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The Cause Behind The Declining Quality of the New York City Subway

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Abstract

This paper is focused on what is the most important cause of the recent deterioration of the subway. I came in thinking that the main issue was gentrification and lack of compensating funding. I was surprised to discover the findings of my most informative source— a *Village Voice* report— pointed to a different direction. It convincingly argues, relying on internal MTA documents and testimony from conductors, that the installation of safety signals without updating the subway system as a whole has been the single biggest factor slowing down the subway. This doesn't mean the subway doesn't need a lot more funding and a major update or contradict the idea that increasing ridership from gentrification has sped up the deterioration of the subway. However, it does suggest that in the short term changing the MTA's approach to safety signals will be an important part of improving the subway. Ultimately however, there is no replacement for a large renovation program. Professor Kang from John Jay's political science department emphasized that Governor Cuomo has been a major political barrier to advocacy for this funding.

Keywords: Subway, MTA, Gentrification

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WA#2

Draft #3

4.22.18

I am curious about the factors that go into how the subway runs and why the subway has declined in quality in the last few years. I've read three articles on the topic, focusing primarily on a major in-depth investigation from the *Village Voice*. I also interviewed John Jay political science professor Susan Kang (susan.l.kang@gmail.com). My suspicion going into writing was that a combination of underfunding and gentrification were the main causes. That is, the subway has gained a lot more riders since gentrification of large swaths of Brooklyn had exploded. Meanwhile, funding of the subway for upkeep and maintenance hasn't meaningfully increased to compensate. While funding is certainly an issue, what I found surprised me. According to my main source, overcrowding wasn't as important as earlier reporting had made it seem. Rather, they've been installing safety signals that force conductors to go much slower. However, this does get back to funding as other countries have subways where subway car speeds are automatically controlled. New York City would need a massive overhaul to its subway in order to have automatic speed controls which no one is currently willing to fund.

In the last few years a popular narrative to explain subway delays has been overcrowding. The *New York Times* article "Every New York City Subway Line Is Getting Worse. Here's Why" by Emma G. Fitzsimmons et al. argues that the main cause of rising delays is overcrowding of the subway. It provides MTA statistics and quotes from MTA officials explaining how the large rise in passengers is the main culprit, not

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longstanding funding issues for the subway. The mechanism it points to is called “dwell time,” meaning the more people there are, the more time it takes to get them on and off the subway and thus the more time the subway spends at each station. This effect is compounded by the initial delays from overcrowding. The subway delay leads to even more people on the platform, which leads to more dwell time and more delays.

The Gordon (2018) *Village Voice* investigation published this year entitled “The Trains Are Slower Because They Slowed the Trains Down” disputes the interpretation presented in the *New York Times* article. It is based on internal MTA documents and argues that the cause for delays is signals installed for safety that don’t automatically control the subway train speed. According to the exposé, in order for conductors to avoid the heavy penalties from speeding, they go well below the speed limit. As the article title suggests, this means the trains have slowed down for the straightforward reason that the MTA has chosen to slow them down. Other countries deal with these safety issues by automatically controlling the subway’s speed, but the nearly century-old signal system in New York City makes that impossible.

Another key piece of evidence the *Village Voice* article points to is that the category of “overcrowding” is nebulous. Even the MTA recognized that this was true when it recently changed the name of the category to “overcrowding/insufficient capacity/other”. In other words, it is misleading to point to the rising importance of train delays labeled this way as evidence that “overcrowding” is the cause. This provides a clear way of understanding and assessing the relative merits of each explanation for the subway slowdown. How much of the growth in this “other” category can be explained by overcrowding versus the new installation of manual safety signals?

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The Gordon (2018) article thus helps us answer the question by providing a critical (but informed) interpretation of MTA official statistics and marshalling previously inaccessible evidence from within the MTA. This evidence is the testimony of subway conductors and key internal MTA documents. The evidence Gordon provided isn't completely convincing because he claims a full study of all safety signals and when they were installed hasn't been conducted. However, the article provides strong reasons to believe it over the MTA's official explanations.

I am convinced by the "safety signal" explanation of the recent subway slowdown provided by the article from the *Village Voice*. I was very surprised by its conclusions and learned a lot more about the New York City subway than I thought there was to know. However, I don't think this necessarily means that the solution is uninstalling these manual safety signals. The larger issue with the subway is how old the subway's signal system is. This in turn means that the main issue is still how underfunded the subway is and that there isn't federal funding for a massive upgrade to the subway. I also wonder if there still is no role for gentrification. Perhaps subway crowding isn't causing the immediate subway delays, but doesn't that mean that it isn't speeding up the deterioration of the subway system overall. This issue is crucial to the day-to-day lives of New Yorkers (as anyone at John Jay can attest), and for the sake of all of New York City, it's very important to adequately fund the subway and finally update our aging system. Professor Kang didn't disagree with the *Village Voice*, but she did emphasise that Governor Cuomo was a major barrier to getting the New York City subway more funding and has been so for a long time.

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