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Train Ticket Scofflaws Avoid Eye Contact With Conductors and Are Seldom Challenged: Cameron on Transportation

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In mass transit, there is no such thing as a free ride. But there are various ways of making sure everyone pays their fair share.

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For example, Connecticut's innovative bus rapid-transit system CTfastrak, which runs between New Britain, Hartford and Storrs, requires passengers to pay before they board.

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Riders can purchase tickets — \$1.75 for two hours of use — at the bus stations or online. This reduces the bus “dwell time” at each stop as passengers can board through any door. A similar system appears to be popular in New York City on “select” bus routes.

But without paying a fare to the bus driver as you board, how do they know you have a ticket? Ah, there's the rub. The “honor system” relies on “fare inspectors” making random checks. Getting caught without a valid ticket means a \$75 fine.

Though widely used in Europe, only a handful of U.S. transit systems have adopted the honor system for fare collection, including the San Diego Trolley and the MUNI light-rail in San Francisco. In Minneapolis, getting caught on a bus without a ticket is a \$180 lesson in doing the right thing.

In Los Angeles, the Metro had so many problems with free-loaders they finally converted to turnstiles. Even a \$250 ticket for fare evaders didn't encourage payment, resulting in a \$9 million loss in ticket sales. And the fare there is only \$1.75.

Fare evasion doesn't seem to be a problem on Metro-North. If you don't have a ticket, they'll just throw you off the train (at the next station, of course). Or get an MTA cop to issue a fine.

Up until a few years ago, you could buy a ticket on the train for the same fare as on the platform. That meant wasted time for conductors selling tickets and making change, and a “money room” at Grand Central processing \$1 million in cash each week.

Now if you don't have a ticket and buy one on the train, there's a \$5.75 to \$6.50 “service charge” — even on a \$2 ticket. Senior citizens get a break as do those boarding at stations that don't have ticket machines.

The good news is that on-board purchases can now be made by credit card.

The bigger problem on Metro-North is uncollected fares. The railroad admits it loses money by not collecting all tickets, but loses less money than it would cost to staff trains with enough conductors to collect them all.

Most infuriating is when trains from Grand Central leave the Stamford station. Everyone can see that dozens of commuters got off there and scores more got on the train. But the tickets of the new arrivals are often uncollected unless conductors issued seat checks to the original passengers who boarded in New York.

The conductors usually just walk through the cars asking for “Stamford tickets.” The scofflaws avoid eye contact, are seldom challenged, and ride for free.

Watching someone traveling from Stamford to Bridgeport, for example, get a “free ride” is like watching someone shoplift in a store. You just know you'll be paying more to subsidize their larceny with neglectful conductors as their willing accomplices.

Is it so much to ask that all passengers pay for their ride? Those of us who do, don't think so.

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