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Transit is out of sync with where the jobs are

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Nearly seven out of ten residents of large metropolitan areas live in neighborhoods served by some form of transit. Try to use transit to get to work, however, and you'll find that most jobs are unreachable, even if you're willing to devote an hour and a half to the trip — one way.

Those are among the conclusions of a newly completed Brookings Institution examination of the routes and schedules of 371 transit systems in the nation's 100 largest metropolitan areas. The degree of job access that's now achievable via transit is not good enough, asserts Robert Puentes, director of the Infrastructure Initiative at Brookings' Metropolitan Policy Program.

The report, [*Missed Opportunity: Transit and Jobs in Metropolitan Areas*](#), finds that lower-income Americans face the greatest difficulty in using transit to reach jobs. Only about one-quarter of jobs in low- and middle-skill industries such as retail and manufacturing "are accessible via transit within 90 minutes for the typical metropolitan commuter," says the report, written by Puentes, Adie Tomer, Elizabeth Kneebone, and Alan Berube.

Higher-skill jobs in industries like health care and finance are slightly more accessible; about one-third of them can be reached by bus or other transit — if you're willing to devote up to 90 minutes to each trip. (The report points out that 90 minutes is three times the amount of time that a typical American commuter — using a car, bus, bike, or other means — spends on getting to work.)

A large part of the problem is that when jobs are scattered through the suburbs, as has been the trend for many years, they're difficult to reach by transit, much of which still operates on a hub-and-spoke layout focused on central business districts.

The West is best

Transit prospects for workers are best in the biggest metro areas and in the West. Fifteen of the 20 metro areas rating highest in transit coverage and job access are in the West. [Research Director Alan Berube](#) attributes this partly to geographical constraints — many Western regions are hemmed in by mountains, deserts, or other barriers. He also ascribes it partly to the willingness, in recent years, of Denver, Salt Lake City, Portland, and other Western areas to invest in rail or other transit services.

Big metro areas such as New York and Washington perform well for workers reliant on transit. But "established transit systems don't necessarily do a better job than newer systems," the report finds. "Chicago and Philadelphia, home to two of the oldest and best-known public transit systems in the country, rank lower in terms of job access than newer networks, such as Denver and Los Angeles."

The southeastern US performs worst, Berube says. “Fifteen of the 20 lowest-ranked metro areas are in the South.” In Birmingham, Alabama, in Greenville, South Carolina, and in many other Southern metro areas, transit systems and the work force suffer what Bruce Katz, head of Brookings’ metropolitan program, calls a “spatial mismatch.”

The report contains links to well-organized information on each of the 100 largest metro areas. A one-page [display for the Chicago area](#), for example, shows that 100 percent of the working-age population of Chicago is near a transit stop, whereas 69 percent of working-age suburbanites are near a transit stop. Job access in the city is 37 percent, compared to 14 percent in the suburbs. The median wait for a rush-hour transit vehicle is 3.3 minutes in Chicago, but more than four times as long — 14.4 minutes — in the suburbs.

The trends identified in the report have three broad implications for leaders at the local, regional, state, and national levels, the authors say:

- Transportation leaders should make access to jobs an explicit priority in their spending and service decisions, especially given the budget pressures they face.
- Metro leaders should coordinate strategies on land use, economic development, and housing with transit decisions to ensure that transit reaches more people and more jobs efficiently.
- Federal officials should collect and disseminate standardized transit data to enable public, private, and nonprofit entities to make more informed decisions.

Federal officials respond

In a [discussion on Thursday](#) immediately after the study’s release, HUD Secretary Shaun Donovan and Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood talked with Katz about how the Obama administration’s policies deal with current impediments to transit’s usefulness.

With rising gasoline prices and the “environmental imperative” of global warming, “we have the stars aligned” for greater national attention for transit, Katz suggested. “Is this,” he asked, “a transit moment?”

“I think Americans are going to rely on transit as gasoline prices go up,” LaHood replied. The administration has made “huge investments” in transit, he said. TIGER grants are helping communities establish streetcar, light-rail, and other transit services. “The president’s five-year [transportation] plan has a 127 percent increase in transit funding.”

Katz identified one of the chief obstacles to linking homes and jobs: a “major employment decentralization” that has occurred in the US even while there has been a downtown resurgence. “A large portion of jobs are 10 miles away from the central business district,” he observed. “A large percentage of transit connections don’t go there. You have to retrofit those transportation systems.”

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, he said, “has started us down the road toward that,” Katz said, but to truly overcome the mismatch, the country may have to “shift to a very different mode of development.”

“There are a lot of lessons on the housing front,” Donovan said. He noted that the administration’s transit-oriented development (TOD) agenda began with a focus on housing, and “the housing crisis has focused the market even more on that.”

The places least connected to transit have lost real estate value at the greatest rate, Donovan said, reiterating a trend frequently cited by smart growth advocates. Mixed-use development is harder to finance and develop than single uses, Donovan acknowledged, but “this is where the Sustainable Community Initiative comes in.

In support of his belief in the importance of transit, Donovan pointed out that “the average family spends 52 percent of its income on housing and transportation.” He also observed that people increasingly want to live where they can walk to their destinations or use transit to get there. “Industry and capital,” he said, “are following people to where they want to be.”

As for whether there’s now an opportunity for a “transformative investment” in transit, Katz said that in view of the struggling economy and government budget problems, “we’re not quite in an investment moment right now.”

“Long-range, we need to do a much better job of coordinating transit with housing and commercial and industrial growth, and we need to consider many possible transportation alternatives,” said Tomer, a senior research analyst at Brookings.

“Public transit may be the answer in parts of some metros; in others, it may be company-contracted transportation, or ride-sharing, or carpooling,” Puentes elaborated. “The strategy needs to fit the situation.” The report’s authors warned that now, when many people are hard-pressed to find work or to afford private transportation, is not the time to cut transit service.

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