

TRANSPORTATION ISSUES & HOMELESSNESS

ISSUE BRIEF 2024



The Colorado Coalition for the Homeless (CCH) recognizes the critical impact that the intersection of housing and other basic needs such as healthcare, employment, education, and transit has on the ability of people to exit homelessness, stay stably housed, and have a successful and meaningful life. For people experiencing homelessness, transportation is essential to getting to medical appointments, case management meetings, lease ups, work, shelter, and more. It is therefore imperative that we craft transportation strategies and policies with the needs of the unhoused community in mind. The issue brief discusses several issues that highlight the intersection of housing stability and transportation policies including transportation costs and access, transit-oriented development, and transit safety.

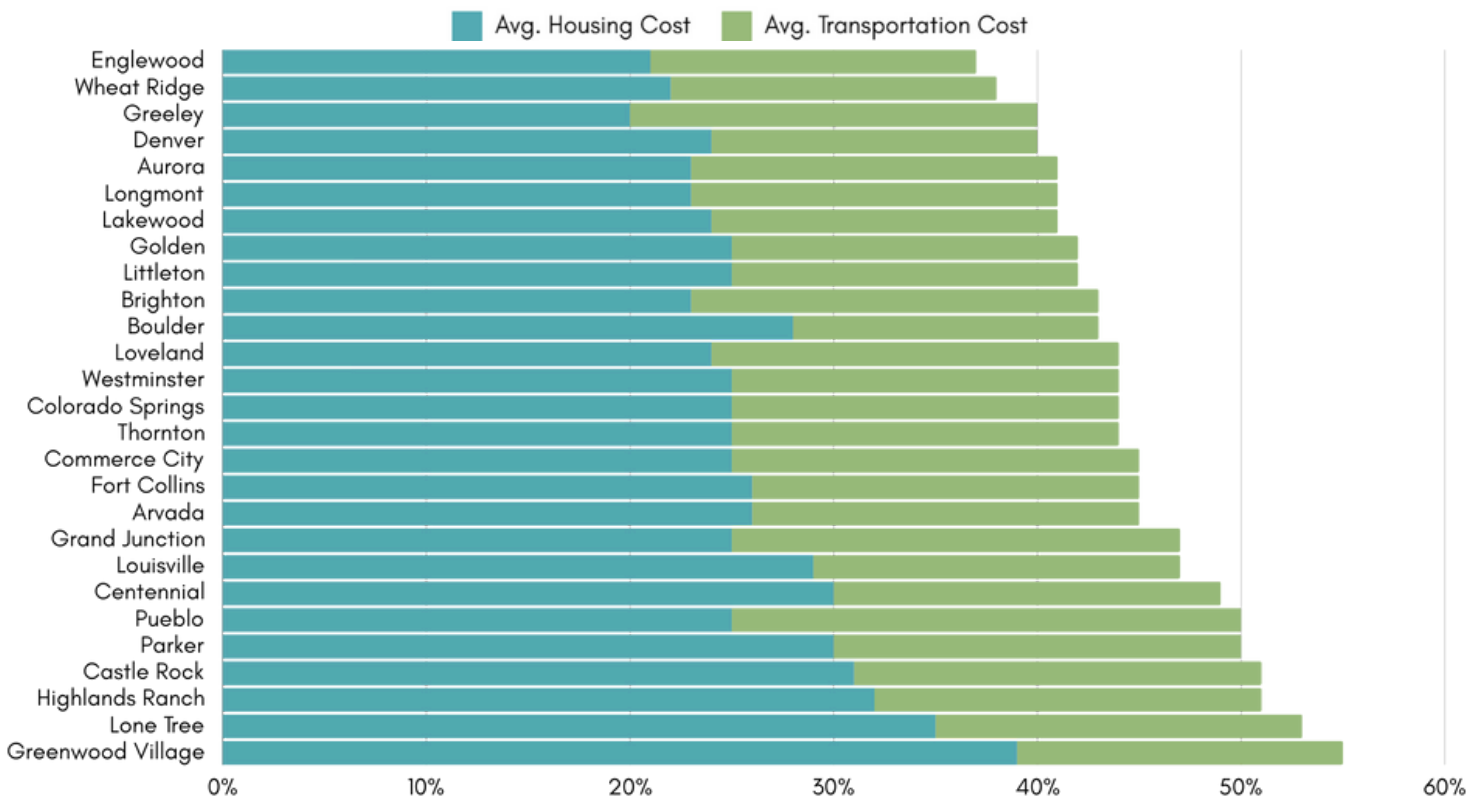
COST AND ACCESS

For the average household, annual expenditures on transportation are second only to housing in both the United States and in Colorado. Together, these two expenses make up the majority of household costs, and account for an even larger share of the budget for households living on the lowest incomes.¹

In 2022, the average US household spent 15% of their after-tax income on transportation while the lowest-income households spent about 30%.² In Colorado, a single adult without children can expect to pay almost \$10,000 per year in transportation costs, while a family of two working adults and two children can expect to pay over \$16,000.³

An article from Housing Policy Debate that examined housing and transportation expenditures found that although transportation costs vary significantly between urban, suburban, and rural communities, low-income renters (<35% AMI) across all types of communities spend upwards of 90% of their monthly income on housing and transportation combined.⁴ Renters in this lowest-income category spent the least in midurban neighborhoods, yet their housing and transportation costs still accounted for 91% of their income. This leaves households with little money for other necessities like food, medications, and childcare. At higher income levels, people tend to pay share of their income to transportation costs as they have more options, more flexible employment opportunities, and better access to housing.

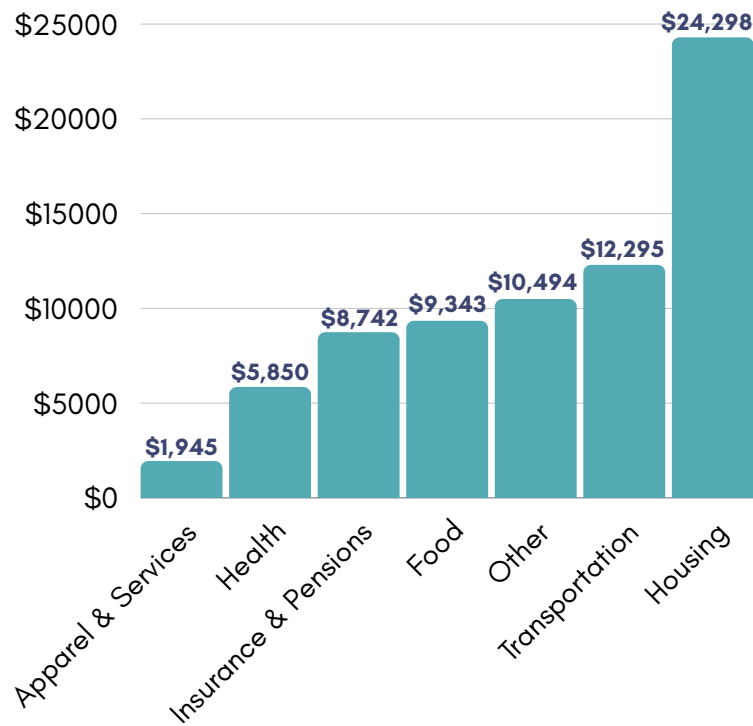
TRANSPORTATION AND HOUSING COSTS AS A PERCENTAGE OF INCOME IN CO



Households living on low or extremely low incomes are less likely to own a vehicle and are left with fewer options for transit, forcing many to rely on public transit systems that are often underfunded, under maintained, and inefficient.⁵ Communities of color are also disproportionately affected. Americans who are lower-income, Black, Hispanic, or immigrants are more likely to rely on public transit.⁶

In recent years, Colorado has piloted several measures to lower public transportation costs and expand transit options. The passage of [SB22-180](#), Programs to Reduce Ozone Through Increased Transit, led to the creation of the “Free Fare for Better Air” initiative, which offered free bus and train rides during peak ozone season in the summers of 2022 and 2023. In July and August of 2023, the program increased ridership by 12% and showed positive environmental impacts as well.⁷ Although free fares were not offered during the summer of 2024, the Zero Fare for Youth program was extended beyond its one-year pilot to allow riders ages 19 and under to use Regional Transportation District (RTD) services at no cost.⁸

AVERAGE US HOUSEHOLD EXPENDITURES 2022



RTD also offers discounted fares to seniors 65+, individuals with disabilities, Medicare recipients, and customers enrolled in LiVE, an income-based discount program for individuals at or below 250 percent of the Federal Poverty Level. RTD also partners with nonprofits, governmental, and social service organizations to provide passes to clients and customers.⁹ Policies and programs that offer free or

discounted fares are a key step in encouraging public transportation use and should be further explored to improve access for lower-income households and people experiencing homelessness.

In addition to lowering costs, expanding transit options is crucial in improving public transportation for lower-income households and people experiencing homelessness. More robust rail lines and bus routes that service low-income areas can help connect affordable housing to employment, social services, grocery stores or food banks, and other essential services. Commuting currently poses a barrier to employment for lower income earners, whose hours may fall outside of public transportation schedules, or who may struggle with transportation costs that are high relative to their current earnings.¹⁰ Expanding bike lanes, providing vouchers to help people purchase e-bikes and scooters, and building more walkable neighborhoods are also strategies that allow more people to commute in a way that is more convenient, while also reducing car dependency and emissions.



PUBLIC TRANSIT IS A NECESSITY

For most people without stable housing or experiencing homelessness, access to affordable public transit is a necessity, not just a convenience. A 2019 systemic literature review that focused on people experiencing homelessness found that their primary mode of travel is public transit, and on average, unhoused people travel nine to 14 miles a day.¹¹ Purchasing, maintaining, storing, and operating a personal vehicle can be prohibitively expensive, and public transit may be the only option for those living on the lowest incomes.

Having affordable housing options near transit helps households remain close to employment centers, reducing commute times and overall expenses. The importance of transit in connecting people is underscored by one study that found that 42% of

unhoused and very low-income people were unable to accept a job opportunity due to lack of transportation access to the job location. Another 21% missed an interview due to difficulties with transit.¹² Transit that connects people to employment, affordable housing and other key destinations can also reduce economic disparities by helping to ensure that people from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds can access the same amenities and opportunities. This inclusivity can reduce social inequalities and improve the quality of life for marginalized individuals and communities by creating more connectedness and opportunity for economic mobility.

ON AVERAGE,
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In addition to helping people access employment and critical services, transit services are occasionally used by people experiencing homelessness to take shelter from extreme, deadly weather. Having a safe place to stay dry and warm is a crucial way to defend oneself against freezing cold temperatures and wet conditions in winter months. Unfortunately, some policies and transit rules seek to criminalize or penalize people experiencing homelessness who seek shelter in transit services. The Colorado Coalition for the Homeless has pushed back against these efforts. For example, CCH helped draft multiple iterations of the Regional Transportation District (RTD) Code of Conduct. We firmly opposed proposed rules which would have penalized people for riding RTD without a clear destination, exhibiting behavior that disturbs the reasonable comfort of other customers or RTD personnel, and other activities which have more to do with the perception of a person's status or identity than the impact on others' ability to access RTD services.

People experiencing homelessness are already frequently discriminated against in accessing transit options without these harmful policies. A survey of public transit agencies found that approximately 40% regularly conduct sweeps of unhoused people near transit environments, and 63% of agencies enforce and rely on punitive measures in response to transit users who are experiencing homelessness.¹³ Another study from California among unhoused individuals notes that 38% reported not being picked up by drivers and 12% reported harassment from other riders.¹⁴ One of the

worst cases was the tragic murder of an unhoused man on the New York subway by another rider in May of 2023.¹⁵ In September 2024, four unhoused individuals were senselessly murdered while sleeping on Chicago's CTA Blue Line.¹⁶ Rather than punishing people experiencing homelessness and creating policies to deter riders from using services, the Coalition seeks to expand access to transit for the most vulnerable by pushing for free or discounted rides and building transit that works for those experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

SAFETY

For transit to be effective, it must be designed with the safety of both its users and pedestrians in mind. The perception that public transportation is unsafe is a common reason people seek out other transit options. A Colorado Fiscal Institute survey found that 23% of respondents identified safety as a barrier to using public transit, and another survey shows that 59% of Denverites expressed that they would like to ride their bicycle, but only if it were safer and more convenient to do so.^{17 18}

In 2023, 133 of the 716 traffic deaths reported by the Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT) were pedestrians. This represents a 16% increase from 2022, even though overall traffic deaths decreased by 6%.¹⁹ Unfortunately, hazards posed by motor vehicles disproportionately impact people experiencing homelessness. Unhoused individuals are largely dependent on walking, biking, and public transportation to get to medical appointments, case management meetings, lease ups, work, and shelter. When people are forced to carry all their possessions on their person, it can slow street crossings and reaction time. Many also have mobility-related challenges, vision impairments, or cognitive disabilities, putting them further at risk of collisions.



CCH case managers and medical providers report that clients and patients are being injured and killed by motor vehicles at an increasing rate, with traumatic orthopedic injuries and traumatic brain injuries being especially common. Recent studies and reports back this up. According to a study out of Oregon, traffic-related fatalities made up the second largest number of unintentional deaths among unhoused residents, and people experiencing homelessness were 45 times more likely to die of a transportation-related death than the overall population.²⁰ Closer to home, eight of the 13 pedestrians fatally struck by vehicles on Colorado Springs' streets in 2018 were experiencing homelessness.²¹ It does not have to be this way. [Senate Bill 036](#), which was introduced in the 2024 legislative session, provides an example of policy aimed at improving transportation safety. The bill, which ultimately failed, would have created the Vulnerable Road User Protection Enterprise in the Department of Transportation to fund transportation system infrastructure improvements. By designing public transportation with a focus on safety for both riders and pedestrians, especially the most vulnerable, it better serves us all and saves lives. The Coalition will continue to advocate for policies, programs, and funding that will protect people experiencing homelessness from traffic-related injuries.

benefits, it also raises concerns about its impact on housing affordability and homelessness.



Transit oriented development has the potential to help low-income households and those experiencing homelessness if it is designed with affordability in mind. However, if TOD is not strategically and carefully planned, it can exacerbate housing insecurity and homelessness. The very success of TOD, which often attracts new residents and businesses, can lead to rising property values, rent costs, housing burden, and gentrification. As the cost of living in these areas increases, it becomes difficult for low-income individuals and families as well as long-time residents—particularly households of color—to find and maintain affordable housing. The rising cost of living and the development process itself can lead to displacement and homelessness. Data-driven anti-displacement policies and affordability requirements must accompany transit-oriented development projects to ensure access for households that currently reside in or have been previously forced from areas at high risk of displacement to avoid further harm to and erosion of lower-income communities.

PEOPLE EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS ARE
45x
MORE LIKELY TO DIE OF A TRANSPORTATION-RELATED DEATH THAN THE OVERALL POPULATION

TRANSIT-ORIENTED DEVELOPMENT

Attention to transit-oriented development (TOD) is gaining prominence as a way to think about smart development to help solve the state's housing crisis and address environmental concerns. The model describes mixed-use, high-density developments around public transit hubs, with the aim of reducing car dependency, increasing housing availability, and fostering sustainable communities. While TOD holds significant promise for addressing environmental concerns, enhancing mobility, and bolstering community

IN 2022, THE AVERAGE US HOUSEHOLD SPENT 15% OF THEIR AFTER-TAX INCOME ON TRANSPORTATION WHILE THE LOWEST-INCOME HOUSEHOLDS SPENT ABOUT 30%

During the 2024 legislative session, CCH engaged in negotiations around [House Bill 1313](#), which defines “transit-oriented communities” and requires them to meet a “housing opportunity goal.” While CCH supports the concept of increasing housing density around transit hubs, increasing the housing supply alone will not solve Colorado’s housing crisis. CCH pushed for provisions that ensure affordability, mitigate and track displacement as the policy is implemented, require local governments to outline affordability strategies, and prioritize people trying to exit homelessness. The bill was successful and will be an important tool for generating greater density near transit and expanding housing options. As the state moves towards implementation, communities must be cognizant of displacement, gentrification, rising property values, rent costs, and housing burden, and take steps to ensure that TOD does not exacerbate housing insecurity and homelessness.



CONCLUSION

While Colorado has taken important steps to improve and expand transit options, there remains work to be done. House Bill 24-1313 takes steps in the right direction by increasing density around transit, spurring the development of affordable housing, and requiring local governments to adopt affordability strategies. This can increase the stock of affordable housing and transit options if implemented with the needs of low-income households and long-time residents in mind.

Going forward, it is critical to focus on housing and transit in tandem, recognizing that affordability and access are key to making these systems work for those with the greatest need. Policy solutions should focus on lowering public transportation costs, expanding transit options, improving safety for both users and pedestrians, and ensuring that transit works for everyone, including those at risk of or experiencing homelessness.

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