R&D Programme: Research Brief

Improving the content and placement of anti-trespass signs (T555)

Background
This project arose as result of a fatal accident to a trespassing and fun-seeking teenager who was killed when he was hit by a train. The victim’s mother proposed that trespass might be more effectively deterred if a ‘do not trespass’ sign were placed. Although there was adequate fencing at the point by which he gained access, his mother proposed that had there been a warning sign at the point of entry this might have acted as an additional deterrent.

Aims
The project’s objectives were:
- to establish the extent to which current ‘do not trespass’ signs convey the consequences of trespass effectively
- to investigate whether the current placement arrangements of ‘do not trespass’ signs is effective
- to develop and test alternative, more explicit, ‘do not trespass’ signs
- to look at the benefits of extending the provision of the signs to other locations where those intent on trespass access the railway.

Methods
The study approach comprised three main phases:
- an inception phase, encompassing the review of existing knowledge and leading to the development of messages and images for testing
- qualitative research amongst the target audience, in the form of focus groups
- analysis, recommendations and the drafting of a protocol for practitioners.

Findings
For the young people within the research base of this project, a number of factors led to them trespassing within the railway environment. Principal amongst these was a desire to find something to do and somewhere to do it. For younger children, the motivation was a place to play; older children and teenagers in particular came to the railway as a space where they can be themselves, away from parents and other adults. Once within the railway environment, it is easier for them to get drawn into more dangerous areas. Whilst education, enforcement and signage will help to deter them, this is not a railway industry problem, rather a community one, potentially best tackled through a multi-agency approach to solve the underlying issues.

The research uncovered a disappointing lack of awareness to the dangers of trespass on the railway. In particular, parents themselves acknowledged that they had not perhaps fully communicated the dangers to their children. This suggests that there may be scope for a campaign amongst parents of young children to improve their awareness of the dangers on the railway and thus deter their children from trespassing.
Initial learning should then be reinforced through ‘top-up’ campaigns as children grow older, provided that messages are kept simple, and credible and maintain the impact.

The risk of being caught by the police has the power to act as a real deterrent in some areas but only if the risk is seen as real. This suggests that the stepping up of police patrols and monitoring of CCTV has the potential to reduce the incidence of teenage trespass, provided that offenders are apprehended and publicly dealt with.

The potential of signs to change behaviour in the absence of any other activity is limited. However, where there is already a basic understanding of the dangers of trespass, signs have the power to activate a wider recall of things already learned and understood. In order to have maximum effectiveness with this particular target audience, signs should carry simple, relevant messages, such as ‘danger of death’ together with an image that speaks directly of the consequences of trespass, for example, a pictogram of a person horizontal from the impact with a train.

A number of potential improvements to existing signage were identified through the focus groups. These include ensuring that warning signs carry the image of a person, and specifically, an image which is relevant to young people and changing the wording of standard signs to be much more direct. This is particularly appropriate to the current platform end signs. It is important, however, that in making any changes, the impact on the wider population not included in the research is also borne in mind.

Trespassers are entering onto the railway environment at a wide range of locations. Identifying and covering all entry points is likely to be impracticable. Moreover, trespassers are often reluctant to divulge their ‘secret’ place to others (even to other trespassers). Tackling stations which are unstaffed for all or part of the day, or where platforms are out of sight of ticket offices, appears to be an obvious starting point. Other high risk areas appear to be where rail lines run adjacent to open land or parks within an urban area. Obvious access routes (for example, access tracks used by maintenance workers) could be another target. However, evidence suggests that trespass is extremely widespread across the railway network and entry points are numerous.

It may, therefore, be more productive to focus efforts on more effective signage at platform ends and at known trouble spots.

Next steps

The research clearly indicates that improvements could be made to the current signage that may have benefits in reducing trespass amongst children and teenagers, although no single design was identified as being fully effective.

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