

## Literature Review

### Introduction

Affordable and reliable transportation is important for women's safety. Access to safe transportation within and between communities can be a key practical challenge for women and their children experiencing or at risk of violence. As part of the Transportation Research Project, the BC Society of Transition Houses (BCSTH) conducted this literature review in Fall 2020 to develop a better understanding of the academic and gray literature research on transportation needs of women, the relationship of transportation to violence against women, and the impact of transportation on the safety of women in rural and remote communities.

### Findings

Safe, reliable, accessible transportation allows people to participate socially and economically in their communities. Increased access to transportation has been linked to higher rates of employment, greater social inclusion, and increased well-being. Transportation is needed to access essential health care, legal and support services as well as housing, schools and workplaces. It is considered a key component of successful poverty reduction.<sup>1</sup>

### Transportation and Violence Against Women

Women are less likely to own a personal vehicle than men (Canadian Women's Foundation, 2018; Criado-Perez, 2019; Duchène, 2011; Schwan et al., 2020; Sustainable Mobility for All, 2017), which limits their transportation options. Women who have experienced violence need transportation in order to leave a violent environment and/or to access the health, legal, and support services that can be located far from where they live (Forchuk et al., 2010; Levan et al., 2007; Schwan et al., 2020).

Safety on transportation is a major consideration for women. Schwan et al. (2020) state that "women, girls, and gender diverse peoples are more likely to encounter harassment and assault when using public transportation than male travelers..." (p. 234). Many women who have had traumatic experiences may not trust public transportation systems and be unable or hesitant to use public transportation (Criado-Perez, 2019).

Around the world, the 'lack of personal security' or 'inability to use transport without fear of being victimized' can be substantial barriers for women's access to transportation, and yet there is a lack of data available on public transit-related crime (Criado-Perez, 2019; Sustainable Mobility for All, 2017). A study in France found that 90% of women had experienced harassment on public transport (*'Half of French women' alter clothes to avoid harassment*, 2016). In Sweden, women who are younger, Indigenous,

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<sup>1</sup> These findings are confirmed in the work of Allen, 2018; Criado-Perez, 2019; Duchène, 2011; Fletcher et al., 2010; Forchuk et al., 2010; Harley et al., 2018; Justice Connect, 2016; Loukaitou-Sideris, 2008; Lucas, 2012; Merlin & Hu, 2017; Páez et al., 2009; Schwan et al., 2020; Sustainable Mobility for All, 2017; The World Bank, 2018; Vais et al., 2019; van Berkum & Oudshoorn, 2015.



frequent transit users, taking longer trips, and previous victims of property crime were found to be at higher risk of being targets of sexual crimes, suggesting that these women have “distinct safety demands in using public transport” (Ceccato et al., 2020). These studies indicate that few women have access to safe transportation.

When public transportation is unable to meet their needs, women must find alternate methods of transportation, which may place them at increased risk of violence. When public transportation is inadequate, women will more often choose to hitchhike to go to appointments, visit friends and family, and to get to work or school. In addition, women may turn to survival sex to meet their basic travel needs, especially during harsh winters (Schwan et al., 2020).

### Transportation and Violence Against Women in Rural Communities

Rural<sup>2</sup>, remote<sup>3</sup> and northern communities face heightened challenges to meeting people’s basic needs for transportation. Inadequate transportation in these communities’ limits women’s access to healthcare, legal and support services, as well as education and employment opportunities. It can also lead to increased social isolation and disengagement (Harley et al., 2018; Litman et al., 2017; Schwan et al., 2020). Long distances can be a factor. When community members are required to travel long distances to see a physician, they often miss appointments or choose not to access medical care (Harley et al., 2018).

Fewer transportation options are also a challenge. Transportation planners and policy analysts have noted that rural communities lack the “seriously subsidized” transit options of their urban counterparts (Alter, 2018). Many of the benefits of public transportation for rural communities can be overlooked in formal transportation planning, and the importance of improvements is often underestimated (Litman et al., 2017).

In rural and remote communities, transportation consists primarily of personal vehicles (Harley et al., 2018), which women are less likely to have access to than men (Criado-Perez, 2019; Sustainable Mobility for All, 2017). Naud (2019) found that elderly women in rural Canadian communities are constrained by transportation problems at 10 or more times the rate of elderly men.

For women experiencing or at risk of violence in rural, remote and northern communities, lack of transportation can bring serious consequences. These women are less likely to leave a violent relationship if they are unable to access support services (Barton et al., 2015; Few, 2005; Koepsell et al., 2006; Mendoza et al., 2013; Schwan et al., 2020). While there is a perception of social closeness in isolated communities as a protective factor against violence, this is misguided as research suggests that violence against women is common in rural areas, sometimes exceeding the rate in urban centres (Barton et al., 2015; DeKeseredy, 2011; Donnermeyer et al., 2006; Draus & Carlson, 2009; Fortney et al.,

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<sup>2</sup> For this project, rural is defined as a community with a population size of 29,999 or fewer.

<sup>3</sup> For this project, remote is defined as community or geographic location with a population of less than 5,000 and/or at least 100 km from a city of >29,999. It can also be a community or geographic location without year-round road access. The project recognizes that geographic isolation that can be compounded by lack of access to social networks, internet and cellphone service, and financial resources.

1995; Small et al., 2010). Lack of transportation, long distances, and lack of privacy have been identified as barriers to escaping violence for women in rural areas (Biesenthal & Sproule, 2000; Girls Action Foundation et al., 2013).

### Transportation and Violence Against Indigenous Women: The Highway of Tears

Indigenous women experience violent victimization at almost three times the rate of non-Indigenous women (Martin & Walia, 2019; Schwan et al., 2020), due largely to the lasting effects of colonialism, discrimination, forced relocation, and the racialization and criminalization of Indigenous spaces and women's bodies (Morton, 2016). As of 2014, Indigenous women were six times more likely to be killed than non-Indigenous women (McDiarmid, 2019).

Insufficient transportation can make it impossible for Indigenous women to relocate to safe housing, escape violence, or even attend work or school. Failures in this system undermine women's security by forcing them to rely on alternative and potentially dangerous ways to travel, such as hitchhiking. For Indigenous women living in remote communities or on reserves, these barriers are even more prominent. (Schwan et al., 2020, p. 237)

Highway 16 in British Columbia, known as the Highway of Tears, clearly demonstrates the links between transportation and women's safety (Schwann et al., 2020). The Highway of Tears is named for the many women, primarily Indigenous, who have gone missing or been murdered along this critical corridor (Carrier Sekani Family Services, n.d.).

The first of 33 recommendations from the Highway of Tears Symposium Recommendations Report (Lheidli T'enneh First Nation et al., 2006) was to implement a shuttle bus between each town and city the length of the highway. A decade later, the British Columbia government announced the trial run of the BC North Bus, to provide safe, affordable and reliable transportation. In 2018, the Highway 16 Transportation Action Plan received a Safety and Security award from the Canadian Urban Transit Association, as well as the Premier's Award for Partnerships (BC Transit, 2018). By January 2019, approximately 18,000 passengers used this service in the two years it was operational (British Columbia, 2019). However, the year the BC North Bus was introduced, the Greyhound Bus Company announced it would soon stop service in Western Canada (McDiarmid, 2019).

McDiarmid (2019) finds that hitchhiking remains common. The billboards along the highway that were intended to provide resources for women travelling along the route instead perpetuate victim blaming, suggesting that hitchhiking is a 'lifestyle choice' rather than an example of constrained mobility (Morton, 2016).

### Women and Transportation Planning

Transportation is intertwined with almost all public services and is considered a basic need. Unfortunately, for too many women and girls, transportation is not safe, reliable, affordable, or accessible (Marlin et al., 2009; Schwan et al., 2020; Sustainable Mobility for All, 2017).

While women have unique transportation needs and complex travel patterns (Criado-Perez, 2019; Gauvin et al., 2020; Sustainable Mobility for All, 2017), these are not often considered in transportation planning.



- “Women’s unique needs are generally not considered in transportation policy and infrastructure development. Although there have been promising practices across the country, housing scarcity and transit underdevelopment continue to combine to create social exclusion for women, girls, and gender diverse peoples.” (Schwan et al., 2020, p. 239)
- “The United Nations Commission on the Status of Women found a ‘male bias’ in transport planning and a failure to address gender ‘in system configuration’.” (Criado-Perez, 2019, p. 33)
- “Vulnerable and special-need groups (including women, children, persons with disabilities, and older persons) are underserved by public and private transport systems. This can happen because users and providers do not carry the full societal costs of excluding vulnerable groups. For example, providers tend to focus on cost effectiveness over equity and inclusion considerations, which have important implications for society in the short and long term.” (Sustainable Mobility for All, 2017, p.25)

The result is a transportation system that is inequitable but not inevitable.

### Conclusion

Although by no means exhaustive, this literature review points to some of the evidence confirming how, why and when transportation is key to women’s safety. Access to affordable, safe, and reliable transportation within and between communities is vital to the safety and mobility of women and their children experiencing or at risk of violence.

This literature review is a component of a larger project, BCSTH Transportation Research Project, which works to develop on-the-ground partnerships between transition house organizations and the Northern Health Connections bus to pilot the opportunity for transportation options between communities for women experiencing violence.

While community-based solutions are important to fill gaps in transportation and meet local needs, the issue of access to transportation also needs to be addressed from a systemic level. Without considering the specific needs of women, even a better-resourced, more extensive transportation system may not be safe or reliable for everyone.

We encourage all levels of government to further develop and implement strategies that work to provide affordable, safe, and reliable transportation for women and their children experiencing or at risk of violence in rural and remote communities in British Columbia. BCSTH continues to work with our members and partners to find local solutions and document the gaps. More information is available on the [BCSTH Transportation Project webpage](#).



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