

# GRASP 2020

**Date: 13 August 2020**

**Time: 09:30 – 11:30 (EDT, UTC -5)**

**Location: Webinar/Teleconference**

## Meeting Details

On August 13, 2020, the Volpe Center (USA) hosted the ninth meeting of the Global Railway Alliance for Suicide Prevention (GRASP). The GRASP working group has met since January 2014 in an effort to share information about efforts to prevent railroad trespass and suicide incidents and to mitigate the consequences of these events. This meeting was unique to meetings so far with a central theme of COVID-19 and its effects in each group member's country.

## Meeting Agenda

Time	Topic
09:30 – 09:50	Welcome and introductions Scott Gabree, USA (facilitating)
09:50 – 10:10	Rate and Characteristics of trespass and suicide incident throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.
10:20 – 10:40	Status of current suicide/trespass mitigation efforts and any impacts from COVID-19
10:40 – 11:00	Health impacts from COVID-19 on railroad employees, including their mental health
11:00 – 11:15	Changes in ridership due to COVID-19
11:15 – 11:30	Strategies for ensuring rider safety and communicating those strategies to ridership
11:30	Adjourn

## Members Attending

Christine Triggs (Can)	Ariane Ally (GB)	Danielle Hiltunen (USA)
Anne Silla (Fin)	Ann Mills (GB)	Starr Kidada (USA)
Grigore Havarneanu (Fra)	Matt Nicholls (GB)	Jeff Moller (USA)
Maria-Christina Fiorentino (Ita)	Matteo Paciletti (GB)	Brenda Moscoso (USA)
Roald van der Valk (Ned)	Ian Stevens (GB)	James Payne (USA)
Tore Mo (Nor)	Stephanie Chase (USA)	Nazy Sobhi (USA)
Helena Rådbo (Swe)	Scott Gabree (USA)	Jo Strang (USA)
Simon Abernethy (GB)	Michail Grizkewitsch (USA)	

## Notes

Below are notes from the 2020 Global Railway Alliance for Suicide Prevention (GRASP) annual update meeting with a focus on impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic. Members present on the call were encouraged to discuss recent efforts or experiences in their country to address rail trespass and suicide and its impacts from COVID-19 and additional impacts to transportation as well. Each of the five topic areas presented are presented in order along with any discussion that took place thereafter (some discussion points were moved if they better fit a different topic area). These notes are not intended to be a verbatim record of the call, but rather to capture main concepts discussed by the participants.

### **Topic 1: Have you experienced any changes in the rate and/or characteristics of trespass and suicide incidents throughout the COVID-19 pandemic?**

#### **Great Britain (GB)**

*Update provided by Ian Stevens, Network Rail*

- After lockdown on March 23<sup>rd</sup> there was a decline in rail suicide incidents. As lockdown eases, numbers are returning to expected levels. Overall, there were only 4-5 weeks where rates were down; now rates are at the same levels as seen in previous years. The reduced operations during this time did not seem to correlate with the number of incidents, although there was an uptick in freight operations. If someone wants to find a train, there is always an updated timetable available to do this. Possibly, some individuals are aware that there is less chance for a suicide intervention during this time. Conversely, there was an uptick in trespass incidents.
- There were concerns about increased suicide rates coming out of lockdown with the current downturn in the economy. However, the opposite may also be true, as it is known that a sense of community can be forged out of challenging times, which may act as a buffer against suicide. There is hope that a sense of community may help keep suicide rates lower during lockdown and as society re-emerges. Another factor that may have kept individuals from taking their lives on the rail is that rail staff were perceived as part of the hero network, who are essential to keep society safe and moving. This increased recognition may have given people pause (act as a deterrent) who thought about taking their life in front of the train with rail staff involved.
- Network Rail partnered with a social media listening provider to look at social media communications talking about suicide during this time. They saw that the number of these communications went down during COVID compared to pre-COVID. They are now to progress a project where they will directly engage in social media listening long-term to establish if such an approach can have a positive impact on suicide prevention.
- They are also seeing an increase in the number of people who are taking their lives on the railway who may have in the past committed unlawful acts, particularly associated with violent crime and sexual abuse.

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- There is also concern about the 12% uptick in suicides in the UK in 2018 and how this may continue to be on the rise as a result of the pandemic. (Interesting comparison with national rates in UK and Netherlands as noted [below](#).)

*Update provided by Simon Abernethy, Transport for London*

- Trespass dropped massively at first, but that only lasted a short period of time after which they saw an increase in people walking down the tracks, urinations, and more antisocial behavior in general. Suicide dropped during the first 4 weeks and went back to expected levels except for the most recent 4 weeks where there has been another decline. The pattern is in fluctuation. The level of operations is close but not yet up to expected levels.
- Due to the furlough system, which pays 80% of an individual's wages, job security has not been an issue throughout COVID. However, the furlough is scheduled to end in October, which is when economic issues are expected to hit.

## **Netherlands**

*Update provided by Roald van der Valk, ProRail*

- Lock down started in March. Same number of fatalities every month as pre-COVID; no fluctuation. At first operations were reduced, but same rates of suicide. As train traffic increased, there was worry that the rate of suicides would too, but that did not happen. Trespass incidents stayed the same with regional seasonal fluctuations. They are currently working with Samaritans closely. During the beginning of lockdown people mentioned being lonely, but also saw that others shared their loneliness, which enhanced feelings of "being in this together."

## **Sweden**

*Update provided by Helena Rådbo, Trafikverket*

- Current figures are the same as last year. Train traffic went down (14-15% drop), but rates stayed the same as last year. However, a lower number of those who trespass with suicidal ideation were taken into care (through societal collaboration mitigation efforts).

## **Canada**

*Update provided by Christine Triggs, Toronto Transit Commission*

- From January to June highest number of incidents in the last 11 years. In 2010 and 2017 there were times when numbers were high as well, but not as high as this year. The provincial shut down began in March. April and May are higher than in previous years. Although random spikes do occur, data shows a 5-year trend of increased incidents in Canada.

## **United States (US)**

*Update provided by Scott Gabree, Volpe Center*

- Overall, the number of incidents is in line with last couple of years. There is a delay in getting this data, so trends are not yet finalized. Different carriers are reporting different impacts of COVID. Some carriers are currently reporting reductions in rates, and others are reporting rates increasing or in line with previous years. There is concern that rates may move up as we come out of lockdown.

## **Norway**

*Update provided by Tore Dyrhaug Mo, Norway*

- Lockdown began March 12th. Numbers not official yet (not known trespass or suicide). There has only been four deaths on Norwegian railroads in the period from the lockdown started until the meeting date (5 months), which is slightly less than normal. COVID-19 seems to have changed society and people seem to have more sense of community and more commitment to each other.
- Update: After the meeting August 13th there were three additional fatalities during the month of August. For August, the numbers are then higher than normal, and for the period from when lockdown started and until the August 25th, the national number of fatalities are at the same level as previous years. (Statistics are not that straight-forward when numbers are low.)

## **Topic 2: Do you have any updates on the status of existing or planned suicide and/or trespass mitigation efforts and any impact from COVID-19?**

### **Great Britain (GB)**

*Update provided by Ian Stevens, Network Rail*

- There has been a constant level of intervention activity. However, they dropped “Small Talk Saves Lives” campaign because people in masks don’t want to approach people or be approached, and the safety standard of being apart 2 meters makes that difficult. They are currently conducting research, by gathering insight from riders, to see how the Small Talk Saves Lives campaign could work in the future.
- Network rail looks to Samaritans for assistance with messaging during the pandemic, though Samaritans do not focus on COVID-19 specifically. They are looking to make adjustments in their messaging so the focus is on personal health and well-being, rather than focusing on the wellbeing of those around them. As of Monday (August 9<sup>th</sup>) Samaritans started a campaign “Real People Real Stories,” but it’s being promoted away from the railway system and moved to radio and TV. There is no direct association with rail in this campaign, but the message will still reach the communities where people will still look to the railway to take their own lives.
- Middlesex University has just published new bespoke rail research relating to interventions and a pracademic review of dissuasion work around the world has just be completed. Insights from both will be used as the basis for a national communications campaign in Q1 2021.

- During the start of the lockdown, there was an increase the amount of charity contributions, which had the potential to introduce those at greatest risk to more online mental health services and support – another possible reason for the decline in suicides on the rail network.

*Update provided by Simon Abernethy, Transport for London*

- There was initially a question if staff should continue to make interventions when COVID started. It was determined that if an incident were to occur, there would be a lack of distance for even more individuals. Ultimately, the efforts continued as before and rail staff still have conversations with individuals at risk, but keep some social distance. Interventions are the same as before but staff now wear masks and visors. Occasionally they have needed to tackle someone who is running for a platform.
- Staff training is still the main mitigation now, and is done on Microsoft (MS) Teams rather than in person. This resulted in a big uptick for people attending training. Staff previously needed to travel to training, but with MS Teams, training is completed online and more conveniently, so they may keep training online in the future.
- Thrive London includes posters to encourage people to speak about anxiety, early indication of depression, etc. These posted throughout the London Underground including buses.

## **Netherlands**

*Update provided by Roald van der Valk, ProRail*

- There are some changes for interventions. Staff approach suicidal people while keeping their distance; if needed staff may overlook social distancing rules, even if not recommended. The number of interventions is comparable to pre-COVID numbers.
- Staff training is still conducted in classrooms, though they have found larger rooms to allow for distancing. They are currently looking into online training moving forward. ProRail stepped up some mitigation efforts so that they are training a larger number of people than planned, and their planned roll out of fencing is being implemented quicker (usually there is a lot of bureaucracy to go through). The health care industry said there may be a rise in suicide, so they considered fencing an urgent safety measure. This allowed them to choose a contractor to put it up, expediting the process.
  - The GB noted, in response to an increase in fencing activity that they have decided to move away from their fencing efforts in recent years. The GB efforts have focused more on community engagement rather than access restriction efforts.
- The Dutch Ministry of Health wants to keep track of suicide occurring nationally, but it usually takes a year to know how many occurred the year before. They created a committee, including representatives from Samaritans, healthcare, ProRail, forensic teams, and NS (passenger rail), so that as a group they can identify, in near real-time, the trends they see nationally. Trends include all methods of suicide to help inform the ministry's policies on

social distancing and other measures for mental and physical health. They collect data in real-time and use a database to monitor changes, but they have not seen a change nationally.

## **Sweden**

*Update provided by Helena Rådbo, Trafikverket*

- No changes in the suicide prevention program; they continue their work in physical and soft measures as before.

## **Canada**

*Update provided by Christine Triggs, Toronto Transit Commission*

- Continued with regular efforts to support mental health, including promoting community driven mental health messaging more in the subway, improving suicide intervention training, and increased vigilance. There was an influx of homeless people from shelters to the subway system. Additional proactive patrols are being used to assist in more interventions on the subway system.
- Worked with Distress Centers of Greater Toronto to provide on-site services to passengers and crews after an incident. This was suspended during COVID because they did not want to bring volunteers into stations. The initiative has now been conclude because they were unable to reach passengers who may have been impacted by the incident. They did identify that employees were often in need of this support and have worked to try to fill any gaps in support directly with employees. This effort is continuing to support employees after an incident.

## **United States (US)**

*Update provided by Scott Gabree, Volpe Center*

- Only one carrier directly provided input, and indicated that all efforts were initially stopped. There had been a plan to increase staff for interventions but it was stopped because of potential risks with too many people on platform. This carrier also recently started working with FRA grant funding to increase trespass enforcement.
- One crisis intervention helpline offered that they have seen a 30-50% increase in call volume. It is unclear if railroad signage has played any part in getting this message out, but the services are being used with greater frequency.

*Update Provided by Michail Grizkewitsch, Federal Railroad Administration (FRA)*

- A grant was released for implementation of a railroad suicide prevention outreach-focused effort. This is not for research, but rather to implement a rail suicide prevention program to work along with the railroads. The effort is outreach-focused, and a partnership between a railroad and a mental health group was necessary. The FRA received 24 applications for the funding (300k available to fund several projects). Currently working to rank applications and

award the funding. The plan is to issue multiple awards with a maximum of 100k for each award.

- Another 500k grant was released to provide resources to enforce trespassing laws. The grants may be used for a variety of enforcement activities, but include efforts such as connecting social workers with homeless encampments to find safer locations for these individuals. The funding of this effort is delayed due to COVID-19, but the hope is to formally issue the funding soon with a period of performance for up to 1 year. The grants were awarded in December 2019, and will start once the funding can be allocated. An advantage of law enforcement mitigations is that near misses can be captured by law enforcement where the US doesn't otherwise capture these occurrences. In the US, law enforcement funding for trespass prevention tends to go to overtime payments as an incentive, and to educate officers on the issue.
  - GB has a similar program, although they can provide funding directly without going through a committee. Interested parties apply and funding can be issued based on the merit of each application.
  - US uses a franchise model -- train operators must build in certain things that are suicide prevention focused. Additionally, system safety plans are required for every carrier and they are encouraged to include trespass prevention in these plans.
  - In the Netherlands, any changes made to infrastructure includes a calculation of the safety benefit in addition to the cost of the project (i.e., needs a societal business case). They use the method of value of life (€2.5M).
  - In the US, the FRA developed a similar cost for their *National Strategy to Prevent Trespassing in Railroad Property*. For each incident, it is estimated to cost \$4.6M. The US currently excludes suicides from this cost.

### **Topic 3: Are you aware of any health impacts from COVID-19 on railroad employees, including their mental health?**

#### **Great Britain (GB)**

*Update provided by Simon Abernethy, Transport for London*

- There is nothing explicit about mental health, but currently shielding 10% workforce, so that those who are vulnerable stay home. Some stations have limited hours or are closed. There are some reports of lack of compliance wearing masks and a few cases of threatening someone with COVID. Ninety percent of customers wear masks.

*Update provided by Ian Stevens, Network Rail*

- There are concerns about social distancing due to a track worker fatality. Several track workers were out on the line working and one took a wide berth to provide distance from a colleague. That individual stepped into the right-of-way when trying to distance and was struck and killed by a passing train. They then increased employee messaging to look out for

yourself and one another. This was a rallying moment for many staff to look out for each other.

- COVID prompted antisocial behavior. There are still some people still not wearing masks. An individual in one case claimed to have COVID and tried to pass it to staff. These are exceptions to normal behavior and not common, but do occur.

## **Netherlands**

*Update provided by Roald van der Valk, ProRail*

- Some customers have expressed resistance to masks, but not much. They also saw behavior where someone threatened to pass COVID to staff. As with the GB, these behaviors are not common, but do occur.

## **United States (US)**

*Update provided by Scott Gabree, Volpe Center*

- Many US carriers are making the number of active and recovered COVID cases among their employees available publicly. Many talk about the screening processes for employees, but this is likely to provide comfort to riders more than to help employees. Not many rail carriers will deny service for not wearing a mask, but all request that passengers wear masks.
- One carrier noted observing increased drug use and paraphernalia in areas of track with fewer operations. In one case, two transit police officers were stuck with needles through their boots, causing elevated levels of anxiety when responding to these scenes.
- The US also has a system called the Confidential Close Call Reporting System (C3RS). This allows rail employees to anonymously report issues or errors without a risk of discipline. In April, C3RS reported a huge uptick in the number of reports that specifically referenced COVID-19. Many were an employee making an error (e.g., going over speed) because they were mentally pre-occupied thinking about COVID or COVID related issues (such as child care or worries about having been exposed to COVID).

## **Topic 4: How has ridership changed as a result of COVID-19, including both initial ridership changes and any recovery to date?**

### **Canada**

*Update provided by Christine Triggs, Toronto Transit Commission*

- Ridership was at 20% of expected levels in March and is now back up to 35% over the entire system. Subways did not change the number of trains running.



## Sweden

*Update provided by Helena Rådbo, Trafikverket*

- In Sweden there was no lockdown, yet many still selected to work from home, if possible. Many people avoid the train and choose to travel by car or bike. They surveyed 1,800 people about returning to the railway. Results showed many are worried about taking the train and choose to walk or bike, and feel this behavior will continue this after COVID. People try to distance, but it's easier on some lines than others. Not many travel for pleasure; most just travel to get to their job or school. Not many people wear masks and mask wearing is not mandated. One rail operator is giving masks out to those who want them, but there are no requirements in public.

## Great Britain (GB)

*Update provided by Simon Abernethy, Transport for London*

- Ridership initially dropped to 5% of expected levels, but is now back up to 20-30% of pre-COVID numbers. They expect this level will remain stable because people will continue working from home. The London Underground also noticed a change in when their trains were busiest, with a shift to earlier hours when construction workers and other essential workers were likely to commute.
- Masks are compulsory – police are asking people to wear them but there are no fines. Network Rail will hold passengers from accessing trains when they get too full.

*Update provided by Ian Stevens, Network Rail*

- Ridership initially declined to 5% of expected levels, and the service level was reduced by about 50%. By mid-July ridership is at about 20% of the expected level. Currently, Network Rail is running a 70% service schedule. There are concerns about how to manage students traveling back and forth to school once schools reopen in September because the public transit system is a common mode of transportation for school age children in cities.

## Netherlands

*Update provided by Roald van der Valk, ProRail*

- March ridership fell to 10% of expected levels, and service was reduced. Ridership is now back up to 40% of usual levels. They expect to take years to recover due to people continuing to work from home. Masks are required on trains but not on platforms.

## United States (US)

*Update provided by Scott Gabree, Volpe Center*

- From the various railroads for which we have information, ridership bottomed out at around 3-5% of expected levels and few have recovered above about a 35% of expected ridership levels.
- Many carriers have implemented caps on service where they will not load a train past a certain volume to encourage social distancing, but many of these carriers are those that can manage this with pre-purchased tickets and seats.
- Many carriers have tried to implement ways for riders to see passenger density information, but most rely on retrospective data (e.g., from the day or week prior).
- A few carriers are surveying customers and some riders don't expect to go back to the rail due to working from home, biking or driving. Currently some carriers are trying to help people feel more comfortable going back to rail by providing more space on trains. Some states within the US encourage people not to travel unless necessary, which contributes to the reduction.

## **Topic 5: Describe any strategies that have been employed for ensuring rider safety and communicating those strategies to ridership.**

## Great Britain (GB)

*Update provided by Ian Stevens, Network Rail*

- Currently Network Rail is promoting heavy cleaning, social distancing, leaving seats blocked, and British Transport Police are reminding people to wear masks. They are providing free masks for customers in many stations and have mask vending machines available.
- There is a push to get people back onto trains. The trade association (the Rail Delivery Group) is exploring how to encourage people to come back to the rail system once it is deemed safe to do so.

*Update provided by Simon Abernethy, Transport for London*

- Added hand sanitizer stands, which are very popular. Some stands however, had been stolen or vandalized by those trying to gain access to the containers inside the stand.
- Passengers may need to be held (queued) to reduce number of people on trains. They are using stewards to manage queuing, and are trying to increase communications to passengers about why they may be held at a platform.
- The online training that is being done to identify warning signs of suicide and intervene is open for those interested.

## **Norway**

*Update provided by Tore Dyrhaug Mo, Norway*

- The Metro in Oslo are opening doors automatically so that no one has to press a button to enter or exit. Ticket controls were stopped when the lockdown started, because of the close distance this would have required between controller and riders. Many seats are marked “not in use” to ensure distancing while on board. People are asked not to travel unless it is necessary to avoid crowded trains.

## **Sweden**

*Update provided by Helena Rådbo, Trafikverket*

- Customers are able to buy a second ticket for the seat directly next to theirs for reduced cost to keep the seat next to them open. Many passengers have done this during their travels.

## **United States (US)**

*Update provided by Scott Gabree, Volpe Center*

- The US has searched publicly available data from US rail carriers to identify the types of strategies they are promoting to their ridership. The specifics of strategies vary widely by carrier. There are a few strategies that are almost universally implemented:
  - Increased cleaning and disinfecting (with various specific strategies)
  - Required mask wearing on trains and in stations
  - Suspending fare collection temporarily, and encouraging mobile or other paperless ticketing
  - Referring riders to official sources for health safety information
  - Other strategies include:
    - Monitoring schedules and ridership to facilitate capacity for distancing
    - Working with local businesses to stagger work hours
    - Many are focused on air filtration, including:
      - Extra ventilation to cycle air 50 times an hour
      - More effective air filters
    - UV filters
    - Some are providing masks or using mask vending machines
    - Some are marking off areas on the floor to assist with spacing
    - Some are blocking off seats, but some talked about challenges with enforcing or with individuals vandalizing the seat markers
    - Some mentioned providing hand sanitizer