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Homelessness in Transit Environments Volume II: Transit Agency Strategies and Responses

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**Publication Date**

2021-05-01

Institute of
Transportation
Studies

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# Homelessness in Transit Environments

## Volume II: Transit Agency Strategies and Responses

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May 2021

UCLA Institute of
Transportation Studies

# Technical Report Documentation Page

| 1. Report No.<br>UC-ITS-2021-54 | 2. Government Accession No.<br>N/A | 3. Recipient's Catalog No.<br>N/A |
|---|---|---|
| 4. Title and Subtitle<br><br>Homelessness in Transit Environments<br>Volume II: Transit Agency Strategies and Responses | | 5. Report Date<br>May 2021 |
| | | 6. Performing Organization Code<br>UCLA ITS |

| 7. Author(s)<br><br>Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris, Ph.D., _https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0186-4751_;<br>Jacob Wasserman, _https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2212-5798_; Ryan Caro,<br>_https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2795-7270_; Hao Ding, _https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5286-3367_ | 8. Performing Organization Report No.<br>N/A |
|---|---|

| 9. Performing Organization Name and Address<br><br>337 Charles E. Young Drive East<br>UCLA Institute of Transportation Studies<br>Public Affairs Building 3320<br>Los Angeles, CA 90095-1656 | 10. Work Unit No.<br>N/A |
|---|---|
| | 11. Contract or Grant No.<br>UC-ITS-2021-54 |
| 12. Sponsoring Agency Name and Address<br><br>The University of California Institute of Transportation Studies<br><br>www.ucits.org | 13. Type of Report and Period Covered<br>Final Report (May 2020 - May 2021) |
| | 14. Sponsoring Agency Code<br>UC ITS |

**16. Abstract**

Transit settings represent sites of visible homelessness, especially since the advent of COVID-19, for many of the over 500,000 Americans unhoused each night. This report seeks to understand the scale of homelessness on transit and how transit agencies are responding to the problem. Part I describes the extent of homelessness on transit in several areas by using count data and synthesizing prior research. We find that transit serves as shelter for a high, though quite variable, share of unsheltered individuals, who are more likely than their unhoused peers elsewhere to be chronically unhoused and structurally disadvantaged. Part II provides detailed case studies of strategies taken by transit agencies around the country: hub of services, mobile outreach, discounted fares, and transportation to shelters. We summarize each strategy's scope, implementation, impact, challenges, and lessons learned. Reviewing these strategies, we find value in collecting data more systematically, fostering external partnerships, keeping law enforcement distinct from routine homeless outreach, educating the public, and training transit staff—all in the context of a broader need for more housing and services.

| 17. Key Words<br><br>transit, homelessness, pandemic, COVID-19 | 18. Distribution Statement<br><br>no restrictions |
|---|---|
| 19. Security Classification (of this report)<br><br>unclassified | 20. Security Classification (of this page)<br><br>unclassified |

| 19. Security Classification (of this report) | 20. Security Classification (of this page) | 21. No. of Pages | 21. Price |
|---|---|---|---|
| unclassified | unclassified | 116 | N/A |

Form Dot F 1700.7 (8-72)  Reproduction of completed page authorized.

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# Acknowledgments

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# Homelessness in Transit Environments

## Volume II: Transit Agency Strategies and Responses

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**May 2021**

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# Executive Summary

# Introduction

In the U.S., over 500,000 people lack a stable roof over their heads on any given night (U.S. HUD, 2020). With few other places for unhoused individuals to turn, transit settings such as buses, train cars, bus stops, and train stations often represent sites of visible homelessness in U.S. cities, especially since the advent of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. This study aims to understand the scale of homelessness on transit and how transit agencies are responding to the problem.

Volume I of the study reported the findings from a survey of transit operators regarding the extent of homelessness on their systems, the challenges they face in responding to homelessness, and what actions they are taking (Loukaitou-Sideris et al., 2020). A key finding from Volume I is that the lack of data about the numbers and locations of unhoused riders, combined with a lack of evaluation and information-sharing on response strategies, represents a challenge for agencies wishing to address homelessness on their systems. Volume II aims to address these issues. Part I of this volume describes the extent of homelessness on transit in several major metropolitan areas using actual count data and a synthesis of prior research. Part II provides detailed case studies of strategies taken by several agencies around the country in response to homelessness on transit. These strategies can be categorized into four main types: hub of services, mobile outreach, discounted fares, and transportation to shelters.

# Part I. Documenting Homelessness on Transit

As policymakers, transit operators, and other stakeholders consider strategies for responding to homelessness on transit, they must first ascertain its extent. Unfortunately, there are currently little data and few prior studies in the academic and professional literatures on this basic question. Nonetheless, reviewing published and unpublished studies of the extent and contours of homelessness in transit environments, we find that homelessness on transit is a well-known phenomenon and is acknowledged as a challenge by most U.S. transit operators. Existing evidence demonstrates that transit serves as shelter for a high, though quite variable, share of unsheltered individuals. And while homelessness on transit is a subset of a larger societal issue, the people experiencing homelessness on transit differ in important ways from the overall unhoused population. From the limited available literature, those experiencing homelessness in transit settings are more likely than their unhoused peers elsewhere to be chronically unhoused and structurally disadvantaged across a number of socio-economic axes. For instance, various surveys have shown that those sheltering on transit are more likely than other unhoused people to be men, to be Black, to have low incomes, to have experienced homelessness for at least a year, to have been incarcerated, or to have a mental illness.

While transit settings are sometimes explicitly included in censuses of unsheltered people, very few agencies take systematic counts. From those areas and operators whose data we could obtain, we conclude that transit settings are commonly used by unsheltered individuals experiencing homelessness. In Minneapolis and New York City, for instance, counts over a number of years found over half of unsheltered individuals in transit settings. Differences in data collection methodologies, however, make it difficult to compare the extent of homelessness on transit among cities, while differences in weather and climate, service hours, and the amount of shelter space available further complicate comparisons. While New York City and Minneapolis count higher percentages of unhoused people on transit than Los Angeles or San Francisco, perhaps because of their colder climate or because of 24-hour transit service, they have much lower shares of *unsheltered* people overall. Meanwhile, during the COVID-19 pandemic, most agencies reported an anecdotal increase in the number of unhoused people on transit (See Volume I) (Loukaitou-Sideris et al., 2020). Data from Los Angeles Metro (LA Metro) bear

out these reports, though Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) in the San Francisco Area, which does not run bus service and never suspended fare enforcement, did not experience an increase.

How should operators best count people experiencing homelessness on transit? Interviewed staff at BART and LA Metro mentioned two different types of counts: point-in-time counts and continuous sampling. Large-scale point-in-time counts involve counting all unhoused riders on the system (or at least at key stations) during a short interval of time. The second method consists of agency staff continuously sampling a set of transit vehicles and stops at multiple times of day or days of the week and then statistically extrapolating the total count for the whole system. The absolute numbers provided by point-in-time counts allow for better agency resource planning, but sampling can cover a greater range of settings, times of day, and days of the week and may better ascertain the effects of homelessness on operations and ridership. Under either method, counting unhoused riders is not a black-and-white task and requires informed criteria and training.

# Part II. Strategies for Responding to Homelessness on Transit

Given the increasing prevalence of homelessness in cities and their transit systems, many transit agencies must address its impact on their service, while at the same time upholding their social responsibility to serve all their riders, housed and unhoused. Past research has demonstrated a general trend for transit agencies to combine enforcement and punitive actions with outreach efforts in addressing homelessness. While the former mostly remove and displace people experiencing homelessness from transit environments, outreach efforts aim to reduce homelessness by connecting unhoused riders with social services and opportunities for shelter and housing. A common challenge faced by transit agencies trying to address homelessness is the lack of external funding and other resources. Yet, the more fundamental challenge is that homelessness is a societal problem that is largely beyond the control of transit agencies. Thus, agencies often rely on partnerships with other organizations as a way to augment their resources and more effectively respond to homelessness on their systems.

In Part II of the report, we document and analyze case studies of strategies adopted by several agencies to address homelessness. These agencies were selected based on a nationwide survey (presented in Volume I), which identified operators that had implemented specific programs to address homelessness on their systems (Loukaitou-Sideris et al., 2020). We followed up and interviewed relevant staff from these agencies and from other partnering organizations to learn how each strategy was initiated and carried out, what impact it has resulted in, the challenges it has encountered (especially since the pandemic began), and the lessons learned during its implementation. The identified programs vary in terms of scope, impact, resource burden, and organizational complexity. We have categorized them into a few major strategies: hub of services, mobile outreach (both smaller clinician/social worker programs and larger, comprehensive strategies), discounted fares, and transportation to shelters. Each strategy is presented as a synthesis of similar programs adopted by different agencies across the country.

## Hub of Services

Given the uneven distribution of unhoused people and need for services on many transit systems, some agencies have begun concentrating services in one place as well. This strategy, hub of services, concentrates a variety of outreach resources and services for unhoused riders in one or more central points in the city, at or near a major transit facility and easily accessible via the transit network. The most successful and comprehensive example of a concentration of services strategy is the Hub of Hope in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, a partnership between the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA), the City of Philadelphia, and Project HOME, a

local nonprofit. Located at a downtown central transit station, the Hub of Hope offers a variety of services to people experiencing homelessness, including case management, showers, laundry, snacks, primary medical care, and limited behavioral and dental health care. The Hub also offers transportation to shelters and outreach teams in surrounding areas through its many partnerships with service providers, government departments, law enforcement, and more. The Hub offers valuable lessons for other operators on its wide range of external partnerships, its emphasis on training and trauma-informed care, and its concentration of many important services for unhoused riders in one central, accessible location.

## Mobile Outreach: Smaller Clinician/Social Worker Programs

In contrast to the Hub of Hope's model of centralized services, a number of transit agencies have adopted various mobile outreach strategies across their systems. The make-up, size, budget, and other details of these teams vary across the agencies studied, but each involves staff moving throughout the transit system to literally meet unhoused riders where they are and provide them services or connections/referrals to services. We explored two smaller but growing programs, one offered by the Sacramento Regional Transit District (SacRT) in Sacramento, California and the other offered by the Denver Regional Transportation District (RTD) in Denver, Colorado. At SacRT, an intern from a local Master of Social Work program rides with transit police officers to meet with people experiencing homelessness when there is a call for assistance. She speaks with the individuals (including those identified on a list of "top ten" chronic offenders on transit), offers them services, and connects with their case manager, if possible. At Denver RTD, a full-time mental health clinician from a regional mental health center rides along with security staff on the transit system to de-escalate confrontations and link people with shelter services and counseling. Since the pandemic, the clinician has operated without accompanying police officers and has received more calls. In both cases, the new model of outreach teams is beginning to result in improved outcomes.

## Mobile Outreach: Comprehensive Outreach Programs

In California, the state with the highest concentration of unsheltered people experiencing homelessness, transit operators are particularly attuned to the challenge of homelessness on their systems and have sought to develop responses. LA Metro in Southern California and a partnership between BART and SFMTA in Northern California have launched comprehensive outreach programs, on the same general model as those in the previous section but of a larger scale.

As a key part of its comprehensive homelessness response program initiated in 2017, LA Metro has deployed four sets of mobile outreach teams: three run by law enforcement agencies and one by the social service agency People Assisting the Homeless (PATH). These teams vary somewhat in the number and type of personnel, but all include staff trained for interactions with people experiencing homelessness and tasked with referring unhoused people to services, working with back-office staff to place them into housing, and de-escalating situations on the system. In April 2020, in response to the increased number of unhoused people turning to transit for shelter during the pandemic, LA Metro also initiated "Operation Shelter the Unsheltered," in which police officers and PATH staff at key end-of-line stations ask unsheltered riders to disembark and offer to provide resources to those seeking shelter. Through its contract with PATH, LA Metro is able to provide temporary shelter in motels for its most vulnerable riders. From LA Metro's performance data, we compared the outcomes of the different outreach teams—a unique opportunity, as the programs were all in operation at the same time and on the same system— and found that the civilian PATH partnership appears to be the most cost-effective and also the most effective in placing unsheltered individuals in housing, especially since the pandemic.

The Bay Area's transit regional homeless outreach program has, since November 2017, also deployed outreach teams, first in downtown San Francisco (as a partnership between BART and SFMTA) and later expanded by BART into other parts of the Bay Area. These Homeless Outreach Teams (HOT) each consist of two civilian

outreach workers with crisis intervention training, who respond to dispatch calls and assist and connect people experiencing homelessness on BART to shelters and other services. These teams are part of BART's broader efforts that also include "Pit Stop" restrooms, elevator attendants, unarmed transit ambassadors, and anti-fare-evasion efforts.

## Discounted Fares

While the prior strategies aim at the housing and health needs of unhoused riders (and the safety of all riders), this next strategy specifically focuses on the *mobility* of unhoused riders. Some transit agencies provide reduced or free fares to assist people experiencing homelessness and enable them to travel on their systems. Three of the agencies whose staff we interviewed—the King County Department of Metro Transit (King County Metro) in Seattle, Washington; the Tri-County Metropolitan Transportation District (TriMet) in Portland, Oregon; and the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency (SFMTA) in San Francisco, California—have such programs. King County Metro sells paper bus tickets at a 90% discount to local social service agencies addressing homelessness and is exploring adding smart-card passes in the future. TriMet provides free and reduced-cost transit tickets to over 90 organizations in its region to cover emergency transportation costs for people in crisis or with immediate need. Finally, SFMTA provides two-year free transit passes to unhoused people who register with the City's Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing, which in turn connects and provides those individuals with services and housing assistance. While discount fare programs do not diminish the number of people experiencing homelessness on transit systems, they nevertheless offer an important service to those unhoused individuals who participate.

## Transportation to Shelters

Discounted fares increase the mobility of those experiencing homelessness to destinations already served by transit. However, some operators also seek to expand the access of unhoused individuals to particular destinations particularly relevant for them, namely shelters. Programs that offer free transportation to homeless shelters are one of the most direct ways that transit operators can aid those experiencing homelessness.

A smaller operator, Metro Transit in Madison, Wisconsin, established a program to provide transportation between daytime and nighttime shelters for people experiencing homelessness. This emergency operation during the COVID-19 pandemic transported people between a daytime shelter in downtown Madison and a nighttime shelter on the north side of the city, which was not easily accessible through public transit, especially for people carrying their belongings. Meanwhile, on the largest transit operator in the U.S., New York City's Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), the City's Department of Social Services has partnered with a nonprofit to engage with people experiencing homelessness at the end of lines, transporting them to shelters and connecting them to resources. The program greatly expanded when the subway ceased operating 24/7 in May 2020. In Los Angeles, LA Metro's outreach teams provide transport to motels for those experiencing homelessness, where they can spend the night, while teams stationed at the ends of major lines offer free bus transportation in the evenings to open shelter beds. And under Denver's Support Team Assisted Response (STAR) pilot program, a mental health clinician and a paramedic dispatched by 911 ride around on a repurposed van, respond to low-level behavioral health crises situations in the downtown area and in transit settings, and offer transportation to shelters and hospitals and connections to community organizations and resources.

# Reflections

Reviewing these strategies and considering their applicability for transit operators across North America, we conclude that:

- Data collection on homelessness in transit environments, though rarely done today, is key to understanding the contours of the challenge. Longitudinal data collected at regular intervals with consistent methodology can help agencies to understand if new challenges are arising or if outreach is working and can enable data-driven policymaking.

- Strategies should be tailored to available budgets but also to the specific physical and social context. In the largest urban areas, multiple strategies could be implemented in concert in different areas or at different times of day.

- Keeping law enforcement distinct from routine homeless outreach appears to be a more effective outreach strategy. Separating homeless outreach from law enforcement, and keeping law enforcement focused on other, more pertinent tasks, may increase the rate of successful outcomes (as the comparison between LA Metro's different programs demonstrates) and can help build trust between unhoused riders and outreach staff. Interestingly, a number of the police officials we interviewed also discussed the benefits of doing so and described civilian homeless outreach as an efficient use of transit or police budgets and a good way to promote public safety.

- In line with transit's social service role, operators should focus on providing their core transportation services to both housed and unhoused riders. Unhoused riders also need transit to access jobs, shelters, medical appointments, food, and social events. Providing them with free or discounted fares allows them to access these needs more easily. Since many unhoused people are already skirting around fare collection due to their inability to pay, agencies are not forfeiting much revenue by providing them free fares. Providing free fares both allows unhoused people to use transit with less threat of an unnecessary run-in with station staff, bus drivers, fare enforcement officers, or police and also makes it easier for bus drivers, who often find themselves having to resolve altercations over this issue.

- The transit industry cannot do it alone when it comes to responding to homelessness. Successful external partnerships are behind all of the case studies presented in this volume and are key in almost any agency effort to respond to homelessness. External partners can fill crucial knowledge and skill gaps, bring in additional resources for transit agencies, and help make a powerful public case for the importance of the issue and the need for greater funding.

- Transit agencies often balance the concerns and fears of their housed riders with their efforts to also serve their unhoused riders. Operators often face complaints and pressure to simply sweep unsheltered individuals away from their system. However, experience has shown that this is not an effective strategy. Public information campaigns are then important to educate housed riders about an agency's outreach operations. Likewise, training bus drivers on how to best handle interactions with unhoused riders is critical.

- Homelessness represents a failure of our society to take care of and respond to the plight faced by its most unfortunate members. Transit is a public service and the transit industry should uphold its social purpose and contribute to the welfare and mobility of unhoused riders. It is clear, however, that the industry is dealing with the downstream effects of a structural problem. Ultimately, if we are serious in trying to help people experiencing homelessness, we need more housing and services for them.

# Introduction

Transit settings often represent sites of visible homelessness in many U.S. cities, especially since the advent of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. This study aims to understand the scale of homelessness on transit and how transit agencies are responding to the problem. Volume I of the study reported the findings from a survey of transit operators regarding the extent of homelessness on their systems, the challenges they face in responding to homelessness, and what actions they are taking (Loukaitou-Sideris et al., 2020). A key finding from Volume I is that the lack of data about the numbers and locations of unhoused riders, combined with a lack of evaluation and information-sharing on response strategies, represents a challenge for agencies wishing to address homelessness on their systems. Very few agencies collect counts, and most responding agencies could only provide perceived estimates of numbers of people experiencing homelessness on their systems. While many agencies acknowledge that homelessness is a significant challenge for the operation of their service, this lack of accurate data, combined with a general absence of formal response strategies and policies, hinders agency efforts. Relatedly agencies often lack knowledge and guidance shared among them on how to best address homelessness on their systems.

Volume II aims to address these issues. Part I of this volume describes the extent of homelessness on transit in several major metropolitan areas using actual count data and a synthesis of prior research. Part II then provides detailed case studies of strategies taken by several agencies around the country in response to homelessness on transit. These agencies were identified based on survey data presented in Volume I. We followed up with relevant staff in these agencies and interviewed them to find out each program's design, impacts, challenges (especially since the pandemic began), and lessons learned. These programs vary in terms of scope, partnerships involved, impact on people experiencing homelessness, and resource burden. They can be categorized into four main types: hub of services, mobile outreach, discounted fares, and transportation to shelters. Each strategy type is presented as a case study with description of how it works and discussion of the lessons learned from its implementation. Volume II concludes with reflections on how transit operators should best characterize and respond to homelessness, considering the data analyzed in Part I and the strengths and drawbacks of the case studies profiled in Part II.

# Part I: Documenting Homelessness on Transit

# I.1. Findings from Prior Research

## I.1.1. Introduction and Key Findings

As policymakers, transit operators, and other stakeholders consider strategies for responding to homelessness on transit, they must first ascertain its extent. Unfortunately, there are currently little data and few prior studies in the academic and professional literatures on this basic question. Nonetheless, the studies and data available reveal important insights about homelessness on transit and its severity.

In this chapter, we review published and unpublished studies of the extent and contours of homelessness in transit environments. We find that:

- Homelessness on transit is a well-known phenomenon and is acknowledged as a challenge by most U.S. transit operators.

- While homelessness on transit is a subset of a larger societal issue, the people experiencing homelessness on transit differ in important ways from the overall unhoused population. From the limited available literature, those experiencing homelessness in transit settings are more likely than their unhoused peers elsewhere to be chronically unhoused and structurally disadvantaged across a number of socio-economic axes.

- We have very limited large-scale counts or other systematically collected data on homelessness on different transit systems over time and space.

## I.1.2. Extent of Homelessness on Transit

While the homelessness crisis affects many urban areas and their transit systems, the scale of homelessness on transit has not been well documented. Only a handful of studies examined this topic in the 1980s and 1990s; they found that homelessness was an issue for transit operators, but their primary focus was the safety and security of housed riders (Boyd, Maier, and Kenney, 1996; Meyerhoff, Micozzi, and Rowen, 1993; Ryan, 1991; and Schwartz, 1989, 1995).

More recent studies offer more nuanced inquiries. A 2011 study surveyed unhoused individuals sleeping overnight in buses in Santa Clara County, California (Nichols and Cázares, 2011). Of 49 interviewees, about two thirds reported that the 24-hour bus line was their only shelter or one of their usual shelters; many slept on the bus every day. Respondents cited dissatisfaction with shelter rules as a major reason for sleeping on the bus, while safety was another important consideration, especially for women. This study offers insights on who tends to use the bus as shelter, and why they do so; however, its small sample size from only one bus route in one region limits the generalizability of its findings.

Larger scale analyses tend to sample transit operators rather than individuals experiencing homelessness. Boyle (2016) surveyed 55 U.S. transit agencies to assess the presence of people experiencing homelessness and the extent to which agencies face challenges responding to homelessness. He found that homelessness is a challenge for most transit agencies (91%), about a third of which regard it as a major issue. The survey also found that homelessness is more likely a major issue for larger transit agencies and a minor issue for smaller ones.

However, only about 60 percent of responding agencies were able to provide an estimate of the size of the homeless population on their systems, indicating a lack of accurate knowledge about the scale of homelessness. Another survey of 49 U.S. transit operators in 2018 inquired about their perceived "social responsibility" to address homelessness on their systems (Bell et al., 2018). It found that more than two thirds of these agencies believed that they should play a role in addressing homelessness.

Like transit operators, state departments of transportation (DOTs) also face homelessness. Bassett, Tremoulet, and Moe (2013) surveyed staff from 25 state and provincial DOTs in the U.S. and Canada and found that many DOTs encounter homelessness in their right-of-way and regard it as an operational challenge. Although covering somewhat different environments, this survey reflects the scale of the issue faced by transportation agencies of all kinds, especially as many transit systems share rights-of-way with state DOTs.

None of the aforementioned inquiries about the scale of homelessness are supported directly by large-scale homeless counts or other systematically collected data on homelessness over time and space. They either draw from small samples or rely on staff estimates and subjective characterizations to assess the scale and severity of homelessness on their systems, which is inevitably imprecise. Lacking counts of homelessness on transit in most major metropolitan areas, we, too, collected staff characterizations in our survey of transit operators in Volume I (Loukaitou-Sideris et al., 2020).

We did, however, find a few examples of studies and data that ascertained the extent of homelessness in transit settings and/or compared it to the extent of homelessness generally. In Minnesota, a 2018 survey by Wilder Research found that 33 percent of adults experiencing homelessness used a transit vehicle, stop, or station or a highway rest area as nighttime shelter at least once in the past year (Pittman et al., 2020). Wilder Research estimated that 50,600 Minnesotans were unhoused at least one night in 2018 (a much higher number than the one-night homeless count, since many people cycle in and out of homelessness over the course of a year), and, therefore, approximately 16,700 people slept at least one night in a transit environment in Minnesota that year. Though only a share of these individuals sleep on transit any given night, this number is still remarkably high. Put another way, three in every thousand Minnesotans sleep at least one night per year in transit or rest area environments (Pittman et al., 2020 and U.S. Census Bureau, 2021).

Data indicate that the homelessness crisis is particularly acute in North America, compared to other cities of the Global North (Toro et al., 2007 and Shinn, 2007). In the United Kingdom, Heriot-Watt University researchers estimated that 11,950 people slept in vehicles, transit, or tents in 2017; unfortunately, the research as published does not separate out transit from these other settings (Crisis, 2018). In Berlin, where homelessness and panhandling are also present (Mahs, 2005 and Busch-Geertsema, 2006), a homeless census counted 154 people sleeping in transit stations—16 percent of the city's unsheltered individuals and eight percent of all people experiencing homelessness (Strauß, 2020). Both the share of unsheltered individuals found on transit and the overall number of unhoused people are significantly lower in Berlin than in the U.S. cities discussed in the next chapter. For comparison, Berlin (population: 3.77 million) had 1,976 unhoused individuals in the city in 2020, pre-pandemic, while the similarly-sized City of Los Angeles (population: 3.98 million) had 41,290 unhoused individuals in 2020, also pre-pandemic (Berlin-Brandenburg Office of Statistics, 2020; Strauß, 2020; U.S. Census Bureau, 2021; and LAHSA, 2020).

# I.1.3. Who Experiences Homelessness on Transit

While the number of people experiencing homelessness on transit is important to policymakers, so too are the characteristics of those people, as they may differ from their peers sheltering elsewhere. We summarize below findings from two studies that compare unhoused people on transit to those in other spaces, both of which find that the former are more structurally disadvantaged.

**Table I-1. Characteristics of Homelessness in the Minneapolis-Saint Paul, Minnesota Metropolitan Area, 2018**

| Characteristic | | Unhoused on Transit on Survey Day | Unhoused on Transit in Past Year | Unhoused, Not on Transit | Total Population |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Male | | 79% | 68% | 52% | 49.3% |
| Ages 25 to 54 | | 74% | 73% | 62% | 41.2% |
| Black (non-Hispanic) | | 52% | 43% | 47% | 9.8% |
| White (non-Hispanic) | | 27% | 18% | 27% | 72.2% |
| Has a child with them/in house (among adults) | | 2% | 3% | 25% | 35.8% |
| Mean annual personal income (among adults) | | $7,080 | $6,612 | $9,000 | $51,212 |
| Unemployed (among adults) | | 84% | 83% | 68% | 3.4% |
| Unhoused for at least 1 year | | 70% | 72% | 59% | N/A |
| Moved nighttime location at least once in past 60 days | | 85% | 85% | 52% | N/A |
| Ever incarcerated | Prison | 35% | 33% | 16% | N/A |
| | County jail | 59% | 65% | 36% | N/A |
| Considers self alcohol- or drug-dependent | | 42% | 43% | 21% | N/A |
| Has a severe mental illness | | 67% | 72% | 58% | N/A |
| Panhandles | | 30% | 37% | 9% | N/A |

*Data sources: Wilder Research, 2019b; U.S. Census Bureau, 2021; and Ruggles et al., 2020*

Along with their statewide work discussed above, Wilder Research conducted an insightful survey of unhoused residents in the Minneapolis-Saint Paul metropolitan area.[1] In an unpublished analysis, they explored differences between those on transit at the time of the survey (135 people surveyed), those not seeking shelter on transit that day but who had done so in the past year (686 people surveyed), and all other unhoused residents in the Twin Cities (3,508 people surveyed) (Wilder Research, 2019b). **Table I-1** summarizes a number of key differences among these groups, also comparing them to the overall population of the region. Those in the first two groups were more likely than other unhoused people and especially the general populace to be men, to be adults between 25 and 54 years of age, not to have kids with them, to have low incomes, and to be unemployed. Wilder Research also found that people experiencing homelessness on transit were more likely than their unhoused peers elsewhere to have experienced homelessness for at least a year and to have moved their nighttime location in the past 60 days. The transit groups were more likely to have been incarcerated, to be addicted to drugs or alcohol, to have a mental illness, and to panhandle (Wilder Research, 2019b; U.S. Census Bureau, 2021; and Ruggles et al., 2020).

## Table I-2. Characteristics of Homelessness in Santa Clara County, California, 2011

| Characteristic | | Survey Respondents on Overnight Bus | All Unhoused | Total Population |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Male | | 73.5% | 67.5% | 50.2% |
| White (non-Hispanic) | | 19.6% | 38.7% | 34.7% |
| Black (non-Hispanic) | | 41.3% | 16.8% | 2.5% |
| Asian/Pacific Islander (non-Hispanic) | | 10.9% | 6.0% | 32.3% |
| American Indian (non-Hispanic) | | 4.3% | 2.1% | 0.3% |
| Hispanic/Latino/a | | 15.2% | 31.1% | 27.2% |
| Other/multiple races/ethnicities | | 8.7% | 5.4% | 3.2% |
| Veteran (among adults) | | 22.4% | 10.1% | 4.7% |
| Income/welfare (among adults) | Receives no government assistance | 38.8% | 40.9% | N/A |
| | Receives no income nor private assistance | | 46.2% | N/A |
| | Unemployed | N/A | N/A | 10.0% |

*Data sources: Nichols and Cázares, 2011 and U.S. Census Bureau, 2021*

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1. Anoka, Carver, Dakota, Hennepin, Ramsey, Scott, and Washington Counties (Wilder Research, 2019a)

Nichols and Cázares (2011) also found differences between their survey population of individuals sleeping on overnight buses and the overall unhoused population of Santa Clara County, California (home of San José, in Silicon Valley) (See **Table I-2**). Their sample had a greater share of men and veterans than the total unhoused population surveyed in the County in 2011—and far more so than the general populace. Those in their sample had about the same likelihood of receiving no income nor welfare as the overall unhoused population. The most striking difference was in the share of Black respondents: over four out of ten surveyed on buses were Black, compared to 17 percent of the total unhoused population and to the less than three percent of the Black residents in the entire county. This wide racial gap was not found in the Twin Cities but matches with survey data from Los Angeles discussed in the next chapter. However, as mentioned above, Nichols and Cázares (2011) only surveyed 49 people on one bus line, compared to the larger survey that took place in the Twin Cities.

Thus, existing evidence, albeit limited, demonstrates that transit serves as shelter for a high, though quite variable, share of unsheltered individuals, who represent more disadvantaged homeless populations than their unhoused peers sleeping elsewhere.

# I.2. The Scale of Homelessness on Transit in Selected Areas

## I.2.1. Introduction

While people experiencing homelessness use transit regularly, both for shelter and transportation, transit operators and other institutions generally do not have accurate data—or often even estimates—of the scale of homelessness on their systems. This was very clear in our survey of 115 transit agencies, reported in Volume I (Loukaitou-Sideris et al., 2020). We found that very few of these agencies actually count people experiencing homelessness on their vehicles and facilities. Only six percent of the responding agencies regularly track homeless counts themselves, and only 17 percent have access to counts or formal estimates, partial or full, of unhoused riders from any source (See Volume I) (Loukaitou-Sideris et al., 2020).

Nonetheless, our survey revealed that homelessness is present on transit agencies across the U.S. and Canada, though to varying degrees. The majority of agencies that gave an estimate of the extent of homelessness reported at least 100 people experiencing homelessness on their system daily. However, only 12 percent of respondents estimated 500 people or more; these were mostly large agencies. These figures though, were only estimates (albeit informed ones) from agency staff, chosen from a multiple-choice list of responses such as "500 to 999 people." Even so, over a quarter of agencies responded "I don't know" (See Volume I) (Loukaitou-Sideris et al., 2020).

While urban districts in the U.S. do conduct biennial "point-in-time" counts of all people experiencing homelessness in their region, as mandated by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) (U.S. HUD, 2020), these counts usually do not fully canvas the transit network and rarely report the share and distribution of unhoused people on transit. A different number and subset of people experiencing homelessness use transit during the day versus overnight, and various survey methods and counting criteria capture these populations differently. Lastly, transit counts typically tally people who appear to be experiencing homelessness. But some of those counted may not in fact be unhoused, and, conversely, some number of individuals experiencing homelessness are not counted because they do not seem unhoused in the eye of the counter or per the counting criteria (Weinstein, 2020b). For all the above reasons, we cannot fully or completely accurately answer how prevalent homelessness is on transit across the U.S. with the available data.

Only a handful of places have homeless count data on transit. In this section, we focus on data on transit as shelter, as opposed to estimates of how many unhoused people use transit for daytime transportation. We hope that these findings provide at least a rough sense of the scope of homelessness on transit in comparable metropolitan areas that do not collect data.

Note that here (and throughout the report), we use the term "unhoused" to describe all people experiencing homelessness and the term "unsheltered" to describe the subset of people experiencing homelessness without a roof over their heads or in places otherwise unfit for human habitation (as opposed to "sheltered" people experiencing homelessness, who sleep in homeless shelters or other temporary accommodations) (Turnham, Wilson, and Burt, 2004).

## I.2.2. Minneapolis, Minnesota

The Minneapolis-Saint Paul metropolitan area in Minnesota is among the regions with the best data on homelessness in transit environments (See the Wilder Research studies in the prior chapter). It is also a stark example of how great a share of metropolitan homelessness exists on transit. Saint Stephen's Human Services, which coordinates a biannual point-in-time count of unsheltered individuals in Hennepin County (home of Minneapolis), tracks the types of location where people spend the night (Legler, 2019, 2020). As **Figure I-1** shows, the share of people finding shelter on a transit vehicle or at a transit stop is rather high but also varies by season and year. These five counts show that, on average, over 55 percent of unsheltered people were counted on transit, ranging from 37 percent in July 2019 to an astounding 72 percent during a night with a low temperature of 9°F in January 2019 (Legler, 2019, 2020; Moore, 2019; and National Weather Service, 2019).
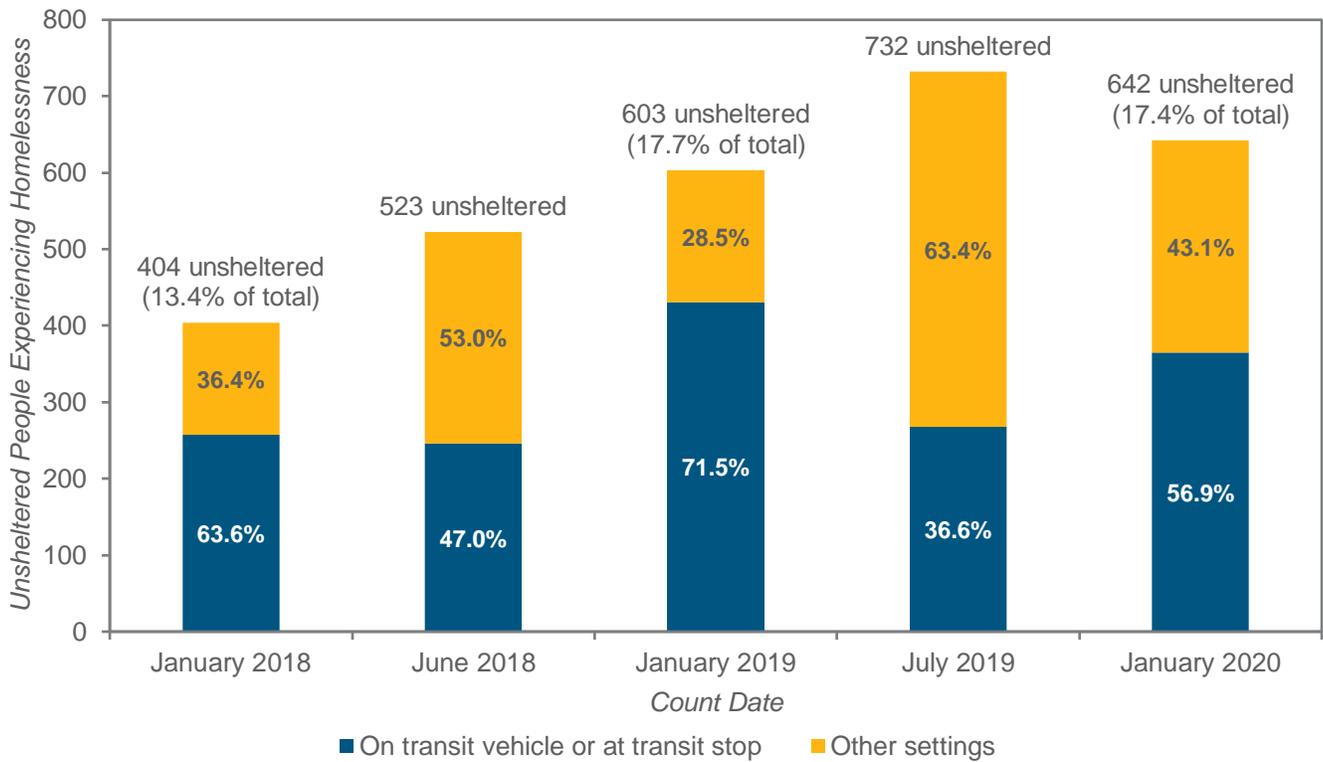


**Figure I-1. Unsheltered Homeless Counts in Hennepin County, Minnesota**

*Data sources: Legler, 2019, 2020; U.S. HUD, 2020; and Minnesota HMIS, 2020*

Note that **Figure I-1** plots *unsheltered* individuals only, who represent 13 to 18 percent of the total counted unhoused population, the rest of whom are in shelters or other temporary housing (See labels atop January counts in **Figure I-1**). This means that even in January 2019, only about 13 percent of the county's *total* population experiencing homelessness slept in transit environments, though that still represents most of the county's unsheltered population (Legler, 2019, 2020; U.S. HUD, 2020; and Minnesota HMIS, 2020).

Conditions in Minneapolis differ from some other U.S. metropolitan areas in three relevant ways. For one, sleeping outside in the winter is dangerous in Minnesota and other Northern cities because of the cold climate. This means that a greater share of unhoused people likely seek shelter in heated transit environments than in the warmer cities of the Sun Belt. On the other hand, most people experiencing homelessness are sheltered on any given night in Minneapolis, while in other states, particularly those in the West, a much larger share of unhoused people are unsheltered (for instance, 71.7% in California, 63.9% in Oregon, 56.8% in Hawai'i, and 53.4% in Nevada in 2019, compared to 20.7% in Minnesota) (U.S. HUD, 2020). While differences in climate may make Minneapolis' rate of transit homelessness higher than those of other areas, differences in shelter availability may actually make it lower. Finally, Metro Transit in the Twin Cities ran light-rail service 24/7 until August 2019, when it started closing the Green Line light rail for a few hours every night (Moore, 2019; Short, 2019; and Melo, 2019). The share of unsheltered individuals on transit in the January count subsequently dropped by 15 percentage points (Legler, 2019, 2020). Areas without all-night service, therefore, will likely have lower numbers of unhoused people on transit.

## I.2.3. New York City, New York

New York City, the most populous city in the U.S., also conducts an annual homeless count every January or February that disaggregates transit settings. The Homeless Outreach Population Estimate (HOPE), conducted across all five boroughs by the New York City Department of Homeless Services (NYC DHS) since 2005, includes a census of all areas with a high density of unsheltered residents (as determined by previous counts and the judgment of outreach staff) and an extrapolated sample of areas with a low density of unsheltered residents (NYC DHS, 2012, 2020). While researchers have pointed out a number of ways that these HOPE data underestimate the city's total unsheltered population (Markee, 2010), they do allow for a comparison of people counted in the city's subway system versus those counted at surface locations like parks and sidewalks. **Figure I-2** shows how this has changed over time.

Since 2005, the share of unsheltered individuals counted on subway platforms and trains has dramatically increased, from 19 percent to a high of 61 percent in 2019. From the start of the Great Recession in 2009 to 2016, homelessness on the subway generally rose and accounts for most of the overall rise in unsheltered homelessness, as homelessness fell in other city settings. Since 2016, counts in other New York City settings have risen as subway numbers have remained largely stable (NYC DHS, 2012, 2020 and New York State Comptroller, 2020). Staff attribute the dip in subway homelessness in the 2020 count—taken before the pandemic and before the subway stopped its 24/7 service—to increased outreach efforts (discussed in Chapter II.8) and unusually warm temperatures the night of the count (NYC DHS, 2020 and Goldbaum, 2020).

Similar to Minneapolis but unlike in the California regions discussed below, most unhoused individuals in New York City have temporary shelter (U.S. HUD, 2020). Therefore, the combined totals of *unsheltered* individuals in **Figure I-2** represent only between three and eight percent of the city's *overall unhoused* population, with the rest in shelters (NYC DHS, 2012, 2020 and U.S. HUD, 2020). It is nonetheless staggering that half or more of the people in New York City without a real roof over their head find shelter on the subway system. In some ways, this may even be an underestimate, as unsheltered individuals at bus stops or on other modes of transit are not included in the subway data. However, Hopper et al. (2008) did find that unsheltered New Yorkers on the subway were generally more visible—and therefore easier to count—than those in other settings.
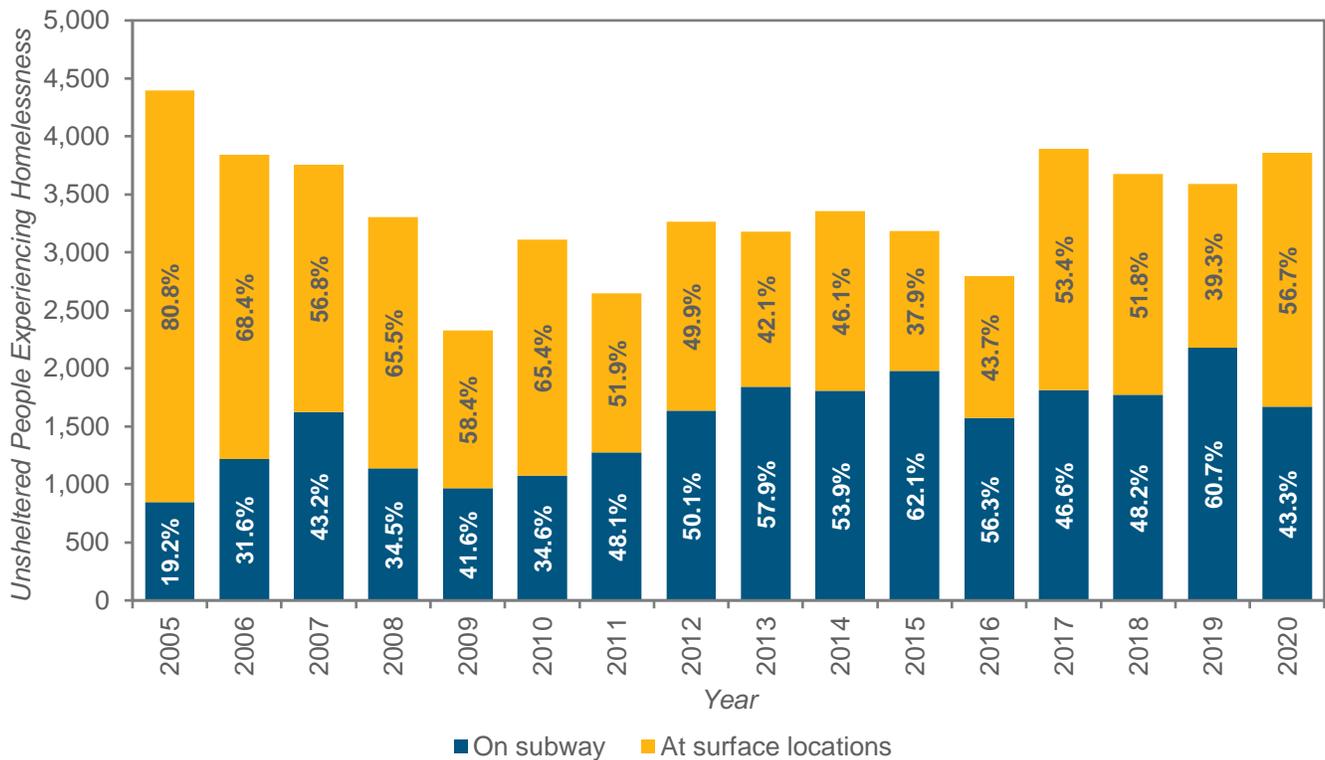
*Data sources: NYC DHS, 2012, 2020 and New York State Comptroller, 2020*

# I.2.4. Los Angeles County, California

## Homeless Counts on Los Angeles Metro

In Southern California, a metropolitan area whose homelessness crisis is among the most dire in the nation (U.S. HUD, 2020), the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority (Los Angeles Metro/LA Metro) has collected revealing data on the scale of homelessness on its system. Like those in the Twin Cities and New York, these counts reveal the enormity of the issue before the pandemic, but they also show a worrying rise since the pandemic as well.

LA Metro has kept detailed data on security and social service contacts with unhoused people since 2016 (LA Metro, 2021a), but only more recently has the agency begun to take counts of the number of people experiencing homelessness on its system. Prior to the pandemic, LA Metro received homeless counts from the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA). LAHSA conducts an annual point-in-time count of unhoused people each January. In 2019 and 2020, LAHSA reported the number of people experiencing homelessness in LA Metro rail stations, as shown in **Figure I-3**. LAHSA counted 119 unhoused people in LA Metro rail stations in January 2019 and 104 in January 2020 (Burrell Garcia, 2020a). Since then, while LAHSA has suspended its counting (Chapman, 2020), LA Metro conducted its own count in October 2020. For the same group of stations, there were

an average of 178 people in the morning and 213 people in the evening (See **Figure I-3**) (LA Metro, 2021b). In other words, since the start of the pandemic, the number of unhoused people seeking shelter in Metro stations has doubled.
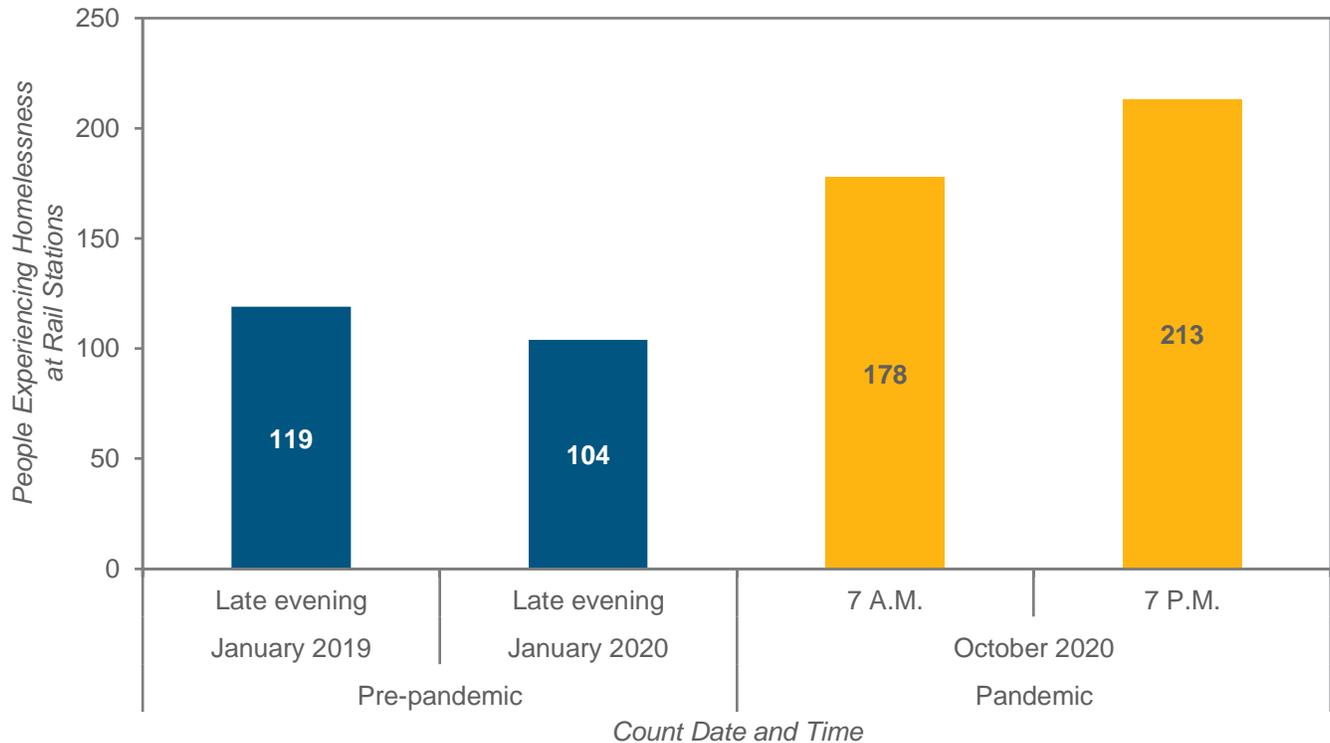
**Figure I-3. Counts of People Experiencing Homelessness in LA Metro Rail Stations**

*Data sources: Burrell Garcia, 2020a and LA Metro, 2021b*

The above comparison is necessarily inexact, as the methodologies of the pre-pandemic LAHSA count and the pandemic LA Metro count differ somewhat (See Chapter I.3, Section 3 for description of the latter) (Burrell Garcia, 2020a and LA Metro, 2021b). We have nonetheless endeavored to make this as much of an "apples-to-apples" comparison as possible (by, for instance, excluding parts of Union Station beyond the LA Metro platforms covered only by the pre-pandemic count and bus rapid transit (BRT) stations and in-vehicle counts only counted during the pandemic). Using as comparable numbers as we could find, we conclude that homelessness at LA Metro rail stations did indeed increase, by a significant degree, in less than a year.

LA Metro's October 2020 count reveals more about the facets of homelessness on transit during the COVID-19 pandemic. Unlike the previous LAHSA counts, LA Metro also counted unhoused people on vehicles, both buses and trains, and took counts at different times of day (See **Figure I-4**) (LA Metro, 2021b). Buses were the most-used shelter for unhoused LA Metro riders, with over 1,000 people experiencing homelessness on them in the early evening. This count is almost double the number on rail and BRT platforms and vehicles combined. Yet despite the larger number of unsheltered people on buses, LA Metro's homeless outreach efforts (See Chapter II.6, Section 1) are almost entirely concentrated on rail and bus rapid transit. Fewer unhoused people sought

shelter on buses during the late night hours, perhaps because more homeless shelters are open during these hours or because LA Metro runs fewer bus lines past midnight.

*Data sources: LA Metro, 2021b*

In a pre-pandemic 2020 count, Los Angeles County had found over 66,000 people experiencing homelessness, including over 48,000 who were unsheltered (LAHSA, 2020). The approximately 1,600 unsheltered people found on transit (summing all modes) at 6-7 P.M. (See **Figure I-4**) therefore represent around one in 40 unhoused county residents and one in 30 *unsheltered* county residents. While this calculation does mix pre-pandemic and pandemic 2020 counts, it is still a high figure—and, of course, LA Metro is not the only transit agency in Los Angeles County.

## Demographics of Homelessness on Los Angeles Metro

As discussed in the prior chapter, those experiencing homelessness on transit differ from those who sleep elsewhere. We find similar differences on LA Metro. Based on a survey of people experiencing homelessness on LA Metro in 2017 (Wiggins, 2017), the unhoused population on that system has a far greater share of Black people and smaller shares of white and Hispanic/Latino/a people (See **Table I-3**). Staggeringly, three quarters of unhoused individuals on LA Metro are Black, compared to four in ten unhoused people in Los Angeles County and just eight percent of all residents (Wiggins, 2017; LAHSA, 2017; and U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). From these

data and the studies in the prior chapter, we conclude that the subset of those experiencing homelessness on transit is less white than the overall unhoused population—and certainly than the general populace.

**Table I-3. Demographics of Homelessness in Los Angeles County, 2017**

| Race/Ethnicity | Unhoused on Transit | Unsheltered* | Overall Unhoused* | Total Population |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| White (non-Hispanic) | 12% | 21.9% | 20.2% | 26.0% |
| Black (non-Hispanic) | 75% | 37.5% | 40.0% | 7.8% |
| Hispanic/Latino/a | 10% | 36.1% | 35.0% | 48.6% |
| Asian/Pacific Islander (non-Hispanic) | 1% | 1.3% | 1.3% | 14.8% |
| Other | 2% | 3.1% | 3.5% | 2.7% |

*\* Excludes Glendale, Pasadena, and Long Beach*
*Data sources: Wiggins, 2017; LAHSA, 2017; and U.S. Census Bureau, 2021*

# I.2.5. San Francisco Bay Area, California

## Homeless Counts on Bay Area Rapid Transit

Another agency addressing homelessness on its system is Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART), the San Francisco Bay Area's subway/regional rail operator. As part of their homelessness response strategies (See Chapter II.6, Section 2), BART conducts counts of "transient" individuals (For the purpose of these counts only, BART uses the term "transient" rather than "homeless" or "unhoused.") both on its trains and in its four downtown San Francisco stations,[2] which it shares with the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency (SFMTA) (Chan, 2021 and Weinstein, 2021a). For more on BART's count methodology and practices, see Chapter I.3, Section 2.

These data show that overall, the number of people classified as transient peaked in 2017-2018 in BART stations (See **Figure I-5**). In January 2018, for instance, staff counted 159 people experiencing homelessness in the four downtown stations. Thereafter, as station counts declined, on-train counts rose and peaked in 2019 (See **Figure I-6**). In January 2019, BART staff counted a high of 292 unhoused riders per 100 train cars on weekends (Chan, 2021)—almost three people experiencing homelessness per car, on average. Reporting from the *San Francisco Chronicle* (Swan, 2019) suggests that this shift from stations to trains coincided with (and may have been due to) agency "blitz" enforcement efforts against fare evasion that likely pushed unhoused people out of stations. BART counts also show that the number of transient individuals per train car is 40 percent to 180 percent higher on weekends than on weekdays (Chan, 2021), perhaps because the same number of people are seeking shelter on a smaller number of weekend cars or because fewer day shelters or other services are available on weekends.

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2. Embarcadero, Montgomery Street, Powell Street, and Civic Center/U.N. Plaza stations (BART, 2021b)
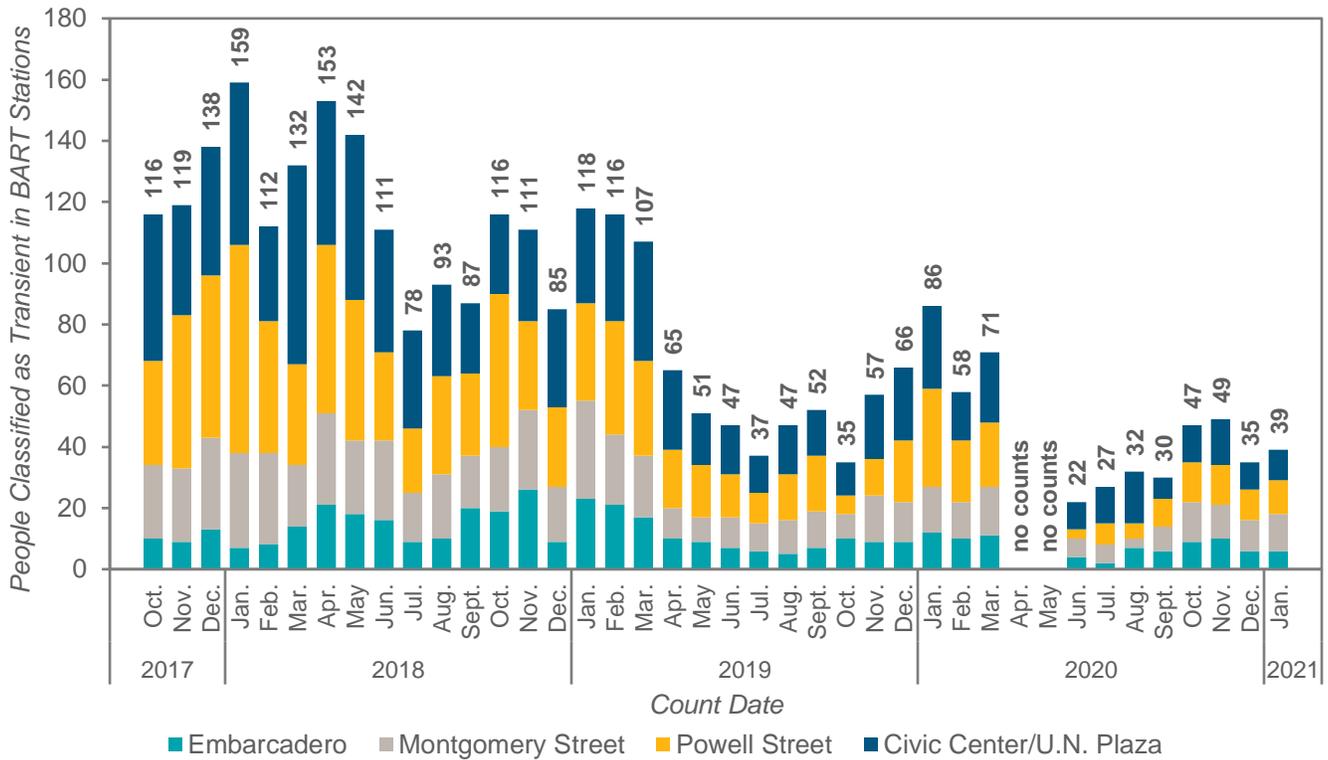
**Figure I-5. Counts of Riders Classified as Transient in Downtown San Francisco BART Stations**

*Data source: Chan, 2021*

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, BART paused its homeless counts. However, subsequent counts show that the number of transient individuals on BART trains and in downtown San Francisco stations has decreased from pre-pandemic levels (Chan, 2021). BART officials attribute this decrease to more BART officer and ambassador presence in stations and vehicles (See Chapter II.6, Section 2 for discussion of these strategies), and in particular to increased fare enforcement (Chan and Sandoval, 2021a). Unsheltered individuals may also be moving outside of stations, as there are fewer opportunities for panhandling due to the lower volume of passengers passing through stations. Finally, encampments are in part protected by CDC's shelter-in-place guidelines (CDC, 2020), so unhoused people may be better able to maintain their belongings in an encampment than on the BART system.

This decrease stands in contrast to both counts from LA Metro, above, and survey findings from other agencies presented in Volume I (Loukaitou-Sideris et al., 2020). In our survey, staff at a majority of agencies that gave an estimate reported, at least to their perception, a rise in the number of unhoused people on their system. Unlike other agencies, though, BART never suspended fare collection during the pandemic. For comparison, King County Metro reported an initial increase in unhoused riders after fare collection was stopped, followed by an increase in the number of encampments on and adjacent to agency properties because of shelter-in-place orders (Jimenez and Greto, 2020). In addition, BART's ridership has been particularly hard-hit by the pandemic, with decreases of between 80 and 94 percent from baseline ridership most weeks (BART, 2021c).
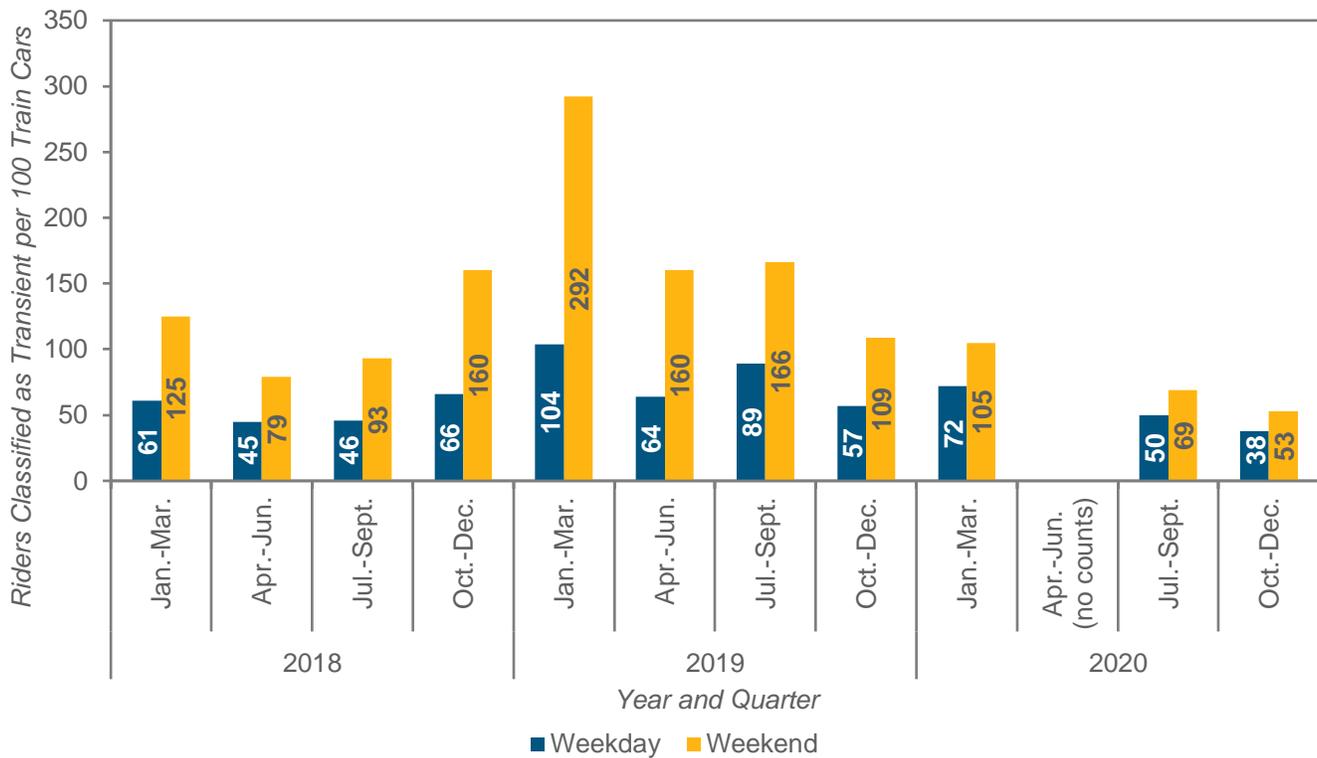
**Figure I-6. Counts of Riders Classified as Transient per 100 BART Train Cars**

*Riders Classified as Transient per 100 Train Cars*

| Year and Quarter | Weekday | Weekend |
|---|---|---|
| 2018 Jan.-Mar. | 61 | 125 |
| 2018 Apr.-Jun. | 45 | 79 |
| 2018 Jul.-Sept. | 46 | 93 |
| 2018 Oct.-Dec. | 66 | 160 |
| 2019 Jan.-Mar. | 104 | 292 |
| 2019 Apr.-Jun. | 64 | 160 |
| 2019 Jul.-Sept. | 89 | 166 |
| 2019 Oct.-Dec. | 57 | 109 |
| 2020 Jan.-Mar. | 72 | 105 |
| 2020 Apr.-Jun. (no counts) | | |
| 2020 Jul.-Sept. | 50 | 69 |
| 2020 Oct.-Dec. | 38 | 53 |

*Data source: Chan, 2021*

## Homeless Counts in San Francisco

While BART covers the broader Bay Area, the City and County of San Francisco itself also collects data on homelessness in transit environments. The City's biannual HUD-mandated point-in-time count of the unsheltered population includes some information about the numbers of people in transit environments: BART stations, Muni Metro (SFMTA's light rail) stations, and on certain bus routes. The last census with available data took place on January 24, 2019, from approximately 8 P.M. to midnight, and found 5,180 unsheltered people (Caplan, 2020); of these, 90 (1.7%) were counted in transit settings. **Table I-4** breaks down the number by supervisorial district.

The reported share of unsheltered people in San Francisco's transit settings is much lower than in Minneapolis, documented above. However, we suspect that differences in count methodology may explain some of this. The count appears to have sampled only select bus routes, and the dataset did not disaggregate people counted at bus stops nor on SFMTA or BART trains. Likewise, the number of people counted in BART stations is far lower than BART's own counts above, though BART counts at multiple times of day, not just the late evening. Regardless, the greatest *number* of unsheltered people in transit settings were in Supervisorial District 6 in downtown (43% of all those in transit settings), but Supervisorial Districts 5 and 9 had the highest *share* of unsheltered people in transit settings (9.8% and 5.4% respectively). Supervisorial Districts 1, 2, and 4, as well as Golden Gate Park, did not have any unsheltered people counted in transit settings (Caplan, 2020).

**Table I-4. 2019 San Francisco Homeless Count**

| Supervisorial District | Major Neighborhoods | Number of Unsheltered Individuals | | | | Share of Unsheltered Individuals in Transit Settings |
| | | Transit Settings | | | All Settings | |
| | | At BART Stations | At Muni Metro Stations | On Buses | Total | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Richmond | 0 | 0 | 0 | 121 | 0.0% |
| 2 | Presidio, Cow Hollow, Marina, Pacific Heights | 0 | 0 | 0 | 171 | 0.0% |
| 3 | Chinatown, Nob Hill, Russian Hill, Telegraph Hill | 6 | 1 | 0 | 278 | 2.5% |
| 4 | Sunset | 0 | 0 | 0 | 34 | 0.0% |
| 5 | Haight-Ashbury, Inner Sunset, Panhandle, Western Addition | 0 | 0 | 18 | 183 | 9.8% |
| 6 | Civic Center, SoMa, Treasure Island | 12 | 10 | 17 | 1,990 | 2.0% |
| 7 | West of Twin Peaks, Lake Merced | 0 | 3 | 0 | 141 | 2.1% |
| 8 | Castro, Diamond Heights, Noe Valley, Glen Park, Upper Market | 1 | 0 | 0 | 295 | 0.3% |
| 9 | Mission, Bernal Heights, Portola | 1 | 0 | 13 | 257 | 5.4% |
| 10 | Bayview, Hunters Point, Visitacion Valley | 0 | 0 | 6 | 1,528 | 0.4% |
| 11 | Ingleside, Excelsior, Ocean View, Merced Heights | 1 | 1 | 0 | 99 | 2.0% |
| | Golden Gate Park | 0 | 0 | 0 | 83 | 0.0% |
| **Total** | | **21** | **15** | **54** | **5,180** | **1.7%** |

*Data sources: Caplan, 2020 and San Francisco Department of Elections, 2020*

# I.2.6. Conclusion

The low number of agencies collecting counts of the unhoused individuals using their transit system makes it difficult to understand the extent of homelessness on transit across the country. While transit settings are sometimes explicitly included in censuses of unsheltered people, very few agencies take systematic counts. Two of these agencies are BART and LA Metro, which track changes in the number of unhoused people both in their stations and on their transit vehicles. However, neither BART, LA Metro, nor any of the other agencies surveyed reported collecting data on unhoused people using bus stops as shelter. More consistent data could help agencies understand the extent of the homelessness challenge as well as allow social service agencies and state and local governments to dedicate resources to assisting unhoused people on transit.

Differences in data collection methodologies make it difficult to compare the extent of homelessness on transit among cities, while differences in weather and climate, service hours, and the amount of shelter space available further complicate comparisons. While New York City and Minneapolis count higher percentages of unhoused people on transit than Los Angeles or San Francisco, perhaps because of their colder climate or because of 24-hour transit service, they have much lower shares of *unsheltered* people overall.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, most agencies reported an anecdotal increase in the number of unhoused people on transit (See Volume I) (Loukaitou-Sideris et al., 2020). Data from LA Metro bear out these reports. BART, however, did not experience an increase, likely because it is one of the few systems that does not run bus service and never suspended fare enforcement.

# I.3. Best Practices in Data Collection

## I.3.1. Introduction

Data collection is imperative for transit agencies to understand the extent of homelessness on their systems. Though many agencies mentioned anecdotally that the number of people experiencing homelessness using transit has increased since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic (both in our survey in Volume I (Loukaitou-Sideris et al., 2020) and in our case study interviews discussed in later chapters), few agencies have data to determine if this is true and the extent of this perceived increase. Indeed, Aaron Weinstein, Executive Officer for Customer Experience at LA Metro and a former manager at BART, raised the concern that the *proportion* of unhoused riders may be confused for the *number* of unhoused riders, in the perception of staff and the public, especially as the number of housed riders has dropped precipitously since the start of the pandemic, leaving unhoused riders more visible (Weinstein, 2021a).

In this chapter, we briefly discuss the data collection methods employed by two operators at the forefront of data collection efforts, BART and LA Metro. These two agencies have conducted systemwide surveys of the number of unsheltered riders on their systems, both on vehicles and at stations (We discuss the data collected from these counts in this chapter and in Chapter I.2, Sections 4 and 5.). While both are large operators, the lessons from their count methods can be applied at smaller agencies as well.

There are two different types of counts: point-in-time counts and continuous sampling. Large-scale point-in-time counts involve counting all unhoused riders on the system (or at least at key stations) during a short interval of time. These counts are then repeated monthly, annually, or biennially. This method is also used by metropolitan housing authorities to conduct their general, HUD-mandated homeless counts. The second method consists of agency staff continuously sampling a random set of transit vehicles and stops at multiple times of day or days of the week and then statistically extrapolating the total count for the whole system. According to Weinstein, point-in-time counts are better for agency resource planning: having the absolute number of people experiencing homelessness is key to determining what strategies to implement in response, where, and with how many staff. Continuous sampling may count the same unhoused rider multiple times, leading to overestimates in the total. However, sampling has advantages such as covering a greater range of settings, times of day, and days of the week, allowing for better estimates of the share of unhoused riders in various settings, and ascertaining the effects of homelessness on operations and ridership (Weinstein, 2021a, 2021b). As Weinstein reflected, a statistical sample "is a better approximation of the impact on riders, and can answer questions like: What is the typical exposure of an average rider to people who are experiencing homelessness, and how does that vary by time of day or day of the week?" (Weinstein, 2021a).

## I.3.2. Data Collection on BART

Bay Area Rapid Transit has collected data on the number of transient people on its trains, since 2018, and in its downtown San Francisco stations, since 2017 (BART, 2018). As noted above, BART has at times used the term "transient" rather than "homeless," "unsheltered," or "unhoused" (Weinstein, 2021a). BART determines transient

status based on observed criteria. Individuals must meet at least three of the following criteria in order to be counted as transients (BART, 2018):

- Lying/sitting on station floor
- Lying on platform seating
- No shoes/shoes in bad repair
- Disheveled appearance
- Dirty clothes
- Extreme odor
- Asking for money or food
- Carrying a lot of belongings/clothing

BART conducts vehicle counts as part of its quarterly *Passenger Environment Survey*. Staff board about 560 trains per quarter on all days of the week, at all times of day, and on all lines. The agency then reports vehicle counts as the number of transients per 100 cars in order to maintain reporting consistency for weekdays versus weekend days (BART, 2018). BART conducts station counts only at four downtown San Francisco subway stations, which it shares with SFMTA light rail service: Embarcadero, Montgomery Street, Powell Street, and Civic Center/U.N. Plaza (BART, 2021b). As shown by the San Francisco point-in-time count data in Chapter I.2, Section 5, these stations are located in the areas of the city with the highest numbers of unhoused residents. Counts are conducted on the second Tuesday of each month, in the morning (5 A.M.-7 A.M.), at midday (2 P.M.-4 P.M.) and in the evening (8 P.M.-10 P.M.). Staff also record weather conditions for the day of the count. Both counts paused briefly after the onset of the pandemic but resumed in the summer of 2020 (BART, 2018).

BART also collects performance data on its various homeless outreach and response initiatives (discussed further in Chapter II.6, Section 2), including number of contacts and results thereof from its outreach teams, people served by its elevator attendant and Pit Stop restroom programs, and reported rider complaints (Chan, 2021 and Chan and Sandoval, 2020).

## I.3.3. Data Collection on LA Metro

LA Metro has also developed an extensive and growing data collection process on homelessness on its system. Since launching its outreach and law enforcement homeless teams in 2017, LA Metro has collected monthly contacts and outcomes from these efforts, reported quarterly to its board (See Chapter II.6, Section 1 for analysis of these data). Prior to the pandemic, though, LA Metro relied largely on the regional annual point-in-time count for (limited) data on the extent of homelessness on its system. But in October 2020, LA Metro also initiated its first system-wide effort to count the number of people experiencing homelessness at one point in time on its rail system and select rapid bus lines. This was followed by another one-time count in November 2020 on LA Metro buses. LA Metro decided to undertake this count because they believed they did not have the data needed to guide their decisions of how to address homelessness on their system. Beginning in 2021, the agency plans to take these counts quarterly to understand how the number of unsheltered people is changing (Burrell Garcia, 2020a, 2021e and LA Metro, 2021a).

For the rail count, 60 law enforcement officers went through LA Metro's six rail and two rapid bus lines at 7 A.M. and 7 P.M. on four consecutive days in October 2020, noting the number of seemingly unhoused people. They did not ask individuals about their housing status, but instead used the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority's criteria to identify people experiencing homelessness (Burrell Garcia, 2021e).

For the bus count, each bus operator used the rearview mirror to count and pushed a button on their console to record the number of seemingly unsheltered people on the bus at 2 A.M., 6 A.M., 6 P.M., and midnight over four consecutive days in November 2020. As with the rail count, they did not ask individuals if they were unhoused but instead relied on LAHSA's criteria. LA Metro does not collect data on the number of unhoused people who seek shelter in bus shelters (Burrell Garcia, 2021e and Weinstein, 2021a).

This program does not have its own budget but requires the participation of many security and law enforcement officers, as well as all bus operators, during their routine duties (Burrell Garcia, Dickerson, and Loew, 2020). However, LA Metro has set aside funds to support improvements to the count methods and scope (Weinstein, 2021b).

# I.3.4. Lessons Learned

The interviewed staff from BART and LA Metro agreed on the importance of collecting data on the number and locations of unhoused people on transit in order to better understand the extent of the issue as well as the effectiveness of different programs (Chan and Sandoval, 2020 and Weinstein, 2021a). For example, BART was able to immediately see the success of its elevator attendant program by tracking the rider complaints and commendations about station elevator service (Chan and Sandoval, 2020). However, while LA Metro has collected data on the results of its different enforcement and outreach programs (LA Metro, 2021a), it has not publicly calculated the comparative effectiveness of these programs (as we do in Chapter II.6, Section 1). The agency has started to collect more data, not just on the number of unhoused people in stations but also about specific behaviors and conditions on transit to inform its future programs (Burrell Garcia, 2021e and Weinstein, 2021b). This more detailed data collection may be helpful in devising responses and guiding decision-making. As explained by Weinstein of LA Metro's Customer Experience team:

> "One of the things that we would like to try to do is to observe specific behaviors and conditions that may be associated with homelessness...and count them individually....Instead of thinking of a person as homeless or not homeless, it gets into specific conditions and behaviors of concern, things that affect the safety and health of the homeless individual and which impact other customers. This approach sets us on a journey of then thinking about solutions that address what you're seeing, especially in situations where housing is unavailable or refused by the person experiencing homelessness.
>
> So, for example, if we're seeing a lot of people with extreme odor, then we can ask ourselves, what kinds of things could we do to help those people and alleviate the odor for others around them? Housing, mental health, and addiction services should be offered first whenever possible. But if an individual won't accept those things, could we bring care kits to give to them, that include deodorant, toothpaste, tampons, adult diapers—whatever folks need? In some cases, that might be...a ticket to a shower. So collect[ing] data about behaviors and conditions...can set us on a journey to think about each person and what they need....When it gets to missing clothing or disheveled clothing, the answer is obvious: can we give them a voucher for a thrift shore? [For] erratic behavior, there [are] mental health interventions that can be done" (Weinstein, 2021a).

When it comes to the conduct of the counts themselves, Weinstein emphasized the need to coordinate with operations staff to prioritize the areas most in need of counts and the most cost-effective ways to do so. Along these lines, LA Metro and a few smaller operators, including Culver CityBus in Southern California, have added an efficient method of conducting continuous samples of unhoused riders across their system: having vehicle

operators count the unhoused riders boarding their bus at all times of day by pressing a specific button on their automatic vehicle location system. However, both Weinstein and staff at Culver CityBus noted a major drawback in this method: bus operators may stop pressing or may never press the button, because they forget, they get tired of doing so, or they are focused on the demanding task of driving the bus (Weinstein, 2021a, 2021b; Stewart, 2020; and Blackshire, 2020). This can reduce the accuracy of the data collected. Nonetheless, with both proper training and criteria for whom to count, this is a method that smaller bus operators could try to use to collect data.

# Part II: Strategies for Responding to Homelessness on Transit

# II.1. Introduction

Given the increasing prevalence of homelessness in cities and their transit systems, many transit agencies must address its impact on their service, while at the same time upholding their social responsibility to serve all their riders, housed and unhoused. Past research has demonstrated a general trend for transit agencies to combine enforcement and punitive actions with outreach efforts in addressing homelessness. While the former mostly remove and displace people experiencing homelessness from transit environments, outreach efforts aim to reduce homelessness by connecting unhoused riders with social services and opportunities for shelter and housing. A common challenge faced by transit agencies trying to address homelessness is the lack of external funding and other resources. Yet, the more fundamental challenge is that homelessness is a societal problem that is largely beyond the control of transit agencies. Thus, agencies often rely on partnerships with other organizations as a way to augment their resources and more effectively respond to homelessness on their systems.

This part of the report first presents an overview of existing literature on transit agencies' responses to homelessness. Following this overview, we focus on case studies of strategies adopted by several agencies to address homelessness. These agencies were selected based on the nationwide survey in Volume I, which identified operators that had implemented specific programs to address homelessness on their systems (Loukaitou-Sideris et al., 2020). We followed up and interviewed relevant staff from these agencies and from other partnering organizations to learn how each strategy was initiated and carried out, what impact it has resulted in, the challenges it has encountered, and the lessons learned during its implementation. The identified programs vary in terms of scope, impact, resource burden, and organizational complexity. We have categorized them into a few major strategies: hub of services, mobile outreach (both smaller clinician/social worker programs and larger, comprehensive strategies), discounted fares, and transportation to shelters. Each strategy is presented as a synthesis of similar programs adopted by different agencies across the country.

# II.2. Existing Research on Transit Agency Responses to Homelessness

Many transit agencies have been responding to homelessness on their systems through a combination of enforcement/punitive and/or outreach measures. However, these operators often face significant challenges in addressing homelessness (See **Table II-1**). As mentioned above, 68 percent of transit operators surveyed by American Public Transportation Association (APTA) believe that transit agencies have some responsibility to address homelessness. However, only five percent reported having resources dedicated to the task (Bell et al., 2018). Similarly, Boyle (2016) finds that many operators are concerned with behavioral issues of unhoused people who congregate on vehicles or in transit centers, but lack of funding and resources, in combination with the extent of homelessness, represents a top challenge for trying to address the problem. Additionally, more than half of the agencies surveyed noted the need to balance customer concerns about homeless riders with humane actions towards them; they also emphasized the need for staff training and support from city and county governments. These challenges have, if anything, only worsened since 2016, as our survey in Volume I found (Loukaitou-Sideris et al., 2020). Given the limited resources that transit agencies have and the complexity of the homelessness crisis, which is beyond the control of transit agencies, they often have to rely on partnerships with outside agencies and organizations to address homelessness on their systems (Boyle, 2016 and Loukaitou-Sideris et al., 2020).

**Table II-1. Transit Agencies' Responses to Homelessness**

| Challenges | Punitive Responses | Outreach Responses |
|---|---|---|
| - Lack of funding and other resources<br>- Extent of the issue; balancing customer concerns with humane actions<br>- Need for staff training and support from city and county governments | - Enforcing anti-homeless laws, often through partnership with local law enforcement agencies<br>- Removal or displacement of people experiencing homelessness | - Outreach through partnerships with social service or nonprofit agencies<br>- Discounted fare programs<br>- Providing special services for unsheltered people during extreme weather<br>- Staff training programs on interacting with people experiencing homelessness |

*Data sources: Loukaitou-Sideris et al., 2020; Boyle, 2016; Bell et al., 2018; and Bassett, Tremoulet, and Moe, 2013*

## II.2.1. Enforcement and Punitive Responses

Scholars have observed a general trend of increasing criminalization of homelessness over the last three decades; transit environments are no exception. Broadly, this has entailed the adoption of ordinances restricting activities associated with homelessness (such as camping, loitering, and panhandling), more intensive policing,

and the use of "hostile architecture" in public spaces (Ehrenfeucht and Loukaitou-Sideris, 2014) (See **Table II-2**). For example, a number of municipalities have enacted since the early 1990s "sit-lie" ordinances, which prohibit individuals from lingering, sitting, or sleeping in public spaces (including bus stops and station platforms). These often exclude and punish those experiencing homelessness for using public spaces in non-conforming ways, such as sleeping in the rough or sitting on the sidewalk. Underlying such criminalization of homelessness are many cities' efforts to reinvest and redevelop previously deteriorating inner cities, and hence the need to sanitize public spaces by removing the unhoused population (Amster, 2003 and Hall, 2017). While recent court rulings have blocked many cities from enforcing absolute bans on unsheltered individuals sleeping or camping in public space as a form of "cruel and unusual punishment," cities have continued to remove their homeless population through intensified encampment sweeps, involuntary commitment into mental health institutions, and forced segregation in mass shelters (Rankin, forthcoming). Some cities also offer transportation assistance such as one-way bus tickets for people experiencing homelessness to relocate to places that can offer housing, but such programs have been criticized because cities can use these programs to simply displace unhoused individuals, while the promised housing at the destinations may not be guaranteed (Baker, 2019 and Paulas, 2020).

## Table II-2. Enforcement and Punitive Responses to Homelessness

| Category | Examples |
|---|---|
| Legislation | - Ordinances against:<br>  - Camping<br>  - Loitering<br>  - Panhandling |
| Policy | - End-of-route disembarkation<br>- Banning the carrying of large items/bags on vehicles |
| Policing | - Sweeps<br>- Move-along orders<br>- Citations and fines<br>- Confiscation of property<br>- Arrest<br>- Involuntary psychiatric commitment |
| Design | - Hostile architecture:<br>  - Seat dividers<br>  - Landscaping<br>  - Spikes and metal studs |

Many transit operators have sought the removal or displacement of unhoused people from their transit system. Boyle's (2016) survey of 55 U.S. transit agencies found that 40 percent of agencies reported periodically conducting sweeps of transit settings where unsheltered people congregate, and 36 percent required riders to exit the vehicle at the end of the line and pay an additional fare to board again (Boyle, 2016). In our survey in Volume I, we found a similar rate of reported sweeps (42%) four years later and a higher rate of requiring disembarkment at the end of the line (67%) (Loukaitou-Sideris et al., 2020). Beyond transit settings, removal of unsheltered people and their encampments from rights-of-way is a common approach adopted by departments of

transportation in many states, but in most cases such actions only serve as a temporary "solution" until those displaced or others return (Bassett, Tremoulet, and Moe, 2013).

Central to the criminalization of homelessness in public space is the employment of law enforcement by municipalities, business improvement districts (BIDs), and transit agencies. In the 1980s and 1990s, law enforcement addressing homelessness had a strong public safety emphasis and involved dispersing homeless encampments, issuing citations, and making arrests; such actions have been criticized as only displacing rather than reducing homelessness (Berk and MacDonald, 2010 and Hartmann McNamara, Crawford, and Burns, 2013). In later years, police have begun to rely more on "move along" orders, confiscation of properties, threats of arrests, and involuntary psychiatric commitments, often in response to third party complaints (Goldfischer, 2019 and Herring, 2019). Nevertheless, this seemingly less violent approach often punishes people experiencing homelessness for their visibility in public space and through a constant and pervasive process that inflicts material, psychological and social suffering (Goldfischer, 2019 and Herring, 2019). Under the threat of COVID-19 infection, the dispersal of homeless encampments from public rights-of-way has been temporarily suspended in some places. In response to guidelines by the U.S. Center of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to "allow people who are living unsheltered or in encampments to remain where they are," (CDC, 2020), many state departments of transportation have refrained from removing homeless encampments during the pandemic (Falsetti, 2020; Stradling, 2021; and Wiltz, 2020).

In addition to policing, another common, albeit more covert strategy, that cities and transit agencies employ is the use of "hostile architecture" (or "defensive architecture") in public spaces and transit settings—the arrangement of space and the use of materials that make sitting or lying uncomfortable or impossible. Such architectural and design features as benches with high middle armrests and spikes or metal studs on ledges in parks, transit stops, and station platforms have been used to selectively design some population groups out of public spaces by making these spaces less hospitable for them and their activities (de Fine Licht, 2017; Petty, 2016; Rosenberger, 2017; and Johnsen, Fitzpatrick, and Watts, 2018). Critics of such design approaches highlight the intention of discipline and social control underlying the use of hostile architecture and the fact that it can only displace instead of reduce homelessness (Johnsen, Fitzpatrick, and Watts, 2018; Smith and Walters, 2018; and Rosenberger, 2017, 2020). In our survey of 115 transit agencies (presented in Volume I), we found that about half of the surveyed agencies employ hostile architecture by installing structural elements or landscaping to discourage sleeping at stops or stations (Loukaitou-Sideris et al., 2020). While other studies of transit agencies' response to homelessness do not mention such design practices, Rosenberger (2017) observes that benches with middle armrests, a typical element of hostile architecture, are often found in transit stops.

Punitive measures constitute a significant part of transit agencies' responses. The survey by Boyle (2016) found that 63 percent of U.S. transit agencies enforced such laws, and 69 percent partnered with local law enforcement agencies. Our more recent survey found that about half of the responding agencies enforce on their system municipal anti-homeless ordinances such as those prohibiting loitering and panhandling (See Volume I) (Loukaitou-Sideris et al., 2020). As the latter survey took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, its finding of a reduction in the percentage of agencies taking punitive measures may be related to the particular circumstances of the pandemic, but it may also be an indication of changing attitudes and policies.

Though detailed empirical evidence on the prevalence and efficacy of punitive measures taken by transit agencies is scant, such methods are part of a broader, more well-studied trend of enforcement to address homelessness in public spaces. The policing of unhoused people in transit systems parallels law enforcement efforts undertaken by business improvement districts (BIDs) that also heavily rely on anti-loitering and anti-panhandling laws and regulations and often result in citations and confiscation of personal property (Herring, 2019

and Glyman, 2016). Enforcement actions that are specific to transit agencies include banning the carrying of large bags and backpacks on transit vehicles and requirements that all passengers disembark from vehicles at the end of transit routes (See Volume I) (Loukaitou-Sideris et al., 2020).

## II.2.2. Outreach Responses

In contrast to punitive measures, studies indicate that outreach is a more effective approach to addressing homelessness; this is also supported by ample empirical evidence on the positive effects of outreach efforts on housing and health outcomes for unhoused individuals (Olivet et al., 2010; de Vet et al., 2013; Munthe-Kaas, Berg, and Blaasvær, 2018; and O'Shaughnessy and Greenwood, 2020). Indeed, studies find that training programs such as crisis intervention training and collaborations with shelters and mental health agencies are important factors for successful outreach (Hipple, 2017 and R. Turner, 2019).

Only limited literature exists on the outreach strategies of transit agencies. Thus, studies on how other entities reach out to support individuals experiencing homelessness are illustrative. Public libraries, police departments, and BIDs often have various outreach programs to link unhoused individuals to social services (Giesler, 2017; Hipple, 2017; and Lee, 2018). One can see an obvious parallel between these entities and transit agencies, as they all interact with unhoused individuals on a daily basis.

Public libraries have acted to accommodate the unhoused population and remove barriers for them to access library resources, offering information and training services and programs that are tailored to their needs. Many libraries also connect unhoused patrons to shelters and other resources via outreach partnerships with social service agencies (N. Hill, 2011; Willett and Broadley, 2011; American Library Association, 2012; and Terrile, 2016). Still, public library staff face significant challenges, such as lack of training on how best to engage with different unhoused people and lack of formalized partnerships with shelters and other social services (Giesler, 2017, 2019). Some law enforcement agencies have begun using outreach- and engagement-based strategies in their encounters with people experiencing homelessness—often through collaboration with social service providers and by giving specialized training to their officers (M. Turner, Funge, and Gabbard, 2018; Hipple, 2017; and R. Turner, 2019). Similarly, many BIDs have started pursuing a combined approach that encompasses not only law enforcement but also outreach activities to address the homelessness problem in a sensitive and engaged manner that offers services and support to the homeless population through partnerships with social service agencies (Lee, 2018).

Given the complexity of the homelessness crisis, effective collaboration is critical to different agencies' response to homelessness. A recent case study (T. Hill and Tamminen, 2020) examines a partnership among public libraries, city governments, social services, nonprofit organizations, and universities in Mississauga, Ontario (Canada), which established a community hub in the library for unhoused individuals to receive help from an outreach worker on how to access resources. The study reveals the importance of collaboration among disparate agencies and organizations, as well as the critical role of a central liaison (the outreach worker in this case) in facilitating such collaborations and connecting unhoused people to resources and services.

Many transit agencies also implement outreach measures that either provide assistance and resources to those experiencing homelessness or at least ensure that their interactions with unhoused individuals are more sensitive (See **Table II-3**). Additionally, as providers of a public service, some transit agencies have programs to lower or remove barriers for unhoused travelers to access their service. These include free or heavily discounted transit tickets, which are often distributed through shelters and social service providers (Boyle, 2016). Moreover, 41

percent of agencies have training programs for front-line employees to prepare them for interactions with unhoused individuals (Boyle, 2016). During the pandemic, a number of U.S. transit agencies suspended fare collection or paused fare inspection to reduce the risk of virus transmission. Agencies that adopted either strategy are more likely to report increased homelessness on their systems; however, differences in enforcement (the removal of fare checks) explain the correlation, rather than a change in the listed fare price itself. (See Volume I) (Loukaitou-Sideris et al., 2020).

**Table II-3. Outreach and Supportive Responses to Homelessness**

| Type of Strategy | Purpose/Benefits |
|---|---|
| Partnerships<br>- With shelters and nonprofits<br>- With other public agencies<br>- With police<br>- With BIDs | - Better outreach to people experiencing homelessness<br>- Connection to social services and housing<br>- Expansion of resources<br>- Diverse expertise |
| Staff training | - Crisis intervention<br>- More sensitive interactions |
| Transportation to shelters | - Enhanced mobility |
| Free or discounted tickets | - Enhanced mobility |
| Hub of services | - Concentration of services (e.g., restrooms, showers, laundry, medical and dental services) at specific central hubs |

Because homelessness is a social problem, which cannot be addressed fully by one public entity, outreach programs tend to be administered through external partnerships. This is especially true given how few transit agencies have dedicated budget items or outside funding for homelessness efforts (See Volume I) (Loukaitou-Sideris et al., 2020). These collaborations focus on connecting people experiencing homelessness to the broader social service system, beyond what operators directly administer, which can better deliver assistance and support. In his survey, Boyle (2016) finds that 71 percent of transit agencies report outreach efforts through partnerships with social service or nonprofit agencies to encourage unhoused people to seek assistance. Other common partners include city and county police, and homeless shelters. In our own, more recent survey of transit agencies, we noticed a shift to even more outreach and partnership strategies (See Volume I) (Loukaitou-Sideris et al., 2020).

We discuss case studies of outreach strategies like the ones above later in this report.

## II.2.3. Evaluation of Responses

Very few studies have attempted to evaluate the effectiveness of transit agencies' responses to homelessness, and most of them are case studies of singular interventions. For instance, Rudy and Delgado (2006) report on an initiative in Orange County, California that involved police, bus operators, and mental health professionals on hotspot routes and resulted in more unhoused people receiving services and fewer customer complaints. The few

existing case studies of partnerships and other outreach response measures conclude that forging strong partnerships with external stakeholders like social service agencies, hiring dedicated staff for homelessness response, crafting policies to target behaviors rather than groups or individuals, and routing to serve social service destinations are best practices (Boyle, 2016 and Bell et al., 2018).

A 2020 audit of the outreach program on New York City's subway, carried out through a partnership between the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, New York City's Department of Social Services, and the Bowery Residents' Committee, a nonprofit homeless service provider (See Chapter II.8), found that the program did not meet its original targets of reducing homeless counts in the system. There was a lack of oversight and monitoring, and data on outreach outcomes, such as placement in shelters, were unverified and unreliable (New York State Comptroller, 2020). The same auditor found additional problems in the outreach program at New York City's commuter rail hubs (New York State Comptroller, 2019). In another recent study, Dembo (2020) evaluated LA Metro's homeless outreach programs, many of which are contracted out to the service provider People Assisting the Homeless (PATH) and three police departments; she found that the PATH teams were more cost-effective, referred more unsheltered individuals to social services, and secured housing for a greater share of them, as compared to the police teams (See also our analysis in Chapter II.6, Section 1 and **Tables II-6**, **II-7**, and **II-8**). Both of these studies sought to evaluate the success of outreach programs, but each used different metrics, which partly explains the different outcomes of evaluation. The MTA audit inquired whether the program was able to achieve preset targets in reducing homeless counts, whereas the evaluation of LA Metro's programs focused on the relative success of the different programs in terms of referrals and cost-effectiveness, without assessing whether any of the programs met preset or given targets. Such differences in evaluation metrics reflect the ambiguity of how success can be defined, by different stakeholders and from different perspectives, which is among the biggest challenges for assessing and evaluating transit agencies' efforts to address homelessness.

In contrast, self-assessments by transit agencies are generally optimistic. In his survey, Boyle (2016) asked transit agency staff to self-assess the success of their agency's measures. He finds that 55 percent rated their responses as at least somewhat successful and 40 percent as neutral, while only four percent regarded them as at least somewhat unsuccessful or worse. Our survey in 2020 likewise found moderately successful self-assessments: most operators considered their responses to homelessness as somewhat successful (42%) or neutral (37%); only a minority considered them either unsuccessful (17%) or very successful (4%) (See Volume I) (Loukaitou-Sideris et al., 2020). However, the reasons for these ratings, especially successful ratings, may vary widely. In Boyle (2016), the three most cited reasons for deeming a response successful were that unsheltered people and other customers are treated equally, that good relationships have been forged with partnering agencies, and that the operator has done a reasonable job within the limited resources available (Boyle, 2016). These reasons, though, do not actually reflect the effectiveness of operators' strategies at producing tangible positive outcomes for agency performance or meeting the needs of the unhoused. The first cited reason comes closest to a successful response, though it is hard to quantify and equates equal treatment with good treatment; the second reason may at best be deemed a positive by-product of efforts to address homelessness, rather than an evaluation of whether the objectives of such partnerships are met; and the third reason is more of a reflection on why some measures cannot achieve greater success than an assessment of actual outcomes. As for barriers to success, frequently cited limitations in the survey include resource and funding constraints; aspects of the homeless population (their appearance, personal hygiene and unwillingness or inability to accept help); and critically, the belief that transit agencies can only deliver some temporary fixes rather than address the underlying issues of homelessness (Boyle, 2016).

The few studies that evaluate responses to homelessness do so from the perspective of transit agencies. We could not find research that has evaluated transit agencies' responses from the perspective of people

experiencing homelessness, but a couple of studies that evaluated responses in other sectors may serve as helpful references. For example, a study that interviewed people experiencing homelessness about their encounters with police finds that unsheltered people tend to feel that officers harass them and constrain their movement and activities rather than offering help (Hartmann McNamara, Crawford, and Burns, 2013). People experiencing homelessness view even certain outreach efforts, like those provided through partnerships between BIDs and social services, as surveillance and harassment instead of assistance and support (Selbin et al., 2018). The lack of trust among unhoused people towards the police, BIDs, and even social service agencies and transit agencies underscores the difficulty of outreach efforts and the importance of training programs for those charged with engaging with unhoused individuals.

# II.3. Case Studies Overview

Between November 2020 and April 2021, we conducted interviews with 26 individuals representing ten different transit agencies (See **Tables II-4 and II-5**). We identified these individuals based on the responses that they or their colleagues had given to our survey about homelessness in transit environments (See Volume I) (Loukaitou-Sideris et al., 2020). One of the questions in this survey asked respondents to identify strategies or programs that their agency had used over the last few years to overcome challenges related to homelessness on their system. We followed up and requested interviews with relevant staff from those agencies and their partners who had identified particular programs that sounded promising. Our interviewees were individuals who were particularly knowledgeable about these programs, as supervisors or employees responsible for their operation. Interviewees represented a wide spectrum of professionals from transit operations, transit police, community outreach, and in some cases, individuals working for nonprofits or other public entities that have partnered with a transit agency in efforts to respond to homelessness. Appendix A lists all interviewees and their affiliations.

**Table II-4. Statistics on Transit Operators Interviewed, Report Year 2019**

| Transit Agency | City/Region | Modes | Boardings | Revenue Service Hours | Vehicles in Peak Service |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) | Philadelphia, Pennsylvania | bus, subway, commuter rail, streetcar, demand response | 308 mil. | 7.5 mil. | 2,390 |
| Sacramento Regional Transit District (Sacramento RT/SacRT) | Sacramento, California | light rail, bus, demand response | 20.0 mil. | 0.8 mil. | 258 |
| Denver Regional Transportation District (RTD) | Denver, Colorado | bus, light rail, commuter rail, demand response | 105 mil. | 4.5 mil. | 1,483 |
| Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority (Los Angeles Metro/LA Metro/LACMTA) | Los Angeles, California | bus, subway, light rail, vanpool | 380 mil. | 8.8 mil. | 3,469 |
| San Francisco Bay Area Rapid Transit District (BART) | San Francisco Bay Area, California | subway, hybrid rail, automated guideway | 128 mil. | 2.3 mil. | 605 |

| Transit Agency | City/Region | Modes | Boardings | Revenue Service Hours | Vehicles in Peak Service |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency (SFMTA/Muni) | San Francisco, California | bus, light rail, streetcar, cable car, demand response | 223 mil. | 3.6 mil. | 1,006 |
| King County Department of Metro Transit (King County Metro/KCM) | Seattle, Washington | bus, streetcar, ferry, vanpool, demand response | 129 mil. | 5.0 mil. | 3,233 |
| Tri-County Metropolitan Transportation District of Oregon (TriMet) | Portland, Oregon | bus, light rail, commuter rail, demand response | 96.6 mil. | 3.2 mil. | 973 |
| Metropolitan Transportation Authority New York City Transit (MTA/NYCT) | New York City, New York | subway, bus, demand response | 3,451 mil. | 36.8 mil. | 10,885 |
| City of Madison Metro Transit (Metro Transit) | Madison, Wisconsin | bus, demand response | 13.0 mil. | 0.5 mil. | 234 |

*Data source: FTA, 2020*

Each interview lasted around 45 to 60 minutes and followed a semi-structured format (see Appendix B for the interview instrument). We asked respondents to give a description and discuss each program's focus, budget, impact and perceived success, any challenges encountered, and the lessons learned from the program's implementation. We also inquired if the program was the outcome of a partnership between the transit agency and other entities, as well as about any impacts that COVID-19 may have had on the program's operation. These interviews were often followed by additional documentation and materials sent to us about the program by the interviewees. In what follows, we discuss these distinct homelessness response strategies, their benefits, and drawbacks:[3]

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3. While we find much to be learned and potentially replicated from these broad strategies and from particular aspects of their implementation by the operators listed in **Tables II-4** and **II-5**, we do not necessarily characterize each specific program as a "best practice" per se. Some of these programs have been praised by other academic researchers and practitioners (Boyle, 2016), while aspects of other programs have also faced criticism for their design or failure to meet goals (New York State Comptroller, 2020; Dembo, 2020; and ACT-LA et al., 2021).

- Concentration of services and outreach resources for unsheltered riders in particular hubs

- Mobile outreach to unsheltered riders by teams of clinicians, transit agency staff, and law enforcement officers
  - Smaller clinician/social worker programs at smaller operators
  - Comprehensive outreach strategies at larger operators

- Discounted fares for unsheltered riders

- Transportation to shelters

**Table II-5. List of Case Study Transit Agencies and Programs**

| Transit Agency | City/Region | Number of Interviewees | Type of Program |
|---|---|---|---|
| Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) | Philadelphia, Pennsylvania | 3 | hub of services |
| Sacramento Regional Transit District (Sacramento RT/SacRT) | Sacramento, California | 1 | mobile outreach: smaller clinician programs |
| Denver Regional Transportation District (RTD) | Denver, Colorado | 3 | mobile outreach: smaller clinician programs<br>transportation to shelters |
| Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority (Los Angeles Metro/LA Metro/LACMTA) | Los Angeles, California | 4 | mobile outreach: comprehensive programs<br>transportation to shelters |
| San Francisco Bay Area Rapid Transit District (BART) | San Francisco Bay Area, California | 3 | mobile outreach: comprehensive programs |
| San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency (SFMTA/Muni) | San Francisco, California | 3 | mobile outreach: comprehensive programs<br>discounted fares |

| Transit Agency | City/Region | Number of Interviewees | Type of Program |
|---|---|---|---|
| King County Department of Metro Transit (King County Metro/KCM) | Seattle, Washington | 3 | **discounted fares** |
| Tri-County Metropolitan Transportation District of Oregon (TriMet) | Portland, Oregon | 1 | **discounted fares** |
| Metropolitan Transportation Authority New York City Transit (MTA/NYCT) | New York City, New York | 1 | **transportation to shelters** |
| City of Madison Metro Transit (Metro Transit) | Madison, Wisconsin | 1 | **transportation to shelters** |

# II.4. Hub of Services

## Introduction

In our survey in Volume I, operators reported homelessness concentrated in certain hotspots: generally major bus hubs, intermodal stations, and transit centers (Loukaitou-Sideris et al., 2020). Given the uneven distribution of unhoused people and need for services on many transit systems, some agencies have begun concentrating services in one place as well. This strategy, hub of services, concentrates a variety of outreach resources and services for unhoused riders in one or more central points in the city, at or near a major transit facility and easily accessible via the transit network.

The most successful and comprehensive example of a concentration of services strategy is the Hub of Hope in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The Hub represents a partnership between the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA), the City of Philadelphia, and Project HOME (Scullion, Player, and Nestel, 2020), a local nonprofit founded by Sister Mary Scullion in 1989 that has as its mission "to empower adults, children, and families to break the cycle of homelessness and poverty, to alleviate the underlying causes of poverty, and to enable all of us to attain our fullest potential as individuals and as members of the broader society" (Project HOME, 2020).

SEPTA serves the Philadelphia region, including Bucks, Chester, Delaware, Montgomery and Philadelphia Counties. SEPTA operates bus, subway, streetcar, and commuter rail services. The agency operates 290 rail stations and over 450 miles of track (SEPTA, 2021 and Li, 2019). With 2,390 vehicles in peak service, SEPTA had 308 million annual boardings pre-pandemic, according to the National Transit Database (NTD) Report Year 2019, about half of which were on buses (FTA, 2020).

## Program Description and History

According to Sister Scullion, the Hub of Hope program first started in the winter of 2011, as a small walk-in outreach center of 1,000 square feet located in a storefront at SEPTA's Suburban Station, which despite its name is a central regional station in Philadelphia. This space was open only during the winter months, with the purpose of assisting people who were experiencing homelessness, offering them a cup of coffee and referring them to shelters. According to SEPTA Chief of Transit Police, Thomas Nestel, Suburban Station is a good location for such a hub of services because it is centrally located and big. Unhoused and vulnerable people could find safety from the elements there, and the station had become a hotspot for people experiencing homelessness. However, the availability of space was uncertain from year to year (Boyle, 2016), and this first hub was also too small to accommodate the increasing demand for its services. Thus, after SEPTA was able to identify another space in close proximity to Suburban Station, which was owned by the City of Philadelphia and did not require zoning changes, the new Hub of Hope opened on January 31, 2018 with an expanded (11,000 square feet) facility offering year-round services (Scullion, Player, and Nestel, 2020 and Scullion, 2020a).

Today, the Hub of Hope offers a variety of services to people experiencing homelessness, including: case management; hospitality services such as showers, clothing and laundry, and coffee, tea, and snacks; a "living room" for older people, people with mobility issues or people with physical or mental illnesses; primary medical care and limited behavioral and dental health care; transportation to shelters through a partnership with a local

nonprofit, Citizens Acting Together Can Help, Inc. (CATCH); and meals through a partnership with another local nonprofit, Muslims Serve (Scullion, Player, and Nestel, 2020 and Scullion, 2020a).

Prior to the pandemic, the Hub was open seven days a week, from 7:00 A.M. to 7:00 P.M. Monday through Friday and from 3:30 P.M. to 6:30 P.M. on Saturdays and Sundays. During the pandemic, it has opened Monday through Friday for fewer hours and has limited its capacity to ensure physical distancing in accordance with CDC guidelines. Moreover, dental care services have been suspended. However, the medical team still offers free COVID-19 tests (Scullion, Player, and Nestel, 2020 and Scullion, 2020a) and, as of this writing, also offers COVID-19 vaccines (Wolters, 2021).

## Program Focus

The primary focus of the program is assisting people experiencing homelessness who congregate in and around SEPTA's central transit stations and scatter throughout the wider Center City district. Aside from those who visit the Hub on their own, SEPTA's transit police and the city police patrolling with outreach workers also direct and/or take unsheltered individuals whom they encounter during their patrol to the Hub (Scullion, Player, and Nestel, 2020 and Scullion, 2020a).

According to Chief Nestel,

> "The Hub of Hope is really the hub for all of the law enforcement and social service agencies. They are all connected to the Hub....We have social service specialists who walk the concourses with [SEPTA] officers and...are in direct contact with the Hub folks to arrange for shelter, medical treatment, and social services, which we may not be able to provide, but we are able to guide them to the right location. So, we are all connected through the Hub" (Nestel, 2020).

According to Sister Scullion, even with its 11,000 square feet, the Hub is not big enough. During Fiscal Year 2019, the Hub of Hope had over 100,000 visits from approximately 4,000 unique individuals. During the first two quarters of Fiscal Year 2020, before the pandemic, there were roughly 270 to 300 visits to the Hub each day (Scullion, Player, and Nestel, 2020 and Scullion, 2020a).

## Effects of COVID-19

The pandemic has had an impact on the Hub's operations. Due to the substantial contraction of its hours of operation and services, the Hub has seen a dramatic decrease in the average number of daily visits. Just prior to the pandemic, the Hub was receiving as many as 300 visits per day. As the pandemic arrived, there were on average 135 visits a day to the Hub between January and August 2020. Between August and November, the numbers dropped to approximately 70 to 80 visits per day, but those numbers started rising again as the temperatures dropped in the winter months. In accordance with CDC guidelines, the Hub team encouraged people experiencing homelessness who had a place (a shelter) to stay to do so and has limited the capacity of the Hub to 30 guests per two-hour rotation to ensure physical distancing (Scullion, Player, and Nestel, 2020 and Scullion, 2020a).

The closure of parts of Suburban Station and of the Municipal Services Building on top has also reduced the physical accessibility to the Hub (Scullion, 2020a). While the reduced capacity of the Hub may have increased the challenge for SEPTA to address homelessness on their system, the direct impact of the pandemic on unhoused populations is perhaps an even greater challenge. According to Chief Nestel,

*"I'm sure that COVID is increasing addiction issues and mental health issues. And it's certainly increasing poverty issues in a city that already has a major poverty problem. But I think that the perception is much worse than the reality only because there are no other people around, so that vulnerable population can't mingle in"* (Nestel, 2020).

## Partnerships

The primary partnership that has made the Hub of Hope a reality is between SEPTA, Project HOME, and the City of Philadelphia. For the current Hub, the City provided the space and pays for the operating costs, and SEPTA paid for its initial renovations. SEPTA's leadership was essential in securing support for this program to begin and to continue (Scullion, Player, and Nestel, 2020 and Scullion, 2020a).

As mentioned above, during daily operations, both SEPTA's transit police and City police for the Center City district refer and/or bring people experiencing homelessness to the Hub. Another partner is the Center City District business association, which has partnered with Project HOME to operate an outreach program called the Ambassadors of Hope. These ambassadors also help refer people who they encounter outside the station area and throughout the Center City district to the Hub. This program has two outreach teams, one for the east side of City Hall and the other for the west, consisting of a Project HOME outreach worker, a Center City representative, and a City Police officer. SEPTA's transit police also has three outreach teams consisting of police officers and outreach specialists. Transit operators can call the transit police when they see unsheltered individuals, and the outreach team would respond (Scullion, Player, and Nestel, 2020 and Scullion, 2020a).

The Center City District business association also provides transportation to shelters during the day, while the City provides transportation to shelters at night through CATCH, a nonprofit mental health provider that has vans (Scullion, Player, and Nestel, 2020 and Scullion, 2020a).

## Program Budget and Staff

The Hub of Hope program has an annual budget of about one million dollars, excluding the budget for medical, behavioral health and dental services, which are funded through Project HOME's Federally Qualified Health Center. The Hub has nine social service staff members and six medical care staff members (Scullion, 2020a).

Funding comes from SEPTA, Project HOME, and the City. SEPTA provided the initial seven-figure capital for the renovation of the space, and Project HOME raised one million dollars initially to pay for the equipment. SEPTA currently pays for three social service specialists to work with their transit police officers in their outreach teams, as well as the elevator and daily police outside the Hub. The City pays for operating costs, which amount to about $900,000 to $1 million annually. SEPTA and Project HOME also hold an annual breakfast fundraising event which raises about $3.5 million per year for renovations, equipment, and other expenses (Scullion, Player, and Nestel, 2020 and Scullion, 2020a).

It is clear that SEPTA has invested heavily in the success of the Hub of Hope. According to Chief Nestel:

*"SEPTA knows we have to be a partner, not just a consumer of [Project HOME's] effort[s]. I've had a lot of challenging conversations about this. Some folks within SEPTA told me: 'We are a transit agency, not a social service agency.' But the social service issues have a direct impact on transportation. And if you*

*can't address the social service problems that surround...the transportation realm, then your business isn't going to flourish"* (Nestel, 2020).

## Program Impact

The program's success is demonstrated by the fact that it draws very significant numbers of people experiencing homelessness—about 100,000 visits per year—and offers them a wide range of services which can improve their welfare. The Hub is considered a safe place, which helps reduce the numbers of unsheltered individuals on the transit system (Scullion, Player, and Nestel, 2020). According to Chief Nestel:

> *"It is about developing...relationships, and that's what the Hub does. They have coffee and donuts every day to entice people to come in. They have that daily contact with the folks,...so they develop trust. And then once you develop trust, then you are able to channel people to the assistance that they have"* (Nestel, 2020).

One fact that shows both the success and limits of the Hub is that the numbers of people experiencing homelessness on the transit system are lower during the operating hours of the Hub but rise dramatically when the Hub is closed.

On the other hand, it is tough to gauge the success of the Hub in terms of how many of the people it helps ultimately get out of homelessness because the outcome of their visits is very difficult to track, according to our interviewees. Many of those experiencing homelessness make only a few visits to the Hub. These visits tend to be for specific purposes, such as help with IDs or temporary shelter, and once their specific needs are fulfilled, many patrons do not return (Scullion, Player, and Nestel, 2020). To this end, the Hub may have improved their welfare, but Hub staff do not know if they have ultimately found permanent housing. Additionally, it is very difficult to track people experiencing homelessness who enter into treatment programs and to learn about their outcomes because they are protected by the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) privacy protections.

## Program Challenges

As with all profiled programs that seek to respond to homelessness in transit settings, funding is also a problem for the Hub of Hope. The Hub has fared better than many other programs thanks to the partnership, dedication, and successful fundraising efforts of its three major partners, but still the needs are great. As Chief Nestel noted:

> *"[Funding] is a very strong challenge. Every year at budget time, when I am talking about social service dedicated funding, I say that I would love to have ten to 12 social service specialists working with the [transit] police. [But] it is expensive"* (Nestel, 2020).

Other economic challenges also include the lack of resources to accommodate all the needs of people who visit the Hub and, of course, the lack of affordable housing (Scullion, Player, and Nestel, 2020 and Scullion, 2020a). Sister Scullion illustrates the dilemma of having to balance different needs given the limited resources:

> *"It's never enough space. But our concept also was that if you have $1, it may be better used on the other end for housing, as opposed to creating more Hubs of Hope. If you don't have access to safe havens, housing and treatment, the Hub is only a revolving door that leads to nowhere. Access to safe, affordable housing is essential"* (Scullion, 2020b).

According to Sister Scullion, another challenge that the Hub is facing is that its physical space needs to be redesigned according to trauma-informed care and design principles, in order to create a space that feels "physically and psychologically safe" (Scullion, 2020a). For example, currently case managers in the Hub meet with people in cubicles without much privacy (Scullion, 2020a).

Another challenge is that, as Sister Scullion observed, drugs are regularly sold in the station as well, which has entailed violence and other crimes. Sister Scullion has noticed people experiencing homelessness used as carriers for drugs or the appearance of homelessness being used as cover for drug sales. These activities have increased traffic to the Hub. To address this challenge, SEPTA's transit police has increased its presence and surveillance in and around the Hub. Our interviewees noted that drug-related activities and crimes have decreased during the pandemic (Scullion, Player, and Nestel, 2020 and Scullion, 2020a).

Lastly, the perceptions of commuters and businesses in the station about the homelessness problem represent another challenge. While the numbers of people experiencing homelessness have in fact declined in the station since the Hub started operation, many still often blame the Hub for bringing them to the station (Scullion, 2020a).

## Lessons Learned

The lessons learned from the Hub Hope can be summarized in a few words: 1) building relationships and trust, 2) finding a successful location and designing a trauma-informed space, 3) hiring and training compassionate staff, 4) creating successful partnerships, and 5) having access to placement in safe havens, affordable housing, and treatment programs.

One key theme that emerged during our discussion with Hub staff and partners was the importance of relationship-building. People experiencing homelessness are vulnerable, and it takes time and effort to build trusting relationships that lead to lasting service provision. What the Hub has done is "to meet people where they are" (Player, 2020) by offering coffee, food, and hospitality to make unhoused people feel safe and welcome. Indeed, the Hub provides basic services, medical care, and what Candice Player from Project HOME calls "things...that are so basic that...someone might not even think of [them]: the shower, the laundry, having clean underwear to put on after you[r] shower, toothbrush, toothpaste" (Player, 2020).

The location of the space in a central city hotspot is important and conveniently accessible for the vulnerable population of the area. The design of the physical space also matters, because design rooted in the needs of those who have experienced trauma can help create a more healing space.

For all programs, not just hubs of services, the Hub of Hope offers a lesson on the importance of compassion among the staff to be able to address the specific emotional and psychological needs of fragile people like those experiencing homelessness. This then requires staff to have relevant knowledge, skills, and experience. The same lesson applies to outreach efforts in the field, because when outreach specialists work in tandem with police officers to engage with people experiencing homelessness on the transit system or on the street, they can change the atmosphere from one of enforcement to one of helping. As Chief Nestel emphasized:

> "It is important to note that we are picking the right people for that job. We are not picking the police officer who doesn't believe that this works—and there are plenty of them out there! We are picking the police officer who has a passion for it,...and [who is] very good at communicating with folks who are in need" (Nestel, 2020).

Lastly, a lesson that all interviewees emphasized is the importance of partnerships among different parties. The key to having successful partnerships that can get work done is building trusting relationships among different agencies and organizations. The nonprofit Project HOME has a primary role in this partnership as it operates and manages the Hub and has as its mission to help people experiencing homelessness. SEPTA also plays a critical leadership role, which is rather unusual among transit agencies. SEPTA takes its role of addressing homelessness seriously and considers it as an organization-wide mission. Apart from funding support, SEPTA also hires outreach employees and transit police officers who are working together to refer people experiencing homelessness to the Hub; some of the outreach employees hired by SEPTA are people experiencing homelessness themselves (Scullion, Player, and Nestel, 2020). Similarly, the City plays a crucial role by providing access to a wide range of services and resources that are important for the Hub. In addition to these major partners, the Hub includes partnerships with a wide range of organizations, including the Philadelphia City Police, the Center City District business association, and other local nonprofits that provide transportation to shelters or meals.

In conclusion, in the words of Chief Nestel,

> *"The end result [should be] hopefully housing....If you are given five dollars for the homelessness effort, four of these dollars should [go towards] housing. That's where you are going to have the long-term effect. But you've also got to get people help. And the Hub is...a shining star for that entry-level help that's going to get somebody to housing"* (Nestel, 2020).

# II.5. Mobile Outreach: Smaller Clinician/Social Worker Programs

## Introduction

In contrast to the strategy in the prior chapter, where outreach services for unsheltered riders are concentrated in centralized hubs, a number of transit agencies have adopted various mobile outreach strategies across their systems. The make-up, size, budget, and other details of these teams vary across the agencies studied, but each involves staff moving throughout the transit system to literally meet unhoused riders where they are and provide them services or connections/referrals to services. As described above, operators can pair these strategies, like SEPTA's partnered Ambassadors of Hope, who direct people back to the Hub of Hope (Scullion, Player, and Nestel, 2020 and Scullion, 2020a), or can undertake mobile outreach efforts on their own. In all the cases reviewed, such outreach is the result of partnerships between the transit agency and other entities.

In this chapter and the next, we discuss these programs. Below, we describe two smaller but growing programs at the Sacramento Regional Transit District (SacRT) and Denver Regional Transportation District (RTD), both of which involve the deployment of one or a few clinicians/social workers alongside existing law enforcement efforts (Martingano, 2020b; Jones, 2020; and Sailon, 2020). The next chapter discusses larger, slightly older programs with at least some outreach teams deployed independently of law enforcement. These programs differ mostly in degree, not in kind, but smaller operators and/or those just starting a mobile outreach program might look to the strategies in this chapter first.

SacRT operates both buses (80 routes) and light rail (43 miles of rail, with 52 stations) in much of Sacramento County, California, including Sacramento, Citrus Heights, Elk Grove, Folsom and Rancho Cordova (SacRT, 2020). Pre-pandemic, according to the NTD, in Report Year 2019, SacRT had almost 20 million annual boardings, roughly half of which were on buses and the other half on light rail (FTA, 2020).

Denver RTD operates over 140 bus routes and 12 light rail and commuter rail lines (spanning 113 miles) across eight counties in the Denver, Colorado metropolitan area (Denver RTD, 2020, 2021). Per the NTD, in Report Year 2019, Denver RTD carried 105 million trips, two thirds of which were on buses (FTA, 2020).

## Program Description

SacRT's outreach and targeted enforcement programs started in the summer of 2020 and has two elements. First, the transit agency coordinates with law enforcement agencies in Sacramento County to identify a list of "top ten" chronic offenders on transit. SacRT has found that these predominantly unsheltered individuals account for a large portion of police involvement across the system. Each month, SacRT's homeless response team meets to update the list. However, in contrast with the homeless strategies of decades past, the second part of SacRT's response involves outreach to these individuals. SacRT has hired an intern from a local Master of Social Work program, who interacts with people experiencing homelessness on SacRT, rather than using law enforcement alone as the first response. The intern works a few days every week at SacRT and rides with transit police officers to meet with people experiencing homelessness, when there is a call for assistance. She speaks with the individuals, offers them services, and connects with their case manager, if possible. When back in the office, the intern examines various databases to find out if they have a social worker or family member and tries to connect

them. This program was put in operation after the killing of George Floyd in Minnesota, which increased concerns about police involvement (Murrietta, 2020). This is notable, as very few operators (15%) surveyed in Volume I reported changing their homelessness policies in response to mid-2020 protests against police brutality (Loukaitou-Sideris et al., 2020). As explained by Roman Murrietta, the Chief of SacRT's Regional Transit Police:

> *"This [program] is new, [but] we've been planning on it for a while. [We started it] after George Floyd, which was in May 2020; this big push was to not necessarily have law enforcement officers respond to nuisance-type individuals, people experiencing homelessness, mentally ill people. And we have been working on it since then. Actually, before then, we were working on it, but all of a sudden, there was a big push. And the City of Sacramento itself began implementing and putting together...the Office of Community Response. Through that, we were able to...speed things up and get this intern who is helping us with...case management and essentially connecting the dots"* (Murrietta, 2020).

In Denver, the RTD also started a homeless outreach program in recent years. Under RTD's mental health program, a full-time mental health professional rides along with security staff to de-escalate confrontations and link people with shelter services and counseling. The clinician is a contract position from the Mental Health Center of Denver (MHCD) and currently works for RTD from Monday to Thursday from 9 A.M. to 7 P.M. The program was launched as a pilot in 2019 and is based on a similar program that MHCD has with the Denver Police Department. The program was extended in 2020 and will expand to four clinicians, seven days per week, in 2021. In addition, in October 2020, Denver RTD received a $180,000 Helping Obtain Prosperity for Everyone (HOPE) grant from the U.S. Department of Transportation. The grant will allow Denver RTD to hire a full-time community outreach coordinator on issues affecting unhoused residents (Martingano, 2020b; Jones, 2020; and Sailon, 2020).

Steve Martingano, the Deputy Chief of the Denver RTD Transit Police and the initiator of this program, explained the rationale for starting the program:

> *"One of my responsibilities is fare evasion suspensions....We were finding [that] a lot of people...getting suspended were suffering from mental illness. When somebody gets suspended, they have ten days to appeal that suspension. And a lot of times, we'd be getting phone calls from the Mental Health Center of Denver, saying: 'Hey, a client of ours, "Joe Smith," is suspended, but he needs to get to our agency, meet with the counselor, or update his medicine.' So, this [was] starting to become a daily phone call. So, I then started talking with the Mental Health Center of Denver. I knew that they had a similar program with [the] Denver P[olice] D[epartment], and I asked them if they could bring it over to RTD. And they just loved the idea, because they know a lot of their clients utilize the public transportation system. It took us about seven months to work together to get it approved by everyone. And once it got approved, we started it last year as a pilot program, with one clinician. We extended it this year, and next year, we're actually going up to four clinicians"* (Martingano, 2020b).

According to Martingano, the clinician is also equipped with a police radio and listens to calls that she may be needed for. When such a call comes in, she responds and goes to the person in need along with a transit police officer. Other times, when there is no call, she walks around the various transit facilities making contacts with people that she feels might need some help. Based on the behavior they are exhibiting, she can have a conversation, try to connect them with resources or transportation, contact other agencies and jurisdictions to find out about the person in need, or even put them on a mental health hold in extreme circumstances (Martingano, 2020b; Jones, 2020; and Sailon, 2020). According to the RTD's clinician, Danielle Jones:

*"What my day looks like is: sitting in the car, listening to the radio, [taking] notes, doing whatever I need to do. I look up resources for people; I do intakes—I get people into services: that's what intakes are. It's a variety. No day is ever the same. Some weeks are way busier than other weeks."*

*"Typically, on snow days,...I will just walk around and talk to people. If they approach me, I'll talk to them. I don't typically approach people on my own, just because I never want to assume that they need mental health services....The last thing I want people to [think is that I am] assuming, [because it] is stereotyping. So, I do walk around, letting people approach me, because they do recognize that I'm obviously not security; I'm not a cop. But I have a radio, and people say I look professional. So, they approach me asking for resources"* (Jones, 2020).

## Program Focus

Neither SacRT nor Denver RTD's programs are explicitly focused, per se, on those experiencing homelessness. However, SacRT has found that the majority of the top ten identified offenders are unsheltered. They do not currently track the number of individuals with whom the social work intern interacts but are hoping to purchase a geospatial analysis system that could allow the agency to track data about unsheltered individuals more easily (Murrietta, 2020). Likewise, RTD's internal data show that 93% of contacts are unsheltered. As of October 2020, Jones made approximately 18 documented contacts per month, though some conversations were not recorded. Over the winter, these numbers increased to as many as 12 contacts per week, as more people experiencing homelessness sought shelter in stations (Martingano, 2020b and Jones, 2020).

Before the pandemic, from October to December 2019, RTD's data show that a minority (28%) of the 57 documented contacts were transported elsewhere after their encounter: 12 percent to a hospital for physical health concerns, 9 percent to a psychiatric emergency room, 4 percent to jail, and 4 percent to a detoxification facility (Martingano, 2020a).

## Effects of COVID-19

According to Carleigh Sailon, Program Manager at MHCD, while Denver has been experiencing homelessness for years, the COVID-19 pandemic may have caused an uptick, because people are losing their jobs (Sailon, 2020). At the same time, Denver shelters are at capacity, and, as a result, there are more unsheltered people on the streets (Jones, 2020).

The pandemic has affected how RTD's mental health clinician program is run. While pre-pandemic, the clinician rode along with police officers, she is no longer able to ride in a vehicle with Denver RTD police officers because of COVID-related physical distancing mandates. As a result, she uses her own vehicle to respond to calls (Jones, 2020). According to Jones, "now that I've been by myself, I think I'm getting a lot more calls because I feel like people only want the clinician, not the cop, there" (Jones, 2020).

SacRT's program, meanwhile, started during the pandemic. Chief Murrietta indicated that during the pandemic, unsheltered riders have become more visible on transit. However, SacRT has not collected data to determine if the number of people experiencing homelessness has grown, or if they are simply more visible because of the drop in general transit ridership (Murrietta, 2020) (For further discussion of this distinction, see Volume I (Loukaitou-Sideris et al., 2020)).

## Partnerships

Both SacRT and Denver RTD's outreach programs rely on external partnerships. In Sacramento, the program is the outcome of partnerships between SacRT and several regional entities, including law enforcement agencies, Sacramento's community prosecutor, Sacramento's mental health hospital, and the City's newly created Office of Community Response. The Office of Community Response works with a local university to provide the social work intern for the program (Murrietta, 2020).

The program in Denver is a partnership between Denver RTD and Mental Health Services of Denver, and each partner provides half of the funding (Jones, 2020 and Martingano, 2020b). Additionally, MHCD runs a pilot program called the Support Team Assisted Response, which transports those experiencing behavioral health crises to resources elsewhere and is discussed further in Chapter II.8. The program's clinician also works frequently with the Saint Francis Center, a day shelter. They can help people with getting ID, help with transportation, refer them to other services, and even connect them to a case manager through the Colorado Coalition for the Homeless, who in turn can help them in their search for services and housing (Jones, 2020). Lastly, Denver RTD has started a Homeless Task Force that meets monthly with many homeless organizations in Denver to identify challenges and solutions (Martingano, 2020b).

## Program Budget and Staff

Both programs are relatively small. As the smaller of the two operators, SacRT has a homeless response team composed of one social work intern and three sworn transit officers. SacRT does not pay for the intern, who is completing certain hours of required fieldwork for their degree. The coordination with other law enforcement agencies is part of SacRT's routine work, and as such it does not require additional staff. SacRT hopes to get licenses for a geospatial program to better track unsheltered riders; the agency would receive a few of the licenses that the City of Sacramento is purchasing in a larger order of up to $150,000 total (Murrietta, 2020).

At Denver RTD, the costs run somewhat higher, since the program involves a professional clinician. The budget for one clinician is approximately $110,000, including salary and overhead. Half of this is paid from Denver RTD's $26 million police budget, while the other half is covered by MHCD through Medicaid funding. As the program expands to four clinicians in the near future, the budget will increase to $412,000, paid for in the same way. Currently, the one clinician only works from 9 A.M. to 7 P.M., four days per week, but with four clinicians, RTD's mental health program will have coverage from 7 A.M. to 7 P.M., seven days per week (Martingano, 2020b).

Denver RTD has been successful in attracting a federal HOPE grant, which will infuse $180,000 into its program. The grant will help pay for a staff person who can start working with homeless organizations (Martingano, 2020b). As explained by Deputy Chief Martingano:

> *"[The clinician and the new staff person] are going to work together a lot, very closely, because one of the things you find from the mental health clinician [is that] they dedicate so much of their time and education towards mental health issues, and ways to deal with that, but they don't have a lot of time to actually learn about the homeless outreach organizations"* (Martingano, 2020b).

## Program Impact

The Denver RTD program has positively impacted the lives of unhoused people by having a clinician who is able to talk to them, get to know their stories, and provide them with resources as a first point of contact. The clinician can continue to build rapport over time to establish trust. RTD and MHCD measure the success of the program by

the number of people who are able to receive services through MHCD or other organizations, though they often cannot track outcomes beyond referrals to services (Martingano, 2020b and Jones, 2020). But Martingano noted the other benefits of the program, especially in replacing what were once law enforcement and citation situations with clinician encounters:

> *"From December 27, 2019 to October 21, 2020, Danielle...made 182...contacts. That's great! But the real measure is [that], for a lot of these individuals that have been contacted, enforcement [is] way out of this issue. [Otherwise, we] would either have to write [them] a citation or suspend them from transportation use. [But] with Danielle showing up, contacting them, and getting them resources, they are not an issue the next day. And they're allowed to use the transportation system and not be subjected to some type of criminal enforcement. So really, that's the way we measure it."*

> *"[With] a lot of these individuals, you know their names; if you hear a name, you're like, 'Oh, how is he doing? What's happening with him?' And then you realize [that] Danielle has contacted them, and [they are] now getting the proper medication."*

> *"We're getting a lot of good positive feedback. Because, really, when somebody has that type of mental health outburst, [if] it's on a bus, the bus driver pulls over, because they don't deal with that person or that type of scenario. Well, by deviating from the route, that now [could make it] a criminal charge [against this person for] hindering public transportation. And in the past, the police officer...would show up, write him a ticket, tell him to get off the bus, tell him he can't ride for 30 days. We're seeing now that our bus operators are learning a lot more about the mental health diagnosis, and they're really working better"* (Martingano, 2020b).

Sailon of MHCD also finds the program successful as it results in "much more supportive, non-judgmental interaction[s]" with a clinician who knows and has built rapport with the unsheltered population and can "listen to their stories and...do problem solving in a different way than a transit officer would be able to [do]...[and] connect [them] to community resources [and] day shelters" (Sailon, 2020). Danielle Jones, the clinician, echoes the above sentiments:

> *"Just making connections with people, so that they know that if they do need help, they can come to me—I think that's a huge form of success for people who are in vulnerable situations: just reaching out and wanting to talk to somebody who does have resources. It may not be that day that they get the resources they need, because of whatever situation they're in. But at least they know that I'm there. And I can talk to them about how to take the steps and cover any situation; [it] is a step in itself"* (Jones, 2020).

In Sacramento, the program is only a few months old, and SacRT is looking to collect more data to determine its success. However, in discussing the type of metrics that the agency would like to track, Chief Murrietta focused on costs to the agency. In particular, SacRT plans to track the time and money spent interacting with people experiencing homelessness. They will also track the cost of repairing damage, such as cut fences, associated with unsheltered people's encampments (Murrietta, 2020).

## Program Challenges

Staff at SacRT and Denver RTD identified two sets of major challenges: coordination with other agencies and general lack of resources. Regarding the former, SacRT's Chief Murrietta pointed out the challenge of silos in different law enforcement agencies and social service organizations working to assist people experiencing homelessness. Per Murrietta, there is significant overlap in what these agencies are doing but little

communication between them. Along those lines, SacRT's program would not be successful if it only removed people experiencing homelessness from a station, stop, or vehicle without offering them other resources (Murrietta, 2020). As Murrietta explained:

> "There are a lot of traditional models that want to put a person with a mental health condition in the car with an officer. From our experience, that hasn't had a high success rate. The higher success rate is to have trained individuals making these contacts on their own. So that's one challenge. And the other challenge that I try to have my guys work on daily is not to silo themselves. There's a lot of overlap and not a lot of communication when it comes to this population. So instead, for instance,...[of] kicking someone off a bus or train, we have to slow it down, take a few extra moments, [and] get their information. And then this is where we start documenting a file, because some of these negative contacts, they're never documented. So, no one knows how much of an issue this person is....Now we reach out to...different agencies in different areas that have different resources [to] we let them know about this negative contact. I understand that there are barriers, and that we are not supposed to share some information. But that is really hindering some of our progress when we can't communicate about these individuals" (Murrietta, 2020).

Denver interviewees identified a broader problem. As in most cities, the greatest barrier to assisting unhoused people there is the lack of housing resources. Even when the mental health clinician can connect someone to resources, it is unlikely that they will find housing (Sailon, 2020). As Sailon noted: "Our biggest challenge [is that] people who are unhoused need housing [and] we don't have that readily available in Denver" (Sailon, 2020).

Furthermore, due to limited funding, the program has been so far running with only one mental health clinician, who is expected to focus on mental health issues but is also asked to connect people to resources and services. With demand high, this can be overwhelming for one person alone, who can only cover a limited time and areas of the system (Jones, 2020). Hopefully, the expansion of the program to multiple clinicians will allow more division of labor and operation of the program during all days of the week.

## Lessons Learned

Echoing the key challenges and impacts identified above, staff at both operators pointed to the necessity of partnerships to successful implementation. Murrietta at SacRT identified as key lessons the need for coordination with other agencies and the benefits of being part of existing solutions, rather than trying to invent a new program from scratch. A regional team, such as the one SacRT has developed, can better take advantage of regional resources while also creating a one-stop shop for people experiencing homelessness to find services. Additionally, SacRT has found that people experiencing homelessness are much more likely to accept help and resources if approached by a social worker rather than a law enforcement officer (Murrietta, 2020).

Similarly, our Denver RTD interviewees touted the importance of a transit agency's collaboration with a community mental health center. Because a number of unhoused individuals are dealing with untreated behavioral health disorders, it is important to have a trained professional who can connect them to treatment and services and who has a good knowledge of the available community resources. This is particularly important for programs that do not have the resources to hire more than one staff person. The clinician, then, should not only be an expert in mental health but also know how to navigate local resources, such as criminal justice, housing, hygiene, and jobs, to assist people experiencing homelessness (Sailon, 2020 and Jones, 2020).

Denver RTD staff also highlighted partnerships with other organizations that can assist with transporting unsheltered people to resources. Since the mental health clinician cannot herself transport people, she relies on the STAR program's van, discussed further below (see Chapter II.8) (Sailon, 2020).

Lastly, according to Steve Martingano, transit agencies need to understand that while a mental health clinician puts more focus on problems beyond operations, an outreach program also creates a demand for services. The agency must have a plan to handle the increase in service requests (Martingano interview).

Summing up the sentiments above, MHCD's Sailon outlined the importance of such programs:

> *"[Our program has] been so successful that RTD wants to hire more clinicians. This is a good option...the right response. When someone is hanging out in your transit [system], it is [otherwise] a law enforcement response, and maybe a trespassing ticket...might come from that. It is not really helpful: these are people who are struggling on many levels already, and a trespassing ticket isn't going to help them at all or solve the problem. It may get someone to leave [the transit setting] in that moment. But...if 'lock them up' worked, we would [have] wrapped this up years ago....And we really haven't. And also, you have to look at the cascade effect that a trespassing ticket or an arrest causes. So now you have someone with limited resources, who maybe finds themselves in jail for trespassing, right? Or they're given a ticket, [when] their life is based on survival, right? Let's be serious—what's the likelihood that they're going to make it to that court date or be able to pay those fines that are associated with that ticket? You're basically just getting this person caught up in the criminal justice system for not having anywhere to be. [And if you] don't show up to a court date, then you have a 'failure to appear' warrant, and you are jailed for that?...[We must] try something new!"* (Sailon, 2020).

# II.6. Mobile Outreach: Comprehensive Outreach Programs

## Introduction

California is the state with the highest concentration of unsheltered people experiencing homelessness (U.S. HUD, 2020). As a result, California transit operators are particularly attuned to the challenge of homelessness on their systems and have sought to develop responses. In this section, we focus on comprehensive outreach programs of three large transit operators in California: one offered by Los Angeles Metro in Southern California and one offered through a partnership between Bay Area Rapid Transit and the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency in Northern California. These programs broadly operate on the same model as those in the previous chapter—having trained outreach staff to either patrol across the system with law enforcement officers or on their own—but are of a larger scale, have existed longer, and have more sub-initiatives than those of SacRT and Denver RTD.

## II.6.1. Los Angeles Metro: Mobile Outreach Programs and Operation Shelter the Unsheltered

The third-largest transit operator in the U.S. by pre-pandemic boardings, Los Angeles Metro operates a large bus network and a growing rail system across Los Angeles County in Southern California (LA Metro, 2019). Per the NTD Report Year 2019, Metro ran almost 3,500 transit vehicles during peak hours, while its riders undertook close to 380 million unlinked passenger trips (FTA, 2020). Since 2017, LA Metro has developed partnerships with local law enforcement and service agencies to assist people experiencing homelessness on its system (LA Metro, 2021a).

### Program Description

In the face of a severely worsening homelessness crisis across Southern California, LA Metro developed a strategic action plan and, from it, initiated a comprehensive homelessness response program in 2017. A key part of this program was mobile outreach teams. When LA Metro established a new policing contract with three law enforcement agencies (each covering part of the multi-jurisdictional system) in 2017, it included a mobile outreach team component in each: the City of Los Angeles Police Department's (LAPD) Homeless Outreach and Proactive Engagement (HOPE) teams, the Los Angeles County Sheriff Department's (LASD) Mental Evaluation Teams (MET), and the Long Beach Police Department's (LBPD) Quality of Life (QoL) teams. In addition, LA Metro has also contracted with the social service agency People Assisting the Homeless to provide all-civilian homeless outreach teams as well, also called "County, City, Community" (C3) teams. These four different teams vary somewhat in the number and type of personnel (described further below), but all include staff trained for interactions with people experiencing homelessness and tasked with referring unhoused people to services, working with back-office staff to place them into housing, and de-escalating situations on the system (LA Metro, 2021a; Dembo, 2020; LASD, 2020; and LBPD, 2018).

In April 2020, in response to the increased number of unhoused people turning to transit for shelter during the pandemic, LA Metro initiated "Operation Shelter the Unsheltered." In this expansion of LA Metro's efforts, officers from the partner law enforcement agencies above and PATH staff visit key end-of-line stations[4] to ask unsheltered riders to disembark from trains during closing hours, so that LA Metro service attendants can get on board to clean the train interior. The outreach workers on these teams then offer to provide resources to those seeking shelter. During this period of time, LA Metro tracked available beds in nearby shelters and provided bus transportation to them (discussed further in Chapter II.8). LA Metro staff plan to continue the program post-COVID. While LA Metro has brought in additional LAPD and LASD officers from other special units beyond HOPE and MET to staff Operation Shelter the Unsheltered, LA Metro staff plan to test use of unarmed ambassadors rather than law enforcement officers as the first point of contact for unsheltered people. In addition, staff would like to add additional morning (7 A.M.-8 A.M.) and afternoon (2 P.M.) shifts (Burrell Garcia, Dickerson, and Loew, 2020; LA Metro, 2020a, 2020b; and Palmer, 2021). As explained by Joyce Burrell Garcia, project manager in Metro's System Security and Law Enforcement unit:

> "After everyone is offloaded, they must exit through the turnstile; that is mandatory. They may re-enter the station [and] the platform: if they have a card, they can re-tap, and they can re-enter the station. But what happens once they go through the turnstile: there are outreach teams there that are able to offer them social services along with snacks, to begin to educate them about services that are available to them, and to offer to take them to get services. So therein lies, I think, the power of the program:
>
> ● We're asking individuals to leave the system
> ● We're extending an invitation to get services,...
> ● Where services are accepted, our outreach teams will take them to get the services, and then
> ● We're also able to clean and maintain a healthy, safe, hygienic environment" (Burrell Garcia, 2020b).

Through its contract with the social service agency PATH, LA Metro is also able to provide temporary shelter in motels for the most vulnerable riders (women with children, veterans, the elderly, and disabled individuals) who are encountered in its system after hours. The outreach teams provide them with transportation to the motels and continue to follow up with them once they are registered, so that they can best connect them with services they are eligible for. According to Burrell Garcia, about 25 to 40 people every month are given shelter in a motel (Burrell Garcia, Dickerson, and Loew, 2020).

The size of the outreach teams (composed by both law enforcement officers and outreach staff) is different, depending on the location. The largest teams are at Union Station—the central hub for public transportation in Los Angeles County, and the place identified as a hotspot for homelessness by LA Metro staff in the survey in Volume I (Loukaitou-Sideris et al., 2020), and the station with the highest counts in LAHSA's pre-pandemic homelessness counts (Burrell Garcia, 2020a). In the other stations, the teams are composed of two to four officers and two to four PATH staff members (Burrell Garcia, Dickerson, and Loew, 2020). As Ron Dickerson, Deputy Executive Officer in Metro's System Security and Law Enforcement unit, indicated:

> "As we're gearing up this next year, we're looking to try to expand our programs and to be able to hopefully have deployments of teams Monday through Friday, at two different times. [Around] seven [or] eight o'clock in the morning would be one, and then at 2 P.M. would be the later shift" (Dickerson, 2020).

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4. Union Station, North Hollywood, Downtown Long Beach, 7th Street/Metro Center, and Santa Monica stations (Burrell Garcia, Dickerson, and Loew, 2020)

## Program Focus

From the start, the program was designed to target the unsheltered riders on LA Metros' trains and stations, who use these transit settings as shelter (LA Metro, 2021a and Burrell Garcia, Dickerson, and Loew, 2020). According to Burrell Garcia, the new Operation Shelter the Unsheltered program is specifically meant to "disrupt [their] travel patterns" in order to properly house them off the LA Metro system and connect them to social service resources (Burrell Garcia, 2020b).

## Effects of COVID-19

The expanded Operation Shelter the Unsheltered program is a direct result of COVID-19, as LA Metro staff observed and counted more unhoused people seeking shelter on their system. The program was also partly a response to the agency's need to clean and sanitize its vehicles and stations because of the pandemic. For this to happen, all riders need to disembark the train. Because of the program's perceived success, LA Metro plans to continue and expand it after the pandemic is over (Burrell Garcia, Dickerson, and Loew, 2020).

## Partnerships

Both LA Metro's pre-pandemic and current homelessness initiatives are based on a multiplicity of partnerships with law enforcement and service agencies. In addition to its own transit security officers, LA Metro has also partnered with the LAPD, LASD, and LBPD, which in turn have their own partnerships with homeless service providers and government agencies (Burrell Garcia, Dickerson, and Loew, 2020; LA Metro, 2021a; Dembo, 2020; LASD, 2020; LBPD, 2018; and Burrell Garcia, 2021c). Additionally, LA Metro has partnered with not just PATH, which operates the mobile civilian outreach teams, but also the Los Angeles Diversion, Outreach, and Opportunities for Recovery (LA DOOR) program, through which the City Attorney's office assists people dealing with mental health issues, drug addiction, and past incarceration and diverts them from the criminal justice system, and the Los Angeles Dream Center, a community center of the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel. Staff from LA DOOR and the nonprofit Dream Center work with unhoused riders at a few downtown stations on three weekday mornings and at Union Station on Friday nights, respectively, supplementing PATH's work (Burrell Garcia, Dickerson, and Loew, 2020; LA Metro, 2020a; LA City Attorney, 2020; California BSCC, 2021; Project 180, 2017; and Dream Center, n.d.). As Burrell Garcia noted, "We have [a] L[etter] O[f] A[greement] with the Department of Health Services, a formal M[emorandum] O[f] U[understanding] with The Dream Center and an informal M[emorandum] O[f] U[understanding] with LA DOOR....All of our law enforcement partners have these specialized units that are equipped to engage with unsheltered individuals" (Burrell Garcia, 2020b).

LA Metro interviewees also touted the importance of diverse partnerships for outreach because people experiencing homelessness are heterogeneous and may have different needs (Burrell Garcia, Dickerson, and Loew, 2020). Burrell Garcia described this:

> *"What's helpful about having other partners is that they bring a different dimension in terms of how they operate. So, for instance, one of our outreach partners,...the Dream Center,...is a faith-based organization. Not everyone will want to go into a faith-based organization, but there may be some individuals that are willing [to accept services] if you have a faith-based organization. LA DOOR—this is the LA City Attorney's Office—this program has appeal, particularly for individuals that may perhaps have had encounters with the law. And so, what the outreach workers or teams are able to do is to intercede between the court, the judge, and the individual. The individual is offered the opportunity to accept services in lieu of facing the judge again. So, we're trying to expand; the lessons that we're learning [are that] one size [does not] fit all. We try to really expand and be as comprehensive and inclusive as*

*possible. We are continuing to seek partnerships throughout the city and the county, because that is really what is necessary"* (Burrell Garcia, 2020b).

## Program Budget and Staff

The personnel of each outreach team initiative vary. LAPD HOPE and LASD MET each employ one sergeant and 10 deputies trained in homelessness outreach and proactive engagement. While the personnel on these teams vary across their service areas (which extend beyond transit settings), Metro staff specifically cited a clinician and two interns as part of LAPD HOPE's transit-specific outreach teams. LBPD's Quality of Life team consists of two trained officers specifically assigned to homelessness outreach on LA Metro. These partnerships with law enforcement agencies are part of larger policing contracts. The partnership with PATH, meanwhile, is part of a $4.9 million memorandum of understanding that LA Metro has with the Los Angeles County Department of Health Services, which in turn has a contract with PATH. According to Burrell Garcia, this contract is not only for Operation Shelter the Unsheltered, but it comprehensively includes outreach services on Metro's rail, bus, and various encampment sites. LA DOOR and the Dream Center do not charge LA Metro for their services (Burrell Garcia, Dickerson, and Loew, 2020; Dembo, 2020; Klemack, 2018; LASD, 2020; and Burrell Garcia, 2021c).

The data on these programs that we received from LA Metro allow us to compare the program's budget, in **Table II-6** below, and its effectiveness, in the following section. While the PATH program is more expensive in total than each of the law enforcement agency programs, the PATH program also employs many more staff. The exact staff count varies: the average number of full-time equivalents is 25, with a goal to reach 35 full-time equivalents. Per full-time equivalent, PATH's staff cost LA Metro around two-thirds as much as the law enforcement teams (Burrell Garcia, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2021d and Weinstein, 2021b). In part, this is because much of LA Metro's broader police contract is structured to pay many police officers at overtime rates for their work on the system (Linton, 2017).

**Table II-6. Monthly Costs and Staff for LA Metro Mobile Homeless Outreach Programs**

| Monthly Program Statistics | LAPD HOPE | LASD MET | LBPD QoL | PATH |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Full program cost | $246,000 per month | $267,000 per month | $45,000 per month | $408,333 per month |
| Staff (full-time equivalent) | 11 (plus one DMH clinician and two university interns) | 11 | 2 | 25 (with goal of 35) |
| Full program cost (including overhead) divided by number of staff | $22,364 per month | $24,273 per month | $22,500 per month | $16,333 per month |

*All calculations by authors.*
*Data sources: Burrell Garcia, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2021d*

## Program Impact

LA Metro interviewees perceive Operation Shelter the Unsheltered as successful. As Burrell Garcia emphasized:

> *"We are continuing Operation Shelter the Unsheltered, because we are seeing results. We are seeing that it's having success, not only with those that may be accepting services, but also, it's an opportunity to continue to educate individuals. And [a] primary [goal] for us is to continue to educate individuals"* (Burrell Garcia, 2020b).

According to Burrell Garcia, LA Metro sees fewer people experiencing homelessness seeking shelter on their system since the program started, though whether that is due to the program itself or to people simply choosing to shelter elsewhere is hard to tell. Individuals who have been engaged multiple times by outreach workers appear to be more likely to accept services (Burrell Garcia, Dickerson, and Loew, 2020). As Burrell Garcia summarized:

> *"What we find is that,...during this particular period of time, individuals are becoming even more well known, because every evening...some of the individuals are reengaged....The more they're being engaged, the more likely they are to accept services. And so, we are seeing a decrease [in people experiencing homelessness on the system]. We can't really quantify this, but probably to some extent, individuals are also seeking other venues for shelter during those hours. We don't know how many. But we know that that certainly is a factor"* (Burrell Garcia, 2020b).

The outreach teams keep track of data related to the number of contacts made, referrals to services, involuntary mental health holds, and other actions, though the precise metrics tracked vary by program. These data are reported monthly to LA Metro's Board and are summarized quarterly (See Chapter I.3, Section 3). In addition, PATH also reports the number of individuals housed temporarily in motels and the associated costs, as well as heartwarming stories of those who have found permanent housing or have been reunited with their families (LA Metro, 2021a).

From such LA Metro's performance data, we compared the outcomes of the different programs: the three outreach operations run through law enforcement agencies and the one run through a social service provider. These data afford a unique opportunity, as the programs were all in operation at the same time and on the same system, eliminating the need to control for such differences that might arise in comparing across operators. **Table II-7** presents monthly average data from 2019 (i.e., pre-pandemic) for the four programs, and **Table II-8** presents monthly average data from April to December 2020 (i.e., since the pandemic started).

Confirming the findings of Dembo (2020) over a longer stretch of time, we find that PATH programs are more effective at securing housing for contacted individuals. The share of individuals placed in housing by PATH is far higher than those of the law enforcement programs (See **Tables II-7** and **II-8**), while the share of individuals referred to services is comparable (LA Metro, 2021a and Burrell Garcia, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2021d). Pre-pandemic, PATH also placed more people into housing per full-time equivalent staff person than the three law enforcement programs and did so in a more cost-effective way as well (See **Table II-6**). On the other hand, before the pandemic, the police teams made more contacts and referrals to services per staffer (LA Metro, 2021a and Burrell Garcia, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2021d). Given the scale of LA Metro's homelessness problem (See Chapter I.2, Section 4), volume may be needed, broadly speaking. However, these contacts are not translating into longer-term successful outcomes as effectively as those of the PATH teams.

Since the start of the pandemic, PATH's performance metrics have remained relatively constant. However, the law enforcement programs have seen a dramatic drop in referrals and housing placements (LA Metro, 2021a and

**Table II-7. Monthly Statistics for LA Metro Mobile Homeless Outreach Programs, 2019**

| | Monthly Averages | LAPD HOPE | LASD MET | LBPD QoL | PATH |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Contacts | Total contacts[5] | 815 | 572 | 95 | 204 |
| | Contacts per staff | 74.1 | 52.0 | 47.5 | 8.2 |
| Referrals | Total referrals[6] | 108 | 339 | 46 | 80 |
| | Referrals per staff | 9.8 | 30.8 | 23.0 | 3.2 |
| Housing | Total housing placements[7] | 10 | 14 | 4 | 68 |
| | Housing placements per staff | 0.9 | 1.3 | 2.0 | 2.7 |
| | Share of contacts that resulted in housing placements | 1.2% | 2.4% | 4.2% | 33.3% |

*All calculations by authors.*
*Data sources: LA Metro, 2021a and Burrell Garcia, 2021a, 2021c, 2021d*

Burrell Garcia, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2021d). This comparison is complicated, because the way law enforcement teams count and classify interactions with unhoused riders changed in 2020: law enforcement teams now count both contact of any kind and substantive contacts in which officers at least provide information to unhoused riders (Burrell Garcia, 2021c). Using this latter definition, PATH teams now account for over half of the total contacts across all four programs.

We urge some caution in interpreting these data: according to staff, sometimes referrals and housing placements do not also get counted as contacts, especially if they occurred in separate months. We also encountered a few other small discrepancies in the data, and some of the numbers and staff counts provided to us may have changed since Dembo's (2020) research. Nonetheless, the key patterns described above hold: the PATH partnership appears to be the most cost-effective and also the most effective in placing unsheltered individuals in housing, especially since the pandemic. This may be because PATH's contract includes funding for providing transitional motel housing for people experiencing homelessness.

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5. PATH definition: "Number of unduplicated individuals initiated contact (pre-engagement phase)" (Burrell Garcia, 2021a)

6. PATH definition: "Number of unduplicated individuals engaged (engagement phase)" (Burrell Garcia, 2021a)

7. PATH definition: "Number of unduplicated individuals engaged who successfully attained an interim housing resource (This includes crisis and/or Bridge housing), who are successfully linked to a permanent housing program, or who are permanently housed" (Burrell Garcia, 2021a)

**Table II-8. Monthly Statistics for LA Metro Mobile Homeless Outreach Programs, April-December 2020**

| | Monthly Averages | LAPD HOPE | LASD MET | LBPD QoL | PATH |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Contacts | Total contacts[8] | 1,757 | 2,101 | 992 | 205 |
| | Total engaged contacts (information provided and name obtained)[9] | 33 | 107 | 13 | |
| | Contacts per staff | 3.0 | 9.7 | 6.5 | 8.2 |
| Referrals | Total referrals[10] | 17 | 0.3 | 9 | 112 |
| | Referrals per staff | 1.5 | 0.0 | 4.5 | 4.5 |
| Housing | Total housing placements[11] | 3 | 5 | 0.2 | 81 |
| | Housing placements per staff | 0.3 | 0.5 | 0.1 | 3.2 |
| | Share of contacts that resulted in housing placements | 0.2% | 0.2% | 0.02% | 39.5% |
| | Share of engaged contacts that resulted in housing placements | 9.1% | 4.7% | 1.5% | |

*All calculations by authors.*
*Data sources: LA Metro, 2021a and Burrell Garcia, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2021d*

8. PATH definition: "Number of unduplicated individuals initiated contact (pre-engagement phase)" (Burrell Garcia, 2021a)

9. LASD MET, LAPD HOPE, and LBPD QoL definition: "Information is provided on resources/services; a name of the individual is obtained" (Burrell Garcia, 2021b)

10. LASD MET, LAPD HOPE, and LBPD QoL definition: "Individual is receptive to services; appointments are made for services" (Burrell Garcia, 2021b)

PATH definition: "Number of unduplicated individuals engaged (engagement phase)" (Burrell Garcia, 2021a)

11. LASD MET, LAPD HOPE, and LBPD QoL definition: "Any mode of housing provided to the individual (i.e., motel, [Department of] V[eterans] A[ffairs] housing, etc.)" (Burrell Garcia, 2021b)

PATH definition: "Number of unduplicated individuals engaged who successfully attained an interim housing resource (This includes crisis and/or Bridge housing), who are successfully linked to a permanent housing program, or who are permanently housed" (Burrell Garcia, 2021a)

## Program Challenges

As with other programs, a main challenge that Metro is facing in its response to homelessness is the lack of affordable housing resources and shelter space in Los Angeles County. This challenge has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, as many shelters have lowered their capacities to meet physical distancing requirements. Even before the pandemic, most social service agencies close around 5 P.M., so it is perennially difficult to refer unhoused people to resources in the evenings, a common time for interactions between them and outreach teams (Burrell Garcia, Dickerson, and Loew, 2020).

Additionally, Aaron Weinstein of LA Metro's Customer Experience team noted the challenge of finding and hiring enough qualified staff to do the difficult work of the agency's outreach efforts, much of it during night shifts. (Weinstein, 2021b).

## Lessons Learned

The most important lesson that LA Metro interviewees had to share is that it takes a high degree of collaboration to assist unhoused individuals, as no one agency can tackle the problem alone. LA Metro found several partners that were already working to assist people experiencing homelessness, some of which, such as LA DOOR and the Dream Center, were willing to help the transit agency without charging for their services (Burrell Garcia, Dickerson, and Loew, 2020).

LA Metro has also found that people experiencing homelessness are much more likely to accept help from non-law enforcement employees. This realization has spawned their plan to create a new pilot program as part of the Operation Shelter the Unsheltered: unarmed, civilian transit ambassadors (in-house LA Metro staff, unlike the PATH teams) and a flexible dispatch system to direct them out to appropriate situations. In doing so, LA Metro will reduce the number of situations in which law enforcement make the initial contacts with unhoused riders, thus presenting a friendlier face while also freeing up security officers to deal with other issues (Burrell Garcia, Dickerson, and Loew, 2020 and LA Metro, 2020a, 2020c).

# II.6.2. BART and SFMTA: Regional Homeless Outreach Program

Like LA Metro, transit operators in Northern California face tremendous pressures from the region's homelessness crisis and have implemented comprehensive outreach programs. Prior studies have recognized Bay Area Rapid Transit as a national leader on homelessness response (Boyle, 2016). In this section, we discuss these efforts, many of which are done in partnership with the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency and other city departments, and also discuss how the pandemic has affected them.

BART and SFMTA are the two largest transit operators in Northern California (FTA, 2020). BART's heavy rail system—which, in part, acts as both an urban subway and a suburban commuter system—connects San Francisco; other areas of the upper San Francisco Peninsula; Oakland, Berkeley, and other parts of the East Bay; and various communities in the South Bay (with an extension to central San José in progress). BART's 50 stations and 131 miles of rail span Alameda, Contra Costa, Santa Clara, San Francisco, and San Mateo Counties (BART, 2021a), carrying 128 million trips according to the NTD in Report Year 2019 (FTA, 2020). SFMTA, meanwhile, operates the public transit system (Muni) within San Francisco itself, including buses, light rail, and historic cable cars and streetcars, and also oversees the city's streets, taxis, and other transportation realms (Belov, 2017). With just over one thousand peak vehicles, SFMTA carried 223 million annual trips according to the NTD in Report Year 2019, about 70 percent of which were on buses (FTA, 2020).

## Program Description

The Bay Area's transit regional homeless outreach program started in November 2017 as a partnership between BART, SFMTA, and the San Francisco Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing (HSH). A major element of the program, Homeless Outreach Teams (HOT), initially covered the four downtown San Francisco stations that the two transit agencies share, operating Monday to Thursday from 7 A.M. to 4 P.M. (Powers, 2019). As Kimberly Burrus from SFMTA explains:

> "The outreach workers were designed to work in the four locations—respond to the four locations—in the event that someone was being difficult and to work with each of our frequent [unhoused] individuals and offer them services, let them know what's available, [and] build a rapport. And by building that rapport, we could assist with having [unhoused people] move to different places outside of our actual system" (Burrus, 2021).

The program expanded in 2019 to cover Contra Costa County in the East Bay (called Coordinated Outreach, Referral, and Engagement (CORE) teams there) and additional stations in San Francisco; it will also likely start operation at BART's San Francisco International Airport (SFO) Station in 2021. Homeless Outreach Teams, each consisting of two civilian outreach workers, respond to dispatch calls and assist and connect people experiencing homelessness in the BART system to shelters and other services. According to Armando Sandoval, a BART and crisis intervention supervisor, there are now a total of five stations in San Francisco where the outreach teams operate. Initially, the Salvation Army coordinated with San Francisco HOT to expand outreach services at these stations. As the San Francisco HOT partnership with SFMTA and HSH was suspended in November 2020 due to financial and strategic reasons (discussed below), the Salvation Army is now the primary organization providing outreach support in the downtown San Francisco stations (Chan, 2020a and Chan and Sandoval, 2020, 2021b).

Tim Chan, Group Manager for BART's Station Planning unit, explained that BART was motivated to start this partnership when they noticed through their bi-annual customer survey in 2017 a sharp decline in customer satisfaction, in combination with increased drug use and homelessness, on their system (Chan and Sandoval, 2020). Sandoval added:

> "Before [HOT], we were utilizing [existing City and County of San Francisco] services; these services were extremely limited. A lot of times, they would go case by case and [depending on] urgency. Eventually, we [realized that] we needed our own team. Even though we had trained officers and myself in place, we never had a direct conduit to the system. It was all based on the relationships that we built with available community resources. So now, by having the HOT team connected to services, to [the] County's system, they would come out and work with us directly. They would address the individuals' needs at a basic level, like provid[ing] them with water, food, clothing. And then they would start the process of managing this case by trying to connect them to the three levels of housing, and that's: 1) emergency shelter, 2) temporary shelter, [and] 3) long-term shelter" (Sandoval, 2020).

On the BART side, the program is coordinated by Chan and Sandoval, Crisis Intervention Training (CIT) Coordinator and Community Outreach Liaison (Chan and Sandoval, 2020, 2021b). Sandoval explained his role and the role of the outreach team:

> "My role was a unique position when it was introduced to BART. It was the first of its kind throughout the nation for transit systems to provide CIT training and direct support to officers in the field [and] to manage cases and link individuals to resources. I was also the community outreach liaison building relationships with our community partners and stakeholders. Our approach is to be compassionate and empathetic to

*the struggling and to provide them with an opportunity to improve their quality of life, connecting them to the appropriate services. We deal with many individuals that are willing, unable, and unwilling, so by having these direct relationships with our community partners like the HOT team, CORE team, or the Salvation Army, they are able to assist us with both short-term and long-term solutions"* (Sandoval, 2020).

Building on the regional outreach program, BART is also developing a self-described progressive policing pilot program, in an effort to include community outreach specialists and crisis intervention specialists in the BART Police Department's efforts to address homelessness on their system. We note that this mode of policing would represent a change for the department, which shattered community trust and gained notoriety for the killing of Oscar Grant, a Black rider, by a BART Police officer in 2009 (Eichenholtz, 2018). Under the new approach, outreach workers would work alongside some police officers and transit ambassadors to engage with people experiencing homelessness on BART and offer assistance and referrals. The police officers would only step in when enforcement is required. In conjunction, BART has established the Bureau of Progressive Policing and Community Engagement, which has ten transit ambassadors and 20 crisis intervention specialists. The ambassadors are unarmed, non-sworn liaisons on the BART system (Chan and Sandoval, 2020, 2021b and Chan, 2020a). As noted by Sandoval:

*"There are more eyes in the field, providing a softer rollout when responding to the populations in need. They are not social workers but provide direction and support. They are trained [as] to when [to] engage with people who are in pre-crisis. They have received training on cultural awareness, profiling, fair and impartial policing, and unconscious bias to add to their tool belt of skills to be more sensitive and compassionate"* (Sandoval, 2020).

We should note that, in addition to the HOT program, BART has also developed certain programs in response to concerns about visible homelessness expressed by its housed riders. One such initiative is the Elevator Attendants program, which started in April 2018 to monitor and discourage undesirable activities in street-to-concourse and concourse-to-platform elevators at the four downtown San Francisco BART stations. Additionally, BART has also carried out other strategies (See **Table II-9**), such as station "hardening" (physical barriers against fare evasion), proof-of-payment enforcement, and the use of transit ambassadors to address customer concerns about safety, security, cleanliness, and maintenance, which are often related to homelessness (Chan and Sandoval, 2020; Chan, 2020a; and Powers, 2019). SFMTA also has a long-standing (since 1996) transit ambassadors program, the Muni Transit Assistance Program (MTAP), under which community members trained in conflict resolution ride buses and de-escalate conflicts (Hammons, Nelson, and Burrus, 2021 and Dailey, 2017).

According to SFMFA's Burrus, her agency is also tweaking its homeless outreach program and training all its staff on proper responses (Hammons, Nelson, and Burrus, 2021). As she explained:

*"Sometimes when a rider sees a [person experiencing homelessness] in crisis, it creates a problem and it affects our ridership. And so, what we are pivoting [to] and doing is changing the partnership in a way that we will still work with HSH, but we're going to train all our staff. So, instead of funding those two HSH outreach staff, we're going to train all of our staff in crisis response [to] homeless[ness], so that everyone knows what to look for,...how to respond properly, and then [how to] reach out to the necessary entity for specific service that [a] particular person with whom we are in contact at that time [needs]"* (Burrus, 2020).

## Table II-9. Matrix of BART Strategies in Response to Homelessness

| Location | | Engage + Support | Engineer + Maintain | Enforce + Monitor |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Non-stations/right-of-way beneath aerial tracks or adjacent to tracks | | - Contact responsible jurisdiction and request they take action to address hazards | - Identify, prioritize, and secure BART property (including better fencing)<br>- If not BART property, work with responsible jurisdiction to secure | - "No trespassing" ordinance<br>- Fire code |
| Yards | | - BART Police will take enforcement action regarding BART- owned property, with BART grounds crew clearing the area. | - Identify, prioritize, and secure property (including better fencing) | - "No trespassing" ordinance<br>- Fire code |
| Remnant parcels | | - BART owned property is BART's responsibility, unless we offer the property to a municipality with the condition that they take policing responsibility. | - Identify, prioritize, and secure property (including better fencing) | - "No trespassing" ordinance<br>- Fire code<br>- Transfer responsibility when applicable |
| Stations | Outside paid area, parking lots, and intermodal areas | - Connect to services (i.e., HOT)<br>- Partner with local jurisdictions<br>  - San Francisco<br>  - Contra Costa County<br>  - San Mateo County/SFO<br>  - Oakland<br>  - Alameda County<br>- Regional coordination with key parties | - Lighting<br>- Cameras<br>- Signage<br>- Hardening by outside elevator areas (fare evasion)<br>- Frequent checks by police personnel | - Connect to resources whenever possible<br>- Seek voluntary compliance in keeping area clear, clean, and safe<br>- Intervene and prevent<br>- Take enforcement action if there is a violation of the law |
| | Inside stations | - Connect to services (i.e., HOT)<br>- Partner with local jurisdictions<br>  - San Francisco<br>  - Contra Costa County<br>  - San Mateo County/SFO<br>  - Oakland<br>  - Alameda County<br>- Regional coordination with key parties | - Street entrance barriers<br>- Street canopies<br>- Zamboni cleaning<br>- Dedicated cleaning crews at key stations<br>- Station brightening<br>- Hardening (fare evasion) | - Connect to resources whenever possible<br>- Seek voluntary compliance in keeping area clear, clean, and safe<br>- Intervene and prevent<br>- Take enforcement action if there is a violation of the law |

| Location | | Engage + Support | Engineer + Maintain | Enforce + Monitor |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Stations | Plazas | - Connect to services (i.e., HOT)<br>- Partner with local jurisdictions<br>  - San Francisco<br>  - Contra Costa County<br>  - San Mateo County/SFO<br>  - Alameda County<br>- Regional coordination with key parties | - 16th Street and 24th Street plazas<br>  - Dedicated cleaning crews<br>  - Increased steam cleaning at night<br>  - Signs in elevators<br>  - Ongoing partnership with San Francisco Department of Public Works Pit Stop program (attended street restrooms)<br>- Hardening by outside elevator areas (fare evasion)<br>- Frequent checks by BART Police and other police departments if there is joint jurisdiction | - Connect to resources whenever possible<br>- Seek voluntary compliance in keeping area clear, clean, and safe<br>- Take enforcement action if there is a violation of the law |
| | Paid area/ platforms | - Connect to services (i.e., HOT)<br>- Partner with local jurisdictions<br>  - San Francisco<br>  - Contra Costa County<br>  - San Mateo County/San Francisco International Airport<br>  - Oakland<br>  - Alameda County<br>- Regional coordination with key parties | - Reopen underground restroom pilots at Powell Street and 19th Street<br>- Steam cleaning<br>- Cameras<br>- Hardening (fare evasion) | - Elevator attendants in San Francisco<br>- Proof of payment<br>- Code of conduct<br>- Arrests/citations if there is a violation of the law<br>- "Stay away" order following certain violations |
| On board trains | | - Connect to services (i.e., HOT)<br>- Regional coordination with key parties | | - Train ambassadors<br>- Police officer train team<br>- Proof of payment<br>- Code of conduct |

*Reproduced from: Chan, 2020a*

## Program Focus

The primary focus of the HOT program, as explained by the BART interviewees, is to assist and connect people experiencing homelessness to services and resources. The primary focus of BART's other programs, which involve enforcement aspects, is to address customers' concerns about safety, security, and cleanliness (Chan and Sandoval, 2020; Chan, 2020a; and Powers, 2019).

The new outreach training partnership being developed by SFMTA will focus on crisis management skills that transit agency employees should have for assisting people experiencing homelessness. Because this program

has not yet been launched, there is no data yet on how many people it would serve (Hammons, Nelson, and Burrus, 2021).

## Effects of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a major negative impact on these Bay Area outreach programs. The partner agencies have temporarily suspended the San Francisco HOT initiative, as the budgets of BART and SFMTA, similar to other transit agencies around the country, have been hit hard because of lost revenue from decreased transit ridership (Chan and Sandoval, 2020, 2021b). BART's Chan summed up the situation:

> *"Unfortunately, because of COVID, our budgets have been decimated, and SFMTA wasn't able to jointly fund the San Francisco HOT. They also took this opportunity to reassess and wanted to go in a different direction"* (Chan, 2020b).

On the other hand, BART is continuing its cost-sharing partnership and contract with Contra Costa County for the similar CORE teams and with the Salvation Army in San Francisco and is seeking to develop a partnership to have more outreach teams at stations in Alameda County, San Mateo County, and at SFO Airport (Chan and Sandoval, 2020).

## Partnerships

As discussed above, the HOT program resulted from a partnership between BART, SFMTA, and San Francisco HSH. Its expansion to Contra Costa County, CORE, was through a partnership between BART and Contra Costa County Health Services. Expanded San Francisco operations grew through a partnership between BART and the Salvation Army to cover additional stations. Finally, the anticipated new HOT staff at SFO Airport would be a partnership between BART, SFO, and San Mateo County. Similar to LA Metro, BART's multiple teams result from having a number of different external partners; these many partnerships are necessary because BART spans multiple jurisdictions, each of which requires an agreement for such outreach teams to operate. These are primarily cost-sharing partnerships, but partners also coordinate to review monthly reported data and decide on improvements and changes to the program. These coordinating meetings often include, in addition to the transit operators and representatives from HSH, also representatives from municipal departments of public works and public health (Chan and Sandoval, 2020). Sandoval explained the importance of coordination at both the administrative and operational levels:

> *"[We are partnering with] community leaders that are connected to services on the administrative level and in the field. We have these two things going on simultaneously so that our partners and stakeholders would take this and us a little more serious[ly] and [see] the need for a partnership and seat at the table. The multi-disciplinary forensic team is a work group made up of law enforcement, Department of Public Health, D[istrict] A[ttorney], public defender, jail psychiatric services, mobile outreach [teams], shelter programs and community advocates (like [the] N[ational] A[lliance on] M[ental] I[llness]). [We] have these monthly meetings, where law enforcement brings a case and/or an area of concern to the work group and, through a multidisciplinary effort, we develop a strategy on next steps and how to reduce recidivism, individuals getting arrested, individuals going to the hospital, [and] individuals getting put on a mental health detention hold; this is also [to reduce] the potential for a call for service [going] to the extreme of a lethal use of force and [to safeguard] public safety and officer safety. So, you have all of these things that are going on that these two meetings, [at the administrative and operational level] are potentially addressing and attempting to reduce or eliminate. Both of them have one key element. And that's collaboration! Without it, guess what, we're just floundering,...[because] BART can only do so much. The*

*BART Police can only do so much, so you need a unique approach and a strong community partnership"* (Sandoval, 2020)*.*

## Program Budget and Staff

Funding allocated for the HOT program has been about $250,000 per year per team of two outreach workers, although these numbers will likely increase going forward. The cost is shared between BART and its partners, including Contra Costa County Health Services for the Contra Costa CORE teams and SFMTA for the San Francisco teams. Thus, funding mostly comes from the local level, not state or federal levels, despite the region-wide scale of both the problem and the response. But BART is trying to build a coalition among California transit agencies to lobby for state funding and support to address homelessness in transit systems (Chan and Sandoval, 2020).

## Program Impact

The HOT program has achieved a certain degree of success, as seen in its performance metrics (See **Table II-10**). As the HOT program grew, the number of contacts and referrals likewise rose. HOT had a high share of successful referrals and a comparable share of housing placements to those of LA Metro's civilian outreach teams. Before HOT was suspended for budgetary reasons near the end of 2020, the program was proving remarkably effective during the pandemic: HOT had a very high volume of contacts (with over 500 each in March, April, and May 2020) and a share of successful referrals, on top of the additional Contra Costa County CORE teams (Chan, 2021 and Powers, 2019).

### Table II-10. Monthly Statistics for BART Mobile Homeless Outreach Programs

| Monthly Averages | San Francisco HOT | | | Contra Costa County CORE |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Nov. 2017-Oct. 2018 | Nov. 2018-Feb. 2020 | Mar.-Nov. 2020 | Jan.-Dec. 2020 |
| Contacts | 58.6 | 117.8 | 312.1 | 59.5 |
| Referrals/ services provided successfully | 44.8 | 72.6 | 260.6 | no data |
| Share referred successfully | 76.4% | 61.7% | 83.5% | no data |
| Share given permanent housing assistance | 23.3% | no data | no data | no data |

*Data sources: Chan, 2021 and Powers, 2019*

Discussing the impact of the BART outreach program, both Sandoval and Chan noted how much it is connected to factors not always controlled by the first responders or the transit agency:

*"Outcomes:...that's the million-dollar question. Outcomes are very relative to the individual and the need of that individual versus your need, their safety,...cleanliness, [etc.]....Rapport building—that takes time with this population. And when you're in the first responder mode, you want to see something happen sooner [rather] than later and not tomorrow or next week, let alone next month. That's always going to be a challenge. The outcomes vary—they really do—because you have to go from an unwilling place, observing if the individual is even capable of making decisions. You've got to be strategic about a game plan. And then even [with those] willing, you have a challenge. They could be 100 percent willing, and go with you right then and there. But what if there's no shelter available? What if there's no short-term or long-term bed? They have to go onto a waitlist. So now you have this poor person that has to endure, and then you have to get creative on how to help them endure"* (Sandoval, 2020).

*"The measure of success [can be] very different. If you're simply measuring it by the ability to connect the unsheltered population in our system to services and to get them to Homeward Bound and to get them to their families and to do whatever, that is one level of success. Armando and I mentioned station cleanliness; that's another level of success. And then the public may have unreasonable expectations around this issue: 'Well, I just don't want to see anybody [unhoused] in my station. So, all the stuff you're doing, if I'm still seeing [unhoused] people,...you're not succeeding, and I'm wasting my money on you.' But...I wanted to emphasize all the external factors that we do not control, that operators do not control. We don't control the fact that the federal government...is delaying issuing stimulus funding to keep people in their homes. We don't control that. And we don't control tenant loss. We don't control subsidies for housing, for affordable housing, and all of those factors....And if there's [not] a regional solution or a state or federal solution to that, then that all comes back into the system, and then we bear the brunt for not taking care of it"* (Chan, 2020b).

## Program Challenges

In addition to the challenge of being buffeted by structural, external issues, our interviewees also referred to additional challenges. One related issue is the lack of adequate funding and support from state and federal governments, exacerbated by BART and SFMTA's decline in revenue since the start of the pandemic. This budget crunch has led BART and its partners to concentrate outreach resources only in a selected number of stations (Chan and Sandoval, 2020). As Kimberly Burrus noted, "Our homeless population is greater than the amount of outreach that we are able to give" (Hammons, Nelson, and Burrus, 2021).

Chan also relayed the difficulty faced by a transit agency that spans over multiple counties, having to build relationships and partnerships across different institutional entities and jurisdictions. While BART may deem homelessness as a major issue that needs to be addressed, it needs collaboration and support from county governments. However, each county may have a different priority and may not see BART as an important partner in addressing their problems (Chan and Sandoval, 2020).

A third challenge and "major pressure point" for transit agencies concerns the attitudes of the general public. Those who complain to BART mostly want to see people experiencing homelessness removed from the transit system and may not often understand the nuances of outreach programs that seek to help and connect them to resources and help (Chan and Sandoval, 2020).

## Lessons Learned

Our interviewees discussed four main lessons they learned from the implementation of their outreach programs: 1) the importance of partnerships; 2) the need of communication with and education of the public; 3) the need to become informed about the communities that the agencies are serving; and 4) the importance of starting with pilot programs.

Echoing many of the findings from the other strategies profiled in this report, Chan highlighted the importance for a transit agency to build a partnership for outreach to its unhoused riders:

> *"One of the biggest things that I tell operators...is [that] you start with partnerships, because partnership means you have skin in the game. And partnership means funding. It doesn't just mean we're going to work together;...it now means that we have to devote some budget....Now, putting skin in the game tells [county governments that] BART is serious,...and then [they] figure out what they can provide that's going to help the people in our system"* (Chan, 2020b).

Communicating and coordinating with other partners on outreach efforts is critical, but it is also very important to educate the public about a transit agency's outreach efforts. As emphasized by Chan:

> *"What many of our customers want to do is simply remove [unhoused people] from their presence. We can't do that....They are a protected civil class....So, we [have to] totally educate the public about what's possible and then also communicate repeatedly to the public all the things that we're doing and how we're trying to make a difference"* (Chan, 2020b).

For Sandoval, transit agencies not only should educate the public but also need to become better informed about the populations they are serving (Chan and Sandoval, 2020). Asked about how the relationship between BART Police, communities of color, and homelessness efforts has changed since the killing of Oscar Grant, he responded:

> *"If we do not immerse ourselves in these challenges, and cultures and communities, we're not going to understand what they're going through....It's been over ten years since our first introduction to reform. God forbid—or shame on us—if we didn't learn anything in those ten years. We can probably say we are progressive, but we clearly know now that we need to do a lot more. And a lot more of that is to become better informed—and then, be at the table and inform others about what it takes to address these issues and concerns"* (Sandoval, 2020).

Finally, Chan stressed the importance of starting with small pilot outreach programs first, developing metrics to measure and evaluate their effectiveness and success, and using a program's positive impact to persuade policy makers to fund larger programs. As he argued:

> *"Start small with pilots! It doesn't have to be the big fancy, shiny program right off the bat that's going to last for a really long time. Start with a six-month pilot. Make sure you have your metrics....Make sure you are setting your pilot up for success. Then, you track it, and then you...present [the data] to your execs, to your board; you present it to the public. And that allows you to then make the case for more money to extend it for another year. You need to tailor it: if one little aspect of it is not working, but you know there's a better way to do something, that's your time to do it....You [should] constantly look and relook at your program to make modifications"* (Chan, 2020b).

# II.7. Discounted Fares

## Introduction

While the prior strategies aim at the housing and health needs of unhoused riders (and the safety of all riders), the strategy discussed in this chapter specifically focuses on the *mobility* of unhoused riders. Some transit agencies provide reduced or free fares to assist people experiencing homelessness and enable them to travel on their systems. Three of the agencies whose staff we interviewed—the King County Department of Metro Transit (King County Metro) in Seattle, Washington; the Tri-County Metropolitan Transportation District (TriMet) in Portland, Oregon; and the SFMTA in San Francisco, California—have such programs. The oldest program among these three is the Human Services Bus Ticket Program, initiated by King County Metro in 1992. TriMet started its Access Transit program in July 2018. Even more recently, SFMTA initiated its Access Pass program in October 2020, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, though planning for this program had started in January 2020, prior to the onset of the pandemic on the U.S. West Coast. Note that while many transit operators, including those profiled here, have free or reduced fare programs for certain groups, such as low-income riders or riders with disabilities, we focus here on agencies with programs (or subsets of programs) targeted specifically at unhoused riders (Jimenez and Greto, 2020; Charley, 2020; and Hammons, Nelson, and Burrus, 2021).

King County Metro provides bus service in King County, Washington, which includes the City of Seattle. The agency's network spans over 200 bus routes, two water taxi routes, and on-demand services such as paratransit; it also operates under contract a streetcar service owned by the City of Seattle and a light rail and regional bus service owned by Sound Transit. On buses, streetcars, and demand-response services, King County Metro had 129 million annual boardings (almost all on buses) pre-pandemic, per the NTD in Report Year 2019 (King County Metro, 2020; Fryer, 2019; FTA, 2020; and Jimenez and Greto, 2021). A state to the south, TriMet is the regional public transportation operator in the Portland, Oregon metropolitan area. The agency operates over 80 bus lines, a light rail network, and a commuter/hybrid rail line. TriMet had 96.6 million annual boardings pre-pandemic, per the NTD in Report Year 2019, over half of which were on buses (TriMet, 2021b and FTA, 2020). And as previously indicated, SFMTA operates San Francisco's multimodal public transit system (Belov, 2017).

## Program Description

King County Metro has several programs that provide reduced fares to different groups, including the Human Services Bus Ticket Program specifically designed to assist people experiencing homelessness (Jimenez and Greto, 2020). According to Lindsey Greto, from King County Metro reduced fares team:

> *"Our philosophy is that everyone should have access to mobility, and everyone should be able to get around the county in the most efficient, cost-effective and safe way...We'd love for people to take transit and to reduce the drive-alone rate. Pricing really matters for people, and we really strive to create pricing strategies and develop programs that help people get that mobility"* (Greto, 2020).

The program sells paper bus tickets at a 90% discount to local social service agencies addressing homelessness. These agencies give these tickets for free to their clients to assist them with their mobility needs. In 2022, new technology will be available that would allow for these agencies to also purchase smart-card based tickets and passes, which would provide people with a longer-term and more sustainable transit benefit, so that they need not return to their service providers every time they need to travel. King County Metro is running a demonstration project with seven social service agencies to determine if this is a model that could be adopted once the new

technology is available. According to Greto, in addition to expanding the mobility of individuals in extreme poverty, a smart-card-based system would also give the transit agency a better understanding of the extent, travel patterns, and transit behavior of its unhoused riders (Jimenez and Greto, 2020, 2021 and Ramirez, 2020). As she argued:

> *"[Under the present system], we don't have any data on [people experiencing homelessness], because it's a paper ticket. They are just given a ticket, and we don't know how many they are given or who has given it to them. So [another reason] why we are really trying to move people to this card [is that] we can actually get data"* (Greto, 2020).

TriMet in Portland has a number of fare programs under the Access Transit umbrella which benefit people experiencing homelessness, though have broader eligibility. The first, the Reduced Fare for Low-income Riders program, allows all residents in the region with incomes under 200 percent of the poverty line to qualify for discounts of up to 72 percent off regular TriMet fares. Qualifying residents can register with one of about 50 partner agencies across three counties. These partner agencies verify eligibility, including assisting people experiencing homelessness who need identification or other documentation to qualify. Meanwhile, with its Fare Relief Program and Fare Assistance Program*,* TriMet provides free and reduced-cost transit tickets, respectively, to over 90 organizations in the region to cover emergency transportation costs for people in crisis or with immediate need (Charley, 2020 and TriMet, 2021a).

SFMTA's Access Pass in San Francisco is a reduced-fare program to assist people experiencing homelessness, providing them with a free transit pass for two years on Muni vehicles. Eligible individuals must be registered with the City's Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing. After applying online or by mail, the transit pass is mailed to an address of the customer's choosing; this is often one of eight HSH access points, a shelter, or various support networks. The enrollment process with HSH can be done over the phone or in person and is designed to take no more than 15 minutes. In addition to providing the free transit pass (through a personal ID card that serves as a pass), enrollment in this program also automatically waives all previous fare evasion citations (Hammons, Nelson, and Burrus, 2021 and Nelson, 2020, 2021a). As explained by Diana Hammons from SFMTA's Access Pass program:

> *"We also...waive all prior fare evasion citations with enrollment in this program. That's also another piece of it. We work regularly with advocacy groups that represent folks experiencing homelessness, and this is [an outcome] of the evolution of our discussions. The ability for folks in these situations to be able to pay their past fare evasion citations is very low. And so, we don't want to create more barriers for folks in the cycle"* (Hammons, 2021).

## Program Focus

The King County Human Services Bus Ticket Program serves exclusively people experiencing homelessness, but King County Metro also has a reduced-fare program for low-income individuals, ORCA LIFT (available for residents who earn 200% of the federal poverty limit or less), which has more than 40,000 people currently enrolled. In October 2020, King County Metro also launched a new subsidy program under the ORCA LIFT reduced-fare program, in which people who are enrolled in one of six state benefit programs can enroll and receive an annual pass, which provides them with fare-free travel on King County Metro and Sound Transit services for up to a year. According to interviewees, evaluation data about the subsidy and the Human Service Bus Ticket demonstration project will inform King County Metro's priorities for transit subsidies in the future (Jimenez and Greto, 2020, 2021).

While TriMet's Fare Relief and Fare Assistance Programs provide passes to service providers to then distribute to people experiencing homelessness, TriMet's Reduced Fare for Low-income Riders Program is not exclusive to people experiencing homelessness. However, several of the approximately 50 partner agencies that participate in the latter program also serve largely or exclusively unhoused people. Of the approximately 32,000 people enrolled, about 2,000 are enrolled by nonprofits specifically addressing homelessness. However, the number of unhoused individuals benefiting from the program is likely significantly higher, as other participating nonprofits engage with unhoused people as part of their work. TriMet expects to eventually enroll 50,000 to 60,000 people in the program, including as many as 3,500 to 4,000 unhoused people (Charley, 2020 and TriMet, 2021a). For reference, TriMet's three-county service area has just over 5,000 unhoused people at last count, about a third of the state's total (U.S. HUD, 2020).

SFMTA's Access Pass is specifically designed for people experiencing homelessness. In its first few months, 150 individuals have been registered. As of January 1, 2021, 140 individuals were in possession of the Access Pass. SFMTA was unable to capture data on daily ridership, as the pass is not a smart card. Nevertheless, SFMTA expects the number of Access Pass holders to rise quickly, as 7,000 unsheltered individuals visited an access point last year (Hammons, Nelson, and Burrus, 2021 and Nelson, 2021a, 2020).

In addition to the Access Pass, SFMTA also provides three other discount fare programs for low-moderate income individuals (Nelson, 2021a):

- Lifeline: a half-price monthly pass for adults with an annual income at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty line

- Free Muni: free transit for San Francisco youth, seniors, and people with disabilities, with an annual income at or below 100 percent of the Bay Area's median income

- Clipper START Program: a Bay Area regional program that provides half-price fares to people at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty limit.

## Effects of COVID-19

As described in Volume I, a majority of surveyed transit agencies that provided an estimate reported higher numbers of unhoused riders since the pandemic (Loukaitou-Sideris et al., 2020). This reported uptick has affected programs like the ones described here. For instance, as a response to the pandemic, King County Metro stopped charging fares from March 15 to October 1, 2020. According to our interviewees, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a major effect on the number of unhoused people using King County Metro. Because the agency stopped collecting fares to protect vehicle operators from disease transmission through interacting with customers, "non-destination riders" doubled in April, May, and June 2020 (Jimenez and Greto, 2020). The numbers eventually declined to normal levels by November 2020, perhaps because the removal of encampments also stopped in Seattle during the pandemic (Jimenez and Greto, 2020). But, as Cathy Jimenez from King County Metro admitted,

> "We're not really sure if we can trust [those] data, [as] the measuring of 'non-destination riders' on our buses is really difficult to quantify because it requires an operator to report it."

> "Getting operators to report or count them is really, really difficult. We haven't figured out a good mechanism to quantify non-destination riders. And then, it's difficult to identify homeless [individuals]."

*"But interestingly, [as] the number of non-destination riders that we saw spike[d] and then drop[ped] really low,...encampments are much more prevalent...than they were in 2019. The reason...is that our Seattle Police Department and the navigation team that was primarily responsible for dispersing and breaking up encampments has been defunded....There isn't a team responsible for breaking those encampments up, so they just continue to grow. And under COVID circumstances,...the homeless service provider network has determined that it's safer to enable them...to shelter in place safely than to move them all around the city and move encampments about"* (Jimenez, 2020).

During the pandemic, King County Metro suspended its fare enforcement program. Since they were not collecting fares, they also did not sell reduced-price tickets to agency partners (Jimenez and Greto, 2020). As stated by Jimenez:

*"While our fare enforcement program is currently suspended due to COVID, and we have no idea when it will come back on line, we are hoping that all of [our] subsidized [fare] programs...[can] connect those people to the right resource, so that it breaks the cycle of fear of enforcement for them"* (Jimenez, 2020).

In Portland, the pandemic has reduced demand for TriMet's Access Transit programs, but according to program manager Wes Charley, TriMet does not have the data to know if the reduction in demand is among people experiencing homelessness or among housed but low-income riders (Charley, 2020).

In San Francisco, as discussed above, SFMTA launched its Access Pass program during the pandemic, so no comparisons can be made before and since the start of the pandemic. The SFMTA staff interviewed noted, however, that the pandemic has made it more critical for their agency to provide assistance to those who need it (Hammons, Nelson, and Burrus, 2021).

## Partnerships

All three agencies have partnerships—two with social service agencies and one with another public agency—which help them distribute the discounted tickets.

King County Metro partners with the County's Department of Community and Human Services (DCHS) on the sale of bus tickets to local social service agencies assisting unhoused people through their Human Services Bus Ticket Program. With support from King County Metro, DCHS puts out a request for proposals every year, and social service agencies apply to this solicitation for ticket allocation. They receive the passes at the beginning of the year, and then they can distribute them to their clients. King County Metro also distributes information on available social service resources during fare enforcement checks to people who appear to be experiencing homelessness or indicate a need for particular resources (Jimenez and Greto, 2020, 2021).

TriMet's Access Transit programs are also based on partnerships with local organizations who verify and enroll low-income people in the program. TriMet has made these partnerships a priority because it wants the program to be embedded in social services already available in the community. Furthermore, TriMet does not have the ability itself to verify documents to enroll people (Charley, 2020).

SFMTA's Access Pass program involves a partnership between the transit agency and the City's Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing. According to SFMTA staff, this ensures that unhoused individuals can receive holistic services when applying for an Access Pass. HSH conducts outreach to people who qualify for an Access Pass and in turn connects those visiting their sites to obtain an Access Pass to housing assistance. HSH also sends SFMTA daily a list of visitors to HSH sites, so SFMTA staff can verify that Access Pass applicants

have visited one of these sites. SFMTA also works with shelters and other service providers to distribute information about the program, but these agencies must direct individuals wishing to apply for the Access Pass to HSH (Hammons, Nelson, and Burrus, 2021 and Nelson, 2021a).

## Program Budget and Staff

While our interviewees from King County Metro could not pinpoint a specific budgetary figure for the cost of program implementation, they mentioned that the program involves foregone revenue. However, given that many unhoused people are unable to pay for transit fares and ride or attempt to ride without paying, the amount of revenue foregone by running a subsidized fare program is likely relatively low (Jimenez and Greto, 2020).

SFMTA respondents made exactly the same point, adding that because the Access Pass serves a relatively small number of people compared to their other reduced-fare programs, the demand on SFMTA staff is minimal (Hammons, Nelson, and Burrus, 2021). As Hammons noted:

> *"Particularly with these discount programs or free programs, people talk about lost revenue. I think everyone acknowledges this is not an issue of lost revenue here. These are folks that are unable to pay their fares and get on the vehicles. Many are in fear of getting the humiliation of the interaction of getting a fare evasion citation. So, I think this program is more so an acknowledgment of the support that we need to provide for people experiencing homelessness to get to those critical appointments...and other things. So, both from staffing and revenue loss, its [cost] is negligible"* (Hammons, 2021).

TriMet staff did provide some dollar figures in response to our question about the cost of the agency's Reduced Fare Program, indicating that it expects to ultimately devote $12 million per year. According to Charley, the agency expected a cost of $6 to $7 million in 2020, but due to reduced demand during the COVID-19 pandemic, they ultimately spent only $5 million. The administrative costs to run the program come to $150,000 to $175,000 per year. The cost of this program is funded from a portion of Oregon's statewide transit payroll tax (Charley, 2020).

## Program Impact

None of the three agencies profiled here gave us specific numbers to indicate how many unhoused individuals benefit from their discounted fares programs, though respondents from King County Metro mentioned that by implementing a new smart card in the near future, they hope that they will be able to track accurately the number of people using it (Jimenez and Greto, 2020; Charley, 2020; and Hammons, Nelson, and Burrus, 2021).

In Spring 2020, TriMet had planned to launch a partnership with Portland State University researchers to study the data from the cards of people registered through Access Transit, but this effort has been postponed because of the pandemic. Such an evaluation would help the agency better understand the travel patterns of low-income and unsheltered riders and the extent to which they are using the free fares (Charley, 2020).

While all respondents outlined that discounted or free fare programs will not reduce the extent of homelessness, they nevertheless emphasized that such programs increase the mobility of people experiencing homelessness, allowing them to travel without fear of being caught without payment. Additionally, SFMTA staff mentioned that by asking unhoused riders to go through the HSH access points to get their passes, they hope that they get people connected with other resources and social services or at least give them information about them (Hammons, Nelson, and Burrus, 2021; Jimenez and Greto, 2020; and Charley, 2020).

## Program Challenges

According to the King County Metro interviewees, one of the biggest challenges they face in their discounted fare program concerns communication: simply letting eligible individuals know that such a program exists (Jimenez and Greto, 2020). As Lindsey Greto explained:

*"We have heard, time and time again, that people either:*

- *Don't know about the reduced fare program that they might qualify for, or*
- *They know about it [but] don't know how to get it, or*
- *They know about it [and] they know how to get it [but] don't trust it."*

*"We are trying to improve our communication efforts. We are right now working on a piece that would explain to people easily all the different options we have, how they can qualify, and then how they would get them. It's a complicated story to tell, because we have so many programs, and there's no one-stop shop to get [them]. You go here to get one; you go here to get another—and it's very confusing for people."*

*"We know that there are people who pay cash for any number of reasons, and we know that a fair number of our cash-paying riders qualify for a reduced fare, which is only available with ORCA [the smart-card system]....Prior to COVID, we had launched an effort with a behavioral evaluation agency...to really look at:*

- *Who are our cash-paying customers?*
- *Why do they pay cash?*
- *And what techniques might move them to not pay with cash and to enroll in some of our programs?*

*I think there's a lot we don't know about these different groups"* (Greto, 2020)

Another challenge mentioned by King County Metro staff is a lack of coordination with other local transit agencies, which may or may not have discounted fare programs. As a result, there are different fare rules and prices on different transit modes and systems, creating a confusing environment for people experiencing homelessness (Jimenez and Greto, 2020).

For TriMet, the main challenge that their reduced fares program is facing is financial. The program has to compete with other transit programs for scarce funding. Fortunately, the local social service providers have been active in demonstrating the need for this program (Charley, 2020).

Lastly, SFMTA interviewees recognized some challenges in the enrollment process for their Access Pass program, as unhoused individuals often need to go to certain specific sites (HSH access points) to apply for it. Though 95 percent of those who apply are eligible, determining eligibility is more complicated than for comparable programs for low-income riders broadly, for which tax returns or MediCal enrollment can be used. Similar to the situation at King County Metro, how to best communicate with a vulnerable population is a challenge (Hammons, Nelson, and Burrus, 2021). As SFMTA's Emmett Nelson described:

*"I'd say communication of the program has been somewhat successful but also somewhat difficult. Communicating to people [who] want the pass that they need to go to [HSH] first seems like an unnecessary burden for some people, but it is for the best interest. So [the challenge] is really the outreach component. Since it's reliant on other agencies to do it, we don't have our hand in it. And*

*sometimes, you don't quite know what message is being delivered to people. But so far, we haven't really received any complaints from people about being confused, other than not seeing why they need to go to another department to get verified as being homeless, when they say they are obviously homeless. But that's been the only challenge I've really seen so far"* (Nelson, 2021b).

## Lessons Learned

King County Metro interviewees emphasized that operators cannot ignore the problem of homelessness on transit. Rather than simply asking social service providers for help, a transit agency has to attract them by offering support and resources of its own, such as deeply reduced-price fares (Jimenez and Greto, 2020). As Jimenez argued:

> *"Transit agencies have historically not undertaken very much of a role in response to homelessness. And that's why we're all struggling so much right now, because it's in our face. It's the ridership that we're left with during COVID. And now [we] can't ignore the problem...What we hear a lot in our agency is, 'We just need to partner with the better-resourced [agencies],' or 'We need Community and Human Services to take this for us.' [But] those systems are overtaxed, they're overwhelmed, and they need resources themselves. And as a transit agency, we may have a different stream of resources than they've ever had available to them before. And so, what I am hoping is that transit agencies learn to entice those service providers to partner with [them] by bringing more funds [and] more resources to the table and not just looking to them for help—not just watching the problem. It is our problem!"* (Jimenez, 2020).

Better ways of communicating with unhoused individuals to let them know about the existence of these beneficial services are needed. The enrollment processes should be streamlined so that they are as easy as possible. Doing both would not only help unhoused riders but also lessen staff time necessary to run the program, thus reducing its cost. As noted by Diana Hammons of SFMTA:

> *"One of the most important parts is [to] make this accessible for the people who are eligible,...eliminating as many bureaucratic barriers as you can, making sure that communication is very clear. Because...you lose people at every step with these kinds of programs the more complicated things get. So, it's really critical...[to] think about every part of the application process: Is it really worth it? What are the trade-offs? A lot of times you focus too much on lost revenue, but [then] you're spending as much staff time."*

> *"Part of that is also ensuring from an equity perspective [that] applications and processing are available. Because particularly [for] people experiencing homelessness, putting stuff on websites and downloading applications is not a solution. So, you really have to tailor to the population that you're trying to serve with your processes to make sure that you're not creating barriers for participation"* (Hammons, 2021).

Echoing a concern from King County Metro, Wes Charley from TriMet drew the conclusion that communication and regional coordination among transit agencies operating within the same jurisdiction is essential. Similar programs and levels of service should apply across the region, to avoid confusion when changing from one system to another (Charley, 2020 and Jimenez and Greto, 2020).

Indeed, broadly, our interviewees agreed on the importance of partnerships to operating discounted fare programs. According to Charley, it *is* important to first secure agreements with state agencies and partner organizations at the outset to avoid delays. If partners can enroll eligible riders directly, the process is more efficient, because service providers can give the reduced fare cards at the time they enroll people in other homelessness programs. Such partnerships also lessen the burden on the transit agency, as the operator does

not need to devote staff to enrolling unhoused people. Social service agencies also have the ability to assist people experiencing homelessness who do not have the government-issued identification that the transit agency requires (Charley, 2020).

Similarly, SFMTA's Nelson emphasized that the partnership and collaboration of an agency with a city or county homelessness or public health department are key for outreach and eligibility verification. For SFMTA, it was important to collaborate with HSH to share data, consolidate services, allow those without Internet or mail access to apply, and cut down on bureaucratic steps (Hammons, Nelson, and Burrus, 2021).

While discount fare programs do not diminish the number of people experiencing homelessness on transit systems, they nevertheless offer an important service to those unhoused individuals who participate. In the words of Hammons:

> *"I don't think the goal of...these programs is to reduce the number of [unhoused] people riding our vehicles....From the fare program side, I think success would be participation rates: getting people to participate in the program....[High] participation rates is always the goal that we have for these programs"* (Hammons, 2021).

# II.8. Transportation to Shelters

## Introduction

The prior strategy, subsidized tickets for unhoused riders, increases the mobility of those experiencing homelessness to destinations already served by transit. However, some operators also seek to expand the access of unhoused individuals to particular destinations for those experiencing homelessness. Programs that offer free transportation to and from homeless shelters are one of the most direct ways that transit operators can aid those experiencing homelessness.

In this chapter, we profile two systems which provide transportation to shelters or work with other agencies to do so: the New York City's Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) and Madison, Wisconsin's Metro Transit. The City of New York's Department of Social Services (DSS) transports unhoused MTA subway riders to shelters in partnership with a local nonprofit, and MTA itself works with the same nonprofit to provide similar rides from commuter rail hubs to shelters (Wilson, 2020, 2021; Banks, 2021; and McGinn, Martin, and Sharma, 2021). Metro Transit, meanwhile, offered free transportation to and from shelters to its unhoused riders for a limited period during the pandemic (Gadke, 2021). We also discuss briefly the elements of Denver RTD and LA Metro's programs that involve transportation to shelters (the broader scope of these programs is described in Chapter II.5 and Chapter II.6, Section 1, respectively).

The nation's largest transit operator in its largest city, MTA operates bus (over 300 routes), subway (22 routes, three shuttles, and 472 stations), and commuter rail services across the New York City metropolitan area, including Long Island, southeastern New York State, and Connecticut (MTA, 2020). In the NTD's Report Year 2019, MTA's services in New York City alone had 3.451 billion boardings (more than seven times those of the next largest U.S. operator), over three-quarters of which are on the subway. The agency also has 36.8 million revenue service hours and 10,885 peak service vehicles (FTA, 2020).

A much smaller transit agency, Madison Metro Transit operates over 50 bus routes throughout the Madison, Wisconsin metropolitan area (City of Madison, 2021). According to the NTD, in Report Year 2019, it had 13 million boardings, half a million revenue service hours, and 234 peak service vehicles (FTA, 2020).

## Program Description

Two concurrent homeless outreach and transport-to-shelter programs operate on New York MTA: one on the subway system and another at commuter rail stations. The first of these transports unhoused riders from end-of-line subway stations to shelters, stabilization beds, and Safe Havens (low-barrier shelters for particularly at-risk or chronically unhoused individuals). While the subway system itself is run by MTA, a state agency, the lead agency in charge of the subway outreach program is the City's Department of Social Services, which encompasses the Department of Homeless Services. Since 2013, DSS has partnered with the Bowery Residents' Committee (BRC), one of New York City's leading nonprofits that offers housing and other services to the city's unhoused population. At around 25 stations at the end of subway lines, trained outreach workers from BRC and DSS conduct outreach with people experiencing homelessness, engaging with them, referring them to shelters, and offering free transport. The program deploys around 22 to 28 vans for these rides on a given night, with more on colder nights and with at least ten additional vans for moving staff and as contingency (Banks, 2021; McGinn, Martin, and Sharma, 2021; Wilson, 2020, 2021; and New York State Comptroller, 2020). Coordinating these referrals and transports required a new placement system, as DSS Commissioner Steven Banks explained:

*"Instead of simply taking people to the intake center and then making placements from there, we developed a way to actually make shelter placements directly from the subway station....So, instead of having the client be brought into intake and then placed in shelters, the outreach workers are doing intake literally in the subway station—connecting to our central shelter placement 24-hour operation and getting placements that way. And because we have a right to shelter,...we have to have enough shelter on any given night for the people that came in. At the very beginning, this was very challenging. And that's how we had to invent this new system of placements directly from the station to avoid a bottleneck at the intake centers"* (Banks, 2021).

MTA plays a supporting role in the outreach program on the subways, but since 2010, it has also operated a parallel outreach and transport program at Penn, Grand Central, and other commuter rail stations in New York City. Though the City is not directly involved in this sister initiative, it operates similarly; the MTA also contracts with BRC for outreach staff (Wilson, 2020, 2021 and New York State Comptroller, 2019).

At a smaller scale, Madison Metro Transit also established a program to provide transportation between daytime and nighttime shelters for people experiencing homelessness. This emergency operation during the COVID-19 pandemic lasted from March 2020 to September 2020. Thereafter, a contracted private bus company provided the service, to comply with Federal Transit Administration regulations. During the months that Madison Metro Transit operated the program, the agency utilized two full-size, 40-foot buses twice a day, during both A.M. and P.M. hours, to transport people between a daytime shelter in downtown Madison and a nighttime shelter on the north side of the city, which was not easily accessible through public transit, especially for people carrying their belongings (Gadke, 2021).

In conjunction with their mobile outreach described in Chapter II.5 and Chapter II.6, Section 1, respectively, Denver RTD and LA Metro also have programs themselves or work with programs that transport unhoused individuals to shelters. In Los Angeles, LA Metro's civilian PATH outreach teams provide transport for those experiencing homelessness to motels where they can spend the night. Under LA Metro's Operation Shelter the Unsheltered, initiated during the pandemic, unhoused riders at the end of certain major lines are also provided free bus transportation in the evenings to open shelter beds a short distance away. Meanwhile, the Mental Health Center of Denver operates the Support Team Assisted Response (STAR) pilot program, in which a mental health clinician and a paramedic ride around on a repurposed van and respond to low-level behavioral health crises situations in the downtown area. STAR also offers transportation to shelters and hospitals and connections to community organizations and resources. STAR is sent out by 911 dispatchers in response to applicable calls. While STAR is not connected to Denver RTD's mental health clinicians program per se, it can provide some aid (Sailon, 2020). As noted by MHCD's Carleigh Sailon:

*"If Danielle, who is our transit clinician, has someone who's hanging out at the bus depot or the train station and says, 'I'm hanging out here, but I would be open to go into a shelter or open to connecting with some other sort of community resource,' we go pick them up on the van and actually transport them to those community resources"* (Sailon, 2020).

## Program Focus

As might be expected given the different sizes of the agencies, the programs profiled here have a different focus and target populations. MTA's program focuses on people experiencing homelessness on New York's subways and commuter rail system. Cynthia Wilson, Director of MTA's Homeless Program Office, noted that, according to the latest available data from New York City's annual homeless survey (reflecting the survey conducted in

January 2020 prior to the pandemic) discussed in Chapter I.2, Section 3, around half of the over 3,000 unsheltered individuals counted sleep on the subway (Wilson, 2020 and NYC DHS, 2020). Even at this scale, Commissioner Banks characterized the outreach approach as "individualized": unhoused people with whom outreach staff interact are entered onto a "by-name" list, through which repeat interactions and follow-ups can be coordinated (Banks, 2021).

The primary focus of the Metro Transit program in Madison was a group of 60 to 70 unsheltered men. As explained by Phil Gadke, Operations General Supervisor for Metro Transit, the city's centrally located nighttime shelter could not accommodate its patrons because of social distancing rules during the pandemic, and the city was forced to relocate them to a temporary, less central location at the Warner Park Community Recreation Center. As these individuals spend most of their day at The Beacon daytime shelter, the need arose for their transportation between the two facilities. Thus, in coordination with other city departments, Metro Transit began to help with transportation to these shelters (Gadke, 2021).

## Effects of COVID-19

COVID-19 has driven the agencies profiled in this chapter to start or expand their transport programs. For instance, Madison Metro Transit instigated its temporary transportation-to-shelters program as a response to the pandemic. Likewise, LA Metro's Operation Shelter the Unsheltered program, which includes bus transportation from major rail stations to shelters with open beds, also began during the pandemic as a response to spiking perceived levels of homelessness on the system (Gadke, 2021 and Burrell Garcia, Dickerson, and Loew, 2020).

In New York City, MTA suspended 24-hour regular subway service in May 2020 for the first time since the system's opening over a century ago. The system closure from 1 A.M. to 5 A.M. allows for deep cleaning but has faced criticism—both from transit advocates concerned about night-shift workers and homelessness activists worried about displacement of unhoused riders to less safe and less familiar street environments (Goldbaum, 2020 and Surico, 2021). However, in response to the closure, the City greatly expanded its end-of-line subway program at the same time. The program, which originally covered 10 stations, grew to around 25 (selected and adapted based on need). More broadly, the City opened 1,300 new, low-barrier shelter beds and generally increased staffing and staff deployment on homelessness outreach (Banks, 2021; McGinn, Martin, and Sharma, 2021; and Wilcox, 2021).

As the pandemic has drawn on, it has also forced these transport programs to adapt and change their models. In Madison, as mentioned above, Metro Transit transferred its shelter bus services to a private bus company after September 2020. Likewise, while the MTA initially provided 35 paratransit vans to the New York subway outreach program, the operations and funding for the program shifted entirely to the City in the fall of 2020 (Wilson, 2021 and Banks, 2021). Similar to other transit agencies, New York MTA has experienced economic hardships stemming from reduced revenues during the pandemic. This has affected its budget for responses to homelessness. As Cynthia Wilson mentioned: "We are...scaling back due to the budget crisis and decline in ridership" (Wilson, 2020). However, the City stepped up its efforts and picked up the cost of the program. Discussions are ongoing about how MTA could return to deeper involvement in homeless outreach, as the federal COVID-19 relief bills have improved the agency's financial outlook (Banks, 2021).

## Partnerships

In New York, both the City-led subway program and the MTA-led commuter rail program rely on a partnership with the local nonprofit BRC, contracted for outreach services (Wilson, 2020 and Banks, 2021). As Wilson noted:

*"Responding to homelessness is not our core competency, but [we] do see this as a significant aspect of our operations, as it affects transit riders. For homeless outreach, we have a contract with BRC...because they are the technical experts and know better how to engage with [unhoused] individuals. They transport the unhoused to shelters and connect them with resources that provide help"* (Wilson, 2020).

As part of their broader homeless outreach efforts, MTA has initiated partnerships with other stakeholders, including Amtrak, the New York Police Department (NYPD), other law enforcement partners, the City's DSS, and other outreach personnel. These stakeholders come together in monthly borough-wide meetings to identify target areas that need a response, to discuss mitigation strategies, and to coordinate how best to share resources and disseminate relevant information to people experiencing homelessness (Wilson, 2020).

While the NYPD were initially involved in homeless outreach programs on the subway, DSS Commissioner Banks noted that they "pulled back...during the protests in the city in May and June [2020]. And then, ultimately, it was a budgetary decision to not have the PD involved anymore" (Banks, 2021). Since then, the day-to-day operations of the end-of-line subway program are largely staffed by civilian outreach workers (Banks, 2021).

The primary partners for Madison Metro Transit's transportation-to-shelter program were the two shelters. They worked together with Metro Transit staff to organize pick-up locations and coordinate operations. Likewise, LA Metro's transport-to-shelter efforts have been accomplished through coordination with the service provider PATH and a variety of local law enforcement and government agencies (See Chapter II.6, Section 1). Meanwhile, the Mental Health Center of Denver's STAR program is not a formal partnership with the transit operator Denver RTD, but Denver RTD and MHCD do work together on the complementary mental health clinician program discussed in Chapter II.5. STAR operates in partnership with local hospitals and law enforcement (Gadke, 2021; Burrell Garcia, Dickerson, and Loew, 2020; and Sailon, 2020).

## Program Budget and Staff

MTA's annual budget for the responses to homelessness on its commuter rail system is $1.86 million, and the City spends $23 million annually in its contract with BRC for its subway efforts. Both of these figures include the whole scope of each agency's transit homelessness outreach, such as outreach workers and engagement services, not just transport to shelters. The City's subway program deploys up to 40 BRC and 60 DSS staff people each night since May 2020 (Wilson, 2020 and McGinn, Martin, and Sharma, 2021).

In Madison, since the program was provided through an emergency operations request, it was funded by the city's general fund (unlike routine Metro Transit service). As explained by Gadke, such interdepartmental emergency requests are not unusual, and frequently, the department providing the service may not bill the requesting department. In this case, he estimated that the costs for this program were modest, as it involved only the pay of the drivers and the cost of operating the two buses on their fixed route between the shelters daily. He elaborated:

*"We have an hourly cost per vehicle that we would charge, and we also have a guaranteed pay for drivers....So, the service that we provided [between the shelters took] a driver and...a 20-minute trip, and then there's report time and [other] things. Let's just say their scheduled work for that particular run [was] an hour. [But] the driver is going to get guaranteed pay for two hours and 15 minutes....So, if it takes two drivers, that's four and a half hours' worth of pay (and then whatever the cost of the bus would be), and we do that twice a day. So, it's about eight hours' worth of driver pay and four hours' worth of the cost of operating the bus. [For other operators], it's going to be variable based on the agency and what their minimums...and...pay [are for drivers]. But our service was very short: just a couple of hours in the*

*morning and a couple of hours in the afternoon. Essentially, it was one trip, one direction, by two buses"* (Gadke, 2021).

Finally, Denver's STAR pilot program is also operated for a relatively low cost. MHCD pays one full-time worker, while the paramedics are staff from a local hospital, paid by the hospital. The van used for transportation was donated by the police department, and MHCD's existing liability insurance for their other work covers the STAR program as well. If the pilot program expands from just the downtown area to cover the whole city, it will cost an estimated $1.5 million to $3 million (Sailon, 2020).

## Program Impact

Fundamentally, transportation-to-shelter programs enhance the mobility of unsheltered individuals. Many unhoused people cannot afford the cost of the fare to reach a shelter or another destination and/or would not have been able to reserve an open shelter bed without these initiatives. In Denver, for instance, the STAR transport program responded to around 37 calls per month concerning people experiencing homelessness between June and October 2020 (along with another 92 calls per month for other people in crisis) (Sailon, 2020).

Comprehensive programs also build relationships with unhoused individuals, creating the trust necessary to get them not just to go to a shelter but remain there, where they can continue to receive stabilizing services, instead of potentially returning to transit. In that vein, through the outreach program on the New York subway system, 7,595 people accepted at least a referral and transport to shelter placements between May 6, 2020 and April 4, 2021, of which 2,435 (32%) accepted shelter placement after transport. Commissioner Banks emphasized that, as of April 6, 2021, 792 unhoused people are still in shelter who were once on the subway system during the pandemic (Wilcox, 2021 and Banks, 2021).

Metro Transit's Gadke underlined another positive impact of transport-to-shelter programs: the continued contact between bus drivers and people experiencing homelessness during the period of the service has enabled the development of more trusting relationships (Gadke, 2021). Such relationships can make it easier for both parties, and drivers do not have to always rely on enforcement:

> *"It was actually kind of good for our driver staff to interact with this population a little bit differently than just when they see [them] on their main-line buses; they don't have a lot of time then to have any conversations with them. But all of a sudden, some of our regular drivers who [drove the shelter-to-shelter buses] multiple times were seeing [them]: 'Hey, it's Charlie today!...How are you doing? You're looking good!' It's kind of cool to see that type of relationship develop. And all of a sudden, that translates out into [the] main-line world, because these guys are all over town. And when they get to know them a little bit, they know that, 'Okay, maybe Charlie's got some mental health issues or addiction issues. But, I know that he's a good guy, but maybe he's just having a bad day today. And I can work with him a little easier and have a conversation with him,' rather than get into this standoffish 'You need to have your bus fare, and I'm not going to tolerate this' behavior....It's a lot easier if we know who they are. And we will treat you like a person rather than a problem. It becomes a much better environment for everybody, and trust is built"* (Gadke, 2021).

## Program Challenges

According to Wilson, the challenge that the MTA in New York City has faced is not with its programs per se but rather with the pandemic, which has resulted in decreased ridership by housed riders and hence higher visibility of unhoused riders (Wilson, 2020). However, pre-pandemic audits of the subway and commuter rail programs

identified a number of issues (See Chapter II.2, Section 3). For instance, the subway program did not meet certain performance targets—as counts of unhoused individuals on the system increased in recent years (See Chapter I.2, Section 3)—and the commuter rail initiative did not operate all of its contracted hours and did not coordinate properly with other rail agencies at Penn Station (New York State Comptroller, 2019, 2020). In response, Commissioner Banks noted both that City staff now work directly with BRC staff to increase accountability and that significant operational changes since the pandemic have resulted in the successes described above.

Madison Metro Transit staff reported fewer challenges for their smaller program. The agency staff was able to resolve some initial timing and coordination issues with the shelters (e.g., when the buses were scheduled to arrive and depart). Since there is not readily available open parking near the shelters, the buses had to pull over at the curb, board their passengers, and immediately leave (Gadke, 2021).

## Lessons Learned

As with all the other programs profiled in this volume, MTA's Wilson and DSS' Banks agreed that coordination with partners and close communication between the transit agency and local homelessness agency is necessary for success. Likewise, they both noted that outreach personnel need to build trust with people experiencing homelessness for shelter transport and housing efforts to work (Wilson, 2020 and Banks, 2021). As Isaac McGinn, a communications staffer at DSS, observed, a successful referral "can take several months and hundreds of interactions....This is really hard-fought work" (McGinn, 2021). Banks noted that the pandemic has, in some sense, expanded those opportunities:

> *"Certainly, the key to outreach work is building trust with people, whether in the subways or in the streets, who have fallen through every social safety net that exists. The key skill is for outreach staff to be able to be effective in rebuilding trust for people who are distrustful of the government—they've been failed by government previously. Pre-pandemic, the challenge was always: the train would come into the station, and the client might get back on the train. During the pandemic, I think we've been able to have more time to work with people and therefore more time to build trust."*

Metro Transit's Gadke echoed this theme. As discussed above, he referred to trust between drivers and unhoused riders that grew through the transport-to-shelter program (Gadke, 2021). He also noted the significance of building good relationships between transit agencies, shelters, municipal departments, and law enforcement:

> *"My advice for any agency that...may have requests...from either their municipalities or shelters is to do it. It was beneficial for [us]....I would highly recommend building that type of relationship with shelter organizations and...helping your staff familiarize themselves with a population that can be easily looked down upon or forgotten about....It can really develop into some good relationships that can build what you do every day and make things easier for everyone: not only your own staff, but your ridership as well."*

> *"And I'd always recommend involvement and building relationships with other departments and other entities. We have a huge relationship with the University [of Wisconsin-Madison]....I've [also] become the liaison between our agency and law enforcement. We have together solved significantly bad crime on the bus....I've got the ear of people that can help me right away, and that maintains a safer environment"* (Gadke, 2021).

Finally, in terms of operations, Wilson cited the benefits of having outreach staff remain in place in the transit station their whole shift, while separate staff drive unhoused people to open shelters. That way, the station has a

continuous outreach presence. Additionally, Wilson favored using smaller, wheelchair-accessible paratransit vans, as opposed to more unwieldy full buses that MTA once used for such efforts (Wilson, 2021).

# Reflections

We complete this report by summarizing our reflections from what we have learned in Parts I and Parts II of this volume.

## Importance of Good Data

We saw that only a handful of transit operators collect counts and have accurate knowledge of the extent of homelessness on their system. Nevertheless, data collection is key to understanding the contours of the challenge. Longitudinal data collected at regular intervals with consistent methodology can help agencies to understand if new challenges are arising or if outreach is working. Whenever possible, agencies should collect data both in stations and on vehicles, as neither setting alone can show the full extent of homelessness. Data should also be made available to social service agencies, government agencies, and researchers, to help others working to serve unhoused people. Simply collecting and reporting data is not enough, however. While our research found that data collection on homelessness on transit is rare, data-driven policymaking is even rarer. These data should be used to make concrete decisions, such as allocating more funding to outreach programs that successfully find housing placements for unsheltered people or allocating resources to parts of the system with more unhoused riders.

## Importance of Tailoring Strategies to the Specific Context

We saw from our case studies that different transit agencies may employ different response strategies to address homelessness on their systems. Strategies should be tailored to available budgets but also to the specific physical and social context. For example, it makes sense for operators in cities or regions where homelessness is concentrated in central districts to opt towards providing a centrally located hub for outreach and services, as SEPTA did in Philadelphia. On the other hand, mobile outreach services may be more appropriate for metropolitan areas, such as Los Angeles, which may experience a dispersion of homelessness throughout the metropolitan landscape. In the largest urban areas, multiple strategies could be implemented in concert in different areas or at different times of day. The extent of homelessness should also inform the size of the response program. As we saw with SacRT and Denver RTD, each uses one outreach team, while BART and LA Metro, both large operators, utilize multiple and larger outreach teams.

## Importance of Homeless Outreach Distinct from Law Enforcement

Many of our case studies interviewees emphasized that the coordination and collaboration between law enforcement and outreach staff is critical. However, we also find, from our interviews and review of program performance data, the value of keeping law enforcement in the background or distinct from routine homeless outreach as a more effective outreach strategy. While smaller operators like SacRT and Denver RTD pair civilian outreach staff with law enforcement officers, LA Metro's PATH teams, BART's HOT program, and New York City DSS' end-of-line subway program are solely composed of unsworn caseworkers and outreach staff. To be sure, LA Metro has law enforcement outreach teams as well, and even the all-civilian teams at these agencies coordinate with police departments. Nonetheless, separating homeless outreach from law enforcement, and keeping law enforcement focused on other, more pertinent tasks, may increase the rate of successful outcomes (as the comparison between LA Metro's different programs in Chapter II.6, Section 1 demonstrates) and can help build trust between unhoused riders and outreach staff. For instance, during the pandemic, Danielle Jones, RTD's clinician, has worked without an accompanying officer. She noted, "Now that I've been by myself, I think I'm getting a lot more calls because I feel like people only want the clinician, not the cop, there. That [helps explain the] difference in calls: since about September, the calls have [gone] up a lot" (Jones, 2020). Likewise, in a recent review of LA Metro's public safety strategies, the Alliance for Community Transit-Los Angeles (ACT-LA) writes:

*"It is important to note the inherent difficulties in combining pro-social services with law enforcement. Deep differences in organizational identities, lack of information sharing, and divergent approaches to problem-solving can all hinder cooperation between law enforcement and social services providers (Wolff, 1998). Moreover, the very presence of law enforcement can be threatening and even re-traumatizing to unhoused people, undermining successful outreach, especially in light of the violence that...law enforcement agencies often direct towards people who are unsheltered (Miller, 2020)"* (ACT-LA et al., 2021).

Interestingly, a number of the police officials we interviewed also discussed the benefits of separating law enforcement from homeless outreach. Chief Murrietta of SacRT's Regional Transit Police described their "big push...to not necessarily have law enforcement officers respond to nuisance-type individuals, people experiencing homelessness, [and] mentally ill people" (Murrietta, 2020). As Murrietta reflected:

*"There are a lot of traditional models that want to put a person with a mental health condition in the car with an officer. From our experience, that hasn't had a high success rate. The higher success rate is to have trained individuals making these contacts on their own"* (Murrietta, 2020).

Likewise, Deputy Chief Martingano of Denver RTD's Transit Police reflected on this issue at the start of his remarks at the 2021 UCLA Luskin Summit. In reference to the mid-2020's protest movement around policing, Martingano said:

*"Just because I wear this uniform doesn't mean I disagree with a lot of the points [raised]. There's actually a lot of them I do agree with, especially taking responsibilities away from police officers in regards to homelessness as well as mental health issues"* (Martingano, 2021).

Both chiefs, and other law enforcement staff we interviewed, viewed civilian homeless outreach as an efficient use of transit police budgets and a good way to promote public safety. For instance, half of the cost of Denver RTD's clinician program is paid for by the agency's existing police budget. To be clear, we do not think in all circumstances that civilian transit outreach programs should be funded by police budgets, nor should they be housed under police departments, as that could run the risk of, in the end, *increasing* law enforcement involvement in routine homeless outreach. But regardless of the funding and organizational details, these unarmed, unsworn outreach efforts have significant potential for success, as acknowledged by advocates, agency staff, and law enforcement themselves.

## Importance of Free Fares

After reviewing the evidence in this volume and the last, we urge that transit agencies rethink their priorities if they are primarily concerned with removing unhoused individuals from transit property because their presence makes some housed riders uncomfortable. More in line with transit's social service role, they can instead focus on providing their core transportation services to both housed and unhoused riders. Unhoused riders also need transit to access jobs, shelters, medical appointments, food, and social events. Providing them with free or discounted fares allows them to access these needs more easily.

Since many unhoused people are already skirting around fare collection due to their inability to pay, agencies are not forfeiting much revenue by providing them free fares, as some of our interviewees have acknowledged. Additionally, as one interviewee noted, doing so would make it easier for bus drivers, who often find themselves having to resolve altercations over this issue (Jimenez, 2020). Providing free fares allows unhoused people to use transit with less threat of an unnecessary run-in with station staff, bus drivers, fare enforcement officers, or police

(though on a system with fare checks, fare enforcement situations still have the potential to escalate, even if an unhoused rider has a free pass on hand). Note that this strategy is focused on providing unhoused people with mobility rather than with shelter and may therefore result in *more* unhoused riders in transit systems. Thus, matching this strategy with outreach and external connections to housing is important. Actively engaging with unhoused individuals provides transit agencies an opportunity to direct them to services at the end of the line or with mobile outreach teams.

## Importance of Partnerships

As we also identified in Volume I (Loukaitou-Sideris et al., 2020), the transit industry cannot do it alone when it comes to responding to homelessness. Partnership and coordination with other entities are crucial. For example, without the close collaboration between SEPTA, Project HOME and the City of Philadelphia, the Hub of Hope would have not been possible. Similarly, the collaboration between Denver RTD and Mental Health Center of Denver is behind the successful outreach program that the transit agency has recently initiated. SFMTA's discounted fares program involves a partnership between the transit agency and the City's Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing. Successful partnerships are behind all of the case studies presented in this volume and are key in almost any agency effort to respond to homelessness.

External partners not only can fill crucial knowledge and skill gaps and bring in additional resources for transit agencies, but they can also help make a powerful public case for the importance of the issue and the need for greater funding. The stories of unhoused riders that partners can elevate and the data they can collect can help persuade governments, foundations, and other funders of the necessity of addressing homelessness specifically on transit.

## Importance of Educating the Public and Training Bus Drivers

Transit agencies often balance the concerns and fears of their housed riders, described as "pressure point[s]" by one interviewee (Chan, 2020b), with their efforts to also serve their unhoused riders. Operators often face complaints and pressure to simply sweep unsheltered individuals away from their system. However, experience has shown that this is not an effective strategy. As MHCD's Sailon put it, "If 'lock them up' worked, we would [have] wrapped this up years ago" (Sailon, 2020). Public information campaigns are then important to educate housed riders about an agency's outreach operations. Likewise, bus drivers are front-line personnel who often interact with people experiencing homelessness. Training drivers on how to best handle these interactions is critical. A number of transit agencies have started doing so, as we saw in Volume I (Loukaitou-Sideris et al., 2020).

## Importance of More Housing and Appropriate Services

We close with two notes about the framing of homelessness as transit agencies respond to it. First, we noticed that a number of agencies, in their outreach generally or in their data collection, have a category of "service refusal." We urge agencies to avoid characterizing a negative response by unhoused riders to offers of specific services and housing as "refusal" (or worse, as "service resistance"). Many shelters, temporary housing sites, and service programs have regulations that present a significant burden for unhoused people. For instance, people may not be able to bring along partners, pets, or belongings; sites may have an overly strict curfew; and those suffering from addiction may fear getting kicked out because of drug use. Moreover, shelters and services may be located far away (a concern transit agencies, especially, should take seriously), and accepting them may take people away from their established communities, friends, job, etc. Finally, unhoused riders may turn down an offer of services if they fear or do not trust the police officer or outreach worker making the offer, based on negative

past experiences (Wusinich et al., 2019). These concerns should not be dismissed by transit agencies, and collapsing outcomes into "acceptance" versus "rejection" of services is overly simplistic.

Second and more broadly, homelessness represents a failure of our society to take care of and respond to the plight faced by its most unfortunate members. Transit is a public service and the transit industry should uphold its social purpose and contribute to the welfare and mobility of unhoused riders. It is clear, however, that the industry is dealing with the downstream effects of a structural problem. Ultimately, if we are serious in trying to help people experiencing homelessness, we need more housing and services for them.

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# **Appendices**

# Appendix A: List of Interviewees

<div style="background-color: yellow">Table A-1. List of Interviewees</div>

| Interviewee | Agency/Organization | City/Region | Citation |
|---|---|---|---|
| Mary Scullion | Project HOME | Philadelphia, Pennsylvania | Scullion, Player, and Nestel, 2020 |
| Candice Player | Project HOME | | |
| Thomas Nestel | SEPTA Transit Police | | |
| Roman Murrietta | SacRT/Sacramento Police Department | Sacramento, California | Murrietta, 2020 |
| Steven Martingano | Denver RTD | Denver, Colorado | Martingano, 2020b |
| Danielle Jones | Denver RTD/Mental Health Center of Denver | | Jones, 2020 |
| Carleigh Sailon | Mental Health Center of Denver | | Sailon, 2020 |
| Joyce Burrell Garcia | LA Metro | Los Angeles, California | Burrell Garcia, Dickerson, and Loew, 2020 |
| Ron Dickerson | LA Metro | | |
| Jennifer Loew | LA Metro | | |
| Aaron Weinstein | LA Metro (formerly of BART) | San Francisco Bay Area, California | Weinstein, 2021a |
| Tim Chan | BART | | Chan and Sandoval, 2020 |
| Armando Sandoval | BART | | |
| Diana Hammons | SFMTA | San Francisco, California | Hammons, Nelson, and Burrus, 2021 |
| Emmett Nelson | SFMTA | | |
| Kimberly Burrus | SFMTA | | |

| Interviewee | Agency/Organization | City/Region | Citation |
|---|---|---|---|
| Cathy Jimenez | King County Metro | Seattle, Washington | Jimenez and Greto, 2020 |
| Lindsey Greto | King County Metro | | |
| Michael Ramirez | King County | | Ramirez, 2020 |
| Wes Charley | TriMet | Portland, Oregon | Charley, 2020 |
| Cynthia Wilson | New York MTA | New York City, New York | Wilson, 2020 <br> Wilson, 2021 |
| Isaac McGinn | NYC Department of Social Services | | McGinn, Martin, and Sharma, 2021 |
| Ian Martin | NYC Department of Social Services | | |
| Neha Sharma | NYC Department of Social Services | | |
| Steven Banks | NYC Department of Social Services | | Banks, 2021 |
| Phil Gadke | Madison Metro Transit | Madison, Wisconsin | Gadke, 2021 |

# Appendix B: Interview Questions

We followed a semi-structured interview format. While interview questions varied based on the agency and staff member interviewed, we sought responses to the questions below.

## 1. Program Description

- When did the program start?
- How does it operate?
- What kind of services or activities does it involve?

## 2. Program Focus

- Who is the primary focus of the program?
- Is it only targeting riders experiencing homelessness?
- Approximately how many people experiencing homelessness does it serve?

## 3. Program Budget and Staff

- What is the program's budget?
- How many staff members work for this program?
- Where does funding come from?

## 4. Partnerships

- Does the program involve partnerships?
- What kind of partnerships does it involve (and with whom)?
- How do the partnerships operate?

## 5. COVID Impact

- Has the program been affected by COVID? In what ways?

## 6. Program Impact

- Is the program considered successful? In what ways?
- How are program outcomes being tracked or measured?
- Does the program have an impact on the extent of homelessness on the transit system?
- Does it have an impact on the welfare of riders experiencing homelessness?

## 7. Program Challenges

- What challenges has the program faced?

## 8. Lessons Learned

- What lessons can other transit agencies learn from the program?