

Research Notes

Planning/Policy/ Programming

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Project Title: Addressing Impacts of Unhoused Individuals on Transit Agency Operations

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Addressing Impacts of Unhoused Individuals on Transit Agency Operations

Many people experiencing homelessness use public transit as shelter or for travel because they lack stable housing and access to services, creating significant operational and financial challenges for transit agencies of all sizes. As more agencies experiment with approaches such as outreach teams, service hubs, discounted fares, and transport to shelters, there is a growing need to understand which strategies truly help both unhoused riders and the transit systems that serve them. This research will examine why people turn to transit for shelter, how often it occurs, and how agencies currently respond by surveying transit operators nationwide and conducting detailed case studies at agencies with promising programs. By gathering insights from agency staff, partner organizations, and people experiencing homelessness themselves, the project will identify effective practices that can be scaled and shared. The findings will help Caltrans provide stronger guidance and support to transit agencies facing these challenges, advancing statewide goals for equity, mobility, and reliable transportation.

WHAT IS THE NEED?

On any given night, more than three-quarters of a million Americans and nearly 200,000 Californians lack a permanent place to live. As the housing crisis intensifies and gaps in the social safety net persist, some people experiencing homelessness turn to public transit environments—including buses, trains, stations, stops, parking areas, and other facilities—as places of temporary refuge. Others rely on transit in the same way as housed travelers, using it to access employment, retail, health care, social services, and other essential destinations. For many, transit serves both purposes.

People experiencing homelessness who use public transit are among those most likely to experience chronic homelessness and face multiple forms of disadvantage, including socioeconomic and health-related challenges. Their presence in transit environments presents significant operational, safety, and financial challenges for transit agencies. Research has documented a range of impacts across transit systems of



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varying sizes, underscoring the need for effective and sustainable agency responses.

In response, transit agencies across the country are developing and implementing innovative strategies to address these challenges. Approaches include establishing service hubs and mobile outreach teams, providing discounted or free fares, and using agency vehicles to transport people to shelters, warming centers, cooling centers, and other supportive services. In many transit systems, these programs have matured beyond the pilot stage and have generated sufficient experience to allow their effectiveness to be systematically evaluated.

This emerging body of practice presents an important opportunity to identify which strategies are most effective, the circumstances under which they are successful, and how transit agencies can adapt and implement these approaches to better serve people experiencing homelessness while improving the safety, efficiency, and reliability of transit operations.

WHAT ARE WE DOING?

To understand how common homelessness is on transit and how agencies are responding, the research team will begin by sending a survey to all large transit operators across the United States and to every California transit agency they can reach. The survey will ask why people experiencing homelessness might use transit for shelter, how often it happens, what their needs are, and which types of support or interventions might help. Using the survey results, media reports, academic studies, and recommendations from experts, the team will then select three transit agencies that have created new or particularly effective programs to address homelessness. For each agency, the researchers will conduct interviews with staff at different levels and with partner organizations, and they will also gather insights directly from people experiencing homelessness on transit—an important perspective that agencies often lack. These interviews and surveys will form the basis of detailed case studies

that highlight promising strategies and lessons for transit systems of different sizes.

WHAT IS OUR GOAL?

This research aims to understand why people experiencing homelessness sometimes use public transit as a temporary place to stay, how transit agencies currently respond, and which strategies actually work. It will look at different types and sizes of transit agencies to identify approaches that are supported by data and can be shared as best practices. California invests in public transit to help reduce greenhouse gas emissions, cut down on driving, and improve transportation options for low-income and marginalized communities. However, the challenges created by homelessness on buses, trains, and transit facilities can strain agency resources, disrupt service, and reduce ridership. When transit systems struggle to operate safely and reliably, it becomes harder for the state to meet goals related to equity, climate action, and improved mobility. This research will help identify solutions that support both people experiencing homelessness and the transit systems that serve them.

WHAT IS THE BENEFIT?

This multidisciplinary research project will examine the extent to which and reasons why people experiencing homelessness seek temporary shelter in transit environments, how transit agencies respond to homelessness, and the effectiveness of those interventions. The research will identify data-driven best practices and strategies that can be applied across transit agencies of different types, sizes, and operating contexts.

The findings will help Caltrans provide practical, evidence-based guidance and resources to transit agencies throughout California that are experiencing challenges related to homelessness, supporting agencies in developing effective responses that address the needs of people

experiencing homelessness while maintaining safe, efficient, and reliable transit operations.

WHAT IS THE PROGRESS TO DATE?

Project is scheduled to begin 06/30/2026.

IMAGES

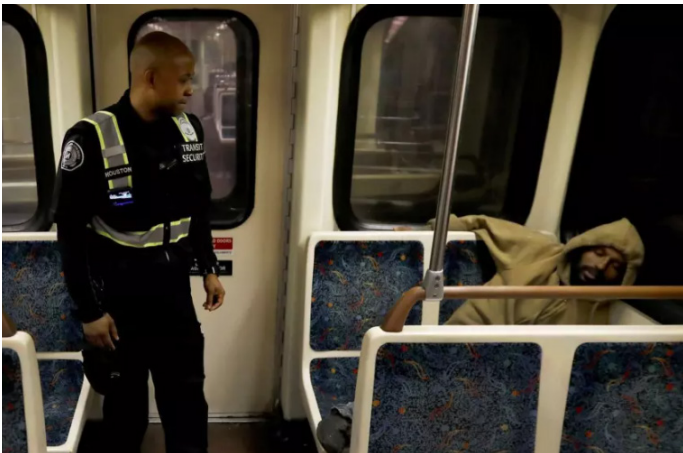


Image 1: Metro transit security guard Tracey Houston rouses a man sleeping on the Metro Red Line subway. Early-morning and late-night trains are often a refuge for homeless people looking for a warm place to sit or sleep. (Francine Orr / Los Angeles Times)