

January 2023

Homelessness in State Transportation Environments

Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris, Ph.D., Distinguished Professor of Urban Planning, UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs
Jacob L. Wasserman, Research Project Manager
Hao Ding, Graduate Student Researcher
Claire Nelischer, Graduate Student Researcher
UCLA Institute of Transportation Studies

Issue

Homelessness has become an increasingly major challenge in the U.S. in recent decades. Of the half million unhoused people in the U.S., many seek shelter in settings under the auspices of state departments of transportation (DOTs), including freeway rights-of-way, under- and overpasses, rest areas, parking lots, maintenance facilities, and DOT-managed urban streets and sidewalks. State DOTs must adapt and implement measures from policy realms outside of transportation to address homelessness. Some are already doing so. Their response is critical for the welfare of unhoused denizens but also for ensuring a safe, operational road network.

Most DOTs report frequent encampments on their land and encounter operational and legal challenges as a result. On public transit, a comparable transportation setting, those taking shelter tend to be more likely to be chronically unhoused and disadvantaged along other axes than their unhoused peers elsewhere. Freeway environments may offer certain advantages for those seeking shelter, but proximity of encampments and debris to traffic and infrastructure is dangerous to drivers, neighbors, and the unhoused individuals themselves.

To investigate the challenges and strategies state DOTs have with regards to homelessness, we reviewed the websites of every state DOT, conducted interviews or received responses from staff at 13 DOTs that are responding to homelessness and/or particularly face it, and interviewed staff at eight relevant nonprofits, service providers, and external stakeholder organizations and partners involved in issues of homelessness.

Key Findings

- Encampments tend to be in spaces sheltered by infrastructure, vegetation, or landscaping (Figure 1). Their presence varies by geography and time due to climate and weather. DOT interviewees noted safety concerns and crimes at encampments; however, counts and data are rare.
- Following Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidance in 2020, many DOTs left encampments in place, but in 2021 and 2022, encampment removals generally resumed.
- DOTs employ both “push” (expulsion) and “pull” (alternate housing) strategies, the most common of which is encampment removals, usually enforced by police. These are sometimes paired with preemptive outreach by notified homeless service providers. DOTs also employ “defensive design” to prevent encampments at potential or past sites.
- Proactively, state DOTs have partnered with low-barrier shelters to take in people from their rights-of-way, and some are exploring using their own surplus land for shelters or providing sanitation services to encampments on DOT land.
- Two notable example initiatives highlight new models of DOT engagement. Project Off-ramp in Fresno, California, offered people in encampments converted motel rooms with supportive services in 2021. Indiana DOT contracted with Horizon House, a homeless service provider, to provide funding for a trained outreach worker effectively on call.



Figure 1. Tents Next to a Highway. Photo by Wonderlane (CC BY 2.0)

- DOTs should evaluate the necessity of encampment removals and prioritize encampments with criteria based on legitimate safety concerns, instead of blanket removal policies. Service providers recommended policies that ensure safety while avoiding unnecessary displacement.
- DOTs should also acquire better data on homelessness on their lands, establish formal partnerships with nonprofits/ service providers, and create a homelessness coordinating office within their department.
- Addressing the challenge of homelessness in DOT environments is a larger social issue that requires attention and action from the part of DOTs but also support, collaboration, and coordination between DOTs and other public and nonprofit entities, with the ultimate goal of providing more permanent housing.

Conclusions

- External partner interviewees argued that addressing homelessness should be part of the responsibility of DOTs and should be intertwined with their transportation objectives.
- Interviews and prior research show that the effectiveness of encampment removals is limited. Encampments often return, and removals are expensive. Offers of shelter may come with barriers to entry, and the root causes of homelessness remain unaddressed. Likewise, past research makes a strong case for reserving law enforcement for instances of crime against persons instead of trespassing alone.

More Information

This policy brief is drawn from the “Homelessness on the Road: Reviewing Challenges of and Responses to Homelessness in State Transportation Environments” research report and project by the UCLA Institute of Transportation Studies. The full report can be found at <https://www.its.ucla.edu/project/understanding-and-responding-to-homelessness-in-state-transportation-settings/>.



Research presented in this policy brief was made possible through funding received by the University of California Institute of Transportation Studies (UC ITS) from the State of California through the Public Transportation Account and the Road Repair and Accountability Act of 2017 (Senate Bill 1) and funding received by the Pacific Southwest Region (PSR) University Transportation Center (UTC) from the California Department of Transportation.

The UC ITS is a network of faculty, research and administrative staff, and students dedicated to advancing the state of the art in transportation engineering, planning, and policy for the people of California. Established by the Legislature in 1947, the UC ITS has branches at UC Berkeley, UC Davis, UC Irvine, and UCLA. www.ucits.org

The PSR UTC is the Region 9 University Transportation Center funded under the U.S. Department of Transportation’s University Transportation Centers Program. Established in 2016, PSR is led by the University of Southern California and includes seven partners: Long Beach State University, UC Davis, UC Irvine, UCLA, University of Hawai’i, Northern Arizona University, and Pima Community College. metrans.org/metrans_tier1_utc