

Statement of
Michael Taborn, Chief of Police
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Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority
Before the Council of the District of Columbia
Special Committee on School Safety and Truancy
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9:30 AM

Good morning, Chairman Biddle other members of the Special Committee on School Safety and Truancy and staff, my name is Michael Taborn, Chief of Police , Metro Transit Police Department. It is a pleasure for me to appear before the committee this morning to offer testimony on problems with truancy and youth behavior on Metrorail and Metrobus. With me today is Deputy Chief Tracie Simmons who is in charge of the MTPD Patrol Operations Bureau. Deputy Chief Simmons will assist me in responding to the committee's questions.

Over the last several years, Metro has had a significant problem with youth misbehavior on Metrobus and at Metrobus stops, on Metrorail trains and at Metrorail stations over the last several years. In 2010, WMATA Transit Police made a total of 2,012 arrest, of that number, 507 were youths. Transit police also issued 6,615 citations for fare evasion and public conduct violations. In 2010, there were 136 aggravated assaults and of this number 32% or 90 assaults were on bus operators. Many of the bus operator assaults were carried out by youth or young adults. Bus operator assaults range from operators being punched, hit by a thrown object, spat upon and in some cases having urine thrown on them. In addition to the 136 aggravated assaults, there were also 615 simple assaults of individuals in the rail system or on buses.

Two other crime categories that are largely impacted by youth are larceny and robberies of electronic devices. Larceny is a large crime category at Metro. There were 930 reported incidents in 2010. Of that total, 55% involved property stolen from motor vehicles parked on our lots and 30% of these crimes involved the theft of bicycles from our station areas. There were 1,007 reported robberies in 2010 that involved the snatch and run of passenger electronic devices i.e., I Pods, I phones and other devices.

THE PROBLEM

Young people have always been more boisterous when they are with their friends traveling back and forth to school. Recent trends have shown that some of them have become more aggressive and violent while utilizing the transit system. I want to add here that I am not saying that all of our young people have become more aggressive and violent. Some 20,000 students in the District of Columbia use transit daily to go to school and I believe that most of these young people are great transit patrons. As is always the case when one examines only a very small subset of the total number are the real trouble makers.

Over the last 5 years as a result of a decreasing enrollment, the District started closing some of its public schools requiring more students to travel outside of their neighborhoods to junior and senior high schools. Other students attend specialty schools that have sprung up across the city requiring their travel. Add to this mix the charter schools that have also been created, many in non-traditional school buildings in close proximity to other schools. Reconfiguration of the school system both public and private has led to students criss-crossing transit lines while traveling to school – often increasing opportunities for rival schools and neighborhood crews to mix.

These kinds of disturbances have occurred across the District of Columbia. I will not name schools in my testimony but these disturbances have involved mostly junior and senior high school age children at bus stops and on buses traveling along Georgia Avenue/ 7th Street, Benning Road, Nannie Helen Burroughs Ave., Martin Luther King, Jr. Avenue, Stanton Road, Pomeroy Road, Michigan Avenue, 12 Street, NE, Military Road, 14th Street, NW, North Capital Street, H Street, Monroe Street and Florida Avenue.

In the Metrorail system the problem stations have been Brookland/CUA, Fort Totten, Takoma, Gallery Place- Chinatown, Metro Center, Van Ness, L'Enfant Plaza, Minnesota Avenue, Deanwood, Anacostia and Stadium-Armory. These rail stations like the bus routes mentioned before tend to serve students from multiple schools and their coming together at the stations and on the trains have been problematic.

METRO'S RESPONSE

The Metro Transit Police and various offices within the Transit Authority have been working with the Metropolitan Police Department, and the District's Public Schools, Charter Schools, Department of Transportation and parent groups over the last several years to address this problem. Every day at 1:00 pm., the Metro Transit Police participates on the Metropolitan Police Departments School Safety Division conference call, with the agencies mentioned above, to discuss intelligence gathered concerning disputes or issues between local neighborhood groups or crews. We discuss the morning school travel and whether anything happened that might trigger retaliation by someone or some group in the afternoon. We also discussed any planned after schools events, i.e. games or concerts. At the end of the call, a decision is made on whether special attention should be paid to a certain school, certain area or transit facility.

The Metro Transit Police Department also worked with several agencies, schools and student groups across the District of Columbia to implement "Project Respect." This project works with student leaders and school administrators and places emphasis on students respecting themselves and others while using transit. The program sought to discourage students from being loud, boisterous and using profanity laced language on the trains and buses. Metro Transit Police attend school assemblies and speak about the need and benefits of being a good neighbor and transit user.

The Metro Transit Police Department has redeployed officers from other assignments to cover certain rail stations and rail lines during the school release hours to minimize the likelihood of fights and other disturbances. WMATA has increased the number of undercover officers that ride Metrobus during the school release hours to reduce the number of incidents that occur on our buses.

The Metro Transit Police Department has worked with the School administrators and principals, parent groups and other city agencies to encourage and suggest staggered release or school departure times in an effort to reduce the number of children from different schools, who would arrive at a transit facility in the same time frame. We have negotiated 15 minute to ½ hour differences in the dismissal times. This has contributed greatly to reducing the number of incidents.

The Metro Transit Police Department has participated in the Metropolitan Police Department's and city government program to provide "Safe Passages" to schools. Metro Transit Police officers patrol the route between our transit facility and certain neighborhood schools to ensure the student who walk along these routes can do so safely.

In July of 2010 the Metro Transit Police Department implemented METROSTAT. METROSTAT is a new initiative to combat criminal activity within the Metro system. Metrostat is based on the COMSTAT model, which is being used across the United States by law enforcement agencies. The process involves identifying hot spots, crime trends, crime frequency, crime types and the deployment of resources. After this identification and evaluation process we develop new strategies to address the identified criminal activity.

We have also dedicated a new Auto-theft Unit to address the increases in auto-thefts from our properties and a new Robbery Suppression Unit to address the increasing number of robberies involving electronic devices. These units are plain clothes and working at the high incident stations.

The Metro Transit Police Department has an outstanding working relationship with the Metropolitan Police Department and all of the other police agencies within the National Capital Region to assist us in combating criminal activity in and around Metro Stations.

Finally, we have launched several activities to help protect riders and combat the increases in crime. In addition to working with the schools, we have increased our public outreach to riders in an effort to educate them on the protection of valuables. We have issued safety travel guides and literature. We have increased public announcements encouraging our riders to be aware of their surroundings.

The issue of truancy is a hard issue for our officers because there are so many young people folks who have dropped out of school who tend to congregate at certain locations for long periods of time. Many hang outs are in close proximity to schools or transit facilities. Because the District of Columbia does not have an anti-loitering law, the only legal measure available to officers is when it appears

that their hanging around impedes the progress/ability of others to use the sidewalks.

When we do encounter youth who we believe are truant we call the Metropolitan Police Department's Truancy Unit and turn the youth over to them.

Several weeks ago I and other WMATA staff met with Deputy Mayor for Public Safety and Justice Paul Quander, who invited our participation on a truancy committee to addressing this problem. Metro Transit Deputy Chief Jeffery Delinski will represent Metro on this committee.

Now Mr. Chairman let me stop here and answer any questions that you and the committee may have.