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Off the Rails: Alternatives to Policing on Transit



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Issue

The rise of recent protests organized by Black Lives Matter has focused media and political attention on the long-standing issue of state-sanctioned violence and racism in Black and Brown communities in the United States. These issues of police brutality, discrimination, and escalation also extend to policing on public transit systems. The same officers involved in use-of-force cases at a home, business, or during a traffic stop could be patrolling transit the next day. A 2016 investigation by the Labor/Community Strategy Center found the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department racially profiled Black and Brown transit passengers in citations and arrests for fare evasion (Linton, 2017). Responding to concerns about staffing and officer visibility, LA Metro revised its policing contract and now splits security responsibilities among four agencies in its current five-year policing contract for \$797 million approved in 2017 (Nelson, 2017).

Given the risks associated with policing Black and Brown transit riders and the high price tag for LA Metro, this research on behalf of the Alliance for Community Transit — Los Angeles' (ACT-LA) Transit Justice Coalition investigates whether armed law enforcement personnel are the most viable way to provide safety and security services for transit. Drawing on case studies informed by previous research and interviews, the researcher evaluated

alternatives to armed law enforcement for ensuring passenger safety on LA Metro's system.

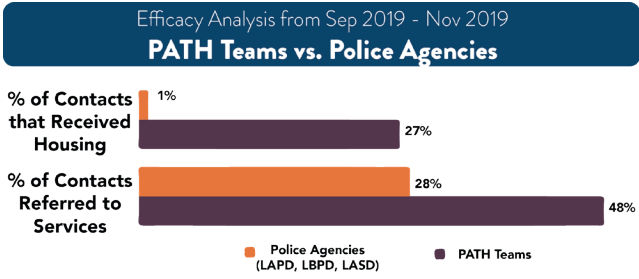
Key Research Findings

Cities across North and South America have seen effective alternative solutions to policing that also maintain transit safety. In many cities, advocates have suggested increasing the presence of transit ambassadors on buses and trains. Transit ambassadors are designated unarmed, identified transit agency staff with the role of providing extra eyes, ears, and authority at a transit facility or on a transit vehicle. They can:

- Reduce operator assaults.
- Prevent youth from entering the criminal justice system.
- Increase perceptions of safety.

Similarly, elevator attendants are designated unarmed transit agency staff in station elevators. Elevator attendants reduce instances of urine, defecation, graffiti, and needles in elevators.

Some agencies have taken steps to assist people experiencing homelessness in their facilities. Figure 1 shows how LA Metro's collaboration with the nonprofit



Source: Metro's Quarterly Update on Metro's Homeless Outreach Efforts, Sep 19 - Nov 19

Figure 1: Comparison between police homeless outreach and social workers on LA Metro, Sep-Nov 2019

People Assisting the Homeless (PATH) social worker teams are more effective than police officers at directing unhoused individuals to housing and services.

In Philadelphia, the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority created a permanent drop-in service center inside a station with the nonprofit Project Home. In the first quarter of 2019, the center placed 765 individuals in some form of housing.

Two performance art tactics also show how creative de-escalation tactics are effective in improving rider safety. Ponte la del Metro was an intervention on Mexico City's subway that used clown performers to inform subway patrons about proper behaviors when commuting. A similar intervention in Bogota, Colombia, replaced traffic cops with mimes and significantly reduced annual traffic fatalities.

Study Approach

The researcher analyzed existing programs throughout North and South America to understand and evaluate their efficacy and methods. The sample is from agencies the ACT-LA Transit Justice Coalition identified, snowball sampling, and personal knowledge from professors and

colleagues. To evaluate these alternative programs, six semi-structured interviews were conducted with professionals from five transit operators and public documents about the programs were analyzed. Most professionals interviewed had participated firsthand in program development and implementation. The researcher also examined additional supporting data, such as police contracts, crime statistics for transit agencies, ridership statistics for transit agencies, and transit riders' perceptions of safety.

Conclusions

Instead of deploying law enforcement on transit, alternative safety programs are often more cost-effective at improving safety and perceptions of safety in transit environments. Despite their positive outcomes, programs like these, unfortunately, are the exception and not the rule. I conclude from these reviews that there is a need to expand the definition of public safety along with the approaches to providing these services to the public. While mimes and clowns usually do not come up in discussions of ways to improve transit safety, the evidence reviewed here suggests that they — along with social workers, transit ambassadors, and elevator attendants — can be effective tools. While more evaluations are warranted, the data gathered here support the merit of alternatives to policing on transit. I conclude that the challenge of making public transit safe and civil while reducing the harms of armed policing of transit will come down to budgeting reforms from transit senior leadership.



Dembo, M. (2020). *Off the rails: Alternatives to policing on transit* (Master's capstone, UCLA). Retrieved from: <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1z-p7d0ms>

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