

Transgender fears over tram, train travel

Timna Jacks

Simona Castricum has been spat on, sexually assaulted and mocked on public transport.

The Melbourne University academic, who is transgender, now uses Uber pools or drives whenever possible, to avoid abuse on Melbourne's trains and trams.

"I've had some of the worst things happen to me on public transport and railway stations," she said.

"Everything from sexual assault to verbal abuse to being spat on ... and being intimidated by people who are too disgusted to sit down next to me, so they get up and move."

Every time Ms Castricum boards a train or tram, she feels "immediately on guard".

"The first thing I have to do is scan the carriage ... and make sure that who I am sitting next to seems OK, which is a difficult decision to make, so really you just sit down and hope for the best.

"I take a risk when I get on public transport ... I need to find my escape route as quickly as I can."

It comes as new data obtained by *The Age* shows that sexual offences have risen by 60 per cent on public transport in the past three years. The number of sexual offences at train stations jumped by 70 per cent, despite more than 1400 Protective Service Officers patrolling the city's stations, up from 1110 PSOs in 2014.

The Productivity Commission has separately warned that nearly



Every time Simona Castricum gets on public transport she's immediately on guard. Photo: Meredith O'Shea

one in three Victorians do not feel safe using the state's public transport.

The official data doesn't include the gender identity of victims, but experts say that women, transgender and gender-diverse people are being overwhelmingly targeted.

There is a lack of local and international data showing how gender non-conforming people are treated on public transport.

But a 2014 La Trobe University

study found more than one-third of young people in this cohort experience physical abuse, discrimination or harassment on public transport. One-quarter said they avoided public transport because they felt unsafe.

Lead author Elizabeth Smith said public transport was an "area where young people who are trans or gender diverse are more vulnerable to verbal or physical abuse".

"It's about visibility; being read as

not conforming to gender stereotypes," the research fellow at La Trobe University said.

The crime figures were released a week after the murder of international student Aiiia Maasarwe, after she got off the 86 tram.

The incident prompted calls for more PSOs and better lighting at train stations and tram stops.

But a series of Monash University studies led by public transport researcher Professor Graham Currie

has found that improving design features in train stations such as lighting, emergency buttons and CCTV cameras, did not always make people feel safer.

A commuter's perception of a station's safety was more closely tied to the crime rates in the suburb the station was in.

"This means that the issue of crime on public transport is more about society than it is about public transport," Professor Currie said.

"Although we can improve designs for stations - and there is a strong preference for them to be staffed - in the end, the designs of stations and what we do there is not as important as the suburbs within which they are situated."

Transgender Victoria's chair Brenda Appleton called for PSOs and customer-facing staff on public transport to be better trained in supporting gender non-conforming commuters.

This would encourage LGBTI people to report their abuse and overcome any "distrust that people in uniforms will treat them fairly".

"In general, we need society to be more accepting of difference, of LGBTI people or other forms of difference," she said.

"The other aspect is to encourage people to stand up for each other, rather than being a silent majority.

"But the risk is that those who are more generous of spirit suffer the consequences of stepping in, and that's an issue."