

Report shows advanced decay of New York City subway stations

By Isaac Finn
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Last month, the New York State Comptroller's office released a report, "NYC Subway Station Conditions," detailing the widespread disrepair within the city's subway system, the largest in the United States, which transports over 5.7 million people on an average weekday. According to the report, only 31 stations of 472 had "all of their structural components in good repair."

While the report does not come as a surprise, the statistics do highlight a widespread deterioration of public infrastructure within the most populous American city and the center of global finance. Over the past year there have been several incidents of debris falling from station ceilings and elevated trains onto riders and cars.

The report largely focuses on the widespread decay of structural components—which includes parts of the station platforms, stairs and ventilation—and architectural components—such as lighting and ceiling, floor, and wall tiles—over a five-year period from 2012 to 2017. The information is based on data collected by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) during its last inspection in 2017. It does not consider repairs or further deterioration of stations over the past two years.

Despite omitting mention of any politician or major event, the report is an indictment of the failure of both the state's Democratic Governor, Andrew Cuomo, and the city's Democratic Mayor, Bill de Blasio, to address the crisis within the subway system. The report, in fact, reveals a subway system that in many ways is in a greater state of disrepair than it was in 2012, when many stations were flooded during Hurricane Sandy.

The report notes, "only 26 of the 471 subway stations in operation at the time of the survey had all of their structural and architectural components in good repair,

half as many as in 2012." Over the same time period, the Bronx and Queens, two of the city's outer boroughs, saw their share of structural components in disrepair increase by 34 percent and 44 percent respectively.

The New York State Comptroller Tom DiNapoli, who released the report, noted that "[y]ears of underfunding for the MTA capital program has translated into a longer list of needed repairs in New York City's subway stations, fewer stations in good condition, and ever-increasing rider aggravation."

The data used in the report was gathered in the middle of the 2015-2019 capital improvement plan—which included station reconstruction as well as purchase of new subway cars, the replacement of tunnel lighting, tracks, switches and the upgrade of power facilities. The plan's funding saw a shortfall of \$15.2 billion out of \$32.1 billion because both Cuomo and de Blasio agreed to make completely inadequate contributions to the fund. The MTA has stated that they only received about \$11.3 billion.

Details for a 2020-2024 capital plan will be announced in October. Already, Cuomo and sections of the mainstream media have attempted to blame the funding issues on transit workers having "excessive overtime," and pit riders and transit workers against each other. The MTA has proposed a contract with the Transport Workers Union Local 100, which the union will work to implement in the face of opposition from its members, that greatly increases the number of outside contracts, relaxes work rules and calls for a wage increase that will not keep pace with the rate of inflation.

It is the decision of Democratic and Republican politicians to underfund the system that has resulted in widespread disrepair and even put commuters in

danger. DiNapoli, referring to the station report, noted, “The rising number of potentially hazardous worn or damaged platform edges is particularly troubling.”

According to the report, between 2012 and 2017 the percentage of platform edges that were worn or damaged increased from 43 to 65 percent over the same time period. Damaged platform edges pose a serious risk as it increases the likelihood of riders falling onto the tracks.

The report also notes that “one-third of tiles or other finishing on platform floors, walls and ceilings were worn or damaged,” which is the same as in 2012.

There has been a series of incidents of debris falling onto riders waiting for trains, or people and cars passing under elevated lines. On July 22, Afnan Perviaz was struck in the head by a falling metal panel while waiting for a train at the Dekalb Avenue station. Perviaz, who suffered a slight concussion, later told Pix11 that a doctor “said I’m lucky that the corner of it didn’t hit me on my head otherwise I most likely would have died.”

In June 2018 a similar incident occurred when the ceiling of the Brooklyn Borough Hall subway station collapsed, raining down chunks of plaster and other debris on riders waiting for their train and knocked down a light fixture. In this incident only one person was injured.

In February a wooden beam from the 7 train elevated track in Queens crashed through a car’s windshield in Queens just inches from the driver’s seat. Within two weeks a rusted piece of metal fell from the 7 line and shattered a moving car’s windshield. In both cases no one was injured. In response to these events, the MTA announced a \$4.6 million pilot program to install netting under certain sections of elevated track to catch debris.

A separate report issued by District 9 International Union of Painters and Allied Trades in early 2017 exposed that paint on the 7 train track contained more than 40 times the legal threshold for lead. It is well documented that exposure to any amount of lead is unsafe. Exposure to lead is associated in a wide range of physical and mental disabilities, including abdominal pain, depression, and learning disabilities in children. The paint was allowed to flake for years, exposing working class communities to the known neurotoxin. The MTA announced last year that it would

initiate a \$43 million plan to remove all the lead paint over a two-year period.

The conditions of the New York subway system reflect a national infrastructure in an advanced state of decay that regularly puts workers’ lives at risk during their daily commute, at their jobs or even in their own homes. According to a report by the American Society of Civil Engineers in 2017, the US needs to spend roughly \$4.5 trillion by 2025 to improve roads, bridges, dams, airports, schools and other facilities. Among other communities across the US, residents in Flint, Michigan and Newark, New Jersey have been exposed to lead for years through contaminated drinking water.

Any attempt to address the crumbling infrastructure would require a massive redistribution of wealth from the top echelons of society and toward critical development programs. Such a policy could only be implemented in direct opposition to the Democrats and Republicans, who have allowed subways, roads and pipes to deteriorate for decades.

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