

# Student Travel Safety

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Capstone Essay

Nearly 65,000 city students rely on SEPTA to get to their schools. That is about 50% of the district's students. As much as we wish we could say that the majority of these students feel 100% completely safe on their rides, WE CAN'T. Although, we can help students feel more secure throughout their commute to and from school by instilling safe travel methods in schools and the school district to protect students' personal security and physical safety. What exactly is student travel safety? It is the use of different self-defense, self-awareness, and safety measures taught to students to ensure their well-being while traveling to and from school. Another significant element of travel safety is the effort the district, schools, the city, and SEPTA put in to help foster a secure and supported school environment. Student Travel Safety is a significant issue facing Philly students today, which needs to be addressed in order to protect their well-being.

## The Different Components of Travel Safety

Self-awareness is essential for ensuring public transportation safety. Self-aware students may make informed judgments and take the appropriate safeguards to protect themselves and others. Self-awareness in public places and on public transit begins with awareness of one's surroundings. It entails paying attention to your surroundings, judging their behaviors, and

spotting any potential signals of danger or aggressiveness. Students with self-awareness are more likely to recognize and identify potential security concerns or suspicious actions around them. Students aware of their environment can recognize behaviors or situations that may endanger their or others' safety. This could involve watching somebody acting suspiciously, such as hovering near exits or displaying signs of aggression. Self-aware students who recognize such indicators quickly can take appropriate action, such as reporting the incident to authorities or moving to a more secure position within the transportation vehicle or station.

Self-awareness also includes being aware of one's physical capabilities and limitations.

Understanding one's own strengths and weaknesses might help one develop effective self-defense tactics and responses. It enables students to assess their physical capabilities to confront a threat accurately. It assists them in identifying alternate options, such as asking for help from others or finding a safe retreat.

Another important aspect of improving travel safety in public places and on public transportation is crime prevention. It entails taking proactive steps to discourage criminal activity, reduce opportunities for crime, and create a safe atmosphere for commuters. Students can reduce the hazards associated with travel by concentrating on crime prevention methods.

Personal safety habits such as keeping personal possessions secure, remaining attentive, and being aware of one's surroundings can lower the probability of becoming a target of crime.

Reporting suspicious behavior or incidents to authorities allows authorities to act quickly, preventing potential crimes from growing or repeating.

Risk assessment and risk reduction, in my opinion, are the most important elements of crime prevention. This involves evaluating one's everyday routines and habits to discover potential vulnerability areas. People, for example, can evaluate their home security measures, such as

installing dependable locks, alarms, or video surveillance, to prevent possible intruders.

Similarly, when out in public, individuals can practice risk reduction by taking precautions such as avoiding isolated areas, using well-traveled routes, and exercising caution when engaging with strangers. Students can improve their personal safety and reduce their chances of becoming a target for criminals by actively decreasing risk factors and making educated choices.

Many self-defense programs stress the necessity of avoiding conflicts wherever possible and only resorting to physical measures as a last resort. Students can mitigate potential conflicts and diffuse situations by focusing on prevention strategies, such as verbal de-escalation, assertiveness, and boundary-setting. These abilities enable people to negotiate potentially harmful situations using effective communication, assertive body language, and conflict-resolution techniques.

Physical defense is a type of self-protection that students can resort to when confronted with impending threats or attacks in public places or on public transit. While it is always preferable to emphasize personal safety and avoid physical confrontation whenever possible, there may be times when physical defense is required to protect yourself.

Physical defense strategies are often designed to maximize safety while minimizing harm.

Examples of these methods are strikes, kicks, joint locks, and defensive moves.

It is critical to highlight that proper training and practice are required to execute these techniques efficiently and safely.

Physical defense in public places and on public transit should be viewed as a last choice after all other options for de-escalation, avoidance, or escape have been exhausted. The purpose is to eliminate the immediate threat while also providing an opportunity for self-defense or escape.

Techniques that target weak places, such as the eyes, nose, throat, crotch, or knees, can momentarily incapacitate the attacker, allowing students to escape and seek safety.

## Inspirations to Learn About Travel Safety

I rode SEPTA to and from school for nearly four years. As I live in the Northeast, I regularly spend up to 3 hours a day on SEPTA trains, buses, and subways. While spending all that time commuting, I have seen and experienced my fair share of incidents on SEPTA. My most traumatizing experience was my freshman year on the Market Frankford line. A man was harassing me by blowing me kisses and repeatedly saying vulgar comments towards me. The same man, who seemed to be impaired, whether it be mentally or by the use of drugs, proceeded to trail me once I got off the train and followed me all around the station. Panicked, I went in circles around the train station, attempting to lose him in the crowds. The anxiety and fear I felt that day was incomparable to anything I had ever experienced. Unfortunately, I cannot say that was the last or only time I had to go through such a thing.

Throughout the next three years of high school, I continued to get catcalled, intimidated, followed, and harassed as I rode SEPTA. No young, vulnerable high school student should ever experience all this. Many other students and I have had to deal with the fact that this is our reality, and we have no power over it. Once I realized this issue needed to be addressed, I started researching it more.

As I started to look more into travel safety, I began to hear more and more testimonies from my friends and peers. The most interesting thing is that no matter whom I asked, they would have at least one story of their own to contribute. A huge part is the female population of students that complain of consistent catcalling and objectification as they commute to school. Just from my

friends, I have heard stories of men taking pictures of them from under their skirts, being grabbed and groped, and even cornered. One specific friend even resorted to hiding her pepper spray in a bush at the local playground just so it would not be taken away and she could use it on her train ride home, which added numerous safety issues for the community.

Although, these experiences are not only limited to girls who take SEPTA. Many of my male classmates expressed their concerns about not feeling safe or secure while on public transit. An SLA Student told me about a physical altercation he had with a homeless substance abuser while coming home from playing soccer in the park. Many male students have reported feeling nervous and uneasy while riding in a transit vehicle with someone who seems unstable and could lash out at any moment.

These concerns also extend out to school staff as well. Many staff members must continually remind their students to stay safe while going to school and coming home because they know the harsh reality of having to travel in an urban environment. An incident occurred with a teacher who was attacked on their way to their car by an aggravated mentally ill homeless person.

Hearing testimonies and stories like these opened my eyes and helped me realize how widespread the problem is.

Within my research, I found that I am not the first to flag it or attempt to raise awareness about this issue. Several petitions have been started to allow students to bring pepper spray and safety devices to school, and other petitions that have tried to get school district attention on these matters. Some of these petitions even date back to the 2015-2016 school years, showing that this matter has been on the minds of students, staff, and parents for years. This left me wondering why the school district still needs to address this. As I looked through all the different petitions, the thing I realized they all had in common was that they all only demanded action instead of

proposing solutions. As I began to think of ways to address the safety issue within the school district, I thought of negotiable solutions that the district may agree to. These are just a few factors that contributed to my peaked interest in this problem and why I chose it as my capstone project.

## Public Incidents That Have Occurred

While everyone has personal experiences while riding SEPTA, over the past couple of years, there has been an ongoing rise in violent attacks inside SEPTA transportation services that have been publicly reported all over local news outlets and different social media sources. A big situation that caused much commotion within school communities was in November of 2021 when four Asian Central students were the targets of a racially motivated attack. The four were riding home after school on the BSL (Broad Street Line) when another group of teenage riders began hurling racial slurs at them, and eventually, the altercation became physical. Council member Oh even commented on the attack saying, "We need uniformed police officers there to let people know who to go to if something happens and that they are safe. There are too many people telling me that they don't want their children riding SEPTA, too many adults saying they no longer take public transportation, and there has to be a level of action."

Only a month prior to this, there was another occurrence in October of 2021, where a woman was sexually assaulted on the MFL ( Market Frankford Line), which was reported on local news and even reached the New York Times. This happened on a regular Wednesday night, and the other passengers on the train failed to intervene. This particular case sparked outrage among school communities and SEPTA riders all over the city. After hearing about this, many parents were on high alert when sending their children to school.

Finally, a more recent event in July of 2022 where a 19-year-old boy was shot three times after a verbal argument escalated. It occurred under city hall at the 15th Street station. Multiple officials spoke out about the importance of adding more transit officers throughout the Market-Frankford and Broad Street lines. State Representative Amen Brown told NBC10, "They are armed with walkie-talkies; that's not what we need right now." Student riders and other SEPTA riders and even employees complain of a rising number of people addicted to drugs, experiencing homelessness, or suffering from serious mental illness on transit and feeling unsafe as they travel. Even the city council held a joint meeting in November of 2021 in which they called for SEPTA to get tougher on crime and public safety.

SEPTA officials spoke out in August of 2022 about implementing and expanding more safety measures to keep public transit safer for students for the new school year. According to CBS News, Ynaria Vicks, a mother of two, said, "If it did come down to taking the bus, I wouldn't let her take the bus, just because it is too much going on and getting dangerous, the fighting and the shooting," Unfortunately, many parents have that same worry for their children. As this current 2022-23 school year has gone on, it is a shame to say that parents and students have still had the same worries as before, and city and SEPTA officials have not changed much within the circumstances of violence for students that commute on SEPTA.

I went to look for the numbers and statistics to try and make sense of the ongoing violence in Philadelphia and on SEPTA and found that overall crime in Philadelphia has been up by 8% over the past year. Gun violence has been at a record high for the past three years, increasing by 3% this year. This makes sense comparing the incredible number of gun violence stories we have seen on the news recently. The growing crime rate throughout the city also parallels SEPTA's crime rates, which had 111 aggravated assaults reported on SEPTA property last year – more

than double the 46 reported in 2019. SEPTA has also observed increased crime on trains in the past two years. Due to these unsettling statistics combined with Covid-19 effects, we have also seen an almost 50% decrease in SEPTA ridership numbers.

These statistics only show how dangerous it has become for a student traveling on SEPTA. Students have legitimate reasons to be concerned about their safety and well-being while traveling to and from school. School and everything related to it should be considered a secure environment. While we understand that the SDP does not have the resources to provide every school in the district with school buses, as that is just a challenge that comes from living in an urban city, the students, staff, and parents would appreciate it if they were able to work together to make the situation we have now safer for students.

## The SDP Weapons Policy

According to Title 218.1. WEAPONS SDP Policy "means any object, device, or instrument designed as a weapon or capable of threatening or inflicting serious bodily harm or which may be used to inflict self-injury including, but not limited to any firearm, shotgun, or rifle, whether loaded or unloaded; any knife, cutting instrument, or cutting tool; any nunchaku; any chemical agents such as pepper spray or mace; laser pointers; stun gun; incendiary device; any other tool, instrument or object used or intended to be used to inflict serious bodily harm to another."

While I understand the serious need for these rules to be in place, this policy extremely restricts students' ability to bring self-defense items with them as they travel to and from school. Students are bringing their pepper spray and just taking the chance of getting caught or even hiding them in the neighborhood around the school, which poses a bigger risk to the community.



Furthermore, the policy fails to acknowledge the reality students often encounter a wide range of safety concerns while commuting to school. Urban environments, in particular, can present various safety challenges, including harassment, assault, and robbery. By denying students the option to carry safety devices, the policy disregards their right to self-protection and hinders their ability to respond effectively to potentially dangerous situations. This restriction not only compromises students' personal safety but also undermines their overall sense of well-being and security. The prohibition on safety devices can disproportionately affect vulnerable populations, such as students who live in high-crime areas or those who have experienced previous incidents of violence. Safety devices can serve as a crucial source of empowerment for these students, providing a sense of security and peace of mind during their commute. By denying them this option, the policy further exacerbates existing disparities and potentially places already marginalized students at a greater disadvantage.

A major disadvantage is that the policy fails to address the underlying issues that lead students to bring weapons to school in the first place. Rather than focusing solely on punitive measures, addressing the root causes of violence and implementing comprehensive strategies to promote a positive and supportive school culture is crucial. By relying solely on a weapons ban, the policy neglects the need for preventative measures, conflict resolution programs, and intervention strategies to address the many factors contributing to violence.

## What Can and Should Be Done

I previously mentioned that we should work together on negotiable solutions to help solve this issue. What are said solutions? Well, first, the initial step should be to educate students on the different elements of Travel safety to lay the groundwork for students to protect

themselves. Whether at school-mandated assemblies or simply just websites and resources made available for students district-wide to learn more. Teaching self-defense provides students with practical tools to defend themselves in an emergency or physical altercation. While the primary goal is always to avoid or de-escalate conflicts, self-defense training can instill confidence and empower students to protect themselves if necessary.

Travel safety and self-defense education contribute to creating a culture of safety and respect within the student community. When students are knowledgeable about safety practices and understand the importance of respecting others' boundaries, it fosters an environment where everyone feels more secure and supported. Promoting a collective responsibility for safety helps create a community that actively looks out for one another. Teaching students travel safety and self-defense measures is crucial for their personal safety, empowerment, and development of essential life skills.

The school district should also work with schools to allow a program that is an exception to the weapons policy, which allows students to bring safety devices, such as pepper spray, to school. Carrying pepper spray empowers students to take an active role in their personal safety. It provides them with a practical means of self-defense, enabling them to respond effectively in threatening situations. By allowing students to carry pepper spray, the school district demonstrates a commitment to their well-being and acknowledges their right to protect themselves.

The policy can include provisions that require parental consent for students to carry pepper spray. This ensures that parents are involved in decision-making and can discuss safety

measures with their children. It also emphasizes the importance of responsible behavior and accountability, as students must understand the serious nature of carrying and using pepper spray.

Allowing students to carry a pepper spray can serve as an opportunity for education and responsibility. Students can receive proper training and guidance on appropriately using pepper spray, emphasizing the importance of responsible behavior and understanding the potential consequences of misuse. This can further promote a culture of safety, respect, and responsible decision-making among students.

There also needs to be more action from the City Council and SEPTA officials to further the agenda of keeping students safe while traveling on public transportation. We need more SEPTA police officers at stations in general, but especially at the highly populated student stations. The presence of SEPTA police officers creates a sense of security among passengers. Knowing that trained law enforcement professionals are present can instill confidence and peace of mind as well as support the overall accessibility and sustainability of public transportation systems.

Having more SEPTA police officers ensures a quicker response time in emergencies. They can swiftly address incidents of assault, harassment, or other criminal activities, providing immediate assistance. Their presence can help alleviate the impact of such incidents and increase the chances of resolving them effectively. The presence of SEPTA police officers also serves as a strong deterrent to potential criminals who may target vulnerable students. With more officers stationed at student-populated train stations, the visibility of law enforcement creates a sense of security and discourages criminal activity.

The presence of SEPTA police officers at student-populated train stations allows for collaborative efforts between law enforcement and schools. This collaboration can include

sharing information about safety concerns, coordinating safety initiatives, and providing resources to educate students about personal safety and the role of law enforcement. By working together, SEPTA police and schools can create a comprehensive and cohesive approach to student travel safety.

Student-populated train stations should be safe spaces where students feel comfortable and supported during their commutes. By increasing the presence of SEPTA police officers, an overall safer environment is created. This contributes to their physical well-being and promotes their mental and emotional well-being by reducing anxiety and fear associated with traveling on SEPTA.

In conclusion, ensuring travel safety for students commuting to and from school is of utmost importance. By implementing safety measures and providing appropriate education, we can help students navigate public spaces and transportation systems with confidence. Creating a safe travel environment for students fosters a sense of security and contributes to their overall health and peace of mind. When students feel safe during their commute, they can focus on their studies and engage in school activities without distractions or worries about their personal safety. Travel safety for students promotes a positive and inclusive school community and shows commitment to their overall welfare. It recognizes their vulnerabilities and acknowledges the importance of protecting them during their daily journeys to and from school.