

**NYU**University Relations
and Public Affairs**For Immediate Release:**Monday, Sept. 27, 2021
N-XX, 2021-22**Contact:**Rachel Harrison
212-998-6797
rachel.harrison@nyu.edu**NYU Public Health Researchers Receive NIH Grant to Protect Transit Workers from COVID-19***\$4 million will fund collaborative research involving transit workers to improve safety and build resilience*

NYU School of Global Public Health researchers have been awarded a five-year, roughly \$4 million grant from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to study efforts to protect New York City transit workers from COVID-19 and how these infection prevention and control programs impact the health and well-being of frontline workers. Through participatory research that will bring transit workers and other stakeholders to the table to work alongside the research team, the project seeks to identify ways to reduce occupational health disparities and improve preparedness for public-facing workers against infectious diseases.

The research is being conducted in coordination with the [Transport Workers Union \(TWU\) Local 100](#), representing more than 40,000 New York City bus and subway workers, and builds on [a pilot study](#) of transit workers conducted by NYU and TWU Local 100 in August 2020.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, New York City's public transportation kept running, enabling the city to continue functioning and getting essential workers to their jobs. But the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) workers, who operate and maintain the city's subways and buses, have been subject to heightened risks, including exposure to COVID-19, and high rates of hospitalizations and deaths.

[Last year's pilot study of transit workers](#) revealed that nearly a quarter (24%) of the 645 workers who completed the survey said they had COVID-19 themselves, and the majority (76%) knew someone who died of COVID-19. Workers also experienced verbal abuse and physical assaults by riders over masks, leading 71% of those surveyed to feel fearful for their personal safety at work.

"The pandemic thrust transit workers into the role of frontline workers, even though they lacked the training, experience, equipment, and supervision available to other frontline workers such as health professionals and emergency medical services," said Robyn Gershon, clinical professor of epidemiology at NYU School of Global Public Health and the grant's principal investigator. "We need to improve how we protect transit workers by providing safe working environments for them and building resilience by ensuring that they know effective ways to help protect themselves from infectious diseases in the workplace."

The pilot study, which was recently [published in the Journal of Emergency Management](#), demonstrates a need to improve emergency preparedness for frontline workers and ensure that

they are adequately protected from infectious diseases and other hazards. The researchers found that transit workers in the study who reported difficulty accessing personal protective equipment, such as masks and disposable gloves, were more likely to report a history of infection with COVID-19. Transit workers who had difficulty obtaining protective gear were also more likely to report feeling fearful and having mental health symptoms such as anxiety and depression.

"We're grateful that NYU won this \$4 million federal grant so it can continue this important research and recommend ways to better protect transit workers' health. This is groundbreaking research that will be helpful in the ongoing battle with COVID-19 and other infectious diseases that might emerge in the future," said Tony Utano, president of TWU Local 100.

The NIH grant ([1R01NR020174-01](#)) will support a series of new surveys of transit workers to capture real-time shifts in the pandemic and ongoing changes in federal, state, local, and organizational policies and practices, particularly infection prevention and control programs involving masks, testing, vaccines, ventilation, and training. The researchers will analyze the impact of these changes—for instance, New York State's vaccine or testing mandate for transit workers—on the workforce's outcomes, including COVID-19 cases, mental health, and resilience.

The surveys will inform ongoing "participatory action research" teams made up of transit workers, academics, rider representatives, and other key stakeholders. Together, these teams will formulate data-driven strategies to increase the effectiveness of interventions, reduce occupational disparities in public-facing workers, and further support resilience in the face of an evolving pandemic.

The findings will be disseminated in an effort to shape policies and practices that can better protect essential workers during any pandemic, including supporting workers and their mental health and ensuring that the workforce is better prepared for future public health events.

"The lessons we learn through our research on reducing occupational risk during dangerous health events will be helpful in protecting other public-facing work populations as well," said Gershon.

Gershon, an occupational and environmental health scientist, leads a research team with extensive experience working with unions and frontline workers employed in high-risk jobs. Gershon has conducted many studies focused on worker safety, including emergency evacuation of high-rise buildings (following the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center), needlestick prevention and safety in hospitals, psychosocial work stress in law enforcement, and a previous collaboration with TWU Local 100 on transit workers, noise exposure, and hearing loss. For the last two decades she has also conducted numerous public health disaster studies.

Working with Gershon is [Alexis Merdjanoff](#), clinical assistant professor of social and behavioral sciences at NYU School of Global Public Health and an expert on disasters and inequality, and [Rachael Piltch-Loeb](#), associate research scientist at NYU School of Global Public Health and postdoctoral preparedness fellow at Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, and an expert on emergency preparedness and crisis communications. Additional expertise will be provided to the team by Yale epidemiologist and infectious disease expert David Vlahov; Beverly-Xaviera Watkins, an expert on health disparities and community-engaged research, and the daughter of a retired transit worker; and industrial hygienist Jonathan Rosen.

The project's Senior Scientific Advisory Board includes Donna Shelley of NYU School of Global Public Health; Denis Nash of CUNY School of Public Health; Chandra Ford of UCLA Fielding School of Public Health; and Barbara Israel of University of Michigan School of Public Health.

About the NYU School of Global Public Health

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