adventures. For half the people who met their partner on public transport, the encounter had a lasting impact on their lives. Many of the people we spoke to spoke of solid, lasting stories, marriages, families, and relationships that have had a significant impact on their personal journeys.

But it's not just about romantic encounters. Indeed, almost 25% of public transport users claim to have made significant friendships during their daily commute. These friendships often arise from casual conversations. This type of interaction, though often furtive, enables regular passengers to gradually establish lasting relationships, transforming strangers into regular travel companions.

Beyond friendships, public transport is also a strategic place for professional networking. Nearly 15% of users surveyed claim to have had fruitful professional encounters in this context. These may be chance encounters with people who share the same commute times or exchanges triggered by a shared professional event. The survey also shows that public transport is an essential space for re-establishing everyday social ties. For 60% of respondents, interactions on public transport contribute significantly to their sense of belonging to the local community. Public transport is not only a place of insecurity and fear, but also of encounters and social ties.

