Everyday Security:
Default to Decency

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T he most impressive arsenal of security technology is built into the everyday: how people look out for each other in daily life and respond when trouble happens, such as a fire breaking out next door or a child wandering into a busy intersection. Professional security, whether from government agencies or private companies, would be wise to consider mundane practices that, if care isn't taken, could be knocked out of commission by official action. Knowing the ins and outs of ordinary life—the subject matter in much of sociology, the discipline that I practice—can be useful in such endeavors.

Sociology in Practice: NYC Subway

When looking specifically at the subject of disasters, sociologists note the wondrous resilience of people to remain calm, self-organize, and help one another.[1,2] Panic and looting, so common in media depictions, are in fact unusual compared to orderly behavior. A glaring example is what happened on 9/11, the stimulus for so many security endeavors: yes, approximately 3,000 people died as a result of the attacks, but 17,000 lived because they went down the stairs, sometimes assisting one another as they did.[3] To be sure, preparedness had something to do with it—office workers had gone through several anticipatory drills resulting from a prior assault on one of the towers. But the main ingredient was a propensity for rational helpfulness and the effective use of some very mundane physical elements that mostly held up, such as stairways, lighting, and ventilation.

Partly in response to 9/11, Noah McClain and I studied the New York subway system to learn how security protocols, handed down by management, matched actual practices by workers, police, and other employees. Most well-known perhaps was the "See Something, Say Something" campaign, widely imitated at airports, train stations, and even museums in New York and around the world.

In a two-year study funded by the US National Science Foundation, we interviewed more than 100 workers along with upper management. We also spent dozens of hours closely watching workers perform their jobs, including how they manipulated equipment such as turnstiles and train doors, and how they enforced rules about the use of trash bins, benches, and seating, We encouraged workers to invite us to visit them at the worksite (driving a train, conducting the cars, staffing booths, or cleaning waiting areas). This showed us more precisely what they were talking about in interviews. McClain also put himself through the official safety training that developed in part as a result of

the attacks.

The security authorities face a huge challenge: New York subways provide more than 5 million rides every day; people enter and leave over 400 stations, each with multiple entry stairs, pedestrian tunnels, platforms, lobbies, crevices, toilets, newsstands, donut shops, equipment sheds, and interior construction sites, large and small. Some of these same people leave a lot of items behind, probably in the thousands. And many New Yorkers indeed "say something" and tell subway workers where and when.

But we learned that if these workers got such a report or saw something on their own, they didn't follow protocol. As with much else, they handled it on their own. So the way to deal with a large McDonald's shopping bag, for example, is to kick it. When they come across a stuffed black garbage bag, they assume a cleaning crew left it. Suitcases and backpacks end up in the lost and found. The reason for these practical responses is that if everything were dealt with as a "big deal," there would be no New York subway system. A single call for help, whether for police or some other authority, costs time and money. If protocols are fully followed, stations would be closed, trains stopped, and the whole system glommed up. Those we interviewed repeated that their job is to keep the system going and the trains running on time. They "look the other way" as a practical urgency, relying on the same good discretion that all of us use daily—and invent the meaning of rules in light of the other organizational details in play. Otherwise they are "judgmental dopes," viewed as incompetents by their supervisors.

Some rules are exactly followed, especially when they make sense to the workers. So, for example, conductors use an unvarying right-from-the-rulebook choreography when they close train doors: head stuck out the window of their compartment, with eyes remaining on train car openings, they press buttons (not looked at) to close the doors. There was never an exception to this watchfulness, the point being to make sure that a train doesn't move when there's a possibility of dragging a passenger. Workers are especially on the lookout for children who might be darting on or off—citing their own children's behavior when telling us of the possibility.

They also told how when schools let out, they manipulate turnstiles and other equipment to minimize the risks of boisterous and energetic kids crushing one another at turnstiles or train doors. They do so in ways inconsistent with the official work rules, for example, by disengaging entry turnstiles. Anyone at that time can enter for free; the kids think they're getting in via their cards, but in fact the system has been disengaged. Likewise workers watch out for people being pushed, inadvertently or on purpose, into the tracks.

Workers characterize the antiterrorist measures implemented after 9/11, including the modest training they receive in regard to them, with a common response: "What a joke." We gathered many reasons for their cynicism but an important one is how little the security regime takes into account the job's actual practices. Workers' attention is already focused on strategic spots of danger and can't easily shift to follow a bureaucratic prescription. Workers also regard the special equipment placed on hand to "deal with" terror, such as gas masks, as "ridiculous" because they're too few in number, they preclude person-to-person communication (the lifeblood of dealing with emergencies), and poison gas was quite low on the kinds of emergencies that actual experience has taught them are likely.

Workers do have experience with fire, smoke, flooding, crime, stink, and death. They have experience calling the police, with varying degrees of success in getting them to appear in a timely way. Meanwhile, they witness periodic set-ups of police inspection tables where passengers are asked to submit their packages and luggage for search. As a matter of New York civil liberty protection, no one can be forced to submit to such inspections; those who wish not to do so are free to leave, perhaps to use a different station or different entrance to the same station. Especially "important" stations (such as Times Square) have sniffing dogs or armed soldiers. Again, the workers take a dim view of such putative defenses.

Maybe it's because they know that, at this writing, not a single person has been charged with a terror offense as a result of any of these measures, including the "See Something" program. Linked in with the "quality of life" policing strategy favored in New York of late, authorities have captured drugs and guns, sending a number of offenders to jail. For some of us, this might seem like a gain, but it has nothing to do with the program's rationale; for others of us, it's a loss—using up resources to increase the jail population with petty offenders (many of them African American or Latino youth).

Improving the System

So what would make better sense for subway security? We can derive lessons more generally relevant for how to enhance public safety. My list follows:

- Bring those on the ground, workers in this case, much more into the picture and take seriously the practices, safety or otherwise, through which they routinely maintain order.
- Enhance mundane physical elements. Rather than surveillance cameras—which have been found to simply not work in the dimly

lit, byzantine, and vandal-prone New York subways—improve the ventilation (and widen the hallways). More people would survive smoke or gas, whatever its source.

- Get better signage. Not only would this help guide people out during moments of emergency, it would also educate them so that they would know more if and when a crisis occurred at some later time.

- Improve audio so that announcements can be understood. The public address apparatus, both on platforms and in the cars, frequently is garbled. This is frustrating in routine life and dangerous in emergencies.

I wasn't able to give other security venues the kind of sustained ethnographic attention we gave to the subways, but I did direct some systematic attention to airports, including through interviews with former TSA top leaders. There are huge gaps, and even cursory airport visits reveal some of them. For example, prior to official screening, nobody has been checked, so a larger crowd is gathered at the security gate than will ever be on an airplane (www.schneier.com/blog/archives/2012/03/). The system creates a target that otherwise wouldn't exist. By shortening the line (a nice improvement for all), you lessen the target. If workers dealt with back-ups by just letting some people through, akin to what subway workers do when kids gang up at the turnstile, fewer would be exposed to preboarding bombs.

Similarly easily observed (and experienced!) is the rudeness of present set-ups, driven in part by the logistical challenges of self-frisking for coins and keys, untying shoes, and trying to remember the phone. Rules abound about what is or is not contraband, where to stand, and how to hold one's body.

Debates can follow on about what is or is not a liquid, a "medicine," or a knife or how high hands must go. I've seen children bust out of line and toss toys to "the other side" with mothers in frantic pursuit.

Given all the shortcomings in equipment and complexity for the humans trying to get through, nobody is around to help make up the difference. TSA guards instruct, cajole, and go through our stuff, but they don't help a weak person lift a suitcase on to the conveyer. They don't hold a pram while a parent tries to rebalance a fretting toddler in her arms. They don't hold jackets, crutches, canes, or fragile items as the momentary needs arise. They don't offer suggestions—they issue instructions and bark out orders.

Helping wouldn't sacrifice intelligence but add to it. When you assist a person to "get ready," you learn a lot about what's going on. Anyone who has helped a child put on a jacket knows it's a learning experience for the helper. You discover if kids have a hurt arm, if they took a cookie, or if their body heat seems above normal. Touching people and their stuff in a helpful way, not just frisking them, is data rich. The fact that it might also do some good for fellow human beings is no small advantage.

Besides being natural to all cultures, joking is—like helping—a potential source of information. It's discouraged and even forbidden if interpretable as about weapons, security, or rebellion, but humor (like helping) can reveal, in a subtle way, otherwise masked intentions. Letting humor run its natural human course would be another source of intelligence: it tips off. It also helps put people at ease, and that too has a potential security payoff.

All the rules, artifacts, and policing interfere with calm. If everyone is made anxious by security itself, it becomes harder to pick out those

who are anxious because they're up to no good. As ocean surfers well know, a shark in calm water is easier to spot than a shark in rough seas. So even within narrow conventions of surveillance security, calm is best. And it should also be remembered that we don't really know if all the misery and cost do any good anyway: the antiterrorist set-ups at US airports have revealed (just as with the NYC subway) no terrorists or even charges of terrorism.

As things now stand, much of the trouble reflects a general lack of design. After 9/11, the TSA used dog food bowls to hold our coins, pens, and other pocket metals. The trays for laptops originated as dish-bussing equipment; the shiny metal tables also derive from the commercial kitchen. At a time when the common toothbrush is subject to focus groups and teams of ergonomic and stylistic experts, security stuff fends for itself. In 2009, the TSA did hire the prominent design firm IDEO to develop new prototypes (the shark analogy was part of its presentation), but other than a trial set-up at Baltimore-Washington International, implementation has been frustrated. I learned from former top TSA officials that the very word "design" and some of IDEO's other terminology, such as "customer engagement," put off some officials and politicians, never mind lingo like "composing lily pads" and "rejuvenating send-off" that really went against the militaristic grain.

A more positive way to respond is to embrace a *default to decency*: if you don't know what you're doing anyway (or at least a lot of what you're doing), take actions that have a benefit no matter what. Ventilation offers more refreshing and healthful air flow, quieter environments during tense moments of travel, and better PA systems to help folks more easily get to a destination. Security programs that incorporate

such tactics, besides potentially saving lives, would acknowledge the multiple goals we and our organizations always have—to remain prosperous, be amused, and get us from one place to another. Such remedies should be seen as themselves security measures rather than alternatives to security.

The bottom line for the security of anything—hardware, software, airports, or subways—is the same. Dig deep into how people actually operate in the everyday including the ways they already solve problems, particularly those having to do with safety. Avoid intrusions that create anxiety or otherwise disturb how they make order and solve difficulties. ∎

References

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