

Cleaning Up Crime and Grime

Why Equitable, Purpose-Built Incident Reporting Is a Public Safety Imperative

A Public Safety Policy Brief | June 2026

The Moment That Demands a New Answer

Two stabbings and a random shooting in about a week and a half. In broad daylight. On trains that thousands of commuters, students, and families depend on every day. Large-scale media coverage, social media videos, and thousands of comments added.

Riders who spoke to local media were blunt. One customer said simply:

It is dangerous. I do not like even riding really.

Another added: *You just have to be prepared to defend yourself.*

Police Can't Be Everywhere. Riders Are.

A sprawling transit network — cannot be staffed at a ratio of one officer per bus or train car. That is not a criticism of transit police; it is reality. The system is simply too large, too dynamic, and too resource-constrained for enforcement alone to serve as the primary safety layer.

What transit systems do have, in every vehicle, at every stop, at every hour, is riders. People with eyes on the environment, instincts about what feels wrong, and — given the right tool — the ability to alert police before a tense situation turns violent.

The logic is straightforward: when riders can report quickly and discreetly, **police gain the most valuable asset in any response scenario — time**. A two-minute head start is the difference between an officer arriving while something is still preventable and arriving to document what already happened.

Empowering riders is not a soft strategy. It is a force multiplier. And it only works if the reporting tool is actually used.

Rider Perception: The Fear Factor

Rider perception is a real operational signal. When the public feels less safe, ridership declines, fare revenue falls, and the downward spiral deepens. The time to address that perception — is now, before it becomes a crisis of confidence that takes years to reverse.



Checking the Box Is Not a Safety Strategy

Some transit agencies have responded to public safety pressure by pointing to a text-a-tip as a way to report a concern. The implication is that the reporting function exists, therefore the need is addressed.

It is not.

Providing just a text-a-tip function barely clears the bar. It is not enough for a robust safety program. Leadership can check the box — ☒ reporting app provided — but **the outcome for riders is largely unchanged.**

If public safety is truly the top organizational priority — as virtually every transit authority states in its mission — then the standard for tools that support safety must match that stated priority.

What Purpose-Built Looks Like

Finely tuned incident reporting is not a feature — it is a discipline. The difference between a system that genuinely engages its community and one that performs engagement is visible in the details:

- ▶ **Speed.** A rider who sees a threat has seconds, not minutes, to decide whether to act. The reporting interface must require the fewest possible taps to submit a concern.
- ▶ **Discretion.** On a crowded train or bus, pulling out a phone to report the person sitting across the aisle requires that the action itself not be visible as reporting. Design matters.
- ▶ **Channel equity.** Not every rider wants to use a single way to report concerns. A fully equitable system accepts reports by text message, web form, email, voicemail and mobile app — meeting riders where they are.
- ▶ **Operational integration.** Reports must reach the right people in real time, with enough context to dispatch a response — not land in a queue to be reviewed the next morning.
- ▶ **Sustained promotion.** A tool that riders do not know about won't work. Active, ongoing rider communication — in stations, on vehicles — is what drives adoption.

These are not aspirational features. They are characteristics of systems that have been deployed, tested, and refined through more than a decade of operational experience across major transit and airport environments — and that have received millions of incident reports as a result.



Riders as Partners in Cleaning Up Crime and Grime

There is another dimension to purpose-built reporting that goes beyond violent crime: the daily, grinding quality-of-life issues that erode rider confidence and system perception over time. Graffiti. Unsanitary conditions. Aggressive panhandling. Drug use. Broken lighting that makes a platform feel unsafe at night.

These are the conditions that precede violence in the public safety research literature — and they are the conditions riders encounter every day before a stabbing makes the evening news.

A robust incident reporting platform turns riders into active participants in the maintenance of their transit system. They are not passive victims of a deteriorating environment; they are community members with a tool that lets them say, in real time: **this is not acceptable**, and here is where it is happening.

That kind of civic engagement — riders helping to **clean up crime and grime from transit** — is both practically effective and symbolically powerful. It signals that the system takes their customer experience seriously. It builds the trust that makes riders feel ownership over their transit environment rather than resignation to it.

The Bottom Line for Transit Leadership

The riders who spoke after the most recent attacks were not asking for the impossible. **They were asking to feel safe.** They were asking for more security, for real. They were asking for a transit environment that takes their concerns seriously before something terrible happens — not after.

Riders want to communicate with their transit. ELERTS' set of proven, purpose-built tools that give riders a real voice, give police the time advantage they need, and signal — clearly and credibly — that public safety is a top priority..

Riders are the network. When they are equipped, engaged, and trusted as partners in safety, the system is safer for everyone.