



POLICING + TRANSIT

Transit is the safest way to get around U.S. cities. Transit riders are less likely to become victims of robbery and assault than car occupants, and more likely to reach their destinations without incident. Yet many transit agencies approach policing with a "broken windows" mindset, applying harsh penalties to minor transgressions like fare evasion, and flooding transit systems with additional police at the slightest whiff of an uptick in crime.

Safety matters - riders cite safety as their #2 concern in TransitCenter surveys. But when responding to these concerns, agencies need to recognize that "safety" means different things to different people. Moreover, the penalties for rule-breaking can have a dramatically different impact that varies with riders' race, class, gender identity, and citizenship status.

A role remains for law enforcement on transit. But a growing number of agencies recognize that policing cannot serve as a one-size-fits-all response to crime - real or perceived. In San Francisco, SFMTA uses unarmed inspectors to conduct fare checks, and BART recently approved funding to hire transit ambassadors trained in de-escalation strategies. To respond to a growing homeless presence on transit, LA Metro provides funding for outreach workers, and SEPTA partnered with the City of Philadelphia to establish a drop-in center in a subway station. And WMATA in Washington DC and King County Metro in Seattle have made it easier for riders to report sexual harassment.

An overly punitive approach to minor offenses on transit can create more problems than it solves, while failing to respond to actual harm can give the impression that no one cares. These agencies are showing that it's possible to find a middle ground - one that creates a welcoming experience for riders.

1. Fare enforcement

Studies from countless U.S. cities have shown that fare enforcement conducted by police officers disproportionately stops and issues higher penalties to Black and Brown people. To what end? No matter how many cops are assigned to police fares, no transit agency ever gets their evasion rate down to zero. It's time for a different approach.

- **Fare evasion should be decriminalized, and the penalties should be made proportional to the severity of the offense.** TriMet in Portland, SFMTA in San Francisco, and Sound Transit in Seattle have all decriminalized fare evasion, and made the fine commensurate to that of a parking ticket. These agencies offer alternatives to paying the fine, including the opportunity to enroll in a low-income fare payment program.
- **Enforcement should be conducted by unarmed fare inspectors, not police.** Fare checks should never discriminate or result in violence. To conduct fare checks, SFMTA uses unarmed inspectors who receive training in de-escalation and anti-bias strategies.
- **Transit agencies should be transparent with data about fare evasion and fare enforcement activity.** Keeping information related to fare enforcement under wraps provides cover for discrimination. When NYPD finally released its data, it showed that enforcement efforts disproportionately targeted Black and Brown transit riders.

Law enforcement cannot serve as a "one size fits all" approach on transit.

2. Homelessness

Major crime rates remain low across most transit systems. But homelessness is rising in a number of cities, and transit agencies feel compelled to respond to the presence of people seeking shelter in their systems. Criminalization is not the solution. A program in NYC that has sought to remove homeless individuals from the transit system by offering a choice between a summons and accepting shelter elsewhere has largely been a failure.

- **Establish an office dedicated to homelessness.** In a survey of 46 U.S. transit agencies, APTA found that only one-third have a homeless outreach program, and one-quarter have an office responsible for addressing homelessness. These offices can train frontline staff in conflict resolution, as well as conduct a periodic "census" of homelessness within their systems.
- **Invest in outreach workers.** LA Metro provides funding for eight teams of outreach workers who make daily contact with the system's homeless riders. The program has placed 1,600 people in temporary housing and 150 in permanent housing.
- **Seek opportunities to partner with local municipalities.** SEPTA teamed up with the City of Philadelphia to build an 11,000-square-foot, heavily used homeless drop-in center at a busy subway station. This provides homeless individuals with a safe alternative to riding trains and buses.

3. Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment is a very real concern for transit riders, particularly for women and transgender passengers. Across the country, women are more likely to say that there are too few police on board transit systems. How can agencies address the problem without resorting to overpolicing tactics?

- **Make it easier to report harassment.** King County Metro, WMATA, and Translink in Vancouver have all rolled out public awareness campaigns about sexual harassment, and tools designed to make it easier to report it when it happens. Translink allows riders to report harassment via text, and WMATA has a website to log complaints.
- **Dedicate trained staff specifically to the problem.** Transport for London and the British Transport Police have 3,000 police and police community support officers dedicated to catching perpetrators of sexual harassment. These officers are assigned to someone as soon as they've reported an instance of harassment.
- **Hire transit ambassadors to patrol the system.** Safety concerns most often arise when there's a sense that there's no one around. In San Francisco, BART has hired 10 transit ambassadors who will provide a non-threatening presence on transit vehicles and in stations. Agencies can also reassign booth-based ticket collectors to serve as customer ambassadors on subway platforms.