




Preventing Assaults on Transit Workers and Riders

Every year, thousands of American transit workers are attacked while on the job. Bus operators are regularly slapped, punched, stabbed, spit on, and sexually assaulted. Disputes leading to these assaults often occur when transit vehicle operators request payment of fares or simply enforce transit agency safety policies. In both 2024 and 2025, ATU members were senselessly murdered over less than \$3.00 in fares.¹ Because transit systems are rare examples of truly public spaces, public transit workers engage with all segments of the population, including those facing homelessness and mental illness. State legislators have an important role to play in ending this crisis and making public transit safe for both workers and riders.

worker assault were reported in 2023 alone.³ According to data from the National Transit Database, there are an average of 42 assaults on transit workers every day nationwide.⁴



ATU members attend vigil to honor Shawn Yim, a Local 587 member who was murdered by a passenger.


“MARTA bus driver shot to the death over \$2.50 fare dispute”
— January 3, 2025

Assaults on public transit have been on the rise for more than a decade. Federal Transit Administration (FTA) data indicates that the rate of assaults on public transit operators nearly tripled from 2008 to 2022.² More than 11,000 incidents of transit

These statistics vastly understate the crisis that ATU members face, as transit workers frequently avoid reporting assaults due to burdensome reporting processes, fear of retaliation from management, and the belief that reporting assaults won't make transit workers or passengers safer.⁵ Many assaults occur on moving vehicles, compromising the safety of bus operators, their passengers, pedestrians, and others on the roadway.

1 Scott Flynn, “MARTA bus driver shot to the death over \$2.50 fare dispute, gunman on the run,” *WSB-TV Atlanta*, Jan 3, 2025, <https://www.wsbtv.com/news/local/dekalb-county/marta-bus-driver-decatur-shot-death-over-fare-dispute-1-3-suspects-run/6WT2MU5NEFGQDKZQVIWGTNYLGE/>; Samantha Lomibao, “We lost a brother,” Transit community honors Metro bus driver killed on duty,” *KIRO 7 News*, Dec. 22, 2024, <https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/we-lost-brother-transit-community-honors-metro-bus-driver-killed-duty/4HHDTFL13FFPZB47X6DGFSGEYA/>.

2 Lindiwe Rennert, “Assaults on Transit Workers Have Tripled in the Past 15 Years. Income Inequality and Societal Tensions Have Contributed,” *Urban Wire*, Urban Institute, Nov. 28, 2023, <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/assaults-transit-workers-have-tripled-past-15-years-income-inequality-and-societal>.

3 U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Transit Administration, *Monthly Model Time Series* (Updated Dec 2025), https://data.transportation.gov/Public-Transit/Monthly-Modal-Time-Series/5ti2-5uiv/about_data.

4 U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Transit Administration, *Monthly Model Time Series* (Updated Dec 2025), https://data.transportation.gov/Public-Transit/Monthly-Modal-Time-Series/5ti2-5uiv/about_data. Average daily assaults on transit workers calculated using data from Jan-May 2025.

5 Hunter Akridge, Sarah Fox, Alice Tang, and Nikolas Martelaro, *Health & Safety Sideline* (Carnegie Mellon University, 2024), <https://safety21.cmu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Transit-Policy-Brief.pdf>.

The epidemic of transit worker and passenger assaults has lasting effects on transit workers, systems, and passengers. Fear of assault affects the mental health of transit workers and exacerbates already significant staffing shortages. Every additional assault, whether it be verbal or physical, contributes to an unsafe work environment for transit employees. Left unaddressed, this crisis undermines the confidence of riders and drives them away from transit systems.

ATU supports installing safety barriers on buses to protect operators from assault, the creation of transit ambassador positions to secure transit vehicles and facilities, and the upgrading of criminal penalties for assaulting transit workers.



Currently, most bus operators are left unprotected in the driver's seat or are forced to work with only a flimsy plexiglass "spit shield" installed during the COVID-19 pandemic. These shields are easily pushed aside and are made from inferior materials that are prone to scratching and glare, reducing an operator's visibility. Safety barrier technology has rapidly developed in recent years, and ATU has worked through labor-management partnerships to test and implement modern barrier designs that protect bus operators from assault without impeding visibility.

Rather than waiting for more assaults to occur, several transit agencies have taken proactive action and installed modern fully-enclosed barriers in their vehicles. Los Angeles (LA) Metro, for example, installed floor-to-ceiling barriers in every one of the over 2,000 buses in its fleet. Operator assaults radically decreased.⁶ State legislators have already

taken action on this issue—Nevada and Illinois both passed bills requiring barriers in public transit buses.

ATU also supports the creation of new transit ambassador positions at agencies across the country to provide enhanced support for both transit workers and the people who rely on transit every day. Transit ambassadors help riders navigate systems, connect riders to social services, and serve as the eyes and ears on the ground to call for help when safety concerns arise. After LA Metro created a transit ambassador program, 63% of riders reported that seeing ambassadors on the system made them feel safer.⁷ Transit ambassadors also allow transit vehicle operators to focus on the road or rail ahead and maintain control of the vehicle when incidents occur.

Until all transit operators are working in vehicles equipped with barriers, assault-detering policies are also necessary to protect transit workers. Assaultants should be properly charged and prosecuted for their offenses. More than 30 states recognize that enhanced penalties are crucial to preventing attacks on transit workers. Other states should follow suit and should notify passengers of these penalties to maximize their deterrent effect.⁸ When a person assaults transit workers or riders, transit systems also need the power to keep them off trains and buses.

ATU SUPPORTS:

1. Requiring all fixed-route public transit buses to be fitted with security barriers that reach from floor to ceiling, fully enclosing the bus operator's workstation, and preventing the unwanted entry of people, fluids, and objects;
2. Upgrading penalties for assaulting transit workers, and the expansion of current anti-assault statutes to cover all transit workers including bus and rail operators, mechanics, station agents, and other transit personnel;
3. Requiring transit systems to post notices on vehicles and at transit stations of the penalties for crimes against transit workers;
4. Investing in transit ambassador programs to provide safety support for passengers and transit workers; and
5. Authorizing transit agencies to ban passengers who assault transit workers and riders.

⁶ "LA Metro Equips Entire Bus Fleet with Protective Barriers," *METRO*, Jan. 2, 2025, <https://www.metro-magazine.com/10233735/la-metro-first-u-s-transit-agency-to-equip-entire-fleet-with-protective-barriers>.

⁷ Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority, *METRO Transit Ambassador Pilot Program Evaluation*, Board Report No. 2023-0433 (Oct. 19, 2023), 5, <https://datamade-metro-pdf-merger.s3.amazonaws.com/2023-0433.pdf>.

⁸ Jared Brey, "Rise in Bus Driver Assaults Triggers New Protection Laws," *Governing*, March 6, 2023, <https://www.governing.com/work/rise-in-bus-driver-assaults-triggers-new-protection-laws>.