

Unhoused Riders on Bus Line 22

Line 22 is a 24-hour public bus route, operated by the Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority (VTA) that runs from Palo Alto to Eastridge Mall in San José, CA. During a three day period in November of 2007 students at Santa Clara University rode line 22 overnight, talked with individuals who ride the bus for shelter, and collected survey data from 49 unhoused riders.¹ This summary report highlights some of the survey findings and includes anecdotal quotes from riders.

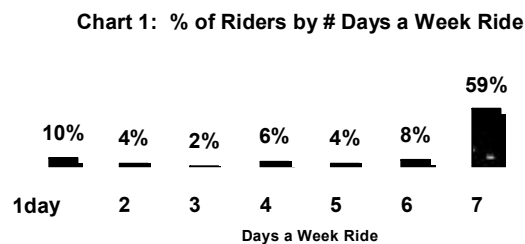
DEMOGRAPHICS

The ages of those who ride Line 22 for shelter range from 20 to 71 with a mean age of 46. Seventy-two percent are men and 28% are women. Just over forty percent (42%) of the unhoused riding the bus are African American, 23% are white, 17% are Latino, and 13% are of Asian decent. Three of the 49 are veterans.

Thirty-nine percent have no source of income while 20% receive Supplemental Security Income (SSI).

MOST RIDE THE BUS OFTEN

The majority of riders (59.2%) ride the bus seven days a week (Chart 1).



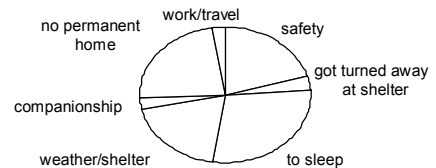
Forty-two percent of riders have been riding line 22 for 1-2 years and 43% have been riding for four or more years. Over half ride throughout the whole year and 29% ride during the winter only. Some have been riding the bus for many years like "Mary":

"I am in my 50s, and I'm an unhoused rider of "Hotel 22." I've been riding for twenty years now... I'm permanently disabled and so I get an SSI check and live off of that."

WHY RIDE THE BUS FOR SHELTER?

There are many reasons those who are unhoused ride Line 22 for shelter. One third ride the bus for safety (see Chart below, multiple reasons could be checked).

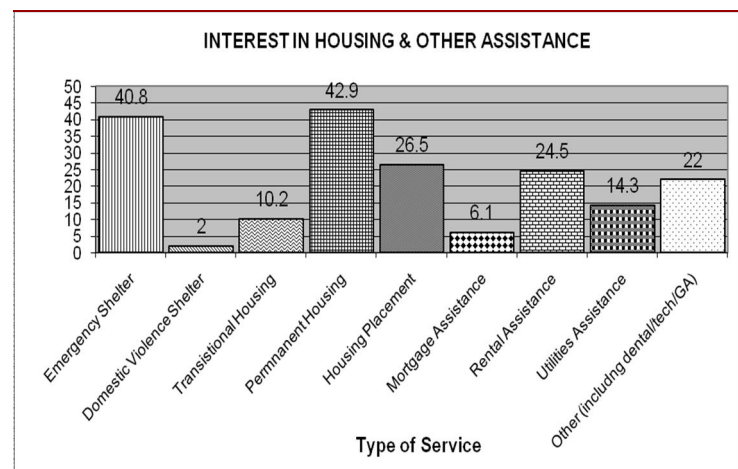
Chart 2: Main Reasons for Riding Bus 22



"I've been sleeping here (on the 22) for a few months. Before I started sleeping here I would sleep in a park somewhere. They started closing that park down at night, so homeless people cannot sleep there anymore; I had to find a new spot to sleep. I just try to find a place that is safe enough that I won't be accosted." Tim

Some ride the bus because they know of no other shelter options: 41% want assistance finding emergency shelter and 43% would like help in obtaining permanent housing.

Figure 1



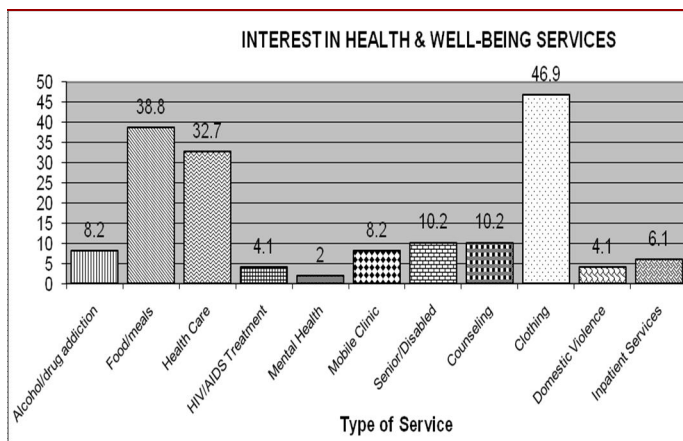
Others, like "Tony" who has been riding the bus off and on for over six years, say that they ride the bus as an alternative to emergency shelters: *"I've been to the shelters, but they're terrible. I've had things stolen from me while I sleep, I've seen people attacking each other, and it is just not a safe place for people to be. It's not that I don't know where they are, but I just don't want to go. That's why I ride the bus; I think its overall a safer place, especially for children or families."*

For others the bus provides a stopgap between places to stay. One rider spends \$10 a night riding the bus when he has no money for a hotel.

INTEREST IN SERVICES

Riders say that they are interested in obtaining a number of services. Besides housing, the most desired resources include clothing (for 47% of unhoused riders), food (a need of 39% of riders), and health care (33%). Students noted in their field notes that a number of riders had vision and mobility problems.

Figure 2

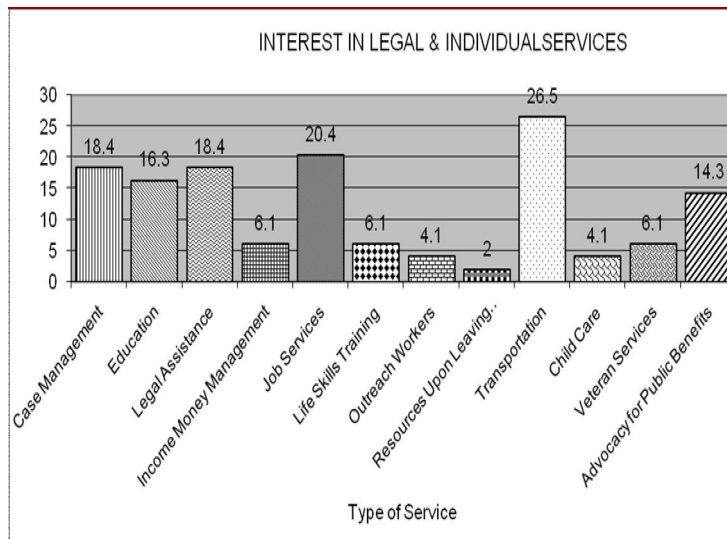


Over two-thirds of riders do not have regular access to bathing facilities. They point to a lack of both clean clothes to change into and a place to take a shower. When a student asked “Mel” where he showered he said: “Oh I stop at the Denny’s and get food. They don’t make people like me pay for it. You know, they’re decent people. So yeah, I stop by Denny’s; grab a ‘bird-bath’ and some food.”

Some riders specifically mention using shower facilities and other services at the Opportunity Center in Palo Alto.

Some unhoused riders would like assistance with transportation (26.5%), job services (20.4%), case management (18.4%), and legal assistance (18.4%).

Figure 3



Eighteen percent of unhoused riders are currently employed, but not making enough to afford stable housing. These riders see riding the bus for shelter as temporary:

“My name is ‘Manuel’ and this is the first week that I use this bus for shelter. I have a job in maintenance in Sunnyvale, so I use this bus to go to work too... It’s been tough sleeping on the bus. Actually it’s really hard to sleep on the bus because it moves a lot and makes a lot of noise. I have bruises on my body and wake up with pain. A human isn’t meant to sleep on the bus, or to sleep sitting down. I know that this is only a phase in my life.”

¹ The students were part of a class on Applied Sociology taught by Dr. Laura Nichols at Santa Clara University. Data collectors on the bus were: Maricela Alvarez, Ashley Butts, Gabriel Covarrubias, Danielle Diaz, Sarah Erker, Connor Gurnee, Charles Moore, Margaret Pierotti, Dre DeLa Peza, Kendrick Poon, Angelica Rodriguez with the assistance of Peer Educator: Drexel Harris. Those who conducted data analysis were: Maggie Fahey, Pomai Hanson, Melissa Hunt, and Kevin McQuaid. The project team would like to thank Fernando Cázares, City of San José; Edna Pampy, Luther Pugh, and Mark Garcia, VTA; all the VTA operators who assisted students; Laurie Laird, SCU Ignatian Center; as well as Heiri Schuppisser and Karim Kaahwaji from Momentum for Mental Health and Julia Jones and Cathy Hendrix from VTA for providing training. We especially thank the riders who trusted and spoke with us, hoping that their participation would help themselves and others. Comments or questions are welcome: please contact Laura at: LNichols@scu.edu. The names of those quoted have been changed.