



Identifying Barriers Between Homeless Populations, Homeless Services Providers, and Transportation Providers

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No matter where you live, but especially if you live in a big city, you have likely seen people experiencing homelessness (PEH) using public transportation services. PEH use public transportation not only to get from place to place but also as shelter. Unfortunately, the relationship between the homeless populations, homeless services providers, and transportation providers is not well understood, making it difficult to pinpoint the best ways to accommodate those experiencing homelessness. Conducted by the research team at the University of Texas, Arlington, this project served to determine the needs of PEH in order to advise transportation providers on how to best support this population.

THE RESEARCH

The research team asked four main questions:

1. How does Dallas Area Rapid Transit (DART) meet the daily needs of PEH?
2. What are the nationwide services provider practices for providing mobility for PEH?
3. Why do PEH not use public transit?
4. What are the reactions of PEH and homeless services providers to potential transit agency interventions identified in earlier research?

To answer these questions, the research team conducted in-person interviews with willing PEH at a Dallas County homeless services provider. They also gathered data with a quantitative survey and remote interviews. The survey was sent to five hundred homeless services providers across the United States, and 21 percent of them responded. The remote interviews were conducted with survey participants who, in the survey, indicated a willingness to participate in a follow-up interview. Thirty ended up following through.

The in-person interviews revealed that PEH—mostly Black and mostly male—in Dallas find DART to be a critical resource if they lack a personal vehicle. Many endorse the use of buses and trains as shelter from the extreme temperatures that occur in Texas. PEH also use public transport to get to jobs and appointments, so unreliable schedules can cause frustration and take up large chunks of time.

Providers nationwide report similar stats about their clients: 79 percent of respondents indicated that they evaluate the transportation needs of their clients routinely. Services provided include free or discounted ride passes, partnerships with public transportation or ride sharing services, and an organization-specific shuttle bus. Still, only about a third of responding agencies provide internal training to their staff regarding client transportation, and smaller agencies conduct training less frequently than larger ones.

FINDINGS & IMPLICATIONS

According to the agencies, PEH do not use public transit when the travel time is long, the route structure does not reach their destination, the cost is high, and the system is difficult to navigate. The highest concern varies depending on the type of city. Rural agencies hear more concerns about discrimination; suburban agencies hear more about the long travel times and cost; and urban agencies report difficulty navigating the system. To try and find the most effective way to combat these problems, the research team asked providers about the intervention methods currently in place in their areas to handle these problems. About 55 percent of agencies were unsure about their laws and policies regarding using public transport as shelter, and 24 percent indicated that their areas have a law prohibiting such usage.

To sum up the findings and where to go from here, the researchers provide four key recommendations:

1. Future research should be much more local with multiple sites and spanning a longer period of time.
2. There is much room for providing education about the necessity of transportation to people studying fields related to this topic, like social work, civil engineering, and urban planning.
3. There should be a shift from a “housing first” model to a “housing and transportation (H+T) first” model, seeing as the former is not sustainable without transportation consideration.
4. Counsels made up of diverse groups of people from all related fields would serve as effective, respectful approaches to PEH mobility.

Although there are systems in place to support PEH, “Toward Data and Solution-Focused Approaches to Support Homeless Populations on Public Transit” suggests that there is much room for improvement. There is also much room for further research. What is clear is this: when PEH, providers, and transportation professionals work together, then all

populations benefit from safe, efficient, equitable use of public transportation services.

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THE REPORT and RESOURCES

For more details about the study, download the full report “Toward Data and Solution-Focused Approaches to Support Homeless Populations on Public Transit” at nitc.trec.pdx.edu/research/project/1508

Photo courtesy of Dallas Area Rapid Transit (DART)

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