

# Citizens' perceptions of public transport safety in Port Moresby



Public buses in PNG's capital, Port Moresby  
*Photo Credit: Minetta Daniella Kakarere*

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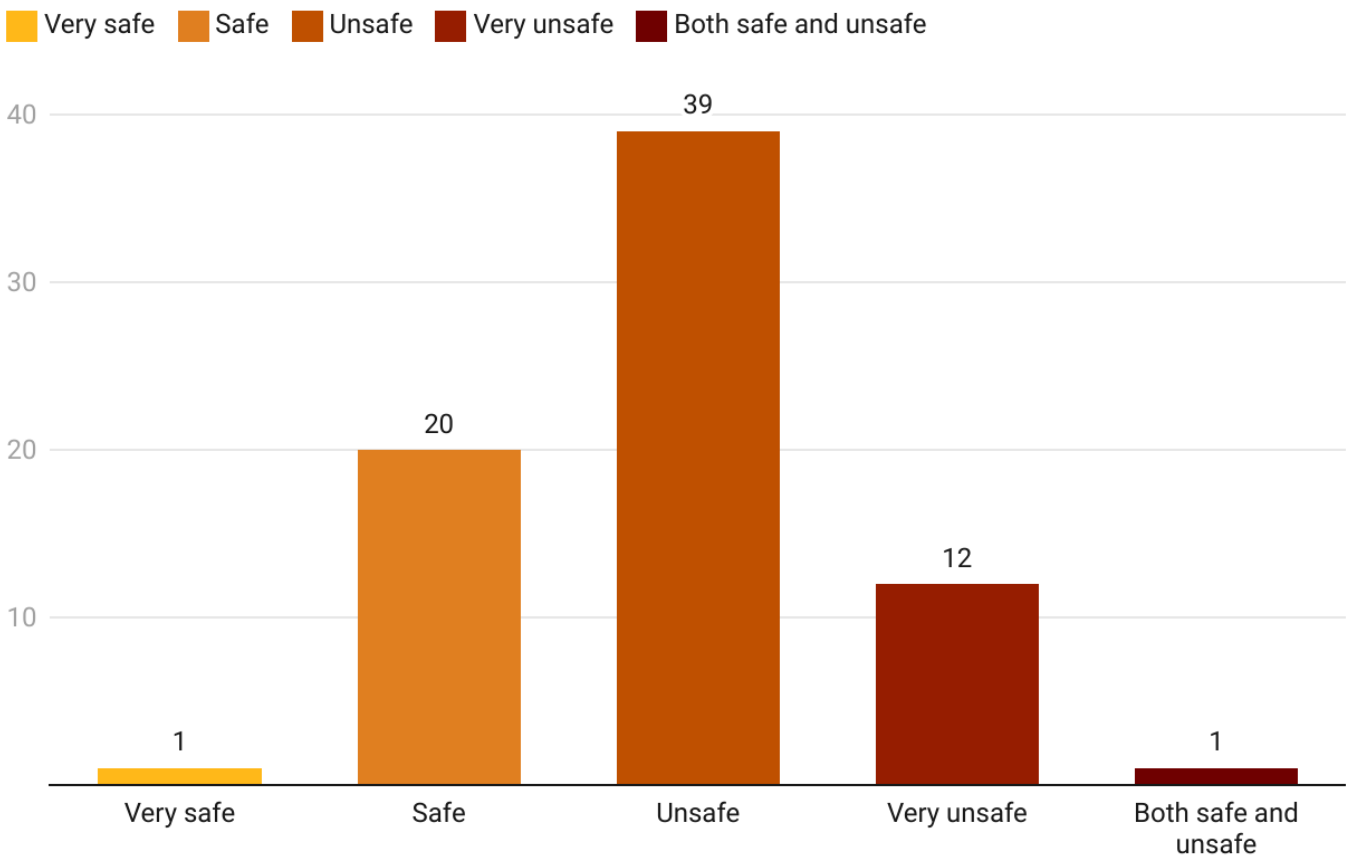
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The need for an affordable, clean, safe and efficient public transport system in Port Moresby is both pressing and widely recognised among residents. While numerous studies and reports have examined the issue, no substantive measures have yet been taken to improve the system.

The responsibility for the city's **outdated bus system** lies with the National Capital District Commission (NCDC), the Road Traffic Authority (RTA) and the Department of Transport, none of which have undertaken the necessary upgrades. Public Mobility Vehicle (PMV) buses **remain unhygienic**. Crew members are usually unkempt, frequently chewing betel nut and smoking while transporting passengers.

A survey of 73 citizens was conducted in 2024. It included 43 women and 27 men (with three people not responding on the question of gender). Of the respondents, 39 reported feeling unsafe while using public buses within the city limits (Figure 1). Almost half of those who felt safe acknowledged that their perception was based on not having encountered any harmful incidents themselves on the specific days when they travelled. However, they noted that public buses, in general, are not considered truly safe.

## Figure 1: Responses to ‘how safe are public buses in Port Moresby?’



Note: Respondents could only select one answer.

Source: UPNG survey results • Created with Datawrapper

When asked whether they had experienced negative incidents of any kind while using public buses, 51 respondents answered “yes” and 22 “no”. The most commonly reported experience was theft, with street criminals targeting passengers’ personal belongings (Figure 2). As highlighted by the [Police Commissioner](#), commuters frequently fall victim to petty thieves who operate around bus stations, often stealing mobile phones, bags, wallets and other valuables.

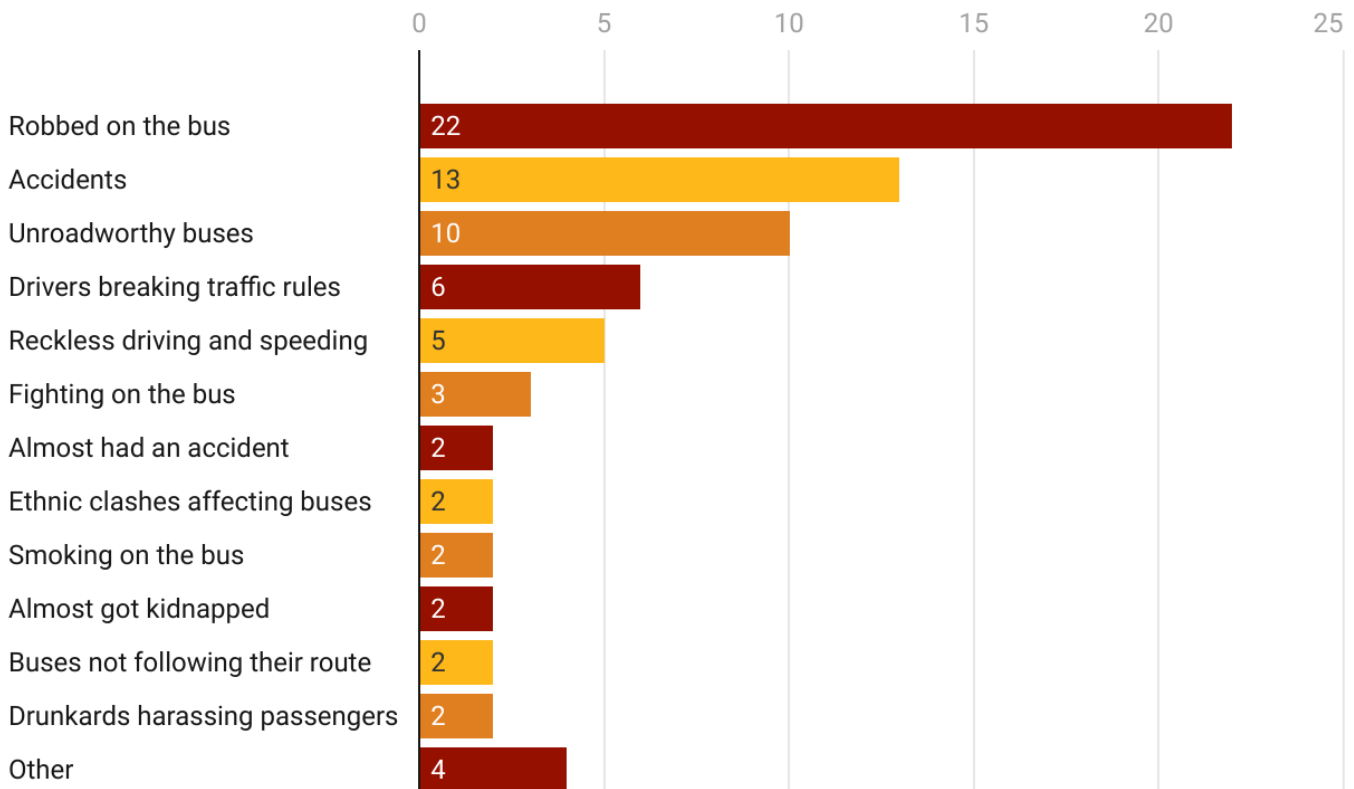
The second-most frequently reported negative experience among respondents was involvement in accidents. Many respondents recounted incidents in which their buses collided with other vehicles, veered off the road or narrowly avoided crashes (Figure 2). A widely shared concern is that, since the public transport system is privately owned, it prioritises profit over passenger safety and wellbeing, resulting in substandard services.

Most of the buses are unroadworthy. Common issues include broken seats, malfunctioning windows and cracked windscreens. One respondent described boarding a bus with a large hole in the floor through which she could see the road

beneath. She feared that debris from the road might fly up and injure her. Additionally, these buses frequently violate traffic regulations, creating hazards and inconveniences for other motorists and pedestrians.

During peak hour, drivers often disregard road etiquette, stopping abruptly in the middle of the road to pick up or drop off passengers, leading to unnecessary congestion and increasing the risk of accidents.

**Figure 2: Respondents' experiences on public buses**



Source: UPNG survey results • Created with Datawrapper

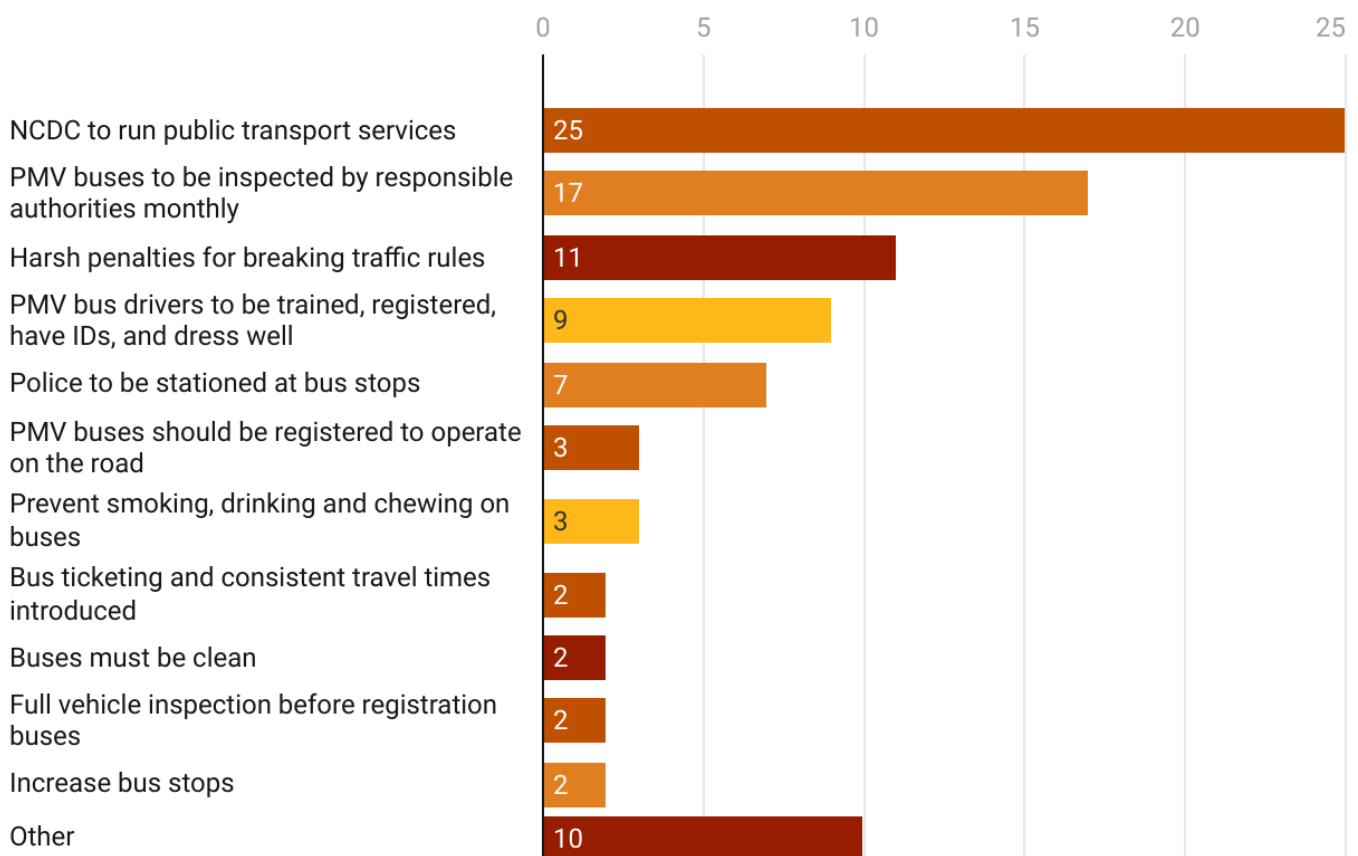
Senior police officers in Port Moresby have repeatedly urged PMV bus drivers to adhere to designated bus stops for picking up passengers, yet this practice remains largely ignored. The NCDC, the Lae City Authority and the Land Transport Board have relinquished control of public transport to private operators, who have mobilised into powerful groups to protect their business interests over service quality, often to the detriment of commuters.

One respondent recounted boarding an unregistered bus that was stopped at a police checkpoint. The bus driver asked all the passengers to disembark, forcing the respondent to walk to the nearest bus stop, where he was held up by a group of thugs armed with small knives who stole his belongings. Similarly, other respondents reported being stranded when buses failed to complete their routes. Additionally, some respondents said they were forced to walk home from school or

work due to unnecessary bus strikes and ethnic clashes. This not only left them physically exhausted but also vulnerable to petty crime along their way.

Public transport safety remains a daily concern for many residents of Port Moresby, underscoring the urgent need for improvements in this sector. According to survey respondents, the most preferred solution is for the NCDC to take over the management and operation of the public transport system (Figure 3).

**Figure 3: Responses on ways to improve the bus transport system**



Source: UPNG survey results • Created with Datawrapper

Having a single operator for public buses would offer numerous advantages, including streamlined management, increased efficiency and greater accountability for drivers in the event of road incidents. Under such a system, police officers or RTA personnel could be stationed on buses to enhance passenger safety and security, particularly for women and girls. Additionally, this system would help ensure that buses remain clean and roadworthy for commuters.

Most importantly, all drivers should be required to undergo formal training, pass exams and obtain certification before being employed by NCDC as public transport operators. Smoking, chewing betel nut and consuming alcohol should be strictly prohibited on board, with enforcement by police and RTA officers to ensure

compliance, especially given that some passengers may disregard regulations.

A standardised bus schedule would further improve efficiency. Moreover, transitioning from a cash-based fare system to a card-based payment method could enhance financial transparency and provide funds for further improvements to the public transport network. To strengthen security and accountability, GPS tracking systems and surveillance cameras could also be installed on buses, ensuring better oversight of bus crews and passenger safety.

All of the proposed improvements outlined by respondents (Figure 4) are more likely to be realised if public transport is managed by a single, centralised operator. This raises a critical question: is it preferable to maintain a privatised system, where only a select few — primarily bus owners — benefit while the majority endure substandard transport services? Or would a single, government-operated entity, dedicated to delivering efficient and accessible public transport for all, be the better alternative? If NCDC were to oversee the system, this could bring significant positive changes, as its primary objective would be to serve the public rather than generate profit.

Since bus drivers and operators often fail to realise the vital role of public transportation in the economy, it would be more effective for the government to take control of the system. As Papua New Guinea will celebrate 50 years of independence this year, one must ask: how much longer must the residents of Port Moresby continue to voice their dissatisfaction over this important issue?

### **Disclosures:**

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