



**Stevens Square Community Organization**  
(612) 874-2840  
<http://www.sscoweb.org>

**Community Discussion: Ways to Combat Street Harassment – October 24, 2016, at Minneapolis College of Art and Design, 2501 Stevens Ave.**

**Sponsored by [Minneapolis College of Art and Design](#), [Sexual Violence Center](#), [Stevens Square Community Organization](#), [Whittier Alliance](#).**

Approximate attendance: 49

Facilitated by Kristen Sukura and Ashley Workman, Sexual Violence Center

Public officials present: Kathy Waite and Chelsea Adams, Minneapolis Police 5<sup>th</sup> Precinct; Matt Wilcox, 5<sup>th</sup> Precinct Community Attorney

Introduction by Kristen and Ashley

The Sexual Violence Center (SVC), which serves all of Hennepin County and parts of Carver and Scott Counties, deals with a wide spectrum of behavior involving forms of sexual violence. SVC works to support survivors and their families and friends. 24-hour crisis line: (612) 871-5111. Street harassment is a form of sexual violence. Victims are often expected to shrug it off. However, street harassment is real and it is never okay. It has different impacts on different individuals. It's important to reaffirm that harassment is the fault of the perpetrator and is never the victim's fault. The purpose of this discussion is to hear from community members about what's going on in these neighborhoods. For example, Stevens Square presents more opportunities for those committing street harassment than some other, less densely populated, neighborhoods: more people are traveling on foot or waiting at bus stops and are therefore more vulnerable to harassment. Ground rules for a safe neighborhood: respect each other.

Comments from community members:

- One of the current problems is groups of Somali males (up to a dozen at a time) who wander around the neighborhood all day long harassing people. This situation is different than being confronted by one or two individuals, and has been the focus of discussions among neighbors, on NextDoor, and at SSCO's last safety meeting. We are trying to identify preventive measures we could take to resolve this problem.
- When you are out in the neighborhood you have to be ready to take evasive action in anticipation of street harassment. The problem is not caused by residents, but by people who drift through the area.
- As a new resident, one can see quite a bit of street harassment occurring in the area. One response to harassment is to get away from the perpetrator quickly, such as by getting on the first bus that comes along regardless of where it's going. This can have a real, negative economic impact if, by trying to stay safe on the street, a person ends up late for work.
- Bus stops are popular locations for those who commit street harassment. Being approached by an intoxicated male who, over the course of twenty minutes and in a very invasive and physical way, makes sexually degrading and threatening remarks to women designed to frighten and intimidate them makes one angry. A person doesn't think straight in these situations. A person knows that her young daughter will grow up to experience the same thing. Make a police report when an incident like this happens. Tell the bus driver to call Transit police to deal with the perpetrator.
- On the way to this discussion, a male friend made sexually inappropriate comments about the appearance of another female. That is not a compliment; that is harassment.

- There are too many experiences of street harassment to share – it would take hours. No matter where, when, or what one wears, street harassment has been constant since the age of 15.
- 5<sup>th</sup> Precinct Inspector Kathy Waite: The problem is frustrating. It happens to female officers in police uniform. What makes this behavior okay? It's demeaning, it's not okay. Where is the parenting? How does a person grow up this way? Minneapolis police try to intervene in situations when they can.
- How do we recognize those being harassed on the street who need help? As a community, we need to band together to make things better.
- Kristen: Police can't always do something about a situation. In many instances, perpetrators, victims, and witnesses of street harassment are in motion, on their way to somewhere else, and therefore often disperse before police can respond.
- Kathy Waite: When in doubt, call 911. Usually, a street harassment incident will be assigned a lower priority when squads are dispatched. If you call, be aware that if MPD is unable to dispatch the call, another jurisdiction in the area (such as Transit or U of M police) might be assigned to respond. If the incident is in progress, you can call 911, explain the situation, and then leave the line open so that the operator can hear what's going on. Educating people about their options is a way to empower them.
- Community Attorney Matt Wilcox: Report an incident to 911 promptly. When officers arrive at the scene, they can determine whether a crime has been committed and take appropriate action. Some incidents of street harassment could be charged as disorderly conduct or indecent conduct.
- Kristen: Not everyone is comfortable calling 911 in these situations. So far, the emphasis of this discussion has been on what a potential victim of street harassment can do to stop or avoid it. This is the wrong direction – we have to be careful not to blame the victim. Instead, let's identify the risk factors of being harassed on the street: the risk is high if a person is female; it's also high depending on one's gender identification. Why do perpetrators feel comfortable harassing these individuals on the street?
- Sometimes the threat level depends on how many perpetrators are involved. If it's a group of males, the level is high; if it's one male, it's still a threat but it can depend on whether the perpetrator has an opportunity to act. For women, it can come down to making a split-second decision about whether a stranger is a potential threat. Those engaged in street harassment often claim that they are not doing anything wrong. Women need to know that they have the right to respond to a threat and to defend themselves. There may be a research project to look at the cultural factors which contribute to street harassment, and then how to change that culture – which is also known as rape culture.
- Today, you can call 911 and get a police response regarding street harassment. In the old days, you were on your own; it was not a topic to be discussed with family or friends. It's important to try to be comfortable as yourself. If you have a bad experience, you have to learn to move on. The culture needs to change; some of those involved in street harassment simply don't grow up.
- For some, street harassment can cause high anxiety to the extent that, ignoring one's own safety, expressing one's anger to the perpetrator is the immediate response. This can involve cursing at the perpetrator, threatening him, and letting him know that what he has done is not okay.
- The problem can be worse in areas where street prostitution is prevalent. Women in these areas are often approached by "johns" who solicit them for sex. This is a crime. An immediate response that works well is to use a cell phone to take photos of the "john" and his vehicle and then, if the criminal activity continues, call 911 with the information and ask that a squad be sent. Is there any kind of database, public or private, to which victims can post information and photos of "johns", their cars, and the locations where they operate?
- Crime Prevention Specialist Chelsea Adams and Kristen: [Hollaback Twin Cities](#), a group which is devoted to ending street harassment and has tried to track and map street harassment incidents, is largely defunct. They are looking for a new manager to restart the project; the Sexual Violence Center will connect anyone who is interested to Hollaback. The Minneapolis Police department posts photos and information about those who have been arrested for soliciting prostitution. Go to <http://www.minneapolismn.gov/police/> and click on the link in the right hand column.
- Kathy Waite: Those who have been solicited for prostitution on the street can let others know what's happening via social media. The problem with that approach is that there is no way confirm or verify the information which is shared. Some neighborhood groups take that approach, in effect shaming the perpetrators, which can be effective. Prime time for street prostitution includes morning and evening rush hours. Any information one has about prostitution suspects, times, and locations should also be shared with police.
- Matt Wilcox: A private citizen could create and share a database regarding street harassment incidents. If a government agency compiles information, it needs to comply with the state Data Practices Act.
- Soliciting prostitution is a crime. Call 911 if you are a victim or witness. Another way to share information is to post it on a neighborhood blog.

- Chelsea Adams: Similar information is often posted on NextDoor sites. The problem with this kind of reporting is that innocent people can be targeted – accidentally or intentionally – as criminals or deviants because the information is not vetted by anyone in a position of authority.
- Kathy Waite: Block clubs, with police as a component, can help inform residents about what's happening and empower them prevent or resolve problems.
- It's important to talk about the culture and find out why street harassment happens. Look at how kids are taught about sex: the earlier a male has sex, the better his status among peers. Anyone who grows up surrounded by that culture is likely to still hold those values. A long-term solution to the problem has to start with talking with young males about sex and how they view women.
- Sex trafficking is still rampant in parts of the city. Women are owned by men all around the world. How does the behavior of males affect our community, and is there a way to educate them about the problems? Community organizations and elected officials need to support efforts to resolve those questions. Public service announcements (PSA) used to be aired on TV – that could be one way to get the message out.
- Kristen: Producing a PSA could be a class project for MCAD students. The problem is that TV stations, which are required to air PSA's, often schedule them for off-hours when viewership is low.
- Unwanted sexual advances, stalking, harassment, and intimidation by strangers against women: this is part of a culture that sets the tone for what behaviors are accepted. This culture is tied to the environment and socio-economic status in which perpetrators were raised. Males are responsible, they are the major perpetrators who drive this problem. And males need to turn it around. Street harassment is accepted as normal in certain neighborhoods, and is not acceptable in other neighborhoods. By repealing the lurking ordinance, the City Council has tied the hands of police officers when they try to prevent or stop street harassment. They have sent the message that it is okay for strangers to stalk, follow, and harass women in the city. Why did the City Council take this action without input from the citizens who are affected by this criminal behavior? There are resources here; we need to find a way to broaden the discussion and come up with good ideas.
- Kristen: Who will educate males about how to counteract street harassment? The Sexual Violence Center has produced a flyer featuring tips for interrupting street harassment. The neighborhood organizations will distribute it. Solutions to the problem need to come from residents. While some people saw the lurking ordinance as a good tool to combat street harassment, it has been repealed partly because it was disproportionately applied to people of color. Even when that ordinance was in place, though, street harassment was still a problem. It is up to us to come together and think of creative ideas to combat street harassment in our community.
- Most of the lurking offenders were African American males. Female voices will be needed to repair the damage done by the Council.
- Those who engage in street harassment in the neighborhood need to know that their behavior is not acceptable and that they need to go elsewhere. People make choices and need to accept the consequences for their behavior. People who live here have the right to feel comfortable in their community.
- Kristen: There may be no answer to the question of how to change the culture we've been talking about. Communities can set and enforce their own standards of behavior. It's up to residents to make it happen here. It could be a model for other neighborhoods to try. The onus needs to be on the perpetrators of street harassment, not on their potential victims. If you see a problem, say it. Think about what to do as a witness to street harassment; be aware that intervening directly can be dangerous. Another factor to take into account when witnessing street harassment is the state of mind of the victim and how to determine whether the person wants others to intervene or not. When someone shares a personal story about being harassed, the most important thing to do is to believe the victim, and not question her actions or response during the incident or speculate about what she could or should have done instead.
- Whittier Alliance (871-7756) and Stevens Square Community Organization (874-2840) are signing up volunteers to work on task forces to combat street harassment. One of the ideas is an outreach project to businesses aimed at finding safe places for street harassment victims to go.

Thanks to the Minneapolis College of Art and Design for providing the venue, staff, and sound equipment for this discussion!

*Discussion began at 7:00 and adjourned at 8:38 p.m.*

*Discussion notes prepared by Dave Delvoye.*