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## **On Metro-North (and Other Commuter Lines) 'On Time' can mean Six Minutes Late: Cameron on Transportation**

**Author :** David Gurliacci

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Last spring, Japanese railroad officials [apologized for a huge mistake](#): one of their trains left a station 25 seconds early! This was the second time such an egregious error had been made and I imagine that the offenders were severely disciplined.

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Meanwhile back on Metro-North's New Haven line, the railroad's [latest OTP \(on time performance\) statistics](#) stand at about 82% — a new low.

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To make matters worse, what the Japanese railroads and MNRR consider “on time” are two different things. “On time” in Japan means the 7:12 am train departs at 7:12, not 7:11 (as in this horrendous incident which prompted the apology) nor at 7:13. “On time” means ON TIME.

Metro-North, however, defines a train is being on time if it arrives or departs within five minutes and 59 seconds of the scheduled time. So the train due in Grand Central at 8:45 a.m. is still “on time” in its record keeping if it pulls in just before 8:51 a.m.

On a train run averaging an hour from Connecticut to Grand Central Terminal, that's about a 10 percent margin of error — so their 82 percent “on time” record could really be much, much lower. What the exact “on time” stats are, they will not say.

But Metro-North is not alone in such squishy record keeping. Most commuter railroads in the U.S. also observe this 5:59 standard. And on Amtrak, it's even worse. On a short run (less than 250 miles), a train is on time if its 10 minutes late. Long distance trains (over 550 miles) are given a 31-minute leeway.

When trains are late, there is usually a good reason. For Metro-North it could be switch problems, overhead power lines (catenaries), track conditions and, of course, weather. And when one train is late, delays can cascade, just like a fender-bender on I-95 can create a huge backup.

But all of this is O.K. with me. I'd rather be safe than on-time.

We used to be able to always count on Metro-North to be on time and would schedule our travel accordingly, assuming no delays. And yes, the trains were on time something like 98 percent of all runs. But they were also unsafe and we didn't know it.

So if my train now is 5 or 10 minutes late, that's O.K. Because I took an earlier train just to be safe, I can handle the delay and still keep to my personal schedule.

Over the years I've found that when service on Metro-North is messed up, there's usually a valid explanation. While [commuters' tweets](#) are quick to assume it's stupidity or incompetence on the part of the railroad, it usually isn't. It's aging equipment or things beyond their control.

The men and women who work at Metro-North may not be rocket scientists, but I honestly believe most of them are trying their best.

While OTP on the railroad has been slipping, there is one area where we have seen a huge improvement: communications.

A small army of railroad people now work 24/7 to Tweet and e-mail every problem on every line. And they update the information, keeping us posted on delays. That's valuable information riders can use to make decisions, find alternatives and alert colleagues they may be late.

Let's give the railroad credit for doing this much right.

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*Jim Cameron has been a Darien resident for more than 25 years. He is the founder of the Commuter Action Group and also serves on the Darien RTM and as program director for Darien TV79. The opinions expressed in this column, republished with permission of Hearst CT Media, are only his own. You can reach him at [CommuterActionGroup@gmail.com](mailto:CommuterActionGroup@gmail.com).*