

PUBLIC TRANSIT IN AMERICA: RESULTS FROM THE 2001 NATIONAL HOUSEHOLD TRAVEL SURVEY

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Understanding transit ridership has become a critical transportation research interest and policy goal. The Federal Transit Administration (FTA) has challenged the industry with a top priority goal of increasing ridership. The American Public Transportation Association (APTA), the industry trade association, has indicated that ridership growth is its top strategic goal, and FDOT has established ridership goals for transit. Growing transit ridership is highly dependent on understanding the travel behavior of the traveling public, especially those who are current users of public transportation. It is important to continue to build on the existing body of knowledge so that planners and policymakers can more fully understand public transportation travel issues.

OBJECTIVES

The objective of this project is to update *Public Transit in America—Evidence from the 1995 Nationwide Personal Transportation Survey* with data from the 2001 National Household Travel Survey. To update the report, researchers analyzed the 2001 NHTS data. This new data offers a unique opportunity to provide a rich understanding of travel behavior and to develop a valuable resource to the industry, in terms of specific analyses relevant to public transit.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Persons in all locations, socio-economic conditions, household structures, ages, and physical conditions use public transportation. Yet, at the national scale, use remains concentrated in population segments that are less likely to have auto travel options: i.e., the largest group of transit passengers are those who need transit service. Thus, transit service is highly important to the quality of life and economic contributions of this segment of the population, but not a mode of choice for large segments of the population for many of their trips.

The fate of transit service for the past few decades has been closely tied to the size of the market of travelers that might be characterized as transit dependent -- those who do not drive or do not have a car available. These conditions have been highly correlated with residential area location, income, race/ethnicity, employment status, home ownership status, medical condition, and other factors. The transit-dependant segment of the population appears to have stabilized after years of declines and may even have grown modestly in recent years. However, reduced pressure on transit ridership from the multi-decade trend of transit travelers becoming auto owners and discontinuing or dramatically curtailing transit use by no means ensures the growth of transit demand. The transit industry has acknowledged the need to attract travelers to transit who have travel choices.

Many lay persons and professionals see opportunity to grow transit use by leveraging the pending surge in baby boomers reaching retirement age and, possibly, the end of their driving years. Two travel behavior trends have typically accompanied aging: overall travel rates decline and, as an offset, transit use increases. Thus, for there to be significant growth in transit demand from aging baby boomers, there will need to be changes in current trends.

Two other key factors driving future transit markets are land use patterns and energy cost and availability. This study has shown a strong relationship between urban area size and transit use. The largest urban areas, which are known to be denser, remain the strongest public transit markets. The extent to which future growth produces denser development patterns will be a critical factor in determining the extent to which more of the developed area is sufficiently dense to support higher quality transit services.

Many of today's senior public transportation professionals entered the industry two or three decades ago, when the combination of natural resource constraints and environmental considerations, population growth, and growing congestion suggested an imminent renaissance of public transit. Several decades later, as the NHTS data show, transit continues to play a very important role in both individual lives and the overall economy, and remains a modest and arguably stable provider of transportation. The role of public transportation in the overall system of transportation, important but modest, has not shown a meaningful breakout. There are no obvious or easy new markets that can dramatically grow transit use and, absent significant deterioration in economic conditions or energy crises, growth will require attracting travelers who have mobility choices: to grow, transit will have to offer competitive services.

BENEFITS

This data serves as a resource to planners and policymakers. The results have been and will continue to be broadly disseminated to support informed planning and policy decision-making, which is the ultimate benefit of this research

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