

# It's About Time: The Transit Time Penalty and Its Racial Implications



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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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**Neighborhoods Organizing for Change** (NOC) is a grassroots, member-led organization building power in under-resourced communities and communities of color across the Twin Cities. Together, NOC members fight for racial and economic justice.

[www.mnnoc.org](http://www.mnnoc.org)

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**TakeAction Minnesota** is a statewide network of people working to realize racial and economic equity across Minnesota. TakeAction Minnesota does this by connecting people and organizations to each other, turning someone's individual desire for change—to pass a more progressive policy or law, to improve an institution, to change a harmful idea or perception—into the broad public action that makes change happen where it wasn't possible going it alone.

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**ISAIAH** is an organization of congregations, clergy and people of faith throughout Minnesota working together to promote racial and economic justice. ISAIAH is a member of the PICO National Network.

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# It's About Time: The Transit Time Penalty and Its Racial Implications

Neighborhoods Organizing for Change  
TakeAction Minnesota  
ISAIAH  
Center for Popular Democracy

## Abstract

A well-funded and well-designed transit system helps increase access to opportunity across a region and connect residents to each other, jobs, education, grocery shopping, health care, and recreation. However, a transit system that does not serve current housing, employment, and education patterns exacerbates existing racial and economic disparities.

This paper focuses on the role that transit planning and funding can play in addressing one aspect of these disparities: the transit time penalty, which is the additional time required to travel between two points by public transportation, compared to travel by car.

**In the Twin Cities region, transit riders of color lose about four work weeks more per year than white drivers in travel time to work.** Metro Transit's *Service Improvement Plan* thoughtfully addresses many of the factors exacerbating the transit time penalty, including the introduction of Arterial Bus Rapid Transit, which will speed local routes along the cities' busiest streets by as much as 30 percent over today's service. But these improvements can only happen with enough funding. If transit funding is cut, the time penalty is certain to worsen. Funding cuts proposed by House Republicans will result in lost service—longer waits, more delays, longer travel times, and more crowded buses and trains.

The funding plans proposed by the Governor and Senate leadership frontload the investments in increased bus service, addressing the dire need for quick action. The Metro Transit plan calls for roughly half of the service and budget increases to happen in the first three years of the plan—an aggressive investment that will stimulate a 16-point increase in riders over those three years and will lay the foundations for a 42-percent rise in ridership over the next 15 years.

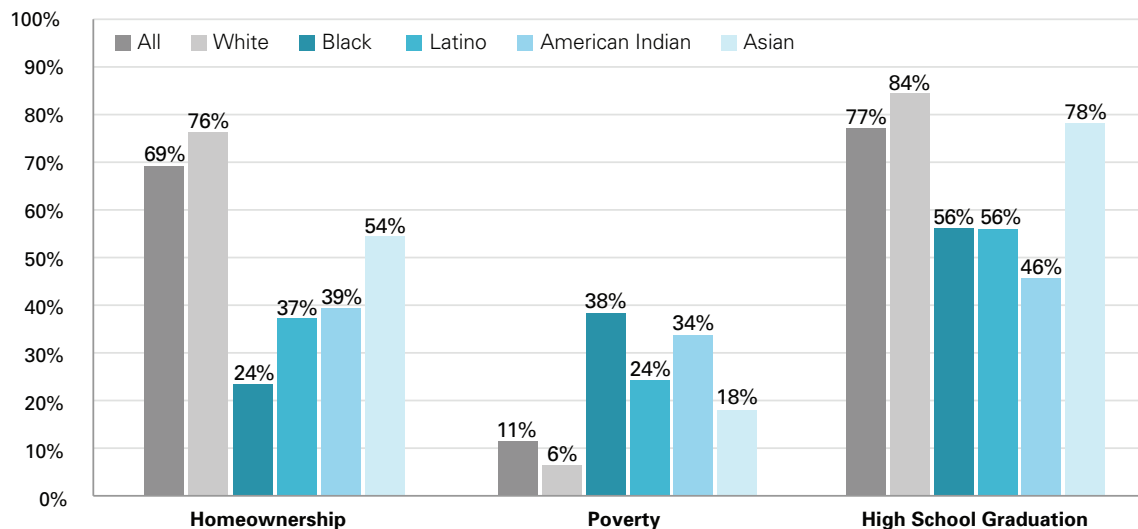
**We urge the legislature to adopt the transit funding plan that will enable the full implementation of Metro Transit's *Service Improvement Plan*.**

## Introduction

A well-funded and well-designed transit system helps increase access to opportunity across a region and connect residents to each other, jobs, education, grocery shopping, healthcare, and recreation. For low-income residents, for whom car ownership may be out of reach, public transportation may be the only way to access opportunities outside their immediate neighborhoods. However, a transit system that does not serve the current housing, employment, and education patterns exacerbates existing racial and economic disparities.

Racial disparities have long shadowed the Twin Cities region. The region has long been considered one of the best places in the US to live both overall<sup>1</sup> and on a range of measures—quality of life,<sup>2</sup> happiness,<sup>3</sup> health<sup>4</sup> and fitness,<sup>5</sup> family life,<sup>6</sup> and business and careers.<sup>7</sup> However, the region has some of the most dramatic racial disparities in the country: labor force participation, income, and educational attainment rates among communities of color reflect sharp disparities of opportunity and outcome.

### Twin Cities Homeownership, Poverty, and High School Graduation Rates, by Racial and Ethnic Group



Source: Minnesota Compass

Without active policy-making to ensure the prosperity of the region is shared, the expansion of existing disparities among the region's fastest growing populations will erode the overall quality of life. This paper focuses particularly on the role that transit planning and funding can play in addressing one aspect of these disparities: the transit time penalty.

Lack of transit exacerbates racial and economic disparities in two ways. First, the lack of transit service forces dependence on costly auto ownership.<sup>8</sup> Only approximately 15% of jobs in the Twin Cities region are well served by transit, resulting in working families in the Twin Cities spending more on transportation than on housing.<sup>9</sup>

Second, inadequate public transportation results in a costly transit time penalty—defined as the additional time that is often required to travel between two points by public transportation, compared to travel by car. The transit time penalty disproportionately impacts communities of color due to the dynamic interplay of geographic segregation and the disparate rates of public transit use, which we

discuss in the next section. In the Twin Cities area, Black, Asian, and Latino workers who rely on public transit spend the equivalent of roughly 4 work weeks per year more on their commute than white solo drivers.

The Metro Transit *Service Improvement Plan 2015-2030* (SIP) thoughtfully addresses many of the factors exacerbating the transit time penalty. Indeed, the plan rightly focuses on how to expand and realign service within the current service area in order to increase ridership (particularly for trips other than commutes to work) and decrease travel time. By focusing on improving the connections within, increasing the frequency of, and expanding the coverage of existing bus service, the transit authority has clearly set the goal of improving transit equity, which will contribute to greater equity throughout the region. However, if transit funding is not increased to make this plan a reality—the House Republicans are currently proposing to cut transit funding—racial and economic disparities in the region will worsen.

## Transit Time Penalty in Commutes

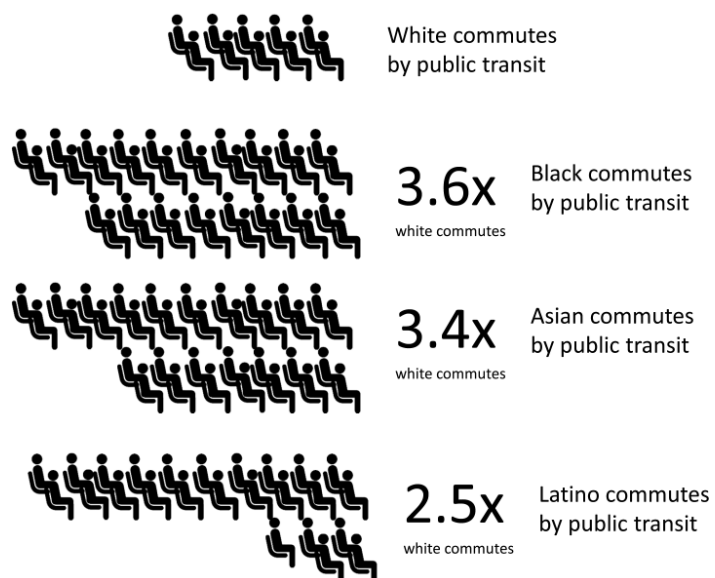
Transit has many individual and community benefits—from improved safety and cost savings to enhanced personal and environmental health. However, across the nation, trips to work by public transportation take twice as long as trips to work by single-occupancy vehicle.<sup>10</sup> While 68 percent of commutes by people who drove alone last less than 30 minutes, more than half (53 percent) of public transportation commutes are 45 minutes or longer. These travel-mode disparities have racial outcomes: national data show that people of color rely on public transportation for their commutes at significantly higher rates than whites.<sup>11</sup>

Geographic segregation and the disparate rates of public transit use result in time penalties for commuters of color. Across modes of transportation, compared to white workers in the US:

- Asian-American workers spend almost 29 more hours (at the mean) a year commuting.
- African-American workers spend almost 23.2 more hours (at the mean) a year commuting.
- Latino workers spend almost 15.2 more hours (at the mean) a year commuting.<sup>12</sup>

Recently two academic reports have showed that *sufficient access to public transportation has a stronger effect on the employment and income chances of a community than many other factors*, including elementary school test scores, crime, or the family composition of the neighborhood.<sup>13</sup>

### Rate of Public Transit Commutes, By Race: US, 2009



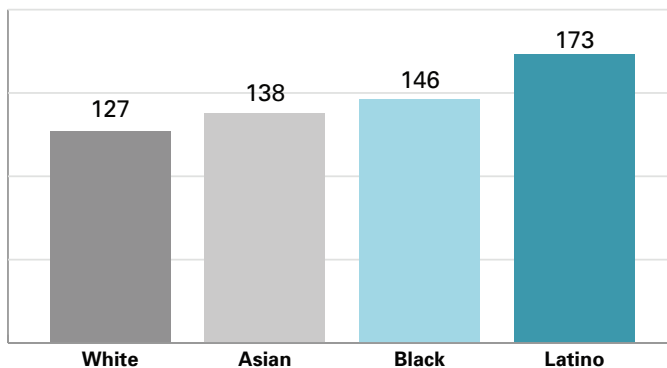
Source: US Census Bureau, *Commuting in the United States: 2009*.

## Commuter Transit Time Penalty in the Twin Cities Region

In the Twin Cities region, the transit time penalty is especially pronounced and contributes to unequal opportunities and outcomes in the region.<sup>14</sup> Residents of the Twin Cities commute by public transit at rates (7.4 percent in Hennepin County and 5.9 percent in Ramsey County) significantly in excess of both the Minnesota (3.4 percent) and US averages (3.6 percent).<sup>15</sup>

The transit time penalty becomes more evident when the length of transit commutes is compared to the commutes of white workers driving alone. Infrequent service, indirect routes, delays, overcrowded vehicles, and insufficient shelter at bus stops contribute to the transit time penalty both quantitatively (adding minutes to a trip) and qualitatively (increasing the stress of the experience).<sup>16</sup>

### Twin Cities Annual Transit Time Penalty: Additional Commute Time for Transit Users Compared to White Drivers (in hours), 2013



Source: ACS Public Use Micro Data, 2013.

In other words, every year Black and Asian transit users spend the equivalent of about 3.5 weeks of work more than white drivers on their commutes alone. For Latino transit users, it is nearly 4.5 weeks. **That means that, for a month a year more than white drivers, transit commuters of color are unavailable for working, helping children with homework, helping parents get to the doctor, running errands, volunteering in their communities, or participating in their churches.**

Transit times are typically longer for all users of public transit. However, white transit riders as a group lose less time than other riders. And, the time penalty affects a smaller proportion of white commuters than Black and Latino commuters. While 5 percent of whites and Minnesotans of Asian descent commute by public transit, 8 percent of Latinos, 10 percent of Blacks, and 29 percent of American Indians commute to work on public transit.

### Keonna Laury



Keonna Laury, 17, is a full-time high school student and also works full time at Burger King. After her mom was laid off for taking too many sick days as a cancer patient, Keonna became the sole breadwinner for her family of seven. Keonna, who was named Employee of the Year last year, commutes two hours each way from her home in north Minneapolis to the Burger King in south Minneapolis, spending a total of about 20 hours a week in transit. By the time she gets off work, it's late at night, so if she misses a bus or train she often has to wait an hour for the next one. Between leaving work, finishing her homework, and leaving for school in the morning, Keonna often only gets a few hours of sleep. Reducing the transit time penalty would give Keonna more time to concentrate on her schoolwork and more time to sleep.

### Jacqueline Moren

The transit time penalty burdens trips other than commutes, particularly when those trips are at non-peak times. Jacqueline Moren, a member of Our Saviour's Lutheran Church in the Phillips neighborhood of Minneapolis, lives near University and Fairview in St. Paul. She recently moved there partly because she does not own a car and the location is served by many transit routes. She attends a weekly Bible study at her church, which is less than six miles away and takes just 12 minutes by car. But she takes the Green Line into Minneapolis and then a bus to the church—a trip that takes one hour each way.



Furthermore, in the seven-county metropolitan region, many bus commuters outside of the racially diverse core cities and inner-ring suburbs rely on the opt-out suburban bus services, some of which subsidize each trip more heavily and offer coach buses and wi-fi,<sup>17</sup> amenities that facilitate relaxation or work during transit and, therefore, mitigate some of the penalty in the time difference.<sup>18</sup>

## Transit Time Penalty in Action

A sample of trips from concentrated residential areas to areas with high employment density show the impact of the transit time penalty. For people who rely on transit, otherwise quick trips become long endeavors.

### Sample Commutes from Residential Areas to Employment Hubs, with Transit Time

Point of Origin	Destination Name	Transit Time	Driving Time	Transit Time Penalty
City of Savage	Mall of America, Bloomington	64	30	214%
Apple Valley	Burnsville Center	48	12	400%
Burnsville	Burnsville Center	31	12	258%
St. Paul's East Side	Mall of America, Bloomington	53	28	192%
Bloomington	Mall of America, Bloomington	35	13	269%
Richfield-Fort Snelling-Minneapolis	Downtown Minneapolis	35	23	155%
Brooklyn Center and Brooklyn Park	Commons Hotel, University of Minnesota East Bank Campus	74	22	336%
St. Paul's North End	MSP Airport	47	16	294%
North Minneapolis	Regions Hospital, St. Paul	68	17	410%
South St. Paul	Downtown Minneapolis	68	32	213%

*\*All trips have an 8:00 am Monday departure time. All times are in minutes.*

*Source: Met Council.*

The penalty is exacerbated by the socio-economic segregation of the region. According to the Metropolitan Council, the 7-county regional planning authority, “45 percent of the region’s low-income households of color live in concentrated poverty, compared to only 12 percent of white households.”<sup>19</sup> Two-thirds of residents in areas of concentrated poverty are people of color,<sup>20</sup> although they make up only 24 percent of the Twin Cities-area population.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, for workers who travel from the central cities out to suburbs, the service design in many of the opt-out transit systems constrains reverse commutes, lengthening such trips and limiting the viability of employment in those areas for people who live at a distance.

### Mary Spaulding

The transit time penalty does not only impact commuters. Once a week, Mary Spaulding needs to attend an evening meeting in Eagan, MN. Departing from her home near Victoria and University in St. Paul, her commute takes one hour and 20 minutes.



She rides the train to downtown Minneapolis and connects with an express bus to head south. Her ride home after 8pm takes even longer. At that hour, she has to route back through the Mall of America then go to downtown Minneapolis and then head back to St. Paul. This three-hour and 20-minute commute costs her a lot of time every Tuesday. The drive-time to the same location to Eagan is usually just 20 to 25 minutes.

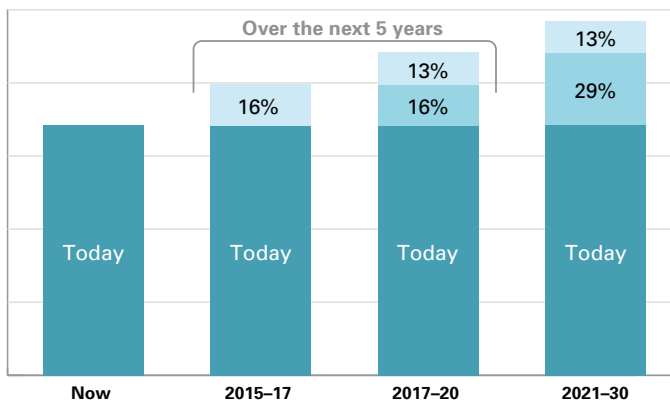
## Metro Transit Plan Will Reduce the Transit Time Penalty and Increase Ridership

Metro Transit’s adopted *Service Improvement Plan 2015-2030* (SIP) thoughtfully addresses many of factors exacerbating the transit time penalty. Indeed, the plan rightly focuses on how to expand and realign service within the current service area in order to increase ridership generally and decrease travel time for both commutes and other trips. By focusing on improving the connections within, increasing the frequency of, and expanding the coverage of existing bus service, the transit authority has clearly set the goal of improving transit equity, which will contribute to greater equity throughout the region.

In particular, the Metro Transit plans to introduce Arterial Bus Rapid Transit (ABRT)—that is, bus service along the cities’ busiest streets that will complement existing service with lines that will make fewer stops and allow pre-boarding ticket purchase, transit signal priority to allow buses to move through intersections more rapidly, and physical adjustments. ABRT is designed to make local routes faster by as much as 30 percent compared to today’s bus service. Importantly, this bus service has the amenities that will help attract users who might otherwise choose to drive, while having the routes that will also serve transit-dependent riders.<sup>22</sup>

The plan adopted by the Metropolitan Council and Metro Transit and supported in additional funding proposals by Governor Dayton and Senate leadership frontloads the investments in increasing bus service, addressing the dire need for quick action. The plan calls for roughly half of the service and budget increases to happen in the first three years of the plan. That aggressive investment will stimulate a 16-point increase in riders over those three years and will lay the foundation for a 42-percent rise in ridership over the next 15 years.<sup>23</sup>

### Aggressive Investment Now Will Increase Ridership by 42% Over 15 Years



Source: ACS Public Use Micro Data, 2013.

42-percent rise in ridership over the next 15 years.<sup>23</sup>

The interventions are strategically planned for areas that are densely populated, have concentrated employment, and have a good level of pedestrian access. The plan is particularly focused on connecting people with low incomes, people of color, people with disabilities, and people without access to cars to jobs, education institutions, key destinations, and other transit routes. With this focus on connecting residential areas to concentrated

employment areas, and the particular attention to lower-income communities, the Metro Transit plan will increase access and equity in the region.

## Stripping Funding Will Further Harm Communities of Color

Over the past decade, transit funding in the metropolitan area has been essentially stagnant, while ridership has increased 14%.<sup>24</sup> Keeping funding flat will continue to exacerbate racial and economic disparities.

If transit funding is cut from the Metropolitan Council/Metro Transit budget, the transit time penalty is certain to worsen. Bus service, which forms the backbone of the metropolitan area transit system with nearly 90% of rides, will be particularly hard hit.



The 2015 legislative session has only a few days remaining before its constitutional deadline.

The transportation funding plan proposed in the House Republican transportation omnibus bill relies on shifting about \$1 billion of revenues from the general fund over the next four years to fund road and bridge construction. In the meantime, the House plan would result in a 25-percent cut in transit service—resulting in longer waits, more delays, longer travel times, lost service, and more crowded buses and trains. Decreased service will lead riders to look for more reliable means of transportation; with fewer riders, fare revenues will decline. This vicious cycle will result in longer waits and travel times, more delays, and fewer useful routes. These draconian cuts could endanger federal funding for future projects important to the Twin Cities region and result in legal violations under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act.

Less frequent, less reliable service will cost not only individual workers, but their employers, as well. When workers build in extra time for inadequate transit, they sacrifice rest and may suffer from that sacrifice during work. When bus service is unreliable, workers may arrive to work late, leaving employers short staffed for the period of the delay. As the time cost of getting to shopping becomes greater, people who rely on transit may spend less money in local stores.

Instead, the Service Improvement Plan will initiate a virtuous cycle—more service, shorter travel times, greater connection, and increased ridership. It will help drive the economy and increase racial and economic equity in the region.

### Harry Maddox

Harry is a resident of south Minneapolis and is a long-time transit rider.

Harry has worked a variety of jobs in the Twin Cities and suburbs, always commuting by bus—and over the last ten years he’s seen the elimination of bus routes that he used to rely on to get to work.



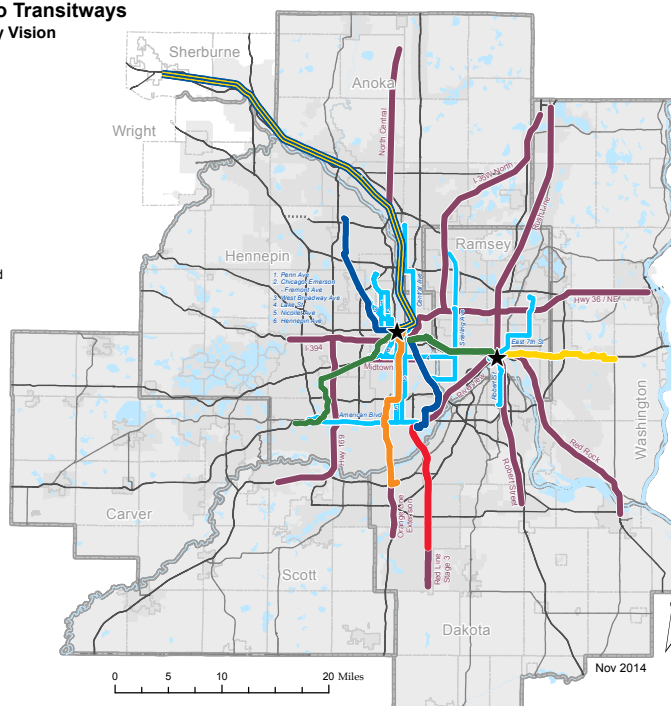
“I once lost a job because the bus came late. We need better funding so people can get between the suburbs and cities.”

#### Increased Revenue Scenario Transitways Building an Accelerated Transitway Vision

- Northstar Line
- Blue Line
- Green Line
- Red Line
- Orange Line
- Gold Line
- Accelerated Arterial BRT
- Accelerated Transitways under study mode and alignment not yet specified
- Regional Multimodal Hub

This map depicts transitways (such as, light rail, BRT, and ABRT) that complement regular route bus service.

- Reference Items**
- Principal Arterial Highways
  - Other Trunk Highways
  - Lakes and Rivers
  - City Boundary
  - County Boundary
  - 2040 Urban Service Area MPO Area



Source: Metropolitan Council

## Notes

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Better Transit  
means:

Better  
Connections For Our  
Community

#How

