Blindspot City: The Bus & Community Health

By Phillip Summers, MPH
Winston-Salem, North Carolina
One day back before COVID-19, one of my brilliant researcher friends at the medical school, Phillip Summers, came into my office to say that he had followed his research right out the door and into the driver’s seat of a city bus. And not just for a bit of immersive participatory research. He was quitting his job and becoming a no-kidding bus driver. What?

If COVID has taught us anything, it is humble appreciation for the “essential” people on whom life depends, most of whom were too mundane to hardly notice before. Turns out that our lives depend on the careful diligence of researchers who quietly assemble and reflect on data about how human communities work so that we understand ourselves at least as well as potential virus might. And what could be more mundanely essential than bus service?

Curiosity and courage are essential, too. This book is also about that—one researcher turning on the lights that all of us need in order to understand who we are, how we are connected, and how we might find our way on the other side of COVID.

— Gary Gunderson
VP, FaithHealth, Wake Forest Baptist Health

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In 2010 I was making $40,000 a year, about the median income for our small city in the American South. I had a good job doing research at an academic medical center, with benefits to support my young family. We had one car. I commuted to work by bus and bicycle.

My neighborhood is “on the wrong side of the tracks.” It is a burgeoning Hispanic barrio where poverty and racial segregation go hand in hand. When I started riding the bus to work, I began to get to know my neighbors. As we passed taco taquerias and tiendas, I was
aware that we rode together but lived with different amounts of privilege. They made a fraction of what I made, working jobs as cleaners or cooks. I began to see the bus fare as a tax on their beleaguered resources and the bus schedule as a drain on their limited time. I rode alongside patients who were anxious for the medical center’s cure but were dreading the cost. While waiting at the bus stop, I learned of their struggles to get ahead.

A recent regional study found that nearly 40 percent of households have access to one or less vehicle, leading many to rely on alternative transportation modes (Appalachian Regional Commission). In our city, the majority of bus riders are transit dependent, which is a fancy way of saying poor and vulnerable to the structural inequalities rife in systems such as public transportation. Policy makers who own cars don’t think about those who don’t. The stories I heard from my neighbors made clear: The bus system in our city is undervalued.

In 2015 I began leading an effort at the academic medical center that was tasked with stakeholder engagement. The local stakeholders requested that work be done to enact local policies that would promote health. Transportation and access to services was a grave concern, so they asked that we start with public transportation policy.
It was a cushy job in a swanky new office building. I made twice the median income. I had two cars and could easily support my growing family. We stayed in our wrong-side-of-the-tracks house. In my head was a nagging thought—that privilege is often a barrier to solidarity with the poor. The Winston-Salem Regional On-Board Transit Survey found that over 80 percent of WSTA riders lack a car, and 69 percent have an annual household income less than $20,000. What was life on the bus like for them?

I began to get restless in 2018. I wondered how I could do more to advocate for expanding bus service after having spent the last three years researching its profound impact on public health.

Yes, we had some success in expanding night and weekend service. We made a beautiful documentary short film called “Bus Stop Jobs,” which is about a day in the life of a bus rider. I spoke at a few conferences and even wrote a peer reviewed manuscript about the process. Still, I wanted to know how the millions of rides the transit authority provides really impacted our community.

In 2019 I quit my fancy job and took a job as a bus driver. My nice salary dropped to an hourly wage that qualified my family for Medicaid. I drove a bus as a protest against the blinders of privilege and as an outcry to raise awareness about the plight of my transit-dependent neighbors who struggle to make ends meet. I wanted to drive a bus to promote civility in public space while building social capital. I hoped to become a public servant with a positive outlook, enhancing mobility in our community.

**Bus Stop Jobs** is an 11-minute documentary that tells the story of a day in the life of a bus rider in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. The aim is to show the challenges of balancing work, raising a child, and navigating home life, given long commutes that bus riders encounter. The film was produced by the Center for the Study of Economic Mobility, housed at Winston-Salem State University.

**Stakeholder Health Podcasts**
Gary Gunderson’s three interviews with Phillip Summers

- **Podcast 1**
  - 30 minutes
- **Podcast 2**
  - 25 minutes
- **Podcast 3**
  - 50 minutes

To listen, click the orange box
I learned quite a bit about public transportation during my year behind the wheel. Over the course of 47 weeks, I worked 2,037 hours (226 hours more than the average American works in 52 weeks). I drove approximately 24,721 passenger trips and earned $26,764 in take home pay. I witnessed the hardships of transit-dependent individuals. I saw the neglect the buses and passengers endure at the hands of policy makers who overlook their mobility needs. Doing adventurous things had always seemed glamorous to me, not frightening. Driving the bus would be an adventure, I thought. But it often beat me down and broke my heart.

A researcher at heart, I wanted to see public transportation firsthand, like an anthropologist. I wanted to know how it really worked and who it really served. I wanted to crack the code on how to evaluate routes and gauge ridership.

This is what I learned along the way.
As a bus rider with a background in public health, I knew the bus was a community asset. As a bus driver, what I learned was the extent to which the bus knits together the social fabric of marginalized communities and has tremendous potential to promote health equity. What was analysis, reading articles, and research turned into a daily witnessing of the power of public transportation from the driver's seat of a bus. I learned the movement patterns of the city. I saw how the bus moves people to community gardens, grocery stores, work, school, and healthcare. I saw how public transportation knits the community together.
The Bus Is Physical Mobility

“When I seen you [gasp] I took off running. [gasp] I am too old to run like that, but I didn't wanna miss you.” The passenger appeared to be in his late sixties, a tall, thin African American man. He was happy to have caught the bus and relieved that I’d waited on him. When people reach the bus after exerting themselves, they are often smiling and more talkative.

Bus drivers have a policy: if someone is making an effort to get to the bus stop, then be courteous and wait. This is a daily occurrence, and what is fascinating is that people of all ages, genders, sizes, and builds will run to catch the bus. They run, jog, shuffle, hustle, and hurry. Studies show that compared to commuters who drive to work, bus riders get more steps. On a daily basis, they move more.

I happened to be riding the bus on my 40th birthday. I was reminded of how the bus is the bedrock of an active community—particularly for people with physical limitations. My designated route for training that day included Bus 88 north to the Industries for the Blind. It was my first trip on the route, which stops early on at a group of apartments. To my amazement, I saw three visually impaired people board a bus and safely ride to work. Bus drivers, I thought, give sight to the blind. I later learned that the bus takes over 100 people a day to work at the Industries for the Blind.

At the end of the day, I was on Bus 86, which goes through my neighborhood. I had never ridden 86 to the end of the line at “quitting time.” This is the exact time that our local food bank’s “Community Kitchen” students are getting out of class. I counted 15 people boarding the bus at the stop, recalling several of my friends whose lives have been changed by the food bank’s culinary education program. It became clear to me: In order for the marginalized to benefit from community resources, those resources must be accessible. To be accessible to those with limited mobility, community. Community resources need to be woven together. The bus is that connector. It is the thread that knits together our social fabric.

The Bus Is an Information Hub

I enjoyed my conversations with passengers for the ongoing dialogue and insight into their lives. I met mothers, children, significant others, in-laws, even cousins of fellow drivers. You meet all manner of households riding together on the bus. You get a glimpse of kindred networks.

One day I helped a mother and daughter from Venezuela find their way to a community college. As I talked with them in Spanish, I could see the anxiety on the mother's face melt away. They confided that they were relieved and surprised to meet someone who could help them find their way in their dominant language. Buses are the bottom rung for newcomers who are trying to assimilate. Their lives largely depend on whether or not they are met with welcoming systems.

That same week, a first-time passenger flashed a smile and thrust her phone at me, displaying an address. She wanted to know where she should get off the bus. I could tell from a recent trip to Guerrero that she was from the Costa Chica region of Mexico. (Most of our
neighbors in Waughtown are from there, so I had gone to see what they were fleeing from. My videos from the trip show the landscape and rudimentary fishing, but they don't capture the drug and gang violence or the harsh racial tensions that deny many people of opportunity. Our Guerrerroan neighbors come to America for opportunity.) Days later, she was on my bus again with more questions about the schedule. She was planning her commute to a new job.

To assimilate, newcomers have to undergo change. But that change doesn’t have to be devoid of love. Community members at the bottom rung need something orderly to grab onto. Transportation offers order, a shared language born of a shared need. (We all have to get places.) On the bus that order comes to life in a rich—and often crucial—exchange of information.

Several months ago, I was invited to a church service on a Monday night. I had heard of the service’s popularity before. The church provides a free hot meal in a neighborhood where food security is an issue. I went, and while my friend spoke, I saw several people in the audience who looked familiar. They were my passengers. I spotted one of my favorites, a young mother named Jasmine.

Two days later, I saw Jasmine get on the bus with a crowd of people, near another church. That’s when I realized what was going on: Weeknights, Jasmine rides the bus to different churches across the city for the free community meal. The food before the service, plus the to-go bag afterward, is her (and her baby’s) food security. People often hear about their next meal word-of-mouth on the bus, and generously sharing information about community resources is part of bus culture.

This is a picture of the bus at its best.
The Bus Is a Broken-Down System—With Consequences

“This country has socialism for the rich, rugged individualism for the poor.” —Martin Luther King, Jr.

As a public health professional in our city, I knew the bus was an underappreciated community asset. What I learned as a bus driver was the consequential gravity of neglect, inefficiency, and lack of support.
I suspected that bus riders were vulnerable to systems of inequality, and indeed they are at the mercy of a broken system. I saw that brokenness hurt the bus drivers and administrators, whose contributions are undervalued. I saw failing equipment and high driver turnover leading to burnout. I saw the impact of privatizing public services, which has made corporations rich while impoverishing host communities.

What I saw was a a massive intersection of risk factors.

**The Bus System Is a Safety Net—With Holes**

Driving the bus at night was a whole other story. Working in the dark brought out all my anxieties, fears, and worries. I was, to be honest, unaccustomed to feeling afraid. The stress of not getting good rest added to a vicious cycle of anxiety.

While there is less traffic late at night, you do have the added burden of fatigue. The weariness of both driver and passenger makes the bus quiet. Many of our late-night passengers toil in kitchens, scrub buildings, and keep watch over a property. They are either tired from a long shift or are headed to work until morning. The mood on the bus is somber.

At night you also have passengers seeking shelter. I often worried about what they would find. I cannot forget the woman in her 60s—she could have been my aunt—anxiously asking me directions just as the last buses were departing from the transit center downtown.

It was 11:30 p.m. It became clear she was trying to decide where to go to be away from others so that she could camp out. She boarded my bus and pressed me with questions about which areas in town she might find to be safe. It is heartbreaking to think of what befalls the homeless during the night.

The bus is a safety net for people who have fallen through the cracks of a community. However, my own fear tuned me in to the reality that the bus system routinely lets those same people down, often placing them at risk for physical harm.

From the driver’s seat of the city bus, I came to dread the intersection of Patterson and Indiana Avenues. This intersection is the convergence of bus routes 87 and 92, and you can see from the ratio of rides per hour that they are our most popular routes. Combined, they represent just over 15 percent of all rides in the city.

I was often fearful for the people I saw walking in this dangerous interchange. I saw them darting across the busy intersection, trying to catch whichever bus was passing at the time. If you witnessed in person or on Google Maps, you would see pedestrians but no crosswalks, no island, no signal, no infrastructure for safely navigating the interchange. I felt lucky that I never saw anyone struck by a car.

In a wealthier part of town, crosswalks are often considered a simple amenity. In this part of town, the lack of crosswalks is a
gaping hole in public health measures, a preponderance of vulnerability to an already-marginalized population. There is no advocacy at the intersection of Patterson and Indiana.

**The Bus System Is a Resource—But Impoverished**

As a cadet (bus driver in training), I was more than a bit nervous for my first notoriously ‘tight route’. A tight route is one that is known to “run down,” meaning it typically takes more time than allotted to complete. A route can be tight for several reasons. The most obvious reasons are traffic, a great distance to travel, detours, passenger volume, or difficult passengers.

The senior driver on board that day had the swagger and bravado of someone who revels in a challenge. He had a dry wit and obvious joy in interacting with passengers. I wanted him to like me, but I later found out he likes everybody. It is the secret to his success, a survival skill on a tight route that can easily frustrate passengers and drivers alike.

I took the wheel at 9 a.m. with trepidation about the demands of the day ahead. At 10 a.m., on the third run, the senior driver said, "You smell something? It stinks in here." I had yet to catch a whiff of what he was picking up on. Not 15 minutes later, a warning light came on about the bus’s exhaust system. The senior driver radioed for a replacement bus. Switching buses got us behind schedule just as traffic was about to pick up. That was the first of two times that "P1" would have to help us get back on time. (P1 is a minibus that “plugs routes,” supplementing service when a route is running down.) The second run was the only run I completed on time that day.

Despite doing everything in our power to keep things on time, I felt deep frustration. Buses often break down. If your car breaks down, it’s a pain. However, unlike bus riders, you may have the power, urgency, and control to fix it. Wealthy Americans spend a lot of money on cars to feel independent and powerful.

That day the bus had a leaking roof, dirty seats, and brakes that ‘grabbed.’ The majority of the buses show their age with oil leaks and broken handicap lifts. Disabled riders suffer from our apparent reluctance to update our bus fleet. To say the least, lack of resources makes our buses unreliable.

On a Sunday evening in the fall, 10 volunteers helped me sweep up the cigarette butts at the bus terminal downtown. The terminal is
filthy from lack of deep cleaning—and from the fact that smoking is still permitted.

We wanted to improve the appearance of our city. This transportation hub in the heart of downtown plays a prominent role in how riding the bus is viewed. We also wanted to reduce second-hand smoke residue for the health of waiting passengers. We used simple tools—a broom, a dustpan, a rake, and trash bags.

Cigarette butts were lodged into every crack and crevice. The volume overwhelms the regular cleaning crew's ability to sweep them all up. It took 10 people an hour and a half to sweep up five full bags.

The terminal is named after long-standing driver Clark Campbell, who drove a city bus for 45 years—3 million miles on our city’s streets. His contribution and legacy are so profound in the community that although he retired in 1992, riders still remember him.

One morning I got up and stretched at the end of the bus route, and an older gentleman made an off-handed comment, "Clark Campbell always did that too. He would really stress getting up and stretching." He said that Campbell loved to sing hymns and Gospel music. What I heard was that Campbell didn’t just drive. He built rapport with passengers and enjoyed a fruitful tenure in public service.

During my year driving the bus, I learned from drivers who have more than 30 years of experience. On tight runs with heavy traffic, I was amazed at how they knew the time points and the logistics like clockwork. On countless routes I heard drivers predict who would be waiting at the stop around the corner based on the riders' routines. These seasoned drivers’ experience and knowledge of the routes is valuable to the efficient and effective running of the bus system.

I learned so much as a cadet, about myself and about the logistics of driving a bus (half fare passes, bus transfers, run boards). What is harder to fathom is the loss of senior drivers to high turnover. The contribution of bus drivers is typically unknown and as a result, undervalued. Retention of talent is an issue that further impoverishes the bus system.

Working in transit is demanding in the early starts and the late shifts, the long hours behind the wheel, the broken equipment, and
the frustrated passengers. At the end of a 9-hour bus shift, all you want is to sleep. Which is to say that driving a bus leaves little room for work-life balance.

I accrued 17 hours of vacation for 2020. It made me wonder how I compared to my fellow drivers.

Table 1 shows the breakout of allotted vacation hours by the number of drivers. You can see that the 5 most senior drivers (each of whom gets 6 weeks off) account for almost 15 percent of all the allotted vacation hours. By comparison, my classmates (4 drivers)
account for .08 percent. The average driver will get 80 hours of vacation in 2020.

Creating these subgroups makes it easier to visualize the fact that 30 percent of the drivers do not have much vacation.

The current business practice is to keep drivers on part-time status for an indefinite amount of time. This means many drivers wait over a year to access full-time benefits, if they even stay long enough. This is an occupational health issue within a system that is itself undervalued. Yes, the countenance of the bus system is crestfallen—for a reason.

Current policy forces new drivers to wait two years to receive one week of vacation. Drivers seem to either put their head down and stick it out so that they achieve a comfortable position in the system that values seniority, or they leave as soon as they can. This graph shows that the majority of drivers have fewer than 5 years experience.
As I mentioned, I am a researcher at heart. When I started this journey, I set out to evaluate the bus system and more fully understand its value proposition within the community. I saw the need for a metric that would fairly evaluate routes, but I also wanted to understand the qualitative side of service delivery. My task: to put these stories of my experiences into public health terms, with the hope of elevating the countenance of public transportation as a community-wide intervention that promotes health.
Increase Service Frequency, Increase Economic Mobility

Roy was a passenger whom I met on his first day of work at a packaging corporation. The morning I picked him up, he was beaming with anticipation. He showed me the scrap of paper recommending my route. I confirmed. He sat down with his bag in his lap. *First day nerves*, I thought. I remembered the feeling.

By the time we closed in on Roy’s destination, we realized too late—he’d needed a different bus, one that covered a different part of the road we were on. Roy’s face switched to panic. At the stop, I pulled out my phone to consult Google Maps. Roy’s face slid into dejection. He wasn’t going to make it on time. It would take one hour on foot. His feet weren’t good, he told me. Even if he made it, he wasn’t sure he could physically get through the day after walking.

Bus routes are notoriously complicated. More frequent service (not once-an-hour service) is one of the simplest ways to improve transportation and bring about positive health impacts. More frequent service gives people a fighting chance to self-correct mistakes that inevitably happen.

Roy’s economic mobility is likely akin to the roughly 40 percent of Americans who would struggle to cover a $400 emergency expense, like a broken down car (FRB). One week, three different passengers sheepishly admitted they were new riders because of

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<td>0.5</td>
<td>361.8</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

D = Cardinal Direction | T = Type (Circular, Cross Town, Linear) | NSD = N Service Days ^ = has 2nd bus | * = 2nd Bus Funded by NCDOT B-40
recent car trouble. They represent the latent demand that I see in the
*ride per hour ratio*.

I have come to the idea of using a ratio that compares ridership per
hour of service. It occurred to me to create the ratio as a way for me
to anticipate ridership on a route.

Table 2 shows bus ridership for September 2019. I included a
variable of cardinal direction to illustrate that the impoverished
areas are serviced by the most popular routes, while routes that run
through the nicer areas to the west have less service and fewer
riders.

Both of the two most popular routes, 87 and 92, travel by major
housing projects and past major human service organizations. Take
the least popular routes, 100 and 99, which run through wealthy
areas of town and have no connection to downtown. The ridership
patterns match the areas of town that are racially segregated and
have concentrated poverty. If we are looking for ways to help
reduce these negative factors on health, then increasing
the mobility of the residents along these routes would save them time
in transit. Improving transit along these routes like 87 and 92 would
save crucial time in transit and would impact that population's
health by improving their access to the community.

This ride-per-hour ratio helps us untangle a complex system and
evaluate where targeted investment would yield the greatest
number of increased rides based on current demand. The

assumption is that there is latent demand on the most utilized
routes.

"They said there was a second bus, so I tried it this morning. Sure
enough, I slept in a little and even had time to bring a lunch,” one
of my early morning passengers chatted me up. The Spring light
illuminated our mutual joy that morning. He was catching the 6
a.m. bus to work for the first time. He normally caught the bus at
5:30 a.m. but because of increased frequency on his route, he was
afforded another 30 minutes in his day. He used that extra time for
two health-promoting activities: rest and preparing lunch for work.

Increased frequency in bus service reduces travel times and frees
up time for riders to do other productive things. A study I helped
design for the Winston Salem State University Center for the Study
of Economic Mobility found that "Employed bus riders spend 8.7
hours more a week in commuting time than equivalent workers
taking vehicles. That averages to lost wages of $4,350 per year." A
bus rider once complained to me that all the time lost in transit was
like “having a part-time job that didn't pay.”

Improving commute times means less opportunity cost for riders.
When they regain time that was previously lost in transit, they
increase their economic mobility.

The WSSU study was conducted before increased frequency was
started on 6 routes because of an NCDOT grant to mitigate the
impact of a major highway closing. I drove 4 of the 6 routes that
had 30-minute frequency, and I heard riders express their appreciation for the improved service. It was also worth noting that word-of-mouth seemed to be the best way to communicate with passengers. Later that day, I made an announcement on a different route that also got improved frequency. The overwhelmingly positive response from the riders blew me away. One passenger exclaimed, "Now that is a step up!"

**Successful Advocacy Efforts, Locally and Nationally**

I was nervous on the cold January night in 2017, when I first stood up to advocate for public transportation at City Hall.

At the time, there was a public outcry from newly redesigned bus routes. Through coalition building and policy advocacy, we were successful in expanding night and weekend service on several routes. We were able to have bus routes added to Google Maps to improve wayfinding and trip planning. We even created a short film to educate the public and conducted a rider survey. These efforts are a glimpse of the truth that implementing changes in the bus system is impactful and possible.

Consider the issue of bus fare. From my experience, I see bus fare as a regressive tax. I witnessed passengers begging for change to pay the fare. I know neighbors who forgo trips due to lack of bus fare. In 2016, with the help of a student, I wrote a policy brief of fare-free transit. We discovered that the Transportation Research Board with the National Academies found many positives to fare-free transit, which can increase ridership by 20-60 percent. Eliminating fare collection speeds up boarding times and increases transit efficiency. Although the public subsidy and total cost might increase, there is a significant drop in the subsidy per passenger. Cities with fare-free transit have been recognized as the most appealing and livable cities in the country.

Fare-free transit can look different in each community. Some route-specific examples: ‘The Orbit’, a public transit service in Tempe, Arizona, has multiple fare-free routes connecting the residential areas to local destinations surrounding Arizona State University. The Bull City Connector is a fare-free hybrid electric bus service that runs between Duke University campus, Duke medical facilities, and the downtown Durham area. Major employers can subsidize their employees’ fare. St. Luke’s Health System in Boise, Idaho, has an Employee Transportation Alternatives Program which allows employees to ride the ValleyRide transit system for free using their ID badge. University of Wisconsin-Madison Transportation Services gives employees bus passes for unlimited rides on the Madison Metro Transit.

My favorite approach is the comprehensive Fare-Free Systems because I have lived it, during graduate school. The Chapel Hill Transit and AppalCart are both completely fare-free transit systems in North Carolina, serving multiple towns as well as major universities, (UNC-Chapel Hill and Appalachian State University, respectively). Chapel Hill Transit, in particular, is noted for
contributing to Chapel Hill being named the 2009 “Most Livable City” in America.

As an example, here is what it might look like to implement free transit locally, in Winston-Salem:

A route-specific fare-free implementation via a fare-free corridor called “The Health Connector” that would be comprised of two important routes within the city system and would circulate on a 30-minute frequency. Both of these routes provide access to important health assets—hospitals, social services, mental health facilities, grocery stores, a DMV, pharmacies, a dialysis center—and have demonstrated demand in current ridership. The Connector would also pass through downtown, where it has potential to connect riders to the rich civic, cultural, and political resources in the city.

This fare-free corridor would require $353,895 in funding to cover the current budgeted fares of the two routes. As a fare-free corridor, ridership is projected to reach over 515,206 rides in a year. The project assumes a 40 percent increase in ridership \[(\text{Route 87} = 21,546 \times 12) + (\text{Route 107} = 9,121 \times 12) \times .40 = 515,206\]. The aim of a fare-free transit implementation like The Corridor is to address the social determinants impacting health and access to care. As we’ve seen from implementation in other cities, success is possible. As society faces the pressures of bank mergers, global acquisitions, and healthcare consolidation, enacting evidence-based policies that support a growing number of citizens, who in turn gain access to the benefits of public transportation, is a good local investment.

Public transportation will look different in every community. However, the fundamental purpose of affording mobility options remains a critical social determinant of health. Expanding the reach of the bus system and increasing its utility will only strengthen the health of a community.
A Call to Consider

My experience behind the wheel left me with questions about how systems and structures such as class privilege, privatization of government services, economic globalization, and racism affect how we deliver public transportation services.

Why do we allow the lifeline service of transportation to flourish for the car owner and languish for others? Why do we expect...
individual self-sufficiency when communities—and their health determinants—are innately interconnected? Why do we create interventions based on individual thinking and expect a different result? Why do we say to the more vulnerable, ‘you change, not us’?

Author Andy Crouch writes that community building requires a paradoxical mix of strength and weakness. He describes this paradox in a 2 x 2 chart that depicts the need for increased authority and increased vulnerability to create flourishing. I see this paradox at work within public transportation.

Crouch defines authority as “the capacity for meaningful action.” My own authority comes to mind when I realize it is a privilege to choose my vocation and have the financial security to take risks professionally. I am grateful that I’m able to learn new skills.

As a bus driver, I saw passengers exercising their authority through acts of kindness and mutual support of fellow riders. I saw their fortitude and resilience as they daily traveled in a system that affords few amenities. I saw how that infrequent and often unreliable system robbed them of authority.

Crouch defines vulnerability as "exposure to meaningful risk." Becoming a bus driver caused me to be afraid, to fall out of my comfort zone. I was often met warmly by passengers who aided me with their reassurance.

I see exposure to risk in the suffering of the young and frail in the toxic environment of the transit center, which remains full of second-hand smoke and oil spills. I see the anxiety of passengers when connections are missed, causing them to be late for jobs where employers are not sympathetic to the whims of the system. I hear their complaints about routes that don't have weekend service constraining them to either being altogether stranded or to use costly alternatives to reach low-paying jobs. I see vulnerability.

I recommend Crouch's book Strong and Weak: Embracing a Life of Love, Risk and True Flourishing because of its penetrating look at community flourishing. Public transportation has the rich potential for being an environment in which we affirm the dignity of others. You might be shocked to learn that the act of withdrawing is the cruel opposite of flourishing.

I hope to draw attention to bus riders’ suffering in a city dominated by a privileged car-centric perspective. I hope to inspire investment in public transportation as a community asset, thereby promoting community development and economic mobility as a social justice issue, so that more residents can flourish in my city and yours.

A Call to See for Yourself

Check out your community’s transportation profile. Your city’s profile information is available online at the National Transit Database. Accessing your community’s profile can help you get a better idea of the value proposition of public transportation. You
can look at the Census and the American Community Service data to find out the number of cars in households by census block groups. You can look at the CDC’s Cities initiative to access maps of health indicators.

Learn how transportation moves through your health system. Local health systems can work with their HR contacts and people leaders to find out how public transportation affects their employees and patient access. For example, our medical center runs two shuttles directly to the main terminal in the evening, to help employees connect to buses and get home. As a transit rider, I witnessed how much of a time savings such a shuttle was and how often it was full of passengers. Riding transit forced me to engage with the shuttle services and gave me an opportunity to ride alongside employees with whom I would not otherwise interact.

Medical centers often have a person responsible for assisting with discharging patients and figuring out how to help transport them home. Meeting with these employees and learning from their experience as a transportation resource is helpful. My city set up a matching grant application for nonprofits that help citizens who are in need with transportation. Finding out if discount bus passes can be purchased through such a program can stretch limited resources. Some patients can be discharged with a bus pass. Knowing the routes and schedules for the bus that services your medical center is important. Using Google Maps transit trip planner functionality can help you plan trips and answer logistical transit questions. Making sure the route schedule is posted with the shelter at your facility is a simple courtesy.

Ride the bus. Riding the bus yourself is eye-opening. Try commuting from your home to work. Notice what you see along the way and how you have to prepare for your trip. Did it seem like a logistical nightmare? Can you imagine doing it every day? Try it a second time and see how the two experiences compare with each other. Was it easier the second time? As you are able, ride a third time to look for patterns or familiar sights. Did you recognize the driver? Did you see a fellow passenger you remember? Did you hear any conversations conveying passengers’ perspectives of the bus?

What did you see and hear and learn along the way?
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Phillip Summers began working in community development in 2001, teaching health and physical education in Belize. He holds a Master of Public Health from UNC-Chapel Hill. Phillip is interested in social justice, racial reconciliation, and active living by design. He has more than 30 co-authored publications from community-based participatory research with immigrant farmworkers and construction workers. While doing community-engaged research, public transportation captured his imagination and passion for creating systems that enable health. He lives with his family in Winston-Salem, NC, and worked as a bus driver for the public transportation system.

Stakeholder Health is a movement of people in healthcare systems, along with others, who are learning to cross the sidewalks around their hospitals in order to share in the life of their communities. Learn more at stakeholderhealth.org.