

Ride Fearlessly:

A Framework for Reimagining Transit Safety





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About TransForm TransForm promotes walkable communities with excellent transportation choices to connect people of all incomes to opportunity, make California affordable, and help solve our climate crisis. With diverse partners, we engage communities in planning, run innovative programs, and win policy change at the local, regional, and state levels.

Limitations of this report Due to time and resource constraints, interviews prioritized people doing transit or racial justice work. The report has limited perspectives from the LGBTQI community, people with various immigration statuses, non-English speaking people, and the disability justice community. Future research is needed to more deeply engage these rider groups, frontline workers, and labor union members.

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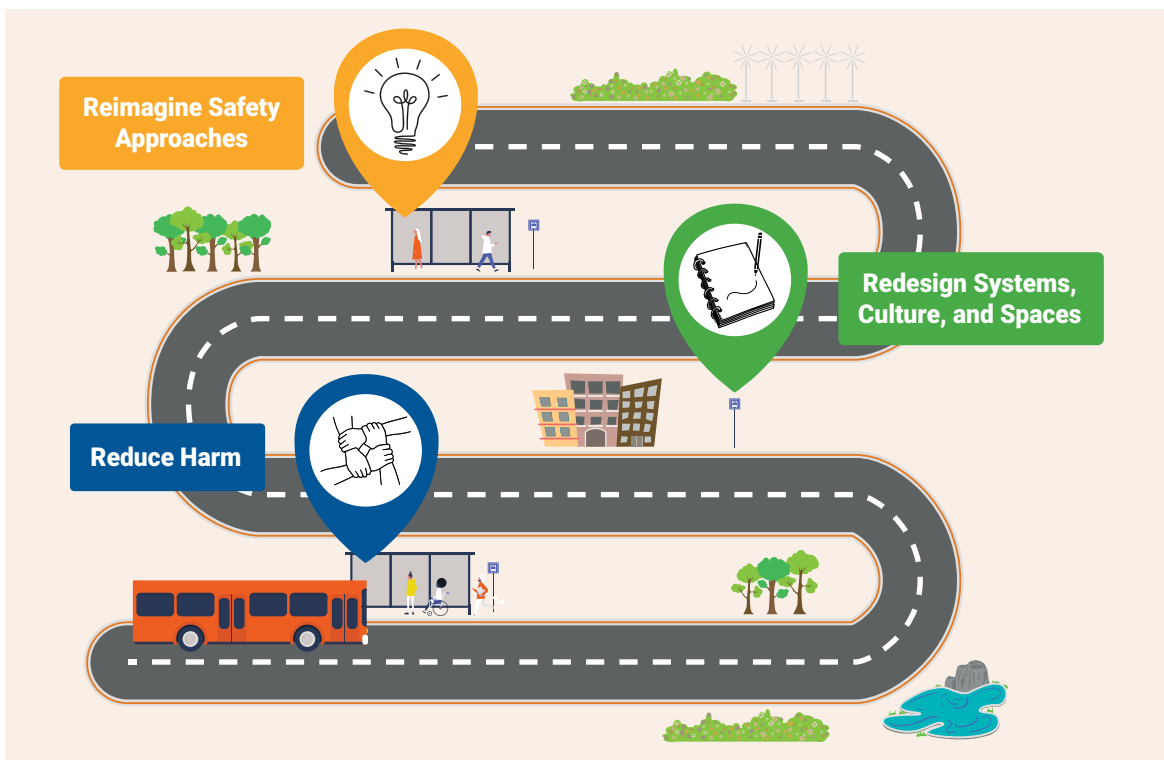
Key Findings and Recommendations

Safety on transit is essential to reviving ridership and creating a thriving, transit-first culture. TransForm’s vision for safety centers on a holistic definition of objective and subjective safety as experienced by marginalized communities and the most vulnerable riders. To make transit safe for everyone, transit agencies must look beyond policing. Transit agencies across the country are already implementing alternative safety pilots and programs, but there is still a long way to go before we achieve transit systems where everyone feels safe. Collaboration and active partnerships among transit agencies, community-based organizations, and everyday riders are key to achieving a world where everyone can ride fearlessly.

TransForm’s Safety on Transit Policy Framework

Our findings inspired a three-part policy framework to create safety beyond policing.

- 1. Reimagine Safety Approaches:** Seek out community-based approaches, leveraging innovation and imagination, intentional data analysis, and meaningful community partnerships. Use pilot programs to test new ideas and allow time to get feedback from riders and staff before making permanent changes.
- 2. Redesign Systems, Culture, and Spaces:** Create reliable and frequent service that meets changing rider needs. Use environmental design strategies such as bright lighting and accessible operator call boxes to mitigate everyday acts of harassment and harm. Cultivate inclusive and communal spaces and confront harmful behavior via strategies like bystander intervention training.
- 3. Reduce Harm:** Prevent negative interactions between riders and law enforcement by decriminalizing fare enforcement, deploying transit ambassadors, and limiting police use of force. Critically, agencies must review code of conduct enforcement policies, which can lead to harmful interactions with law enforcement that don’t enhance rider safety.



Transit Safety is Fundamental to Ridership Recovery and Thriving Communities

As transit agencies seek to regrow ridership in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, safety remains a top priority for riders. In the San Francisco Bay Area, [36%](#) of respondents in a recent poll indicated concerns about safety keep them from taking public transportation more frequently. Safety concerns discourage riders from using transit to access jobs, pursue education, receive health care, [escape poverty](#), and improve their quality of life.



Photo: Sound Transit

The World Health Organization (WHO) categorizes safety in [two dimensions](#): objective, measured through external criteria such as the number of assaults; and subjective, defined by an individual's internal perception. The perceived safety of a public space has a [strong influence](#) on people's decision to use or avoid it. A reduction of objective injury-related measures does not necessarily lead to a proportional increase in subjective safety perception, and vice versa, according to WHO. Therefore, successful safety approaches on transit must consider both subjective and objective factors.

Addressing safety on transit can be a challenge because people perceive and experience safety based on diverse lived experiences and identities. Factors ranging from a lack of cleanliness and the presence of unhoused people to sexual harassment and physical assault impact riders' feelings of safety.

In this report, TransForm will analyze public safety through the lens of marginalized communities including BIPOC, lower-income, and female and non-binary identified people. These riders are more likely to experience harassment on transit, yet their perspectives are often ignored. For instance, in Stop AAPI Hate's national report, [Righting Wrongs: How Civil Rights Can Protect Asian Americans & Pacific Islanders Against Racism](#), 26% of survey respondents reported experiencing discrimination while using public transit. Prioritizing safety for marginalized riders is pivotal to revitalizing ridership and establishing a thriving transit system.

Addressing safety on transit can be a challenge because people perceive and experience safety

"Discrimination is a public safety issue that prevents people from using public services and goods."

– Annie Lee, Managing Director of Policy at Chinese for Affirmative Action

Expanding Transit Safety Beyond Policing

To make transit safe for everyone, transit agencies must look beyond policing. For many of the safety-related issues transit agencies face, an armed officer is not necessary. Not only do transit agencies waste valuable resources deploying police officers to respond to non-violent issues, but their deployment makes many people, especially Black and Brown riders, [feel less safe](#).

The over-deployment of police resources stems from an outdated [“broken windows”](#) policing model that targets low-level offenses as a strategy to prevent larger crimes. Not only has this model been [disproven](#), but it has led to punitive responses to fare evasion, homelessness, and mental health crises on public transportation that reflect broader systemic inequalities. Further, enforcement-first approaches [disproportionately](#) target Black and Brown riders. Solutions that address the root cause, like connecting riders in need with social service providers, will be more effective than practices rooted in a [carceral framework](#).

“How are you serving people who do not want an armed presence from police officers? Often they are more vulnerable. We have an equity obligation to focus on these groups.”

– Alicia Trost, Chief Communications Officer at BART

Transit is not the only sector to grapple with alternatives to a police-first approach to safety. As transit agencies expand beyond policing to address safety concerns, we can learn from other successful alternative interventions in public safety and mental health.

In Eugene, Oregon, the CAHOOTS community-based public safety program has been successfully operating for over 30 years. Responding to calls via a free hotline, CAHOOTS deploys two-person teams consisting of a medic and a crisis worker to provide a first-response alternative for crises involving mental illness, homelessness, and addiction. Out of [24,000](#) CAHOOTS calls in 2021, police backup was requested only 150 times. CAHOOTS is also a cost-effective program. In 2017, CAHOOTS handled 17% of the Eugene Police Department’s calls, saving the city approximately \$8.5 million in public safety costs.

In 2021, Oakland, California, built off the success of CAHOOTS by starting the Mobile Assistance Community Responders of Oakland ([MACRO](#)). The program sends an EMT and mental healthcare worker as the first response to calls involving mental illness. Oakland-based Anti Police-Terror Project takes this further with its [Mental Health First](#) initiative, offering a free hotline, mobile peer support, de-escalation assistance, and other non-punitive and life-affirming interventions.

“We need to ask what makes us feel unsafe and why. Our understanding of race and class are salient to how we define safety.”

– Sunita Patel, Assistant Professor of Law at the UCLA School of Law

The following section of the report suggests a framework and strategies for transit to shift away from a punitive approach to a compassionate and community-oriented model that prioritizes supporting vulnerable individuals rather than punishing them for their circumstances.

A New Transit Safety Framework



Reimagine Safety Approaches

Seek out community-based approaches, leveraging innovation and imagination, intentional data analysis, and meaningful community partnerships. Use pilot programs to test new ideas and allow time to get feedback from riders and staff before making permanent changes.

Transit agencies are not equipped to address safety issues related to homelessness, mental health, and drug use without the support of other providers. Many agencies, including [CapMetro](#), [BART](#), [King County Metro](#), and [LA Metro](#), have partnered with direct service providers to implement outreach programs that include social workers, peer mental health workers, and other trained staff. These [behavioral health-oriented](#) programs call for sending social workers or other health workers [rather than the police](#) to respond to quality-of-life calls, non-violent offenses, and non-criminal acts. In some cases, community partnerships can also be cost-effective, with partners bringing their own funding or enabling new grant opportunities.

Principles For Successful Transit Safety Partnerships

Successful pilots and programs depend on strong partnerships with riders, community-based organizations, service providers, and local governments. Pilots require both resources and time to build trust and accountability, particularly in communities that have been actively harmed by or excluded from past transportation decision-making and investment.

Key principles:

1. **Transparency and Trust:**

Foster strong relationships by sharing processes and limitations up front.

2. **Decision-Making Power:**

Meaningfully involve partners in decision-making processes.

3. Equity: Prioritize partnerships with experts who have lived experience, offer compensation to community leaders, and ensure local roots.

Data collection allows agencies and community partners to measure the effectiveness of pilots and can clarify gaps and identify where new approaches are needed. Standardized data collection across transit agencies should inform safety programs. California is leading the way by creating a [universal community survey](#) that transit agencies can use to collect better data on passenger safety and [requiring](#) California's top 10 public transit systems to collect survey data.

“Mental health is not a criminal event. We want to be able to provide people with resources.”

– Steven Martingano,
Regional Transportation
District Transit PD

LA Metro's [Gender Action Plan \(GAP\)](#) provides an excellent example of using data collection as the foundation of a project with their [How Women Travel](#) report. LA Metro conducted multilingual storytelling-based focus groups, collaborating with community organizations serving women facing homelessness, undocumented women, and women with children. The insights informed more than 20 strategies, including improved service frequency, a women and girls governing council, redesigned vehicle stops, and a fare-capping pilot.

CASE STUDY:

SEPTA's SCOPE Program

The Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) partnered with service providers for unhoused people for its [SCOPE program](#) (Safety, Cleaning, Ownership, Partnership, and Engagement). This initiative deploys trained mental health workers, including peer mental health leads, to offer resources and referrals to vulnerable populations; partners with students to offer a "Health Navigators Program;" maps shelters close to SEPTA stops; convenes regular meetings with local service providers to coordinate efforts; and provides de-escalation training to staff.



Photo: SEPTA

SEPTA aids around 4,300 vulnerable individuals monthly, connecting them to resources such as emergency rooms, food pantries, drug and alcohol treatment, mental health treatment, and shelters. The program has reduced assaults on employees and improved rider satisfaction. In June 2023 alone, outreach staff completed 628 referrals to resources, three Narcan deployments, and 31 warm handoffs of vulnerable people to direct service providers.



Redesign Systems, Culture, and Spaces

Create reliable and frequent service that meets changing rider needs. Use environmental design strategies such as bright lighting and accessible operator call boxes to mitigate everyday acts of harassment and harm. Cultivate inclusive and communal spaces and confront harmful behavior via strategies like bystander intervention training.

Enhanced service, from greater frequency to improved reliability, is a commonsense way to improve transit safety. Knowing when a bus or train is going to come allows riders to time their arrival at bus stops and stations, reducing the potential for incidents. Increasing transit frequency reduces wait times, similarly lowering the likelihood of harm.

Improving frequency and reliability also **increases** the number of people riding transit, which in turn boosts riders' sense of safety in a virtuous feedback loop. More people riding and waiting together creates a safer transit environment and a thriving transit system.

Environmental design and education also play a pivotal role in shaping riders' feelings of security. Features such as dedicated waiting zones, accessible operator call boxes, and well-lit surroundings foster safety. Perceptions of safety can even hinge on cleanliness.

"Empty trains do not feel safe. We need frequent lines that are reliable, which avoids long wait times."

– Annie Lee, Managing Director of Policy at Chinese for Affirmative Action



Photo: Avery Wilcox / Golden Gate Xpress

Systems and space improvements should be coupled with [bystander intervention](#) training and other empowerment programs that give riders tools to defuse minor, non-violent incidents. This entails not only offering practical skills to safely intervene but also confronting rape culture, xenophobia, and anti-Blackness because biases often play into harassment as well as bystanders' failure to intervene.

Transit agencies must proactively recruit a diverse range of personnel, including transit operators and community ambassadors, to cultivate safety in spaces, systems, and culture. While hiring for these positions is cost-effective compared to police officers, many transit agencies still face challenges in [recruiting enough unarmed staff](#).

Improving working conditions and creating effective pipeline programs can help address workforce shortages. Examples like AC Transit's partnership with the Unity Council, LA Metro's [Win LA](#) program, and Mass DOT's Construction Career Development program highlight successful approaches.

In Chicago, [CTA's Second Chance Program](#) provides job skills and career opportunities to residents who face challenges re-entering the workforce, such as those struggling with housing insecurity, survivors of abuse, and justice-involved people. Since 2011, the program has doubled in size, becoming one of the country's largest reentry workforce programs. More than 1,800 Chicagoans have taken part, with over 500 hired by CTA.

CASE STUDY:

BART's Not One More Girl Takes on Sexual Harassment

San Francisco's Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) launched the [Not One More Girl](#) initiative to tackle gender-based harassment. In partnership with community-based organizations, the initiative started with a \$35,000 investment from BART then tripled its budget with outside support from private foundations. Leading with the voices and needs of the community, especially girls and gender-expansive youth of color, the program engaged a total of over 300 community members, 100 youth, over 10 BART staff, 11 artists, and over 15 organizations as key stakeholders and decision-makers in addressing and preventing sexual harassment and violence.

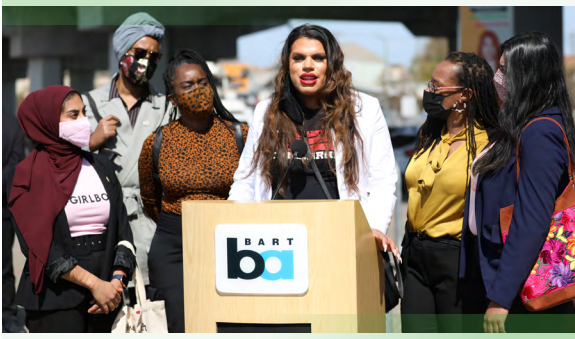


Photo: BART

[Policy changes](#) included new reporting categories such as "unwanted sexual harassment (non-criminal)," updated code of conduct rules explicitly prohibiting sexual harassment, and a comprehensive list of non-police resources on BART's website. The program's accompanying poster campaign increased rider safety perception by 36%, according to a BART survey.

CASE STUDY:

TriMet Reimagines Public Safety

In 2020, the Portland, Oregon region's TriMet redirected [\\$1.8 million](#) from police contracts and other funds as part of its effort to transform its approach to public safety. After engaging with more than 10,000 community members, TriMet adopted 24 strategies, ranging from a lighting audit of all stations to the establishment of a Reimagining Public Safety Advisory Committee made up of community and labor stakeholders.



Photo: ARTYOORAN / Shutterstock.com



Reduce Harm

Prevent negative interactions between riders and law enforcement by decriminalizing fare enforcement, deploying transit ambassadors, and limiting police use of force. Critically, agencies must review code of conduct enforcement policies, which can lead to harmful interactions with law enforcement that don't enhance rider safety.

Decriminalizing fare evasion on public transit reduces harm and improves safety for all riders. Fare enforcement [disproportionately](#) affects Black and Brown people and can funnel riders into the criminal justice system when fare evasion citations are charged as misdemeanors. [Misdemeanor charges](#) can have far-reaching consequences, affecting employment, housing, voting, and immigration status, and can throw people with no prior record into the criminal justice system.

In situations calling for law enforcement intervention, agencies should take steps to minimize harm. For example, transit agencies such as San Diego MTS and the Pittsburgh Regional Transit Port Authority have implemented changes to use-of-force policies to reduce police violence by limiting force.

"The visible presence of transit ambassadors is important to people and creates a sense of safety."

– Holly Winge,
Community Intervention
Specialist, CapMetro

CASE STUDY:

SFMTA Decriminalizes Fare Evasion

In 2008, San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency (SFMTA) decriminalized fare evasion, shifting from court-based misconduct citations to in-house payment plans and community service. SFMTA's [program expanded](#) to offer discounts or dismissals of tickets, including for unhoused individuals, and increased the ways riders could pay, to include, for example, a phone app. Following the policy change, [fare evasion did not increase](#) nor did fare revenue decrease.

CASE STUDY:

San Diego MTS Limits Police Use of Force

In 2020, the San Diego Metropolitan Transit System (MTS) enacted [reforms](#) in its Security Department policies, banning certain restraint techniques, requiring proportional use of force, instituting intervention duty, training officers in de-escalation tactics, and mandating warning before use of force. The reforms apply to Code Compliance Inspectors and contracted security staff and were enacted alongside a [fare diversion pilot](#) program replacing citations with community service.



Photo: meunierd / Shutterstock.com

Unarmed transit ambassadors are increasingly deployed to respond to safety concerns and help riders navigate the system. Both [SFMTA](#) and [BART](#) have transit ambassador programs with personnel trained in areas such as de-escalation and anti-bias deployed to respond to security and safety concerns. In 2023, nearly 300 [transit ambassadors](#) joined LA Metro's staff as a part of their effort to reimagine safety. At least 10 agencies across the country operate transit ambassador programs (see Appendix item A).

Agencies can also update their codes of conduct to ensure that everyone feels safe on transit. Changes may include ["safe transit" policies](#) to safeguard undocumented individuals from immigration enforcement on transit, banning sexual harassment, and discontinuing the [use of out-of-service buses](#) for transporting police or individuals arrested by police.

"We do not want to use transit funding for law enforcement. Transit operations dollars should be used for the services and well-being of its riders."

– Alfonso Directo Jr., Advocacy Director at ACT-LA



Photo: SFMTA

Prioritizing Safety is the First Step

Safety on public transit affects ridership and riders' sense of well-being. When riders feel secure, transit is a vehicle for greater mobility and opportunity, leading to improved quality of life.

Conventional safety methods that rely on policing and enforcement are inadequate and perpetuate harm. TransForm's framework centers on a holistic definition of safety defined by the most vulnerable riders. By reimagining safety approaches, redesigning spaces and systems, and reducing harm, transit agencies can take the bold steps necessary for safer transit systems that support thriving communities.

Implementing the recommendations from this report requires a proactive approach. Transit agencies across the country are already using many of these approaches in ongoing programs and pilots, but there is still a long way to go before all riders feel safe on transit systems. Collaboration and active partnerships among transit agencies, community-based organizations, and everyday riders are key to achieving this change.

High-quality public transportation is essential to a just, sustainable, and thriving world. We begin to create that world when everyone can ride fearlessly.

"If we want to figure out how to solve some of these problems, we must talk to people who are reliant on transit. We also have to talk to unions and labor who make transit run."

– tamika I. butler,
Founder + Principal
at tamika I. butler consulting



Photo: LA Metro

Appendix

Item A: Non-Police Safety Measures Within Transit Agencies in the United States

Information for this graph was compiled from TransForm’s national survey of transit agencies and through online research.

Name of Measure	Description of Measure	Agencies Using This Method
Anti-Harassment Campaign	Create a communication plan that includes posters and messaging, events/outreach, and other elements.	BART, WAMTA, MD MTA, Metropolitan Transportation Authority
App or Textline	Offer a transit app or text line for riders to report issues and get help.	BART, LA Metro, MARTA, Houston Metro, New Jersey Transit, San Diego MTS, Santa Clara VTA
Audit of Infrastructure	Conduct an intake of the transit system to identify updates related to safety such as light audits.	TriMet
Crisis Intervention Specialist	Hire staff who have social services backgrounds to provide support to people experiencing a mental health crisis, homelessness, etc. Sometimes these responsibilities are folded into transit ambassadors’ job descriptions.	BART, LA Metro, MARTA, Houston Metro, TriMet, New Jersey Transit, Metropolitan Transportation Authority
Data Collection/Reporting	Collect rider data (in multiple languages) through customer satisfaction/passenger surveys, etc., with a focus on safety concerns including non-criminal incidents like verbal harassment.	BART, MD MTA, LA Metro, SFMTA
Designated Waiting Areas	Improve waiting areas to include extra safety measures such as an operator call box, increased lighting, or proximity to staffed kiosks.	Houston Metro
De-escalation or Bystander Intervention Training for Staff	Equip staff with the skills and knowledge to effectively manage and defuse potentially volatile situations as well as intervene in situations where inappropriate or harmful behavior is taking place.	MARTA, BART, Houston Metro, New Jersey Transit, Metropolitan Transportation Authority, San Diego MTS, LA Metro, SFMTA
Decriminalizing Fare Evasion	Remove or reduce the criminal penalties associated with not paying the fare. Shift the approach from treating fare evasion as a criminal offense to addressing it as a civil matter or a minor infraction. In some cases, fare evasion rules enforcement is let go altogether. Some agencies also offer diversion programs or low-income rider support.	TriMet, SFMTA, San Diego MTS, King County Metro, Sound Transit
Operator Call Button or Box	Add call boxes on station platforms that allow passengers to report emergencies to station managers. In some cases, they are also installed inside the bus or train car.	WAMATA, BART, CTA, MARTA, Houston Metro, San Diego MTS, Golden Gate Bridge Highway and Transportation District

Name of Measure	Description of Measure	Agencies Using This Method
Partnership with Direct Service Organizations	Foster collaboration between transit agencies and organizations that specialize in providing support services, outreach, and engagement for vulnerable populations. The partnership provides services that the transit agency is unable to offer due to limited resources/knowledge gaps.	SEPTA, MARTA, TriMet, BART, LA Metro, Houston Metro, New Jersey Transit, Metropolitan Transportation Authority, San Diego MTS, Santa Clara VTA
PSA/User Information	Share safety information for riders to access resources on the transit agency website.	Majority of agencies
Research/Report	Conduct in-depth research that is often topic-specific and offers detailed information about safety concerns.	LA Metro, SFMTA
Request to Stop/ Courtesy Stop	Allow passengers to request stops closer to their drop-off location with better lighting or sidewalks, so they are more comfortable getting off the bus at night. To request a stop, riders tell the driver where they would like to be dropped off when they board.	DC, CapMetro, SFMTA-Muni, LA Metro, Houston Metro
Reforming Use of Force Policies	Ban carotid restraints and chokeholds by transit police, reduce the number of weapons carried by transit police, and train officers in crisis intervention/de-escalation.	MTS, Port Authority, BART
Task Force/Committee	Establish a committee made up of people affected by the issue to serve as advisors and help guide decisions on a certain area.	LA Metro, BART
Unarmed Transit Ambassador	Hire staff who are trained in de-escalation and serve as guides. Their tasks include assisting people with navigating the transit system and de-escalating potential conflict. Roles vary based on agency.	BART, King County Metro, LA Metro, SFMTA, TriMet, MARTA, New Jersey Transit, Metropolitan Transportation Authority, San Diego MTS, Sound Transit

Item B: [Research Methodology](#)

To collect information, TransFrom conducted a literature review, developed a [national survey](#), and engaged in expert interviews with relevant stakeholders. All Interviews were conducted online through video or phone calls. A total of 43 people were invited to participate in an interview and TransForm conducted 28 expert interviews. Four of these interviews were group interviews, including the Voices for Public Transportation coalition made up of transportation experts and community-based organizations. Questions asked in interviews varied and were open-ended. A breakdown of organizations interviewed is (30): transit agency (9), transit advocates (15), and non-transit CBO (6).

Item C: [Key Terms](#)

Item D: [Further Readings and Resources](#)

Item E: [ACT LA Metro as Sanctuary “Community Safety Through Environmental Design” Framework](#)

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System Limitations

As many transit agencies make efforts to directly address homelessness, drug use, and mental health crises through transit ambassadors or social workers, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the social welfare and health system, which in itself is flawed and [can replicate carceral harm](#).



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