

How Can Cities Create More Equitable Transportation Systems?

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The [suburbanization of poverty in many regions has exacerbated transportation inequities](#) as suburban areas are usually not served by frequent and reliable transportation.

Transit-oriented developments have gained attention for increasing sustainable population growth but can also lead to [gentrification and displacement of low-income communities](#) who could benefit from transit access.

Transportation decisions should be made through [deep and meaningful community engagement](#) with low-income and historically excluded residents and rooted in [an understanding of the legacy of racist policies and actions](#) that has led to racial inequity in transportation.

All Americans need some form of transportation to access employment, education, health care, and other services. But not everyone has equal access to high-quality, reliable, and safe transportation.

To understand the barriers to transportation and to identify ways transportation systems can become more equitable, we studied four metropolitan regions, each a distinct type in its transportation infrastructure, sprawl, fiscal health, population growth, and housing costs. Through data analysis and interviews with community leaders, we found that these varied cities share common barriers to equity—and common solutions.

DEFINING TRANSPORTATION EQUITY

Perceptions of transportation equity vary by neighborhood, region, and individual experience. For this work, we created a definition of transportation equity in collaboration with community and public leaders from our four case study regions:

Transportation equity means that transportation decisions are made with deep and meaningful community input that leads to transportation networks and land use structures that support health and well-being, environmental sustainability, and equitable access to resources and opportunities.

EXPLORING TRANSPORTATION EQUITY IN FOUR METRO REGIONS

For each metro region, we interviewed government officials, transit authorities, planners, and advocates to learn more about their region's transportation norms and barriers to providing equitable transportation.

Seattle

The Seattle-Tacoma-Bellevue Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) includes the three most populous counties in Washington State: King, Snohomish, and Pierce. The region has one of the largest public transit systems in the country, but a recent surge in high-income residents has increased income disparities, promoted gentrification, and reduced affordable housing near transit-rich areas. Challenges with coordinating several transit systems, providing safe pedestrian and bike routes, and weathering state budget cuts all contribute to Seattle's transportation inequity.

Lansing

The Lansing-East Lansing MSA includes the City of Lansing, which houses the state capital, and East Lansing, which includes Michigan State University. While the Capital Area Transportation Authority offers bus routes and paratransit throughout Lansing, interviewees stated that a car-centric culture prevails because of the state's automotive industry and the city's lower population density. Rural areas have particularly limited transportation options, and the area faces challenges coordinating transit investment and service decisions across jurisdictions.

Baltimore

The Baltimore-Columbia-Towson MSA includes Baltimore City, Baltimore County, and five other Maryland counties. The area is highly segregated across race and income, leading to inequities in transportation access. The current system efficiently moves people in and out of downtown Baltimore but has limited ability to connect residents to opportunities outside the urban core. A plan to connect the major light rail lines was canceled in 2015 because the governor prioritized highways in less-populated areas of the state.

Nashville

The Nashville-Davidson-Murfreesboro-Franklin MSA encompasses 13 counties, including the principal cities of Nashville, Murfreesboro, and Franklin. Rapid population growth in the region has brought increased traffic congestion, prompting calls for new investment in public transportation. But a car-centric culture and stigma around the safety and quality of public transportation have made it challenging to raise funding for investments in transit systems.

DEVELOPING MORE INCLUSIVE TRANSPORTATION SYSTEMS

Despite the four regions' differences, common solutions for providing equitable transportation emerged.

1. Metro regions need to **define transportation equity in partnership with historically excluded residents**.
2. Transportation departments need **dedicated funding sources** to allow for equitable and innovative transportation decisions.
3. Transportation decisions need to **include meaningful community engagement** with low-income and other historically excluded residents.
4. Local land use, zoning, and housing agencies **must coordinate to ensure that transportation investments increase equity** rather than exacerbate disparities.
5. Land use planning (particularly relating to housing) **must keep equity as a guiding principle** to make equitable transportation feasible.
6. Cities should **collect better data to track transportation equity and create tools to help them make transportation decisions** with equity as a key consideration.

Equitable transportation can help bridge disparities and connect people with jobs, resources, and other services. Developing a shared approach to transportation equity and measuring it over time will be key to achieving these goals.

This fact sheet draws from the Urban Institute report *Access to Opportunity through Equitable Transportation*, www.urban.org/research/publication/access-opportunity-through-equitable-transportation, and the online feature "The Unequal Commute: Examining Inequities in Four Metro Areas' Transportation Systems," www.urban.org/features/unequal-commute.