

**A
RIDERS
PLAN
FOR
PUBLIC
SAFETY**

A ROOT CAUSE APPROACH



A RIDERS PLAN FOR PUBLIC SAFETY

NEW YORK'S ICONIC SUBWAY, which over three million people ride every day, is a flashpoint in the national debate over crime. After an uptick during the pandemic, ten percent of NYPD officers now patrol the subway against less than two percent of the city's reported crime. With 3,500 officers ostensibly in transit to stop violence, New York City Mayor Eric Adams said he doesn't want to see photos of bored officers on their phones and has embraced an 'order maintenance' policy that includes arresting turnstile jumpers and food vendors. 'Broken windows' policing, in a subway visibly suffering nearly a century of deferred maintenance, is a stark reminder that, two years after George Floyd's murder, the backlash to calls to 'defund the police' is surging.

Beyond simply trying to stop violence, politicians and media outlets exploit instances of crime underground to distract from scandal and difficult-to-tackle policy matters and to justify harsher law enforcement from bail reform rollback to fare evasion arrests. In this environment, it's little wonder that even with more police officers in the subway, the appetite for yet more patrols keeps growing. But over several decades leading up to 2020, subway crime dropped sharply as ridership grew, even while the number of officers in the system declined.

This riders plan for public safety embodies the work of Riders Alliance members, leaders and allies to address what's needed to move subway service safely forward for all. Our plan also has broader implications for the country's trajectory. More than ever, grandstanding and fear mongering threaten not only individual lives, families and communities, but the future of our political system. The plan proposes transportation, housing, healthcare and policing solutions to make a subway where everyone feels safe, welcome, and included—against a backdrop of a nation torn apart, too often in the name of law and order beneath New York City streets.

BACKGROUND

For most riders, on most days, the subway is not the crime-ridden hellscape of tabloid fantasy but underfunded public infrastructure, less reliable, frequent, affordable, accessible, and resilient than it must be to meet our needs. The political spin is often out of touch with what millions of people who depend on our transit system need. Watching some channels and listening to some politicians, it's as if all would be right with the world if the subway were on lockdown. But we can't arrest, convict, and jail our way out of poverty, mental illness, lack of housing, public disinvestment, reckless driving and other crises playing out in public transit.

"We hear a lot of huffing and puffing from various decision makers about fare evasion and safety in the subway. As a daily subway rider, somebody jumping the turnstile doesn't slow down my commute and it doesn't make me feel any less safe. You know what does? The guy who is clearly having a mental health crisis who tries to repeatedly kick the subway doors until they break. I don't want to see cops standing at the station entrance issuing violations to teenagers for going through the gate, I want to see mental health workers getting people who are having a crisis the help that they need, before things escalate."

Ned K., Riders Alliance member from Manhattan

New York's subway stations and cars serve as shelters of last resort for thousands of the most visible unhoused Americans. The mental health and addiction crises erupting elsewhere in public space feel especially urgent here. Asking police officers to solve decades of budget cuts from housing and healthcare programs is asking far too much of them. Meanwhile, with traffic crashes spiking above ground, New Yorkers are at greater risk of physical harm walking to the subway than riding it. To foster actual safety, we need to look at the real threats and invest in community resources, protect the most vulnerable, and bring more activity to the city.

For the subway and city to succeed, riders' needs must come first. No longer should trouble in transit be an opportunity to distract or deflect blame. Instead, the governor, mayor, and MTA officials must address the root causes of the problems in the transit system to deliver the service New Yorkers deserve.

TRANSIT POLICY SOLUTIONS

As New York City Transit President Richard Davey put it, the subway is a public square, a core public space at the heart of the city. While many of the intersecting crises in

the transit system are not manifestations of transit policy itself, some are the result of decades of infrastructure divestment. Here, we outline what the governor, legislature and MTA can do to improve transit service in ways directly tied to public safety for millions of riders.

WHAT THE STATE CAN DO

Run Trains and Buses at Least Every Six Minutes, Seven Days a Week

More frequent service would make public transit much safer by (a) shortening lonely waits on platforms and at bus stops, which MTA data show riders fear more than riding trains, (b) reducing frustration that contributes to disputes between riders and assaults on transit workers, and (c) speeding door-to-door trips, attracting more riders and creating safety in numbers throughout the day and week. RPA data show New Yorkers rank better, more frequent service, tied with fare discounts or free fares, as the best way to win riders back to public transit.

“Reductions in subway and bus service have left New Yorkers standing alone on the streets and in subway stations for long periods of time, especially in the middle of the night. This is an entirely inexcusable recipe for danger. New York must increase the frequency of buses and subways to ensure that New Yorkers reach their destinations safely (and on time).”

New York State Black, Puerto Rican, Hispanic, and Asian Legislative Caucus Impact-Based Ten-Point Plan For Public Safety (March 26, 2022)

“Women are more likely to travel off-peak, generally late at night or midday. Off-peak transit schedules can be prolonged, less frequent, less reliable, and prone to service cuts. Waiting at bus stops or in subway stations late at night, especially when there is a long wait, can be confusing or formidable. The sparse ridership portends a lack of bystander assistance. In parts of the subways, a lack of WiFi or cellular service can make it hard to get help or report incidents.”

NYU Wagner Rudin Center The Pink Tax on Mobility: Opportunities for Innovation (February 10, 2022)

Staff Stations Safely

New York City Transit ambassadors and wayfinders in station booths and on platforms and mezzanines can provide a range of important services for riders, from facilitating fare payment to giving directions to deterring harassment on the basis of gender, race

or ethnicity. The state should invest to exceed pre-pandemic station staffing levels to ease tensions and fears and make sure workers themselves are present in significant enough numbers to keep one another safe.

“Unarmed personnel should be used for non-police activities when possible. This personnel can serve as an agency’s eyes and ears while they conduct their everyday work. An increased agency presence can help create a sense of community and of safety on transit systems.”

TransitCenter, Safety for All (July 12, 2021)

Improve Built Design and Enhance Subway Evacuation Procedures For All Riders, Particularly for Riders with Disabilities

Transit workers performed heroically in responding to the Sunset Park shooting and leading riders to safety. Agency procedures need to accommodate all riders, including people in wheelchairs. Updated protocols should be widely disseminated and regular training offered.

“We propose reframing design interventions around co-creation and shared stewardship of our transit stops, stations, buses and trains. People feel safe and secure in well-designed, human-centered environments that meet their needs. This includes transit stations with comfortable and ample seating, well-functioning elevators, and bright, clean bathrooms that are regularly serviced. Natural lighting, plants, and other greenery could promote feelings of wellness and connection with nature. Cleanly maintained transit environments further communicate care and safety.”

Alliance for Community Transit - Los Angeles (ACT-LA), Metro As A Sanctuary: Reimagining Safety in Public Transit (March 2021)

WHAT THE CITY CAN DO

Make Walking to Transit Safer and Speed Up Bus Service

Walking to transit is much more dangerous than riding it and it’s getting worse, with traffic deaths up 44% this year. Fully funding and implementing the NYC Streets Plan will make the perilous walk to transit safer by protecting pedestrians from reckless and distracted drivers. Meanwhile, faster, more reliable bus service will provide a better complement and alternative to subway service for the millions of riders who depend on it.

“The piecemeal way we plan our streets has made no sense for far too long, and New Yorkers have paid the price every day stuck on slow buses or as pedestrians or cyclists on dangerous streets. We need faster buses, safe streets infrastructure for pedestrians and cyclists, and more pedestrian space. We need to do everything we can to encourage sustainable modes of transportation, especially with the realities of climate change growing more dire every day. This plan will get us there, and by doing so it will make New York City a much more livable and enjoyable place to call home.”

Former New York City Council Speaker Corey Johnson (October 30, 2019)

Expand and Deepen the Affordability of Fair Fares

Fair Fares is by far the nation’s largest low-income transit fare discount program. Scaling it up would transform many more lives and protect riders from a desperate choice that can lead to conflict with law enforcement. Extending half-price fare discounts to riders earning up to 200% of the federal poverty line would cover several hundred thousand working people (a member of a family of four earning \$50,000 could qualify).

“The City Council should expand Fair Fares to all low-income New Yorkers, specifically by increasing the eligibility threshold from 100 to 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Level, and significantly improve Fair Fares outreach, including to eligible NYCHA residents and CUNY students, among others.”

Community Service Society, Mass Transit As An Economic Equalizer (February 14, 2022)

With more investment, riders below the federal poverty line could ride public transit for free, eliminating all transportation expenses from the most precarious household budgets. Deepening the affordability and expanding the availability of Fair Fares will alleviate the cost burden of public transit, cutting interactions over fare payment between riders and police officers that can involve use of force and stiff collateral consequences of ticketing, arrest and/or conviction.

Improve Public Transit’s Resilience To Extreme Weather Events

The remnants of Hurricane Ida swamped the subway system last September, shutting down every line. To keep subways running while climate change delivers increasingly extreme weather, City and MTA leaders need to work together to unclog drains, turn street space into spongy green infrastructure, and raise station entrances to minimize the extent to which the subway doubles as another sewer system.

“As the window of opportunity to adapt to climate change narrows, all city agencies, especially DOT and DEP, must immediately align with each other—and with the MTA—in order to complete projects more rapidly to mitigate the impacts of rain-induced flooding. New York City can achieve this in part by promoting greater inter-agency coordination and implementing a comprehensive planning framework, where budget and capital programs would be aligned with current and future needs. While those recent subway station flooding videos are shocking to watch, we know these events may soon become commonplace unless we invest, coordinate, and act now.”

Regional Plan Association, Improving Stormwater Management in the New York City Subway (July 15, 2021)

HOUSING AND HEALTHCARE POLICY SOLUTIONS

“Negative behaviors in the subway are amplified by the media. Crime that takes place within the subway system could happen anywhere at any time. The City and state must address the root causes of conditions and behaviors that foster unwelcome behaviors by passing budgets for housing, education and job training, employment, mental and physical health.”

Karen H., Riders Alliance member from Queens

Making the subway safe, welcoming, and inclusive for all requires better public services beyond the transit system and city streets. Too many New Yorkers have fallen through a tattered and torn social safety net and into the subway. Unhoused riders are some of the most vulnerable people in the entire city. They need permanent supportive housing and, where appropriate, healthcare solutions to move out of the transit system. If simply moving people along or locking them up were sound housing policy, no one would be living in the subway today.

WHAT THE STATE CAN DO

Pass Good Cause Eviction Legislation To Protect Tenants From Homelessness

Eviction is a major predictor of homelessness; requiring landlords to have good cause prior to eviction will protect hundreds of thousands of tenants from becoming homeless.

Broadly supported legislation in Albany would limit major rent hikes and protect tenants who have paid their rent and have been good neighbors.

Ease the Creation of More Affordable Housing and Midtown Redevelopment

Much of the discussion about subway safety hinges on the idea that fear of transit is keeping white-collar workers home. Making it easier to convert hotel and office properties into housing will ease New York's housing crisis while also calming anxieties about the future of our business districts, especially the nation's largest in midtown Manhattan. Expediting state regulatory changes to promote hotel conversions and eliminating the state-imposed floor area ratio cap will breathe new life into midtown, including its dozens of subway stations.

WHAT THE CITY CAN DO

Provide Unhoused People With Good Alternatives to Congregate Shelters and Permanent Supportive Housing

The subway system is no place to live but serves as a last resort for some of the most vulnerable New Yorkers, many of whom have found conditions in congregate shelters intolerable. To provide an alternative, the City should open at least 3,000 new Safe Haven and stabilization beds in private, single-occupancy rooms and offer them to all unsheltered homeless individuals.

MAYOR ADAMS MUST:

- ✓ **Stop** the sweeps & add **3,000** single-occupancy room Safe Haven & stabilization beds **immediately**
- ✓ Set aside **6,000** affordable apartments per year for **homeless** households & build another **6,000** apartments per year for **extremely low-income** households
- ✓ Treat **ALL** homeless people with **respect & compassion**



Coalition for the Homeless graphic (May 5, 2022)

“For me, a big part of making the subway feel safer is getting people access to the services they need. As a rider, I sometimes see people who clearly need help—maybe they are hungry and need food, or they are homeless and need a place to live, or they have a mental illness and need some form of therapy or treatment. I don’t think it’s appropriate to call 911 in those situations because none of those things are a crime and they often aren’t emergencies either. I would feel more comfortable as a rider if there was a number I could call, other than 911, when I see someone in need of help on the bus or subway.”

Steven M., Riders Alliance member from the Bronx

“Permanent supportive housing (PSH) is a model that combines stable, affordable housing with wraparound services benefiting residents and their families. For example, PSH for those who have been recently released from prison provides employment support, counseling, and other vital re-entry services. Offering supportive housing upon re-entry has been found to reduce re-arrest rates by 40 percent and re-incarceration by 61 percent within the year following release. At a local level, increasing access to affordable housing by building more low-income housing units has significantly reduced violent crime.

Alongside its safety benefits, PSH is a cost-effective financial investment. In the long-run, governments recoup a large share of the upfront costs through reduced healthcare, short-term shelter, and criminalization expenses. In New York, reduced service use yielded annualized savings of \$16,282 per housing unit, equal to 95% of the supportive housing costs. In Portland, savings were even more extreme, with the government actually saving \$15,000 per unit after deducting both the cost of housing and services provided.”

Civil Rights Corp, Getting Smart on Safety: Evidence on Non-Carceral Investments That Work to Prevent Violence & Harm (May 2022)

Improve Mental Health Services

Half of hate crimes are committed by people with mental illness, and that’s just the folks who have diagnoses already. Racial and gender harassment are worse because of gaps in mental healthcare for those who need it.

The City and state should collaborate to establish and support community-based response units for mental health emergencies, with training and resources dedicated to public transit. Crisis Stabilization centers which are open 24/7, and provide rapid

support services to anyone who walks through their doors, should operate within or immediately adjacent to major subway hubs.

POLICING THE SUBWAY

“The police that are currently in the subway don’t do much to deter actual crime, instead focusing on fare evasion, vending, and other non-violent offenses. In February 2020, I was harassed and threatened with homophobic violence on a subway platform. There were police in the station, but they were too busy looking out for turnstile jumpers to patrol the platform and intervene in my situation. When I approached them for help, they didn’t seem interested or concerned. Why are police focusing on fining people who didn’t have \$2.75 to pay for a subway ride instead of ensuring a safe commute for riders?”

Kevin R., Riders Alliance member from Brooklyn

As long as armed officers continue to patrol the subway, there’s a fierce debate about how to police a subway system with millions of riders, thousands of workers, and hundreds of stations. Popular outcry against social media footage of officers joking around with one another or staring down at their phones, using force against turnstile jumpers, and arresting immigrant food vendors and confiscating goods or destroying food suggests that the right answer has proven elusive. But as the sole actors underground authorized to apply force, what is clear is that armed officers should limit use of force to stopping imminent threats of violence to riders and workers.

As a rule, police in the subway should not:

- **Arrest, harass, or confiscate the wares of otherwise peaceful subway food vendors**
 - New Yorkers’ subway commutes are some of the longest in the nation and riders appreciate being able to buy snacks from vendors who also serve as eyes and ears on our transit system, actually making the subway safer for all
 - Licenses and permits to sell food are mired in bureaucratic red tape and kept artificially scarce
 - Police crackdowns on food vendors, often immigrant women of color, undermine the relationship between officers and civilians that could help stop serious crime

- **Use the threat of force and arrest to enforce payment of the subway fare**
 - Use of force and collateral consequences are grossly disproportionate to nonpayment of a \$2.75 transit fare
 - The MTA itself has acknowledged that officers belong on platforms and trains and is pursuing educational approaches to fare collection with its new panel
 - City Hall's return to the idea that fare evasion is a signal of disorder and a way to apprehend violent criminals is an outdated, needle-in-a-haystack approach to finding illegal guns and stopping serious crime
- **Evict unhoused New Yorkers from the subway or issue tickets for being homeless**
 - Already this year, massive subway and encampment sweeps have cost millions of dollars and upended thousands of lives without solving any housing problems
 - Unhoused people are among the most vulnerable riders in the transit system; targeting them for exclusion is cruel and counterproductive to addressing their basic needs
 - As detailed above, the solution to transit homelessness is to tackle the citywide crisis and properly fund proven humane measures to rehouse people in need

What police officers should do, in the subway as in any public space, is respectfully interact with the riders and transit workers whom they are there to serve and protect. To the extent that riders want police in the subway, it's to stop serious crime. To stop crime, officers need to remain alert to their surroundings and converse in a relaxed manner with riders and workers ready and willing to talk with them.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Riders need evidence of what actually makes transit safer. Without it, all we get are periodic furors over fare evasion and repeat surges of police into the subway. Instead, officials should regularly and transparently evaluate prior measures taken to advance subway safety, broadly understood. Given the large expense to riders and taxpayers of additional policing and other support services, it's essential to frequently report back on progress toward articulated goals.

CONCLUSION

WITH SEVERAL MILLION RIDERS using the subway system each day—more than 60% of pre-pandemic ridership figures—crime, homelessness, and working from home are unlikely to destroy the nation’s largest transit system. But fiscal austerity, especially given the precarity of transit finances, could still trigger a death spiral of service cuts, fare hikes, and terminal ridership decline.

Focusing on crime and punishment in transit, too often to the exclusion of all other problems and solutions, distracts and deflects from the need to improve transit service and provide for the most vulnerable New Yorkers. Seeing the subway as a political symbol rather than a transportation network contributes to threats against its viability by obscuring riders’ needs.

As riders, we hope that by taking a holistic, root causes-driven approach to rider safety, the conversation can shift from demagoguery to policymaking and from distraction to momentum toward addressing major crises. Better public services, in turn, can help heal the city and the nation and prove the strength that comes from organizing to reach common goals.