

Note: This webinar is being recorded.

Enhancing Transit Safety Through De-Escalation and Assault Prevention

Webinar // July 15, 2026

Stephanie Lewis, MEd & Gennaro Saliceto, MSPH, WSO-CSE, TSI-TSSP (Bus & Rail)



7

Meet the Center for Urban Transportation Research (CUTR) Staff



Stephanie Lewis
CUTR, Project Manager



Gennaro Saliceto
CUTR, Instructor & Researcher



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8

North Carolina Department of Transportation Introduction



Brennon Fuqua, MPA, PE, PMP
Director, Integrated Mobility Division
North Carolina Department of Transportation



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9

Q&A: Participant Interaction

- What do you believe is the primary trigger for transit worker assaults?



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10

Presentation Outline

Overview of safety challenges in transit

Data on the national context regarding assaults on transit workers and riders

Data on the North Carolina context regarding assaults on transit workers and riders

Examples, studies, and potential causes of transit assaults

Federal and NC response regarding transit assaults

Strategies to reverse the increasing trend

Prepare you for the full-day, hands-on training session



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11

Overview of Safety Challenges in Transit



Physical and verbal assaults on operators, especially in urban systems



Fare disputes and confrontations with passengers in crisis



Limited resources for security and mental health support



Increased passenger complaints about threats and unruly behavior



Operators often deal with passengers in mental health crises, needing skills beyond basic customer service



Need for better data collection, reporting, and inter-agency coordination



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12

National Context: Transit Workers and Riders Assault



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13

Key Statistics – National



645 major assaults were reported in 2025, a **172% increase** since 2016



Assaults have almost **tripled since 2016**, according to National Transit Database (NTD) data



Assaults on bus operators are the most common, followed by assaults on rail operators



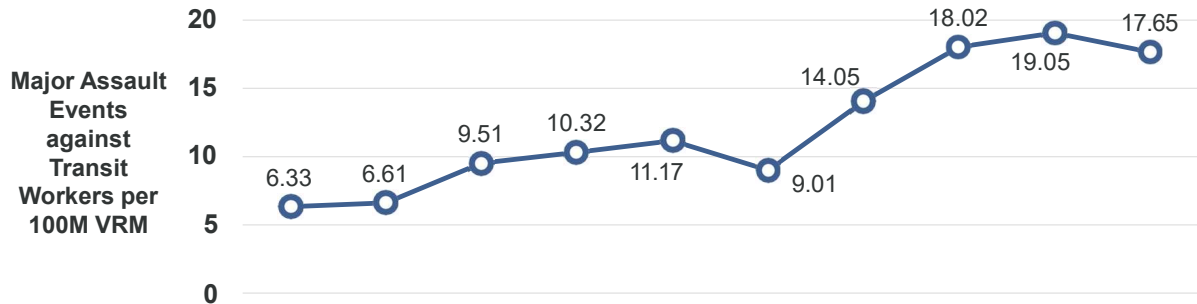
80% higher average assault rate in recent years compared to pre-2020 levels (2016–2019)



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14

Major Assaults on Transit Workers: FY 2016-25



	FY16	FY17	FY18	FY19	FY20	FY21	FY22	FY23	FY24	FY25*
Major Assaults	237	249	359	395	364	284	459	615	674	645
Injuries	243	254	360	399	368	290	469	656	722	688
Fatalities	0	0	0	1	0	12	1	3	4	2

Source: Federal Transit Administration (FTA) using National Transit Database (NTD)

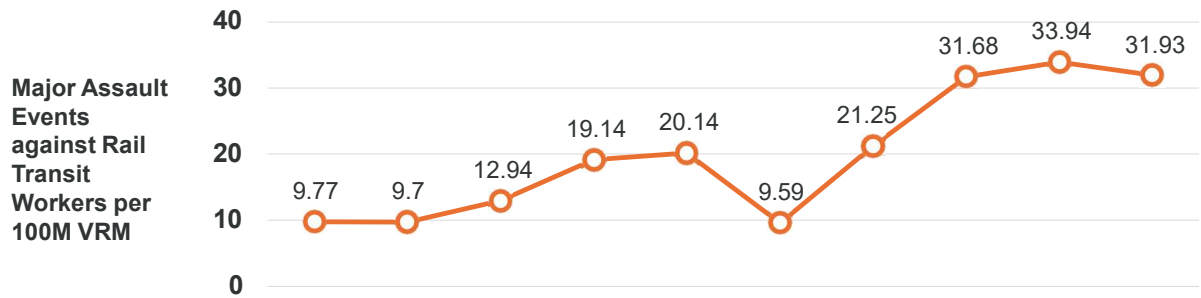
*FY 2025 data are preliminary



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Major Assaults on Rail Transit Workers: FY 2016-25



	FY16	FY17	FY18	FY19	FY20	FY21	FY22	FY23	FY24	FY25*
Major Assaults	77	78	104	157	148	70	156	246	266	264
Injuries	79	80	105	162	150	74	165	279	308	300
Fatalities	0	0	0	0	0	10	0	2	0	0

Source: Federal Transit Administration (FTA) using National Transit Database (NTD)

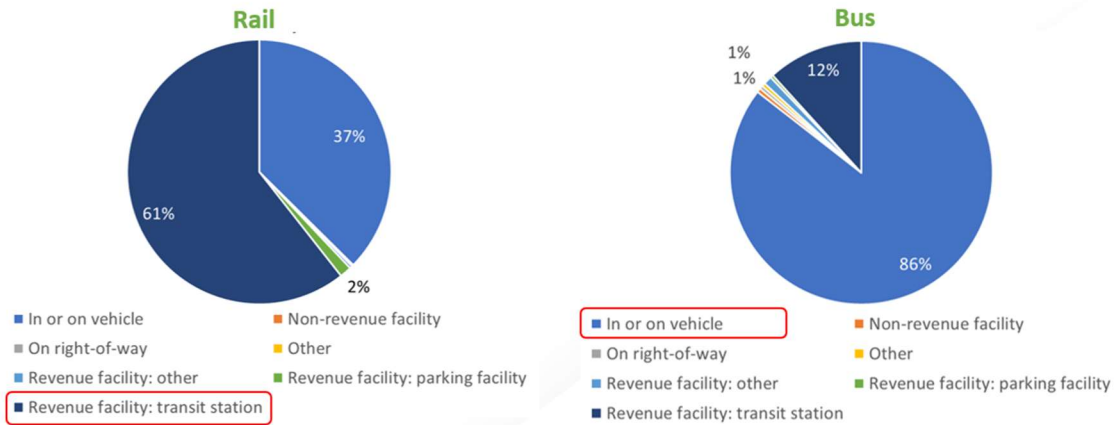
*FY 2025 data are preliminary



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16

Assault by Location FY 2016-25 – Rail and Bus



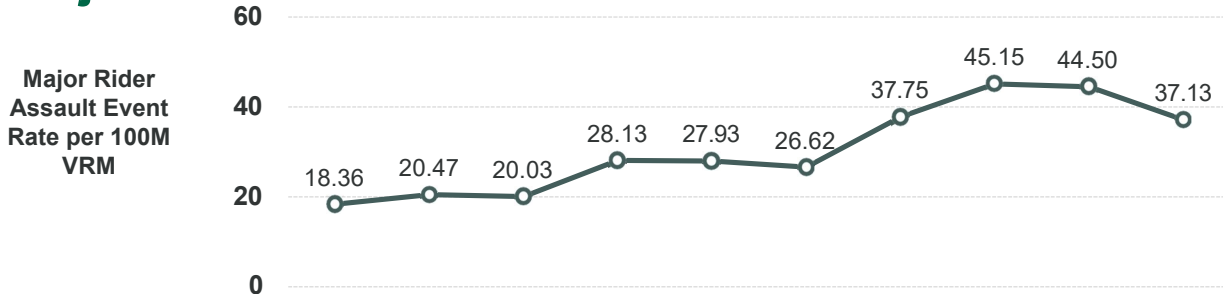
Source: National Transit Database (NTD)



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17

Major Rider Assaults Annual Trends: FY 2016-25



	FY16	FY17	FY18	FY19	FY20	FY21	FY22	FY23	FY24	FY25*
Major Assaults	687	771	756	1077	910	839	1233	1541	1574	1357
Injuries	711	787	783	1135	921	854	1244	1579	1601	1389
Fatalities	18	23	12	10	28	26	40	42	44	29

Source: Federal Transit Administration (FTA) using National Transit Database (NTD)

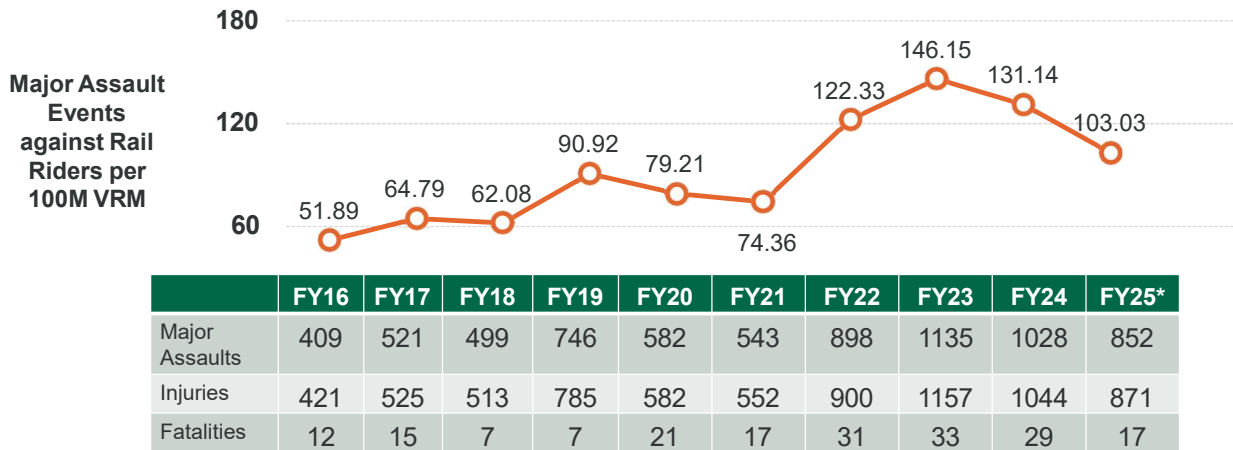
*FY 2025 data are preliminary



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18

Major Rail Rider Assaults: FY 2016-25



Source: Federal Transit Administration (FTA) using National Transit Database (NTD)

*FY 2025 data are preliminary



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19

Trends for Transit Worker Assaults

Transit worker assault continues to be an issue on transit

- Rail transit workers experience a higher rate of assault compared to the overall industry
- Zero rail transit worker assault fatalities since FY23

The number of assault events fell in FY 2025

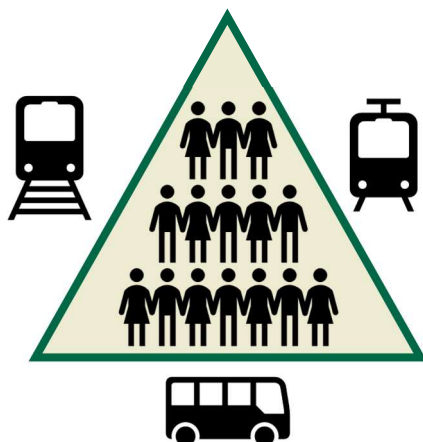
- Reversed an ongoing upward trend
- Major assaults remain elevated compared to earlier years in the time period



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20

Trends for Transit Rider Assaults



The number of rider assault events, fatalities, and injuries all fell in FY 2025

Continued a promising downward trend

Still elevated relative to years prior to 2022



The rate of rider assaults recorded is much higher on rail systems than in the transit industry overall



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21

North Carolina Context: Transit Workers and Riders Assault



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Key Statistics – North Carolina



15 major assaults (total) were reported in 2025, a **200% increase** since 2016 (5 major assaults reported)



Assaults have **tripled since 2016**, according to National Transit Database (NTD) data



Assaults on bus operators are the most common, followed by assaults on rail operators, following the national trend



NC reported rates of 0.15 and 0.22 per 100 million VRM assaults on transit workers and riders, respectively

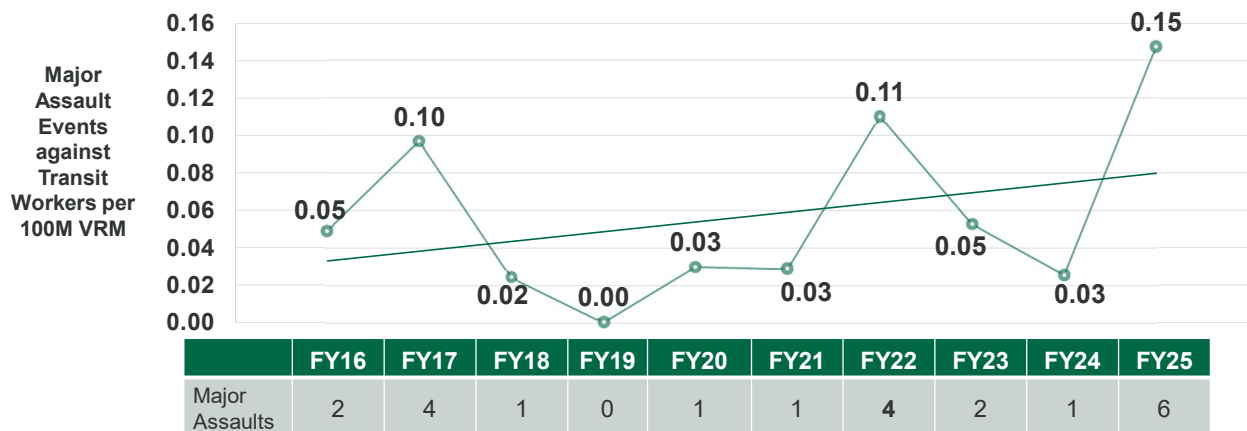
*Maryland reported 0.031 and Massachusetts 0.02 (NTD, 2026)



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23

NC Major Transit Workers' Assaults Annual Trends: FY 2016-25



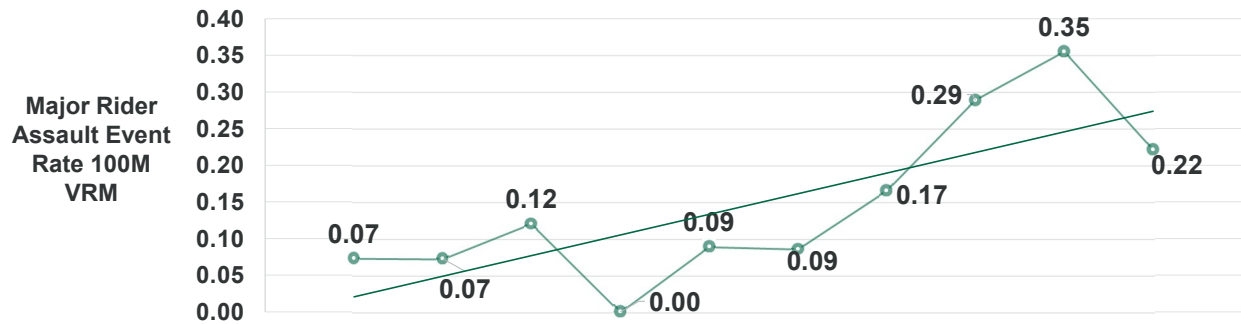
Source: National Transit Database (NTD)



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24

NC Major Rider Assaults Annual Trends: FY 2016-25



	FY16	FY17	FY18	FY19	FY20	FY21	FY22	FY23	FY24	FY25
Major Assaults	3	3	5	0	3	3	6	11	14	9

Source: National Transit Database (NTD)



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Comparison NC vs Nation

- Although assault numbers and severity have declined nationwide in 2025, North Carolina is experiencing an increase, especially on transit workers
- Considering the assaults by location, North Carolina exhibits patterns similar to those of the nation
 - The majority of assaults occur in vehicles on the bus mode
 - The majority of assaults occur at transit stations on the rail mode



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26

Assaults: Examples, Studies, and Potential Causes



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High-Profile Assault Cases in Transit

Charlotte CATS (2025):

A fatal stabbing took the life of Iryna Zarutska, a 25-year-old Ukrainian refugee woman, sparking major community concerns.

Atlanta MARTA (2024):

Two stabbings in one week prompted a federal investigation and new safety risk reduction plans.

Chicago CTA (2024):

Surge in worker assaults led to a 75% increase in police patrols, resulting in a 29% reduction in incidents.

NYC MTA (2024):

A subway conductor was slashed, and a station agent was assaulted, leading to work stoppages and the hiring of additional transit officers.

Philadelphia SEPTA (2022):

Assaults on operators quadrupled, prompting the installation of security cameras and protective barriers, reducing incidents by 25%.

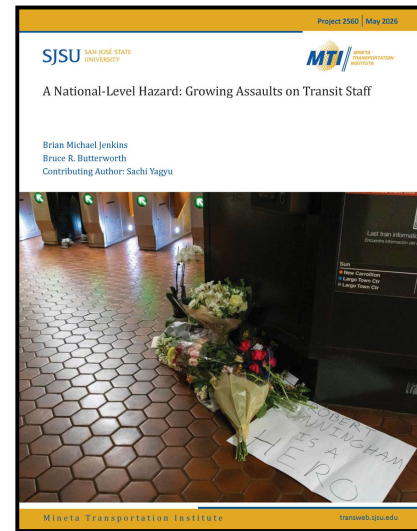


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28

Mineta Institute Study

- The apparent rise in random violence on public transit systems parallels other manifestations of social aggression
- Nearly 86% of the attacks were carried out by a single individual rather than a group
- A significant number of attacks appear to arise from precipitating events
 - Rule enforcement
 - Fare enforcement
 - No smoking



<https://transweb.sjsu.edu/sites/default/files/2560-Jenkins-Growing-Assaults-Transit-Staff.pdf>

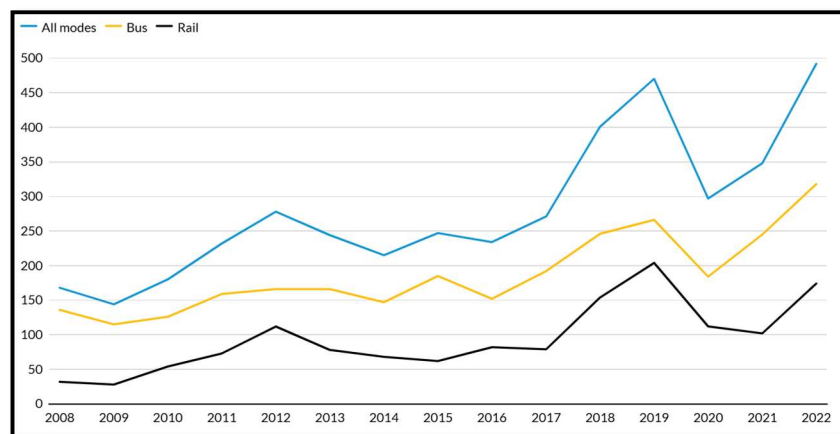


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29

Urban Institute Study

- Assault counts have been climbing for years, with a post-pandemic surge



<https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/assaults-transit-workers-have-tripled-past-15-years-income-inequality-and-societal>



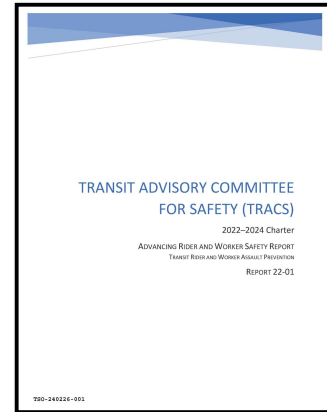
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30

Transit Advisory Committee for Safety (TRACS)

• Advancing Rider and Worker Safety Report

- Mandate conflict de-escalation training for transit
- Standardize suicide prevention, distressing events training, and post-event support
- Improve data collection and reporting on assaults
- Enhance security features in transit vehicles and facilities
- Foster community, labor, and management partnerships



<https://www.transit.dot.gov/sites/fta.dot.gov/files/2024-07/ARWS-TRACS-Final-Report.pdf>



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31

Contributing Factors to Transit Assaults



Co-Occurring Disorders

- **Mental Illness (MI):** At times, severe MI
- **Substance Use:** Drug Overdoses



Anger/ Hostility

- **Fare Evasion:** Financial Instability
- **Escalation of minor conflicts and unprovoked assaults**



Persons Experiencing Homelessness

- **Unstable Housing**
- **High dependency on public transportation:** Sleeping on transit vehicle or in transit environments.



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32

Federal Transit Administration (FTA) Response



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Federal Mandates and National Policies

Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (2021):

- Requires transit agencies to implement de-escalation training and assault prevention programs

FTA Safety Management System (SMS):

- Federal guidelines mandate agencies to identify safety risks, including worker assaults, and develop mitigation strategies

Expanded Reporting Requirements (2023):

- All worker assaults (major or minor) must now be reported to the NTD



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Key Federal Safety Actions

General Directive 24-1

- Issued by the FTA, this mandates that transit agencies receiving federal funds conduct risk assessments and develop strategies to mitigate assaults on transit workers

Expanded De-Escalation Training

- Updated PTASP regulations mandate that transit agencies expand training for frontline workers to safely manage fare disputes and confrontations

Mitigation Best Practices Fact Sheet

- The FTA publishes and distributes guidelines that highlight effective security strategies, such as physical barriers for operators, increased transit police patrols, and real-time GPS tracking

Responses to General Directive 24-1: Required Actions Regarding Assaults on Transit Workers

Jeremy Fennor
Division Chief, Office of Transit Safety and Oversight
July 1, 2025



<https://www.transit.dot.gov/sites/fta.dot.gov/files/2025-07/Transit-Worker-Assault-FTA-Update-APTA-Rail-7-1-2025.pdf>



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CUTR Study

Stakeholder Input

Survey (301 respondents)

- 180 bus or rail operators
- 81 transit agency administrative or management
- 30 union representatives

Interviews with Frontline Transit Agency Workers

- Different locations associated with case study site visit agencies
- ATU and TWU Local members

Transit Worker Union Workshops/Input

- ATU Legislative Conference, Washington, DC, July 2024
- TWU Joint Division Meeting, Denver, CO, August 2024

Transit Agency Case Studies (13 case studies)

- Rural, tribal, and urban transit agencies
- Bus only and bus and rail agencies
- Geographically and operationally diverse

Industry Presentations and Discussions

- APTA Mid-Year Safety and Security Seminar, December 2024
- APTA Mobility Conference, May 2024
- Florida Public Transportation Association Conference, September 2024



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36

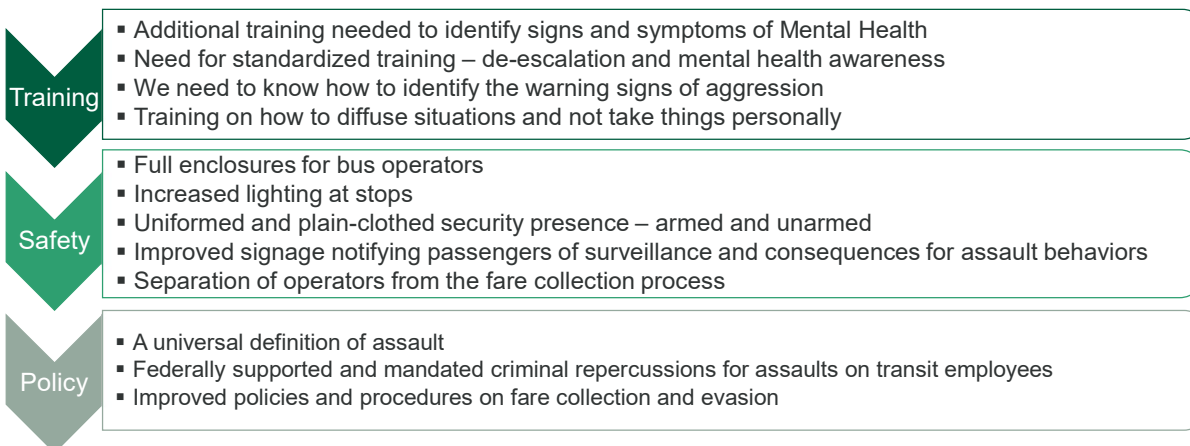
Transit Agency Case Studies



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37

Agency Perspectives and Recommendations



Preliminary Findings from Agency Focus Groups, 2024



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North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT) Response



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Collaborations for Transit Safety in North Carolina

CATS Charlotte Safety Initiatives:

- Integrated Security and Public Safety Plan
- Bikes and utility terrain vehicles to patrol
- Redeploy officers to train platform

WSTA and Winston-Salem PD Coordination:

- **BEAR Team (Behavioral Evaluation and Response):**
 - Specialized unit focused on mental health, substance abuse, and behavioral crises
 - Offers **reactive crisis intervention** during WSTA service hours
 - Collaboration with WSTA dispatch and security to manage non-criminal incidents before escalation
- **Training Efforts:**
 - WSTA staff receive annual **8-hour de-escalation training refresher courses**
 - Monthly safety meetings to review incidents and identify improvements
 - Coordination with WSPD on crime statistics and patrols around transit centers



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40

WSTA and Winston-Salem PD Community Impact

- The BEAR Team is **positively received** and helps manage behavioral crises, reducing operator stress and improving rider experience
- Similar initiatives, such as Greensboro's Behavioral Health Response Team (BHRT), show the value of collaboration between transit agencies and law enforcement



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41

Other Safety Initiatives

Adherence to safety plans

- PTASP
- Reporting systems
- Implementation of FTA General Directives

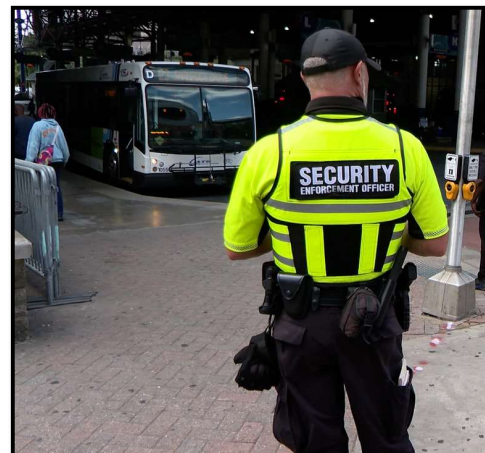
Dedicated security personnel

De-escalation protocols

Operator empowerment

- Prioritize personal safety over fare enforcement
- Dedicated training

Physical and policy mitigations



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42

Strategies to Reverse the Increasing Trend



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43

De-Escalation Techniques

Definition

- Techniques to reduce tension and prevent conflict from escalating into violence

Core Techniques

- **Verbal De-Escalation**
 - Use calm, neutral language
 - Active listening
 - Acknowledge feelings
 - Offer choices
- **Crisis Prevention Institute (CPI) Training**
 - Recognize early warning signs
 - Use non-threatening body language
- **Scenario-Based Practice**
 - Role-play common situations (fare disputes, agitated passengers)



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44

Assault Prevention Strategies

Physical Measures

- Operator shields/barriers on buses and trains
- Panic buttons and silent alarms for discreet emergency communication.
- Surveillance cameras for deterrence and evidence

Policy & Training

- Clear procedures for reporting and responding to threats.
- Regular staff training on violence prevention and mental health awareness.

Mental Health Response

- Partnerships with local behavioral health agencies (e.g., CATS Connect)
- Use of real-time reporting apps (e.g., See Say) for rapid intervention



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45

National Best Practices

BART (CA): ICAT scenario-based training for mental health crises

LA Metro: Care-Based Services Division deploys unarmed ambassadors and crisis teams, reducing incidents and connecting riders to services

King County Metro (WA): Mentorship and customer assistance programs improve operator safety and retention

Denver RTD: Transit Police Outreach Program and Denver Homeless Navigator Coordinator

SEPTA: Unarmed Outreach Services: Safety, Cleaning, Ownership, Partnership, and Engagement (SCOPE) Initiative



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46

Resources



Federal Transit Administration

[FTA's Enhanced Transit Safety and Crime Prevention Initiative](#)

[The Public Transportation System Security and Emergency Preparedness Planning Guide](#)

[Developing Community-Based Public Safety Programs for Transit Webinar](#)



Transportation Research Board

[TCRP Synthesis 146 - Transit Security Preparedness](#)

[TCRP Synthesis 86 - Security-Related Customer Communications and Training for Public Transportation Providers](#)

[TCRP Synthesis 86 - Public Transportation Passenger Security Inspections: A Guide for Policy Decision Makers](#)



American Public Transportation Association

[APTA Standards Development Program - Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design for Transit Facilities](#)



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47

What We Presented

Overview of Transit Safety Challenges:

Understanding the risks faced by transit workers and riders

National Context on Assaults:

Assaults on transit workers are rising rapidly, with a **120% increase since 2013**

North Carolina's Specific Context:

Local agencies like WSTA are addressing these issues through partnerships (e.g., BEAR Team)

Examples and Causes:

Real-world case studies demonstrated the causes and impact of transit assaults nationwide and in NC

Federal and State Responses:

Bipartisan Infrastructure Law mandates de-escalation training, and NC is aligning with national standards

Reversing the Trend:

Strategies like de-escalation training, collaboration with law enforcement, and enhanced safety protocols are critical

Preparation for Hands-On Training:

Today's webinar has set the stage for practical skills development in the upcoming full-day workshop



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48

Key Takeaways

01

Assault prevention requires a proactive and collaborative approach between transit agencies, law enforcement, and community partners

02

De-escalation strategies and mental health crisis intervention are **essential tools** for transit operators

03

North Carolina is leading with innovative solutions, such as partnerships with BEAR Teams and training alignment through NCDOT

04

Participation in the **October hands-on training session** is crucial to mastering these skills and reinforcing safety culture



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Next Steps



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Preparing for In-Person Training

What to Expect:

- Hands-on exercises and role-playing based on NC-specific scenarios
- Deep dives into de-escalation, assault prevention, and mental health response
- Tools and technologies for real-time intervention and reporting

Benefits:

- Build confidence and competence in handling challenging situations
- Network with peers and share best practices
- Receive practical resources and job aids to use on the job



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51

Q&A: Participant Interaction

- Are there any specific topics would you most like us to cover during the in-person workshop?



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Call to Action: Next Steps

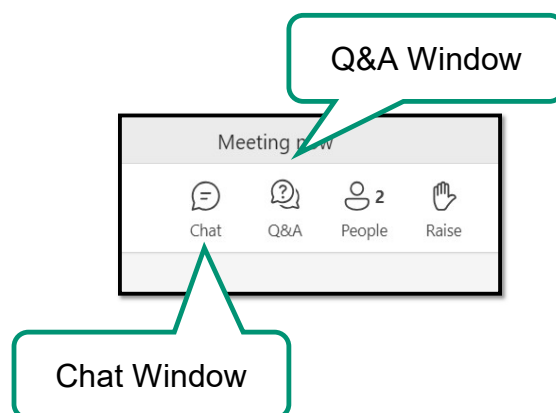
- Register for the full-day, in-person training session (*coming soon*)
- Review your agency's safety plan and identify areas for improvement
- Share feedback on today's webinar to help us tailor the workshop
- Stay connected with NCDOT and CUTR for ongoing support and resources



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53

Questions/Discussion



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54

Q&A, Evaluation, and Closing

Please take a few moments to provide feedback



www.surveymonkey.com/r/7VDJ5LY



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55

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THANK
YOU!



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56