



BETSY GOTBAUM
PUBLIC ADVOCATE FOR THE CITY OF NEW YORK
Solving Problems • Protecting New Yorkers

[HOME](#)[SERVICES](#)[NEWS](#)[POLICY](#)[ABOUT](#)[Contact Us](#)

POLICY

[Policy Guide](#)[Reports](#)[Speeches](#)[Legislative Initiatives](#)

Reports

Payphone Plight

The Office of the Public Advocate recently conducted a survey of the condition of payphones within the New York subway system. Everyone has experienced the frustration of needing to use a payphone and realizing it was broken. Although cellular phones are in great use across the city, not everyone owns one, and generally they do not work below ground. In addition to convenience issues, payphones must be available for New Yorkers to use to report any suspicious activity to authorities.

To study the problem, 10 stations were selected from the boroughs of Manhattan, the Bronx, Queens, and Brooklyn; 40 stations in total. These stops were selected to represent both a geographic sampling of the city subways as well as a mix of stations that had many connections and stations that serviced only one line. Within this framework, the choice of stops was random. Because Staten Island only has one railway line with few stops compared to subways in the other four boroughs, only four stations were selected to represent the borough. However, a Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) representative informed our surveyor that no Staten Island stations have payphones within the turnstiles except for the St. George stop. Therefore, only the phones at the St. George stop were surveyed in Staten Island.

The study was conducted to test for several categories of payphone performance. These categories included presence a dial tone; if a quarter was accepted (nothing blocking entry and coin accepted by the phone); if the quarter was returned when coin return lever pressed; if the initiated call successfully went through; and if all of the essential parts of the phone were clean. The office surveyed only phones that were within the station and past turnstiles, indicating that a passenger would have to have already paid his or her fare to use them.

Findings

In the 41 stations visited, 206 phones were surveyed.

No Dial Tone. From our data, we discovered that 15 percent of phones in city subways surveyed had no dial tone. The Bronx's phones were the worst: 22 percent of phones surveyed had no dial tone.

Calls Initiated but Unable to Be Completed. Citywide, 4 percent of phones surveyed, though having a dial tone, were unable to complete calls for other reasons, including only allowing calls to

911, no registration of quarters taken by machine or no registration of phone numbers dialed. Staten Island was the worst of these, with 10 percent of its phones unable to complete calls for these reasons.

Dirty Phones. Dirty phones were also a problem. Although citywide only 13 percent of phones were described as dirty, 35 percent of pay phones in Brooklyn were considered dirty. The main cause of dirty phones was gum on the receiver.

Stolen Change. Citywide, 11 percent of phones did not return the change inserted into the phone. 17 percent of the phones in Queens exhibited this fault, making it the worst offender.

Take My Money, Please! The last category, phones that were unable to accept the change, was seen in 12 percent of the phones surveyed. The Bronx was the worst in this category, with 22 percent of phones unable to accept change.

.....

[Back to top](#)

The Public Advocate's Office • 1 Centre Street, 15th Floor • New York, NY 10007 • **General Inquiries:** (212) 669-7250 • **Ombudsman Services:** (212) 669-7250 • Fax: (212) 669-4091