



APTA STANDARDS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM  
**RECOMMENDED PRACTICE**

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Working Group

# Identifying Suspicious Behavior in Mass Transit

**Abstract:** This *Recommended Practice* establishes minimum guidelines for identifying suspicious behavior in mass transit.

**Keywords:** identifying, security, suspicious behavior, suspicious, transit

**Summary:** In a post-September 11 era, securing transit agencies against terrorism is a priority. Transit agencies by nature are open and easily accessible by the public, and thereby are easily accessible by terrorists and potential criminals. It is impractical for transit agencies to use the screening practices used in airports. Terrorists and criminals could be of any race, color, gender, religion, ethnicity, or national origin. Selective screening of passengers based only on these characteristics is profiling and is unconstitutional and unlawful. An acceptable method of securing transit agencies is to monitor and identify suspicious behavior. This *Recommended Practice* provides guidance and procedural guidelines for identifying suspicious behavior and potentially criminal activity. It includes criteria for identifying basic behavioral characteristics of possible criminals and/or terrorists.

**Scope and purpose:** This *Recommended Practice* is applicable to all transit agencies, regardless of size or mode. The guidance is not intended to substitute federal, state, or local regulatory requirements. This document offers a baseline set of recommendations to assist transit agencies in their implementation of behavioral analysis. The scope of this document is limited to guidance for identifying suspicious behavior, thereby assisting law enforcement in taking appropriate actions that mitigate the risk of criminal activity. This document does not provide guidance on steps the transit agency should employ to respond to or report suspicious behavior. This document is intended to provide transit employees guidelines on recognizing suspicious behavior.

## Summary of Recommendations:

- Train employees in potential preparatory actions for terrorism or criminal activity and/or tendencies
- Write policies and procedures employees should follow for pre-established reporting procedures
- Develop, maintain and update the security-related training curriculum for all employees

This Recommended Practice represents a common viewpoint of those parties concerned with its provisions, namely, transit operating/planning agencies, manufacturers, consultants, engineers and general interest groups. The application of any standards, practices or guidelines contained herein is voluntary. In some cases, federal and/or state regulations govern portions of a rail transit system's operations. In those cases, the government regulations take precedence over this standard. APTA recognizes that for certain applications, the standards or practices, as implemented by individual transit agencies, may be either more or less restrictive than those given in this document.

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## 1. How to identify suspicious behavior

Identifying suspicious behavior is a continuous, iterative and logical process, as shown in the following sections. (Figure 1 shows a detailed flow chart of the steps and process of identifying suspicious behavior.)

### 1.1 Look for out-of-the-ordinary situations

Transit employees should be aware of and familiar with their surroundings. If something regarding a particular individual or group is out of the ordinary and arouses suspicion, then transit employees should actively assess the situation to the fullest extent, especially when the security of the system is in question. If the situation has potential to disrupt service or harm others, then actions should be taken to control the situation.

Transit employees should attempt to collect as much information as possible to determine if the situation warrants additional attention. However, employees must be cautious and use their judgment so as not to compromise their own safety while collecting more information.

Suspicious behavior can manifest itself in many forms, most notably actions indicative of planning or preparing for terrorist or other criminal activity. Transit employees should be aware that planning and surveillance for criminal activity may take from several weeks to several years. Individuals with malicious intent may be present among transit travelers on a regular basis to analyze the operating procedures of the transit agency. Transit employees need to examine behavior to distinguish criminals from regular passengers. People exhibiting indications of suspicious behavior may need to be assessed as potential threats. Table 1 lists actions related to terrorism or criminal preparation.

**TABLE 1**  
Potential Preparatory Actions for Terrorism or Criminal Activity

Taking photos of critical infrastructure	Working in groups
Taking notes/drawing diagrams	Avoiding eye contact
Inquiring about security/operations	Revisiting the same location
Not actually using the transit system	Immediately fleeing the area when noticed
Boundary probing	Weak cover story if questioned

Special attention should be given to people exhibiting multiple actions from Table 1. When potential criminals and/or terrorists are working in groups, they most likely will attempt to maintain covert ties with one another. These ties may be in the form of nonverbal communication, such as eye, head and hand gestures. Perpetrators also may use mobile phones with one another in the same area.

### 1.2 Analyze suspects for nervous tendencies

During the preparation and execution phase of terrorist or criminal activity, the perpetrators may be nervous. Nervous tendencies are also indicators of suspicious behavior. Transit personnel can assess passengers by looking for nervous trends. Table 2 shows nervous tendencies suspects may demonstrate.

**TABLE 2**  
Nervous Tendencies

Trembling	Continuously scanning the area	Aggressively biting nails
Unusual perspiration	Heavy breathing	Eyes wide open
Fidgeting	Rubbing hands	Pacing
Clock watching	Repetitively touching face	Exaggerated yawning
Avoiding uniformed officers	Exaggerated emotions such as crying or laughing to self	Other physical reactions

Nervous tendencies may increase in close proximity to uniformed security personnel, K9 units and security checkpoints.

These tendencies may not be necessarily threatening in nature, but they are cause for concern. For example, a person with unusual perspiration and heavy breathing who is repetitively touching her face and continuously scanning the area may be looking for help because he or she is suffering from a heart attack or other medical emergency. These tendencies still need transit employees’ attention.

Criminals and terrorists who are extremely dedicated may not be nervous but may instead intensely focus on completing their objective. This type of threatening focus may manifest itself in isolation. The perpetrators may have cold, penetrating stares or may be unresponsive to questions or authoritative commands.

### 1.3 Look for signs of execution

Criminals going unnoticed during the surveillance stage will likely proceed to the next step: execution of their plan. Transit employees need to be aware of passengers or people on transit property who exhibit signs of potential execution of criminal and terrorist plans. Signs of the potential execution of terrorist or criminal activity are listed in **Table 3**.

**TABLE 3**  
Signs of Terrorist or Criminal Activity Execution

Inappropriate clothing for the season	Repeatedly patting upper body
Exposed wires	Rigid posture with minimal body movement, arms close to sides
Excessive fidgeting, clock watching and area scanning	Appearing to be in disguise
Appearing in a trance	Drastic and sudden change of appearance (shaved body hair, shaved head, increased mass from explosive vest)
Unresponsive, distant, and/or inattentive	

## 2. Reaction to suspicious behavior

### 2.1 Investigate suspects

If a transit agency employee observes any of the above actions or notes other activities that increase suspicion, he or she should do one of the following, depending on the agency’s SOP:

- Initiate some type of casual conversation with the person in question.
- Inform his or her supervisor or security provider.

For example, if the person exhibiting suspicious behavior is wearing a heavy coat in warm weather, the employee could say, “That’s a nice coat. Where did you get that?” Or if a suspicious person is taking notes at the transit agency’s facilities, the employee could ask where the person is going or if he needs any help. These opened-ended questions give the employee a chance to analyze the person in question’s body language.

**Table 4** gives a sample list of questions that can be used when interacting with passengers, whose behavior has not risen to the level of being suspicious.

**NOTE:** Transit agencies should carefully consider when it is proper for their employees to interact with someone who is acting in an out-of-the-ordinary or suspicious manner. There can be many degrees in the level of suspicion. For instance, at a less severe level, a man waiting around on a platform, repeatedly not boarding trains could be engaged in surveillance or he may just be waiting for his spouse to arrive. At a more severe level, a man is wearing an overcoat in the summertime and carrying a bag with wires sticking out of it. In the first example, it may be appropriate from a customer service standpoint to interact with the passenger. In the second example, requesting immediate police response would likely be the more appropriate option. In conclusion, when and how to interact with riders may also be affected by the duties of an employee’s job function and labor agreements in effect.

**TABLE 4**  
Open-Ended Questions

What’s going on?
What can I help you with today?
Where did you get that coat?
How do you think they’ll do? (if wearing sports paraphernalia)
That’s interesting, what are you working on? (if taking notes or drawing)
Where are you going today?
What are you looking for? (if boundary probing)

This tactic puts the person in question on the defensive. If the person is indeed a criminal or terrorist, he or she will attempt to deceive the employee and may become increasingly evasive or aggressive. The employee should be aware of nonverbal indicators of deception during the discussion and note any change in temperament. **Table 5** shows nonverbal indicators of deception.

**TABLE 5**  
Indicators of Deception

Increased nervous activity	Clears throat excessively	Avoidance of eye contact
Voice becomes higher in pitch	Yawns excessively	Sweating
Ambiguous or evasive response	Adam’s apple jump	Stammers
Gestures that do not match the verbal message	Fast eye blink rate	Facial flushing
Stalled/delayed response	Accelerated pulse	

## 2.2 React to suspicious behavior

If suspicious behavior is detected or suspected, transit agency employees should follow pre-established reporting procedures. Law enforcement and/or agency security should be notified immediately and should be involved with further investigating the person. Law enforcement procedures will determine further actions from this point. For example, depending on the circumstances, law enforcement may have the right to search and/or question the person.

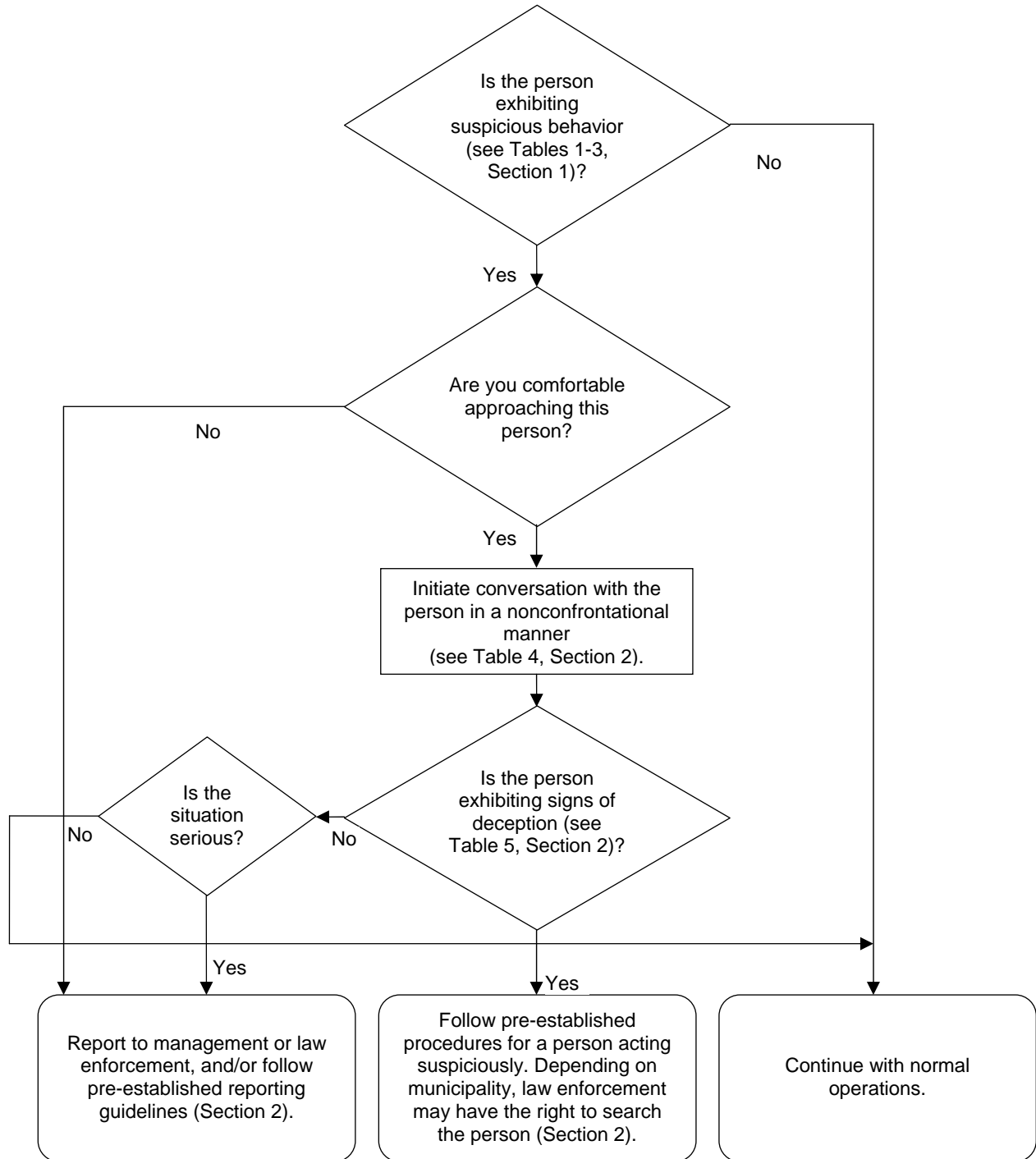
**Figure 1** shows a flowchart of the process of identifying suspicious behavior.

## 3. Training

An important aspect of every employee's job is his or her individual responsibility for safety and security per the agency's SOPs. Each agency should develop, maintain and update the security-related training curriculum for all employees. Security training should be required for all personnel and is considered an essential and proactive element of the security program. It is designed to reinforce security roles and responsibilities for all employees.

Identifying suspicious behavior requires training for transit personnel. There is extensive training available to the industry through various outlets. Please see APTA's *Recommended Practice* "Security Awareness Training for Transit Employees" for further sources of information.

**FIGURE 1**  
Suspicious Behavior Flow Chart



## References

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## Definitions

**profiling:** Assuming that a person has criminal tendencies suspect behavior based on that person’s race, ethnicity, age, gender, religion, sexual orientation or dress. Unlawful profiling may result in harassment charges and lawsuits and is illegal.

**reasonable suspicion:** A legal standard in U.S. law; suspicion that a person has been, is, or is about to be engaged in criminal activity based on specific and articulable facts and inferences.

**standard operating procedures:** Pre-established and practiced procedures to enact during specific circumstances.

**surveillance:** The act of collecting information by observation.

**suspicion:** A feeling of distrust in an individual or group because of some type of hint or suggestion of criminal motives. Suspicion should arise when something concerning safety or an individual is out of the ordinary.

**suspicious behavior:** Behavior that raises feelings of wariness or distrust because it is out of the ordinary for the time, place or circumstances. Increased suspicion is more than a hunch, but less than the reasonable suspicion required to detain a person or group. Suspicion should be based on behavior and not profiling race, color, age, gender, religion, ethnicity or national origin.

**transit employee:** Personnel employed directly by the transit agency or through contracts. This includes but is not limited to operators, facilities maintenance workers, customer service representatives, receptionists, station managers, fare collectors, security guards, contracted security guards, local security not directly associated with the transit agency, and sworn law enforcement assigned to or patrolling transit agency assets.

## Abbreviations and acronyms

<b>FACS</b>	Facial Action Coding System
<b>K9</b>	canine
<b>SOP</b>	standard operating procedures