

Understanding the Prevalence of Mental Health and Behavioral Distress in Transit Assaults and Presenting Targeted Response and Mitigation Methods to Reduce Victimization Trends

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Introduction

United States (U.S.) public transit systems face a broad spectrum of incidents, including physical and verbal assaults. In 2023, transit agencies reported 2,200 major assault injuries sustained on public transit vehicles or within transit environments, the highest annual number recorded in the history of NTD data collection (NTD, 2024).

This project gathered and analyzed extant literature and data to improve understanding of the prevalence of mental health and behavioral distress in transit assault events. From the literature review, case studies, and data analysis, the research team presented corresponding targeted response and mitigation methods to reduce victimization trends. This research can aid transit professionals and other stakeholders to better understand why and how mental health plays a role in transit assaults and how to integrate this understanding into response efforts to make transit safer for all.

Study Methods

This research includes a literature review, a data presentation and overview of reported public transit assault-related events, a discussion of contributing factors, and documentation of 10 public transit agency case study sites, including:

- Ann Arbor Area Transportation Authority, Ann Arbor, Michigan
- Broward County Transit, Ft. Lauderdale, Florida
- Chicago Transit Authority, Chicago, Illinois
- Dallas Area Rapid Transit, Dallas, Texas
- Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority, Los Angeles, California
- Miami Dade Transit, Miami, Florida
- New Jersey Transit Corporation, Newark, New Jersey

- Pinellas Suncoast Transit Authority, St. Petersburg, Florida
- Tri-County Metropolitan Transportation District of Oregon, Portland, Oregon
- Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority, Washington, DC

The research team facilitated comprehensive site visit qualitative data collection. An initial survey was sent to case study sites to help frame and better understand the current conditions at each transit agency. A semi-structured, open-ended site visit protocol was developed iteratively by the research team, and an interview questionnaire was developed for each site visit based on each agency's responses to the survey. This protocol was utilized to ensure data collection consistency.

Qualitative data was analyzed using a narrative analysis methodological approach. Site visit data was transcribed verbatim for analysis. The research team spent time immersed in the data to uncover underlying themes, patterns, and meanings embedded within the narratives. Findings were interpreted within the broader context of the evaluation research questions. Conclusions were validated through subjective assessment and debriefing during biweekly meetings.

Findings

Across the transit industry there are relevant challenges that must continue to be addressed, highlighting the need for coordinated national and agency-tailored approaches to improve public transit safety and transit worker support. Recommendations to the public transit industry based on this project's findings include:

- Establish a consistent and clear definition of assault.
- Expand de-escalation training to include mental health awareness and utilize real-world scenarios.
- Implement specialized training for frontline workers and supervisors that is focused on recognizing the signs and symptoms of mental health challenges, substance abuse, fatigue, depression, or other health issues.
- Actively pursue legislative support at both the state and federal levels to protect transit workers.
- Establish and/or strengthen court advocacy and other support programs, such as confidential and easily accessible Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs).
- Expand law enforcement presence and foster collaborative relationships with local law enforcement agencies and community-based organizations.
- Improve data collection and associated analyses in support of risk assessment and management activities.
- Implement operator safety barriers across the transit bus fleet and mandate their use.
- Expand and enhance video surveillance systems, particularly in high-risk areas, to further deter potential assaults, other forms of victimization, and vandalism.
- Expand community outreach campaigns that may prove effective in addressing contributors to assault events.

Policy Recommendations

The mental health conditions of transit workers are sometimes overlooked. Frontline workers, especially those who are regularly exposed to verbal abuse and assault, need protection and support services. Frontline workers who are victims of transit assault often experience emotional struggles, including PTSD-related conditions. There should be minimum standards for the employee support services that transit agencies provide to affected workers, such as comprehensive and confidential EAPs.

All public transit agencies and transit workers would benefit from national legislation that protects transit workers from assaults, establishes assaults on transit workers as felonious, and provides mandatory penalties for assailants.

About the Authors

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To Learn More

For more details about the study, download the full report at transweb.sjsu.edu/research/2407



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