Assaults on Bus Staff in Great Britain

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The incidence, causes, and methods of ameliorating assaults on bus staff in Great Britain are examined. Over 13,800 assaults were reported in the years 1979 to 1985, with over one-half of these resulting in staff absenteeism. The major causes are disputes over fares, hooliganism, and traffic incidents. Although London has a more severe problem than elsewhere, assaults are not just a phenomenon of large cities: some operators in small towns also have proportionally high levels of assaults. However, recent initiatives by operators and police authorities, including more use of radio communications, on-bus videos, schools, public relations programs, and a greater police presence do appear to be reducing the number of assaults in some areas.

Assaults on bus-operating staff are a serious problem in Great Britain. In 1984 an ad hoc working group was set up under the aegis of the British Department of Transport to examine the problem and possible solutions (1). As part of the work to support this the Department of Transport commissioned research into the incidence and causes of assaults on bus staff and on the methods that operators were using to try to ameliorate the problem. The results of that research are presented in this paper.

LEVELS OF ASSAULTS

Over the years 1979–1985, just over 13,800 incidents were reported by bus operators in Great Britain. The incidents fall into three categories:

1. Those resulting in bus staff absenteeism;
2. Those in which staff were physically assaulted but which did not result in any absences; and
3. Other incidents, usually arguments and disputes with no physical contact.

Research in London (2) suggests that only two-thirds of actual assaults are reported, therefore 13,800 is probably an underestimate of the true number of incidents.

Assaults should be considered in the context of factors such as the numbers of passengers being carried and the number of bus-operating staff. In Table 1 the average levels of assaults over recent years for 40 undertakings are given with the number of passenger journeys as a common basis of measurement.

The undertakings are divided into four categories: (a) Passenger Transport Executives (PTE) that provide services in major conurbations, (b) municipal operators that provide services in small- to medium-sized urban areas, and (c) National Bus Company (NBC) subsidiaries that operate in a variety of areas that are predominantly rural and small urban areas but also include some larger cities. London Buses Ltd. (LBL) is identified separately.

Although London has a more severe problem than elsewhere, assaults are not just a phenomenon when measured against passenger journeys. For example some of the PTEs have a much lower relative incidence of assaults than many of the municipal operators running services in much smaller free-standing towns. The NBC subsidiaries generally have less of a problem than either the PTEs or the municipals, and those with a comparable level of assaults include larger urban areas in their operating territory.

As shown in Table 1, reported assaults vary from year to year but have tended to increase in London and among municipal operators. NBC figures peaked in 1983, while PTE assaults reached their highest level in 1985 after a considerable fall in 1984. As the figures show, LBL faces a problem far worse than the other operators.

The figures given in Table 1 relate to all reported incidents. Within the British bus industry there is a view that more serious assaults (those leading to staff absenteeism) are growing rather faster than total incidents. From the perspective of management, this increase is linked to a growing use of weapons, particularly of knives. Disaggregation from the effect of assault tends to support this view. In 1980 assaults causing staff absenteeism amounted to 48 percent of all reported incidents. By 1983 this figure had risen to 60 percent, and although the proportion fell back to 54 percent in 1984, the underlying trend does appear to be upward.

As mentioned, LBL has a much more serious problem than any other operator in Great Britain. Nationally LBL carries about 20 percent of all bus passenger journeys but accounts for over 60 percent of all reported assaults. One feature of LBL's services that distinguishes it from other operators is its still extensive use of bus conductors. Data collected by LBL shows that conductors are almost six times as likely to be the subject of an assault as are drivers. Outside London the difference is less dramatic but is nonetheless still apparent, with conductors twice as likely to be assaulted as drivers.

CAUSES OF ASSAULTS

Although the underlying reasons for an assault may be the antisocial attitudes of the people involved, the ostensible causes are many and varied. Principal among these are disputes over fares, including attempted fare evasion, arguments over the validity of passes, change (which is still given by the majority of operators), overriding, and disputes about child fares (see Table 2).

Hooliganism and bad behaviour are another major cause of assaults as are traffic incidents. The latter refer to disputes between the bus driver and other road users over such matters as vehicles parked at bus stops, or bus drivers not showing
TABLE 1  INCIDENCE OF ASSAULTS 1980–1985

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Operator Category</th>
<th>Type of Assault</th>
<th>No. Assaults Per 10 Million Passenger Journeys</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PTE (4) A</td>
<td>0.901</td>
<td>0.875</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PTE (4) B</td>
<td>1.713</td>
<td>2.006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total PTE</td>
<td>2.614</td>
<td>2.881</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Municipal (17) A</td>
<td>0.628</td>
<td>0.535</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Municipal (17) B</td>
<td>1.955</td>
<td>1.759</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Municipal</td>
<td>2.583</td>
<td>2.294</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NBC (18) A</td>
<td>0.293</td>
<td>0.319</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NBC (18) B</td>
<td>0.860</td>
<td>0.779</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total NBC</td>
<td>1.153</td>
<td>1.098</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Assault Type A causes staff to be absent from duty for 1 day or more, and assault Type B indicates other assaults.

PTE 1985 figure is estimated.

Parenthetical numbers in the Operator Category column represent the number of operators who provided data over the 6 years.

LBL represents a single operator.

normal courtesy to other road users. Traffic accidents are a relatively insignificant cause of assaults.

Disputes arising from passengers trying to board or alight at places other than recognized bus stops also frequently lead to assaults. They are more common in London, where a substantial proportion of the buses have open rear platforms for entrance and exit, than elsewhere where buses have automatic doors controlled by the driver.

Robbery of the crew or passengers is still a relatively rare occurrence, and drunkenness is not as commonly reported as might be expected. However, alcohol probably plays a larger part as a causal factor than figures (Table 2) suggest. If the

TABLE 2  CAUSES OF ASSAULTS: LBL AND OTHER OPERATORS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cause</th>
<th>LBL (%)</th>
<th>Other Operators (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overriding</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child/adult fare dispute</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pass/fare card</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fare evasion/refusal</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other ticket disputes</td>
<td>22.5</td>
<td>17.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtotal</td>
<td>42.3</td>
<td>26.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drunkenness</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal abuse</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remarks by crew</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hooliganism</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>12.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scheduling/gaps in service</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boarding/alighting</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seating/standing</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traffic incident</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traffic accident</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accident to passenger</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robbery of crew</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robbery of passenger</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial attacks</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missiles</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other causes</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No apparent reason</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>8.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reason not reported</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>16.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtotal</td>
<td>57.7</td>
<td>73.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grand Total</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>110.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
occurrence of assaults by time of day is examined there is a
distinct peak in the late evening from 10 p.m. Most licensed
premises (public houses serving alcoholic beverages) close at
10:30 p.m. or 11 p.m., and it is likely that the sharp increase in
reported incidents at this time is connected with passengers
who have drunk well but not wisely. There is also a secondary
peak in the late afternoon, which is primarily due to incidents
involving juveniles on their way home from school.

A diurnal pattern to assaults is detectable with propor­
tionately more occurring on Fridays and Saturdays. These two
days account for 34.5 percent of all reported assaults in
London, and 41.2 percent elsewhere. Although the figures for
Sundays are only approximately 60 percent of the Monday to
Thursday level, both service provision and ridership are much
lower on Sundays. There is no national data against which to
measure the incidence of assaults by daily ridership, but in
proportionate terms, the Sunday level may be even higher than
Friday and Saturday levels.

COSTS OF ASSAULTS

The effects of assaults in terms of costs can be measured in a
number of ways: (a) directly, when services are disrupted, (b)
lost staff time, and (c) indirectly, when bus operators have to
take measures to deal with assaults. Staff absenteeism due to
assaults amounts to over 20,000 person days per annum of
which almost 90 percent is attributable to LBL staff. At current
value absenteeism costs the industry around £1 million a year.

In addition to the cost of length of absence from duty, costs
also arise from service disruptions and resignations. Severe
assaults have led to staff resignations. This is not a common
occurrence and is becoming less frequent largely because of
better arrangements between staff and management over the
procedures to be followed after an assault. Nonetheless it does
happen and the loss of fare revenue can be significant
nationally, running into some tens of thousands of pounds.

The social costs of assaults include the pain and discomfort
suffered by the victims; the costs incurred by the National
Health Service and other social and welfare agencies, and the
expenses involved in tracing, apprehending, and prosecuting
assailants. When services are withdrawn there is a cost, over
and above the direct fares loss, attributable to the inconve­
nience to passengers. There may also be a reluctance on the
part of the public to use bus services at certain times and in
certain areas. For those operators where assaults are a serious
problem high turnover of staff may in part arise because of
violence, and there is some evidence of increased staff absen­
teeism when staff report sick in order to avoid duty on a service
where there is a greater risk of an assault.

Finally costs are incurred from countermeasures taken by the
operators; costs reported by operators for these are incomplete.
For example, some operators consider the installation of radio
communication systems as a means of combating assaults and
regard the costs as a cost of assaults. Other operators do not. An
increasing number of operators include some training in inter­
personal skills for their operating staff, but the costs of these
training programs are not reported. Specific physical measures,
such as fitting protective screens over the driver’s (interior) cab
doors or alarm systems, are usually reported, but more general
activities, such as publicity campaigns or education programs
at schools, are seldom included. Over the period 1979 to 1985
undertakings outside London reported expenditure of just over
£9 million of which 93 percent (£8,734,000) was attributable
to radio systems. Expenditure on protection screens amounted to
just over £250,000, and £100,000 was spent on alarm systems.

POLICE INVOLVEMENT AND PROSECUTION

Outside of London the police were involved (1979–1984) in 80
percent of incidents, usually in the sense of being informed of
the occurrence of an assault.

It is unsurprising that, given the short time during which an
assault takes place, only 21 percent of the assaults outside
London have led to a prosecution. However there is no infor­
mation available for a further 18 percent, some of which may
have resulted in court proceedings.

When records contained information that an assailant had
been prosecuted, an analysis of the results showed that the most
common outcome was a fine, sometimes with compensation to
be paid to the victim. The amount of the fines varied but were
seldom large, most were below £100. Custodial sentences were
given in 20 percent of cases, but were more commonly given
(in 38 percent of cases) when the assault was severe. Sentenc­
ing policy for assailants is an issue that causes the industry
some concern. Among the staff there is a general feeling that
sentences are not severe enough in relation to the crime and as
deterrents.

PREVENTIVE MEASURES

A wide range of preventive measures are being adopted by
British operators. These include fitting drivers’ cabs with pro­
tective screens, on-bus radio systems with emergency or panic
buttons that can be used to alert control that an assault is in
progress, and on-bus video cameras.

Early evidence from London, where all one-person-operated
(OPO) buses were fitted with screens in August 1986, shows a
30 percent decrease in assaults on drivers. Other city operators
provided with fitted screens have also found a significant
decrease in assaults.

Use of radios probably reduces the number of assaults (per­
haps by approximately 5 percent), but it is difficult to quantify.
Evidence from one city operator in Leicester suggests that the
ability to summon police assistance quickly via a radio link
does increase the proportion of assailants who are apprehended.
Similarly early experience with videos suggests that they act as a deterrent and increase the probability of an
assailant’s being caught. However, videos are regarded prin­
cipally as a means of preventing vandalism.

Currently, more attention is being given to training staff in
how to defuse a potential assault situation, mainly through
training in interactive skills. Studies have shown that such
training can change staff attitudes but there is as yet no conclu­
sive evidence that this leads to a reduction in assaults.

Publicity campaigns and reward schemes have been intro­
duced by some operators with some success, but one of the
more interesting public initiatives is Cleveland Transit’s adopt-
a bus scheme in Middlesborough, whereby a school adopts a
specific bus, is given a photograph of the bus, together with
brief vehicle details, and is encouraged to consider the bus as
its own. Some misgivings have been expressed that a rival
school might regard the other’s bus as fair game for vandalism;
however, to date this has not happened. It appears that the
scheme is successful and 12 months after it started 48 schools
in the Cleveland area had adopted a bus. The operator there
eventually expects to have about 140 adopted vehicles.

Liaison with the police continues to improve in most areas in
Britain. In London, the police introduced a hop-on-a-bus
scheme in which all uniformed officers were instructed that,
where a bus route crossed their beat, they should board and
travel on a bus (free of charge) at least once during their tour of
duty. Additional backup was provided in those areas known to
suffer most from assaults on bus staff through the deployment
of District Support Unit Officers and plain clothes officers.
Other operators have used local police, particularly in the late
evening, to deal with services where many passengers were
refusing to pay fares.

When considering ways to reduce the probability of vio-
lence, bus fares and fare policy should not be overlooked.
Arguments over fares are the most common cause of assaults
(see Table 2). Research shows two specific fare-related causes
of assaults. In one case, (Cleveland) an experimental low fare
of 10 pence was introduced for distances in and around the
central area with the next fare set at 25 or 30 pence. This
difference in fares led to overriding and, consequently, a num-
ber of incidents. As a result, the fare system was changed to
one based on zoning, which subsequently reduced the incidents
caused by overriding.

A different aspect of the same problem of a large fare
differential was reported in Nottingham where the child fare is
less than one-half of the adult fare precipitating arguments over
the age of the child, particularly in the late evening. The
suggestion under consideration is to revise the fare structure in
the late evening to require all passengers, including children, to
pay either a full fare or a flat fare. In general, it is believed that
increased off-bus ticketing with passes and multiride tickets
reduce the number of incidents in most cases.

CONCLUSIONS

As shown by the data collected during the course of this study,
a assaults on bus staff are a serious problem although they are by
no means universal. The number of assaults, particularly
serious ones, has increased since the late 1970s; however, most
recent data suggest that assaults may now be declining, at least
in some areas.

The Department of Transport’s Working Group on Violence
to Road Passenger Transport produced close to 40 recommen-
dations including those discussed in this paper, as well as
provision of improved arrangements within undertakings to
handle the aftermath of assaults and improved after-care for
victims. Much remains to be done including seeking a clearer
understanding of the causes of violence and improving the
efficiency of some of the remedies. Further research for the
latter is being undertaken in four areas: staff training, police
liaison, use of protective shields in cabs, and use of radio
communications.

The initial results of the more in-depth studies suggest that
progress can be made to reduce the number of assaults, and it
seems likely that the methods increasingly being used by oper-
ators have substantially helped to reverse the trend toward
increased assaults.

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   Working Group on Violence to Road Passenger Transport, Depart-
   ment of Transport, Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, London,

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