

Preventing Crime and Disorder at the Port Authority Bus Terminal, New York

Program Summary

Aim: To reduce the unacceptable levels of crime and disorder at the Port Authority Bus Terminal, as well as the number of transient people located at the station.

Problem: The Port Authority Bus Terminal was characterised by high rates of criminal activity and anti-social behaviour including theft, drug and alcohol-related crime, prostitution, and telephone scams. It was also home to several hundred transient people living in or frequenting the terminal each day. This situation was proving embarrassing for the Port Authority, and was contributing to fear and disgust among commuters, as well as discontent among commercial tenants.

Strategy/Intervention: Seventy-six intervention strategies based on situational crime prevention and crime prevention through environmental design (CPTED) were implemented to reduce crime and the numbers of transient people at the station.

Location: New York, United States.

Administering Institutions: Port Authority Bus Terminal, New York Police Department and external social service consultants.

Key Stakeholders: Port Authority Bus Terminal, commuters.

Program Overview

Background: The Port Authority bus station is the largest and busiest bus station in the world. Located in the heart of midtown Manhattan, it serviced almost 56 million passenger trips in 1998 and on a typical weekday transported 187,000 people on 7,200 buses. The terminal has nine different levels and 220 bus gates.

Crime at the Port Authority bus terminal was rampant, with hundreds of transient people loitering and sleeping in the station. It was not uncommon for these people to also set up “house” in the terminal. Phone hustlers monopolised public phones to sell international calls, often driving legitimate users away. Other problems included people soliciting sex, selling and using drugs, taking over restrooms, and using parts of the station as public toilets.

Among the seventy-six measures developed and introduced to reduce crime and anti-social behaviour at the bus terminal were:

- **discouraging loitering and hustling:** modifying window ledges; removing benches and installing single flip seats; and using technology to block access to international telephone calls;
- **increasing visibility: installing new lighting:** using glass walls, light coloured paint and tiles; and removing obstructing walls and fixtures;
- **improving natural surveillance:** closing off nooks, stairwells, and areas between walls; improving entrances to buildings; and introducing centralised ticketing;
- **improving restrooms:** modifying stall doors; improving ventilation; installing corner mirrors; modifying sink sizes; enhancing lighting, stall walls and tiles; and introducing attendants;
- **improving commuter flow:** improving stairway and escalator flow; and improving commuter assistance and communication; and
- **improving retail ambience:** introducing chain retailers and improved management; redesigning space; and removing betting facilities and violent video games.

These measures were primarily introduced to “design out crime” and make it more uncomfortable for transient people to live in the station. Another key initiative was the development of a coordination service (Operation Alternative) for the homeless. This program assisted transient people to access a range of support and crisis services.

Method: Annual Port Authority customer surveys and police data were used to test the effectiveness of the prevention measures. Assessment referral data, daily counts of the homeless and customer complaints were all used to measure the effectiveness of prevention strategies on transient populations. Observations by Port Authority staff and police were also included as qualitative measures.

(Scientific methods rigour: 2)

Results: *Transient Population:* Between 1991–94, Operation Alternative made 33,000 client referrals on behalf of homeless people. Surveys show a decline in the number of people who were “often” bothered by homeless people: from 51 per cent in 1991 to 19 per cent in 1994.

Telephone fraud: After the introduction of technology that restricted telephone access to local calls only, no more international calls were made on these phones. Port Authority staff and local police observed that offenders had abandoned these areas and there were fewer customer complaints.

Retail trade: Retail trade data showed that sales in the Port Authority bus terminal increased 70 per cent in four years: from \$US388 per square foot in 1990 to \$US659 in 1994. Store revenue also increased by 34 per cent over the same period.

Police Complaints (made by commuters and police): Complaints to police decreased from 5,650 complaints in 1988 to 2,888 complaints in 1994. Complaints made to police regarding predatory crime including larceny, robbery, pickpocketing, assault, burglary and rape decreased from 3,053 in 1988 to 1,358 in 1994. Most notable were the declines in larceny, robbery and vehicle related crime.

Commuter Surveys: Commuter surveys revealed enhanced cleanliness, safety, and security at the station. Improvements in police “effectiveness” and “visibility” were also observed.

Further reading

Felson, M., Belanger, M.E., Bichler, C.D., Bruzinski, C.D., Campbell, G.S., Friecol, C.L., Grofik, K.C., Mazur, I.S., Regan, A.B., Sweeney, P.J., Ullman, A.L. and Williams, L.Q. 1996, “Redesigning Hell: Preventing Crime and Disorder at the Port Authority Bus Terminal”, in R.V. Clarke (ed.), *Preventing Mass Transit Crime*, in *Crime Prevention Studies*, vol. VI, Criminal Justice Press, New York.

Policy Issues

Sensible prevention strategies contributed to the Port Authority’s success in reducing crime at the bus terminal. Removing many of the station’s nooks and crannies, redesigning restrooms, introducing cleaner and brighter space, and improving policing have all led to significant improvements throughout the station. From a situational crime prevention perspective these strategies predominantly focused on deflecting offenders, removing targets and improving natural surveillance. Policy makers should consider the value of incremental change. Although each modification introduced by the Port Authority was small, collectively they worked to reduce offensive and undesirable behaviour.