

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.

The incidence of assaults on bus staff is not a big-city 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 about 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

Operator Category	Type of Assault	No. Assaults Per 10 Million Passenger Journeys					
		1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985
PTE (4)	A	0.901	0.875	0.727	1.066	NA	NA
	B	1.713	2.006	2.092	1.763	NA	NA
	Total	2.614	2.881	2.819	2.829	2.488	3.012
Municipal (17)	A	0.628	0.535	0.659	0.681	0.881	0.638
	B	1.955	1.759	2.196	2.042	2.803	2.533
	Total	2.583	2.294	2.855	2.723	3.684	3.171
NBC (18)	A	0.293	0.319	0.167	0.366	0.379	0.361
	B	0.860	0.779	0.910	0.951	0.813	0.536
	Total	1.153	1.098	1.077	1.317	1.192	0.897
London (LBL)	A	5.435	6.972	6.976	7.837	7.053	7.633
	B	4.057	2.352	4.818	2.768	3.595	4.227
	Total	1.492	9.324	11.794	10.605	10.648	11.860

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

Cause	LBL (%)	Other Operators (%)
Overriding	4.3	2.4
Child/adult fare dispute	3.1	0.4
Change	2.5	1.0
Pass/fare card	1.6	2.2
Fare evasion/refusal	8.3	3.2
Other ticket disputes	22.5	17.2
Subtotal	42.3	26.4
Drunkenness	3.1	5.2
Verbal abuse	1.2	1.9
Remarks by crew	2.1	0.1
Hooliganism	9.3	12.0
Scheduling/gaps in service	2.5	0.7
Boarding/alighting	7.4	4.3
Seating/standing	3.3	0.5
Traffic incident	6.4	7.4
Traffic accident	1.0	0.9
Accident to passenger	0.2	0.1
Robbery of crew	1.7	2.1
Robbery of passenger	0.4	0.2
Racial attacks	0.1	0.3
Missiles	2.1	5.0
Other causes	12.0	7.4
No apparent reason	2.6	8.9
Reason not reported	2.3	16.6
Subtotal	57.7	73.6
Grand Total	100.0	110.0

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 proportionately 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 inconvenience 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 absenteeism 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 interpersonal 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 door 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 information 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. Sentencing 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 protective 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 (perhaps 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 principally 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 conclusive evidence that this leads to a reduction in assaults.

Publicity campaigns and reward schemes have been introduced by some operators with some success, but one of the more interesting public initiatives is Cleveland Transit's adopt-

a-bus scheme in Middlesbrough, 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 violence, 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 number 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, 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 recommendations 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 operators have substantially helped to reverse the trend toward increased assaults.

REFERENCES

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