

Bus Operators in Crisis:  
The Steady Deterioration of One of  
Transit's Most Essential Jobs,  
and How Agencies Can Turn Things  
Around

# Presentation of TransitCenter report

- Report released on July 20<sup>th</sup>, 2022
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- TransitCenter is a foundation that works to improve public transit in cities across the U.S.

# Operators in Crisis

- TransitCenter report detailing bus operator shortfalls
- Pursued this research after reading about pandemic-era labor shortages across the US
- Pre-pandemic, we had begun to look into bus operator job quality
- We held an event featuring bus operators in early March 2020
- <https://transitcenter.org/publication/bus-operators-in-crisis/>

# Research methods

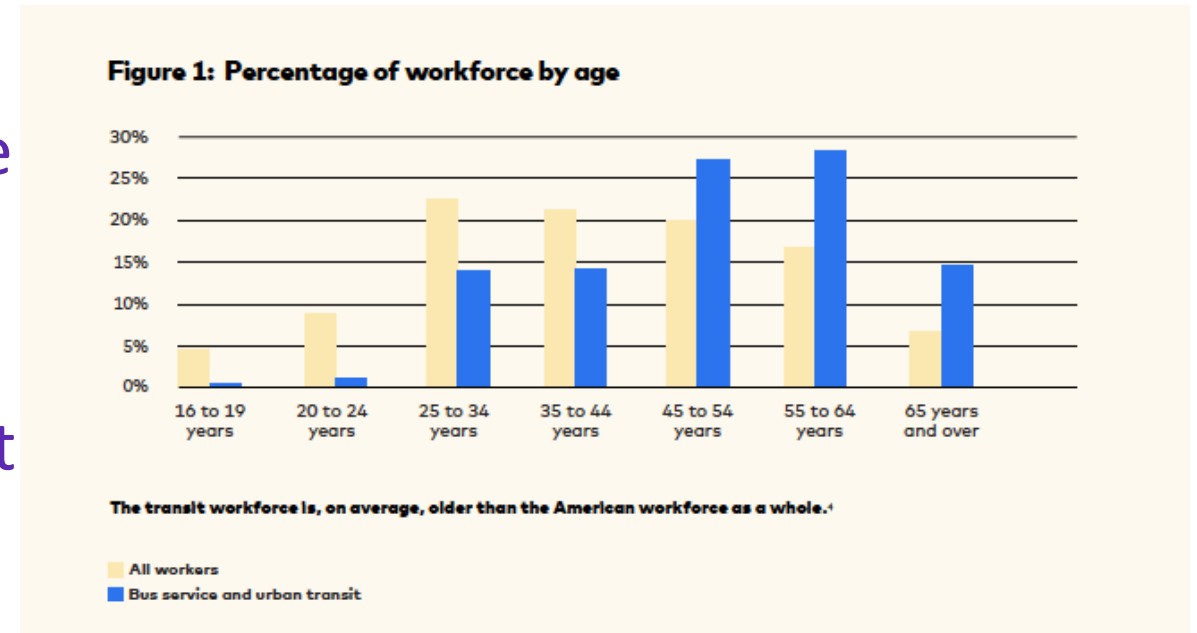
- Interviews
  - Spoke with agency staff, former operators, union representatives, transit advocates
- Conducted desk research
  - Looked to past studies on the topic
  - Collected news items from across the US
  - Used economic data to identify trends inside and out of the transit industry

# Findings – This is an industry wide issue

- The crisis is affecting agencies of all sizes. APTA survey found 71% of agencies have either had to cut service or delay service increases because of operator shortfalls.
- The problem is multifaceted – there are many causes yet they play out differently from agency to agency
- Today's industry-wide shortfalls were projected by US DOT, DOL, and DOE in 2015 – many agencies saw this coming but could not prevent it

# Findings – retirements are a key driver

- A “silver tsunami” is hitting employers across the US economy as baby boomers retire
- Transit workers are older than the average US worker
- Agencies are struggling to recruit and retain enough workers to replace retirees



# Findings – declining job quality hurts attractiveness of position

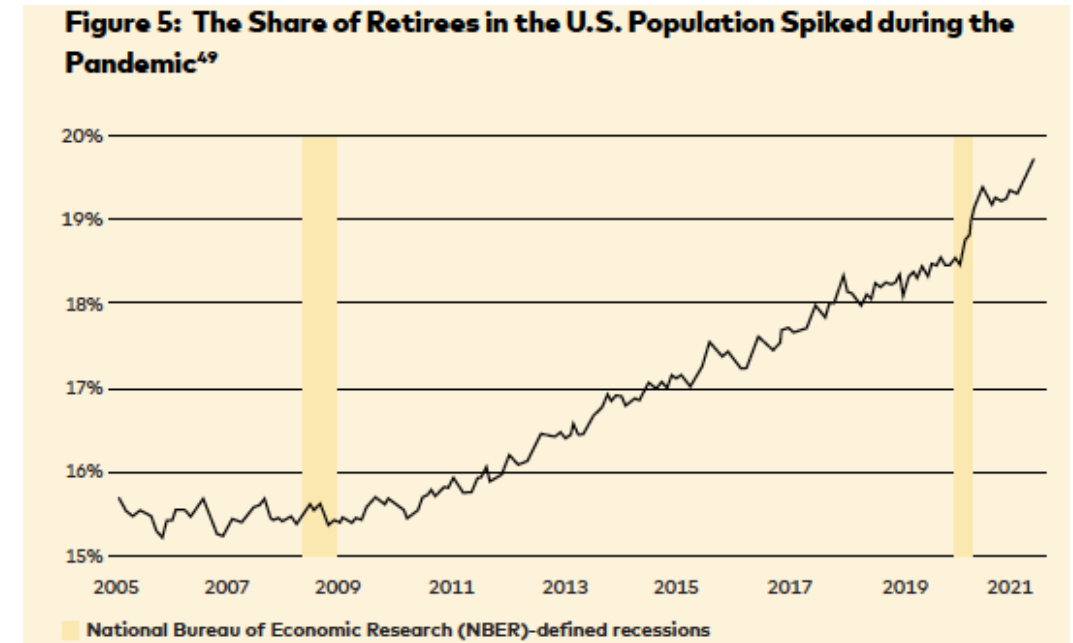
- Declining job quality is a major factor in recruitment and retention struggles
- Pay raises have not kept up with cost of living– especially in transit-rich cities
- Schedules are difficult for operators with childcare and eldercare responsibilities – work-life balance is hard
- Operators assaults are on the rise
- Lack of access to restrooms, adequate break rooms

**Figure 2: Starting hourly salaries for operators in the top 7 transit ridership regions**

Agency	Starting Salary (hourly)
MTA NYCT	\$25.49
LA Metro	\$20.49
MBTA (Boston)	\$21.13
SEPTA (Philadelphia)	\$19.55
CTA (Chicago)	\$24.27
SFMTA (San Francisco)	\$29.61
WMATA (DC)	\$25.51

# Findings – this is a long-term crisis

- COVID has exacerbated, not caused, operator shortages
- Shortages are causing burnout amongst operators that stay
- Shortages are impacting agencies' ability to recover from the pandemic – multiple agencies have had to respond with service cuts or cancel redesign plans





# Recommendations for agencies

1. Rebuild the workforce by getting new recruits in the door: Agencies must make a more compelling pitch to potential hires.
2. Improve hiring processes: Agencies must improve response rates to applications, make the job offer more attractive with signing bonuses, and help applicants obtain CDLs.
3. Provide competitive compensation: Starting salaries must be competitive, and new hires should be on the fast track to median wages in order to improve retention rates.
4. Improve employee facilities: Restroom access and better employee facilities are needed for employee health and wellness.

# Recommendations for agencies - continued

5. Support operators in their careers and lives: Operators need better mental health and professional development support.
6. Double-down on operator safety: Agencies must work to create more secure cockpits for operators, and take fare collection off the list of their responsibilities.
7. Provide flexibility in scheduling: Operators must be given greater control over their schedules despite the logistical challenges the change presents to agencies.
8. Listen to operators: Agencies must be more proactive in seeking out operator feedback and identifying workforce issues before they reach a crisis level.

# How can the states help?

1. Fund transit operations
2. Expedite the processing of CDLs
3. Develop Second Chance Programs

# What role can the federal government play?

- Use public and media appearances by Secretary Buttigieg and other agency leaders to bring attention to the issue
- Form an Interagency Task Force
- Issue comprehensive guidance and FAQs
- Elevate driver safety as a national issue
- Revise guidance around drug testing
- Launch national advertising campaign to recruit operators and mechanics

Link to the report: <https://transitcenter.org/publication/bus-operators-in-crisis/>

Questions?

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