

Walking. Driving. Riding. Whatever you do, whatever you use, chances are that if you live in America, transportation is an integral part of your day. Every state has its own version of a public transportation system that has evolved in the past few centuries. From the horse-drawn carriages that allowed for more seamless travel between distant locations, to the electric streetcars created in the 20th century¹—public transportation has always been focused on people. People make places and places attract people. At the beginning of the 20th century, public transportation was one of the most profitable industries because of this belief, and, when paired with good real estate speculations, could generate new urban centers around popular transit systems². As a result, most public transportation was initially modeled after cities, with some cities naturally taking shape around these systems. Once the Great Depression happened, many private companies were left unable to maintain their businesses, driving the federal government to take control of public transportation. Since then, public transportation has been under the control of both federal and state governments. And while several things have changed since this transition, with public transportation programs having received more than \$2 trillion worth of funding since 1956³, one problem remains: the urban-centered model that often isolates those who don't live in these areas. The people most affected by this are college students.

45% of Americans have no access to public transportation⁴. The affected include students who attend schools outside of cities or who live in suburban or rural areas that don't offer integrated public transit options. Access to public transportation also does not guarantee access to *feasible* public transportation. We see the reality of this situation in the lives of students like 18-year-old Ernesto Rubio, who began studying to become an emergency medical technician in the summer of 2021⁵. He was the first in his family to attend college, an important milestone for him. However, Rubio, a CA native, was unable to afford the \$40 bus pass necessary for him to travel the 3-mile distance to complete his classes. As a result, he endured the two-hour walk in the brutal summer heat, with temperatures going up to 110 degrees at times. For others, sometimes it is not just cost that acts as a deterrent, but access. When 24-year-old college freshman Monica Momoh temporarily lost her car, which was the 'lifeline' allowing her to attend classes at her local community college, she was left without any inexpensive transportation⁶. Being from a remote area, the 8-mile distance to her school seemed to stretch an infinite distance ahead of her. When rideshare apps proved too expensive, she had no choice but to turn to the local bus—except the 'local' bus wasn't exactly local, but a 40-minute walk from her home. Weather conditions and her health sometimes extended the journey. But she had no choice but to endure it until she regained access to her car.

The biased infrastructure for public transit has been proven to have a negative impact on students from low-income and minority backgrounds. A joint study by UNC Chapel Hill and UnidosUS found that Hispanic students were 19 percent more likely to report transportation problems as creating a barrier to college completion than non-Hispanics⁷. A budget published by the College Board for the 2020-2021 school year discovered that transportation expenses accounted for approximately 20% of expenses for college commuters. Community college students were

spending on average close to \$2000 on transportation. This is almost half of what students spend on tuition and fees every year to attend classes at places that are celebrated for offering a more 'affordable' education. The efficacy of public transportation is also questionable when some students, due to the city-modeled transit routes, can spend over an hour getting to and from school in what would be 10-20 minutes in a car⁶.

I went to school in the city but lived in the suburbs. I was fortunate enough to live 10 minutes away from the local bus stop and have someone available to drive me there every day. However, the monthly bus pass was \$120, which depleted my savings as a new college student. Taking the bus in the afternoon, I was greeted by overcrowding. When I opted to take classes at my local community college, I was only able to take them virtually, as there were no public transportation options to make the 30-minute commute. The commute to the city was also around 30 minutes but had rail lines and buses readily available. With the ability to allocate more than \$2 trillion to public mass transit, comprised of up to \$77 billion annually at times⁸, it's evident that the US government can capture the investment necessary to address these issues in public transportation, especially seeing how it negatively affects students, some of the biggest drivers of the economy.

However, the reality is that money may not be the only investment necessary to reverse this trend, because *yes*, the government has put trillions into public transit in over half a decade, and *yet* the problem persists. Since 1999, the number of people who use public buses has decreased by 17%⁹. Between 2012 and 2018 alone, there was a 14% decline in the use of public transit systems¹⁰. It brings into question why revisiting the investment into public transportation is even a practical or fiscally sound solution to this problem when less people are seemingly relying on public transportation to begin with. But the reality is that the biggest users of public transport are still people in urban areas. It isn't a matter of money, but access. The fact remains that residents in suburban and rural areas still lack comparable access to public transportation. It is not just enough to keep providing billions of dollars of funding for the creation of roads and the expansion of mass transit systems, such as the infrastructure plan offered by the Biden Administration in 2021¹¹. The real solution is in the design of these systems and ensuring that public transit takes advantage of these new roads and infrastructure to create optimal transit routes for all residents, not just urban ones.

¹ <https://oxfordre.com/americanhistory/display/10.1093/acrefore/9780199329175.001.0001/acrefore-9780199329175-e-28#:~:text=Mass%20transit%20has%20been%20part,by%20the%20mid%2D19th%20century.>

² <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2018-08-31/why-is-american-mass-transit-so-bad-it-s-a-long-story>

³ <https://miscellanynews.org/2022/04/28/opinions/we-need-better-public-transportation-in-america/>

⁴ <https://www.apta.com/news-publications/public-transportation-facts/>

⁵ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2021/12/10/college-students-transportation-struggles/>

⁶ <https://stateline.org/2022/10/24/lack-of-transportation-hinders-community-college-students/>

⁷ <https://hechingerreport.org/a-surprising-reason-keeping-students-from-finishing-college-a-lack-of-transportation/>

⁸ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1296052/total-funding-spent-public-transit-us/>

⁹ <https://newuniversity.org/2022/01/30/we-need-to-prioritize-public-transportation/>

¹⁰ <https://news.yahoo.com/americas-public-transit-systems-are-hurting-can-they-recover-005109427.html>

¹¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/02/climate/biden-public-transit-amtrak.html>