EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION: CRIME AND THE ECONOMICS OF MASS TRANSIT

by

Ronald V. Clarke

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

The crime problems of mass transit flow from the ambivalence with which it is regarded — especially in America, the land of the automobile. This ambivalence leads to perennial conflicts over the funding of transit, with resulting compromises that can greatly exacerbate crime and fear.

An article of faith for central governments, planners and a variety of "green" interests is that mass transit is a vital component of environmental and energy policy. Without public transport, it is held, the world's energy reserves would become depleted, and congestion and pollution would overtake the cities. Public transport is also seen to be essential to the vitality and economic well-being of metropolitan areas. It provides ready access, for rich and poor alike, to the city's amenities — the museums, parks and theaters. It permits the central core to serve as economic engine for the metropolis as a whole. Unless the city is surrendered to the car, it is argued that private vehicles cannot fill these transportation needs.

This reasoning helps to sustain the investment in public transit, but this investment is constantly challenged by advocates of lower taxation and "small government." Many citizens have little appreciation of the wider social and economic benefits of mass transit and make little use of it themselves. Relatively few people commute to the downtown area, and not all residents take advantage of the city's amenities. For them, getting to work or to the mall may be perfectly well done by car.

For those who must use public transport, the experience is not always pleasant. Buses and trains are often overcrowded and uncomfortable. Delays and accidents may occur, and travelers have to endure boredom and regimentation. They may have to make several changes and wait at cold stations and windy bus stops. In off-peak periods, waits are long and travelers may feel isolated and exposed to danger. For many ordinary people, therefore, a journey by public transit is one to be endured rather than enjoyed.

While the public may not appreciate transit, its taxes must sustain it because few public transport systems in the world can charge economic

fares. The funding dilemmas are deepened by the vast sums of money involved and, once built, subway and rail systems have to serve in their original form for long periods. During that time, demand for transport may decline in one part of the system but rise in another without there being much flexibility to alter service. In addition, standards met at construction may become seriously deficient with the passage of time. For example, the excessive noise of the New York City subway, its confined platforms and their harsh, metal and concrete appearance are much below the standards of comfort demanded today. Those who can avoid it outside the commuting hours generally do so, leaving it to serve mostly the poor. This affects revenues and also means that there is less discretionary use of the subway in the evenings and weekends. As shown in this volume by Clarke, Belanger and Eastman's study, this reduced ridership has serious consequences for robbery, which increases dramatically when passenger densities decline. In a vicious "cycle of fear" (Carr and Spring, 1993), higher crime rates lead to more fear, which in turn leads to further drops in ridership and revenues.

Funding compromises made during construction and modernization have many other consequences for crime. To save money staff levels are cut, thus depriving the system of valuable surveillance. Cheaper materials that become more vulnerable with age to vandalism and graffiti may be employed. Levels of lighting are reduced, with heightened fear as a result.

Some of the ensuing problems are not difficult to predict. When new ticket machines were installed on the London Underground, a cheaper system of dispensing change was selected that exposed the machines to slug use (Clarke et al., 1994). Given the huge numbers of travelers, it was inevitable that this would be discovered and, when it was, the cost of the remedy was more than the original cost of using the secure equipment.

Some other problems are not so easily anticipated. Even thirty years ago, few people would have predicted that token gate vaulting would require floor-to-ceiling entry barriers to be installed on the New York City subway (see Weidner's article). The architects of the Port Authority Bus Terminal in Manhattan could not have known that the building would become a haven for the homeless (see the article by Felson and his students). Nor could it have been foreseen that the large banks of pay phones installed for commuters would create the conditions in the building for the development of an international toll-fraud business (see the article by Bichler and Clarke).

Fortunately, solutions can be developed, but problems must be carefully analyzed and remedies adequately funded. This is compellingly demonstrated by the highly successful efforts made by the management to deal with crime problems at the Port Authority Bus Terminal. Even more

encouraging, so long as crime prevention principles are followed in design (see López, 1996 for comprehensive design and management guidelines for secure Metro systems), mass transit need not fall prey to fare evasion and other crimes. Nor must it reflect the crimes of the wider society. Nancy La Vigne's evaluation of the Washington Metro design, summarized in this volume, shows that its crime rates are lower than those of other subway systems and lower than in the city as a whole. Encouraged by this success, perhaps, the designers of the new Paris metro line, Le Meteor, have included a wide range of preventive measures (see Myrhe and Rosso's article).

Another finding of the research included here is that the crime risks of transit involve more than just the journey on the system. La Vigne's analysis found that more than half of Metro's serious crimes occur in the commuter parking lots. High levels of commuter lot theft were also found in Vancouver (and, as shown in the article by Barclay and his colleagues, were reduced by a bike patrol). In Chicago, Block and Davis show that the highest risks of mugging are not in the subway stations themselves, but nearby, a block or two away. Here, robbers can find potential victims unprotected by station staff or fellow travelers.

In future studies, it will be necessary to consider transit crime in the wider context of the whole journey, not just while on the system. Other pressing topics for research include comparisons of the crime risks of mass transit with those of private transportation. Are people who use cars more or less likely to fall victim than those on mass transit, if one includes the risk of auto theft when parked at the destination? Are the risks of attack higher in deserted subway stations than in parking garages?. Are travelers more fearful of being mugged on the subway than of being carjacked at the mall?

Research on these questions would help refine the debate about crime costs and ought to be commissioned by the transit authorities. The studies reported here — the first American book devoted entirely to criminological research on transit — were mostly undertaken without funding and at the initiative of the researchers. Partly to blame for the lack of commissioned research is the general pressure on funds. However, the fear of crime that stops many people from using public transport has a serious impact on revenues. Involving criminologists in analysis of these problems could help reverse this cycle of fear, but a dialogue must first begin between officials and criminologists. This will require some changes of attitude. Transit officials may have to learn that not all criminologists are social activists or ivory tower intellectuals. For their part, criminologists must be ready to put their theories to practical test. I hope this volume will help promote these changes.

✦

Acknowledgments: While the research reported in this volume was mostly unfunded, my editorial work was facilitated by a grant (95-IJ-CX-0021) from the U.S. National Institute of Justice. I was also greatly helped by Dr. Martha Smith, Research Director of the Center for Crime Prevention Studies at Rutgers University-Newark.

REFERENCES

Carr, K. and G. Spring. (1993). "Public Transport Safety: A Community Right and a Communal Responsibility." In: R.V. Clarke (ed.), *Crime Prevention Studies*, vol. 1. Monsey, NY: Criminal Justice Press.

Clarke, R.V., R. Cody and M. Natarajan. (1994). "Subway Slugs: Tracking Displacement on the London Underground." *British Journal of Criminology* 34:122-38.

López, M.J. (1996). *Crime Prevention Guidelines for the Construction and Management of Metro Systems*. The Hague, NETH: Result Crime Management.