

ASSAULT SURVEY 2003 LONDON TRANSIT OPERATORS

John M. Gillet VIWP Committee Member
Pat Hunniford VP ATU 741
Dawn Bruyere RN, MScN

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Workplace Violence may be defined as “a threat or act of aggression arising out of or during the course of work resulting in physical or psychological damage, pain or injury to a worker (Report: Health and Safety Training Solutions That Fit, 2001, p. 6). Described as “endemic and pervasive” (Brown, 2001), violence on-the-job is a multi-causal phenomenon that continues to escalate. According to Simonowitz (1997), workers are more at risk [for acts of violence], if they “deal with the public, work alone, work late at night, or provide services to people who may be experiencing frustration” (p. 307). Transit workers are service workers who are at risk for violence in the workplace (LaMar, Gerberich, Lohman & Zaidman, 1998) and according to Olsen (1994), they rank ninth among occupations for greatest risk for violence. Furthermore, jobs that involve working with the public create a potentially unsafe environment, increasing exposure to violence for employees. These job-descriptive tasks include: handling of money and fares, dealing with the public (often who are frustrated), working in a unsheltered environment, creating waiting times (such as passengers having to wait for transportation), enforcing fares, and dealing with complaints about service (Workers’ Health and Safety Centre, 1997, p. 8). Not having an effective mechanism to deal with violence can lead to an organization “becoming a poisonous environment in which to work, bad public relations, escalating medical claims, lengthy and costly investigations and

possibly lawsuits” (Minimizing Harassment and Violence in the Public Sector Workplace, 2003, p. 1). Violence is a growing problem that requires intervention.

Many public transit operators expressed an intuitive awareness that assaults happen in their workplace. A transit operator (and one author of this report) experienced an incident in 1999 which fuelled the desire to explore and document violence as a real issue for the London Transit Commission. Frustration and perceived lack of support from management, in addition to absent written official policy to assist operators who experienced acts of violence, prompted the formation of a cooperative effort between Union and Management. A committee was formed to examine the issue of Violence in the Workplace. Two surveys were the products of input from the Union Membership who presented the findings to management in 1999 and 2003.

Although the incident of violence at OCTranspo (1999) highlighted the potential for harm to employees, including management in a controlled environment, the issue of potential violence for operators in an uncontrolled environment is paramount. It is an issue that demands analysis and the development of strategies to prevent acts of violence in the workplace for transit operators. The Surveys of 1999 and 2003 provide a starting point for continued cooperative effort from Union and Management with the hope that a comprehensive approach may be developed to decrease the incidence of violence on public transit in London Ontario. The purpose of this report is to review the 2003 Operator Survey, make comparisons to the 1999 Operator

Survey, provide interpretation of the results and make recommendations for future collaboration to address the issues of violence in the workplace for London Transit Operators.

BACKGROUND

The London Transit Commission services an urban population of 360,000 with a ridership of 16.5 million per year. There are 320 operators who provide daily service from 05:00 hrs to 01:30 hrs Monday to Saturday and 08:00 hrs to 23:30 hrs on Sundays. Public transit is a venue that involves isolated work areas and various start-and-stop times for operators.

The most recent survey (2003) was conducted during Operations work assignment selection process (See Appendix A). At this time Operators of all seniority groups were present over a three-day period [March 2-4, 2003]. No prior notice was given to minimize bias. Only operators that attended the work assignment selection were allowed to participate.

The survey consisted of seventeen "Yes-No" questions in three distinct categories: 1) Occurrences, time-frames and frequency of filed reports, 2) Incident classification, and 3) Operators' perception of employee-employer relationship in violence-related matters. Space was available for written comments.

The survey took place in the Operators' room of the London Transit Commission.

PURPOSE

The survey fulfilled multiple purposes. These include:

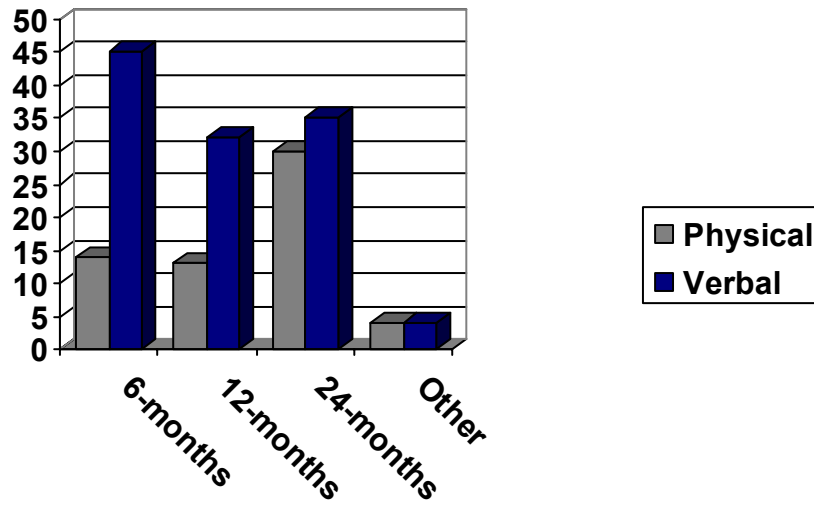
- 1) Supplement to Operator Assault Survey 1999
- 2) Re-establish Level of Violence in the Workplace
- 3) Categorically outline how operators perceive violence in daily work environment
- 4) Create an up-to-date document giving Union and Management a focal point to re-address the issues
- 5) Strengthen lines of communication
- 6) Re-focus resources
- 7) Create awareness of Risks in Occupation based on Operators' perceptions

RESULTS

Of the 320 Operators, 232 completed the survey. A total of 29.7% (69/232) were punched, grabbed, pushed, spit on. Forty-one percent (95/232) of respondents were verbally threatened.

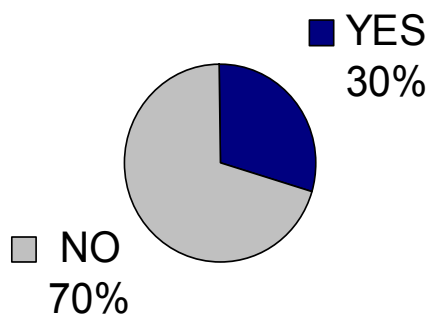
Filed incident reports for physical assaults were 36.2% (25/69), but only 28.9% (20/69) of respondents notified the Union Office. Filed reports for verbal threats totaled 20% (19/95) but again, the number of respondents who notified the Union was less (17.8% or 17/95).

The time frames for occurrences were divided into intervals.

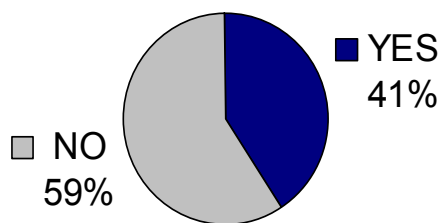
Table 1: Physical and Verbal Incidents over Time

Verbal threats occurred more frequently than physical assaults. The longer the employee worked at London Transit (6 months versus 24 months), the likelihood that he or she would experience physical incidents increased.

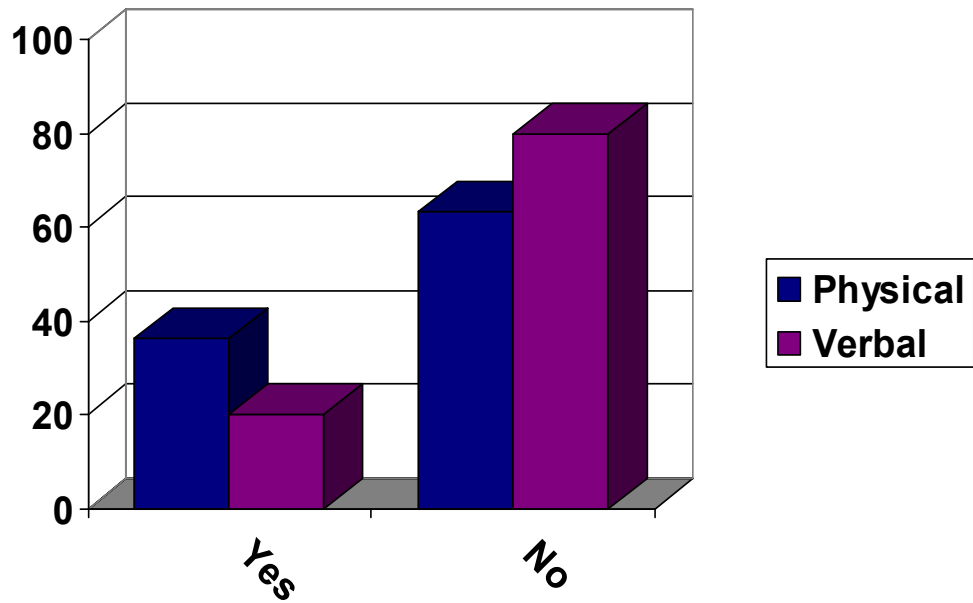
Physical Assaults



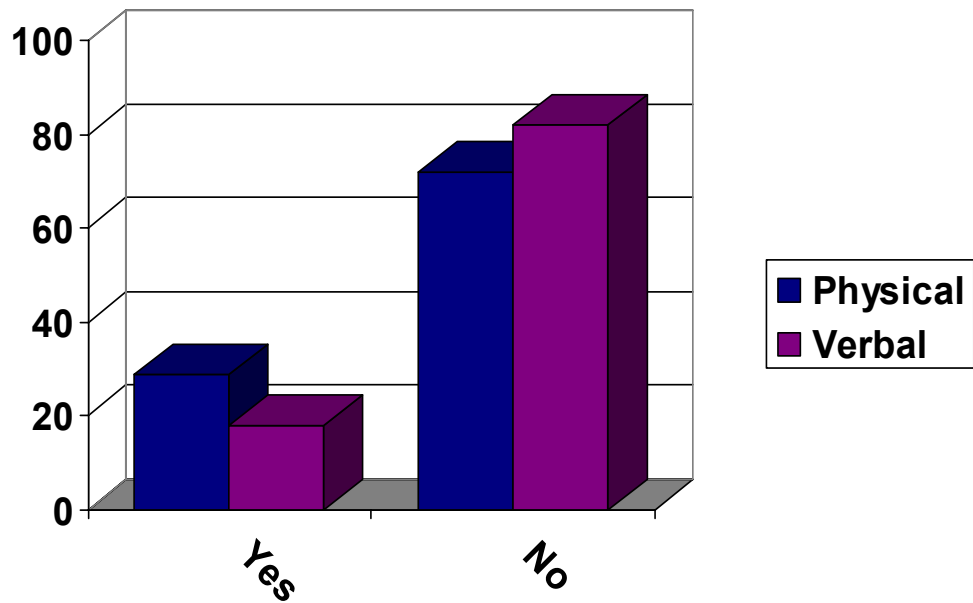
Verbal Assaults



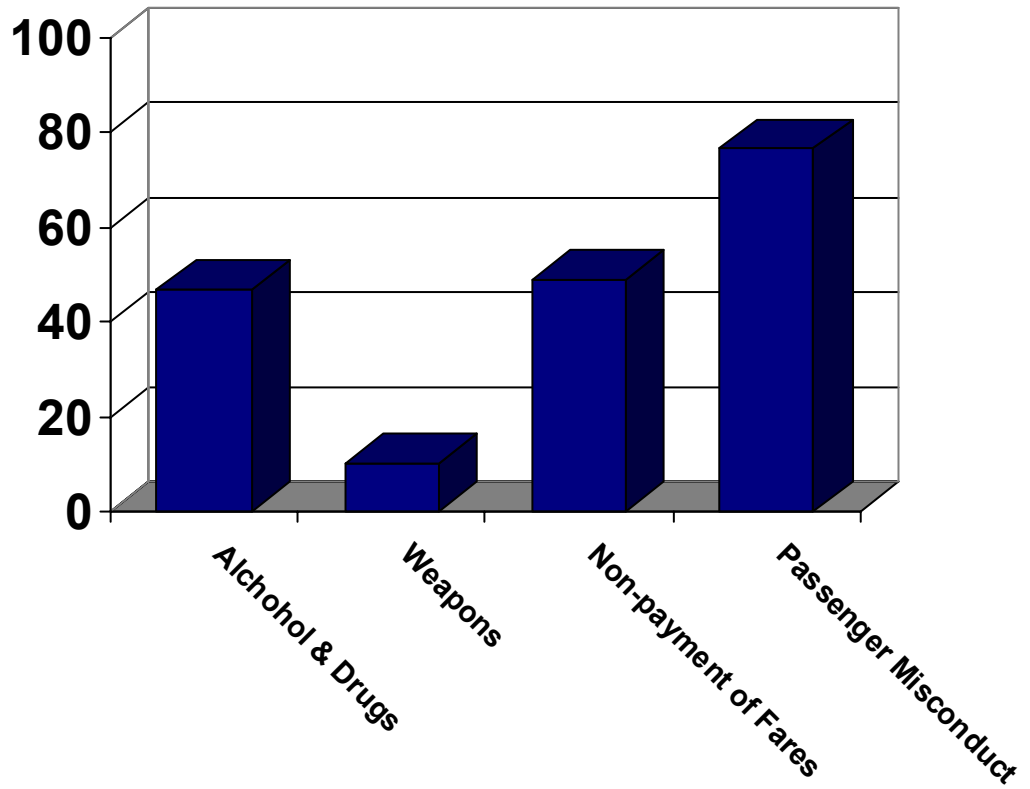
**Table 2: Incident Reports Filed:
Physical and Verbal Assaults (2003)**



**Table 3: Notification of Union Office:
Physical and Verbal Assaults (2003)**



**Table 4: Contributing Factors:
Physical and Verbal Assaults (2003)**



Operator Assault Survey Comparison 1999 to 2003

Operator Assault Survey	2003	1999
Total Surveyed	232	261
Physically	69 (29.7%)	90 (34.4%)
Verbally	95 (40.9%)	135 (43.7%)
Filed Incident Report (Physical)	25 (36.2%)	40 (44.4%)
Notified Union	20 (28.9%)	25 (27.7%)
Did Not File	42 (60.8%)	53 (58.8%)
Did Not Notified Union	49 (71%)	65 (72.2%)
Filed Incident Report (Verbal)	19 (20%)	27 (20%)
Notified Union	17 (17.8%)	15 (11.1%)
Did Not File	83 (87.3%)	106 (78.5%)
Did Not Notify Union	84 (88.4%)	113 (83.7%)

INTEPRETATION

Workplace Violence may be defined as “a threat or act of aggression arising out of or during the course of work resulting in physical or psychological damage, pain or injury to a worker (Report: Health and Safety Training Solutions That Fit, 2001, p. 6). In order to assess the threat of violence for Operators at the London Transit Commission, the survey was conducted with support from the Amalgamated Transit Union 741.

Descriptive words in the survey focused Operators' response to categorically outline their experiences. For example, physical assaults included being “punched, grabbed or spit on” while verbal assaults included any threat to physical harm or commonly, being told to “step off the bus”. Contributory or causative factors for acts of physical and verbal assaults were identified: 1) Alcohol and Drugs, 2) Weapons, 3) Nonpayment of Fares and 4) Passenger Misconduct (See Table 4: Contributing Factors and Appendix A).

The literature supports variables that focus on the individual, environment, and social issues related to violence (Agudelo, 1992, Mullen, 1997, Olson, 1994, Reynolds, 1994). Theories that attempt to explain causes of violence focus on the behaviour of individuals (Bandura as cited in Olson, 1994). Aggressive behaviour is learned through observation of “familial, subcultural and media events that are imitated” (Olson, p. 478). What is considered as an aggressive behaviour will be expressed in situations where positive outcomes are expected. For example, speaking in harsh, loud tones may be acceptable

behaviour in familial situations; however, if one transposes that same tone to public interaction, then the behaviour may be considered to be aggressive.

Violence is not only a learned behaviour or uni-dimensional. Mullen (1997) examines violence as “medicalised” and states that violence may be seen as a product of disease or biological inferiority. For example, aggression (as a prelude to violence) may be a factor of substance abuse. Substance abuse, as a medical diagnosis, explains one factor influencing violence. Mullen argues that the danger of this view is that “the decontextualization of workplace violence leaves it meaningless outside the characteristics of the individual” (p. 22). The individual is deviant with no relationship to environmental influences such as exposure to violent events or desensitization to what is considered violent. Reynolds (1994) concurs with Mullen to say that workplace violence is stripped of potential for raising critical questions about society. Early detection of troublemakers and identification of potential offenders leaves little room to focus on societal influences such as socioeconomics, culture, social status and self-worth.

How one views violence, and its causative or contributory factors influences policy development on violence in the workplace. While it is prudent to focus on contributory factors such as alcohol and drugs, weapons, passenger misconduct or nonpayment of fares, it is imperative to implement policy that targets behavioural, environmental and social factors in a combined, comprehensive manner. Policy development has been identified as an area of concern by London Transit employees.

In addition to the terms that described violent acts, the effect of “violent acts can be felt physically and emotionally in many ways over short and long periods of time” (Critical Incident Systems Management Handout, May 1999, p. 1). The figures attached to Physical Harm (8.9%) and Emotional Harm (29.6%) illustrate that some Operators were willing to declare physical and emotional harm in conjunction with identification of physical and verbal assaults.

In reviewing this data, one must consider the environment and its effect on Operator response. The closeness of other employees in the sign-up room, the nature of transit operators to down play or shrug off an incident raises concern that these results are low.

This fatalistic approach is evident in multiple comments from Operators who felt that “the company does not back LTC employees” (Survey, 2003). This is also reflected in the quantitative data that sixty-one percent (60.8 %) of potential respondents did not file reports. Underreporting may reflect “a lack of institutional reporting policies, employee beliefs that reporting will not benefit them, or employee fears that employers may deem assaults the result of employee negligence or poor job performance” (Lanza, 1991 as cited in Simonowitz, 1997, p. 307). Underreporting is an issue that must be addressed.

There is potential for an escalation of violence. In the literature presented by Mattman (Workplace Violence Research Institute, 2000, p. 5), verbal threats often precede acts of physical violence. In the 2003 survey, forty-one percent (40.9%) of operators reported incidents of verbal threats. If the literature reflects reality, then there is great potential for physical assaults when verbal threats

occur. This theory may be examined in future studies, but the surveys in 1999 and 2003 do not directly provide concrete evidence of this relationship.

Written Comments were summarized according to five themes (See Appendix B): 1) Training or Education, 2) Public Communication, 3) Support from LTC Management, 4) Operations and 5) Environmental concerns. Overall, there was an overwhelming desire to have educational training that address Operator actions and response, public awareness and support systems available at London Transit.

Safety for Operators in uncontrolled environments was an underlying theme not only in the written comments, but also was supported by data collected. Ninety-four percent of operators, who reported physical or verbal incidents, felt that they were inadequately trained to cope with incidents that included violence. More importantly, 85 percent of Operators that reported “no problems,” also recognized a need for better training.

This raises the educational issue of Critical Incident debriefing. Critical incidents are “not necessarily major disasters but events that generate powerful emotions and potentially virulent stress reactions” (Clark & Friedman as cited in Ragaisis, 1994, p. 38). For example, a critical incident may be a conflict between passenger and Operator that results in verbal assault or physical assault. The stressor is created and the effect may manifest itself differently from individual to individual. Crisis intervention is a form of brief treatment that assists people “to clarify the presenting problem, verbalize feelings, identify goals, options for reaching goals, and selection of a plan (Ragaisis, 1994, p. 39).

At London Transit, the Critical incident team exists for support of employees who experience acts of violence. However, as the responses indicate, many Operators do not feel supported. Furthermore, most Operators are not even aware that this program exists. According to Critical Incident Stress Management (1999) employees may experience acute or delayed reactions that impair judgment to recognize need for help. The mechanism of delivery needs to be examined so that Operators who experience acts of violence find support.

There are recognized limitations to this survey. Percentages, for example, are skewed by multiple occurrences, incomplete or spoiled questionnaires. Although this reflects numbers less than those reported in the 1999 Survey, the incidents do not account for the new Employee: Exposure ratio that may lower percentages.

Questions were written to accommodate quick response and so may not be indicative of true perceptions. The occurrence and/or frequency of an incident may be influenced by: 1) the expressed need for a person to be counted, 2) the fact that the survey was conducted without notice and 3) the hectic environment.

Interestingly though, it is uncanny to note that incidents were consistently reported in the 1999 and 2003 surveys.

CONCLUSION

The Surveys of 1999 and 2003 provide a focal point for continued cooperative effort from Union and Management with the hope that a comprehensive approach may be developed to decrease the incidence of violence on public transit in London Ontario. The findings validated the hypothesis of many public transit operators that assaults happen in their workplace. Furthermore, physical and verbal assaults continue to reflect violence as an issue that has been consistently reported. Violence is “a complex but analyzable process, the understanding of which calls for an approach that is rational, systematic, structured according to phases, typological, research-based and inter-disciplinary” (Agudelo, 1992, p. 368).

SUGGESTED ACTIONS

- 1) Maximize educational component to create awareness of violence in workplace. Use formal and informal means of communication to get message out that acts of violence exists for London Transit employees; underlining that violence is not acceptable.
- 2) Develop policies that clearly target Operators’ options when acts of physical or verbal assault occur. Produce a step-by-step plan for Roles (Operator, Dispatcher, Management and Union) to protect workers and management from legal and costly ramifications.

- 3) Develop policies that target public and employee codes of conduct. Implement actions that support zero tolerance.
- 4) Continue Critical incident process as part of response to incidents of violence.
- 5) Develop Violence Program to include confidential reporting and interventions taken for effectiveness on Operator safety and well-being. This documentation will support future program development and provide an evaluative process for improvement.
- 6) Develop data-base for documentation of incidents over time. This information may be utilized at the local, provincial and national level for inclusion of proposals that target financial support for the development of programs and the initiation of public awareness campaigns.
- 7) Write proposals for funding from private and public industry for municipal and national funding initiatives that increase the feeling of safety for employees and project the London Transit Commission as a safe working environment.
- 8) Utilize available information from other transit commissions, other service industries, national organizations committed to Workers Safety in order to progress with policy development and program implementation.
- 9) Lobby municipal and provincial governments for violence prevention regulation.

- 10) Evaluate progress using time-lines and milestones for the creation of policies, for the development of awareness campaigns internally and externally, for the effectiveness of current and future strategies.
- 11) Harness the energy of employees, academic colleagues and professionals from other organizations to move forward.

APPENDIX A: SURVEY 2003 SUMMARY AND RESULTS

March 3, 2003

Important Operator Assault Survey

The last Operator assault survey was conducted in 1999 and in order to keep the information current and to track assaults since that date we are asking that you as operators take the time to complete the following survey.

Again it is very important for each Member to fill out this questionnaire. For only than can we get an accurate reading on the number of occurrences. Please complete the form and return it to John Gillet during sign-up or he Union Office. For additional information on assaults please read the March Omnibus.

Seniority # _____

1.	Have you been physically assaulted? (Punched, grabbed, pushed or spit on)	Yes 69	No 163
	1a. If yes, in the last 6 months	Yes 14	
	1b. If yes, in the last year	Yes 13	
	1c. If yes, in the last 2 years	Yes 30	
2.	Did you file an accident/incident report form?	Yes 25	No 42
3.	Did you notify the Union Office?	Yes 20	No 49
4.	Have you been verbally threatened? (Told to step off the bus, verbally threatened with physically harm)	Yes 95	No 137
	4a. If yes, in the last 6 months	Yes 45	
	4b. If yes, in the last year	Yes 32	

- 4c. If yes, in the last 2 years Yes **35**
5. Did you file an accident/incident report form? Yes **19** No **83**
6. Did you notify the Union Office? Yes **17** No **84**
7. Was the person under the influence of alcohol or drugs? Yes **61** No **69**
8. Did the incident involve a weapon? Yes **12** No **104**
9. Did the incident involve the non-payment of a fare or transfer?
Yes **59** No **61**
10. Did the incident involve passenger conduct?
(Swearing, vandalism, etc.) Yes **88** No **27**
11. Were you physically injured in any way? Yes **10** No **107**
Describe: _____

12. Were you frighten or harmed in some way other than physical? Yes **37** No **88**
Describe: _____

APPENDIX B: SUMMARY OF QUALITATIVE DATA USING THEMES AND GENERAL COMMENTS

Comments were written and collected then summarized according the five themes:

1. Training or Education
2. Public Communication
3. Support from LTC Management
4. Operations
5. Environmental concerns

Training or Education

Training courses on dealing with people

Scenario training

Is there training available to handle verbal threats?

Better self-defense training

Company needs to inform use of what their doing for us and what to do in assault situations

I have not been assaulted so I do not know what the company does enough of

Public Education

The Public is not informed how to use the system

Is the public told that we are not be verbally abused?

Support from LTC Management

Operator should not have to be proven innocent in cases of threat and violence

Violence should be considered serious crime against operators

Company will not back you concerning incidents involving non-payment and transfers

We should check fares but I do not because the company will not back you

Management does not want you to confront passengers on fares

LTC does not back employees

Yes to operators responsible for fares as long as management supports them

Management should always back the employee regardless

I will not deal with cheating passengers because the company will not back me up

Operator Role

Operators should collect fares but not to enforce them

Not worth the problems of possible assaults

Everyday is a challenge.....depending on your attitude reflects how you handle problems

Get rid of transfers

Nothing going to be done about it i.e. ***** the Biter

Too many inconsistent rules i.e. ***** the Biter, i.e. confiscating fraudulent passes which starts confrontation which the company does not want

Company policies could be re-worked

If I wanted to argue with people, I would get married

Confiscate fraudulent pass: placed in top left pocket and he tried to remove it (female operator)

Confiscated 50 passes since September 2002 and I have had no acknowledgment

Environmental Concerns

Physical Environment

Impossible to see passes at night

Do not make the number on the passes big enough to see

Driver area closed off; enclose the driver

No first-aid box or training

Notices stating that any assault on an employee will be charged with the full force of the law

Social Environment

No respect for Operators

Feeling towards LTC vented towards Operators

Customer is not always right

Inspectors should check for passes

Transit police would help

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