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Publication Date

2021-04-01

DOI

10.17610/T6PC83

Homelessness in Transit Environments: Survey Findings

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April 2021

Issue

Shelter is a basic human need. Yet more than half a million individuals experience homelessness every single night in the U.S. In the last decade, homeless counts have risen in many U.S. metropolitan areas, despite efforts and funding to address the issue. The limited capacity of shelters and other social service agencies to meet the needs of a rapidly growing homeless population has forced many individuals experiencing homelessness to look for shelter in various public spaces. Without other options, many turn to transit vehicles, bus stops, and transit stations. Many also use transit to reach destinations such as workplaces, shelters, and community service centers. With affordable housing scarce in some metropolitan areas and the scale of the homelessness crisis often surpassing the capacities of existing safety nets, transit operators face the crisis in their work. They must implement policy measures from realms beyond transportation to address them.

The COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated these problems. Fear of infection in homeless shelters and reduced capacity due to physical distancing requirements are driving more unhoused people to take shelter on the streets as well as in transit settings.

To explore these issues, the researchers surveyed 142 staff at 115 U.S. and Canadian transit agencies inquiring about the extent of homelessness on their systems and the actions they employ in response.

Main Findings

Extent of Homelessness

- Homelessness is present across U.S. and Canadian transit systems, with 51% of responding agencies reporting at

least 100 unhoused people on their system daily. A small share of agencies (16%) report 500 unhoused people or more; these are mostly large agencies from the West Coast or Mountain West.

- More people are reported to be experiencing homelessness in transit settings now than before the pandemic.
- Centrally located major bus hubs, intermodal stations, and transit centers are hotspots for homelessness. Buses are the most common mode for transit homelessness (See Figure 1).

Challenges

- Most agencies view the extent of homelessness on their system as a challenge — increasingly so since the pandemic.
- The most highly reported challenges include other riders' concerns about unhoused individuals, lack of funding, lack of government support, and unclear or undeveloped policies on how to address homelessness. The severity of these challenges seems to have worsened since a prior survey in 2016.

Responses

- Staff consider responding to homelessness as a rather important — albeit not their most important — priority, rating it 3.5 out of 5.
- Only 19% of agencies (mostly large operators) have developed formal response policies.
- Even without formal policies, agencies take measures in response to homelessness: enforcement, such as requiring disembarking at ends of lines (67%), “hostile

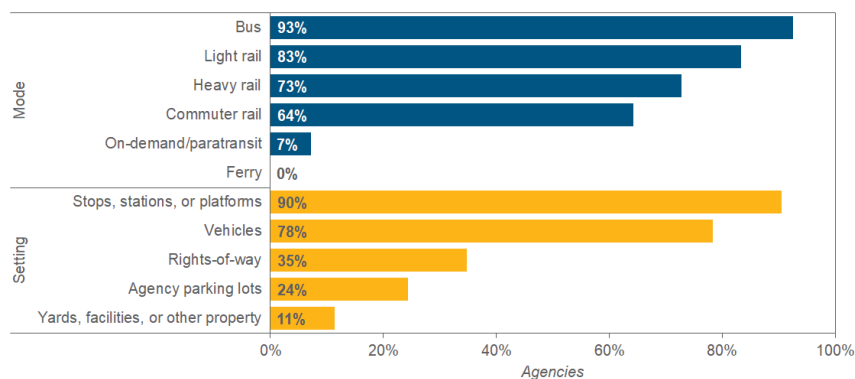


Figure 1: Settings where Agencies Mostly See People Experiencing Homelessness

architecture” (50%), and enforcement of anti-loitering laws (49%), and outreach/services, such as discounted/free fares to unhoused riders (31%) and use of vehicles/facilities as heating/cooling centers (24%).

- The pandemic has caused 41% of agencies to rethink or develop new policies, 29% to intensify responses, and 29% to start new partnerships and strategies to address homelessness.
- Very few agencies receive external funding or have dedicated staff to address homelessness. However, 53% offer training to front-line employees.
- Most agencies (86%) partner with external entities to respond to homelessness, including law enforcement (69%), public social service agencies (58%), and/or nonprofit or private organizations (51%).
- Most agencies consider their responses somewhat successful (42%) or neutral (37%).

Conclusion

- A shift toward outreach over enforcement strategies, as well as partnerships with other agencies, organizations,

and nonprofits, may be occurring and has promise in responding to homelessness in transit environments. Partnerships can help provide a more comprehensive response to homelessness, lead to cost-sharing and added resources, and improve the welfare of unhoused riders.

- Given the dearth of external funding, the transit industry should consider lobbying legislators and policymakers for grants to respond to the homelessness crisis.
- Centering the mobility and wellbeing of unhoused riders fits within transit’s social service role and will improve outcomes for them and for all riders.

More Information

This policy brief is drawn from the “Homelessness in Transit Environments: Volume I, Findings from a Survey of Public Transit Operators” research report by the UCLA Institute of Transportation Studies. The full report can be found at www.its.ucla.edu/publication/homelessness_in_transit_environments.

Further Sources

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Research presented in this policy brief was made possible through funding received by the University of California Institute of Transportation Studies (UC ITS) from the State of California through the Public Transportation Account and the Road Repair and Accountability Act of 2017 (Senate Bill 1). The UC ITS is a network of faculty, research and administrative staff, and students dedicated to advancing the state of the art in transportation engineering, planning, and policy for the people of California. Established by the Legislature in 1947, the UC ITS has branches at UC Berkeley, UC Davis, UC Irvine, and UCLA.

Project ID UC-ITS-2021-13 | DOI: 10.17610/T6PC83