



**APTA SS-SRM-RP-009-09, Rev.1**

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APTA Security Risk Management 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, suspicious behavior, transit

**Summary:** Transit systems by nature are open and easily accessible by the public—and thereby are easily accessible by terrorists and 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, national origin or age. 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 transit staff guidance and procedural guidelines for identifying suspicious behavior and potential criminal activity. It includes criteria for identifying basic behavioral characteristics of possible criminals and/or terrorists.

**Scope and purpose:** This document is intended to provide transit employees guidelines on recognizing suspicious behavior. It is applicable to all transit agencies, regardless of size or mode and is not intended to substitute for 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 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 recommended practices or guidelines contained herein is voluntary. APTA standards are mandatory to the extent incorporated by an applicable statute or regulation. In some cases, federal and/or state regulations govern portions of a transit system's operations. In cases where this is a conflict or contradiction between an applicable law or regulation and this document, consult with a legal advisor to determine which document takes precedence.

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## Introduction

*This introduction is not part of APTA SS-SRM-RP-009-09, "Identifying Suspicious Behavior in Mass Transit."*

APTA recommends the use of this document by:

- individuals or organizations that operate public transit systems;
- individuals or organizations that contract with others for the operation of all transit systems; and
- individuals or organizations that influence how all transit systems are operated (including but not limited to consultants, designers and contractors).

## Summary of recommendations

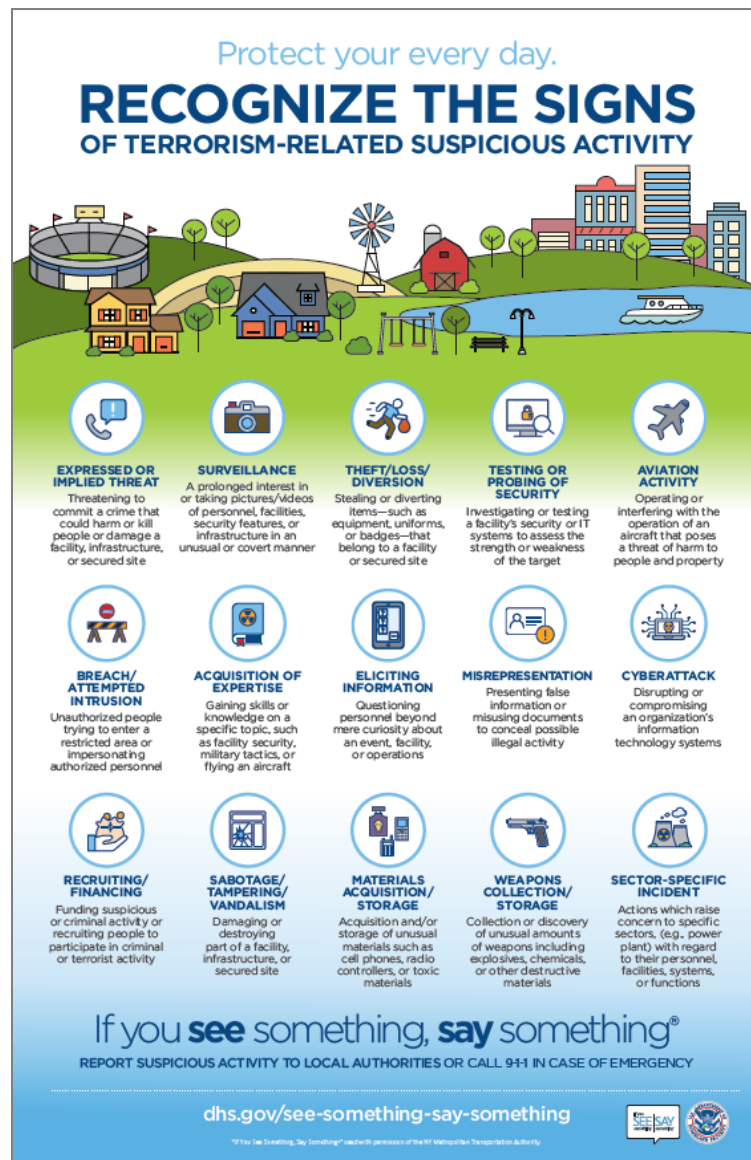
- Train employees in potential preparatory actions for terrorism or criminal activity and/or tendencies.
- Write policies and procedures employees should follow for preestablished reporting procedures.
- Develop, maintain and update the security-related training curriculum for all employees.

# Identifying Suspicious Behavior in Mass Transit

## 1. How to identify suspicious behavior or activity

This document demonstrates how identifying suspicious behavior or activity is a continuous, iterative and logical process. Refer to **Figure 1** for recognizing signs of terrorism-related suspicious behavior.

**FIGURE 1**  
Recognize the Signs of Terrorism-Related Suspicious Activity



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

Transit employees should be aware of and familiar with their surroundings. A security-aware transit employee understands typical behavior on the transit system and therefore is more likely to notice when something is out of the ordinary. If the behavior or activity of a particular individual or group is unusual and arouses suspicion, then transit employees should actively assess the situation, especially when the security of the system is in question.

Transit employees should attempt to collect as much information as possible to determine if the situation warrants additional attention. However, employees must also exercise caution, good judgment and common sense to avoid compromising their own safety while collecting information. If the situation has potential to disrupt service or harm others, then the transit employee(s) should take actions to control the situation according to the transit agency's preestablished policies and procedures.

Suspicious behavior can manifest in many forms. Most notable are actions indicative of planning, preparing and/or performing surveillance for terrorist or other criminal activity, which can occur several weeks or even years in advance of the activity. 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 suspicious individuals from regular passengers.

**Table 1** lists actions related to potential terrorism or criminal preparation. A person exhibiting multiple actions listed in the table is an indicator of suspicious behavior that should be given special attention and assessed as a potential threat. 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. Subjects may also use mobile phones to communicate with one another while in the same area.

**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

## 1.2 Analyze subjects for nervous tendencies

During the preparation and execution phase of terrorist or criminal activity, the subject(s) may be nervous. Nervous tendencies are also indicators of suspicious behavior that transit personnel can use to assess passengers. **Table 2** provides some nervous tendencies suspects may demonstrate. These tendencies may increase when a subject is near uniformed security personnel, canine (K9) units or security checkpoints.

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**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 that are not typical in the transit environment

Nervous tendencies may not necessarily be threatening in nature, but they are cause for concern regardless. For example, a person with unusual perspiration and heavy breathing who is repetitively touching his face and continuously scanning the area may be looking for help because he is suffering from a heart attack or other medical emergency. A transit employee should pay attention to any person exhibiting these tendencies.

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

### 1.3 Look for signs of execution

Criminals who go unnoticed during their surveillance stage will likely proceed to the next step and execute 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. **Table 3** lists signs of the potential execution of terrorist or criminal activity.

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

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

## 2. Reaction to suspicious behavior

### 2.1 Observe and report subjects

If a transit agency employee observes any of the actions described in Section 1, or notes other activities that increase suspicion, he or she should do one of the following, depending on the transit agency's preestablished policies and procedures.

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**NOTE:** Transit agencies should carefully consider and clearly establish when it is appropriate 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 and repeatedly not boarding trains could be engaged in surveillance, or he may just be waiting for his spouse to arrive. A man wearing an overcoat in the summertime and carrying a bag with wires sticking out of it, however, is a more severe level of suspicion. 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. When and how to interact with people on the transit system may also be affected by the duties of an employee’s job function and any labor agreements in effect.

- **Option 1:** Observe and assess reactions while engaging in casual conversation with the person in question.
- **Option 2:** Report observations to supervisor or security and law enforcement personnel, and continue observing.
- **Option 3:** Record video or capture photographs if you can safely do so.

Asking open-ended questions may put the person in question on the defensive. It is important for employees to offer customer-oriented body language and respectful tone. 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 verbal and nonverbal response, including body language. **Table 4** gives a sample list of questions that a transit employee can use when interacting with people on the transit system whose behavior has not risen to the level of being suspicious.

**TABLE 4**  
 Open-Ended Questions

How are you doing today?
How can I help you?
Can I help you navigate our system?
How do you think they’ll do? (If wearing sports paraphernalia)
What are you working on? (If taking notes or drawing)
Can I help you find something? (If boundary-probing)

If the person is indeed a criminal or terrorist, they may attempt to deceive the employee and may become increasingly evasive or aggressive. **Table 5** lists nonverbal indicators of deception that employees should be familiar with when interacting with the people acting suspiciously.

**TABLE 5**  
 Indicators of Potential 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	Pulsing carotid artery	Changes in temperament

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If suspicious behavior is detected or suspected, transit agency employees should follow their agency's preestablished reporting procedures to notify law enforcement and/or agency security immediately and remain available to assist the investigation. Law enforcement procedures will determine further actions. For example, depending on the circumstances, law enforcement may have the right to search and/or question the person.

### **3. Training**

An important aspect of every employee's job is individual responsibility for safety and security per the agency's preestablished policies and procedures. 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 a transit agency's security program. Security training reinforces 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, including TSA's First Observer Plus. Transit agencies should also maintain training records. See APTA's recommended practice "Security Awareness Training for Transit Employees" for further sources of information.

**Figure 1** shows the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's "Recognize the Signs of Terrorism-Related Suspicious Activity" infographic, which may be used to accompany training. While this graphic depicts suspicious activities that may occur and be visible throughout the community, several highlighted activities may reveal indicators of terrorism-related activities within public transit environments. Public transit-related suspicious activities in this infographic include the following:

- Expressed or implied threat
- Surveillance
- Theft/loss/diversion
- Testing or probing of security
- Breach/attempted intrusion
- Acquisition of experience
- Eliciting information
- Misrepresentation
- Cyberattack
- Sabotage/tampering/vandalism
- Sector-specific incidents



## **Related APTA standards**

**APTA SS-SRM-RP-005-09**, “Security Awareness Training for Transit Employees”

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## **Definitions**

**profiling:** Assuming that a person has criminal tendencies 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:** Preestablished 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 based on 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**

**NATSA** North American Transportation Services Association

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**Summary of document changes**

- Added DHS’ “Recognize the Signs of Terrorism-Related Suspicious Activity”

**Document history**

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