Article

Perceptions of Safety

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Introduction

Feeling safe is an important part of how people experience and interact with the transport network. Perceptions of safety can influence whether people choose to walk, wheel, cycle, use public transport, or drive as well as where and when they travel. There are implications for both road casualty rates and modal shift. Perceptions are shaped by a range of factors, including the design and maintenance of streets and public spaces, the behaviour of other road and transport users, lighting and passive surveillance.

Taking a holistic view of the perceptions that shape if and how people travel is key; everyone considers the safety of the transport options available to them when making decisions about travel. Nevertheless, viewing the network through the eyes of specific groups of users showcases the issues that can make a particular mode or route feel unsafe. Visually impaired people, people with reduced mobility, women and LGBTQ+ people can face specific barriers to travelling independently or at certain times of day. While measures designed to improve safety can encourage people to travel more confidently, interventions need to consider the experiences and perceptions of different users to ensure that the transport network *feels* safe and accessible for everyone.

This article explores perceptions of safety across different aspects of the transport network, showcasing case studies that highlight the experiences of different groups and approaches to creating safer, more inclusive journeys. It also signposts suggested further reading and resources for those looking to better understand and address perceptions of safety in transport planning and design.

Case studies

Please see the appendix for more details on the following case studies, exploring perceptions of safety through the lens of accessibility, gender and age.

- Bus Stop Bypasses: Understanding Perceptions of Safety
- How everyday obstructions affect perceptions of pedestrian safety
- Travelling After Dark: Women's Perceptions of Safety
- LGBTQ+ People's Safety and Inclusion: Lessons from the London Travelwatch report "Out in London"

Conclusion

Professionals working in the highways and transportation sector have both a responsibility and an opportunity to create transport networks where more people feel safe, confident and able to travel independently. This can lead to a number of benefits,

including reduced road casualties, reduced congestion and improved public health. Understanding how different users experience the transport network is essential to developing interventions that respond to a wider range of needs and perceptions. Through thoughtful design, inclusive planning and sustained and meaningful engagement with different communities, it is possible to create safer and more accessible journeys for everyone. Embedding perceptions of safety into policy, planning and practice will be essential to delivering transport networks that not only are safe in a statistical sense but feel safe to use.

Appendix

Case study 1: Bus Stop Bypasses: Understanding Perceptions of Safety

Bus stop bypasses are locations where a cycle track passes between a bus stop and the main carriageway, meaning that bus passengers, pedestrians and cyclists may need to interact within a relatively constrained space. They are also known as floating bus stops, shared-use bus stop boarders or bus stop islands.[1] While there are several different design configurations, they generally involve a combination of a cycle track and footway at or around the bus stop.

The design of these facilities reflects the wider aim of providing safer, more attractive infrastructure for cycling. As set out in Local Transport Note 1/20: Cycle Infrastructure Design (LTN 1/20), protected infrastructure, including segregated cycle tracks, is a key element of improving safety and perceptions of safety for cyclists.[2] Providing protected space can help enable more people to cycle, regardless of the volume of motor traffic. However, infrastructure needs not only to be objectively safe, but also to be perceived as safe if it is to give people the confidence to use it.

This presents a particular challenge at floating bus stops, shared-use bus stop boarders or bus stop islands, where people need to cross the cycle track to access buses. A single location can therefore bring together several different road users, including pedestrians, cyclists, bus passengers and vehicle drivers, each with different needs and expectations. This creates the potential for conflict in a relatively small and highly contested space.

Looking beyond collision statistics

Traditional approaches to measuring transport safety tend to focus on the severity and frequency of injuries, often using measures such as people killed or seriously injured

[1] Department for Transport and Active Travel England (2026) *Floating bus stops provision and design*
[2] Department for Transport (2020) *Cycle infrastructure design (LTN 1/20)*

(KSI). However, this approach does not necessarily capture the full safety experience of people using bus stop bypasses.

As outlined in a 2024 report by University College London (UCL) for Guide Dogs, the likelihood of a collision between a cyclist and pedestrian resulting in a fatal or serious injury, as officially defined, may be relatively low.[3] A reliance on KSI statistics could therefore suggest that a facility is safe, while failing to capture other experiences that affect whether people feel comfortable or confident using it. Near misses, uncertainty about who (pedestrians or cyclists) has priority, difficulties navigating the space and fear of collision may all influence people's behaviour without resulting in a recorded injury.[4]

This is particularly important for people with visual impairments or other disabilities. For example, guide dog users may experience unique challenges in identifying and navigating the boundary between the footway and cycle track, particularly where the design does not provide clear and intuitive separation. Guide dogs may be trained to lead their owner directly to the bus stop which would involve traversing the cycle lane rather than stopping before crossing. Furthermore, those with hearing disabilities may not hear cyclists approach the crossing. The absence of recorded serious collisions does not necessarily mean that everyone can use the facility safely and confidently. There is also a wider behavioural consideration: when people perceive a transport environment as unsafe, they may simply avoid it. This can reduce access to public transport, discourage walking, wheeling and cycling, and disproportionately affect people who have fewer travel options such as older people, disabled people and non-drivers.

Why perception matters

In this context, perception should not be dismissed as a subjective or inaccurate interpretation of risk. Perception is an important part of how people understand their surroundings and make decisions about how to move through them. A person's assessment of whether a space is safe can influence their behaviour even where the measured risk of injury is low.

This means that assessing the safety of bus stop bypasses requires a broader approach than collision data alone. Understanding people's experiences, confidence and behaviour can provide valuable evidence about whether a design is working as intended.

The issue has attracted considerable public and professional debate. Bus stop bypasses have been the subject of controversy in London and elsewhere, with concerns raised about interactions between cyclists and pedestrians, particularly visually impaired

[3] Guide Dogs (2024) *Designing for Inclusion*
[4] Ibid.

people.[5] The debate demonstrates the importance of considering how different groups experience transport infrastructure, rather than assessing safety solely through conventional injury statistics.

Policy context

The controversy has also led to changes in national policy. On 20 November 2025, the Minister for Roads and Buses, Simon Lightwood MP, wrote to local authorities in England asking them to pause the installation of floating bus stop designs that require passengers to board or alight directly from or into a cycle track. This pause remains in place.[6]

The experience of bus stop bypasses highlights a wider lesson for transport planning and design: safety is not simply the absence of collisions or serious injuries. Infrastructure must also be intuitive, accessible and comfortable to use for the people who rely on it. The DfT-funded Bus Centre of Excellence (BCoE) provides a range of free courses to BCoE members including online training courses on understanding disability and inclusive design.

For transport professionals, this means considering both objective and perceived safety when designing and evaluating infrastructure. Combining collision data with user experience, accessibility considerations, near-miss reporting and behavioural evidence can provide a more complete understanding of whether a facility is delivering the safe and inclusive transport environment it was intended to create.

Case study 2: How everyday obstructions affect perceptions of pedestrian safety

Footways are a fundamental part of the transport network, providing space for people to walk, wheel and access public transport. However, their usability can be affected by a range of activities and obstructions, including vehicles parked on the footway, overhanging vegetation, street furniture, advertising boards and bins. These may appear to be minor inconveniences, but they can reduce the space available to pedestrians, create hazards and influence how safe and confident people feel when travelling on foot.[7]

The consequences can be particularly significant for older and disabled people, including wheelchair users, people with visual impairments and people with other mobility impairments. For these groups, an obstruction may present not only a physical barrier but also a reason to avoid a particular route altogether. As a result, maintaining

[5] BBC (2026) *Disability campaigners call on PM to scrap floating bus stops*
[6] Department for Transport and Active Travel England (2026) *Floating bus stops provision and design*
[7] CIHT (2024) *Creating a Public Realm for All*

safe and accessible footways is important not only for reducing the risk of injury, but also for enabling independent travel and encouraging walking and wheeling.

For example, vehicles parked partly or entirely on footways can substantially reduce the width available to pedestrians. This may force people to move into the carriageway to pass, potentially bringing them into conflict with moving traffic. For wheelchair users and people using mobility scooters, the obstruction may make a footway impassable, particularly where there is insufficient space to manoeuvre or no suitable dropped kerb nearby. Similarly, overhanging vegetation can narrow footways and create hazards for people with visual impairments, particularly where branches or bushes extend into the path at head or face height for walking adults, wheelchair users and children in buggies.

Research by Living Streets has highlighted the relationship between footway conditions and people's willingness to travel on foot. Its research has identified pavement parking as a particular concern for older people, with polling commissioned by the charity finding that 62% of adults aged over 65 in England were worried about obstructions on pavements.[8] The House of Commons Transport Committee has also previously heard evidence that pavement parking can discourage people from leaving their homes, contributing to reduced independence and social isolation.[9]

These concerns extend beyond pavement parking. Overhanging vegetation, uneven surfaces, poorly maintained footways and street clutter can all make routes more difficult to navigate. For someone with a visual impairment, an overhanging branch may be difficult to detect with a cane, while a wheelchair user may be unable to pass through a narrowed section of pavement. Older people who are concerned about falling may also be less willing to use routes where they anticipate uneven surfaces, restricted space or unexpected obstacles.

The cumulative effect of these issues is important. A single obstruction may be manageable, but repeated barriers along a journey can make walking or wheeling tiring, stressful or impractical. People may change their route, avoid certain streets, rely on others for assistance or abandon a journey altogether. This can restrict access to shops, healthcare, public transport and social activities, with implications for independence, physical activity and wellbeing.

Case study 3: Travelling After Dark: Women’s Perceptions of Safety

Feeling safe can be an important factor in determining whether, when and how people travel. For women and girls in particular, concerns about personal safety can influence

[8] Living Streets (2018) *Pavement parking*
[9] Transport Committee (2019) *Pavement Parking - Transport Committee - House of Commons*

decisions to walk, cycle or use public transport, particularly after dark. This means that creating transport networks that are objectively safe is only part of the challenge; places also need to feel safe and give people the confidence to travel independently.

Transport for London (TfL)'s TfL Spatial Planning: Night-time assessments for women's safety initiative aligns with national ambitions to reduce violence against women and girls, recognising that the design and operation of streets, public spaces and transport networks can influence both actual and perceived safety.[10] TfL's Spatial Planning team has sought to address this through changes to the way night-time conditions are considered within the planning process.

While developed in London, the challenges addressed through night-time assessments are not unique to the capital. Research consistently shows that concerns about personal safety can influence how women and girls travel, particularly after dark, affecting access to employment, education, leisure and social opportunities across the country.

Moving beyond peak-hour assessment

TfL's Spatial Planning team works with the Greater London Authority (GLA), London boroughs and developers to influence how transport and land-use decisions shape the capital. Its Transport Assessment guidance includes Active Travel Zone (ATZ) assessments, which consider how people will access and move through new developments.

Following growing public concern about violence against women and girls and its impact on travel behaviour, particularly after dark, TfL identified an opportunity to use its planning role to ensure that the needs and experiences of women and girls were better reflected in the assessment of new developments. The approach reflects growing recognition that planners, urban designers and transport professionals have an important role to play in creating environments where women and girls feel safe and confident travelling.

Engagement with stakeholders, women and girls' lived-experience research [11]and a review of existing processes identified a gap in conventional Transport Assessments: while they typically considered travel during peak periods, night-time conditions were rarely assessed systematically. This was significant because the characteristics of a place after dark, including lighting, visibility, wayfinding and the design of routes and public spaces, play an important role in shaping people's sense of safety and confidence. These barriers can affect access to employment, education, leisure and

[10] Home Office (2026) *Freedom from violence and abuse: a cross-government strategy - GOV.UK*; Mayor of London (2026) *The Mayor's Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy 2026-29 | London City Hall*; Active Travel England (2026) *Women and girls' safety hub*
[11] Transport London (2026) *Ending violence against women and girls - Transport for London*

social opportunities, particularly for women and girls who rely on walking, cycling or public transport.

In response, TfL introduced a requirement in 2023 for night-time Active Travel Zone assessments. The aim was to ensure that night-time conditions were consistently evaluated and that any necessary design improvements or mitigation could be identified and secured through the planning process.

Embedding lived experience in planning

The approach involved changing established planning practices rather than treating women's safety as a separate consideration. Planners led policy integration, urban designers refined the assessment methodology and equity, diversity and inclusion leads supported alignment with TfL's wider commitment to women and girls' safety.

Co-design workshops, peer review and engagement with boroughs and industry were used to challenge approaches that had traditionally focused on peak-hour travel. Training was also provided for planning officers, alongside presentations and internal discussions to build understanding across TfL. Externally, TfL engaged with borough officers and the GLA to understand constraints, share solutions and support consistent implementation.

In February 2025, TfL published its night-time Active Travel Zone advice note.[12] The guidance established consistent parameters for assessing night-time conditions and now informs planning applications, master planning, transport interchanges and third-party highway works.

From assessment to practical improvements

The change has resulted in a substantial increase in the number of major Transport Assessments considering night-time conditions. From a baseline of 0%, TfL reports that 70-80% of major Transport Assessments now include a night-time Active Travel Zone assessment. TfL's ambition is for all major Transport Assessments in London to include a night-time Active Travel Zone assessment by 2027.

The assessments have demonstrated how relatively simple interventions, such as improved lighting, clearer wayfinding, active frontages and enhanced public transport facilities, can be identified and secured through the planning process.

These changes demonstrate how considering perceptions of safety at an early stage can influence the design and delivery of transport environments. Rather than attempting to retrofit improvements once a development is complete, identifying concerns through

[12] Transport for London (2025) *Night-time Active Travel Zone (ATZ) Assessment*

the planning process can help ensure that safety and accessibility are considered from the outset.

The initiative was also recognised through the CIHT Awards, with TfL winning the CIHT's Equality, Diversity & Inclusion Award in 2026 for TfL Spatial Planning: Night-time Assessments for Women's Safety, highlighting the value of embedding women's lived experiences and perceptions of safety into transport planning.[13]

A wider lesson for transport planning

This case study demonstrates the value of understanding how people experience transport environments, rather than relying solely on conventional measures of safety.

For women and girls, a route may be classed as objectively safe but still feel uncomfortable or intimidating because of factors such as lighting, visibility, isolation or uncertainty about the surrounding environment. If people do not feel confident using a route or accessing public transport after dark, this can become a barrier to sustainable and independent travel.

Considering night-time conditions within Transport Assessments provides one way of bringing these experiences into formal planning processes. It also demonstrates the importance of engaging with people whose experiences may not be captured by conventional datasets.

While developed for London's planning context, the principles underpinning night-time assessments have wider applicability. As the profession increasingly seeks to create places that are safe, inclusive and accessible for everyone, understanding and responding to the experiences of women and girls can help remove barriers to travel and improve outcomes for all users.

Case study 4: LGBTQ+ People's Safety and Inclusion: Lessons from the London TravelWatch report "*Out in London*"

Feeling safe when travelling is not simply about the physical design of transport infrastructure. The behaviour of other passengers, the risk of harassment and discrimination, and the confidence that support will be available if something happens can all influence how people experience the transport network. For LGBTQ+ people, concerns about prejudice, harassment and hate crime can create additional barriers to travelling safely and independently.

In November 2023, London TravelWatch, in collaboration with LGBTQ+ anti-abuse charity Galop, published *Out in London: LGBTQ+ People's Safety on London's*

[13] CIHT (2026) *CIHT celebrates excellence at the Awards Dinner 2026*

Transport Network. The research explored the experiences of LGBTQ+ people using public transport in London, examining perceptions of personal safety, experiences of victimisation and the measures people take to protect themselves when travelling.

The report was based on a survey of more than 600 LGBTQ+ adults who use transport in London, alongside qualitative research involving organisations supporting LGBTQ+ communities and transport stakeholders. Its findings highlight how concerns about personal safety can affect everyday travel decisions, even where no incident has taken place.

Understanding the scale of the issue

The research found that 66% of LGBTQ+ respondents had experienced at least one form of victimisation on public transport in the previous 12 months, while 21% reported experiencing hate crime during the same period.[14] More than two-thirds (67%) said they felt there was always a possible threat of violence or harassment when using public transport, while 43% often felt uneasy or on edge.[15]

These concerns were closely linked to wider experiences of discrimination. More than 68% of respondents said that anti-LGBTQ+ prejudice in society made them feel unsafe or uncomfortable when using public transport.[16] This demonstrates that perceptions of safety are influenced not only by the immediate transport environment but also by wider social attitudes and experiences.

The findings also highlighted differences within the LGBTQ+ community. For example, 87% of cisgender lesbian, bisexual and other sexual minority (LB+) women and 73% of trans+ respondents reported a general feeling of being unsafe at night, compared with 43% of cisgender gay, bisexual and other sexual minority (GB+) men.[17] Trans+ people, Deaf and disabled LGBTQ+ respondents, younger people and LGBTQ+ people of colour were also more likely to identify their own experiences of harassment, abuse and anti-social behaviour as reasons for feeling unsafe.[18]

This illustrates the importance of considering how different aspects of a person's identity can intersect to shape their experiences of the transport network. A single approach to improving safety may not adequately address the different barriers faced by particular groups.

Changing behaviour to feel safe

[14] London TravelWatch and Galup (2023) *Out in London: LGBTQ+ People's Safety on London's Transport Network.*
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid.

One of the report's most significant findings was the extent to which safety concerns influence how LGBTQ+ people behave when travelling. Rather than simply avoiding particular incidents or locations, many respondents described making adjustments to their appearance and behaviour to reduce the likelihood of experiencing harassment or abuse.

The research found that 82% of respondents sometimes, often or always modified their travelling behaviour because of concerns about their safety.[19] This increased to 91% among trans+ respondents and 92% among cisgender LB+ women. Of those who changed their behaviour, 72% said they hid or disguised their LGBTQ+ identity, while 68% reported becoming hypervigilant and constantly monitoring their surroundings.[20]

These adjustments included changing clothing or appearance, avoiding public displays of affection and limiting interactions that might draw attention to their identity. The report also highlighted how the fear of being recognised as LGBTQ+ can affect people's sense of freedom and confidence when travelling.

Such findings demonstrate that the impact of feeling unsafe extends beyond the immediate risk of physical harm. People may feel unable to express themselves freely, relax during their journey or use transport without constantly assessing their surroundings. This can undermine the principle that everyone should be able to access and use public transport with confidence and without fear.

The importance of support and reporting

The research also identified concerns about the availability of support when incidents occur. Three-quarters of respondents said that feeling unsafe or fearing for their own safety would prevent them from intervening if they witnessed an incident on public transport.[21] Among those who had experienced abuse or discrimination and reported that other passengers witnessed it, 65% said bystanders watched but did nothing.[22]

Confidence in formal reporting processes was another significant issue. Of those who had experienced victimisation on public transport during the previous year, 84% had not reported their experiences to the police or other formal support services.[23] Reasons included a lack of trust in the police, concern that incidents would not be taken seriously and fear of discrimination.

[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid.

The findings suggest that visible police presence alone may not be sufficient to reassure all passengers. Nearly half (49%) of respondents said that seeing the Metropolitan Police did not make them feel safer on public transport.[24]

This highlights the importance of creating transport environments in which people feel confident that incidents will be taken seriously and that appropriate support will be available. Staff training, clear reporting procedures and effective responses to harassment and hate crime are all important elements of improving perceptions of safety.

Recommendations for a more inclusive transport network

Based on its findings, London TravelWatch and Galop made a series of recommendations for decision-makers, transport operators and policing authorities.

These included:

- Raising awareness of hate crime and harassment targeting LGBTQ+ people through cross-industry campaigns.
- Providing regular staff training, co-designed with LGBTQ+ people and relevant organisations, to improve understanding and support for passengers.
- Working directly with LGBTQ+ organisations and people with lived experience throughout the development of policies and initiatives.
- Maintaining frequent and reliable public transport services, particularly at night, to reduce the risk of passengers becoming stranded in potentially unsafe situations.
- Improving infrastructure and facilities that can support perceptions of safety, including lighting, CCTV and connectivity.
- Ensuring visible staff are available at stations and on services to support passengers before, during and after their journeys.
- Developing more effective approaches to tackling anti-social behaviour and improving confidence in reporting incidents.

The report emphasises that engagement with LGBTQ+ communities should be embedded throughout transport planning and delivery, rather than treated as an additional consideration.

A wider lesson for transport planning

The research demonstrates how perceptions of safety can influence travel choices even when the physical characteristics of a transport environment remain unchanged. For

[24] Ibid.

LGBTQ+ people, the possibility of harassment, discrimination or hate crime can create a persistent sense of vulnerability, affecting how they present themselves, interact with others and use public transport.

It also highlights the importance of recognising that safety is experienced differently by different groups. Measures that improve the transport environment for one group may not address the concerns of another, particularly where experiences of discrimination and disadvantage intersect.

For transport professionals, the findings reinforce the need to look beyond conventional measures of safety and consider the wider experiences that shape people's confidence when travelling. Meaningful engagement with LGBTQ+ communities, inclusive staff training, reliable services and effective responses to harassment can all contribute to a transport network where people feel able to travel freely and without fear.

Although the research focuses on London, its findings have wider relevance for transport providers and professionals across the UK. Creating inclusive transport networks means understanding the barriers experienced by different communities and ensuring that safety is considered not only in terms of preventing physical harm, but also in enabling everyone to travel with confidence and without fear.

Further reading

Guide Dogs (2024) *Designing for Inclusion*

Living Streets (2023) *Pedestrian slips, trips and falls*

Home Office (2025) *Angiolini Inquiry Part 2 First Report*

Rebecca McIntosh for the Winston Churchill Trust (2025) *To Research Night-time Economy Governance of Cities and its Impact on Safety and Accessibility for Women*

London TravelWatch and Galop (2023) *Out in London: LGBTQ+ People's Safety On London's Transport Network*

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- Support the economy
- Help address societal inequalities
- Reduce environmental degradation
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