



DEEP DIVE

Transit agencies weigh security forces amid calls to defund police

U.S. cities are reassessing transit policing in an effort to address issues of systemic racism. "This is about reimagining what safety looks like," one transit official said.

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In a first-of-its-kind move, the Washington, DC Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (Metro) Board of Directors voted on Tuesday to develop a review panel that will oversee the Metro Transit Police unit in an effort to address inequitable policies and issues of systemic racism.

The decision comes in the wake of racial justice demonstrations following the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis — and Metro isn't the only agency to re-evaluate its security forces.

Portland, OR's TriMet system said it will eliminate its budget to hire six new transit officers and instead reallocate \$1.8 million to community outreach programs. Meanwhile, Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) announced it would create an anti-racism training course for police officers, including training for unarmed response and a ban on the use of carotid control holds.

"The process of reform is never complete, and my department is committed to continuous improvement through policy changes

and ongoing training that exceeds industry standards," BART police chief Ed Alvarez said in a statement.

These adjustments in transit policing are a result of nationwide calls for cities to defund police departments and increase spending on community services. Advocates say transit agencies should focus more on adding service to minority neighborhoods or reducing fares, instead of funding security forces to deal with minor incidents like fare evasion.

"If crime is a response to a lack of opportunity, transit is a piece of that opportunity."

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Executive Director, Tri-State Transportation Campaign

But not every agency is on that path. In December, New York's Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) approved \$249 million to hire 500 new police officers over the next four years — a move that's been put on hold due to the coronavirus pandemic — to focus on homeless outreach and fare evasion.

In a letter sent this month to New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, a series of advocacy groups called on the MTA to reverse the controversial hirings and take the hold time to reassess spending. Nick Sifuentes, executive director of the Tri-State Transportation Campaign (a signatory on the letter), told Smart Cities Dive that money for new transit police could be better spent on improving services for riders in need.

"If crime is a response to a lack of opportunity, transit is a piece of that opportunity," Sifuentes said. "Not having transit really limits the chances you have in the world."

Re-assessing the role of police

The makeup of security forces varies across agencies. Many operate their own security staff, while others contract with local departments or private security firms. This variety can create confusion about who is actually policing transit systems — an audit released this year found that Portland's TriMet used security personnel from 14 different agencies — and what standards officers are held to.

Dorothy Schulz, a former captain with Metro-North Commuter Railroad police department, said standards should be consistent from city police officers to officers on transit systems, despite any specializations of the latter position.

"If you're reading the conduct manual, it's virtually identical," said Schulz, now a professor emerita at the City University of New York John Jay College of Criminal Justice. "The [transit] agency's goal is to enhance ridership and to make customers feel wanted. You're doing a lot more work in customer relations, working directly with riders."

That work includes deterring and responding to crimes like robberies or assaults while making sure riders feel safe. But transit police have often been in the spotlight for putting more aggressive enforcement behind minor crimes, like fare evasion or loitering:

- A 2017 civil rights complaint from two Los Angeles civil rights groups alleged the city's metro police had unfairly targeted minorities. The inquiry said Black riders represented 60% of Metro arrests despite making up only 19% of ridership.
- In 2019, New York Police Department officers handcuffed a woman selling churros in a subway station, a move that activists called an abuse of power.

- In February, WMATA confirmed that Metro Transit Police officers held an internal, weekly contest to encourage arrests and enforcement, the Washington Post reported. The disclosure came after a video circulated on social media of Metro Transit Police handcuffing a 13-year-old boy.

These incidents are once again in the spotlight amid the national upheaval following Floyd's death, even prompting calls to defund transit police specifically.

In Denver, Regional Transportation District (RTD) board member Shontel Lewis has floated eliminating the agency's contracts with a private security firm and the agency's use of off-duty police officers from local agencies. Lewis instead suggests redirecting that money to mental health professionals and those trained to assist people experiencing homelessness, leaving RTD to operate its own security force. Lewis' plan has not yet been formally introduced to the board.

"This isn't about cutting, this is about reimagining what safety looks like," Lewis told Smart Cities Dive. "More often than not, officers are responding to people who are in crises or who are experiencing challenges. My proposal is that we meet people where they are ... and give them what they need in the right environment."

RTD spokeswoman Tina Jaquez said in an email that its police force performs an "essential function to uphold safety," and that RTD has a full-time mental health professional on staff to work with security officers. She added that RTD is "looking to expand in this area as resources allow."

Schulz said that while a bulk of her transit police work, particularly in New York's Grand Central Station, did involve people having a

mental health crisis or experiencing homelessness, it didn't necessarily help to add additional responders.

“These things never seem to last very long. The social service professionals are not used to what’s entailed in dealing with people exactly in crisis,” Schulz said. “It’s not as easy to work with this population as people think.”

Adding to the toolbox

As agencies look at how to balance security with community outreach, Portland’s TriMet may offer a potential model. The agency’s contact with the Portland Police Bureau (PPB) was in the spotlight last week as the city council debated a new police budget amid the protests. Commissioner Jo Ann Hardesty had proposed a \$50 million cut to the PPB, including eliminating its work with the transit agency. She ended up negotiating a \$15 million cut that included a reduction of police on TriMet.

"We’ve heard for years from Black, Indigenous and other people [of] color (BIPOC) that they do not feel any safer having transit officers on public transportation. In fact, the presence of transit officers often make our BIPOC and houseless community feel less safe," Hardesty said in an email to Smart Cities Dive. "I’m much more interested in public transit agencies investing in staff and programs that can help people navigate the system, de-escalate situations, and ensure all riders feel safe and welcome."

Instead, TriMet will invest \$1.8 million in community outreach. Bernie Bottomly, executive director of public affairs for TriMet, told Smart Cities Dive that while details are still being worked out, the goal is to adapt the security force to right-size the response for each incident. TriMet will seek input from community members and security experts as it develops its plan.

"I don't want to give the impression that we're disbanding transit police. We're making additions to the tools we have," Bottomly said. "There are going to be times when there are issues that call for a uniformed officer to respond. But there are also times when you don't need a police officer, but if that's the only tool you have, you're going to call a police officer."

This will also build on a number of moves TriMet has taken in recent years to de-escalate the use of police. The agency contracted with the private firm Portland Patrol Inc. in 2018 to bring in unarmed officers who are trained in mental health response. Hardesty has also proposed a program where city police would be partnered with a mental health professional, which Bottomly said is under consideration.

The agency has also worked to decriminalize fare evasion. In 2018, the fine for a first offense was reduced from \$175 to \$75 or four hours of community service, and the penalty could be resolved with TriMet rather than having offenders sent to court. Even though an audit found no systemic bias in enforcement of fare evasion, Bottomly said the reforms have made the transit agency more equitable.

Even as the agency faces budget cuts due to coronavirus, Bottomly said TriMet will continue those efforts.

"We have to find the resources that we need to ensure the system is secure and safe, and that includes being safe from bias and discrimination," Bottomly said. "Going forward, it's hard to know exactly how these programs will work or how expensive they'll turn out to be, but we will make it a priority."

The role of tech

Some agencies have turned to expanded security technology in lieu of additional police forces. Chicago, for instance, is utilizing a Strategic Decision Support Center to solve Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) crimes, with access to 32,000 surveillance cameras. In a statement, the city said this support center will "allow for smarter, data-driven patrols."

In fact, surveillance cameras have been a mainstay of transit security for decades. Schulz, who co-authored a 2016 report for the Transportation Research Board on transit surveillance, said closed-security cameras are "not a panacea," but can be effective if they are monitored constantly to watch for potential crimes.

In addition, agencies have explored ways to improve lighting and design of stations, bus stops and parking lots, including the addition of police call boxes to boost rider security, Schulz said.

Agencies have also increased the use of body cameras and other tracking technology for officers to reduce violence and better monitor enforcement. And in 2018, the Los Angeles Metro became the country's first transit agency to install full body scanners to protect riders from concealed weapons or explosive devices.

Ultimately, advocates say the best thing transit agencies can do to balance security and equity is to expand service and offer reduced or free fare programs. The sharp drop in ridership during the COVID-19 pandemic — and the budget discussions that will follow — could provide an opportunity for some agencies to re-examine their approach to equity.

"We have to get creative and think about mobility as a human right and one of the biggest drivers of opportunity," said Jarred Johnson, the chief operating officer of Boston-based TransitMatters. "Access to good transportation enables better health care, better food access, better education, better job access.

I'm not the one controlling the budget, but I would hope that those people think about that when they're deciding what to spend on security."