Leveraging GTFS data to calculate an open-source Transit Supply Index

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ABSTRACT

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INTRODUCTION

Transit service level indicators include those in the Transit Capacity and Quality of Service Manual (TCQSM) (1), the Transit Score metric and many more. Practitioners, researchers and advocates seeking to use such metrics may face two inter-related challenges: firstly, there is the problem of calculating the metrics themselves for a specific location; secondly, is the challenge of explaining the metrics, their meaning and importance those who are not specialists in transit, such as politicians, other decision-makers or the general public.

The TCQSM specifies Levels of Service (LOS) between A and F across a range of factors including service span, frequency, speed, and the proportion of population serviced. Previous research by Wong (2) overcame some challenges of using the TCQSM, by using Python, PostgreSQL and R software and GTFS feeds as input to automate the calculation of daily average headways, route length and stop numbers. This indicators, however, are route based and so do not include any consideration of geographic or population coverage. Further metrics addressing these topics and much detail about their calculation and meaning are included in the TCQSM, such as the Service Coverage Area (pp. 5-8 to 5-21). However, these appear highly detailed, may required bespoke GIS or other analysis, and it might be challenging to explain these measures (beyond the fact at A is good and F is bad) to non-technical decision-makers, stakeholders or others who might be involved. Transit Score provides a similarly easily understood rating scale, scoring locations out of 100 (3). However, the algorithm is patented and effectively a black box, meaning that it is not possible to calculate scores independently to understand how the metric might change with cahnges to the transit system or surrounding environment.

The Supply Index developed by Currie and Senbergs (4) may provide a metric that is relatively easy to calculate, open (rather than a black box), and relatively simple for a non-technical audience to understand, engage with and use. This Index is based on calculating the number of transit arrivals at stops within an area of interest, with an adjustment made for the amount of the area of interest that is within a typical walk access distance of each stop. However, it does not appear to have been widely used, perhaps in part because it still required an analyst to obtain sources of timetable and geographic data. Since the publication of Currie and Senbergs (4) such data has become much easier to obtain with more than 10,000 agencies now providing timetable and network data using the General Transit Feed Specification (GTFS) format (5). A gap, however, is that there is not yet a method for calculating the Currie and Senbergs (4) Supply Index directly from GTFS data.

This paper reports the development of R code to calculate the Supply Index of Currie and Senbergs (4) directly from GTFS data. The code is developed using data from a single case: the GTFS for Victoria in Australia, which includes Greater Melbourne. Cross-case comparison to Toronto, Canada, and Washington DC, USA, is also undertaken to test the results and gain understanding of how the Supply Index might be useful for practitioners, researchers and advocates. The motivation for this research is to better understand how GTFS data might be used to produce benchmarking metrics that can be calculated using open-source code, that can be used to access proposed network changes and which may be relatively easy for non-technical specialists to understand.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

Even a brief search shows that there is a very large number of metrics available for benchmarking transit services, for example: the Transit Cooperative Research Program (TCRP) Report 88 provides an extensive guidebook on developing a performance-measurement system (6); online databases are provided by the Florida Transit Information System (FTIS) (7) and the International Association of Public Transport (UITP) (8) have online databases, while the Transport Strategy Centre of Imperial College London runs extensive annual benchmarking programmes across over 100 transit provides around the world (9). The Fielding Triangle (10) provides a framework for understanding how such metrics combine service inputs, service outputs and service consumption to describe cost efficiency, cost effectiveness or service effectiveness measures. At a larger scale, Litman (11) and Litman (12) discuss some of the traffic, mobility, accessibility, social equity, strategic planning and other rational decision-making frames that might underlie such transit metrics, while Reynolds et al. (13) extends this into models of how institutionalism, incrementalism and other public policy models might apply to decision-making processes. Further examples are provided by Guzman et al. (14), who develop a measure of accessibility in the context of policy development and social equity for Latin American Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) based networks, and the street space allocation metrics based around 10 ethical principles from Creutzig et al. (15).

However, many of these metrics are difficult to calculate, complex to explain or understand, and likely not well suited to communication with those who are not transit planners or engineers, or otherwise technical specialists. However, where pre-calculated metrics are immediately available it may not be possible for generate metrics for proposed system changes or know exactly how scores are calculated. The TCQSM and Transit Score may provide contrasting examples: with respect to the first challenge, TCQSM metrics may require large amounts of network, service, population and other data to be assembled before the indicators can be calculated; whereas Transit Scores are readily available on the Walk Score (3) website for locations with a published GTFS feed (eliminating the need for any calculations). With respect to the second challenge, the meaning of the Transit Score appears easy to explain (the closer to 100, the better), but as the score is calculated by a patented algorithm (effectively a black-box) it may not be easy to understand or explain the connection between real-world conditions and the score, or what might need to be done to improve the score and service levels. Nor does it appear to be possible for Transit Scores to be generated for proposed changes to networks. The TCQSM, in contrast is open-source, in that Kittleson & Associates et al. (1) provide a manual describing all the metrics and how to calculate them. However, the calculations themselves appear to be complex, which may be a barrier to use by practitioners, researchers, advocates or others who are not transit scheduling specialists. While Wong (2) provides open-source code (`https://github.com/jcwong86/GTFS_Explore_Tool`) this is 11 years old and does not appear to be currently maintained. Future research may involve reviewing this code and using it to analyse modern GTFS feeds. However, in this paper the aim is more modest, in that the objective is to develop code to calculate the simpler Suppy Index metric from Currie and Senbergs (4).

The Suppy Index

The Supply Index is shown in Equation 1, where SI_{Area} is the Supply Index for the area of interest, $Area_{Bn}$ is the buffer area for each stop within the area of interest (in Currie and Senbergs (4) taken as 400 metres for bus and tram stops, and 800 metres for railway stations), $Area_{a}rea$ is the area of the area of interest, and SL_{Bn} is the number of transit arrivals for each stop for a given time period (in Currie and Senbergs (4) taken as one week).

$$SI_{area} = \sum \frac{Area_{B}n}{Area_{area}} * SL_{Bn} \quad (1)$$

The SI_{area} metric describes the number of transit arrivals at stops within an area of interest, multiplied by a factor accounting for the proportion of the area of interest that is within typical walking distance of each stop. An advantage of the Supply Index is that it is a relatively simple number to calculate, understand and explain. It is also addative, in that SI_{area} scores can be aggregated to calculate an overall score for a region encompassing multiple areas of interest.

Currie and Senbergs (4) calculated the SI for various CCDs in Melbourne using a timetable database provided by the Victorian Public Transport Authority (PTA). This predated the widespread availability of GTFS data, which provides a standardised format for timetable data that is produced by many transit systems. GTFS is an open, text-based format that was developed originally to allow transit information to be included in the Google Maps navigation platform (5). A question, therefore, is how to calculate the SI using GTFS data so that SI_{areas} can be calculated and compared for any area of interest where transit service information is available in the GFTS format.

METHODOLOGY

Various analysis tools are available that make us of GTFS data, including the tidytransit package (**?**) for the R statistical programming language (16). Poletti (17) provides code to calculate a departure timetable from a GTFS feed, and this was adapted to calculate arrivals at a stop and the SL_{Bn} term. The code is available at `https://github.com/James-Reynolds/Transit_Supply_Index_GTFS` (and included in the Rmarkdown file used to typeset this paper).

The gtfstools R package GTFS feeds are split by mode to facilitate the buffer zone calculation

RESULTS

R code

Case studies

Melbourne

Overall

Wheelchair accessibility?

The metro tunnel - adding services

Toronto

Washington DC

Cross-case comparison

DISCUSSION

CONCLUSIONS

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

The authors confirm contribution to the paper as follows: study conception and design: A. Anonymous, D. Zoolander; data collection: B. Security; analysis and interpretation of results: A. Anonymous, B. Security; draft manuscript preparation: A. Anonymous. All authors reviewed the results and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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