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How Regional Transit Agencies Can Serve the Daily Mobility Needs of the Unhoused Population

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April 2023

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| 16. Abstract With more people experiencing homelessness in California cities, some transit agencies have begun to comprehensively address the needs of people experiencing homelessness, a population which historically may not have been included in their planning. Research suggests that people experiencing homelessness rely on public transit for the same variety of reasons that all riders do, and that, like other riders, they find it difficult to reach those destinations due to prohibitive costs and transit schedules that do not meet their needs. California transit agencies vary in terms of whether, and how well, they engage with the issue of homelessness. Interviews and a review of policy and programming documents show that most major transit agencies in California made some reference to people experiencing homelessness, but just ten of fifteen addressed their transit needs, and only three addressed those needs through dedicated programs. We use this research synthesis to draw greater attention to the ways that transit agencies can serve the mobility needs of people experiencing homelessness. We present findings from a case study on transit accessibility in San Diego County to supplement our statewide review. This includes a geospatial analysis of transit accessibility from locations where people experiencing homelessness have been known to congregate in San Diego County, as well as interviews with three people who have experienced homelessness in the region and three advocates for the unhoused population. We identify the ways that transit accessibility is a complex issue, requiring consideration of proximity, ease of physical access, and programmatic supports. Based on our research, we recommend that transit and service organizations consider the following: (1) establish coordinated outreach in transit environments, (2) offer shuttles to services and employment to help one resolve their homelessness, (3) improve the reliability and connectivity of public transit, (4) support fare assistance programs, and (5) incorporate expertise from people with lived experience of homelessness. | | | | | |
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How Regional Transit Agencies Can Serve the Daily Mobility Needs of the Unhoused Population

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Executive

Summary

Executive Summary

Transit agencies are tasked with providing a service that enables people to move between home, work, school, commercial ventures, and places of leisure. Increasing numbers of people in California cities experiencing homelessness have led some transit agencies to more comprehensively address the needs of unhoused riders whereas others, including those in the San Diego region, have not changed their policies. This research synthesis draws attention to the ways that transit agencies can serve the mobility needs of unhoused riders, a population which historically may have not been included in their planning processes. This synthesis is divided into four sections, summarized below.

- A synthesis of the research literature on public transit and homelessness. We focus especially on studies that seek to understand the needs of people experiencing homelessness as active users of transit. Research suggests that people experiencing homelessness rely on public transit for the same wide variety of reasons that all riders do, and that, like other riders, they find it difficult to reach necessary appointments, places of employment, and social engagements due to prohibitive costs and transit schedules that do not meet their needs. People experiencing homelessness access social services more than housed individuals, which is difficult to do using public transit. Many people experiencing homelessness also use transit as temporary shelter, which makes them prone to encounters with transit security and law enforcement.
- An overview of policies and programming that impact people experiencing homelessness at fifteen transit agencies in California. Our overview is based on a review of 94 policy and programming documents from fifteen transit agencies in California and interviews with transit representatives from the San Francisco Bay Area Rapid Transit District (BART), the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority (LA Metro), the San Diego Association of Area Governments (SANDAG), and the San Diego Metropolitan Transit System (MTS). Most transit agencies —eleven of the fifteen reviewed — made some reference to people experiencing homelessness. Nine of the fifteen agencies addressed the issue of transportation costs; eight specifically addressed affordability needs for people experiencing homelessness; three agencies addressed those needs through a dedicated outreach program. Other topics we identified in the documents and interviews included fare programs that sometimes have implications for people experiencing homelessness, security and policing, and surveys of riders that occasionally reflected concerns about homelessness. We used the interviews and document review to develop a typology of how most major public transit agencies in the state are addressing homelessness. This typology consists of four categories that reflect: (1) the needs of people experiencing homelessness as transit users, (2) rider concerns related to homelessness, (3) security responses to people experiencing homelessness, and (4) outreach efforts to people experiencing homelessness.

- **Case Study: Geospatial Evaluation of Transit Proximity to Documented Encampments and Homeless Shelters in San Diego.** To support efforts to meet the needs of unhoused riders, we conducted a geospatial analysis of transit accessibility from locations where they have been known to congregate, specifically homeless shelters and encampments of unsheltered persons identified through the 2020 San Diego Regional Task Force on Homelessness Point-in-Time Count (PITC). We show that the distance between public transit sites and the places people experiencing homelessness have congregated meet general standards of walkability. We further discuss how proximity is only one element of accessibility and rely on interviews with people who have experienced homelessness and advocates to consider other elements of accessibility.
- **Policy recommendations.** Finally, we conclude with some policy recommendations. We make five suggestions for transit agencies seeking to improve the mobility of people experiencing homelessness. First, we recommend establishing coordinated outreach programs in transit environments through partnerships with trained outreach workers. Second, where needed, we recommend that homeless shelters and other service providers offer shuttle services, bus passes, or rideshare credits to support employment and other actions that will allow people to resolve their homelessness. Third, we recommend improving transit services in ways that improve reliability and connectivity. Fourth, we support existing fare assistance programs for unhoused transit riders and advocate for their expansion. Finally, we encourage incorporating the expertise from people with lived experience of homelessness into transit planning.

Contents

Introduction

Transportation planning has historically focused on moving people between homes, jobs, and other destinations. These planning frameworks assume people have fixed addresses and stable housing, excluding the perspectives of unhoused and unstably housed Californians, whose ranks have grown substantially since 2016 (United States Interagency Council on Homelessness n.d.; Cuellar Mejia, Johnson, and Herrera 2022).

Much of the research examining the interplay of homelessness and transportation focuses on people experiencing homelessness narrowly defined as staying in fixed locations such as at transit stops and on transportation agency properties (including rights-of-way) (Bassett, Tremoulet, and Moe 2013; Ding, Loukaitou-Sideris, and Wasserman 2021). In this research synthesis, we shift the focus to people experiencing homelessness as active users of transportation. This focus acknowledges that transportation should be considered alongside, and as a complement to, other services that support individuals' efforts to exit homelessness (Hui and Habib 2017).

Research on the mobility of people experiencing homelessness suggests how their needs may be incorporated into transportation planning, despite differences within the population (e.g., age, physical and mental health and capabilities, employment status, ownership of a vehicle, etc.). In general, people experiencing homelessness tend to stay in areas where they have family, friends, and other support systems (Wolch and Rowe 1992). People experiencing homelessness are less mobile, or transient, than is often assumed, and tend to have established patterns and needs for daily movement between shelter, services, work, and social connections (Gowan 2010; Langegger and Koester 2016). Determining the transportation needs and patterns of unhoused and unstably housed individuals, and establishing a framework for regional transportation planning that takes this information into account, is critical to providing appropriate and equitable transportation services to all Californians.

This synthesis was guided by conversations with local organizations which advocate for people experiencing homelessness: Think Dignity, the San Diego Housing Federation's HEAL Network, People Assisting the Homeless (PATH), and Lived Experience Advisors. Think Dignity is a non-profit advocacy agency which provides legal services and other services to people experiencing homelessness. PATH provides a wide variety of services to unhoused people, including extensive outreach efforts. The HEAL Network, or Homeless-Experienced Advocacy and Leadership Network, housed at the San Diego Housing Federation, elevates the voices of people with lived experience of homelessness to ensure their perspectives are included in public policy discussions and strategy development to reduce homelessness. Lived Experience Advisors operates with a similar goal, although it is a standalone agency of consultants with lived experience of homelessness. Before reviewing the literature and transit agency documents, we spoke with representatives from these advocacy and service provider agencies to better understand perceived barriers to transit use by people who have experienced homelessness or who work directly with this population. Think Dignity staff explained that much of their work around transit has focused on the cost of fares, which are high for people experiencing homelessness, and on transit ordinance violation tickets and fines. People with lived experience of

homelessness from the HEAL Network explained that transit reliability and connectivity were also major issues. Lived Experience Advisors described major barriers to accessing discounted passes for people with mental disabilities, as well as challenges related to pricing. And a PATH representative focused on the value of conducting outreach by trained staff in transit settings, independent of transit security. We employed a deductive method by focusing on these issues in our review of the literature, review of policy documents, and interviews with transit agency staff and other advocates for people experiencing homelessness. We also used the review of the literature to further develop deductive themes that we could use when reviewing agency documents.

Review of the Literature

We organize our review of the literature around three topics: how people experiencing homelessness use transit, ridership barriers they face, and how well public transit is serving this population. Past studies have shown that public transit is critical for unhoused and unstably housed people. Scholars have focused on the ways that fares, the criminalization of homelessness, and geographic and physical accessibility can be barriers to transit ridership for this highly disadvantaged population. Studies also review the ways that transit agencies can become assets to this population by partnering with service agencies to connect unhoused riders with services and reduce negative outcomes caused by criminalizing homelessness.

How People Experiencing Homelessness are Currently Using Public Transit

Research makes clear that public transit is the primary method of transportation utilized by people experiencing homelessness, with walking the second most common form of transportation (Murphy 2019). Studies have also shown that the transit needs of unhoused riders are like those of housed riders (Murphy 2019; Smith, Moore, and Canham 2021). Like all people, people experiencing homelessness need to access employment, social functions, medical appointments, as well as training and education opportunities. However, compared to housed riders, unhoused riders face barriers related to stigma, discrimination, and fare cost, all of which may reduce transit use (Jocoy and Del Casino 2010). Since people experiencing homelessness also have a greater need to access social services (Jocoy and Del Casino 2010; Scott, Bryant, and Aquanno 2020), and may depend more on transit since they are less likely to have access to a car (Murphy 2019; Smith, Moore, and Canham 2021), they may be especially reliant on transit accessibility.

Transit agencies gather very little information on people experiencing homelessness as users of public transit. Agency-led (or contracted) counts of unhoused riders are extremely rare. According to surveys with transit operators from 115 agencies across the country, six percent of surveyed agencies counted unhoused riders and 17 percent of surveyed agencies had access to counts created by another organization or agency (Loukaitou-Sideris et al. 2020). When transit operators and staff were asked about their perception of the number of unhoused riders, researchers found that large transit operators reported a significantly higher number than smaller transit operators (Loukaitou-Sideris et al. 2020). Importantly, observations by transit operators about the number of people experiencing homelessness riding transit or seen in transit settings depends on perceptions or bias of what a person experiencing homelessness looks like. In turn, reported observations of how many transit riders are unhoused may miss persons who do not have the appearance of being unhoused.

Barriers People Experiencing Homelessness Face to Using Public Transit

Research shows people experiencing homelessness face several barriers to using transit, including cost, criminalization of homelessness, inconvenient transit schedules, and a lack of accessibility.

Cost

Interview-based studies of people experiencing homelessness have identified cost as a significant barrier to public transit use (Brallier, Southworth, and Ryan 2019; Scott, Bryant, and Aquanno 2020). Transit agencies understand that cost can be a barrier for a variety of populations and many of the largest transit agencies in the United States offer reduced or free fare programs to select populations (Darling, Carpenter, and Voulgaris 2021; Loukaitou-Sideris et al. 2021a). Cost may persist as a barrier, however, because reduced fare programs are sometimes insufficiently publicized, difficult to access, available only for people with disabilities or for a person heading to a job interview, or because people experiencing homelessness struggle to qualify for a program or lose their reduced fare cards (Guo 2017; Scott, Bryant, and Aquanno 2020). Individual circumstances may influence the perception of cost as well. In their study, Hui and Habib (2016) point to the wide variation in schedules and activities among the unhoused in Toronto. Those interviewed held varying perceptions of public transportation's quality, stating that cost depended on how much they used public transportation, how much they walked, and other factors (Hui and Habib 2016). Those who relied more on public transportation struggled to afford it.

Loukaitou-Sideris et al.'s (2021b) recent research suggests that transit agency representatives view reduced and free-fare programs positively but believe these programs may have minimal impact for unhoused riders due to the assumption that many of these riders may already be evading fares. However, transit representatives' perceptions conflict with research on fare evasions. In a qualitative study of extremely low-income transit users, just four of fourteen admitted to occasionally evading fares to catch a ride (Perrotta 2017). Another fare evasion study identified populations other than people experiencing homelessness as primary fare evaders (Reddy, Kuhls, and Lu 2011) and a review by Barabino, Lai, and Olivo (2020) suggests that evasion is often situational and not exclusive to certain populations.

Criminalization

The National Alliance to End Homelessness (2021) defines the criminalization of homelessness as the “policies, laws, and local ordinances that make it illegal, difficult, or impossible for unsheltered people to engage in the normal everyday activities that most people carry out on a daily basis, or in activities that help make them safer.” Numerous scholars have shown that cities use ordinances and law enforcement to monitor and physically move homeless encampments and people experiencing homelessness, especially in response to complaints (Grainger 2021; Herring 2019; Kaufman 2022). Less attention has been paid to the criminalization of homelessness by transportation agencies and their security forces, such as when transit security removes people identified as homeless from staying on transit agency property, or from aboard public transit vehicles (California Transit Association 2019).

In a recent study from the University of California Institute of Transportation Studies (UC ITS), most surveyed transit operators said homelessness was a problem for their transit system and 86 percent reported they had received complaints from housed riders about riders who were believed to be unhoused (Loukaitou-Sideris et al. 2021b). Furthermore, 60 percent saw a decline in housed riders during the COVID-19 pandemic which they attributed to the presence of unhoused riders.¹ Transit operators reported that respondents expressed concerns related to hygiene, aggressive behavior, fear, discomfort, and cleanliness in 2020 much more than they did in 2016. Transit operators' perceptions may not reflect the true reasons behind declines in ridership, given that the survey asked for their views rather than documented reasons for ridership declines, but they do reflect the pressure transit operators feel to address the presence of unhoused riders on transit and in transit stations. Despite such pressures, this same study found that just 19.3 percent of transit agencies surveyed reported having formal policies for addressing homelessness—such as those written in reports, internal documents, or online—while 38.6 percent reported having informal policies (Loukaitou-Sideris et al. 2021b). Most agencies reported responses involving law enforcement removing people experiencing homelessness from transit settings. A smaller number of agencies have taken steps to provide outreach and services, such as discounted or free fares for unhoused riders, or offering vehicles and facilities as shelters during extreme weather (Loukaitou-Sideris et al. 2021b). Loukaitou-Sideris et al. (2021b) suggest that transit operators see reduced or free fares as a positive step toward reducing confrontations between security staff and unhoused riders.

Transit Schedules and Accessibility

Other transit-related challenges faced by people experiencing homelessness are those that affect many riders, such as infrequent service (Hui and Habib 2014), operation times, and geographic coverage (Brallier, Southworth, and Ryan 2019). Some segments of the unhoused population may be more negatively affected by transit accessibility and reliability than others. For example, a study of homeless pregnant women in Florida showed that a lack of timely, efficient public transportation was a leading barrier to accessing prenatal care (Bloom et al. 2004). The 'first mile/last mile problem' (i.e. the first or last leg of a journey to or from the transit station) may also be a major barrier for unhoused riders, although research in this area does not focus on people experiencing homelessness specifically. In general, the literature shows that a lack of sidewalks or safe pathways between a trip origin and a transit stop, or a transit stop and destination, deters riders (Tilahun and Li 2015).

How well people experiencing homelessness access transit also depends on their physical (dis)ability, as well as their need to carry their belongings with them, but researchers have not focused on these topics. This is a problematic oversight given that social service agencies for people experiencing homelessness are predicated on the idea that the unhoused are physically able to travel to access services. Given evidence showing that the

¹ The survey question reads, "In your view, does the presence of homeless people affect the transit ridership of non-homeless customers?" Respondents could report no difference, some difference, or a major difference.

unhoused population is aging (Kushel 2016; Sermons and Henry 2010), transportation policies that benefit senior riders may also benefit many unhoused riders.

How Well Public Transit is Working for People Experiencing Homelessness

People experiencing homelessness will face the same transportation challenges as any other rider who relies on public transportation. An overview of transportation and homelessness research suggests that, in the United States, public transit limitations are frequently a barrier to employment, housing, and maintaining health (Murphy 2019). A Toronto study similarly found transportation costs to be a barrier to accessing employment (Hui and Habib 2017): a challenge felt by low-income riders more generally in other North American cities (Serulle and Cirillo 2016). Researchers have also found that obstacles to utilizing public transportation led to complications in attending medical appointments, accessing services, and getting to work for people experiencing homelessness (Murphy 2019; Smith, Moor, and Canham 2021). Missed appointments were reported as frequent consequences for not having sufficient money to pay a transit fare (Scott, Bryant, and Aquanno 2020). Service gaps, unaffordability, and other access limitations can affect the movement patterns of people experiencing homelessness, just as they do for any other person who relies on public transit. However, people who appear to be unhoused may encounter additional challenges due to stigma that leads other riders to request their removal and transit employees who may seek their departure from vehicles and other transit settings (Šimon et al. 2020).

How California Transit Agencies are Addressing Homelessness as Part of Planning Efforts

In this section, we report on a review of transit agency documents for fifteen California transit agencies. We supplement a review of agency documents with interviews with representatives from four transportation-related agencies who were able to provide up-to-date information on agency strategies to address homelessness.

Agency Documents Reviewed

To conduct our review of transit agency and metropolitan planning organization (MPO) documents, we selected transit agencies that served the regions with the largest per capita homeless populations based on estimates by regional Continuums of Care (CoC) (State of California Business, Consumer Services, and Housing Agency 2022). The California counties (which typically map onto regional CoC boundaries) with the largest unhoused populations per capita are Kern, Los Angeles, San Diego, San Francisco, and Santa Clara. We also included the Fresno area given that this region has sometimes ranked among the top five counties in unhoused people per capita. For San Diego County, Los Angeles County, and several counties in the San Francisco Bay Area (including San Francisco, Contra Costa, Alameda, San Mateo, and Santa Clara counties), the list of transit agencies was compiled from the websites of those agencies which were part of the area's unified transit fare payment cards: PRONTO, TAP, and CLIPPER.

From this list of California transit agencies, the research team then selected agencies for further review based on their size. Transit agencies that only operate a few services, or had a small service area, were excluded from the review. The transit agencies that were selected for further review were:

- Alameda Contra-Costa Transit District (AC Transit) [San Francisco Bay Area]
- Antelope Valley Transit Authority (AVTA) [Los Angeles County]
- San Francisco Bay Area Rapid Transit District (BART) [San Francisco Bay Area]
- Central Contra Costa Transit Authority (CCCTA) [San Francisco Bay Area]
- Foothill Transit [Los Angeles County]
- Fresno Area Express (FAX) [Fresno County]
- Golden Empire Transit District (GET Bus) [Kern County]
- Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority (LA Metro) [Los Angeles County]
- Long Beach Transit (LBT) [Los Angeles County]
- Muni - San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency (Muni / SFMTA) [San Francisco Bay Area]
- North County Transit District (NCTD) [San Diego County]

- San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG) [MPO for San Diego County]
- San Diego Metropolitan Transit System (MTS) [San Diego County]
- San Mateo County Transit District (SamTrans) [San Francisco Bay Area]
- Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority (VTA) [San Francisco Bay Area]

Documents were gathered through agency websites and general web searches. Documents included long-range and short-range plans, customer satisfaction surveys, passenger rider brochures, transit board meeting minutes, or other planning-related documents. We reviewed all relevant documents we could locate online.

Our review of these documents was completed in two stages. First, we sorted every document into two categories based on whether they mentioned people experiencing homelessness or programs that might serve them, even if those programs were not exclusively intended for unhoused riders. For those documents that mentioned homelessness, we coded them to identify themes across documents. During this secondary review, we identified four agency approaches to homelessness on transit: (1) addressing the cost of fares for people experiencing homelessness; (2) describing rider concerns related to homelessness; (3) describing security responses to people experiencing homelessness; and (4) detailing outreach efforts to people experiencing homelessness.

Homelessness and Transit Typologies

The needs of people experiencing homelessness were explicitly addressed by ten of the fifteen agencies we reviewed, either because they mentioned fare supports or outreach efforts. The fact that most agencies mentioned homelessness to some degree reflects the troubling rise in homelessness seen in California since the pandemic began. In San Diego County, the Point-in-Time Count for 2022 revealed that the number of people experiencing homelessness increased by 10.3 percent compared to 2020, the last year in which a full Point-in-Time Count was conducted (San Diego Regional Task Force on Homelessness 2020; 2022). Los Angeles County experienced a 4.1 percent increase in the number of people experiencing homelessness between 2020 and 2022 (Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority 2022). In the San Francisco Bay Area, the increase in homelessness has been even more troubling: Contra Costa County experienced a 35.8 percent increase in their homeless population since 2020 and Alameda County saw a 21.5 percent rise since 2019 (Contra Costa Health Services 2022; City of Alameda 2022). San Francisco County experienced a 3.5 percent decrease in the number of people experiencing homelessness between 2020 and 2022 (San Francisco Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing 2022), while there was an overall increase in homelessness in the other California counties (Cuellar Mejia, Herrera, and Johnson 2022).

We categorized the documents we reviewed into the four categories, or themes, identified above. Table 1 shows which agencies had at least one document referencing each of the four categories.²

² This overview represents information that was publicly available and should not be interpreted as a definitive demonstration of how each transit agency is approaching homelessness. Rather, it should be considered a demonstration of how well they communicate their approach publicly.

Table 1. Typologies of how homelessness is addressed in publications for fifteen California transit agencies or MPOs

| | Fare supports for people experiencing homelessness | Rider concerns related to homelessness | Security response to homelessness | Outreach efforts to people experiencing homelessness |
|---|--|--|-----------------------------------|--|
| Alameda Contra-Costa Transit District (AC Transit) | | | | |
| Antelope Valley Transit Authority (AVTA) | x | x | x | |
| San Francisco Bay Area Rapid Transit District (BART) | | x | x | x |
| Central Contra Costa Transit Authority (CCCTA) | | | | |
| Foothill Transit | | | | x |
| Fresno Area Express (FAX) | | | | |
| Golden Empire Transit (GET Bus) | x | | | |
| Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority (LA Metro) | x | x | x | x |
| Long Beach Transit (LBT) | x | | | |
| Muni - San Francisco Metropolitan Transit Authority (Muni / SFMTA) | x | | | |
| North County Transit District (NCTD) | | | | |
| San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG) | x | | | |
| San Diego Metropolitan Transit System (MTS) | | | x | |
| San Mateo County Transit District (SamTrans) | x | | | |
| Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority (VTA) | x | | | |

Fare Supports for People Experiencing Homelessness

Based on our content analysis, the primary way agencies addressed the transit needs of people experiencing homelessness was by offering, and advertising, free fare programs for unhoused (and in some instances, unstably housed) individuals. Eight agencies had a policy in place for addressing fare costs for some segment of the unhoused population, as shown in Table 1. For example, SFMTA has a program called “Access” that helps people experiencing homelessness apply to, and obtain, a pass to ride Muni vehicles for free (San Francisco Metropolitan Transit Authority n.d.). The process of completing an Access pass also initiates a process by which people can have past fare and transit violations forgiven. Additionally, LBT participates in the Low-Income Fare is Easy (LIFE) program, as well as a program administered through LA Metro which provides free transit access for people experiencing homelessness (Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority n.d.).

Federal law (49 U.S.C § 5307(c)(1)(D)) requires that any transit agency receiving federal subsidy must charge less than half of the peak fare during off-peak hours for seniors, people with disabilities, and Medicare cardholders.³ All fifteen transit agencies provided reduced fare programs for riders with disabilities, those 65 or older, Medicare recipients, young riders, and/or people with low incomes. Most agencies go further by discounting fares for these riders at all times, charging less than is required, and/or extending reduced fares to other populations. Although not explicitly for people experiencing homelessness, these fare reduction programs can benefit some people who may be more likely to experience homelessness. Research shows that people over the age of 62 are the most rapidly growing segment of the unhoused population and that people experiencing homelessness are more likely to report having a disability (Crane et al. 2014; Sermons and Henry 2014; United States Interagency Council on Homelessness 2018). Thus, even though seven of the fifteen agencies did not explicitly address fare discounts for people experiencing homelessness, some of their policies may benefit these riders. An interviewee with prior experience of homelessness in the San Diego area told us that securing a discounted pass due to a documented disability had enabled him to hold a monthly transit pass (Brady 2022). This is significant given that no San Diego agency has a discounted fare pass for people experiencing homelessness.

Numerous transit agencies and planning organizations target low-income youth for transit subsidies. In their Coordinated Plan for 2016-2020, SANDAG described the results of their transportation needs assessment for youth and paid special attention to the needs of low-income and/or homeless youth (San Diego Association of Governments n.d.). The authors noted:

Low-income and/or homeless youth are significantly disadvantaged as they may lack the ability to pay for transit or other means of transportation. As transit is the most cost-effective option available to this group, the service parameters for this group involve connecting this population with the existing fixed-route services and finding resources to subsidize their travel. Specific travel needs vary from

³ <https://www.transit.dot.gov/regulations-and-guidance/legislation/chapter-53-amended-iiija>. Also see <https://www.transit.dot.gov/are-transit-providers-required-offer-reduced-transit-fares-seniors-people-disabilities-or-medicare>

accessing shelter, assistance programs, medical facilities, and where applicable, education/employment facilities. Transportation to these previously mentioned destinations is a critical component for homeless youth in the transitional process to more stable living conditions (pp. 5-20).

The PRONTO Extend program (a pilot program used by both MTS and NCTD) is one program addressing this need: it provides free transit passes to former foster care youth, up to age 24. This program is not intended for people experiencing homelessness, but transit officials told a local newspaper that foster youth are more likely than youth with no experience in the foster care system to experience homelessness, making transit accessibility especially important to their ability to maintain work, housing, and educational opportunities (Danemann 2022). Other youth programs are operated by Foothill Transit, FAX, and LA Metro. LA Metro's program subsidizes transit for the entire family of students to help defray the cost for low-income families (Burrell Garcia and Jones 2022; Foothill Transit 2022). SamTrans launched their Youth Unlimited pilot program in January 2022, which provides free bus fares to students determined to be "socioeconomically disadvantaged," including "students eligible for the Free and Reduced-Price Meal program; students experiencing homelessness; foster-youth; migrant students; or students whose parents did not graduate high school" (San Mateo County Transit District 2022, 3).

Low-income households and individuals are also program targets. Three agencies, BART, SamTrans, and Muni, all participate in a Metropolitan Transportation Commission pilot program begun in 2020 which offers reduced fares to people with low incomes. Muni and SamTrans charge half the price of a regular fare; BART discounts fares by 20 percent (San Francisco Bay Area Rapid Transit District 2021; Metropolitan Transportation Commission n.d.). CCCTA designated certain routes fare-free to defray riders' costs for frequently used routes (Central Contra Costa Transit Authority 2016). NCTD's Service Agency Day Pass program provides one-day NCTD Day Passes sold in bulk to social service agencies at a discount; agencies then provide them to clients. The passes allow riders unlimited travel on NCTD's rail and fixed-route bus systems (San Diego Association of Governments 2021). Besides offering and advertising free or reduced fares, the GET Bus noted attending outreach events at homeless centers to promote its transit services (Golden Empire Transit District 2022).

Rider Concerns Related to Homelessness

Our analysis identified publications from three agencies that spoke about riders' concerns related to homelessness. These reports referenced surveys of, and/or focus groups with, riders and non-riders that transit agencies conducted to identify ways to improve their services. Homelessness emerged through these surveys and focus groups as an issue, primarily with regards to safety and hygiene. An AVTA strategic report from 2020 noted that both riders and non-riders described safety concerns related to certain bus stops and buses, a problem which was "exacerbated in areas where there is a large homeless presence" and long wait times (Antelope Valley Transit Authority 2020, 202). Non-riders wanted to know that AVTA was proactively managing homelessness and other "issues" before they would feel comfortable riding (Antelope Valley Transit Authority 2020, 205). Similarly, a BART rider poll found that rider satisfaction had dropped since 2016 and was lowest for the agency's approach to homelessness in both 2018 and 2020 (San Francisco Bay Area Rapid Transit District 2021). Respondents expressed frustration that BART staff was not taking more action to

monitor the behavior of people experiencing homelessness in transit settings or to assist them by connecting them with services. The poll BART used to survey riders included optional comment sections where respondents could elaborate on why they ranked BART’s approach to homelessness so low. The most common comments mentioned “issues of cleanliness, drug use, fare evasion, personal security, and some riders who appeared to be homeless not wearing face coverings” (San Francisco Bay Area Rapid Transit District 2021, 16). Riders did not necessarily see criminalization as the answer: “While most commenters felt that the number of unhoused riders on BART was an issue, specifically those causing disturbances, some noted that they did not want to see aggressive means being used to address homelessness” (San Francisco Bay Area Rapid Transit District 2021, 16). Our research team did not find similar reports for other transit agencies.

Security Response to People Experiencing Homelessness

The ways in which transit agencies address security and safety measures can also impact people experiencing homelessness. This includes persons who are staying on or near transit property, as well as those using public transit. The Metro Vision 2028 Strategic Plan, for example, discusses LA Metro’s commitment to improve security. This includes, among other things, better enforcement of LA Metro’s Code of Conduct and reducing fare evasion (Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority 2018). Enforcing codes of conduct and fare policies are particularly noteworthy as the impact of these policies may be especially hard felt by unhoused riders. For example, LA Metro’s Customer Code of Conduct includes prohibitions against loitering on agency property and vehicles, policies banning carts, strollers, and luggage that is overly large or in unsafe condition, as well as nuisance odors (Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority 2022). Enforcement actions can be especially burdensome on people experiencing homelessness as those who violate the Code may be subject to ejection from LA Metro, as well as fines and other penalties. Riders who are cited three times or more for the same violation within a twelve-month period, or who fail to pay the fines associated with their violation, or who have outstanding warrants, pending trials, or who are convicted of a California Penal Code offense that occurred on transit, may be subject to exclusion from LA Metro for a period of time or indefinitely (Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority 2022). Even if unhoused riders do not evade fares at higher rates than other riders, they may be constrained in their ability to pay fines and abide by codes of conduct related to belongings.

LA Metro has been taking steps towards improving safety and security for unhoused riders through a community-based approach which aims to reduce the burden of enforcement on unhoused riders and offer alternatives such as support and education. This includes the establishment of a Transit Public Safety Advisory Committee which gathers perspectives from people experiencing homelessness and aims to provide alternatives to law enforcement when responding to nonviolent crimes and code of conduct violations, education about reduced fare programs, and homeless outreach, among other actions (Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority 2020). Outreach organizations, such as PATH educate unhoused riders to pay their fares and give them advanced notice of when fare or law enforcement will be present (Burrell, Garcia, and Jones 2022).

BART also addresses this issue in its publications, specifically referring to rider comments on the presence of unhoused riders adjacent to transportation hubs, as well as fare evasion and drug use by people who appear to be unhoused (San Francisco Bay Area Rapid Transit District 2021). Like LA Metro, BART is taking steps towards addressing homelessness, including outreach, and addressing mental health issues through its partnerships with county public health departments and its own Crisis Intervention Teams (San Francisco Bay Area Rapid Transit District 2021). BART's approach to homelessness also included the creation of the Progressive Policing and Community Engagement Bureau, which is tasked with addressing issues, such as homelessness, that do not necessarily require the help of a sworn police officer (San Francisco Bay Area Rapid Transit District 2021). The Bureau consists of Transit Ambassadors and Crisis Intervention Specialists, who take a more personal and long-term approach when addressing riders engaging in non-violent actions that may violate BART's code of conduct. For example, Crisis Intervention Specialists carry a change of clothing for those using BART. BART Transit Ambassadors serve an important role in the system as unarmed employees who reach out to BART riders (Lahanas and Sandoval 2022).

Similar work is being done in San Diego County. A 2020 article in the San Diego Union Tribune revealed that MTS had been citing people for fare violations at much higher rates than comparable transit agencies (Smith 2020). In response to this report and pressure from advocates for the unhoused and other low-income groups, MTS has implemented a "diversion program," which allows people with fare violation citations to resolve those citations with minimal cost and no court involvement (San Diego Metropolitan Transit System n.d.). This program can be used by anyone with a fare violation. It also provides alternative methods for handling transit policy violations, such as by paying a reduced fine or volunteering to "work off" the fine. These alternatives reduce the incidence of fines and provide fare evaders with a chance to pay the fare after the fact, rather than incurring fines and a documented violation. People experiencing homelessness have been prioritized to take advantage of this program.

Just one other transit agency explicitly discussed homelessness when describing safety and security. AVTA mentions the presence of people experiencing homelessness around its stations as a safety concern for its riders, especially when faced with long wait times (Antelope Valley Transit Authority 2020). In addition to safety concerns at bus stops in general, the presence of people experiencing homelessness was mentioned concurrently with "crime, and other unsafe behaviors" when proposing adding a stop at the Lancaster Metrolink station (Antelope Valley Transit Authority 2020).

Outreach Efforts to People Experiencing Homelessness

Some transit agencies are involved in supportive services and outreach for people experiencing homelessness. Interviews we conducted with staff from BART and LA Metro reflect the tension transit agency administrators feel regarding this aspect of their work. As one outreach supervisor explained:

Transit is a business, it's a transit agency. Trains have to move, people need to pay fees. That influences our approach. There is pressure on law enforcement to support that. For the [outreach workers], they

may be ready to deal with people on a long-term basis and are less concerned with the timetables (Lahanas and Sandoval 2022).

This is further complicated by the complaints transit agencies receive about homelessness from some riders. As explained in one LA Metro document from 2018:

Homelessness is a crisis not only for people who cannot obtain shelter, but for all County residents. In terms of transportation impacts specifically, the presence of homeless people on Metro services and properties can deter other potential riders and affect mobility. For Metro, the critical challenge is to balance our commitment to delivering excellent customer experiences with our commitment to also assist homeless individuals (Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority 2018, 38).

Staff at LA Metro with whom we spoke further explained that they receive complaints daily about homelessness, but their response remains to provide outreach workers who can increase the comfort levels of all riders — housed and unhoused — without increasing criminalization or rider conflicts. This better serves the needs of people experiencing homelessness and can educate riders with low tolerance for visible homelessness (Burrell and Jones 2022). In addition, staff from LA Metro’s Office of the CEO have worked on an informal, ad hoc basis to educate law enforcement, transit staff, and others in the agency about myths versus realities around homelessness, such as the fact that people experiencing homelessness are more likely to be victims of crimes than to commit crimes themselves. Additional research about the work of these, and other, agencies in this area can be found in a 2021 report by Loukaitou-Sideris, Wasserman, Caro, and Ding.

Other transit agencies are just beginning the process of identifying how to integrate outreach into their work. The minutes for the April 2022 meeting of the MTS Security and Passenger Safety Community Advisory Group (CAG), indicate that Committee Chair Megan Welsh inquired about whether the agency had made efforts to “educate homeless individuals regarding programs available to them.” MTS General Counsel Karen Landers stated that “MTS officers carry outreach information for those experiencing homelessness” (San Diego Metropolitan Transit System 2022, p. 3). In February 2022, MTS Director of Transit Security and Passenger Safety, Al Stiehler, told the Security and Passenger Safety CAG about the initiation of an outreach effort at one downtown transit stop. The team doing this outreach included two code compliance officers, an outreach worker from a non-profit that does homeless outreach downtown, and an employee from the San Diego County Health and Human Services Agency. As far as the authors know, this effort is the first of its kind for MTS. In separate interviews with Director Stiehler, a person with lived experience of homelessness, and an outreach worker with PATH San Diego, we learned that Director Stiehler has been proactive in designing collaborative outreach partnerships and moving MTS in the direction of greater outreach and crisis intervention (Brady, 2022; Gruters, 2022; Stiehler, 2022). Director Stiehler told us that his goal is for MTS to move toward a collaborative approach, where transit safety and security officers are teamed up with homeless outreach workers to provide the best possible support for people experiencing homelessness while meeting safety and security needs for all transit riders (Stiehler 2022).

Geospatial Evaluation of Transit Proximity to Homeless Shelters and Documented People Living Unsheltered

We used San Diego County as a case study to assess how proximate public transit is to homeless shelters and documented encampment sites in the San Diego region. We summarized and mapped the proportion of homeless shelters and people staying unsheltered within SANDAG Transit Priority Areas (TPAs)⁴ and the distances between homeless shelters and transit stops and documented encampment sites and transit stops. We additionally interviewed people with lived experience of homelessness and advocates to provide a holistic picture of transit accessibility in one California region.

Homeless shelters in this analysis are built structures where staff from non-profit and/or governmental entities provide on-site services. Unsheltered persons may set up encampments to stay overnight, and often for days or weeks at a time. These are informal and often in violation of local ordinances that prohibit staying or living in places not meant for human habitation. Overall, the findings from our analysis show that most people experiencing unsheltered homelessness in the Point-in-Time Count (PITC) from 2020, as well as most homeless shelters, are within one-quarter mile of a public transit stop. This is important as a quarter mile is generally considered to be the walkable distance to and from transit (Walker 2012; Diepeveen and Skidmore 1994). However, the 2020 PITC shows that some homeless shelters and encampment sites are in areas that are well outside a quarter-mile radius from public transit, with some people living unsheltered being located over six miles from a transit stop.⁵

Data and Method

We obtained data regarding the location of encampment sites from the San Diego Regional Task Force on Homelessness (RTFH). As the region's HUD Continuum of Care program administrator, RTFH is tasked each year with conducting a Point-in-Time Count (PITC) of the sheltered and unsheltered homeless populations in the region. Volunteers spread out across the region to count, and sometimes briefly survey, people who are unsheltered. This includes people living in places not designed for human habitation such as riverbeds, parks,

⁴ Transit Priority Areas are officially defined by the California Public Resource Code as areas within one half mile on an existing or planned major transit stop, with major transit stops including those stops served by rail or bus rapid transit, a ferry terminal with rail or bus connections, or the intersection of two or more major bus routes with a frequency of service interval of 15 minutes or less during the morning and afternoon peak commute periods (California Public Resource Code, § 21064.3 (1972); California Public Resource Code, § 21099 (2013)).

⁵ Distances exclude outliers.

and sidewalks. Homeless shelters report the number of occupied beds on the night of the count as well. The data we use in the figures and maps below shows only those 3,941 persons reported to be unsheltered on the night of the 2020 PITC.⁶

We identified homeless shelters and verified their locations using four sources: the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the County of San Diego Health and Human Services Agency (HHSA), 2-1-1 San Diego, and the San Diego Housing Commission websites. For our analysis, we only included homeless shelters that had 20 or more beds and for which we had physical addresses. The result is a list of 19 homeless shelters throughout San Diego County. We obtained transit stop data from the SanGIS/SANDAG GIS Data Warehouse (SanGIS n.d.). We also obtained data regarding the location of rapid transit stops and Transit Priority Areas through the SANDAG SD Forward ArcGIS Online webpage (San Diego Association of Governments n.d.). For the purposes of this project, ‘rapid transit stops’ include transit stops served by rail or bus rapid transit, or both.⁷

Findings

Figure 1 shows the distribution of distances between people counted as unsheltered during the 2020 PITC and the nearest transit stop. The distance in miles is shown on the X-axis, and the number of people identified as unsheltered within each distance range is shown on the Y-axis. Each bar represents the number of people living unsheltered within a specified distance range, with the total number of people within that distance range labeled at the top of the bar. For example, there were 1,242 unsheltered individuals within 0 and 0.05 miles of a transit stop. This is 31.6 percent of the total unsheltered population enumerated in the 2020 PITC, excluding outliers. The mean and median distances are represented by the blue and purple vertical lines, respectively. Most documented people living unsheltered were relatively close to transit stops, with only a small number of

⁶ X and Y coordinate data for the 2022 PITC is not available at the time of writing, and the full PITC was not conducted in 2021. There were, however, 4,106 documented persons stay outside of shelters in San Diego County during the 2022 PITC.

⁷ Includes all rail and bus rapid transit stops at the time of the 2020 PITC.

unsheltered individuals living at over one mile from a transit stop.

Distance Between PIT Count 2020 Encampments and All Transit Stops

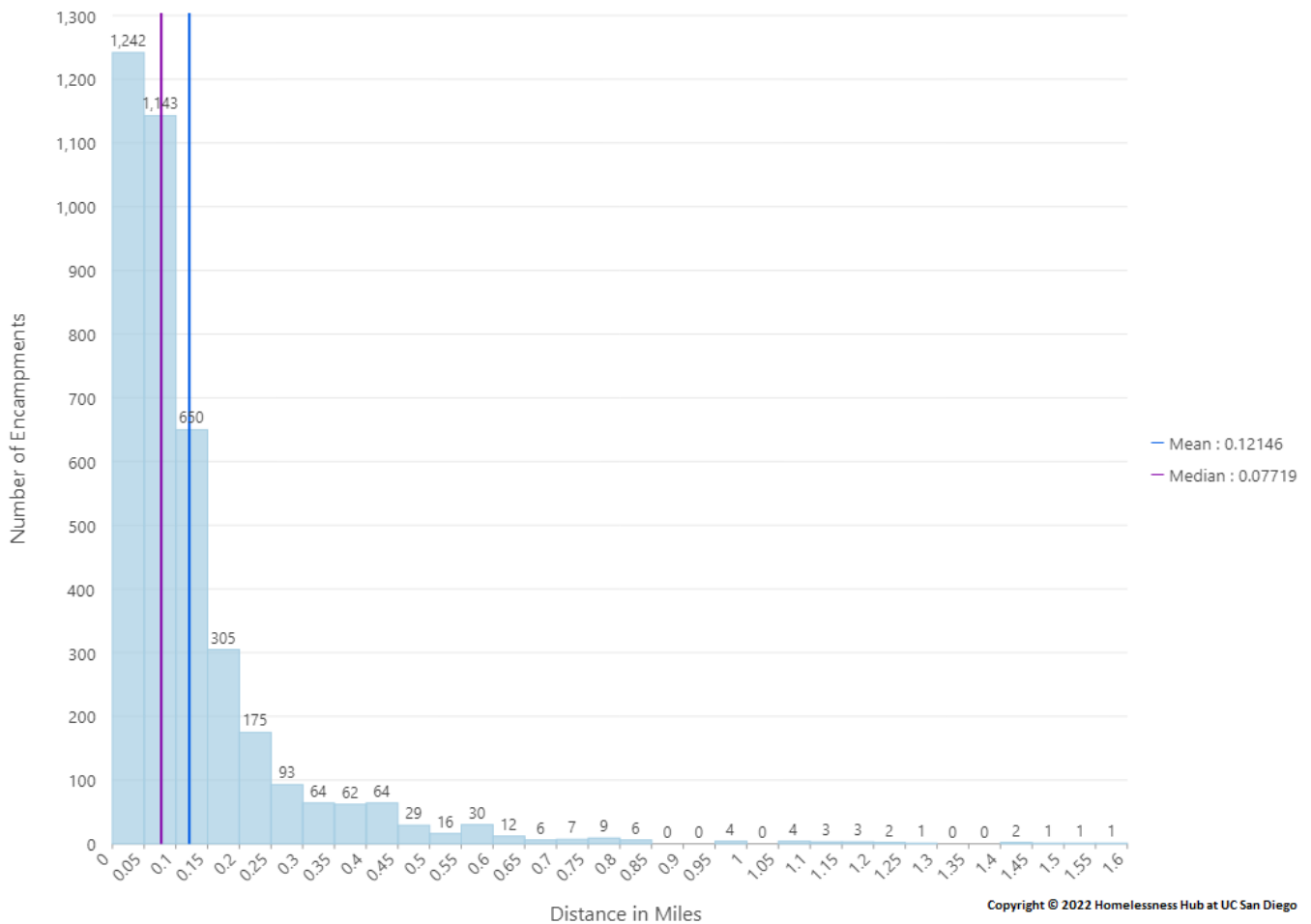


Figure 1. Distance between PIT Count 2020 people living unsheltered and all transit stops⁸

Figure 2 shows the distribution of distances between people living unsheltered and the nearest rapid transit stop. The X and Y axes in Figure 2 are set up similarly to those of Figure 1. Many individuals living unsheltered were located close to rapid transit stops, with 926 out of 3,869 individuals living within a quarter mile of a rapid transit stop, and 1,644 out of 3,869 living within a half mile. However, more people were located greater

⁸ Overly large outliers were excluded from the graphs based on significant breaks in the data. Link to full-size image: <https://its-21-22-report-ucsdonline.hub.arcgis.com/pages/graph-pit-count-all-stops-exclude-outliers>

than one mile away from a rapid transit stop, compared to all transit stops.

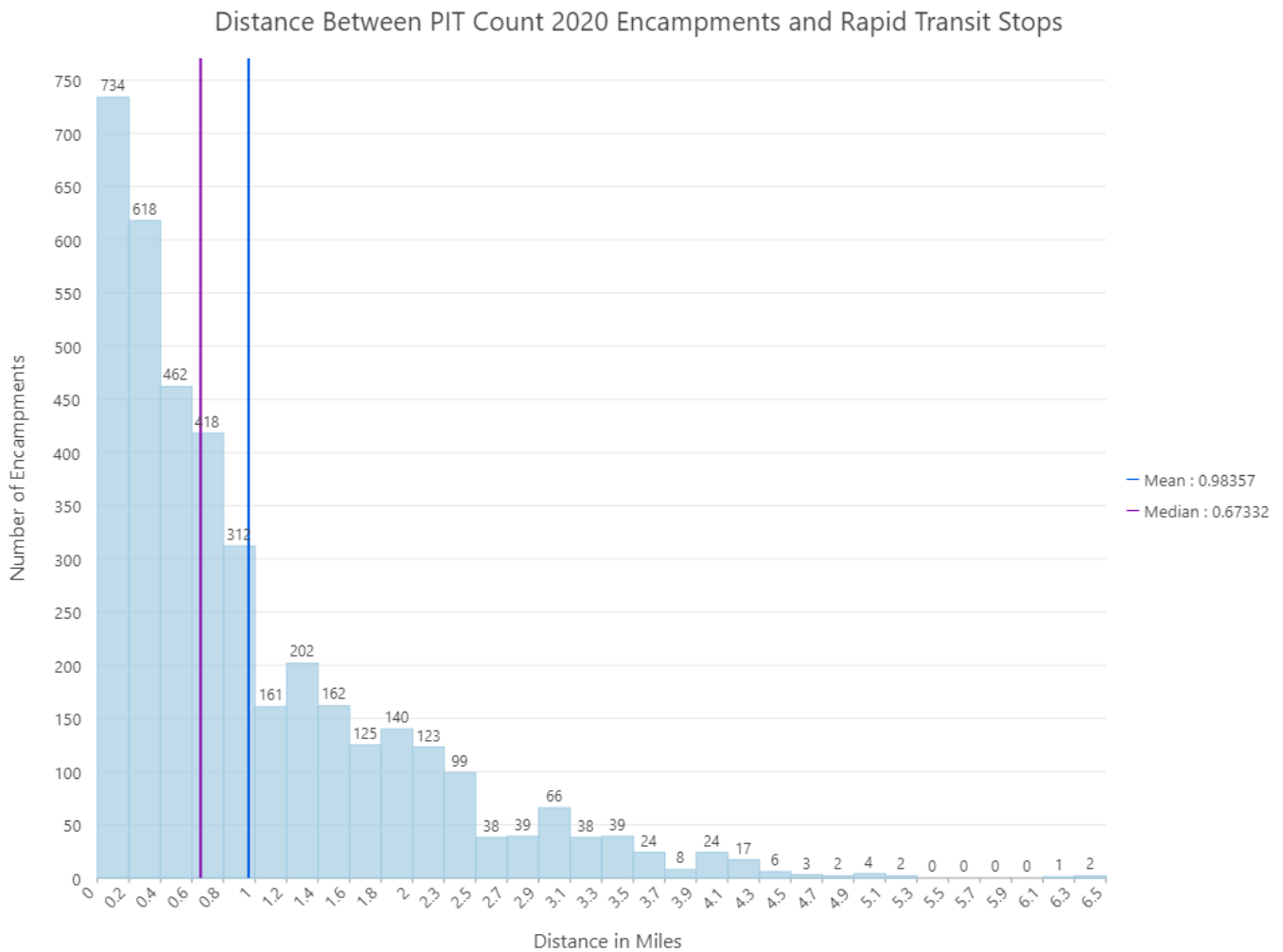


Figure 2. Distance between PITC 2020 people living unsheltered and rapid transit stops⁹

As illustrated in Figure 1, the mean distance between an encampment site and a transit stop, excluding outliers, was 0.12 miles, and the median distance was 0.08 miles. The mean and median distances are higher when considering rapid transit stops, as shown in Figure 2. Rapid transit stops include transit stops served by either rail transit or bus rapid transit. The mean distance between a documented encampment and a rapid transit stop was 0.98 miles, and the median distance was 0.67 miles.

Figure 3 illustrates the distance distribution between homeless shelter sites and the nearest transit stop. Figure 4 shows the distance distribution between homeless shelter sites and the nearest rapid transit stop.

⁹ Link to full-size image: <https://its-21-22-report-ucsdonline.hub.arcgis.com/pages/graph-pit-count-rapid-transit-stops-excluding-outliers>

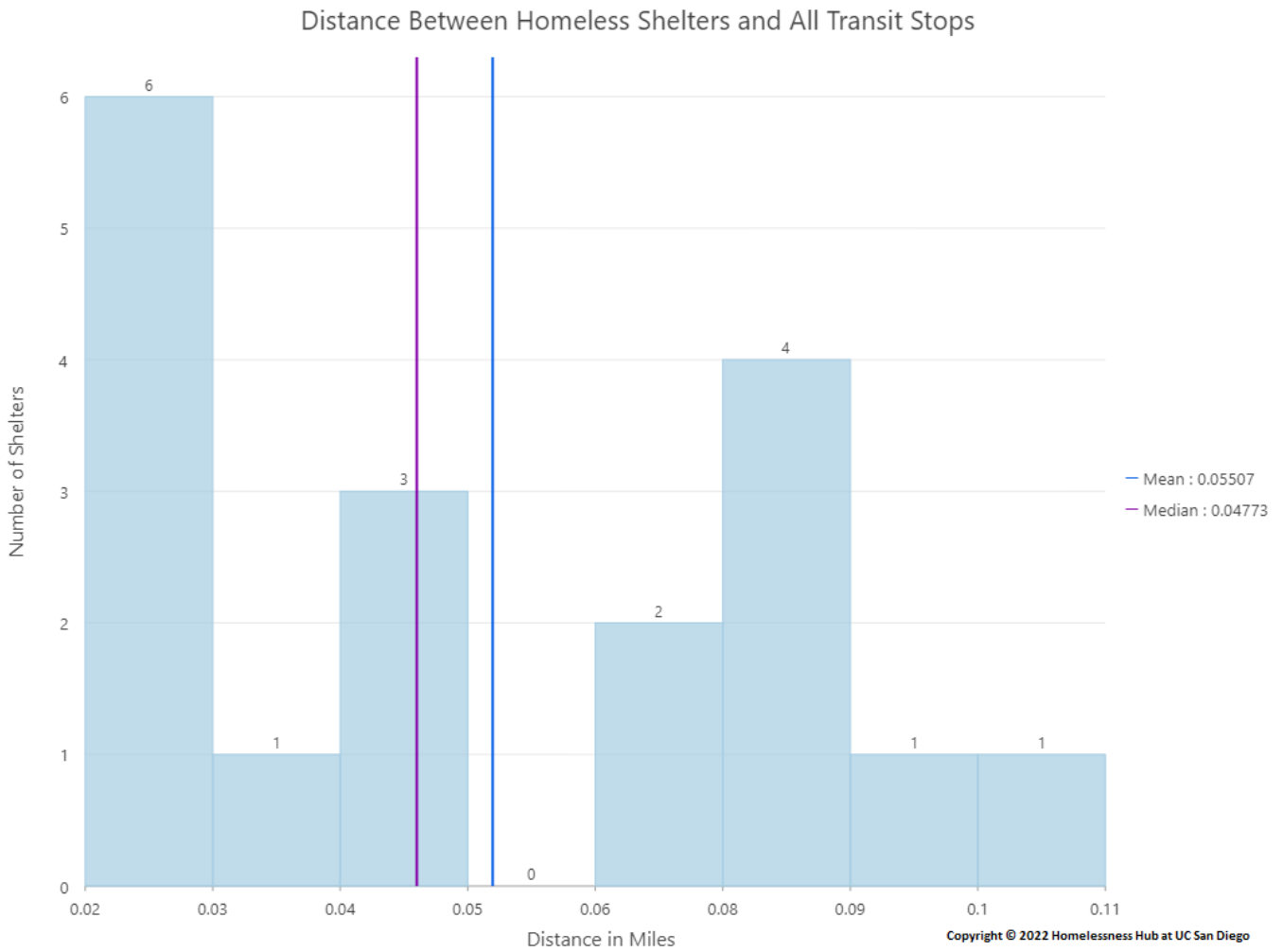


Figure 3. Distance between homeless shelters and all transit stops¹⁰

¹⁰ Link to full-size image: <https://its-21-22-report-ucsdonline.hub.arcgis.com/pages/graph-shelters-all-stops-excluding-outliers>

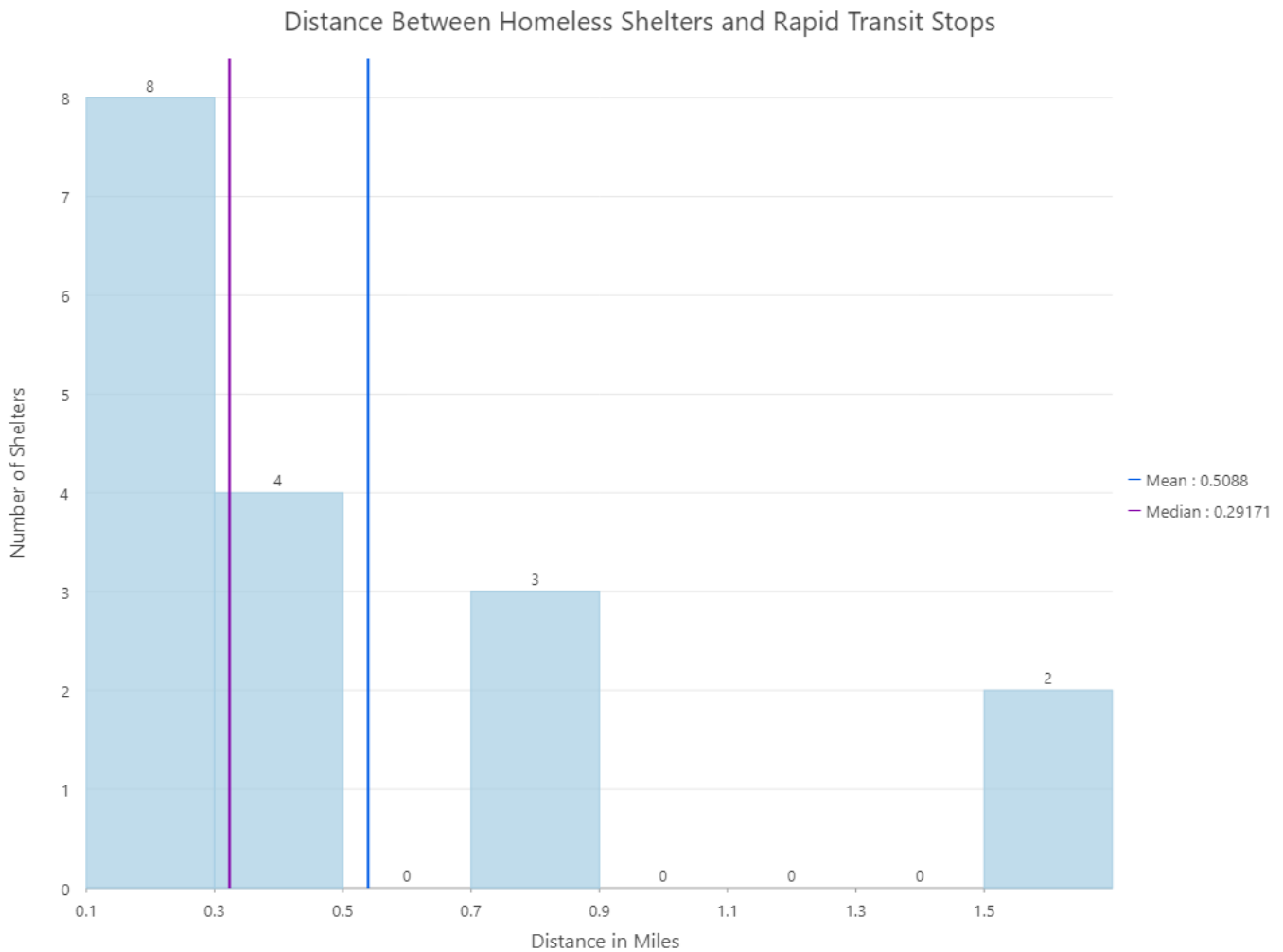


Figure 4. Distance between homeless shelters and rapid transit stops.¹¹

Like people living unsheltered, the mean and median distances between shelter locations and all transit stops is less than that of shelter locations and only rapid transit stops. For example, Figure 3 shows the mean distance to be 0.06 miles between a shelter and any transit stop, while the median distance is 0.05 miles. This increases to a mean distance of 0.51 miles when only considering rapid transit stops, and a median distance of 0.29 miles, as shown in Figure 4.

We conducted a spatial analysis to show the proportion of encampment locations and homeless shelters within certain transit areas. These transit areas include Transit Priority Areas, as well as ½ and ¼ mile radii around all transit stops in San Diego County. The results are shown in the tables and their accompanying maps below.

¹¹ Link to full-size image: <https://its-21-22-report-ucsdonline.hub.arcgis.com/pages/graph-shelters-rapid-transit-stops-excluding-outliers>

Table 2. Proportion of 2020 PITC people living unsheltered and homeless shelters within 2025 Transit Priority Areas

| | Number within TPA / Total | Percentage |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------|------------|
| 2020 PITC People Living Unsheltered | 2,929/3,941 | 74.3% |
| Homeless Shelters | 16/19 | 84.2% |

Table 3. Proportion of 2020 PITC people living unsheltered and homeless shelters within a half of a mile of any transit stop

| | Number within ½ mile radius / Total | Percentage |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|------------|
| 2020 PITC People Living Unsheltered | 3,827/3,941 | 97.1% |
| Homeless Shelters | 19/19 | 100% |

Table 4. Proportion of 2020 people living unsheltered and homeless shelters within a quarter of a mile of any transit stop

| | Number within ¼ mile radius / Total | Percentage |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|------------|
| 2020 PITC People Living Unsheltered | 3,514/3,941 | 89.2% |
| Homeless Shelters | 18/19 | 94.7% |

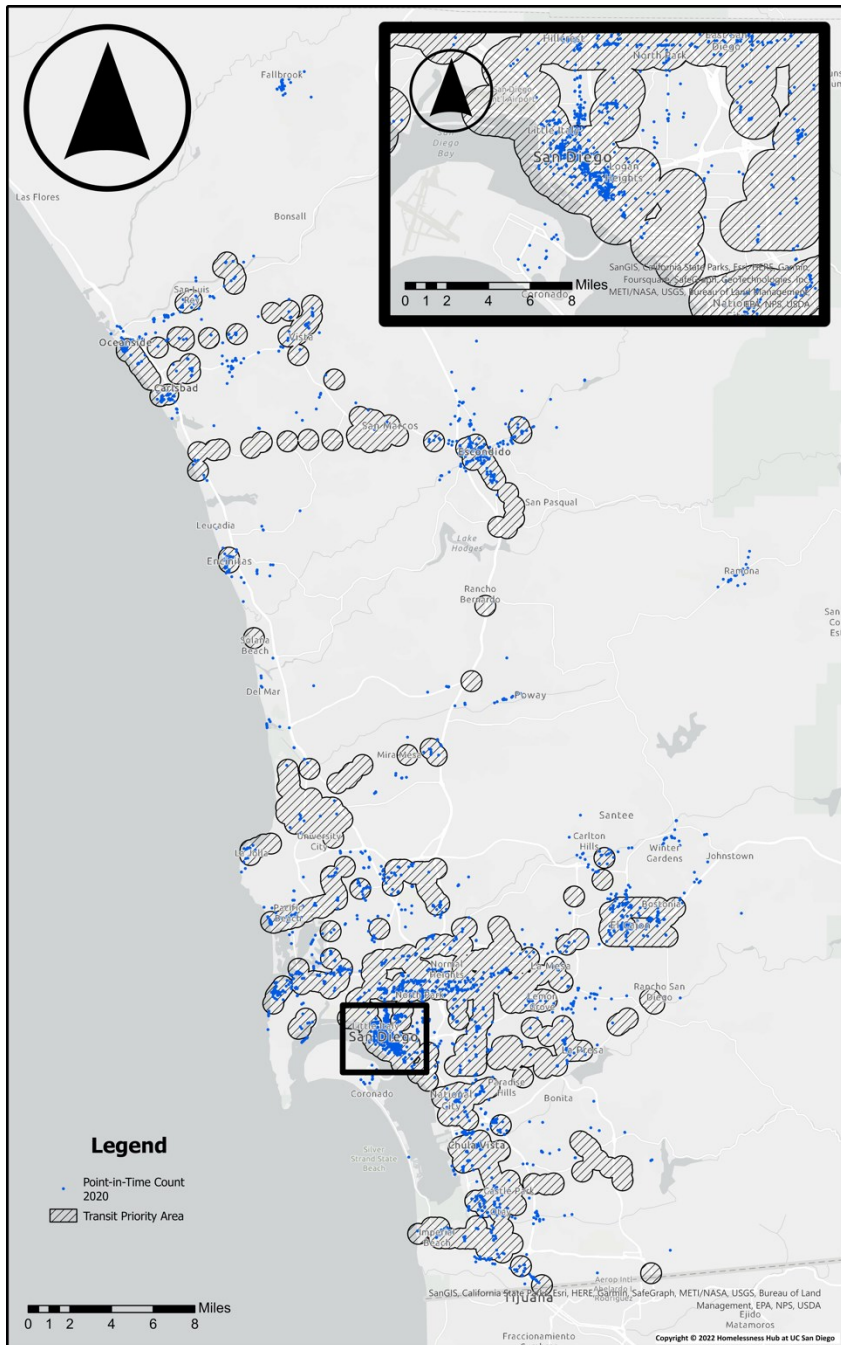


Figure 5. Location of 2020 PITC people living unsheltered in relation to 2025 Transit Priority Areas.¹²

¹² Link to full-size image: <https://its21-22-report-ucsdonline.hub.arcgis.com/pages/transit-priority-area-pitc>

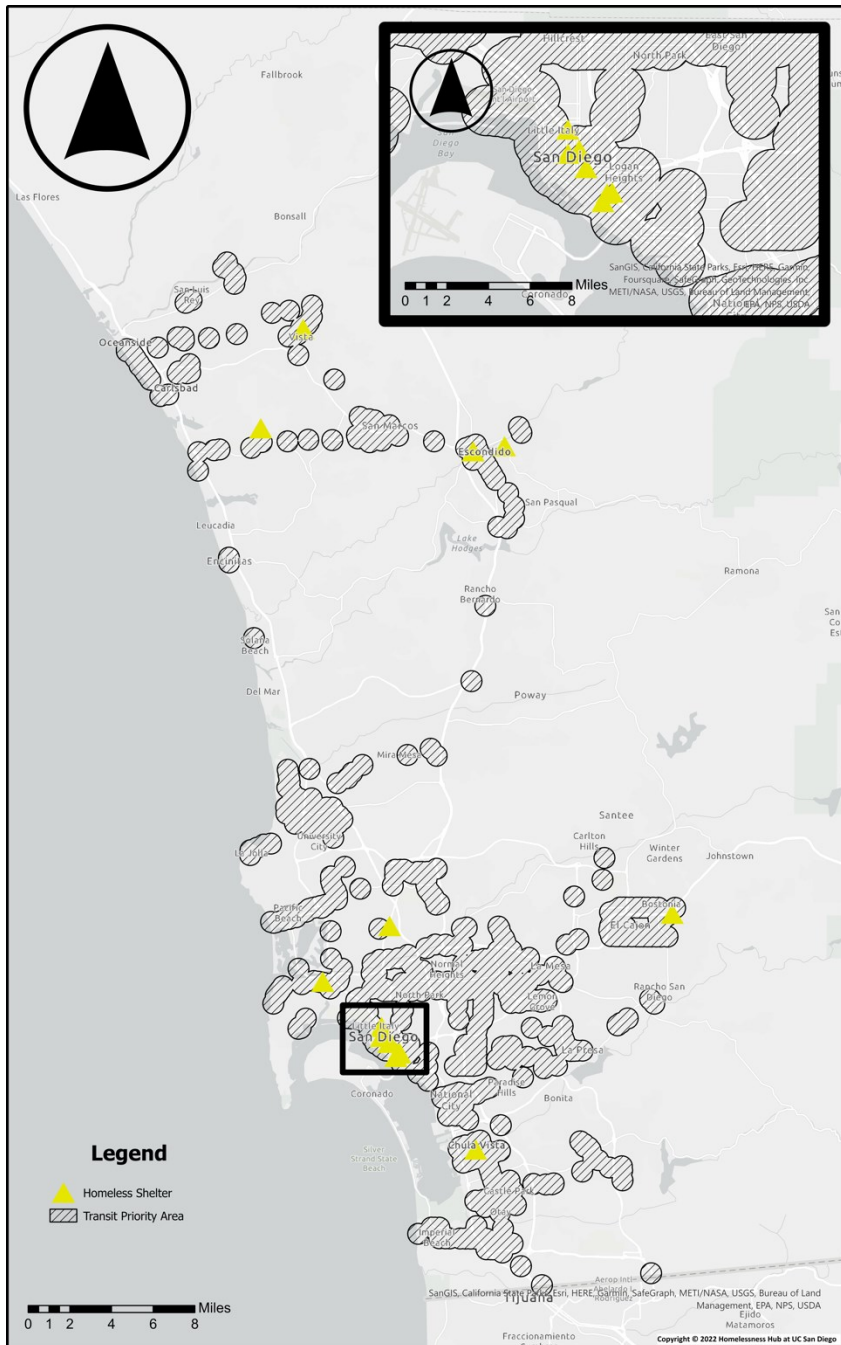


Figure 6. Location of homeless shelters in relation to 2025 Transit Priority Areas.¹³

¹³ Link to full-size image: <https://its-21-22-report-ucsdonline.hub.arcgis.com/pages/transit-priority-area-shelters>

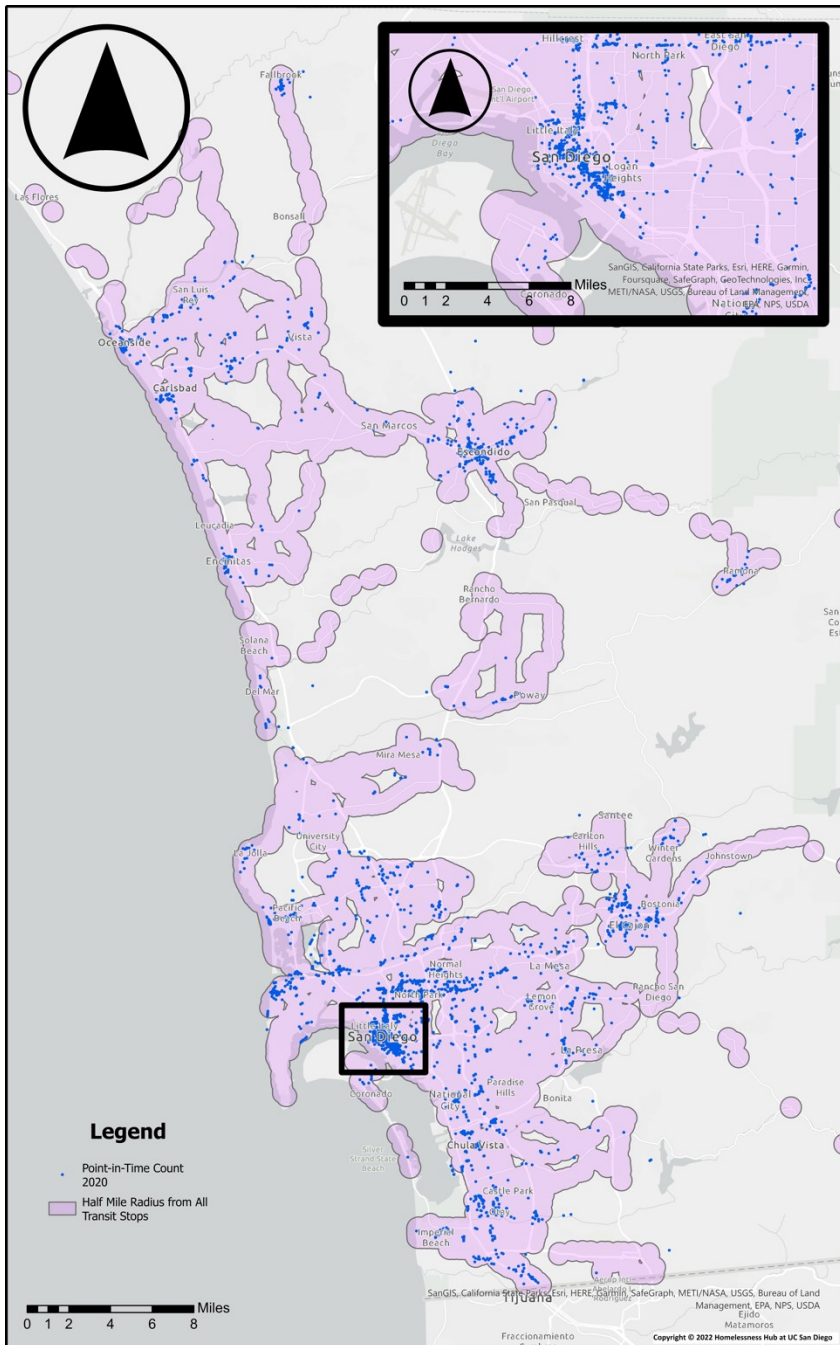


Figure 7. Location of PITC 2020 people living unsheltered in relation to ½ mile buffer around all transit stops¹⁴

¹⁴ Link to full-size image: <https://its-21-22-report-ucsdonline.hub.arcgis.com/pages/all-transit-stops-half-mile-pitc>

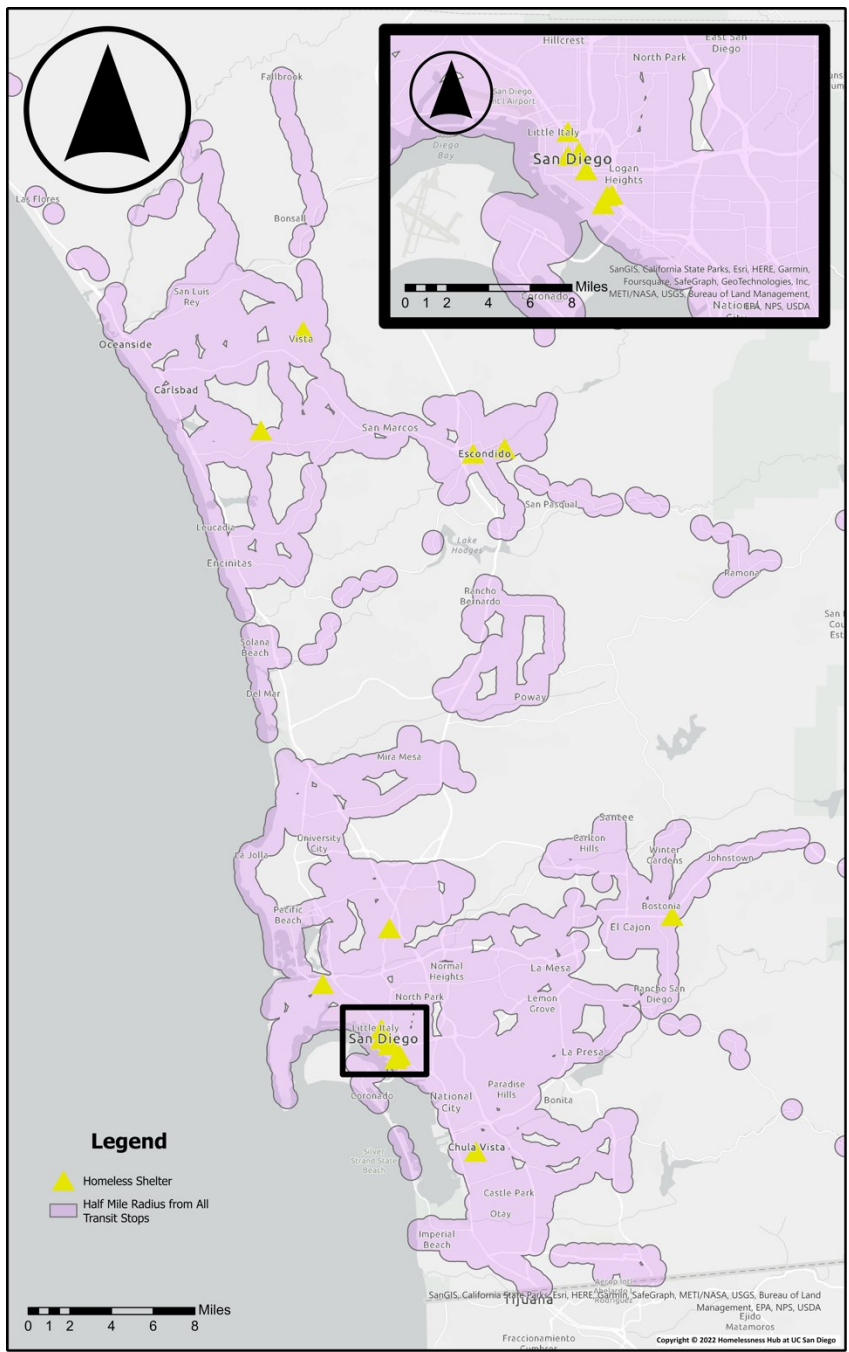


Figure 8. Location of homeless shelters in relation to 1/2 mile buffer around all transit stops¹⁵

¹⁵ Link to full-size image: <https://its-21-22-report-ucsdonline.hub.arcgis.com/pages/all-transit-stops-half-mile-shelters>

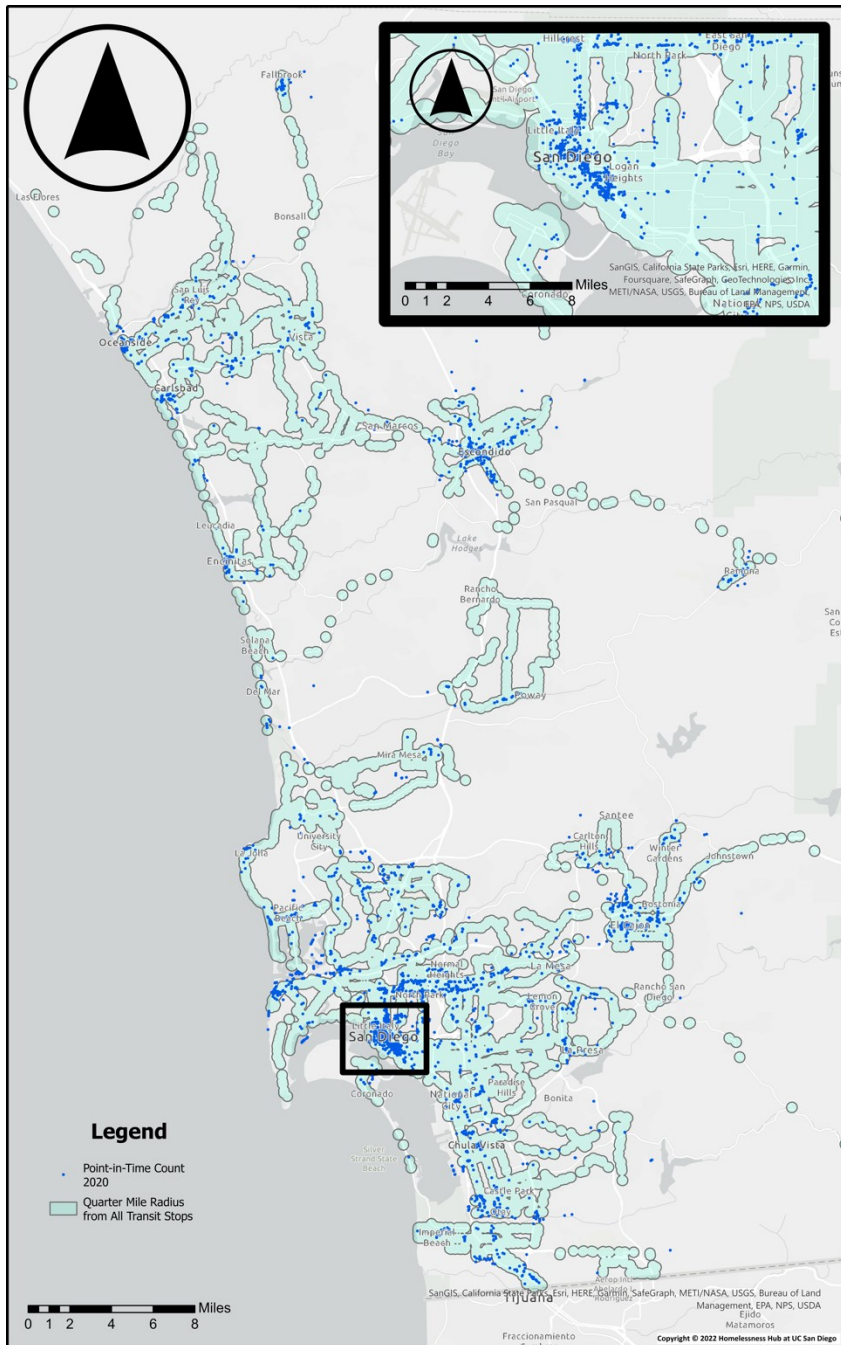


Figure 9. Location of PITC 2020 people living unsheltered in relation to a ¼ mile buffer around all transit stops¹⁶

¹⁶ Link to full-size image: <https://its-21-22-report-ucsdonline.hub.arcgis.com/pages/all-transit-stops-quarter-mile-shelters>

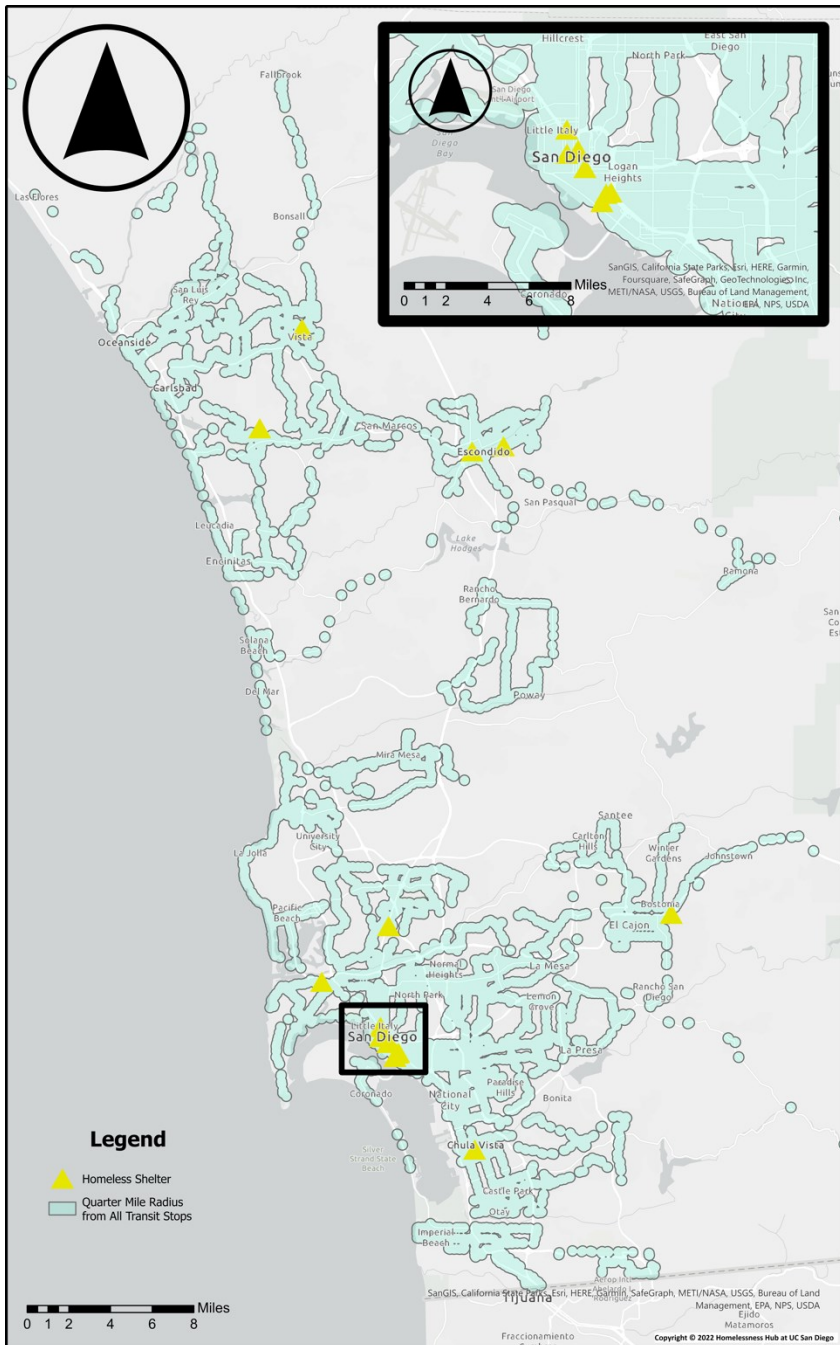


Figure 10. Location of homeless shelters in relation to a ¼ mile buffer around all transit stops¹⁷

Our spatial analysis revealed that most encampment sites and homeless shelters fell within areas of reasonable distance accessibility. Nearly ¾ of documented people living unsheltered from the 2020 PITC fell within a

¹⁷ Link to full-size image: <https://its-21-22-report-ucsdonline.hub.arcgis.com/pages/all-transit-stops-quarter-mile-shelters>

Transit Priority Area. When expanding the analysis to include all transit stops, 97.1 percent of all sites from the 2020 PITC were situated within ½ mile and 89.2 percent were situated within ¼ mile of a transit stop. When looking at the distance between homeless shelters and transit, we found similar distances: over 80 percent of homeless shelters in our study were within Transit Priority Areas. This figure increases when considering all transit stops, with 100 percent and 94.7 percent of all homeless shelters within ½ mile and ¼ mile radii of all transit stops, respectively.

The distance between where a person temporarily resides and transit stops is a critical piece of transit accessibility but is insufficient to accomplish full accessibility. In other words, an unhoused person may be near a transit stop, but accessibility may still be limited. The routes serving a particular stop may not take people to the places they wish to go, the cost may be prohibitive, the pathway from a shelter to a stop may be difficult to traverse, or they may face stigma in transit settings. From discussions we had with advocates for people experiencing homelessness, including three who had experienced homelessness themselves, policies to support ridership include making reduced or free fare programs easy to access (Brady 2022; Kearney 2022; Woodson 2021), improving transit connectivity and efficiency generally (Hancock 2022), and hiring outreach staff who can reduce stigma and alleviate concerns riders may have about visibly homeless riders (Gruters 2022). We provide additional policy considerations in the next section.

Conclusion and Policy Considerations

Below we outline what transit agencies can do to work with the homelessness service sector to manage and reduce homelessness. The transit improvements we describe would not only help people experiencing homelessness, but all transit riders.

Implement Outreach

Outreach focuses on people experiencing homelessness who are using transit to rest or take shelter for a period of time. UC ITS researchers recently recommended that outreach be increased and enforcement (e.g., ticketing people for loitering) decreased, as done by LA Metro, BART, and several transit agencies outside of California (Loukaitou-Sideris et al. 2021b). Our research synthesis confirms Loukaitou-Sideris and co-authors' conclusion. We found that hiring staff whose responsibility is to build ongoing relationships is critical to transit outreach to people experiencing homelessness. Interviewees from BART and LA Metro emphasized this point and explained that outreach is meant to support people and connect them with services, rather than clear them out of the system (Burrell Garcia and Jones 2022; Lahanas and Sandoval 2022). Outreach work takes time because it requires a person-centered approach to form trusting relationships, which may be at odds with transit agencies' desire to maximize ridership and fare revenue by targeting those seeking shelter in transit settings for removal (Lahanas and Sandoval 2022). However, research suggests that encampment clearances do not reduce overall encampment numbers or even keep encampments out of particular locations in the long-term (Herring 2019, 2014). A strategy that seeks to build relationships in order to move people into shelter may prove more effective over time. Outreach workers can also act as a signal to everyone using transit, showing both housed and unhoused members of the public that the humanitarian crisis of homelessness is receiving the attention it deserves (Burrell Garcia and Jones 2022).

Besides connecting people experiencing homelessness to services, outreach workers can also reduce negative interactions between people experiencing homelessness and security. LA Metro staff explained that outreach workers act as an 'early warning system' for those people experiencing homelessness, informing them about the times and locations when transit enforcement will be present so they can clear out temporarily, if necessary (Burrell Garcia and Jones 2022). This approach, while not addressing the causes of homelessness, addresses negative interactions resulting from sheltering in transit environments, such as fines and citations. For transit agencies that may not have the capacity to develop internal outreach teams, forming partnerships with organizations specializing in homelessness outreach is a critical first step. This is the path taken by LA Metro, who has contracted with PATH for outreach services.

Improve Transit Reliability to Homelessness Services

In interviews, people with lived experience of homelessness expressed their inability to rely on public transit due to delays, inconvenient schedules, or limited hours of operation. Delays were especially impactful when commuting to and from their place of employment, as a delay on a certain route could mean that they were late for work, and thus more prone to losing their job (Hancock 2022). For homeless shelters and programs working to support people as they seek employment and work to resolve their homelessness, improving mobility is crucial (Wechter 2022). This could be done by providing shuttle service to and from work or other highly frequented destinations for shelter residents. This shuttle service could be operated by the homeless shelter or service provider themselves, or by a contract executed between a shelter and transit agency, and thus be specifically tailored to the needs of people experiencing homelessness (Hancock 2022).

Improving communication between transit vehicles could help to improve the transit experience and reliability for those experiencing homelessness, but also for all transit riders. For example, if a rider needs to transfer from one vehicle to another to make a connection, communication between vehicles could be improved so that bus operators could inform each other of the connecting rider, and thus ensure that the connection is made (Hancock 2022). Improving inter-vehicle communication could ensure that transit riders make their connections, thereby improving the reliability of transit, insofar as it would not unduly delay other vehicles or disrupt scheduling.

Transit reliability can also be improved by increasing transit frequency. This can be done by reducing the headway between transit vehicles. Improving the frequency provides benefits twofold. First, it allows for more convenient schedules, not just for unhoused riders, but for all transit riders. With frequent transit, riders are not bound to a strict timetable (Walker 2012). Second, increasing transit frequency can at least reduce connection times between vehicles, from say 20 or 30 minutes to 10 minutes (Walker 2012). Improvements to frequency should coincide with improvements to the hours of transit operation by offering more service during off-peak periods, including late nights, early mornings, weekends, and holidays (Walker 2012). These operational improvements can help unhoused individuals resolve their homelessness as they can more easily use transit to reach their places of employment if they work nontraditional shifts or important appointments that may occur before work.

Reduce Barriers to Ridership

Transit agency officials and advocates for people experiencing homelessness both emphasize the importance of reducing or eliminating the cost of transit (Kearney 2022; Woodson 2021). This could come in the form of fare assistance to those experiencing homelessness, including the distribution of loaded fare cards by any government agency distributing common forms of aid (e.g., food stamps) or through the creation of free fare zones. Loaded fare cards could be purchased from the transit agency in bulk (ideally for a discounted rate) and then distributed to those people experiencing homelessness through their shelter or service provider (Wechter 2022). Existing discount programs for youth, the elderly, and other categories of riders could be expanded to

include any person working with a homelessness service agency. Fare reduction or elimination can also prevent fare violations and the associated fines.

Restoring ridership eligibility to people with past transit violations can also reduce barriers. The San Diego Public Defender’s office has worked with governmental and non-profit agencies to create a “Homeless Court,” where people experiencing homelessness opt into the program when they begin working with a service provider to resolve their homelessness. The program assists them in entering specially structured plea agreements to resolve most misdemeanor offenses and some felony convictions. As many infractions relate to transit fare or other code violations, Homeless Court helps people regain their rights to ride transit and provides additional benefits, like greater eligibility for employment, improved credit, and more (Brady 2022; Wechter 2022).

Transit accessibility will not reduce homelessness, but transit agencies can play a role in regional homelessness service ecosystems. They can do this by supporting people who are working to exit homelessness and by reducing further marginalization of people experiencing homelessness through partnerships with outreach organizations. We support efforts by regional systems to create free fare transit systems with low barriers to utilization (Lane, Bradt, and Wiley 2022; Uranga 2022). Moving toward improved public transit can promote the dignity of people struggling to pay, including people experiencing homelessness.

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