**New York State’s Public Transit Divide: A Tale of Two Realities**

Public transportation is often regarded as a backbone of economic and social activity, but in New York State, access to efficient transit systems depends largely on geography. Urban centers like New York City and Albany are home to world-class transit networks, while rural regions like Adams and Essex struggle with limited resources. This urban-rural divide in public transit not only affects mobility but also reflects broader inequalities in infrastructure investment and planning.

“Public transit isn’t just about getting from point A to point B—it’s a lifeline for work, education, and healthcare,” says Sevgi Erdoğan, a professor of Syracuse University and previous Director of the Transportation Policy Research Group of the National Center for Smart Growth. “But for many rural residents in New York, that lifeline is frayed.”

The first chart below demonstrates the gap between urban and rural areas by comparing population and transit scores. It reveals that while cities thrive with comprehensive transit systems, rural areas are often left behind.

***#Figure 1: Comparison of Population and Transit Scores in Urban and Rural Areas of New York State***

**Cities Reap the Rewards of Investment**

New York City, unsurprisingly, leads the pack with a near-perfect transit score of 9.2. Its extensive subway network, 24/7 bus services, and pedestrian-friendly infrastructure provide residents with unparalleled mobility. Other cities like Albany (7.8) and Buffalo (7.3) also perform well, benefiting from decades of investment and a concentrated population base.

“Urban transit is a cycle: more riders lead to more revenue, which funds better services,” says Erdoğan. “That’s why you see this consistent success in cities like New York and Albany.”

In contrast, smaller cities and towns like Cheektowaga and Syracuse offer stark reminders of transit’s challenges. Despite a population of nearly 75,000, Cheektowaga lags with a transit score of 4.7, revealing weaknesses in planning and funding.

**Rural Communities Left Behind**

For rural areas, the story paints a stark contrast. Regions like Adams and Franklin struggle with transit scores as low as 2, reflecting a lack of investment and accessibility. Sparse populations, vast distances, and insufficient funding create significant barriers to establishing even basic public transportation. For many residents, owning a car isn’t just a convenience—it’s a necessity.

“I’ve lived in Franklin my whole life, and public transit here is practically non-existent,” says Jaylen L. Earls, a junior at SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry. “It’s treated like a luxury, not a necessity, and that mindset leaves rural communities at a serious disadvantage.”

**A Look at the Numbers: Correlation Between Population and Transit**

One of the most significant insights into transit accessibility comes from analyzing the correlation between population density and transit scores. The chart below uses a logarithmic scale to account for the dramatic population disparities between urban and rural areas.

***Figure 2: Correlation Between Population Density and Transit Scores in New York State***

As the chart reveals, transit performance aligns closely with population density. Densely populated areas naturally attract more riders, which justifies greater investment. Outliers like Cheektowaga, however, highlight the limitations of this trend, as they lack the infrastructure to match their population’s needs.

**The Cheektowaga Conundrum**

Cheektowaga presents a particularly puzzling case. Despite its sizeable population, its transit score lags far behind cities of similar size. Experts point to several potential factors:

Limited Bus Routes: Inadequate service coverage leaves residents disconnected.

Funding Gaps: Local budgets may prioritize other infrastructure needs over transit.

Planning Challenges: Poor coordination between regional and local governments often hampers transit improvements.

**What’s Next for New York Transit?**

Bridging the gap between urban and rural transit systems requires a concerted effort from policymakers, transit authorities, and local communities. Experts suggest several solutions:

On-Demand Transit Services: Flexible models using technology to provide rides for rural residents.

Increased State Funding: Allocating resources specifically to improve rural infrastructure.

Public-Private Partnerships: Encouraging private companies to invest in transit services for underserved areas.

The disparities highlighted in this analysis reflect more than just geographic differences—they reveal deeper systemic inequities that impact quality of life across New York State.

**A Push for Equity**

Transportation isn’t just about convenience; it’s about opportunity. Urban residents benefit from frequent, reliable services, while rural communities must navigate long commutes and limited options. Addressing these disparities requires acknowledging the role of transit in shaping economic mobility, public health, and community resilience.

“Transit equity should be a priority for all New Yorkers,” says Erdoğan. “If we don’t invest in rural areas now, we’ll be paying the price in lost opportunities and widening disparities for decades to come.”

The data makes one thing clear: it’s time for New York State to rethink its approach to public transit, ensuring that everyone—no matter where they live—has access to the resources they need.