

# **UCLA**

## **Policy Briefs**

### **Title**

Issues and Reforms for California's Transit Workers

### **Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0wj6c129>

### **Authors**

Wasserman, Jacob L

Padgett, Allie

Do, Keenan Ky-An

### **Publication Date**

2024-02-23

### **DOI**

10.17610/T6PK7S

# Issues and Reforms for California's Transit Workers

Jacob L. Wasserman, Research Project Manager  
Allie Padgett, Graduate Student Manager  
Keenan Ky-An Do, Graduate Student Researcher  
UCLA Institute of Transportation Studies

February 2024

## Issue

Public transit operators have a complex job that involves more than just driving a vehicle. Operators collect fares, answer questions, give directions, mind the safety of their passengers, help passengers with disabilities, keep order, de-escalate altercations, serve in place of a police officer or social worker when one is not available, monitor their surroundings while in motion, navigate stressful traffic, communicate with supervisors, make detours as needed, and much, much more.

This work can be rewarding, satisfying, and secure. Frontline transit work offers a public service role with high unionization rates, clear career progression, and the opportunity to see many places and interact with and help people. Transit operator and mechanic jobs may also offer competitive pay for the work and qualifications.

However, difficult working conditions and median pay stagnating or even slightly declining over time — especially since the pandemic — has led some transit operators to leave the industry. Other potential recruits have chosen not to start a career in transit in the first place.

Many agencies across the state have faced operator shortages in the wake of the pandemic, which have delayed service restoration. These shortages are due to both compensation and longstanding issues of workforce safety, culture, and practices. This is particularly troubling in an industry with an older-than-average workforce and in a state where, ironically, transit operators often endure lengthy commutes due to the housing crisis.

## Key Research Findings

- Wages have remained largely flat over the past decade when adjusted for inflation, with slight decreases during the first year of the pandemic on some transit systems. However, pay varies widely by agency and across the state's major regions, with pay in the San Francisco Bay Area generally higher than in Southern California (Figure 1).
- California public transit operators earn significantly more than their area's median incomes and more than employees in trucking occupations and comparable unionized transit jobs in other states. Nonetheless, working conditions have driven away workers and potential recruits.
- Frontline workers have made notable gains in recent contract negotiations. Along with unprecedented off-cycle changes and bonuses, unions gained negotiating leverage due to operator shortages and organizing efforts and have won pay increases and other improvements.
- While health and retirement benefits represent a significant perk of the job, operators in California otherwise face slow wage and seniority progression, a two-tiered pension system, high housing costs, grueling schedules and overtime, security and discipline concerns, and barriers to initial hiring. The pandemic has exacerbated health and safety issues.

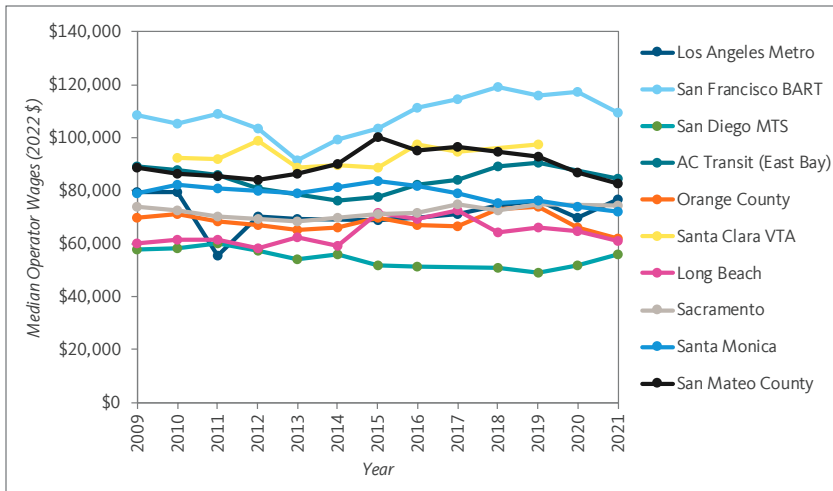


Figure 1. Median Operator Wages by California Transit Agency

- Agencies faced persistent vacancies prior to the pandemic, worsened by pandemic-related hiring and pay freezes and working conditions. Specific trends varied across the agencies, with major systems in San Francisco, Orange County, and Sacramento losing significant numbers of operators after the start of the pandemic and Los Angeles Metro facing hundreds of vacancies in early 2022.

### Conclusion

- Pay raises are necessary but not sufficient to attract and retain operators. Our interviews with management, union leadership, workers, and advocates confirm two experiences reflected in the wage data: 1) pay for transit frontline workers is generally lower than what is necessary to attract and retain the number of needed employees, and 2) recent increases in pay and the new

and continued hardships in other aspects of the job point to the importance of factors beyond wages alone.

- As the workforce ages, agencies, advocates, and unions will need to rethink and expand transit operations funding, raise wages, and implement a variety of hiring and on-the-job reforms. These reforms may include reducing hiring hurdles, expanding outreach, making scheduling fairer, improving facilities and support, removing enforcement duties from operators, and creating career pathways for advancement.

- Lasting improvements to pay and benefits will rely on expanding the budgetary pie rather than fighting over the size of workers’ slice — that is, securing more funding for transit operations, from more sources.
- Transit workforce issues are ultimately transit rider issues. Labor shortages have disrupted transit service and especially hurt those who most rely on transit to travel. Rather than a zero-sum trade-off, the pandemic demonstrated that better working conditions and pay lead to better transit service.

### More Information

This policy brief is drawn from the “Transit, Belabored: Issues and Futures for California’s Frontline Transit Workforce” research report by the UCLA Institute of Transportation Studies. The full report can be found at [www.its.ucla.edu/publication/transit-belabored](http://www.its.ucla.edu/publication/transit-belabored).

#### Figure Data Sources

Bureau of Labor Statistics (2022). CPI-All Urban Consumers (Current Series). *U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics*. <https://data.bls.gov/PDQWeb/cu>.

California State Controller (2023). *Government Compensation in California*. <https://publicpay.ca.gov/>.

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 Resilient and Innovative Mobility Initiative, a one-time General Fund allocation included in the 2021 State Budget Act. 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.

Project ID UC-ITS-RIMI-4F-02 | DOI:10.17610/T6PK7S