

Deputies, LADOT Arrest 20, Seize 47 'Bandit Vans' in Sting Operation

By BILL HEARD, Editor

(June 24, 2003) In a joint operation begun in May by MTA's Transit Services Bureau and the Los Angeles Department of Transportation, investigators have so far arrested 20 unlicensed drivers and impounded 47 "bandit vans" used to carry passengers in violation of city and state laws.



Sheriff's deputies Oscar Nunez, left, and John McKain say LA's "bandit vans" are stealing MTA patrons and creating a safety hazard for riders.

The drivers weren't licensed, investigators said, and had no required city permits. Some had outstanding warrants. Weapons, usually baseball bats, were found in some of the vehicles.

The vans were registered to different people, but many documents listed the same individual as lien holder. LADOT believes that person may own as many as 60 vans that are rented to the drivers for \$400 a week. Investigators hope to obtain an "abatement" that would allow authorities to seize vehicles used in the bandit van operation.

"The drivers don't go through any safety checks, their passengers aren't protected and they don't pay taxes," says Sheriff's Lt. Pat Jordan. "They take money away from MTA and the legal taxicabs."

Metro Bus operators at Crossroads Depot Division 2 had complained to Sheriff's deputies John McKain and Oscar Nunez that the bandit vans not only were stealing their patrons, but also were creating a safety hazard by swerving in front of them at bus stops.

The deputies discovered that from about 5:30 until 8 a.m. and again between 4 and 6 p.m. every weekday, 15-passenger white vans with tinted windows – the bandit van "calling card" – were swarming downtown streets.

'Obviously very well organized'

"I'm looking at vans going up and down the street, picking up people, money changing hands," says McKain. "It was obviously very well organized."

The bandit vans allegedly were picking up passengers in the crowded neighborhoods east of MacArthur Park each morning and transporting them for \$1 each to work in LA's garment district. In the evenings, they brought passengers home again.

In some cases, parents were paying \$10 a week for the vans to take their children to school and back.

Following the MTA operators' complaints and their own preliminary investigation, McKain and Nunez of the Transit Services Bureau contacted LADOT Lead Investigator Robert Johnson and, together, the two agencies planned a series of sting operations to catch the bandit vans in the act.

For the past month or so, plainclothes LADOT investigators in unmarked cars have targeted the bandit vans as they boarded passengers at MTA or LADOT bus stops. One passenger from each van is chosen as a possible witness.

Booking the detainees

Led by McKain and Nunez, a team of Sheriff's deputies in marked cars or on motorcycles stops the vans and takes the drivers into custody. Tow trucks take the vehicles to an impound area, while other deputies book the detainees.

Meanwhile, the LADOT investigators quiz their witnesses about the vans' drivers and operations, where pick-ups and drop-offs are made, and how much drivers charge for a ride – evidence prosecutors will need to prove a crime has been committed.

The deputies say bandit vans first cropped up on LA's streets following the 32-day strike by Metro Bus operators, mechanics and clerks in 2000. But, LADOT's Johnson says the sting operation has significantly reduced the number of vans and their hours of operation.

"We used to be able to find a bandit van within five minutes, now it takes us 35 to 40 minutes," he says. "The Sheriff's deputies are really making a dent in the situation."

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