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Theoretical Perspectives of Safety and Security in Transit Environments

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Introduction

This chapter discusses the extant theories used to explain safety and security in transit environments, which are set out within the conceptual framework identified in the previous chapter. A number of theoretical perspectives have been developed to explain the prevalence of crime, disorder and associated fear in society. None of these are without criticism, and none have been developed explicitly for the purpose of explaining safety and security on public transport systems. This section examines current security and criminological theories, and ideas and perspectives from other fields and disciplines, to ascertain their utility for explaining safety and security specifically in the context of public transportation. The aim is to translate these theories into an integrated and theory-led conceptual framework within which safety and security on public transport systems can readily be examined.

Due to the range of theoretical perspectives evident in the research literature, this text concentrates on those considered most salient to the major components of the public transport system, namely, transport nodes and the micro environment, the stations and stops and their immediate surroundings; the transport journey, along transport corridors, lines and routes that connect the micro and meso environments; and the wider macro environment, considering the connections between the transport network and the context of the wider neighbourhood and regions that it serves. In addition, it is acknowledged that the transport network receives a range of inputs and outputs throughout the day, including users as possible offenders and targets of crime, and those who may deter crime from happening. Possible targets of crime include victims, for example, passengers and the peripatetic staff, and objects, the transport infrastructure, including mobile infrastructure such as vehicles, and fixed infrastructure such as stops, stations and tracks. Therefore the final component of this conceptual framework is to consider safety and security from the user’s perspective.
Theorizing safety and security in transit settings

Arguably the criminological perspective most analogous to public transportation systems is crime pattern theory (Brantingham and Brantingham, 1993). This theory consists of three key concepts, nodes, paths and edges. A node is an activity space in which people carry out major activities and spend most of their time, for example, school, work and leisure. It is suggested that around these activity nodes users will develop awareness spaces, the settings with which they become familiar. On transportation systems the nodes can be considered as the stops, stations and interchanges of the system. The pathways that people take between these nodes, often with a fair degree of regularity, are what crime pattern theory terms paths. In the context of transport journeys these are the routes travelled by passengers during a journey, the en-route aspects of the transit settings aboard a particular mode of transport, for example, a bus, train or tram. The final concept of crime pattern theory is that of edges, beyond which persons are unfamiliar with. On the public transit system the edges can be perceived as the boundaries of the transport environment, in which the transport system ends and a different environment begins. However, in the context of the whole journey approach, these edges may become fuzzy, especially during the walking aspect of any trip.

Around these nodes, paths and edges is an awareness space, a term which applies to both offenders and non-offenders. In terms of explaining crime at nodes, crime pattern theory postulates that offenders will operate within or close to their awareness space. As transport nodes may represent a key component of a person’s activity space, it follows that transport nodes may also embody settings with a likely convergence of activities, in which potential offenders and targets may meet. A question this raises for public transport is whether the offender’s activity spaces focus solely on transport nodes and the nearby surroundings, or whether this extends to transport routes. Outside of the transit environment the paths taken between nodes by potential victims are, on the whole, unrestricted, except perhaps by natural barriers such as rivers, and paths are likely to be walking or driving routes. On a transport system the paths a victim can select are effectively restricted to the layout of the transport network and a number of finite fixed routes. An offender’s activity space may therefore extend from activity nodes outwards onto paths, in other words, from stops and stations onto buses and trains. Therefore the transit system may itself represent an expansion of awareness space, thus extending possible areas for offending.

Micro transit environments and the transit node

Before the establishment of modern public transportation systems in 1800, Colquhoun showed how transportation nodes concentrated a large number of crimes triggered by the movement and assemblage of valuable goods in