

An Ordinary Day... Until Cops Busted Them for Picking Pockets

By BILL HEARD, Editor
(May 8, 2001) After a leisurely breakfast at Clifton's Cafeteria, April 27, three women and their male companion set off for work. They boarded a Metro Bus on Spring Street. It was just another day on the job – picking pockets.

Just another day, except on this day the LAPD Transit Group's five-member Pickpocket Detail kept the group – all pros with a string of arrests for Grand Theft, Person – under close surveillance.

During a three-hour odyssey that had them boarding buses along Spring, Wilshire, Vermont, Adams, Olympic, Washington and Broadway, the undercover officers watched as the suspects wove a criminal ballet around their victims.

The pickpockets would surround an elderly woman and distract her attention. As team members shielded the action, officers reported, one member would quickly open the victim's purse and extract a wallet.

Didn't know they'd been robbed

The team's action was so practiced and smooth, says LAPD Sgt. Bruce Vermaat, officer in charge of the Pickpocket Detail, the victims didn't realize they had been robbed.

Eventually, the undercover officers were able to observe two successful thefts and two attempts. They arrested the alleged pickpockets when they exited a bus near Union Station. Officers recovered four victims' wallets and some \$42.

The suspects were jailed on \$200,000 bail and should come to trial within the next 10 days. Sgt. Vermaat credited officers Refugio Garza, Lorena Alcaraz, George Oto and Lori Tabares with the arrests. The team boards 300 to 400 buses a month.

In the past 18 months Pickpocket Detail officers have arrested 44 professional and "opportunistic" pickpockets on Metro Buses. Since April 1999, the team also has arrested 31 sexual predators encountered during their surveillance activities.

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LAPD TIPS: You can avoid becoming a pickpocket victim

Source: LAPD Transit Bureau's
Pickpocket Detail

- When boarding or exiting a bus or train, be aware of persons crowding or bumping into you.
- If possible, take a seat next to a window.
- Women should carry a purse that is secured with a zipper or snap. Hold the purse in front of you and clutch it to your chest. Don't let the purse hang from the strap at your side or behind you.
- Men should keep their wallets in a front pocket or an inside jacket pocket when traveling in a transit vehicle or in the midst of a crowd.
- Never remove large amounts of cash from your purse or wallet in public view. You could become a

pickpocket target.

- Account for all of your property before exiting a bus or train.
- Report any suspicious activity or persons to the bus operator. The operator will contact the LAPD.