



Remedial Actions to Prevent Suicide on Commuter and Metro Rail Systems

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MTI Project 1129

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Railway suicides have received increased attention of late, and efforts to understand and prevent these tragic events have been initiated by a number of organizations. The present study reviewed current efforts of commuter railroads to reduce or prevent suicide on railways and discussed preventative activities and factors affecting rail related suicides. Primary preventative methods have included erecting physical barriers, posting warning signs with telephone numbers for hotline crisis counseling, using video surveillance on platforms, and training key personnel to identify and intervene with at-risk individuals. However, little or no evidence has been reported to demonstrate the efficacy of these methods.

Study Methods

Following an extensive review of the literature, a survey of 498 community members' attitudes towards, and knowledge of, rail related suicide and its prevention was conducted with respondents from Southern California and Denver, Colorado. Additionally, pre-post surveys of personnel from a large commuter railroad examined the effects of participation in a workplace suicide prevention training program to determine if such training could improve an employee's ability to identify and prevent rail related suicide.

Findings

Results of surveys administered to community and railroad employees showed that people who completed training obtained higher levels of self-efficacy with respect to understanding, identifying, and assisting people who appeared to be at risk for suicide. Program participants also demonstrated knowledge of the signs and symptoms and risk factors for suicide.

Policy Recommendations

1. Ongoing and continuing training of railroad employees regarding warning signs and risk factors for suicide.
2. Training programs should set clear boundaries and guidelines for railroad employees regarding their responsibility and what is expected and not expected.
3. Physical barriers to trespassers are needed but not sufficient, as some individuals who are intent upon self-harm will circumvent the barriers.
4. Community identification, consultation, and engagement with people who live and reside in the immediate area who are dealing with alcohol and substance abuse or some form of mental disorder would likely contribute to prevention efforts.
5. The development of more aggressive suicide prevention outreach programs near railroads and areas where economic conditions are poor is needed.

A review of the literature revealed two factors that pose a considerable obstacle for preventing suicide: media reports that trigger copycat efforts, and economic conditions such as unemployment.

6. Community members and organizations around railroads should be encouraged to take a more active role in suicide prevention.
7. Suicide prevention efforts must be targeted in and around the immediate area of the railroad stations or platforms and also along railroad tracks in general because there are few identifiable “hotspots.”
8. Monitoring of the tracks using remote sensing, motion detectors, and video feeds would be helpful.
9. Development of a general community engagement effort in high-risk areas near the railroad.
10. The efforts of Operation Lifesaver (OLS) must be commended and expanded to include suicide.



Suicide by Train (flickr.com)

About the Author

Dr. Sherry is a Research Professor and the Executive Director of the National Center for Intermodal Transportation at the University of Denver. Dr. Sherry specializes in transportation safety and critical incidents at work. He has consulted extensively with Fortune 500 transportation companies throughout the US and Canada in the areas of safety, safety culture assessment, intermodal workforce development in transportation, and leadership training. Dr. Sherry is licensed as a psychologist in New York and Colorado and a Fellow of the Academy of Counseling Psychology.

To Learn More

For more details about the study, download the full report at transweb.sjsu.edu/project/1129.html

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