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Safer Subways

A Survey of Safety Hazards in the NYC Subway System

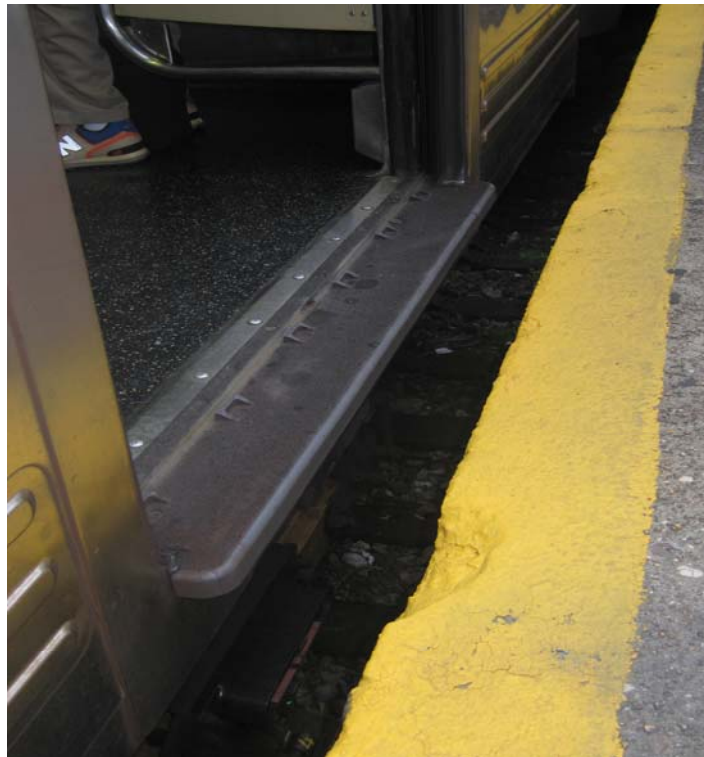


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I. Introduction

Since January 2008, there have been numerous instances where riders of the Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA¹) nearly lost their lives due to hazardous conditions prevalent at Brooklyn subway stations. This study was undertaken to determine if the hazardous conditions at the Brooklyn subway stations were common at other stations in New York City and to determine the extent of these conditions citywide. The following represents the timeline of the incidents that led up to the study.

- On January 17, 2008, a 14-year-old boy nearly lost his life when the board at the edge of the platform of the Kings Highway Station of the B and Q lines gave way beneath him, sending him onto the train tracks as an oncoming train approached. Subsequent investigations revealed that the platform board had deteriorated due to improper maintenance, becoming a safety hazard at the Kings Highway station and at many other stations in Brooklyn as well.

- At a February meeting, MTA New York City Transit (NYCT²) President Howard Roberts Jr., related to Assemblyman Hikin the cause for the hazardous condition at the Kings Highway station. He stated that it was because “no matter how diligent station supervisors are, visual inspections from the top of the [station] platform do not reveal missing or defective supports for the boards.” He further stated that he would be instituting new regulations to ensure that station managers report hazardous conditions expeditiously, that he and would be immediately addressing the platform board deteriorations by sending emergency funding to repair every station in the NYCT system that had similar safety hazards.

- On April 18, 2008, a senior citizen was parking her car under the elevated platform tracks at New Utrecht Avenue and 55th Street of the D line. As she was about to exit her vehicle a large piece of wood track landed on her vehicle shattering the windshield and creating a large dent in the roof of her car. Subsequent investigations revealed that the wood track known as the *railroad ties*, had deteriorated to such an extent that the passing train had loosened them, resulting in large sections of track falling from the elevated station onto the street below.

- On June 17, 2008, a 17-year-old boy was exiting the train at the Avenue M Station of the Q line when his foot was caught between the train door and the station platform. Subsequent investigations revealed that the cement platform had deteriorated to such an extent that the entire station platform was littered with large holes at the edges, causing the boy’s foot to get stuck between the subway door and platform.

These incidents, along with the statement of cause by MTA NYCT President Roberts, are very troubling. The fact that each of these individuals nearly lost their lives due to deteriorating conditions of the subway stations is in itself cause for concern. However, what is even greater cause for concern are the statements by the MTA NYCT President concerning the reason for these conditions.

Over ninety-one stations citywide were surveyed between June and July of 2008, and more than three hundred photos were taken documenting safety hazards at various stations. The following data was gathered from the survey and represents the current condition of the MTA NYCT System.

*1. The Metropolitan Transit Authority will be referred to as the MTA from this point forward.

*2. The New York City Transit system will be referred to as the NYCT System from this point forward.

II. Findings

Ninety-one of the four hundred and sixteen stations (19%) and fifteen different subway lines were surveyed throughout New York City. Surveyors from State Assemblyman Dov Hikind's office were joined by staff members of Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer. Over three hundred photos were taken documenting various hazardous conditions. Surveyors' primary focus was for conditions that represented a threat to rider safety. Specific areas of study were the platforms themselves, their conditions and the prevalence of cracks, gaps, holes, loose footing, overall erosion, gaps between the platform and subway doors and similar platform conditions. Secondary areas of focus were station cleanliness such as the prevalence of litter, rodents, trash bags on the platform, excessive litter in receptacles and similar hygienic issues. Surveyors also documented the prevalence of station restrooms and their conditions, focusing on accessibility, operating conditions, cleanliness and whether they were being properly maintained.

Findings were graded on a scale of one through ten. Grade 1 through 3 represented failing conditions, 4 through 6 represented fair conditions, 7 through 8 represented good conditions and 9 through 10 represented conditions and upkeep that were deemed outstanding. Surveyors documented specifics in each category of focus. An example of a grade in each category is listed in the table below.

STATION, SUBWAY LINE, DIRECTION	HAZARDOUS CONDITION(S), STATION GRADE	PLATFORM	STATION CLEANLINESS	RESTROOM(S)
Avenue M, Q Line, Manhattan Bound	Station Grade 1 Fail Three different conditions representing safety hazards to riders.	Grade 1 Fail Significant erosion throughout platform. Cracks in cement platform, wood platform edge is unstable and has gaps throughout.	Grade 3 Fail Station platform is overly dirty. Full garbage bags lay on platform accumulating rider litter. Graffiti is on platform walls.	Grade 3 Fail Men's restroom is locked. Women's restroom is filthy and is littered with trash. No toilet, hand paper or soap in restroom.

A. Hazardous Conditions

Surveyors found that subway stations throughout New York City, regardless of their size (large, small) or location (underground, outdoors, elevated) had platform conditions that were unsafe, deteriorating and easily recognizable by surveyors. A pattern of neglect, lack of maintenance, shoddy workmanship and seeming indifference has led to system wide safety hazards at station platforms.

Of the ninety-one stations inspected, fifty-seven of them (63% overall) had conditions that represented a significant safety hazard for riders. The conditions documented at stations included cracks in the platform, loose rubbing boards, cracked stairwells, gaps between subway doors and platform, missing sections of platform edge, loose ceiling panels, raised metal and wood plates, eroding cement and other hazardous conditions.

As mentioned above, the significance of these conditions is highlighted by the fact that in each situation surveyors were clearly able to recognize the hazardous conditions and their danger to rider safety.

Stations that scored the worst safety ratings were in Brooklyn, Queens and Manhattan. In Brooklyn, the Avenue J, Avenue M and Kings Highway stations of the B and Q Line were given failing grades due to the conditions of the platforms on both the Manhattan and Brooklyn bound sides. The Avenue J station was also given a failing grade in cleanliness category due to the prevalence of full garbage bags on the platform on multiple inspection dates.

In Manhattan, at the 57th Street station of the F line, surveyors encountered widespread erosion throughout the station. The platform edges throughout the station on both the uptown and downtown sides were cracked, not properly connected and in terrible condition overall. Surveyors witnessed a number of homeless individuals sleeping on the mezzanine level as well. The West 4th station of the B/D/F/V lines was also ranked lowest due to similar platform conditions including a segment of rubbing board that was detached from the platform edge and was liable to crack at any time.

In Queens, the Beach 44th Street station of the A line was given the lowest grade due to widespread erosion throughout the station platform. Additionally, raised beams on the floor of the platform, as well as cement chippings that were eroding around the beams were observed in many areas of the platform. Furthermore, a large step down from the subway train to the platform represented a significant danger when exiting and entering the train. The 71st Avenue station of the E/F/R/V lines was also one of the lowest graded stations in Queens due to many safety hazards on the Manhattan bound side. The wood platform edge was rotting throughout and was shoddily repaired with cement filling which itself was crumbling in many different locations.

B. Station Cleanliness

A general pattern of clean conditions was observed throughout the system and the majority of stations, sixty-five overall (71%), were given passing grades. Surveyors focused on the number of passengers at specific stations and the prevalence of litter relative to rider numbers. Stations were relatively clean and no overflowing receptacles were observed. However, five stations (16%) were observed with full garbage bags lying on the platforms, accumulating litter and attracting rodents.

C. Restrooms

Surveyors found nearly no restrooms accessible in the NYCT system. Of the eighteen stations that were observed with restrooms (19%), only six were open (31%), ten were locked (55%) and four of the six open restrooms (66%) were without any toilet paper and in filthy condition. Only two restrooms of the six open (33%), and one of them at the Church Avenue station of the F line, were clean and properly stocked, and being used by MTA personnel in an area that was closed for riders. Additionally, customers told surveyors that the men's restroom was a gathering place for males to engage in illicit sexual activity. Surveyors observed the women's restroom padlocked and when entering the men's restroom witnessed two males engaged in sexual activity.

IV. Photo Essay

The following pictures represent the overall condition of the stations and were taken by surveyors during the survey period.

Wood platform edge at the Smith Ninth Street Station of the F line.



Loose ceiling panel at the 36th Street Station of the R line



Corrosion of the platform and rubbing boards at the Rockefeller Center Station of the D line.



Corrosion throughout platform at the 4th Avenue Station of the F line.



Holes in the platform edge with crumbling cement at the 71st Avenue Station of the E/F/R/V lines.



Holes in the platform at the entrance of the subway door at the Avenue M Station of the Q line.



IV. Conclusion

Having surveyed more than ninety-one stations, a general pattern of erosion of the station platforms is apparent throughout New York City. Station platforms are cracked, have significant gaps in many locations, and represent serious safety hazards to riders, especially to the most vulnerable, the young and the elderly. Cement fillings and lifted wooden and concrete beams on the station platforms are poorly connected to the platforms and represent tripping hazards to unsuspecting riders. Rubbing boards placed on the edges of the platforms are deteriorating as well. Riders' footwear is liable to get caught in the holes of the rubbing boards and many have corroded to the extent that any pressure on them could result in riders falling onto the tracks below.

What is disconcerting is the fact that MTA employees failed to recognize these corrosive conditions when they were readily apparent to surveyors. It is apparent that safety issues at stations are not being taken seriously by the MTA. Each hazard documented was observed visually by surveyors and was easily recognizable as conditions that threatened the safety of subway riders. Additionally, in the rare situations that these safety hazards were recognized, MTA employees performed shoddy work in repairing them and in many instances, these partial repairs created even more dangerous conditions than beforehand. It is most shocking that these conditions are still prevalent throughout New York City after having been pointed out to MTA officials.

Surveyors observed nearly no restrooms available in working order system wide. The majority of stations with restrooms were padlocked and in most situations inaccessible for riders. Rare instances where restrooms were open found most of them in deplorable condition without any toilet or hand paper for users. Of the two instances where surveyors found clean, fully stocked restrooms, one of them was at a station where MTA employees were performing track repairs and was at a section of platform that is normally inaccessible to riders. It is essential that riders have clean hygienic restrooms that are accessible and cleaned regularly. Failing to do so will result in unsanitary conditions that can cause health hazards to riders.

Although surveyors found the majority of stations clean, some stations were found with full garbage bags on the platforms accumulating litter, attracting rodents and in general creating a setting for filth to gather.