The Prevalence of Transit Assault and its Consequences

Patrick Sherry, Ph.D., Jessica Mantia, M.A., & Keaton Zucker, M.S.

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this project is to identify the prevalence, nature, and psychological impact of operator assaults, with a specific focus on posttraumatic stress, depression, and absenteeism. Bus operators in two Eastern US cities were administered a survey that addressed various forms of assault, standard measures of work productivity, job satisfaction, intention to turnover, personality, depression, and PTSD. Descriptive statistics and correlational analyses were used to examine the data. Results indicated that over 50% of operators reported having been assaulted with between 10-40% having more than five assaults. The consequences of these assaults show a significant positive relationship between the number of assaults and significantly increased degrees of alcohol use, feelings of depression, avoidance of work related situations, and greater feeling of intention to quit the job.

INTRODUCTION

Violence against transit workers is greater than violence against many other occupations (TCRP, 2011) and almost daily there are reports of bus drivers and other transit personnel being assaulted during the course of their work. Assaults on bus operators put the physical and psychological health of operators, passengers and communities at risk and have been connected to employee absenteeism, and workers compensation claims (TCRP, 2011). The most commonly reported psychological consequences of assault include symptoms of anxiety, depression, and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Tse et al., 2006). Sherry (2009) conducted a study of 94 New York City bus operators and found that 56.2% of operators reported having been assaulted while on duty. Twenty-six percent of respondents reported being struck or hit. Following these incidents over 12% of the assaulted drivers met the suggestive criteria for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) on a standard measure called the Post Traumatic Stress Check List (PCL-C). Due to the vast negative impact bus operator assaults have on operators, passengers and transportation organizations it is vital to better understand the impact of and ways to mitigate assaults.

METHODOLOGY

A 128-item questionnaire was developed, including several different forms of assault (hitting, kicking, weapons, objects thrown, spitting, and verbal) and standard measures of work productivity, absenteeism, job satisfaction, intention to turnover, personality, depression, and PTSD. The questionnaire was administered to bus operators from two major metropolitan cities in the East coast of the United States.

Participants: Participants consisted of a convenience sample of bus operators reporting for work assignment from two large metropolitan cities in the East coast of the United States. Every bus operator who reported for duty or were on a break at a specific location was approached as they entered the terminals and invited to participate in the study. A total of N=195 surveys were used for data analysis. Sample consisted of Transit employees from Agency A (N=101) and Transit employees from Agency B (N=94).

Measure: Involvement in Assaults: Respondents were administered a series of questions designed to assess their involvement with being assaulted. Respondents were asked to indicate whether they had been assaulted on the job (Yes or No), which types of assaults they have experienced, how many times they have been assaulted, when and where the incident occurred, and whether they required medical treatment or time off as a result of the incident.

Post Traumatic Symptom Disorder Checklist (PCL-C): Respondents completed the PTSD-Checklist for Civilians (Weathers et al., 1999), a 17-item instrument designed to determine the extent to which a person reported various psychological symptoms of stress following an incident. The items are based on the DSM-IV criteria for PTSD. Respondents are asked to indicate the extent to which they have been “bothered” by each symptom during the previous month using a 5-point Likert scale.

Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (CES-D): The CES-D (Radloff, 1977) is a 20 item self-report scale designed to assess depressed mood during the past week using a 4 point Likert type response scale ranging from 0 “Rarely” to 3 “Most of the time”.

Single Item Measure of Depression: Some authors have suggested that a single item measure of depression can be used as a screening tool for the assessment of depression. Based on this notion a single item was selected from the CES-D (“I felt depressed”) to determine the distribution of scores and whether the distribution was similar to that obtained by the more robust measure.

Work Performance Questionnaire (HPQ): The survey was designed to measure absenteeism and performance while at work transformed to lost workday equivalents. Responses are scored to generate a summary measure of overall lost workdays in the month before the instrument is completed.

Additional Items: Additional items were included to assess intention to quit, alcohol use, and participant recommendations regarding strategies to minimize assaults on bus operators.

RESULTS

A total of 182 bus operators from two major metropolitan locations completed the questionnaire. The preliminary analyses indicate that over 53% of operators report having been assaulted with more than 30% having more than five assaults. These assaults range from a number of different degrees of severity from verbal assault (80%), to being threatened with a weapon (25%). Moreover, the consequences of these assaults show a significant positive relationship between the number of assaults and significantly increased degrees of alcohol use, feelings of depression, avoidance of work related situations, and greater feeling of intention to quit the job.

DISCUSSION

The results suggest that bus operators...

Recommendations/Implications:

- These results indicate a need to address the problem of operator assaults through policy change, employee training, and practice.
- This study has important implications for the bus transit industry as it helps to bring awareness to the problem of bus assaults and aids in gaining a better understanding of the impact of assaults on operators.
- Implement new or enhanced training programs that educate bus operators on strategies to deter or mitigate assaults.
- Additional support, in the form of transit security or police officers riding problematic routes with drivers, may reduce the risk of assault against bus operators. Specifically, 42% of the comments received from persons being assaulted requested these safety measures.
- Bus operators who experience assault should receive proper medical and psychological care through comprehensive employee assistance programs.

Next Steps:

- The research team plans on collecting more data in large metropolitan cities to further analyze the consequences of operator assault and strategies to help prevent its occurrence.
- Future research should consider examining individual differences among bus operators and how specific traits, such as personality and anger management style, relate to the frequency of work-related assault.
- Additionally, research could examine the impact of screening tools that can be utilized during the hiring process as well as enhanced training programs targeted at reducing the frequency and severity of assault.

REFERENCE