



Light Rail Fail

Federal data shows Twin Cities light rail is the most dangerous in America.

People who decide to step on light rail in the Twin Cities are at greater risk of being injured by an assailant than any other light rail system in America. Data from the Federal Transit Association (FTA) shows serious crime on Twin Cities light rail has been consistently higher than the U.S. average in recent years. However, the Twin Cities light rail crime rate surged in 2019, grew even worse in 2020, and remains persistently high today.

This dramatically higher rate of crime and injury on Metro Transit light rail reveals years of mismanagement. This mismanagement only adds to Metro Transit's embarrassing delays and cost overruns with the Southwest Light Rail Transit project. With this record of failure, Minnesota lawmakers need to seriously reexamine the future of the Met Council that runs Metro Transit and the ongoing expansion of light rail.

Background

Federal law requires the FTA to maintain a National Transit Database to sup-

port planning efforts, make multi-year comparisons and perform trend analyses. Part of this data collection tracks personal security events, which includes assault, homicide, robbery, larceny/theft, motor

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vehicle theft, rape, and suicide. Because the FTA maintains a uniform method of collecting and reviewing the data, it represents the best source for comparing light rail systems.

Personal security events must meet a certain reporting threshold of injury to be counted. This includes a fatal-

ity, a serious injury such as a fracture or severe hemorrhage, or any injury requiring transport from the scene for medical attention. These thresholds effectively limit the data to only major events where victims were injured during a crime. Thus, the number is much smaller than the total amount of crime reported by law enforcement agencies.

Importantly, this focus creates a more apples to apples comparison to determine where crime leads to the most severe injuries — the sort of crime people fear most. The data presented here excludes suicides to further narrow the focus on injuries people suffer when they are victimized by another person committing a crime.

The data

Overall, this data shows Metro Transit has consistently operated one of the most dangerous light rail systems in the country since 2014. The following figure shows the rate of people injured by an assailant on Metro Transit light rail was substantially higher than the national

average from 2014 to 2018. However, this rate soared dramatically higher than any other light rail system in the country in 2019. That year, the rate of people injured per billion passenger miles leapt to 1,164. That represents a 254 percent increase from the previous year. This rocketed the rate to 6.7 times higher than the national average, making crime on Twin Cities light rail an extreme outlier in the country.

Looking at the number and proportion of personal security events occurring on Metro Transit light rail is maybe more shocking. The number of personal security events jumped from 33 in 2018 to 117 in 2019. That's twice as many as the next closest light rail system. That's also 40 percent of all personal security events that occurred across America's 22 light rail systems. Putting that in context, Metro Transit accounted for 40 percent of personal security events on light rail while carrying only four percent of passenger miles.

If all the personal security events from 2014 to 2021 were aggregated, and then compared the Twin Cities rate of personal security events to every other light rail system over this time period, we find the Twin Cities is by far the highest — nearly twice the rate of Houston, the next closest city.

Comparing both the number and rate of personal security events between light rail and bus transit in the Twin Cities, in each year, both the number and rate of personal security events on light rail exceeds buses. However, light rail experiences a much steeper increase in the number and rate in 2019.

The analysis here reflects crime on light rail systems in America, and therefore excludes crime on heavy rail transit like New York subways. Metro Transit should strive to meet the standards of light rail systems, which are more similarly situated. That said, the results would be no different if heavy rail were added. When accounting for the much larger number of riders who use heavy rail, the rate of personal security events on Metro Transit light rail far exceeds any heavy rail system. In 2019, only New York City Transit (453) and the Chicago Transit Authority (135) reported a higher number of personal security events on rail compared to Metro Transit (117).

Management failure

The dangerous conditions that Metro Transit allows to fester in their light rail system has certainly not gone unnoticed. Several news reports account for not just the increase in crime, but the increase in nuisance behavior that makes

the current light rail network uncomfortable to ride, to say the least. An October 2022 article by Janet Moore in the *Star Tribune* documents the experiences of riders who witness drug use, smoking, partying, mental illness, homelessness, vandalism, and even sex.

The news story framed this as a problem of “perception” which creates a “narrative” that “works against Metro Transit’s efforts to bring back passengers lost during the COVID-19 pandemic.”

However, the federal data shows this is a problem with reality, not perception. It shows the reality light rail riders face in the Twin Cities is far different and far more dangerous than other cities. This is not a marketing problem. This is a management problem.

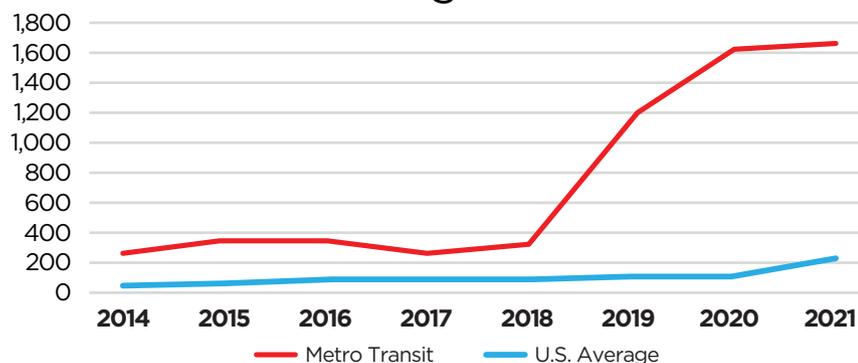
The *Star Tribune* story admits the current perceptions of light rail raises questions about whether transit is being effectively managed. If there were still a question, then the data presented here provides a clear answer: the Met Council has failed to provide a safe and comfortable experience for light rail riders.

Though the data shows a dramatic spike in personal security events on Metro Transit light rail in 2019, this was not when the problem started. Beginning in 2014, the data shows that Metro Transit light rail experienced the highest rate of personal security events in every year except 2016 and 2017. This shows the failure started under the leadership of Gov. Dayton and only grew worse when Gov. Walz took over.

The reality of failed management and severe safety issues raises some obvious questions. Should we continue expanding the region’s light rail network? Will enough riders use the delayed and over budget Southwest Light Rail Transit line to justify finishing the project? Should the Met Council continue to govern in its current form? These are important questions for the legislature and governor to answer. ★

—Peter Nelson

Light Rail Personal Security Events per Billion Passenger Miles



Source: Federal Transit Administration, National Transit Database, Safety & Security Major Event Time Series Data. Passenger-mile data are not yet available for 2021, so they were estimated by multiplying the average passenger-miles per trip in 2020 (broken down by mode and agency) by the number of trips carried in 2021 from the NTB Monthly Module Adjusted Data for July 2022.