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Resilience Hubs are a Community Resilience Strategy That Should be Better Integrated Into Los Angeles' Public Transit System

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Issue

This research was motivated by the need to better understand how the hazard preparedness and resilience strategies of California's public transportation system can be improved through integration with social and safety infrastructure. The study focuses on a specific type of social infrastructure called 'Resilience Hubs', which are community-operated and community-serving facilities that support residents in accessing resources and support during both everyday conditions and extreme events. Considering the potential of these hubs to enhance resilience and safety for historically marginalized individuals, public sector decision makers must understand the function and impact of Resilience Hubs and ensure access to them.

To better understand the role of social infrastructure like Resilience Hubs in supporting safety and hazard preparedness, as well as its integration with public transit, we collaborated with one of Los Angeles' first Resilience Hubs as of 2021: the Boyle Heights Arts Conservatory (BHAC). In partnership with the BHAC and the local non-profit Climate Resolve, we collected data through three listening sessions with a total of 26 residents of Boyle Heights, Los Angeles, with connections to the BHAC. Our research sought to amplify how residents of Boyle Heights

experience cascading urban vulnerabilities and resilience, both in terms of physical and social infrastructure, as well as the improvements they envision for public transit integration with social infrastructure to enhance the resilience of both systems.

Key Research Findings

Barriers to transportation can be compounded by extreme weather events. Extreme weather conditions, such as extreme heat, flooding, and air pollution, pose serious challenges for public transit riders, especially in Los Angeles, where transit stops often lack shade, shelter, and seating. Unreliability and overcrowded transit worsen the situation for transit riders, while parking shortages, safety issues for cyclists, limited green spaces, flooding, and other street and roadway disruptions further complicate transportation access. These transportation barriers are especially severe for youth, older adults, and those with limited mobility.

Transportation and climate vulnerabilities compound with disinvestment, disempowerment, and distrust. Transportation and climate vulnerabilities were magnified by a lack of investment in neighborhood infrastructure, including inadequate lighting, insufficient green spaces,

poor pavement conditions, and flooding issues. Actions by public transit agencies, such as infrastructure designed to deter the unhoused from riding transit and ineffective community engagement practices, worsened issues. Participants' experiences with harassment on public transit, unsafe ridesharing services, and targeted policing have led to increased vulnerability, particularly among marginalized groups. Deep-rooted distrust in law enforcement and government institutions has stemmed from negative experiences with over-policing on public transit, criminalization of poverty, and failure of the government to respond effectively to disasters. Climate anxiety was experienced through observed acts of aggression, feelings of helplessness, and mental health concerns, which were further exacerbated by visible climate change impacts, distrust in government responses, and a sense of individual powerlessness in the face of global environmental challenges.

Community assets compound through empowerment, safety, trust, and imagination. The Boyle Heights community demonstrated resilience through community-driven solutions and collective care. The BHAC provided essential resources such as food, cooling, Wi-Fi, and restrooms, as well as free educational programming and cultural events, demonstrating investment in community well-being. Their services assisted with workforce development, mentorship, and leadership opportunities that fostered personal growth, self-sufficiency, and a sense of purpose. The BHAC provided a profound sense of safety, security, and protection, serving as a trusted refuge during both emergencies and everyday challenges. Community-based alternatives to transportation and policing fostered a sense of safety and trust among community members, particularly among those from marginalized backgrounds.

Resilience among Boyle Heights residents was expressed through their collective sense of hope, which they put into action by creatively envisioning and working together toward a better future.

Policy Considerations

Despite significant challenges in public transit, such as reliability and safety concerns, residents view it as a vital component of the community's resilience network. Participants' recommendations to increase transportation resilience included better collaboration between communities and policymakers and affordable or free public transit. Participants also proposed innovative ideas for public transit agencies to function as community hubs, offering social services beyond transportation to reduce stress and foster collective care. These findings suggest a collaborative approach for policymakers, planners, and communities to transform public transit from a mere mode of transportation into a social service that supports equity and resilience. This involves connecting built transportation infrastructure with social infrastructure, like Resilience Hubs, to mitigate cascading vulnerabilities and leverage existing community strengths.

More Information

This policy brief is based on the ITS report, "Reimagining Transportation as a Social Service to Build Resilience and Support Community Power," prepared by Jeannine Marie Pearce and Elisa Borowski at the University of California, Irvine. The report can be found here: <https://www.ucits.org/research-project/2024-31-4t/>. For more information about the findings presented in this brief or the report, please contact Elisa Borowski at borowski@uci.edu.

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