

## *Policing Mass Transit: Serving a Unique Community*

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Law enforcement agencies can work with transit authorities to improve the security and perceived safety of mass transit systems.

Policing mass transit systems presents distinct challenges to law enforcement. At the same time, though, it enables agencies to send a clear, high-impact message that community-based policing extends to communities distinguished not only by geographical boundaries but also by shared needs. To fully integrate transportation security into a police agency's overall crime reduction strategy, administrators must remember that mass transit riders make up a special community based on a mode of transportation as opposed to a location.

The primary goal of policing mass transit is twofold-to enhance transit system safety and to reduce the fear of crime on transit systems. When riders perceive a transit system as unsafe, they will not use it, no matter what claims statisticians or civic leaders make to the contrary.<sup>1</sup> If the level of crime and disorder becomes so high that it has a measurable impact on the public's perception of safety, the number of riders will decrease either on the entire system or on specific routes or lines. The loss of ridership then sets in motion an inevitable cycle of deterioration spurred by the decline in revenues and the migration of potential middle-class and affluent riders to other modes of transportation.

Transit systems besieged by such a cycle become largely the domain of low-income riders with no alternatives, visitors, and the criminals who prey on them. To avert such scenarios, the police must provide a coordinated effort to combat threatening behavior and maintain order on the mass transit system.

Police officials should not underestimate this challenge. The unique elements of a mass transit environment tend to amplify security concerns among potential riders. In a recent Canadian study, women were asked to identify areas of their lives where they felt unsafe. Respondents ranked riding public transit at night as the third most unsafe city environment. As a consequence, the women polled tended to avoid riding mass transit in the evening whenever possible.<sup>2</sup> Such sentiments could be generalized to the rider population as a whole.

In addition, Hollywood images that highlight the dangers-real or imagined-of big-city mass transit compound the problem. Keying in on modern urban fears, the news media, too, tend to emphasize the transit angle in covering criminal incidents. Crimes that might barely merit mention otherwise become headline news if they occur on a mass transit system.

Selective media coverage perpetuates the myth that public transportation is unsafe. One writer succinctly summed up the public fears that make policing mass transit systems a distinctive challenge for law enforcement: "For many reasons-including television and movie portrayals, the crush of crowds and the necessity of traveling through unknown neighborhoods-transit riders often view the systems as isolated, crime-ridden places."<sup>3</sup>

Fortunately, the police can pursue specific policies to counteract such sentiments and to enhance the

public's attitude toward safety in the mass transit environment. The first step is to develop a reliable and practical standard to measure the success or failure of current and future security efforts.

## STRATEGIC MEASUREMENTS

To achieve the goal of a system that is not only safe but also perceived to be safe, the police, working in concert with the transit authority, must have the ability to measure data that relate to security. Failure to maintain objective measurements of crime and disorder, as well as subjective assessments of security by transit users, will prevent strategic planners from determining the impact of their efforts.

Police can use three readily available measurements to gauge the overall security of a transit system—a statistical database of crime and disorder, a tally of ridership losses and gains, and a survey to estimate the perception of fear among riders and employees. Together, these measurements will provide police managers with an accurate assessment of the safety and the perceived safety of a mass transit system.

### Crime and Disorder

The most logical measurement to use when gauging the security of a transit system is one of crime and disorder on the system—or on particular lines within the system. Analyzing crime records can help police managers identify emerging criminal trends before they become entrenched problems.

In addition to tracking felonies, police managers should monitor statistics covering a broad range of activities that impact the quality of a customer's ride. Data on regulation violations, fare evasions, ejections/exclusions, and other lesser categories can be used to measure disorderly behavior on the system.

When building a statistical database, police managers can use as a starting point the FBI's Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) system for Part I and II classified crimes. In addition, the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) has implemented a new policy for transit agencies, requiring those that receive federal Section 9 operational grants to report a wide range of offenses to the National Transit Database. The FTA created this program in part to encourage and assist transit systems across the country in identifying problems and developing effective countermeasures.<sup>4</sup> However, as transit systems begin to comply with the FTA's requirement, police agencies should use UCR statistics to build their own databases and to measure their own efforts.

### Ridership

Several factors can impact ridership levels on transit systems, but large-scale losses in ridership generally indicate the riding public's loss of faith in the security of a system. Passengers express their fear by abandoning mass transit and choosing alternate, often more expensive, modes of transportation.<sup>5</sup>

Because a decrease in activity can affect either the entire system or specific lines, police managers need to collect detailed data to determine where they should direct resources. A careful measurement of ridership levels before proactive activities begin can serve as a baseline for measuring the success of an enhanced enforcement program. Knowing baseline figures also can help managers redirect their efforts if the program fails to stem a trend of decreased ridership.

### Rider Perceptions

Along with objective measurements, police managers also should use a third, more subjective, measure

to gauge the security of a mass transit system. By conducting periodic ridership surveys with the assistance of the transit authorities, the police not only demonstrate their genuine concern for the safety of passengers but they also gain valuable information that can help them address problems at the earliest possible stages. Riders may perceive potential trouble before a trend in crime reports becomes apparent.

Once the police develop a baseline fear index, managers can use it to monitor the success of the department's efforts to reduce the perception of an unsafe transit system. They also can use it to measure reaction to atypical, but traumatic, events on the system, such as a well-publicized shooting.

## SYSTEM SECURITY

### Patrol

With an effective strategic measurement protocol in place, police managers can focus on developing strategies to increase rider security on the transit system. By far, the most important element of this effort is high-profile police patrol.

Patrol commanders should remember that within the diverse community of mass transit riders, passengers share one common element: Their presence in the system is transitory. That is, they do not reside in the transit system, and therefore, they tend to view the long-term effects of criminal activity occurring in the system in a different framework than they would crime occurring near their residences or places of business.

Long-term, ongoing criminal behavior that has limited personal impact on riders generally makes little impression. For example, signs of flagrant drug use on a system may fail to influence ridership levels. However, threatening behavior that results from drug use could have a profound effect on ridership.

Likewise, the disorder that comes as a by-product of such offenses as drug use has a dramatic effect on riders' impressions of the system in general and the police response in particular. Riders' fear of crime correlates strongly to their perception of police effectiveness in maintaining order in the transit system. In surveys, passengers who give the police high marks for maintaining order also express little fear of being victimized while using the system.<sup>6</sup> Undoubtedly, high visibility enforcement is a central component for maintaining order and making riders feel more secure in the mass transit environment.<sup>7</sup> While the fear of crime is reduced by police presence, crime itself is reduced by police acting on the elements of disorder. When crime analysts from the New York City Transit Police examined statistics for the years 1990 to 1993, they drew the following conclusion:

...police activities (making arrests, issuing summonses, and ejecting violators for minor offenses, such as fare evasion) have had an inverse effect on the number of felonies reported. In other words, when there is an increase in the number of police activities, there is a corresponding decrease in the number of felonies reported.<sup>8</sup>

Panhandling, gambling, and similar activities also have a negative impact on the perceived desirability of mass transit. Through direct observation or by monitoring transit employee reports and rider complaints, police easily can identify and track disorderly individuals. Once a problem has been identified, patrol officers can act quickly to remove the offenders from the transit system.

Special legislation may be needed to give the police specific authority to exclude repeat offenders from a facility. The exclusion of individuals for fare evasion is a particularly effective tool, but police can use other transit-oriented ordinances, such as prohibitions against eating or playing music without

headphones, with equal effect. Whatever the legal tools used, it is clear that by closely monitoring the disorderly behavior of potential offenders, the police can play a crucial role in controlling crime rates in a transit system.<sup>9</sup>

Police officers who patrol transit systems also should practice the proactive intervention strategies characterized by the community policing approach. To help them do so, police managers might find it best to focus efforts away from radio dispatch and dramatic enforcement missions, such as drug arrests, in favor of providing the kind of high-profile crime prevention presence that has a true impact on ridership.

### Night Patrol

Like many components of the urban landscape, transit systems undergo a transformation when day turns into evening. As the number of riders drops dramatically after the evening rush hour, large masses of passengers traveling in one direction give way to single, isolated riders heading to different destinations. Unfortunately, these riders make attractive targets for criminals and opportunists who use the isolation of the transit setting to their advantage. Therefore, as evening passenger traffic decreases, the need for police vigilance to prevent and detect crime increases. In addition to heightened security concerns, nighttime often means an increase in so-called victimless crimes occurring along transit lines. Chief among these is prostitution, which can have a dramatic negative impact on the livability of the community as a whole and can detract from the desirability of mass transit in particular. Vigorous enforcement of solicitation laws-directed both at prostitutes and their transit customers-can greatly improve a system's safety image for potential nighttime riders.

### Juveniles on the System

Studies have found that many passengers find youthful activity-even relatively innocent behavior-threatening.<sup>10</sup> Such concerns are especially profound for "transit-captive" riders, such as the elderly, women, and parents with small children. Youthful exuberance, even without criminal intent, can carry large crowds of young people to extremes. When the energies of youth are coupled with criminal intent, the situation can become volatile.

In many communities, large numbers of students use mass transit to get to and from school. Most of these children ride responsibly. However, the mere presence of large numbers of school-age children can pose problems, especially when single lines serve multiple schools or where students from different schools congregate at transfer points. Normal school rivalries, both within and among schools, can lead to incidents. Added to the problem is the increasing gang-related activity, which raises the potential for an explosive mix, especially with the all-too-real possibility of guns being involved. Police must be cognizant of the tensions within the schools and take action to monitor and control the behavior of school-age riders.

Police managers should work closely with school administrators to avert potential problems. If lines of communication remain open, school officials can notify transit police when potential concerns arise for student-rider safety resulting from increased tension between rival groups or incidents occurring during the school day. This information can prove invaluable in helping the police to monitor and diffuse tense situations on the transit system.

Truancy represents another challenge for the police. Youths who skip school may be more likely to commit other types of offenses. The police can take these youths' criminal proclivities into account by addressing the problem of truancy. In Philadelphia, the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation

Authority (SEPTA) instituted the Truancy Intervention Program (TIP) in conjunction with the Philadelphia Board of Education and the Juvenile Aid Division of the Philadelphia Police Department. As part of the program, police officers who encounter truants on the transit system take them into custody and transport them to designated holding sites operated by the board of education. If further investigation results in criminal charges, SEPTA police officers transfer the students to a police facility. If the police do not file charges, the students are returned to school.<sup>11</sup>

Such an effort can have a dramatic impact on crime not only on the transit system but also in neighboring areas. By diverting lawbreakers to police custody and potential troublemakers back to school, TIP has helped reduce day-light criminal activity in many communities throughout Philadelphia.<sup>12</sup>

### Special Legislation

When police managers consider ways to enhance transit system security, they should not overlook working with the transit authority to strengthen the special ordinances and codes that communities generally enact to encourage orderly behavior on the system. Where a specific need exists, police managers also can work with community groups to support legislation to help address the problem.

For example, to discourage repeat offenses, state legislatures or local governing bodies should be encouraged to enact ordinances to give the police specific powers to expel and exclude troublemakers from the system. Such legislation would provide the police with the legal ability to exclude-and then arrest upon reentry-individuals who demonstrate undesirable behavior. Other laws can be enacted to control behavior that would not otherwise be controlled outside of the transit environment. However, when advocating new legislation, the police must balance the constitutional issues related to regulating behavior that might be legal elsewhere but undesirable within the confines of a transit system.

### Prosecution

To further enhance the overall effectiveness of crime reduction efforts, police managers can work with the district attorney's office to create special prosecution teams for offenses occurring on mass transit systems. In Oregon, the Tri-County Metropolitan Transit Authority (Tri-Met) of the greater Portland area contracted with the Multnomah County District Attorney's Office to hire a prosecutor who specializes in transit crime cases. This prosecutor not only serves as an enforcer of transit law and an expert on transit crime but also acts as a source of valuable training assistance to the police. Further, because the prosecutor's office is adjacent to the Portland Police Bureau's Tri-Met Unit, officers who patrol the transit system have direct, daily interaction with the district attorney's office through this special prosecutor.

### Environmental Design and Maintenance

Ideally, environmental design starts when planners lay out new stations or stops for a transit system. After all, planners understand that a poorly designed system will not attract passengers. Police managers can enhance passenger safety in an existing facility by taking fairly simple steps and working with the transit authority to maintain the aesthetic qualities of the location and to improve security. For example, by responding quickly to graffiti or other displays of vandalism, police and transit authority personnel can significantly enhance passengers' perceptions of the system's safety.

Another important step is to ensure that stations provide adequate signs to direct users to their destination, whether that be another train, the nearest staffed booth or security office, an elevator, or the

proper exit. A person lost in a mass transit system can easily become fearful-and a target of opportunity for criminals. Special security telephones and ample access to pay telephones also reassure riders that they can contact help if needed.

Visibility represents another important safety consideration for a mass transit system. Not only is it important that police have the capability to monitor remote areas of the system, but passengers also feel more confident in a system with good visibility.

Ample lighting in all areas of the system should be a paramount concern. Other measures to increase visibility include installing convex mirrors at corners, removing overgrown plants and poorly designed fixtures, and installing closed-circuit television (CCTV) cameras to cover areas that would otherwise be difficult to monitor on a regular basis.

Some transit systems have taken CCTV to the next level by placing monitor screens so that passengers can remotely observe platforms and other areas of the system prior to entering them. The prominent placement of cameras and monitors throughout the Metro system in Washington, DC, is believed to serve as a significant deterrent to criminal activity that might otherwise take place in the system.<sup>13</sup> Once police managers identify security needs stemming from environmental design, they should advise transit authority officials and suggest measures to correct the problems.

### Community Identity

To address the needs of the transit community properly, police managers must appreciate the relationship between a transit system and the areas it serves. The interconnection between neighborhoods and mass transit is real. Transit lines in high crime areas generally have higher crime rates than other parts of the system.<sup>14</sup>

To increase the community's stake in a safe and secure system, transit authorities and police should work to increase the perception that the transit system is part of the community and not merely something that moves through it. Coordination of law enforcement efforts within the mass transit system and in the neighborhoods can result in reduced crime not only on the transit system but in the neighborhoods as well.

In Philadelphia, SEPTA implemented the Adopt-A-Station program to increase the public's involvement in maintaining neighborhood transit stations. The program's goal is to "...strengthen communications with the public and to enhance the environment that SEPTA and the community share. After 'adopting' a station, the community provides valuable input to SEPTA so that the station continues to reflect or improve the climate of the neighborhood."<sup>15</sup>

In implementing such efforts, transit authorities and police managers recognize that policing mass transit means more than developing techniques for handling crime on vehicles, platforms, and stations. It involves treating mass transit as an integral part of the community and recognizing that the community has an absolute need for the system's service. Crime, or even the fear of crime, will diminish ridership and isolate members of the community served by the transit system.

### CONCLUSION

For police managers, the very term mass transit combines elements that challenge law enforcement's ability to maintain a secure environment: large groups of people in a transitory status. However, by developing a comprehensive approach to policing the transit setting, police can meet the challenge of

providing service to this special community.

Police first must develop a reliable method for measuring important statistics that accurately relate the condition of the transit system in terms of security. These strategic measurements should be broad-based enough to provide a picture of the security needs of the entire system and take into account subjective assessments by passengers of transit security. With this information, police and transit authority officials can develop specific proactive strategies to enhance security throughout the transit system. The ultimate goal should be to make riders feel safe by ensuring that they are safe.

#### Endnotes

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