

TSA beefing up rail security ahead of Labor Day weekend

Cynthia Hodges
September 3, 2015

The Transportation Security Administration (TSA) and Amtrak announced an increase in security presence at U.S. rail stations for the busy Labor Day weekend after a thwarted attack by a heavily armed gunman on a high-speed train in Europe.

U.S. Department of Homeland Security Secretary, Jeh Johnson told reporters at Washington's Union Station on Thursday that passengers could expect to see more uniformed and canine officers in train stations nationwide as part of the periodic effort called Operation Rail Safe. Amtrak announced plans to step up security measures on its trains last week after an attack on a high-speed rail in France was thwarted on August 21, and ahead of Pope Francis' visit to the United States next month.

The United States Department of Homeland Security Inspector General has issued several reports evidencing security gaps in the nation's ground transportation system that continue to make trains vulnerable to terrorist attacks. Operation Rail Safe was developed in partnership by the Amtrak Police Department, New York City Police Department and the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) in 2010 and have expanded to large cities across the nation. Armed Amtrak security personnel perform random luggage searches at bustling hubs like Washington's Union Station or New York's Penn Station.

The Transportation Security Agency rolled out the controversial Visible Intermodal Prevention and Response (VIPR) teams, including federal, state and local law enforcement in 2009 and have gradually increased their presence near and even on buses, trains, ships, ferries, subways, and highways and cars across the nation over the last five years.

In November, 2014, the Chicago Transit Authority announced enhanced screening measures by Chicago police mobile units looking for explosives at some stations. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security funded screening initiative, CTA officials claimed would provide an extra level of protection against possible terrorist attacks. Similar initiatives have launched in other large cities including New York City, Los Angeles, and Washington, D.C..

The ACLU has declared the TSA VIPR program and similar intrusive policies "a direct assault on the Fourth Amendment." Patrick Eddington, a Policy Analyst in Homeland Security and Civil Liberties at the Cato Institute argues that warrantless searches and internal checkpoints are

characteristics of totalitarian political systems and no place in a truly functional democratic republic.