

Transit Watch: Public Transit in Crisis



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Spiking Homelessness Rates

The Changing Capacity of Shelters During COVID-19 Sees Increasing Numbers of the Unhoused Pushed Onto the Street and Public Transit

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At the beginning of the pandemic, public transit ridership dropped suddenly and dramatically, however, there was a noticeable increase in people experiencing homelessness in transit stops, stations, and vehicles searching for shelter. Many of the unhoused also use public transit to travel to their workplaces, public shelters, and community service centers. Nearly half of 115 transit agencies participating in the report, [Homelessness in Transit Environments Volume I: Findings from a Survey of Public Transit Operators](#), published in December, reported a perceived increase in people experiencing homelessness on their systems due to the pandemic.

"Homelessness in transit environments is a major challenge in the U.S. and in Canada, but especially in California," says Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris, Distinguished Professor of Urban Planning, UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs, University of California Institute of Transportation Studies, and lead researcher of the report. "We know that public transit is a major important mode for people who are experiencing homelessness and we know they take shelter in transit environments. However, not that much has been written about homelessness in transit environments."

More than 150,000 people in California experience homelessness every day, with more than two-thirds of those being unsheltered, accounting for nearly half of the nation's unsheltered homeless population. With that market instabilities and lockdowns, a rise in homelessness is expected as many people are on the verge of becoming homeless, as a result of the impacts of the pandemic-induced economic downturn.

Even as they struggle to recover from the impacts of the pandemic, California public transit agencies are increasingly placing a priority on helping the unhoused. The heads of six transit agencies in California - Alameda-Contra Costa Transit District (AC Transit), San Francisco Bay Area Rapid Transit District (BART), Capitol Corridor Joint Powers Authority (Capitol Corridor), Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority (LA Metro), Sacramento Regional Transit District (SacRT), and San Mateo County Transit District (SamTrans) - sent a letter last month to state Assemblymembers Wendy Carrillo (D-Los Angeles) and David Chiu (D-San Francisco) that outlined how transit systems are not eligible to apply for state grants for homelessness and housing and pleaded for more assistance. The letter also explained that the presence of people experiencing homelessness and safety were identified by riders as the main reasons not to ride transit. Riders gave BART's management of homelessness the lowest rating of any subject on the most recent rider survey, although overall numbers improved from last year.

In a statement, Chiu said he greatly appreciated the work by transit agencies, but the challenge is that California has not yet committed to ongoing state funding for homelessness. One-time funding is limited to agencies that directly provide housing and shelter beds, he said. Chiu is co-sponsoring an assembly bill AB 71 to create permanent funding sources for homelessness.

"We have to call on these county and local officials because they're leaving us in this situation," said BART Director Bevan Duffy, who formerly was responsible for overseeing homeless policy and poverty in San Francisco. "It is not our fault that the systems are so broken around the Bay Area that we can't make the connections. And I think on some level, our riders understand, they're just frustrated and scared because they see a situation that is unchecked."

Duffy points to the disjointed county and regional efforts, and the lack of clarity on how much funding for services, outreach, programs, and treatment are available. The result is an inadequate response to the homelessness crisis, that has been exacerbated by the economic disruption, housing instability, and mass unemployment that the pandemic has brought leaving public spaces, like public transit, to deal with spiking numbers of people experiencing homelessness.

STUDY RESULTS

Loukaitou-Sideris found that over half of the agencies surveyed reported that they see at least 100 individuals who are unhoused per day on their system, while 14 agencies reported 500 unhoused people or more.

While the survey included agencies across the U.S. and the largest Canadian transit systems, the researchers oversampled large and small operators in California because homelessness is particularly visible there. Prior to distribution, the 37-question survey was reviewed with staff of the California Transit Association, the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans), LA Metro, BART, and peers at the UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs.

Explains Loukaitou-Sideris, "The key research questions investigated how the COVID-19 pandemic and its associated economic effects impacted the homelessness crisis in transit environments in major metropolitan areas, around the country, including Los Angeles and San Francisco. A nationwide web survey of U.S. transit operators on how the COVID-19 pandemic affected their strategies to deal with homelessness was conducted. The survey asked staff and stakeholders how each of these organizations addressed homelessness; what the scale of their homelessness issues were and the challenges they faced; how the pandemic had changed those strategies or the scale of the problem; and how it affected their effectiveness."

KEY SURVEY RESPONSES OF 142 INDIVIDUAL SURVEY PARTICIPANTS FOUND:

- 85 percent of agencies view homelessness as a challenge.
- 86 percent receive complaints about unhoused riders.
- 60 percent say unhoused riders create a negative effect on ridership, which has increased during the pandemic.

In terms of challenges, a vast number of survey respondents mention homelessness as a challenge, although agencies differed on if they characterize it as a major challenge versus a minor challenge.

According to the report, most of the larger operators characterized homelessness as a major challenge. They also said that other riders' concerns about unhoused people represents a challenge. Other challenges include the lack of funding, both external and internal, to respond to homelessness, and especially a lack of support from city, county, state, and provincial entities. The report also notes that the underdeveloped policies or lack of clear policies on how to respond to homelessness is challenging, as is the lack of staff training on how to interact with the unhoused.

COVID COMPLICATIONS

One of the outcomes of the pandemic is the spotlight that has been placed on vulnerable populations and their dependence on public transit. Unhoused riders are among the vulnerable travelers. According to the survey, the pandemic has caused 41 percent of agencies to re-think and develop new policies to address homelessness, 29 percent to intensify their homelessness responses, and 29 percent to start new partnerships or implement new strategies.

One of the measures LA Metro has taken is its Operation Shelter the Unsheltered. At the beginning of the pandemic, LA Metro began offering bus transportation to the unhoused and other vulnerable individuals who, for their own safety and those of other transit riders, may be in need of social service assessment, shelter or mental health services. In its first month of operation, April to May, more than 290 unhoused individuals riding the LA Metro system accepted bus transportation to nearby shelter beds, a substantial increase compared to the agency's normal outreach rate for homeless housing services. (As a comparison, in January 2020, the agency attained interim housing for 46 individuals.) LA Metro reports that the increase is due in part to the availability of new beds at nearby city recreation centers. The increase is also due to the agency's internal teamwork and close coordination with the city of Los Angeles's Unified Homeless Response Center. This center, established two years ago by LA Mayor Eric Garcetti, acts as a central command post to tackle the city's homeless crisis in real-time.

BART staff reported to its board that the number of homeless individuals in the Bay Area has swelled to nearly 35,000, a 25 percent increase from 2017, with many more at risk of losing shelter because of the pandemic.

The agency's new homeless action plan, introduced at the end of last month, includes advocating with government, expanding public-private partnerships and continuing to build out its new \$8 million progressive policing department that will hire social workers and unarmed ambassadors to respond to homelessness. BART is also in the early stages of exploring with Oakland to potentially create a temporary city-managed safe parking site for unhoused use on BART property in exchange for more homeless resource assistance and support.

This fiscal year, BART budgeted \$18 million for quality of life issues, which includes cleaning, safety, and fare evasion prevention. Of that, \$2.6 million specifically is dedicated to homelessness response, including paying a community outreach coordinator, homeless outreach teams, elevator attendants, and the preventing and cleaning of encampments.

DEDICATED STAFF

Loukaitou-Sideris reports that almost no agency receives external funding to address homelessness. As a result, 66 percent of the agencies reported having to self-fund dedicated staff, and 53 percent offer training to front line employees on how to interact with unhoused riders.

During the pandemic, LA Metro has assigned two full-time employees to the Unified Homeless Response Center to help find available housing near key transit hubs on a real-time basis every day.

"The idea is to be able to offer unhoused individuals space in a shelter while they're at our stations," said Bob Green, LA Metro's Chief of System Security and Law Enforcement to Metro's The Source. "We're seeing some of the unhoused more willing to accept space in the shelters because of the COVID-19 crisis."

LA Metro has also formed a task force comprised of several agency resources working hand-in-hand to offer expedited housing services in the age of coronavirus. In addition to dedicating staff to the resource center to help track bed availability, LA Metro's PATH (People Assisting the Homeless) outreach team members have been joined by transit security, fare inspectors and specialized law enforcement units at key terminus stations such as Union Station, 7th Street/Metro Center and North Hollywood. The task force offers unhoused individuals with bus transportation to nearby shelters within 15-20 minutes, often a key determining factor for whether a person chooses to accept shelter or not.

"We're walking a tightrope in putting the right resources together to tackle this issue. It appears to be making a difference. We are getting folks the assistance they need at a time when essential travel and social distancing on public transit is critical," stated Green.

In January, BART announced the creation of a new position to implement its Strategic Homelessness Action Plan. The new Senior Manager of Social Services Partnerships position will be part of the agency's efforts to increase resources to help address homelessness within the system and connect people to resources. The job will focus on designing, implementing, and overseeing programs to address homelessness and related issues within the BART system. The position will serve as the top advisor for the General Manager and the Board of Directors on matters related to homelessness and the health and social welfare of BART riders.

"This new position doubles down on our commitment to help those in need and to demonstrate a new approach at BART," said BART General Manager Bob Powers at the time of the announcement. "Our riders and employees are concerned for those they come across in the system who are seeking shelter and don't know the best way to help. Homelessness is a complex issue and as a transit system we have struggled to effectively respond to the crisis occurring in the Bay Area. We need someone who can work with a variety of stakeholders, find funding partnerships, and bring new ideas to the table."

BART's Senior Manager of Social Services Partnerships will work directly with BART's Supervisors of Crisis Intervention, who are responsible for providing services to the unsheltered population in the BART system with housing and/or mental health issues. The Senior Manager will also work closely with the BART Police Department to ensure all programs are in alignment with its progressive policing policies.

MORE HELP & DATA NEEDED

"We would definitely recommend expansion of outreach strategies," says Loukaitou-Sideris. "We think partnerships are important, not only because they add resources, but also because they bring different types of expertise to address a very difficult issue. We also recommend expansion of dedicated funding and the transit industry lobbying to get more resources from federal and state entities, as well as the dissemination of best practices."

Data and metrics are an important part of BART's Strategic Homeless Action Plan and the agency's progressive policing efforts to find new solutions that don't rely on armed police. The agency aspires to measure efficacy of the program with monthly sets of specific data points including:

SHORT-TERM METRICS

- Positive engagements
- Rapport building
- Provide information
- Refusal of services
- Follow up for multiple contact individuals

LONG-TERM METRICS

- Acceptance of services
- Temporary housing
- Permanent housing
- Drug/alcohol programs
- Conservatorship
- Reuniting with family or care givers

Adding to policy difficulties, Loukaitou-Sideris states, is that very few agencies take counts of their unhoused riders. "Only six percent take counts of unhoused riders themselves," she reports. "And only 17 percent have access to counts or formal estimates of unhoused riders from any source. Over a quarter of agencies do not have adequate information to provide even a rough estimate of people experiencing homelessness on their system."

Loukaitou-Sideris believes this is a definite problem, asking, "How can you plan, if you don't know the extent of the problem?" More than one in four agencies could not provide a rough estimate of people experiencing homelessness on their systems. However, anecdotally, because again - with very few exceptions - we don't have counts, 50 percent of agencies report seeing more unhoused riders since the pandemic started. At least that is their perception. But keep in mind, that since more of the housed riders have stopped riding transit, it makes the unhoused riders appear more visible. What we really need is more and better data. We need agencies and cities to do better counts to really understand the extent of the issue."

UNHOUSED TRAVELERS

Even with the recent strategies that BART is making to stabilize and prevent homelessness, Green knows more remains to be done to address the massive and complex issue surrounding the unhoused and their use of public transportation during the COVID-19 outbreak.

"All of this is a journey," Green acknowledges. "We're trying to get different strategies in place to address this unprecedented situation we find ourselves in today. It's a profound challenge, but we will continue to offer these services as long as we have shelter space available."

"I think agencies should rethink their fare policies towards the homeless," suggests Loukaitou-Sideris. "These are people who cannot afford the ticket, yet transit is a critical service for some of them to access jobs, it is not just shelter. A number of agencies mentioned that operators must insist on the ticket, but then there are delays, and conflicts. A number of agencies have started distributing free fares to shelters and social service agencies that can be passed on to people that are experiencing homelessness."

Loukaitou-Sideris reveals that her team's next research project on the subject will highlight the best practices being implemented to help people experiencing homelessness.

"We feel the transit industry needs to look into the mobility and well being of not only its housed riders, but also its unhoused riders," she says.

The need to understand the true scale of the homelessness crisis in transit environments, especially in the pandemic and post-pandemic world, is vital in order to work towards identifying and prioritizing new initiatives. This imperative is not only to act as safety nets for vulnerable travelers, but also to address the need to re-establish trust in public transit by housed riders.

After the presentation of the Strategic Homeless Action Plan to the BART board, Director Janice Li punctuated a key motivator for proactively investing in homelessness initiatives stating, "We will not rebuild our ridership without addressing homelessness."

TRANSIT TALKS WEBINAR REPLAY Impact of Homelessness on Transit Operations

On February 24 the California Transit Association and California Association for Coordinated Transportation (CALACT) convened its weekly webinar-based discussion, *Transit Talks*, this time featuring the results of [Homelessness in Transit Environments Volume I: Findings from a Survey of Public Transit Operators](#) and a look at how transit agencies have responded to homelessness.

To access the webinar recording and PowerPoint presentations, [click here](#) (member login required).

For more information, please contact the California Transit Association at COVID-19@caltransit.org.