



The Challenge of Protecting Transit and Passenger Rail: Understanding How Security Against Terrorism Works

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Terrorists see transit and passenger rail as an attractive target. Designed for public convenience, trains and stations offer terrorists easy access to crowds of people in confined environments where there are minimal security risks and attacks can cause high casualties, significant disruption, and great alarm. This report examines the unique attributes of the terrorist threat, how security measures against terrorism have evolved over the years, and their overall effectiveness. Does security work? Empirical evidence is hard to come by. It is not easy to increase security in public surface transportation without causing inconvenience, unreasonably slowing travel times, adding significant costs, and creating vulnerable queues of people waiting to pass through checkpoints.

Designed for public convenience, trains, subways, and stations offer terrorists easy access to crowds of people.

Study Methods

The research combines a quantitative analysis of broad trends in terrorist tactics over the past four decades, statistical findings from MTI's own database of attacks on surface transportation targets, case studies of past terrorist campaigns and events, and a review of the observed effects of security measures.

Findings

- Terrorist events are rare and statistically random, making it difficult to empirically measure the effects of security measures.
- A terrorist "success" is not necessarily a security "failure" as most terrorist attacks are aimed at unprotected targets.
- The primary purpose of terrorism is to manipulate perceptions—terrorism is aimed at the people watching.
- The current trend is toward "pure terrorism," totally random violence—killing anyone anywhere to make the point that no one is safe.
- When Americans ask whether we are safer now, they are not seeking an objective measure of their personal security. They want the feeling of vulnerability to go away.
- Strict cost-benefit analysis does not work. The risk to the individual citizen from terrorism is so low that almost any expenditure on security seems extravagant.
- Jihadist manuals urge followers to launch easy attacks that, even if they are likely to fail, public alarm and political reactions will still give them a good return on investment.
- Imagining what terrorists might do drives public fear while resource constraints limit security planners to defending against what terrorists have done.

- Increased security does not reduce terrorism overall, but pushes terrorists toward softer targets. These indirect effects, however, are visible only over long periods of time.



Carnage Resulting from the Madrid Train Bombing

Policy Recommendations

- Added security measures should offer a “net security benefit,” which means more than merely pushing terrorists down the road to other vulnerable targets that offer them the same results.
- Enlisting the public in security demonstrably works—alert citizens, passengers, or staff have prevented just under nine percent of terrorist bombings by notifying authorities of suspicious objects.
- Cost-benefit analysis is useful in articulating assumptions about the terrorist threat and evaluating security responses, but it cannot be the sole basis for assessing security measures.
- Security strategies understandably focus on risk reduction. We need to explore counterterrorism strategies that draw upon America’s traditional strengths—courage, true grit, self-reliance, sticking together in the face of danger--to create a psychologically more resilient and less-vulnerable public mindset.

About the Authors

Brian Michael Jenkins serves as the director of the Mineta Transportation Institute’s National Safety and Security Center and since 1997 has directed the Institute’s continuing research on protecting surface transportation against terrorism and other serious forms of crime. He has been involved in research on terrorism since 1972.

To Learn More

For more details about the study, download the full report at transweb.sjsu.edu/project/1130.html

MTI is a University Transportation Center sponsored by the U.S. Department of Transportation’s Office of the Assistant Secretary for Research and Technology and by Caltrans. The Institute is located within San José State University’s Lucas College and Graduate School of Business. **WEBSITE** transweb.sjsu.edu