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The Extent of Homelessness on Transit: What We Know

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Issue

In the U.S., more than 500,000 people lack a stable roof over their heads on any given night. 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 COVID-19 pandemic.

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 that explore this basic question. 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.

To address this, the researchers surveyed 115 U.S. and Canadian transit operators regarding homelessness on their systems, obtained data from those few that collect counts, and interviewed select agency staff working on homelessness response.

Main Findings

Based on the survey responses, homelessness is common on transit: a slight majority of responding agencies report at least 100 unhoused people on their systems daily. A few (16%) report 500 unhoused people or more: mostly large agencies, many from the West Coast or Mountain West.

However, only 6% of agencies regularly track homeless counts on their system themselves. Only 17% have access to counts or formal estimates, partial or full, from any source.

Thus, survey responses were mostly estimates by staff at transit agencies.

From the available count data (See Table 1), the research team found that transit serves as shelter for a high, though quite variable, share of unsheltered individuals. In Minneapolis and New York City, counts found over half of unsheltered individuals in transit settings.

Differences in data collection methodologies, weather and climate, service hours, and the amount of shelter space available make comparisons difficult among cities. 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 climates or because of 24-hour transit service in the case of New York — they have much lower shares of unsheltered people overall.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, most agencies in the survey reported a perceived increase in the number of unhoused people on transit. Data from Los Angeles Metro bear this out: counts at rail stations more than doubled. Bay Area Rapid Transit in the San Francisco Bay Area, though, which does not run bus service and never suspended fare enforcement, did not experience an increase.

Those experiencing homelessness in transit settings are more likely than their unhoused peers elsewhere to be chronically unhoused and structurally disadvantaged. Various surveys have shown that those sheltering on transit are more likely 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.

Table 1: The Share of People Experiencing Homelessness Counted on Transit in Various Areas

Area	Count Description and Data Availability	Share of Unsheltered Pop.		Share of Total Unhoused Pop.		Notes
		High	Low	High	Low	
Hennepin County (Minneapolis), MN	Biannual unsheltered homeless count (Jan. 2018-Jan. 2020)	72%	37%	18%	13%	Share on transit highest on cold nights; decrease since 24/7 light rail service stopped
New York City, NY	Annual unsheltered homeless count/ estimate (2005-2020)	62%	19%	8%	4%	Significant increase over time in share on subway, with high in 2019
Los Angeles County, CA	Count of unhoused individuals on LA Metro (October 2020)	3%*		2%*		* Only counted LA Metro, not other transit operators nor bus stops
San Francisco, CA	Annual unsheltered homeless count (January 2019)	2%**		1%**		** Only counted select rail stations and SFMTA buses

“Unhoused” describes all people experiencing homelessness, including those in homelessness shelters. “Unsheltered” describes the subset of people experiencing homelessness without a roof over their heads.

Conclusion

- 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.
- The agencies studied used two different types of counts: point-in-time counts (counting all unhoused riders on the system or at least at key stations during a short interval of time) and continuous sampling (regularly sampling a random set of transit vehicles and stops at multiple times of day or days of the week and then extrapolating). The former may allow for better agency resource planning; however, the latter can cover a greater range of settings

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.

More Information

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

Further Sources

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