



# National Campaign for Transit Justice

A project of Alliance for a Just Society

## A Comprehensive Approach to Transit Safety

Public transit is already one of the safest ways to get around, with transit riders less likely to [experience crime](#) and get into [traffic accidents](#) compared to drivers. Still, there is room for improvement. Surveys of both riders and non-riders continue to show concern about safety while using transit. For example, a [2016 survey](#) of former LA Metro riders found that 29% stopped using transit primarily because of personal safety concerns, while a [New Jersey bus stop study](#) found that fears of crime influenced riders' travel behavior more than traffic safety concerns.

What feels safe varies depending on the characteristics of the transit system and its riders. For example, some riders view a law enforcement presence as protection from crime, while others see armed police as creating a sense of danger on the system. Women and girls are more likely than men to experience harassment on transit, which can discourage them from traveling, especially at night. A [2018 NYU Rudin Center report](#) found that 75% of female respondents had experienced harassment or theft on public transit. Transit workers often face harassment and in some cases [assaults](#) from riders.

Policing alone cannot solve transit safety problems. A comprehensive approach is needed, including investments in transit systems themselves as well as efforts to address the broader societal issues that lead to crime. Only the first element is within the purview of transit agencies, although they often work in partnership with other public agencies and nonprofits on broader community issues. A comprehensive approach to transit safety is also more cost-effective than a law-enforcement only approach, as many of the strategies cost less than uniformed police.

A comprehensive safety approach requires both capital and operating funding for transit systems. However, the federal transit program does not provide operating funding for most transit systems. **The next reauthorization bill should include robust, dedicated funding for operations to help transit agencies invest in safety for their riders and workers.**

## A comprehensive transit safety approach includes:

**Frequent Reliable Service:** One of the most effective ways to make transit riders feel—and actually be—safer is to provide more frequent and reliable service. When buses and trains arrive consistently and on time, riders spend less time waiting at stops and stations, reducing opportunities for harassment, crime, or other unsafe situations. Research shows that the greatest safety concerns often occur not while riding transit, but while traveling to or waiting at a station or bus stop. In one [survey](#), 62 percent of respondents said they would feel safer if transit service ran more frequently. More frequent service also [attracts more riders](#), creating greater safety through the presence of other passengers.

**Transit Ambassadors:** A growing number of U.S. transit agencies are deploying transit ambassadors to improve both customer service and rider safety. Transit agencies call them by different names, such as [CapMetro's Community Intervention Specialists](#), but they all provide a visible presence that increases riders' sense of safety. Roles generally include helping riders navigate the system, responding to homelessness-related concerns, referring people in need of assistance to supportive services, and de-escalating crises. Ambassadors typically receive de-escalation training, while some may be social workers or mental health specialists. [Research on Los Angeles Metro's program](#) shows that rider satisfaction and perceptions of safety improved after its ambassador program was implemented. [SEPTA's SCOPE program](#), which deploys trained mental health workers on Philadelphia's buses and trains, yielded a similar result.

**Clean, Well-Lit Spaces:** Transit riders feel a greater sense of safety when transit facilities - buses, trains, stations, and bus stops - are clean and well-lit. Dimly lit areas and areas filled with graffiti and trash undermine that perception. Transit agencies are working in various ways to ensure that their systems are clean and inviting to all. TriMet in Portland, OR conducted a lighting audit as part of its ["Reimagining Public Safety"](#) Initiative and found a number of locations with poor light levels that needed to be upgraded. WMATA [increased deep cleaning](#) of its Metrorail stations as a safety measure. In the Bay Area, BART has provided [attendants](#) for some of its highest use elevators and restrooms. Since the program began, customer satisfaction with elevators has [increased](#) from 44 percent to 93 percent.

**De-escalation and Bystander Intervention Training:** De-escalation and bystander intervention training equips transit staff with practical tools to recognize, prevent, and safely respond to conflict, harassment, mental health crises, and other potentially volatile situations across transit systems. These trainings teach frontline employees—including operators, ambassadors, fare inspectors, station agents, and security personnel—to intervene safely without escalating tensions or increasing risk. De-escalation training has been implemented at both large and small transit agencies as part of broader efforts to improve safety. [Kalamazoo Metro Transit](#) and the [New Mexico Department of Transportation](#), among others, have made their training materials available to other transit agencies looking to support their staff with similar programs.



**Transit Operator Call Buttons and Emergency Call Boxes:** Transit operator call buttons and emergency call boxes give riders a direct way to quickly report emergencies, safety concerns, harassment, medical incidents, or suspicious activity to transit staff without needing to locate an employee or call 911. These systems can be located on station platforms, inside rail cars, at bus stops, or onboard buses and trains and connect passengers directly to station agents, operations centers, security personnel, or emergency dispatchers. Many transit agencies have added these features to their stations and fleets to improve response times and increase riders' sense of security. Some agencies have also instituted text programs, such as Metro Transit's (Twin Cities) [Text for Safety](#), by which riders can report concerns to transit agency staff in real time.

These proven approaches meaningfully improve safety on transit. Each of these strategies requires an investment in transit operations, whether to support additional service, ambassadors, station agents, call-center staff, janitors, or staff training. Congress should demonstrate its commitment to transit safety by providing dedicated operating funds for transit agencies to implement a comprehensive safety approach.