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Situational Awareness: A Key to Avoiding Danger on Subways

July 27, 2005 | 2153 GMT

On July 26, New York City police began conducting random searches of subway passengers' bags amid security concerns raised by the July 7 London bombings. Officials from the Washington, D.C., transit system will travel to New York on July 28 to evaluate the new measures for possible use in the capital's metro.

Considering the difficulties in [securing public transportation](#) -- the New York City subway carries an estimated 4.5 million riders a day; Washington's carries about 700,000 -- the government can provide an overall level of security and local law enforcement agencies can enhance security with increased vigilance. Ultimately, however, passengers must take some responsibility for their own personal security.

The best way is to maintain a heightened level of situational awareness. Being observant of surroundings and the people in the vicinity is essential to identifying potential threats and dangerous situations. Daily commuters will find it tempting to immerse themselves in a book or newspaper to pass the time, but it is a good idea to at least pause long enough to evaluate people as they board the train at each stop.

Coupled with good situational awareness is the need for commuters to trust their own instincts. On a primal level, people are aware of potential dangers in their environment, though they often are inhibited from acting on their instincts. Many victims of crime or terrorism relate after the fact that they sensed that something was wrong before the attack, but did not act on their instincts. They often say they noticed unusual behavior in the person who attacked them, but did not associate it with an immediate danger. The bottom line is that instincts usually prove right -- if something feels wrong, it probably is. When it comes to personal safety in the hustle and bustle of the mass transit system, people must learn to trust their own radar.

Part of recognizing a danger is to know what to look for. The Israeli government has issued a set of guidelines for its security forces to use to identify potential suicide bombers, including:

- People wearing unseasonable warm clothing, such as trench coats
- People with protruding bulges under their clothing
- People who are sweating, mumbling, or fidgeting
- People who are trying to avoid security personnel
- Young people who appear to be out of place in a certain venue

In addition, according to some reports, suicide bombers often exhibit an intense stare as they approach the final stages of their mission. They seem to have tunnel vision, being able to see only their intended target.

Those who suspect someone is a suicide bomber should remain calm, take note of the individual, leave the train at the next stop, and then contact transit authorities or police as soon as possible and provide a description. Confronting the person -- if he or she is a bomber -- could result in a premature detonation.

In all situations, it is important to have a [personal contingency plan](#) in case of emergency, and to carry a smoke hood and small flashlight. If an attack should occur, unprepared riders could find it difficult to safely leave a crowded, dark and smoke-filled subway.

Although the terrorist attacks in London were shocking, given that they were concentrated on one day and in a few locations, the number of fatalities was minimal. According to the U.S. Department of Transportation's Fatality Analysis Reporting System, 67 people died in traffic fatalities in the District of Columbia in 2003 -- the last year for which the statistics are available -- compared to the 52 commuters killed in the London Underground and bus bombings.

Overall, the U.S. commuter transportation system is safe to use -- but situational awareness and a personal contingency plan will enhance one's chance of avoiding or surviving a terrorist attack.

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