

Transit Security: Keeping Perceptions in Perspective

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The bombings at the New York Trade Center and in Oklahoma have served notice to transit security administrators that terrorism in the United States is a reality. Many transit commuters may argue that they currently experience “domestic terrorism” in the form of antisocial behavior demonstrated on our transit systems. Transit police/security administrators recognize that various social problems are brought into the transit environment from the community. A workshop on transit security was held in Oakland, California, in 1992. Participants included transit police/security administrators, representatives of social agencies involved in community problems, and academics who provided information regarding the social problems. The four major topics were transit effectiveness in addressing intergenerational, ethnic, and cultural conflicts; in working with the larger community to maintain safe and drug-free environments; in alleviating the problem of homelessness; and, finally, how order and cleanliness contribute to a safe and civil transit environment. Many of the problems occurring on transit are not crimes but may be considered infractions, which result in a police/security action being taken. Therefore, the perception of crime on transit may appear to be greater than it actually is. The definition of transit crime continues to be debated among transit police/security administrators. Some argue that a crime is a crime regardless of where it occurs and others rationalize that a crime on transit is unique because of the confined environment. Regardless of the definition, the victims and commuters who use the system are directly affected by

their perception of the transit environment. The problem facing transit police/security administrators is how to provide the public with a commuter quality environment. The approach to reducing criminal and social problems on transit must include the community where these problems originate. Law enforcement alone cannot abate the problems.

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The definition of transit crime continues to be debated among transit police/security administrators (“transit security” in this presentation is used interchangeably with “transit police”). Some argue that a crime is a crime regardless of where it occurs, while others rationalize that a criminal offense on transit is unique because of the confined environment, thereby justifying the term transit crime. Regardless of the definition, commuters who use the system, or those who may want to use the system, are directly affected by the perception of security on the transit system. Webster’s dictionary defines perception as “an awareness of the elements of an environment through physical sensation;

or physical sensation that is interpreted in light of the experience." For our purposes in transit, it simply means what an individual experiences, witnesses, or is told.

PERCEPTIONS

Transit management, commuters, and employees all have security perceptions of the system. Ridership is directly affected by negative perceptions of social behavior. Marketing the transit system is extremely difficult if the image to the commuter is that of personal danger. Transit employees are often the target of antisocial conduct, thus reaffirming the commuter's fears. The media respond with images of potential criminal attacks and lack of security on the system. But are these perceptions valid or are they distorted? Security reports tend to provide factual data, but the media may include infractions and misdemeanors along with major criminal incidents, thus giving the appearance that crime is out of control on the transit system. Graffiti, loud radios, boisterous behavior, and bad language are disturbing elements to most commuters but are not considered major criminal activity by transit security administrators. Yet, the perception of commuters, often supported by the media, is that the transit system is unsafe to ride.

If we include felonies, misdemeanors, and infractions under transit crime, it is easy to see why a perception of lack of security on a system may prevail. Is it a transit crime when a woman's purse is snatched at a bus stop? Or when a commuter heading for a bus stop or train platform is assaulted 300 ft from the boarding area? The commuter does not need a definition of transit crime. The fact that one believes he or she may be assaulted while approaching the boarding area is sufficient reason to avoid riding the transit system.

Management must be sure that reporting of antisocial behavior on the transit system is accurate and does not give the perception that crime is rampant. The Federal Transit Administration (FTA) has developed a new security reporting element for the National Transit Database (Section 15) Report, which has been incorporated into the safety element of that report. Examples of major crimes are arson, aggravated assault, burglary, robbery, grand theft, rape, and homicide. Other offenses include vandalism, loitering, drunkenness, disorderly conduct, fare evasion, and trespassing. This will help eliminate discrepancies in reporting and wrong perceptions of crime on transit.

A COMMUTER QUALITY ENVIRONMENT

Whatever the perception of security of the transit system is, the commuter is entitled to a quality environment. That means being free of antisocial behavior that

is unacceptable to the commuters. To arrive at a commuter quality environment, it must be understood that the origin of antisocial behavior is within the community and that the transit system is only a vehicle for transporting this behavior.

Commuters are in a contained environment when they enter the system, and they expect the transit management to provide them with a commute that is free of nonthreatening activity. This is not an unreasonable expectation, although on some systems commuters realize they may have to chance unwanted encounters.

The problem facing transit managers is how to provide the public with a commuter quality environment. Administrators have recognized for several years that many of the antisocial behavior problems being experienced on transit are just an extension of problems originating in the community.

Management and the community must recognize that a joint effort is necessary to develop a commuter quality environment. Commuters look to law enforcement and social agencies to assist in keeping the community free of antisocial behavior; however, the transit system lacks the resources that are traditionally found in the community.

MANAGING SOCIAL PROBLEMS ON TRANSIT: THE WORKSHOP

Transit security chiefs have long recognized that antisocial problems have a direct effect on transit security perceptions. The FTA's Academic Security Committee, composed of several transit police-security chiefs from throughout the country, held a workshop in 1992 that included transit management, social welfare practitioners, educators, and community representatives. The workshop, *Transit Security: Exploring New Concepts in Managing Social Problems*, was funded by the Federal Transit Administration.

A major workshop theme was that there is no such thing as a transit crime or a transit social problem. These are problems that are emanating from the community and into the transit environment. If transit wants to prevent antisocial incidents from occurring on the system it must be proactive, and that means becoming involved with the communities it serves.

The following workshop modules were offered to the participants, and the recommendations of each are summarized.

Can the Transit System Be More Effective in Addressing Intergenerational, Ethnic, and Cultural Conflicts?

Facilitators were Michael O'Conner, Chief, New York City Transit Authority Police, New York; and Donald

Neuwirth, Conservation Corps Planning Consultant, San Francisco, California.

The Transit System and the Younger User

Preteenagers and teenagers are heavy users of transit systems and often do not realize that boisterous behavior, which is acceptable to their peers, may be unacceptable and even frightening to other transit users, especially senior citizens. Young people need to be educated about appropriate transit behavior, and this education should be reinforced by the school system, parents, and other community institutions. Participants in the workshop discussed whether and how the transit system can undertake this kind of education.

School/public transit partnerships are most likely to succeed if transit officials educate school system decision makers about the inconvenience and possible danger to other passengers of inappropriate behavior by young people on the transit system. School policy makers are also unaware of the high cost of these behaviors, and they do not realize that these costs are borne by the entire community through higher transit fares. It was pointed out that parents are often unaware that boisterous behavior, fare evasion, graffiti, and vandalism are problems on transit systems.

Participants suggested that one approach to working with young people is to develop peer-led programs that have teenagers explain to their peers and to younger children why it is important to maintain behavior standards on public transit. Senior citizens can also be recruited to educate students about how much senior citizens rely on transit and how important it is to them to have a peaceful ride. Participants in the workshop said that it was important to teach teenagers to see old people on the bus as "a lot like their grandmother" instead of "that slow old lady."

Several transit systems represented at the workshop have established outreach programs for the schools. The most successful of these programs have targeted schools where students have been heavily involved in problems on transit. The programs range from presentations in the schools by transit employees who are from the same community to distributing coloring books explaining why the transit system is a community resource and must be treated with respect.

Workshop participants stressed that occasional informal presentations in classrooms will not have a significant effect on the behavior of young people on the transit system. Coordinated and ongoing efforts with multiple points of contact with the decision makers, teachers, parents, and students are required to make a substantial difference in the behavior of young people on transit systems.

Recommendations

In addition to the programs and strategies that can be undertaken by local transit systems, the workshop participants recommended activities that could best be undertaken regionally or nationally to help transit systems address intergenerational, ethnic, and cultural conflicts. Research was a major interest.

Participants recommended collecting and disseminating information about programs that work. This could best be achieved by surveying transit systems for innovative approaches and inviting representatives of these programs to share their experiences with other transit officials. Participants strongly favored small, interactive, problem-solving sessions over presentations, lectures, large group sessions, written materials, or videos.

Because participants agreed that part of the problem is *perceptual*, they recommended a national marketing campaign focusing on the safety and convenience of public transit. A national campaign would be less expensive than multiple local efforts, and public service announcements could be tagged with local phone numbers where people could get more information about their local transit options.

Participants had a final recommendation that was only somewhat related to the subject of the workshop, but which they thought was important. They wanted to know what the likelihood is of being injured in a car accident compared with being the victim of a crime on public transit. It was recommended that if these statistics were not available, they should be gathered, and if they were available, they should be disseminated.

Can the Transit System and the Larger Community Work as Partners in Maintaining Safe and Drug-Free Environments?

Facilitators were Thomas C. Lambert, Chief of Transit Police, Metropolitan Transit Authority, Houston, Texas; and Michael Parker, Manager, Long Beach Neighborhood Services Bureau, City of Long Beach, California. No more than sixty percent of crime is ever reported, and transit systems have difficulty in convincing passengers to report what they have seen during an incident on the system. Part of the problem is building community trust. Workshop leaders encouraged participants to begin involving themselves in neighborhoods in new ways. Transit employees are often invited to attend PTA meetings or to visit Rotary Clubs, settings wherein there is a tradition of community leadership and participation. However, the communities that really need help and can most help the transit system are poorer, less organized, more culturally diverse, and harder to reach than middle-class communities.

Consensus Building in the Community

Participants discussed the fact that a single transit system typically operates in a number of communities and that it is usually not feasible to develop community-relations efforts in each. They recommended that consensus-building efforts be focused in the community where most of the system's patrons reside.

Consensus building begins by identifying the most trusted and respected members of the community. An initial approach would be to meet with all transit employees who are from the target community or who are members of the dominant ethnic and cultural groups in that community. These employees would be asked to identify important individuals and institutions in the community and to volunteer for outreach activities.

The process continues by bringing together community leaders to identify the most urgent community problems. Participants agreed that in their experience, community leaders identify the same problems that the transit system experiences: drug abuse, graffiti, personal safety, and so on. Community leaders, however, see these problems from a community perspective, and they want the transit system's help in dealing with the issues as community problems.

One participant pointed out that community leaders do not expect the transit system to solve all of the community's problems. What they appreciate is sincerity, a good faith effort, and listening. One of the benefits of close community involvement is educating the community about the budgetary limitations of the transit system.

It was stressed that consensus building would be slow. There is a history of neglect in many communities that has led to feelings of resentment and suspicion toward what is seen as "the establishment," which the transit system represents. There are also diverse cultures in most of these communities, and people will need time to learn about each other's communication styles and cultural customs.

Transit systems cannot solve security problems without addressing the fact that there is no such thing as transit crime; there is only community crime that occurs on the transit system. As the transit system becomes a partner with the community, positive results will benefit both.

Consensus Building in the Transit Agency

Community consensus building requires consensus building in the transit agency before building community-transit partnerships. Working effectively with the community requires an organizationwide commitment to transform the organizational culture from reactive to

proactive. The transit agency must develop creative methods with new vision.

Although resources are needed for this transition, it can also be initiated through resource reallocation. What is needed most is a change in attitude, but these changes must be made throughout the organization, beginning at the top.

Recommendations

Workshop participants were concerned about the perception that exists in many communities that increased transit also increases the incidence of crime. Many participants questioned the validity of this belief and suggested that a research project to investigate this perception would be useful.

Participants also believed that many executive directors and general managers of transit systems do not understand how social problems in the larger community influence the long-term economic viability of the transit system, nor do they understand the advantages of becoming proactive in their service areas. There was strong agreement that executive directors and general managers should be better informed about these issues.

The participants strongly supported initiating research to determine whether potential transit users, especially commuters, avoid transit because of unfounded fears about the risks of so-called transit crime. If research supports this premise, aggressive marketing campaigns should be implemented to counteract these beliefs.

What Can the Transit System Do To Alleviate the Problem of Homelessness on the System?

Facilitators were Charles O. Lacy, Transit Security Administrator, Metropolitan Transit Development Board, San Diego, California; and Rita Schwartz, Supervisor of Government and Community Affairs, Port Authority of New York and New Jersey. Some participants argued that transit should not be involved with homelessness. They took the position that the transit systems are not in the business of providing food, shelter, or counseling. Further, they argued that transit systems whose budgets are already stretched beyond their limits must find ways to comply with the requirements of the Clean Air Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act before they consider allocating resources to social problems such as homelessness. However, the majority of participants favored transit involvement and countered by saying that the homeless living in transit facilities affects ridership, employee morale, relationships with vendors, and the communities that rely on the system. The homeless in transit facilities damage the infrastructure, impose on

the commuters, make cleaning difficult, and are a danger to themselves and others. Because social service budgets are not adequate to address the problem, transit officials have no choice but to become involved. Although the homeless affect transit systems in many ways—living along the right-of-way, panhandling outside turnstiles, and sleeping on the system—the workshop focused almost exclusively on the problem of those who live in the transit facilities. Participants from the major metropolitan areas urged participants from smaller systems to address the problem early, before “you have to do what we have had to in New York, take back your facility, and it cost us \$600,000 a year.”

Who Are the Transit Homeless?

The homeless range from middle class families where the wage earners have lost their employment to seriously ill people with multiple medical and mental health problems. People who live in transit facilities usually fall into the latter category.

Some participants argued that homeless people like transit facilities because they are safer than shelters. Transit facilities are open and homeless persons can come and go at will. Transit facilities also provide good opportunities for panhandling and the anonymity of crowds.

New York Experiment

New York City sponsors a program called Operation Alternative, which, according to a workshop leader, has had the involvement of “everyone from the executive director to the washroom attendant.” It includes drop-in centers near the transit facility where the homeless are provided assistance and referrals to other agencies, reserved beds in local shelters, and a system of outreach and cooperation with the social service system.

When homeless people violate transit rules, which are carefully defined and strictly enforced, they are given an alternative of going to an appropriate social service agency (detoxification, mental health), going to a shelter, or immediately leaving the facility. Although there are recurring problems and difficult cases, the program is an overall success. The facility environment has dramatically improved; staff and ridership are regaining trust in the system. At the time of the workshop, robberies and larcenies were down by 50 percent.

Undertaking a project similar to the New York program is not feasible for many transit systems. The political and social service environment in New York, which includes a “right to shelter” law, provides an array of social services that are not available in many other communities. The New York program is also ex-

pensive; however, there may be elements of it that could be successfully duplicated by other transit agencies.

Lobby for Resources

Participants in the workshop expressed concern over declining budgets and increasing regulatory demands that are creating fiscal hardships for transit agencies. Participants focused on practical low-cost approaches to the problem of homelessness.

One strategy that received strong workshop support was to lobby for additional resources. A number of approaches were suggested, and some overall guidelines for successful lobbying were proposed:

- Visual presentations are far more effective than oral ones. Slide shows, videos, and photographs of a situation on the transit system and in the community powerfully demonstrate the need for attention to the problem.
- In addition to presenting the problem, give viable solutions.
- Focus on the economic impact of homelessness. Find out how much it is costing the system and the community. Use a cost/benefit analysis.
- Join others in the community to lobby for social service spending. Be sure someone from the transit agency is present when social service budgets are considered. The transit agency can be a powerful voice because transit represents the economic viability of the entire community.
- Educate the transit board, management, and the union about the costs of homelessness. Treat this as a full-time, all-day, all-week, every-year problem.

Form Partnerships

- Take the lead in helping the community understand that homelessness is everyone’s responsibility. Meet with other organizations that are involved with, or affected, by homelessness.
- Meet with other public agencies in your community—the police, city and county welfare agencies, health and mental health departments—to find out what they are doing.

Recommendations

Participants recommended training for transit officials in effectively presenting the problem of homelessness to other community institutions. There was also great interest in training for transit managers in how to build community partnerships to address homelessness.

How Do Order and Cleanliness Contribute to a Safe and Civil Transit Environment?

Facilitators were John Sullivan, Deputy Sheriff, Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, Los Angeles, California; William T. Hathaway, Research and Special Programs Administration, John A. Volpe National Transportation Systems Center, Cambridge, Massachusetts; and George Kelling, Fellow, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Order and cleanliness encourage respect. Broken windows in neighborhood buildings are a sign that nobody cares. If there are indications that nobody cares, criminals feel free to violate the neighborhood. Thus, disorder is a precursor to serious crime. Workshop participants agreed that this phenomenon is also true in transit facilities. If they are dirty, noisy, run down, and full of graffiti, and if the system tolerates minor rule infractions, the perception is that nobody cares, and serious crime is more likely to occur.

Establishing order and cleanliness requires enforcement of, and community education about, quality of life rules, including prohibitions against smoking, drinking, and eating. It also requires community support for enforcing rules against such infractions as disorderly conduct, loitering, graffiti, and fare evasion.

The transit environment is a system composed of people, procedures, equipment and facilities, and the environment. In each element of the system, actions can be taken that will contribute to order and cleanliness and to the perception that commuters and employees care about the system. Security personnel cannot keep order on a system without support from management, operators, transit employees and commuters. Everyone must send the same message: misbehavior will not be tolerated.

Management

Participants suggested a number of actions that management can take to support a clean and orderly environment. One of the most important is for managers to know what is happening on the system. One general manager said that she asks each of her managers to ride the system at least once a week. She recommended this strategy as one of the most effective ways to get management's attention about the importance of cleanliness and order.

Other participants recommended surveying operators to get their ideas about how to discourage rule infractions and having management and the union work together to implement suggestions. Management often does not understand how serious the issues of cleanliness and disorder are for employee morale.

Participants said that management sometimes resists hearing about and admitting problems because of fear that the reputation of the system will be damaged. Rather than publicly focusing on specific problems, however, management can adopt comprehensive strategies that together send the message that "commuters have rights." Regular meetings can be held with all major departments in the system (planning, marketing, security, operations, purchasing, etc.) to discuss strategies for sending a coordinated message to the public and employees that supports "passengers' rights."

Operators

System operators are in a difficult position. Asking them to handle minor infractions is, as one participant said, "like asking the airline pilot to serve the food." Others said that an attitude of "All I do is drive this bus" actually encourages disorder, because passengers quickly sense that the operator will not take action to stop rule violations or to support the passengers who object to rule-breaking. The need for effective training in "dealing with difficult people," especially training conducted by other operators (peer to peer), figured in the discussion.

Operators need a quick and reliable backup when incidents occur, and they need to feel that management cares about preventing problems rather than reacting to them after the fact. One participant stated, "Security is not just giving citations; it is problem solving. It must be comprehensive; a fragmented approach doesn't work."

Commuters

There is a consensus about minimum standards of civility that cuts across races and cultures. Asking commuters what they find annoying or disturbing is a useful strategy for improving the system environment and gaining support from the riders.

Procedures

Quick removal of graffiti is one of the most important strategies for increasing the perception of order in the transit system and discouraging regular graffiti offenders.

Decentralizing routine station maintenance gives the employees a sense of ownership and improves their morale.

Equipment and Facilities

Participants were more interested in discussing low-cost solutions that could be implemented in existing systems than in recommending expensive design modifications or technological innovations for equipment and facilities.

Other Agencies

It is essential to involve the court system in the importance of prosecuting persistent rule breakers. Strategies need to be found for educating judges about how much graffiti costs taxpayers. In one community, transit officials were able to get a misdemeanor ordinance passed that holds parents directly responsible for any damage their children do to transit facilities.

It is important to work with law enforcement agencies to be sure that laws are clarified, so that terms like “obstructing” have clear definitions. Security people need to be able to cite for specific violations. Arresting and booking procedures for disorder infractions can also be streamlined.

Community Outreach

Workshop participants identified several messages that need to be carried to the larger community. The most important of these are as follows:

- Transit is a community resource; the community is only as healthy as its transit system.
- Passengers have a right to be indignant when they are disturbed by disorderly behavior, fare evasion, graffiti, and other seemingly minor rule infractions.
- The rule infractions are not minor. They contribute to higher fares and reduced service.

Recommendations

Participants suggested involving operators more effectively in efforts to address rule infractions. Research with operators, focus groups, and surveys were recommended to determine how operators view rule infractions and their suggestions for dealing with them.

Participants expressed interest in training for transit officials in how to put cleanliness and civility on the agenda for their transit systems and their communities. They were interested in how to build support for civility in the transit system among other agencies, the larger community, major employers, and the media. They were also interested in giving training to new employees that emphasizes problem-solving as well as how to issue citations.

Closing Session of Workshop

The strongest recommendation from participants in the final session was that a similar workshop be conducted for general managers and executive directors. Many participants said the ideas presented in the workshop cannot be fully implemented without the support of the

top managers who are, in general, not aware of many of the possible innovations in dealing with social problems on transit systems.

Participants, especially those from smaller transit systems, recommended that sessions be held to discuss how transit systems can develop partnerships with their local law enforcement agencies. There was also interest in learning how the concepts of community policing can be applied to the transit system. There was interest in “preventive security,” efforts to work with the community to stop problems before they start.

Participants in the workshop concluded that there was a widespread lack of knowledge of the high costs of antisocial problems on the transit system. It is possible that transit management may not realize the impact of antisocial behavior on employee morale and commuters’ attitudes, or the high costs associated with these problems. In addition, the community does not understand how it relies on transit for economic and social well-being and that social problems on transit contribute to higher fares and reduced service. A major educational program is needed within the transit industry and the community.

Policy makers—transit boards, school boards, city and county officials, and business and community leaders—need to understand that it is necessary for transit and the community to become partners in finding solutions to shared problems.

Research can support transit’s efforts to become more proactive in addressing social problems. Information on effective programs can be disseminated. The problems that vehicle operators confront in their work environment can be identified and solutions found through a viable research program. Information gathered may also be used to lobby the federal government for funding transit system and community partnership programs. Research on transit antisocial behavior can also aid in marketing the system.

The workshop participants believed that a proactive image was necessary at every level of the transit organization. Management must develop new approaches of ways to work with the community without new funds through the reallocation of current resources.

Transit systems and the community need to refocus their attention on the rights of the commuter to a safe and quality environment by sending the message “Anti-social behavior will not be tolerated.”

CONCLUSION

It is time that transit administrators took a proactive, rather than a reactive, approach to these problems. This is not to imply that we are not responding to transit security problems, because several transit systems through-

out the country have instituted proactive programs. Rather, we are in an excellent position to take a leadership role in bringing social problem solvers together.

Technology in public transit is making tremendous progress, but our human concerns continue to lag. Many of the social problems we experience on transit, criminal and civil, are the result of the community's inability to resolve these problems. Transit administrators need to take a leadership role by bringing social welfare practitioners, academicians, community leaders, and transit managers together to seek new and alternative solutions to the problems we are currently facing.

It is well known that transit policing has never been the highest priority in transit districts; with the economy showing little or no sign of substantially turning around in the near future, even less money is expected for policing needs. We should basically look for resources outside the transit environment to help with these problems. It is the nontraditional methods that require more thought and research at this time, rather than an application of traditional methods.

The perception of transit security may be kept in true perspective if transit managers and the community move in more creative directions.