

Police-Free Transit is Safe Transit:

CO-CREATING SAFETY ON OTTAWA'S PUBLIC
TRANSIT THROUGH COMMUNITY-BASED DESIGN,
PLANNING, AND COLLABORATION

Co-authored by Vivic Research and Courage Ottawa



A Note from OTSP

We acknowledge that our work takes place on the unceded, unsurrendered territories of the Algonquin-Anishnabeg people. We recognize that the city we live in and care about is built on stolen land, with revenue from stolen resources. We commit to living lightly on this land and always standing in solidarity with our Indigenous neighbours.

We would like to thank those individuals and groups who have advocated for a safe and equitable transit system before us. In particular, we wish to acknowledge the important work of WISE (Women's Initiative for Safer Environments), Hollaback (now, Right2Be), and OCTEVAW (Ottawa Coalition to End Violence Against Women) for their earlier activism in this space. We hope our work is seen to be building on the rich contributions of these important groups. We appreciate the evolving conceptions of transit safety that have led previous initiatives to be more open to policing than we are. Despite this difference, we are grateful to have received support from these groups, whose openness to the alternatives we propose has been a source of considerable encouragement to the [Ottawa Transit Safety Project \(OTSP\)](#) team.

While we focused primarily on addressing issues directly related to riders' immediate safety, it is important to acknowledge and commend the efforts of groups such as Ottawa Transit Riders, Healthy Transportation Coalition, and Free Transit Ottawa, who have been actively engaged in advocating for broader issues related to public transit. Additionally, we express our deep gratitude to groups like Overdose Prevention Ottawa and Ottawa Street Medics for their innovative work in envisioning and implementing alternative structures for community safety. We encourage the residents of Ottawa to actively participate in these groups, as well as engage with municipal democracy organizations like Horizon Ottawa or the Ottawa Coalition for a People's Budget, which foster discussions and broad conversations on community well-being.

We are grateful to our comrades in the Courage Coalition for the generous funding and infrastructural support. We are indebted to Inez Hillel from Vivic Research whose dedication to and enthusiasm for our project – to say nothing of her amazing research, facilitation, and writing skills - helped keep us motivated through particularly arduous and stressful periods.

We hope that this report can shed light on the current concerns surrounding transit safety in Ottawa and offer community-based solutions. This work is done in solidarity with others fighting for systemic change and social justice in our shared city. Radical access to public transit and public space is inherently linked to police and prison abolition, migrants' justice/border abolition, workers' rights, disability justice, and climate justice. And we are proud to be able to contribute to these increasing demands for a more equitable Ottawa.

Executive Summary

The Ottawa Transit Safety Project (OTSP) was established in the winter of 2021-2022 by members of Courage Ottawa to explore a community-oriented, compassionate, and police-free approach to transit safety. This report, a collaborative effort with Vivic Research, is premised on two rather ordinary yet crucial ideas: first, that everyone deserves to be and feel safe in OC Transpo spaces; and second, that transit riders and transit operators are best positioned to keep each other safe.

Every person interacting with public transit deserves to feel safe. Transit users and operators can experience any number of harms while interacting with the transit system. Many of these harms are not unique to public transit, nor can they be eliminated by initiatives that are limited to transit. Harm may be perpetrated by other community members, OC Transpo employees, Special Constables, fare enforcement officers, or police. Other harms may be institutional, perpetuated through policy and planning. Institutional harm (perpetrated by institutional actors to whom safety has been outsourced) and structural harm (relating to how the transit system is presently designed, built, and maintained) have disproportionate negative impacts on marginalized transit riders. To make transit safe and accessible for everyone, those harms need to be addressed. A transit system that is truly safe and serves all members of the public will need to grapple with these tough realities and ensure that decisions around safety do not serve to create an illusion of safety for some at the expense of real safety for others.

The existing strategy for ensuring safety on transit falls short of its intended goals. A transit system that relies on user fees, excludes people from public spaces, and relies on law enforcement for public safety is fundamentally at odds with an inclusive transit system that can be accessed and enjoyed by everyone. In this report, we explore the variety of approaches that can enhance safety on transit, including eliminating fares, repealing loitering by-laws, substituting Special Constables with Transit Ambassadors, improving the efficiency and reliability of the service, retrofitting stations, and fostering a culture shift. We put forward 15 recommendations that were co-developed with transit riders through focus groups and anchored in evidence-based best practices.

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Introduction

Public transit is an essential service that allows access to essential needs such as groceries, employment, education, visiting loved ones, and reducing individuals' environmental impact. In Ottawa, OC Transpo is the transportation agency that operates the conventional bus service, the Light Rail Transit (LRT) system, and the Para Transpo (accessible) bus service.

[OC Transpo's Special Constables program](#) – now nearing the end of its third five-year term – will soon be up for renewal. Not reviewed, not evaluated, not critiqued. Renewed. Rubber-stamped. For a program that has been with us for such a short period, it is remarkable the extent to which it has been internalized – by all, from city councillors and transit officials to operators and riders – as a permanent and indispensable component of Ottawa's policing and transit networks. The likelihood of anyone in any position of authority questioning its continuation – pondering aloud that it might not be good or effective – is low. But not only is it past time for a review of the program; it is time to talk about alternatives. Can we build a safe, vibrant, healthy, and even joyful transit experience for all Ottawans? Can we do it without policing?

Safety on transit is an incredibly diverse topic – one that is hard to capture in a single report. Broadly, areas that pertain to safety on transit include the physical safety of riders and operators, road safety, infrastructure quality, access to transit, popular narratives around safety, city budgets, and the overall conditions in the community. Within a community, each individual's social position and access to power will inform how they experience public transit and how they understand transit safety. For example, an individual who takes transit infrequently will have a different perception of safety issues on transit compared to a person who relies on public transit as their primary mode of transportation. Both of these individuals will have a different view than a person who relies on public transit as a source of shelter. In this report, we try to hold space for the diversity of complex experiences that can exist simultaneously within a community.

This report distinguishes between *carceral safety* and *community safety*. *Carceral safety* involves initiatives implemented by the state over the public.ⁱ Carceral safety relies on and perpetuates the logic that there are two distinct groups of people in society, the “terrible few” who cause harm and must be punished and disciplined by the state, and innocent mainstream citizens who must be protected by the state. The state punishes and protects through the police, courts, and prisons.ⁱⁱ

Beyond these institutions, carceral safety can also work through “concerned citizens” who police the behaviours of others. This can take the form of confronting others directly, reporting them to the police, or sharing photos or videos of them on social media.ⁱⁱⁱ

Alternatively, *community safety* is co-created by and for the community. Unlike carceral safety, community safety requires everyone to engage in mutual aid and play an active and integral role in building a safe city without relying on banishment, criminalization, or policing of any form.^{iv} Community safety promotes a caring, compassionate, and supportive shared engagement with public space. At the same time, it requires us to actively resist the carceral logics, including racist and capitalist ideologies, that lead us to believe that our safety can be outsourced to the police. Community safety begins with prevention. However, if unsafe or harmful things happen despite prevention efforts being in place, the response should centre on the needs of the people who were harmed; and we should prioritize community-based responses that would prevent a similar situation from reoccurring.

Moving from carceral safety to community safety is not a transition that can happen overnight. We need to shift cultural norms and values in order for all community members to feel that they have a responsibility to engage in mutual aid to foster safety (as opposed to the “that’s not my job” individualist understanding of safety). Comprehensive efforts to build capacity and expertise within communities are critical to being able to reasonably expect that community members will be equipped to respond to various incidents.

A comprehensive discussion on transit safety in Ottawa requires us to delve into the foundations of so-called Canada: capitalism and settler-colonialism.^v *Settler colonialism* is a type of colonialism that requires the genocide and erasure of Indigenous peoples for the land to be used and occupied by settlers.^{vi} It is a living form of colonialism, not a history of the past. Settler colonialism impacts everyone living in Canada, not just Indigenous Peoples.

Capitalism is the predominant economic system of our age, where workers do not own the materials, tools, intellectual property, capital, and other instruments to make goods and services that are essential to survival. Instead, workers are forced to work to avoid destitution. Under the neoliberal form of capitalism, a strong incentive exists to turn everything, even necessities, into products for sale and profit.

For these systems to survive, distinctions are created across class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, and ability. People who are targeted based on these distinctions and marginalized by the system are made vulnerable to exploitation. This is a feature of the way settler colonialism and capitalism operate, not just an outcome, and has direct implications for the safety of many Ottawa residents who depend on the transit system.

Methodology

This report is the product of four streams of research. First, members of the OTSP research team read, discussed, and drew inspiration from several similar reports produced by like-minded groups and research collectives in cities across North America. In particular, [Metro As A Sanctuary](#) by Alliance for Community Transit in Los Angeles and [Safety For All](#) by New York City's Transit Center proved immensely valuable and provided us with many interesting ideas for how to increase feelings of safety in transit spaces, without resorting to increased policing.

In the summer of 2022, we partnered with Vivic Research to hold a series of focus groups with transit riders in Ottawa to learn how they feel about safety on OC Transpo, what they believe to be the causes of unsafety in transit spaces, and how they would like to see safety increased in OC Transpo spaces.

Concurrently, we scoured the websites of the City of Ottawa, OC Transpo, the relevant labour unions (in particular, CUPE 5500 and ATU Local 279) as well as local news archives for information to help us better understand things like OC Transpo's fare enforcement strategy, how much money Transit Fare Enforcement Officers and Special Constables make, the benefits these employees are entitled to, and so on.

Finally, in addition to their tremendous work spearheading our focus groups, Vivic Research also sought out information and data from OC Transpo and the City of Ottawa to get a better sense of how the agency thinks about safety.

The lack of transparency from OC Transpo and the City of Ottawa was a major limitation of this report. Communication with public officials proved challenging, demonstrating a concerning level of narrow-mindedness that raises doubts about their openness to consider alternative proposals put forward by riders within the context of this report. A second limitation of this report is the limited discussion on Para Transpo and the LRT.^{vii} While accessibility and transparency are integral aspects of safety, our focus primarily revolves around safety concerns that typically prompt a response from the police or Special Constables.

Actionable Measures for Alleviating Riders' Safety Concerns Without Policing and Surveillance

Our primary goal in this report is to identify actionable measures to alleviate riders' safety concerns without relying on policing and surveillance technology. In this section, we outline the key safety concerns expressed by transit riders during our focus groups. We then explore potential solutions to address these concerns while explaining how the current safety practices, at best, prove ineffective and, at worst, exacerbate harm. Then, we discuss how safety can be

enhanced through measures such as free transit, repealing loitering by-laws, introducing transit ambassadors, improving service reliability and frequency, and redesigning transit stations.

Understanding Transit Riders' Safety Concerns

We held five virtual focus groups to better understand the range of safety concerns that riders experience on public transit in Ottawa. Many participants shared that they felt generally unsafe on public transit, and others shared that they tried to avoid it altogether due to previous negative experiences. The most reported concerns included:

- ▶ Experiencing harassment from other riders
- ▶ Experiencing harassment from transit operators and other OC Transpo employees, including Special Constables
- ▶ Experiencing racism and discrimination from transit operators and other OC Transpo employees, including Special Constables
- ▶ Feeling scared or uncomfortable when waiting at stops (particularly at night and in remote areas)
- ▶ Not knowing where to ask for help when feeling distressed, afraid, or lost
- ▶ Not knowing how to help other riders in need of support
- ▶ Feeling scared of police and Special Constables at stations and on buses/trains
- ▶ Feeling unsafe due to the absence of COVID-19 precautions being taken by riders and operators

When riders encounter these scenarios, they are generally instructed to rely on Special Constables despite many participants identifying them as part of what makes them feel unsafe. In reality, we know that the riders most likely to experience harm on public transit are also the most likely to be harmed by Special Constables and police. Rather than offering a visible security presence, Special Constables and police presence are a form of surveillance and intimidation for many marginalized transit riders.

This contradiction between carceral safety measures implemented by OC Transpo and the real experiences of riders extends beyond the use of Special Constables. Buses, the LRT, and some transit stations have CCTV installed, although cameras aren't consistently monitored or turned on. Researchers have highlighted that CCTV functions more as a tool that controls who is excluded from certain spaces, rather than tools that prevent harm and conflict from occurring.^{viii} Despite the lack of evidence regarding the efficacy of these costly technologies in preventing harm, the proliferation of CCTV continues to grow as a knee-jerk reaction from politicians when major crises occur.^{ix}

Who are the Special Constables?

Special Constables are a team of sworn Peace Officers mandated to protect customers, employees, and *property* within the transit system. Special Constables possess limited police powers, including investigating incidents, arresting, and charging persons under the Criminal Code and/or Provincial and Municipal acts. Appointed on behalf of the Ottawa Police Services Board (OPSB), they receive use of force training from the Ottawa Police Service (OPS).

Currently, there are 47 Special Constables whose salaries range from \$64,000 to \$91,000 according to the 2020 collective bargaining agreement. However, these numbers are likely to be low estimates as multiple special constables, particularly team leads, can be found on Ontario's Sunshine List (a list of all public servants making over \$100,000 in Ontario) making upwards of \$120,000 annually.

According to the special constable collective agreement, OC Transpo documentation, and public communication on social media between special constables and members of the public - fare enforcement is not within the scope of work for special constables. Rider testimonies and media reports offer conflicting evidence that special constables do enforce fare collection on transit.

While OC Transpo Special Constables may be first responders to an incident, the OPS is responsible for the investigation of all crimes in the City of Ottawa, including the transit system. Appendix A lists the criminal code offences for which OPS allows Transit Special Constables to take the lead and lay charges under the *Criminal Code of Canada*.

Addressing Fare Enforcement Concerns and Optimizing Resource Utilization through Free Transit

Fare evasion poses no threat to personal or public safety, whereas fare collection does. Fare enforcement itself raises safety concerns due to the following reasons:

- ▶ Subjects riders to questioning from Transit Fare Enforcement Officers (TFEOs) and Special Constables
- ▶ Increases risk of conflict on transit, including assaults on transit operators
- ▶ Legalizes the exclusion of individuals from public spaces
- ▶ Conflates compliance with laws and by-laws with safety
- ▶ Places individuals at risk of a financial penalty of up to \$260 (70 times higher than the \$3.69 fare), which can escalate if unpaid^x
- ▶ Increases instances of profiling and discrimination^{xi}

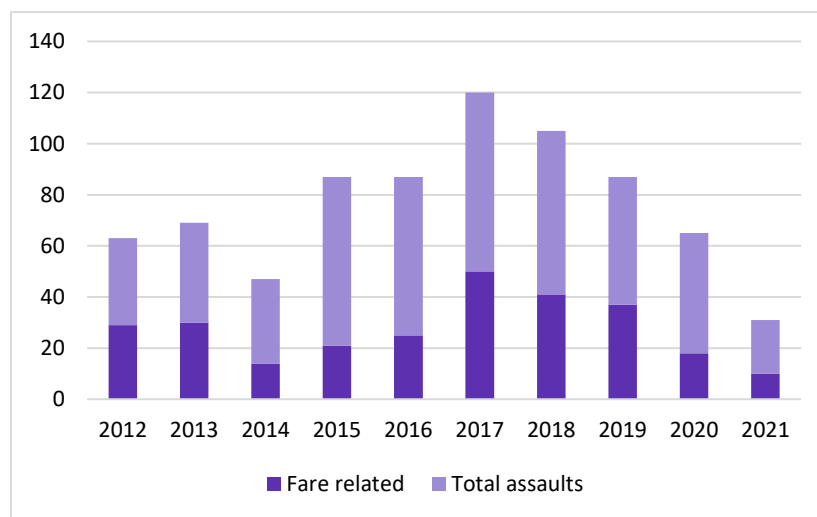
Free transit not only ensures no one is denied transit for financial reasons, but it also eliminates grounds for surveillance and policing, which pose legitimate threats to the safety of marginalized persons who are at a disproportionate risk of police interaction and criminalization. Examining access to transit through a community safety lens supports calls for free transit as opposed to means-tested schemes. Transit is no different than other public services: some community members can afford to pay to access the service, and others cannot. Advocating for

means-tested public transit would be similar to advocating to make every road a toll road – and then reducing the fee for road users who cannot afford to pay it.

Due to several fare enforcement incidents between transit operators and riders escalating into assaults, OC Transpo communications state that they have adopted an “inform not enforce” standard of practice for transit operators.^{xii} Now, fare enforcement falls within the mandate of the four TFEOs, who patrol bus routes to verify proof of payment and are called to respond to situations once a transit operator has asked a rider to pay their fare, and the rider has refused. It is important to highlight that in situations where enforcement is requested by a transit operator, they may call upon a Special Constable, even though fare enforcement is not explicitly designated as their responsibility according to their collective agreement.

Data shows that over the past 9 years, fare-related assaults have accounted for between 24% and 46% of all assaults on bus operators. **It is also critical to note that the data report by OC Transpo only includes assaults by riders and does not include passengers assaulted by operators or Special Constables.**

Figure 1: Assault on transit operators, 2012-2021



Source: Council Member Inquiry Form, Fare Inspectors and Security Officers. Presented to City Council by Councillor C.A. Meehan. December 8, 2021.

Charging fares is not only a way for OC Transpo to fund service delivery – it is also a way to exclude people who have not paid from the transit system. To ensure that exclusion is enforced, OC Transpo pays TFEOs to conduct formal fare checks and invests millions of dollars through the capital budget to install and update the technology used for fare control. This year, OC Transpo set aside \$1 million in the capital budget to retrofit the fare system to allow payment by credit and debit card on buses and at O-train stations. In 2023, the approved capital budget for OC Transpo was \$122 million, although large projects are generally financed over multiple years. The capital budget refers to all money set aside for long-term investments in infrastructure and assets.

OC Transpo does not collect or publish data on the revenue lost from fare evasion, in part because fines are paid to the Provincial Offences Court meaning they do not get the money if someone pays a fare evasion fine.^{xiii} **This point deserves emphasis: all fare enforcement actions result in a net loss for OC Transpo, as they do not collect any revenue from fines imposed during the process.**

This spending is just the latest work-in-progress investments in fare systems, detailed in the table below.

Table 1: Transit Commission Capital Works-In Progress Related to Fare Enforcement

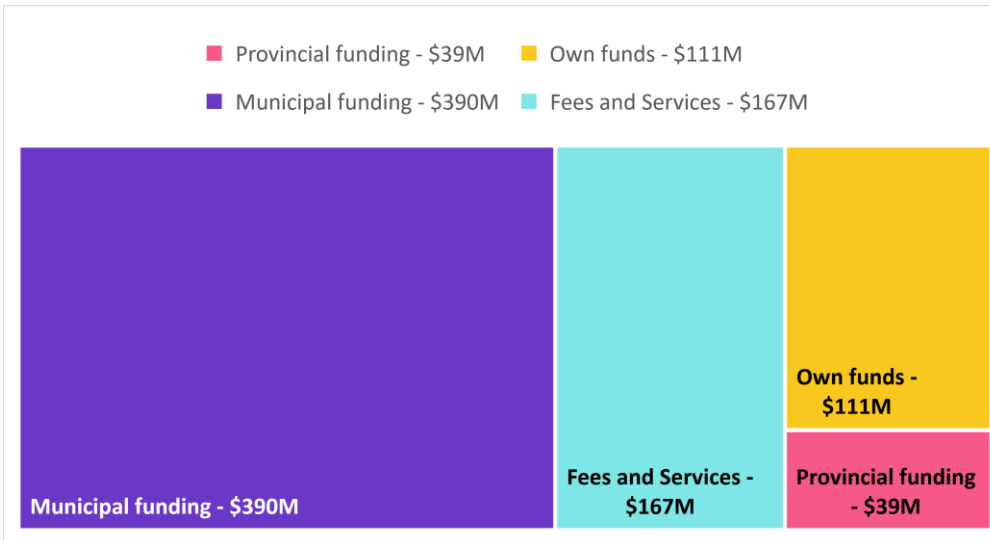
Project	Planned Spending on Fare Enforcement (\$)
Fare Technology Systems 2023	\$1,000,000
Fare Control Syst Confed Line Stn	\$25,940,000
Fare Gate Entrances Transitway	\$1,750,000
Fare Technology Systems	\$2,040,000
Fare Control for Stage 2	\$23,900,000
Fare Technology Systems 2022	\$3,000,000
Total	\$57,630,000

Source: City of Ottawa. (2023). Budget 2023 Working Together for a Better Ottawa: Transit Commission.

How Much is Spent on Public Transit?

The budget for public transit is comprised of an operating and a capital budget. As mentioned earlier, the capital budget for 2023 is \$122 million. The operating budget, which includes all spending on daily service provision, was \$706 million, equivalent to 15.8% of the city's total operating budget.^{xiv} 55% of OC Transpo's operational funding comes from the City of Ottawa and comes primarily from residential and commercial property taxes.^{xv}

Figure 2: Operational Spending on Public Transit by Revenue Source, 2023



Source: City of Ottawa. (2023). Budget 2023 Working Together for a Better Ottawa - Transit Commission.

Transparency around the City and OC Transpo's budget is crucial to fostering meaningful resident engagement. The 2023 City Budget includes cuts to the capital budget - in the form of retiring buses and delaying investments. The justification for these cuts is outlined in a memo to city council, which states "Prior to the pandemic OC Transpo required 851 conventional buses to deliver service. When ridership levels fell due to the pandemic, these buses were retained in the fleet because it was unknown how quickly the City economy and transit ridership levels would recover. Now that ridership patterns are more stable, this budget is proposing a realignment of OC Transpo's bus fleet size to 738 to match actual service needs".^{xvi} While the memo acknowledges the ongoing impact of the pandemic, it appears contradictory to assert that transit levels have stabilized and are unlikely to increase in the coming years. By delaying investments in transit infrastructure, the quality of the service is likely to decline in the coming years.

Unfortunately, despite being a major component of City spending, limited public information is available regarding the transit budget. Throughout our research, communication with OC Transpo, the City of Ottawa's finance department, and city councillors was often difficult, with many of our inquiries going.

Promoting Inclusive Public Spaces by Repealing Loitering By-laws

Between 2017 and 2021, 118 fines were issued for violating Transit By-Law 2007-268, section 19.2(a), which states “No person shall, in or upon any transit property, loiter without due cause”.^{xvii} The definition of loitering includes a large range of non-violent, non-disruptive behaviours that a person can exhibit and be penalized for. These behaviours include spending time inside or on transit property without the express intent of using the transit system, not wearing a shirt or shoes, and begging or panhandling.

Loitering by-laws are an example of the criminalization of poverty, which refers to the ways poor people are entrapped in the criminal legal system for engaging in behaviours needed to survive.^{xviii} The locations of where these fines were issued, notably at the corner of Rideau and King Edward and at Rideau Station, demonstrate the inherently anti-poor and racist nature of loitering by-laws. The people who rely on these public spaces are heavily policed due to their proximity to tourist areas.

It is crucial to emphasize that loitering charges are often issued in non-violent situations. Behaviours such as spitting, urinating, and defecating on transit, while disruptive to other riders, are better addressed through non-punitive responses that meet the needs of individuals rather than simply restricting access to public space. While the definition of loitering encompasses assault and causing disturbance, the high number of disturbance charges laid on OC Transpo property each year suggests that these instances are typically handled by Special Constables or police, rather than by-law agents.

It has been acknowledged that policing may not be the most suitable response to loitering and can potentially escalate and worsen the situation.^{xix} However, when advocating for alternatives, it is essential to consider the intended outcome of these alternatives. Advocating for non-police third-party responders to be responsible for removing individuals from transit, particularly those without alternative shelter from harsh weather or other safety concerns, remains harmful. This approach fails to consider the safety of the person being removed from public space. Safety initiatives must ensure that they are not replicating classist or racist beliefs that favour perceived safety over the actual safety of the most marginalized transit users. Put simply, repealing loitering laws fosters a more inclusive public space by dismantling discriminatory practices that disproportionately target marginalized communities. By removing the threat of criminalization, people can gather, socialize, and express themselves without fear, leading to a more vibrant and diverse public environment.

Introducing Transit Ambassadors to Enhance Safety and Eliminate the Need for Special Constables

Transit ambassadors are generally described as unarmed civilian (non-police) responders who are trained and resourced to be a helpful presence and to respond to various incidents that can occur on transit, which range from helping transit riders navigate the transit systems, providing first aid and conflict resolution support, offering support to riders and operators, and connecting people with auxiliary services. In general, transit ambassadors offer an alternative to carceral responses, such as Special Constables and police.

Transit ambassadors can range from paid staff hired by the transit agency or the city to volunteers with a registered non-profit or a community group. The extent to which transit ambassadors are expected to protect property and enforce rules and regulations depends on who is setting the definition of "safety" that they are tasked with ensuring. However, like other staff-based safety initiatives, transit ambassadors would have limitations in terms of their availability and would primarily engage in reactive responses. While they cannot prevent the challenges that arise on transit, they provide an alternative response that does not share the same limitations as a carceral approach.

What is Layered Policing?

It is crucial to ensure that solutions being put forward are not creative ways of introducing what is called *layered policing*. Layered policing (or tiered policing) is defined as a tactic used by policing institutions to broaden the categories and types of police personnel that perform various police functions.^{xx} This is done genuinely to secure funding and expand the influence of police services beyond frontline response and play a political role in policy and legal decisions.

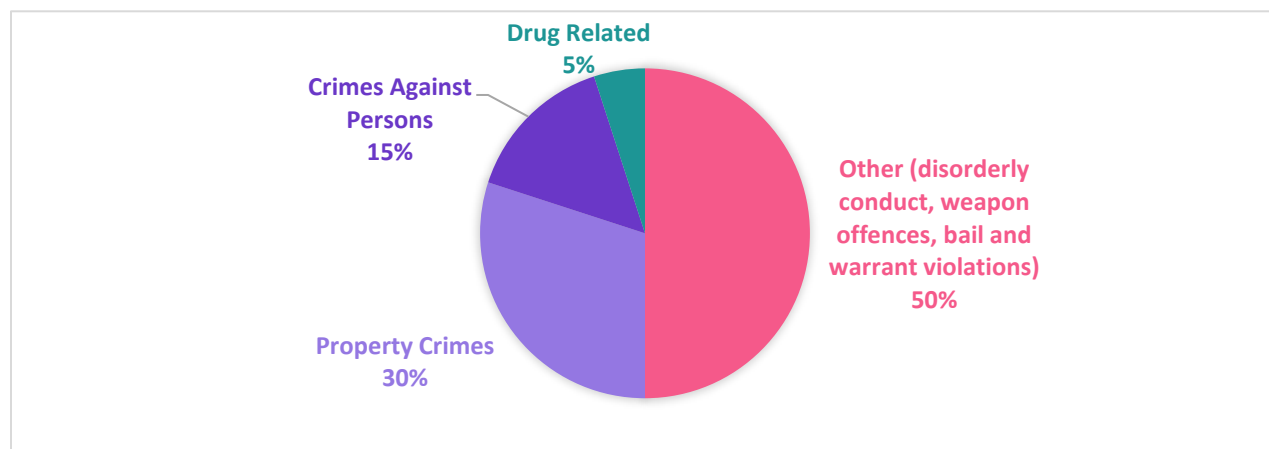
^{xxi}

Police are already embedded in the transit systems in ways that are not always visible. The TRANSECRURE program which provides mandatory training to all OC Transpo employees partners with OPS, the Ontario Provincial Police (OPP), and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP). This is just one of many examples of how the police embedded themselves in safety initiatives that at the surface, may appear to be non-police interventions.

Transit Ambassadors are a creative non-policing solution that can be undermined by police involvement. When police are involved in training Transit Ambassadors or closely collaborating with them, the role of Transit Ambassadors can effectively transform into that of police liaisons. Furthermore, although Transit Ambassadors may mitigate the immediate harm associated with encountering police or Special Constables, if one of their primary responsibilities involves safeguarding private property, they can inadvertently impede safety by enforcing exclusionary practices within a public space. **To fully achieve the benefits of transit ambassador programs, it is essential to keep them independent of the police.**

OC Transpo's annual report includes data on the crime rate, measured as the total number of Criminal Code of Canada offences per 100,000 customer trips.^{xxii} In 2021, there were a total of 1,609 criminal offences, equivalent to 5.1 crimes per 100,000 trips.^{xxiii} This represents an 11% decrease in the number of offences from the year before.

Figure 3: Criminal Code Offences on OC Transpo by Type, 2021



Source: Amilcar, R. (2022). OC Transpo Performance Report for the Period Ending December 2021. Report to Transit Commission on 18 May 2022.

Most of the crimes against persons were assaults (153 of 241 incidents). There were 106 assaults on passengers, 38 assaults on bus operators, and 9 assaults on Special Constables. It is crucial to recognize that relying solely on "crime" data is insufficient as an indicator of the harm and violence occurring on transit. This is because there is no data shared regarding instances where transit riders have been assaulted by Special Constables or operators. However, the disaggregated data on assaults on operators tells an important story. As mentioned previously, in 2021, 26% of all assaults originated from fare disputes. Additionally, 40% originated from non-fare-related policy enforcement. This suggests that by implementing policy changes and modifying enforcement practices, it is possible to eliminate roughly two-thirds of all assaults on operators.

Intrinsically linked to assaults caused by policy enforcement, is the high number of offences coded as "other", which includes disorderly conduct (or breach of peace). In theory, the removal of individuals who behave in ways labelled as "disorderly", might make some transit users feel safer, however, we must consider how these laws, by-laws, and policies are applied in practice. Often, the label of "disorderly" is applied to individuals based on their identity, rather than their behaviour and the response reflects normalized and systemic prejudice against marginalized persons. The transit system and its associated spaces are meant to serve all of us. Rather than excluding marginalized individuals from these services and spaces, we should ask: how can we make public transit serve everybody better? How can we ensure that transit is safe for all users?

In Ottawa, a customer service team known as Red Vests was introduced to help riders navigate the LRT system. Red Vests are a crucial component of real-time customer communication; however, they differ substantially from Transit Ambassadors who in addition to offering navigational support also engage in conflict resolution and de-escalation, crisis intervention, and provide first aid.

The prevailing societal conditioning, which limits intervention to professionals, coupled with limited accessible avenues for learning crisis response, often leaves riders uncertain about how to address injustice or harm. However, despite these challenges, riders consistently step in to support one another, demonstrating that community-led safety is attainable and can be expanded with adequate resources and the necessary political determination. From our perspective, implementing a rider-led community-based Transit Ambassador program in Ottawa's transit system can address assaults, disturbances, medical crises, and other incidents, effectively eliminating the necessity for Special Constables on public transit. This approach empowers the community to take an active role in ensuring safety and promotes a more inclusive and supportive transit environment.

What Are Other Jurisdictions Doing?

Formalized in 1996, San Francisco's Muni Transit Assistance Program (MTAP) was initially established a year earlier in response to persistent safety concerns on bus and rail lines. Originally named Together United Recommitted Forever (Turf Group), it consisted of volunteers, primarily youth who had previous involvement in street-level violence or had experienced criminalization. The program operates in collaboration with San Francisco's transit agency, the San Francisco school district, and the San Francisco Police Department, which allocates funding. The Transit Ambassadors are trained in rail safety, de-escalation, and customer service but have no powers of citation or arrest. They work closely with school administrators, parents, non-profits, and counsellors to hold students accountable through administrative actions instead of entering the criminal justice system. The program is generally approved of by the community and transit operators, who found that "reduces both assaults on operators and the need for operators to get involved in passenger conflicts, letting them focus on driving".^{xxiv}

To overcome the limitations imposed on transit agency staff by institutional constraints, peer-led alternatives can offer a unique range of benefits. Unlike the SFMTA and BART programs, New York City's Guardian Angel program is separate from the Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) and entirely volunteer-run.^{xxv} Established in 1979 in response to street violence, the Guardian Angels operate on the city's subways and streets. Self-identified vigilantes, they wear a uniform, are unarmed, and undergo training in self-defence, basic martial arts, CPR, law, communication, and conflict resolution. One of the key distinctions between the Guardian Angels program and other transit-affiliated patrols is their explicit commitment to community safety, excluding the protection of private property interests.

Enhancing Rider Autonomy and Safety through Reliable and Frequent Transit

The focus groups we held with transit riders revealed that many riders perceive customer service and service reliability as crucial elements of safety on transit. When focus group participants were asked to describe situations where they felt unsafe on transit, waiting alone at bus stops, standing on crowded buses, having trouble navigating the transit system, and taking transit with children, were frequently mentioned. Focus group participants described situations where they felt they needed support but did not feel safe turning to Special Constables to offer the help they needed. It is important to note that limitations to the frequency and reliability of the bus service are amplified for Para Transpo riders, who are required to book ahead of time and are restricted in the number of daily bookings they can make.

These types of safety concerns cannot be meaningfully addressed with reactive responses. Instead, we shift our focus to the way that reliable and frequent transit can reduce conflict, harassment, injuries, and risk on transit. The data on injuries provided in OC Transpo's annual report serves as the closest available evidence that sheds light on the risks associated with unreliable and infrequent transit, which often leads to overcrowding. In 2021, 58 injuries on transit required transport to a hospital. OC Transpo attributes the majority of injuries to two main causes: sudden brake applications to avoid contact with a vehicle, cyclist, or pedestrian, or an individual standing or walking while the bus was in motion. Focus group participants affirmed this perspective, sharing they felt safest on transit when buses weren't overly crowded, they had a place to sit, entering and exiting the bus was accessible, and when drivers could see if riders were still in motion before they started driving.

Research on the transit needs of women and other marginalized groups further substantiates these perspectives.^{xxvi} Researchers have highlighted that frequent service and short wait times:

- ▶ Offers individuals the flexibility and autonomy to leave an unsafe or uncomfortable situation without the worry of waiting a long time for the next bus or train.
- ▶ Reduces the competition for limited transit space, especially for people with limited mobility and young children.
- ▶ Relieves scheduling pressures on operators, improving their working conditions and allowing them to better focus on ensuring safety on board the vehicle.
- ▶ Riders spend less time waiting for transit where they may be isolated and feel unsafe (e.g. late at night at a less frequented stop).

Maximizing Safety Through Design and Infrastructure

Transit stations and terminals are frequented by many people daily. Despite being areas where people congregate, they are not always designed to support those who rely on the public space, nor are they designed to attract people to the space. Retrofitting stations and terminals has been shown to enhance the sense of safety among transit riders, alleviate stress, and reduce perceived waiting times.^{xxvii} Effective retrofits include the installation of benches, shelters, and real-time departure information at all bus stops.

Another safety pressure point identified in the focus groups was the lack of communication between riders and OC Transpo. In our consultations, riders shared they wished to have ways of communicating with OC Transpo staff without having to disturb the transit operator. Focus group participants who reported asking transit operators questions about connecting routes or detours, or had asked for help with navigation, described vastly different experiences, some negative and some positive. All participants agreed that they would like to be able to ask for help from an OC Transpo representative, but worried that answering questions would be distracting for operators. By implementing a non-emergency intercom system for transit riders, OC Transpo could increase communication without overburdening transit operators. Transit riders could ask time-sensitive and important questions to someone with the capacity and tools to provide navigational assistance.

Visions of care-centered and community-based design and planning have already been laid out and can serve as a framework for what is possible in Ottawa.^{xxviii} Care-centered infrastructure includes functional infrastructure like bathrooms, elevators, and benches, but also includes greenery, natural lighting, and public art. Ensuring transit stations are well connected to cycling infrastructure, sidewalks, and crosswalks is key to connecting the transit system to riders' starting points and final destinations. Introducing health and crisis support services and spaces for public education are ways to transform transit stations into spaces where community is encouraged to gather and exist. These types of investments must be made with riders in mind and should not be op-ported by business interests. It is important to consider that amenities like restrooms and the availability of food and drink become increasingly important to riders as wait times increase.^{xxix} Ensuring that station retrofits prioritize need over profit is crucial, especially for the most isolated bus stops that often have limited service and are located far from amenities.

What Are Other Jurisdictions Doing?

An excellent example of repurposing underused spaces to serve the community is the partnership between SEPTA, Philadelphia's transit agency, and Project Home, a local non-profit social services organization. Together, they established a permanent drop-in services center called the Hub of Hope within a station concourse that offers comprehensive case management, primary care, free laundry and showers, housing placements, job application assistance, hot meals, and recovery services.

During the first quarter of 2019, the Hub of Hope successfully placed 635 individuals in shelters, facilitated the placement of over 60 people in safe havens or long-term respite care, and referred more than 70 individuals to permanent housing solutions. Furthermore, the Hub of Hope provided medical services to 168 individuals and made 36 referrals to medical or treatment programs. In 2019 alone, the Hub of Hope recorded over 100,000 visits and provided over 10,000 laundry and shower services.^{xxx}

Cultivating a Culture Shift for Enhanced Safety and Solidarity

A crucial element in promoting preventative safety is the need for a cultural shift that nurtures compassion and solidarity among riders. By shifting our perspective of safety away from a narrow focus on "crime," we can redefine it to encompass a broader understanding of harm. Instead, we use the term "harm" to acknowledge that many behaviours rooted in malice and harm may not necessarily be categorized as criminal, and conversely, not all crimes are inherently harmful or motivated by malice. Recognizing that crime is a subjective reflection of cultural and social norms, values, and laws, rather than an objective category, we challenge the notion that it can serve as an accurate proxy for identifying unsafe or harmful behaviour.^{xxxi}

For example, since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, disability justice advocates have worked to bring awareness to the importance of masks and air purification to prevent the spread of airborne diseases. When safety is defined as an absence of harm, wearing a mask on public transit becomes a safety policy that ensures that transit riders and operators alike can be kept safe while moving through the city.

At an institutional level, the dissemination of information to residents plays a crucial role in empowering them to advocate for quality service. This includes the sharing of financial information from the City and relevant information on the service from OC Transpo. By actively engaging residents and fostering civic participation, trust can be built between riders and transit providers, reinforcing the public nature of transit. As part of this effort, it is important to shift away from the use of the term "customer," which is commonly employed by OC Transpo and city officials and tends to emphasize a transactional exchange where individuals are seen as purchasing access to public transit.

At the community level, the co-creation of safety involves reassigning the responsibility of caring for others back to the community itself. In our focus groups, participants shares that they felt the individualistic culture in Ottawa impeded bystander interventions on transit. Participants expressed concerns about making a situation worse or putting their safety at risk by intervening. Many expressed the desire to see bystander awareness training embedded into education curricula and available in community spaces like the public library or recreation centers. Riders also expressed the need for everyone to be more aware of what can be helpful (or harmful) to marginalized riders in need of support to feel confident in offering help. While participants did not report the same levels of confidence to offer first aid, all participants agreed that buses and trains should be equipped with Naloxone kits and other necessary first aid supplies. By equipping as many transit riders as possible with the necessary information and skills, the responsibility to ensure safety can be shared among an increasingly larger community of individuals.

Conclusion

There is no denying the need for continuous efforts to enhance safety in our community, and we recognize that it is an ongoing endeavour. The purpose of this research report and the focus groups conducted by the OTSP and Vivic Research is to increase public awareness of the experiences related to safety on our transit system. However, we also acknowledge that comprehensive safety measures should extend beyond the transit system to encompass other spaces in the city. By expanding these safety initiatives, we can create a safe and accessible environment for everyone.

The proposed safety measures in this report, notably free transit, repealing loitering by-laws, introducing transit ambassadors, improving service reliability and frequency, and redesigning transit stations, are meant to address the most pressing safety concerns of riders without introducing new potential for harm. Furthermore, these recommendations aim to tackle not only immediate safety concerns associated with violence or harm but also to mitigate the potential risk of such situations arising.

In recent years, the public discourse surrounding safety has been driven by heightened awareness of incidents involving police killings and violence. We echo the calls to remove police from our communities. The actionable measures put forward in this report are intended to shift power away from by-law officers, Special Constables, TFEOs, and OPS. Without a mandate to enforce fares or by-laws, the ability of policing institutions to criminalize individuals' use of public spaces will be diminished. We acknowledge that these changes necessitate a shift in worldviews towards a more empathetic and less individualistic mindset. To facilitate this transformation, public education programs and bystander intervention workshops can play a vital role in creating a safer and more compassionate environment among transit riders. The introduction of a rider-led Transit Ambassadors program provides an alternative contact for riders in need of additional support, eliminating the reliance on the police as the sole option. Resisting carceral expansion on public transit is inextricably linked to holding governments accountable, maintaining control over public services, and putting equity at the forefront of policy decisions.

Our view of what can be possible on public transit is part of a bigger vision of what is possible more broadly. We envision a future where access to housing, food, and health care are also viewed as foundational to ensuring safety. Rather than react to violence, we hope to prevent it by ensuring that everyone's needs are met, and we are accountable to one another. Although a long-term vision, we view it as fundamentally possible and worth striving towards.

Recommendations

1. Make transit free and repeal loitering by-laws to ensure no one is excluded from public transit.
2. Reintroduce a mask mandate to promote the safety of transit riders and operators while fostering a culture of care.
3. Improve OC Transpo and Para Transpo service quality by expanding transit frequency, volume, hours of operation, and accessibility to give riders more choices and control when taking public transit.
4. Improve communications between OC Transpo, Para Transpo, and transit riders in all areas including bookings, general inquiries, and providing feedback to ensure that continuous improvement is possible due to information sharing.
5. Introduce a non-emergency intercom system on transit vehicles and bus stops so riders can access OC Transpo staff without relying on transit operators, effectively reducing driver distractions.
6. Ensure the anonymous reporting system is decoupled from the Ottawa Police Service and that the information about incidents and areas of concern is promptly shared with relevant community groups.
7. Retrofit all transit stops to be fully accessible and have real-time departure information, seating, and shelter to close information gaps and reduce barriers to taking transit.
8. Retrofit transit stops and areas surrounding transit stops to ensure riders have access to restrooms and food and drink options by working with the City of Ottawa and community partners thereby making transit spaces more community oriented.
9. Expand the Red Vest program to help transit riders with navigation.
10. Replace Special Constables with a rider-led Transit Ambassador program that is:
 - a. Independent of the Ottawa Police Service.
 - b. Anchored in trauma-informed principles and harm reduction.
 - c. Trained to offer crisis support & basic medical interventions.
 - d. Mandated to focus solely on wellbeing and not the protection of private property.
11. Develop and continuously update public awareness campaigns on transit safety measures.
12. Offer bystander awareness training and first aid training to ensure riders feel comfortable offering support to others.
13. Promote the benefits of public transit, including its ability to increase community cohesion and decrease traffic fatalities and injuries.
14. Recognize the way all forms of discrimination, including racism, sexism, ableism, and classism, are barriers to public transit and fund proactive ways to reduce these kinds of systemic and interpersonal forms of violence.
15. Support community groups working towards safety initiatives that are both linked to and broader than public transit, including migrant rights, disability justice, Indigenous sovereignty and liberation, anti-racism work, drug user advocacy, houselessness advocacy, and more.

Appendix

Table 1A: Charges that Special Constables Can Lay under the Criminal Code of Canada

Resist or Obstruct Peace Officer	Section 129
Personating a Peace Officer	Section 130
Obstructing Justice	Section 139
Public Mischief	Section 140
Escape Lawful Custody	Section 145(1)(a)
Breach of Judicial Undertaking or Recognizance	Section 145(2) and (3)
Fail to Attend Court	Section 145(5)
Fail to Appear for Fingerprints	Section 145(5)
Fail to Comply OIC Undertaking	Section 145(5.1)
Indecent Act	Section 173
Cause Disturbance	Section 175
Offensive Volatile Substance	Section 178
Interfering with transportation facilities	Section 248
Uttering Threats	Section 264.1
Assault	Section 266
Assaulting a Peace Officer	Section 270
Theft Under \$5,000	Section 334(b)
Possession of Property Obtained by Crime	Section 354(1)
False Pretences Under \$5,000	Section 362(2)(b)
Uttering a Forged Document	Section 368
False Information	Section 372(1)
Harassing Communications	Section 372(3)
Fraud Under \$5,000	Section 380(1)(b)
Fraud in Relation to Fares	Section 393(3)
Personation	Section 403
Mischief Under \$5,000	Section 430(4)
Fail to Comply with Probation Order	Section 733.1

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