



Human Transit

The professional blog of public transit consultant Jarrett Walker.

Should Public Transit Shut Down for Civil Disturbances?

Posted on [June 1, 2020](#) in **General**



What should public transit agencies do when a city is convulsed by massive demonstrations carrying a high risk of violence? Over the weekend, many transit agencies shut down rather than risk possible harm to their staff, passengers, and equipment. This left many good people stranded as they tried to leave the demonstrations.

Christof Spieler, a Board member at Houston Metro, has some ideas in a [Twitter thread](#). He starts with:



Christof Spieler
@christofspieler



Two lessons for transit agencies in the past several days:
(1) Make a plan to never strand riders
(2) Think about an agency's relationship with the police

3:09 PM · May 31, 2020 from Houston, TX 

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As someone who shares the goals of these protests, let me gently lay out why this is so difficult for transit managers. *This is not to defend or uphold any*

particular choices any agency has made. The debate about this is urgent and important. My only point is that it isn't easy or obvious what transit agencies should have done. It was absolutely not OK that people were stranded, and there needed to be a solution for that, but the actual solution isn't so obvious.

Before you say that transit should have run as normally as possible during the crisis, ask yourself:

- If you were a bus driver, would you be comfortable being told to drive into an area where civil unrest is likely and there is some risk of violence?
- If you were a transit manager, who has seen plenty of pictures of burned and vandalized buses, what should be your tolerance of the risk of destroying or damaging the fleet, thus making normal service impossible?
- But, you might say, buses could run normally to near the edge of the affected area. OK, but how is the transit manager supposed to know the boundaries of that area in advance? These are not obedient events. They can rove fast and unpredictably. They can even erupt from nothing where they weren't planned at all.
- But surely they could have kept most of the system running, far from the events? I think there are cases where I'd have recommended that, but again, transit managers can't predict where events will erupt. What's more, *good transit networks are all interconnected and interdependent.* You can't just turn off a piece without it having a huge effect on the rest. This is especially true when that piece is downtown, where lots of lines meet or flow through.
- If you say, yes, but they need realtime monitoring and guidance about how to detour in response to what's happening: Buses have limited option to maneuver as conditions change. They don't fit down every street. They may need several blocks to turn around. The dispatcher/driver ratio is far too low for dispatchers to give each bus driver the best advice for their situation when everything is changing so fast.

All this has to be figured out in realtime by staff who probably support the demonstrators' goals, in a situation where they will be attacked for whatever

they do. They're being criticized for holding back, but they'd also be criticized if the evening news were full of [burning buses](#) and injured drivers and passengers.

Of course, as with the [sudden service changes](#) required by Covid-19, these decisions were made fast by people who might have made better decisions on reflection, and will learn from this experience. But these decisions are hard.

Finally, regarding the use of transit vehicles for police purposes: Most cities put a lot of effort into interagency emergency planning, where the various functions of government decide how they'd work together in various crises. In most situations, that's exactly what we'd want them to do. Clearly, those plans around civil disturbances are going to be reviewed now, and deserve some public discussion. Obviously, the crisis of trust around policing in the US needs to be considered when transit agencies decide how to work with them in these emergencies.

Those plans also need to address transit system shutdowns, because in a big city these are emergencies all by themselves. They need to honor the limitations of each agency's product and not expect the impossible from them, while also creatively addressing the challenges. The Los Angeles transit agency [reimbursed](#) people's Uber, Lyft, and taxi rides out of the demonstrations after they shut down service. Was that the right thing to do? Right now, give them credit for doing something.

Finally, if you care about these decisions, you might want to direct some of your activism toward influencing your city's emergency planning. Many people who do that work are exasperated by public apathy and may welcome your respectful interest.

But please, don't make these emergency decisions sound easy and obvious, because they aren't.

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7 Responses to *Should Public Transit Shut Down for Civil Disturbances?*



david vartanoff June 1, 2020 at 9:12 pm #

REPLY ↩

Related issue—should transit agencies “collaborate” with police? See https://sf.streetsblog.org/2020/06/01/sfmta-helps-crowd-control-riot-police/#disqus_thread and <https://nyc.streetsblog.org/2020/05/29/mta-bus-driver-refuses-to-help-cops-haul-off-anti-brutality-protester>

My personal opinion is no, but I admit this is because I see the police as totally out of control.



Steve Dunham June 2, 2020 at 7:35 am #

REPLY ↩

I hope that the contingency plans include how the abrupt service changes will be communicated to riders. Your mention of “the sudden service changes required by Covid-19” reminded me of the morning in March when bus service near my apartment was abandoned overnight. If I hadn’t checked the news at breakfast I would have gone out and waited for a bus to ride to work. I’m guessing that the decision to abandon the service was made at night or the driver taking us home would have said something the evening before. Service changes prompted by civil disturbance will be made just as abruptly, but maybe most of the public will be aware of the events and checking the news for service information.

Chris June 2, 2020 at 6:04 pm #

REPLY ↩



It's a natural outcome of the increased obsession with "abundance of caution". It's not just transit – LA County's countywide curfew covers a vast area where there have never been and never will be protests. Arcadia and Agoura Hills, for example, are probably going to be OK. I think nobody was surprised where the recent LA county riots/looting have been, although they were in wealthier places than maybe some would have expected. I see LA Metro is now skipping certain stations rather than eliminating service entirely, which is good.

We really should be focusing on the communication aspect of such service cancellations, which continues to be one of the major things transit agencies need to work on.



Jeff Wegerson June 3, 2020 at 5:40 pm #

REPLY ↩

Protesters, vandals, and looters are distinct roles and could be treated as such by the fourth role, cops. Protesters are by these definitions peaceful and as such deserve armed protection from the other two. In that description police riding on transit subordinate to drivers and transit managers could make sense near at risk areas.

Of course to the extent that police are often social vandals who cause disturbance of the peace they would become counter productive riding on transit.

The classic is their de facto role to cause disorder or preserve (dis-)order comes into play.

A police department led by and dedicated to serve and protect would be a natural ally of transit and could greatly help keep it running in these situations.



doris June 16, 2020 at 4:00 pm #

REPLY ↩

They should shut down ,here in the Twin Cities buses and trains would have been on fire if they were running

MetroTransit was very luckily the didn't burn their garages The one garage was very to close to the fire.

The criminals and the homeless took over the transit system here because the police does not want to deal with them anymore .Now the buses are free because of Covid

the homeless are riding the buses and train all day The train was shut down at 9pm because of the homeless.



Darkest Yorkshire June 24, 2020 at 2:27 am #

REPLY ↩

If you want to know about operating transport systems through violence, a lot could be learned from studying America's history of streetcar strikes and strikebreaking. Or pushing scab coaches and lorries through picket lines in the British 1984-85 Miners' Strike.

Just being able to rapidly fix grilles and mesh over the windows makes a huge difference. It's also an opportunity to get some final use out of the oldest vehicles that were nearing the end of their lives anyway.



Roberta Robles July 12, 2020 at 12:40 pm #

REPLY ↩

Here in Portland Oregon on Hawthorne St. I regularly see the paddy wagon full of cops coming in from Gresham to work the protests late night. The paddy wagons can't go on the freeway cause the cops would fly off them. So they take local roads. My suggestion is that these cops get on the bus and ride in. The uber militarization of the local roads to transfer out of district cops to inflict violence and break our local police rules is unbearably grim place to be right now. How do we kill two stones with one bird? Leave all the military hardware home.

The Portland Police mostly live in outer suburbs and somehow find their way to work probably by car with incentivized parking downtown (). We should force these cops to take the bus. That way we don't have to pay the cops trice to do what good neighbors do all the time. Stop being assholes and stand up for your neighbors. That's what the protest at Reed forgot to mention. One guy was killed keeping a guy off a woman. The rest of the passive aggressive polite Reed onlookers didn't lift a finger. So we have a transport solution in here somewhere. One that doesn't allow militarized vehicles to carry officers when a regular bus is fine. Do I care about the increased militarization of the bus system? Not really. It already is and it isn't working. Do I care about the grammer nazis and philosophical arguments about how to craft transport policy? Not really. Just make it safe.

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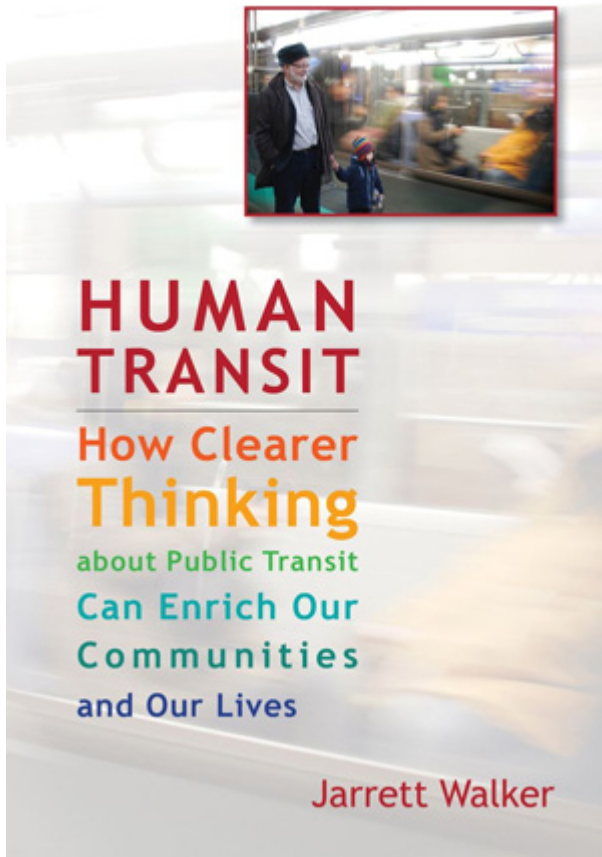
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The Author

Since 1991 I've been a consulting transit planner, helping to design transit networks and policies for a huge range of communities. My goal here is to start conversations about how transit works, and how we can use it to create better cities and towns. [Read more.](#)

The Book



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The Firm



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