



A person wearing a face mask rides the subway during rush hour in New York City.

Police reformers eye transit cops amid steep deficits

By DANIELLE MUOIO | 07/06/2020 10:15 AM EDT

The police reform movement sweeping across the nation has swayed the city budget and ushered in a new set of long-stalled transparency law. Now advocates are turning their attention to policing in the regional transit system.

Prior to the coronavirus pandemic, policing in the state's networks of subway, buses and trains was receiving renewed scrutiny following a wave of unflattering headlines — from the arrest of a woman selling churros on the platform to a cop punching a teenage boy. Transit advocates and civil libertarians alike called for change, beginning with the immediate reversal of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's plan to hire 500 new subway cops.

With the MTA in fiscal crisis from the Covid-19 pandemic, those calls have only intensified in recent weeks.

"Do we need somebody with a gun to solve problems on the subway? To me, the answer is no," said Sen. Jessica Ramos, who has opposed the addition of more cops.

The state-controlled authority has hired 140 new police officers to date. The MTA is currently in a hiring freeze due to the economic fallout from the coronavirus pandemic, but hasn't committed to reversing course on the hiring plan. There are roughly 2,700 New York Police Department officers and 899 MTA cops who patrol the transit system.

"We didn't hire the police officers as a symbolic matter," said MTA Chair Pat Foye when questioned by a reporter at a June press conference. "We hired them because we have a fundamental responsibility to provide a safe and secure environment for our customers and our employees."

The decision to hire 500 new cops last September came after Gov. Andrew Cuomo, who effectively controls the MTA, raised concern over "quality of life" issues on the subways — from increased homelessness, to fare evasion and assaults on transit workers. Transit crimes and fare evasion ticked up slightly last year, but major felonies are down.

Later on, the MTA justified the move by invoking the fear of terrorism.

It faced swift rebuke from transit advocates and elected leaders alike, who at the time questioned the logic of going on a hiring spree when budget watchdogs were warning about the MTA's fiscal health. That criticism has grown in recent weeks, as the MTA projects a \$10.3 billion deficit over two years due to the economic fallout from the Covid-19 pandemic.

"There's a huge opportunity here. They have a revenue neutral way to add service to benefit essential workers," said Danny Pearlstein of the Riders Alliance, who wants to shift funding from hiring more police. "We can't say emphatically enough this is where they need to reverse course."

The MTA has called on the federal government to provide it an additional \$3.9 billion in aid, but it faces an uphill battle in the Republican-controlled Senate that has been reluctant to assist blue New York. The authority has already mostly used up the \$3.9 billion from the first federal stimulus package.

Without an infusion of cash, the transit authority has warned fare hikes and service cuts are all possible without additional federal intervention, and has already frozen its \$54.8 billion capital plan.

Budget watchdogs acknowledge reversing course on the police hires will only go so far for an agency facing an unprecedented fiscal crisis, but say money can't be left on the table. While the MTA has said it will cost \$249 million to add the 500 cops through 2023, budget experts note those costs will rise as police salaries do. The Citizens Budget Commission estimated it could cost the authority more \$500 million over 10 years.

"Every dollar they take in in tolls and revenues should be going directly to service at this time," said Rachael Fauss, senior research analyst at Reinvent Albany, a good government group.

Concerns over policing aren't relegated just to the MTA.

Some say conversations about police reform should also extend to the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey — which runs the region's major air and sea ports, bridges and tunnels between the states, a train line and a bus terminal in Manhattan.

"All police in the United States should be part of the discussion for reform of policing practices and the institution of policing in the United States. All police," said Larry Hamm, a longtime community activist in New Jersey challenging Sen. Cory Booker for his Senate seat.

"Remember it was a transit police officer who killed Oscar Grant," he said, referring to the 22-year-old black man who was killed in San Francisco.

Rick Cotton, executive director of the Port Authority, said in a recent interview the agency has set up an "internal leadership committee" to discuss issues like diversity inclusion with all employees in response to the Black Lives Matter protests.

But when asked if the movement to defund police departments should extend to transit police, Cotton demurred. Many Port Authority police officers draw in six-figure salaries.

"We're a transportation agency and I think the security policies of the agency have been appropriately tailored to carry out the responsibility to ensure those transportation facilities are safe," Cotton said, adding it was Port Authority police that responded to an attempted pipe bomb attack in its system in 2017.

Concerns over policing in transit systems aren't confined to New York, and many liberal cities have made policy changes as protests over police brutality continue across the nation.

City officials in Portland, Oregon, approved a \$15 million cut to its police budget that involves disbanding units that patrol its public transit system. Transportation officials in Los Angeles passed reforms that include the hiring of unarmed ambassadors to respond to nonviolent crimes. Washington, D.C., transit officials recently approved the creation of an independent oversight board for police following a string of controversial interactions with the public, though some say it doesn't go far enough to reform the system.

Advocates say transit could become a larger focus as elected leaders take a closer look at policing.

"I think protests across the country have woken a lot of people up to law enforcement writ large," said Monica Hopkins, executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union of the District Columbia.

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