

TRANSIT

Police Haven't Slowed New Yorkers' Subway Fare Evasion

Officials estimate that the transit authority could lose about \$300 million this year to fare evasion



Emergency exits are seen as a boon to fare beaters on New York City subways. PHOTO: RICHARD B. LEVINE/ZUMA PRESS

By Paul Berger and Leslie Brody

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Fare evasion in the New York City subway has increased despite the deployment of hundreds of police officers across the system in recent months, Metropolitan Transportation Authority officials said Monday.

The officials blamed the rise on a citywide culture that accepts people not paying for rides.

“This is a city’s culture that’s sort of developed over the last few years that we are going to have to try to change,” Patrick Warren, the MTA’s chief safety officer, told MTA board members at a meeting in lower Manhattan on Monday.

Andy Byford, the head of the subway system, also blamed emergency exits at stations, which he described as the Achilles’ heel of the subway system because they allow riders to slip in without paying at a turnstile.

The MTA has the doors to accommodate wheelchair-bound riders and passengers with bulky items. Other major transit systems around the world provide wider turnstile areas that don't pose such a soft spot for fare evasion, he said.

The MTA generates about \$4.5 billion annually in subway and bus fare revenues. Officials estimate that the authority could lose about \$300 million this year to fare evasion, roughly double the estimated \$150 million in lost revenues in 2017.

New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, a Democrat, announced in June that 300 MTA police officers and 200 New York Police Department officers would be redeployed from other areas of the transit system to monitor 50 subway stations and 50 bus routes where fare evasion is most common.

Those officers were deployed gradually, rising from 200 in June to 500 by the end of August. The MTA also posted notices around the system warning against fare evasion and of potential \$100 tickets for fare beaters.

MTA officials presented anecdotal evidence that the presence of officers at some busy subway stations had significantly reduced fare beating. But overall, they said, subway fare evasion increased to 4.7% of riders in August compared with 3.9% in June.

During the same period, fare evasion on buses fell to 22% of riders from 24%.

Some riders on Monday said that they didn't believe fare evasion was widespread. They said that the MTA ought to spend more time focusing on delivering a reliable service.

Nicole Brown, who is 18 and juggles school and a job, said she often jumps the turnstile or goes through the emergency gate. "The train is always late and they expect me to pay \$33 a week for a MetroCard?" she said.

Rachel Welch, a 23-year-old aerospace engineer, said she saw her first fare beater recently and it bugged her. "We should all play by the rules or the fares will go up," she said.

One of Mr. Cuomo's appointees to the MTA board, Lawrence Schwartz, expressed frustration that the MTA seemed unable to curb the problem, especially on the subway.

Mr. Schwartz suggested that academics ought to be brought in to check whether the MTA's data is accurate. He also suggested setting the alarm on subway emergency gates to a near-deafening level to deter evaders.

Riders Alliance, a transit advocacy group, said in a statement Monday: "The solution is to provide reliable, affordable public transit, not deafening gate alarms or an expensive new police force that targets subway and bus riders."

Some board members also criticized the MTA's approach. They questioned whether the cost of paying police officers outweighs savings from fare evasion reductions and pointed out that fare evasion is more prevalent on buses than the subway.

Robert Linn, who was appointed by Mayor Bill de Blasio, questioned why the MTA wasn't deploying its police officers more intelligently. Mr. Linn said that according to data he received from MTA officials, five bus routes were responsible for annual losses of \$27 million, the same as estimated losses at 50 of the worst subway stations combined.

"If this data is accurate, the idea of putting half of cops on buses and half on subways doesn't make any sense," he said.

Mr. Linn declined to identify those routes, deferring such questions to the MTA. An MTA spokesman declined to provide the information, though previously MTA officials have said bus-fare evasion is most prevalent on Staten Island.

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