



Metropolitan Policy Program at BROOKINGS

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An embargoed copy of the Brookings report, individual metro profiles, and ranking list are available at: http://www.brookings.edu/metro/employment_transportation.aspx.

GETTING AMERICA TO WORK

New Brookings report finds U.S. metros must do more to help transit connect people and jobs, boost economic productivity, and provide affordable transportation choices

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Rising gasoline prices put greater pressure on household budgets, so more commuters are looking for alternatives to driving. But if they look to public transit, they may face some serious speed bumps on the way to work.

That's the conclusion of a new report from the Brookings Institution Metropolitan Policy Program, *Missed Opportunity: Transit and Jobs in Metropolitan America*. The report analyzes route and schedule information from 371 transit systems in the nation's 100 largest metropolitan areas and examines how well these systems serve residents and connect them to employment.

According to the report, 70 percent of metropolitan residents can get to public transit, but the typical commuter can reach only 30 percent of metropolitan jobs via transit. Robert Puentes, Senior Fellow and Director of Metro's Infrastructure Initiative, says that's not good enough.

"Job number 1 is getting Americans to their jobs," Puentes, a co-author of the report, said.

"This is about how we become more productive, more competitive, more successful," he said. "Rising gas prices make that harder, so people need reliable alternatives. Our transportation strategies must improve the efficiency and flexibility of our labor markets and provide access to jobs. In many metros, we don't have that now."

"We need to get the most bang for the buck from transportation investments," Puentes said. "Public transit may be the answer in parts of some metros; in others, it may be company-contracted transportation, or ride-sharing, or carpooling. The strategy needs to fit the situation."

Among the key findings in the new report:

- **While most Americans who live in metropolitan areas have access to transit, they can reach only a limited share of jobs via transit.** Seventy percent of metro residents have access to transit, but even allowing for a 90-minute commute (three times the average), a typical resident can only reach about 30 percent of the jobs in her/his metro area. Job access via transit varies widely among metro areas, reflecting not only the extent of transit systems, but also the levels of population and job "sprawl" within these metro areas.

- **Lower-skilled workers have it even harder.** The typical commuter can reach only 25 percent of metropolitan jobs in low- and middle-skill industries like retail and manufacturing via transit. Most transit systems still have a “hub and spoke” design that brings suburban workers into downtowns for higher-skill jobs in industries like finance and health care, but fails to connect them to growing suburban employment centers.
- **Western metro areas do better in connecting workers to jobs via transit, while the South lags behind.** Fifteen of the 20 American metros that rank highest in terms of transit coverage and job access are in the West. Large metros like New York, Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., and San Francisco also perform well. Conversely, 15 of the 20 lowest-ranked metro areas are located in the South.
- **Established transit systems don’t necessarily do a better job than newer systems.** 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. Metros like San Jose, Honolulu, Salt Lake City, and Tucson rank highly in job access across industry skill levels.

Effective transit is also a concern for employers in terms of their ability to compete, said Alan Berube, also a Senior Fellow and co-author of the report. He noted a high-quality transit network lets employers benefit from clustering of people and businesses, helping to increase productivity.

“Transit systems designed for the mid-twentieth century metropolis can’t keep up with the twenty-first century demands of businesses and workers,” Berube said. “Metro areas need to craft comprehensive visions not only for how to create more jobs, but also how to link people to those jobs efficiently.”

Adie Tomer, Senior Research Analyst and co-author, said the report’s findings highlight the necessity of better coordination of local development to meet the needs of workers and employers.

“We don’t want to go ripping the wires out of the system,” Tomer cautioned. “Our existing transit network needs to be re-configured to make it easier for people to get from home to work. In Seattle, Philadelphia, and Dayton, for example, they’re introducing new bus routes to job-rich areas. 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.”

The *Missed Opportunity* report is being released as governments across the country are contemplating serious cuts to transit funding, which could exacerbate some of the access problems identified.

“Governments across the country are considering serious cuts to transit funding,” said Elizabeth Kneebone, Senior Research Associate and co-author, “That could worsen access problems, particularly for lower-income residents who depend on transit the most. After a recession that saw unemployment and poverty climb, we need to foster metropolitan-scale policies that help people get to work and don’t leave the growing number of suburban poor behind.”

The report concludes that government and business leaders must make access to jobs a top priority of their transportation policy and investment decisions. They should include a transit strategy with their planning decisions around housing, economic development, and land use to ensure transit connects more people to more employment opportunities.

The report also highlights the need for better collection of data to drive smarter decision-making. To that end, the Metro Program will unveil a new interactive transit mapping tool, developed in collaboration with Microsoft, which allows users to visualize transit performance in each of the 100 largest metros.

About the Metropolitan Policy Program at Brookings—*Created in 1996, the Metropolitan Policy Program (MPP) provides decision-makers with cutting-edge research and policy ideas for improving the health and prosperity of metropolitan areas, including their component cities, suburbs, and rural areas. To learn more, please visit: www.brookings.edu/metro*

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