Measuring Disruptions’ Impacts on the Reliability of Public Transit Accessibility: Example of COVID-19 and College Football Games

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# Introduction

Accessibility is the primary indicator of a public transit system’s useability. It determines passengers’ ability to reach opportunities given a fixed amount of time [CITATION NEEDED]. However, high reliability of public transit systems’ accessibility is a primary disadvantage compared to other transportation systems. Transit systems are highly dynamic and time-dependent, and their actual arrival time and accessibility can be significantly different from the scheduled time. On-time performance loss worsens the useability and user experience of transit systems, and it is one of the most important factors that affect people’s preference of a public transit system (*1*, *2*).

A major cause of unreliability is public transit systems’ vulnerability to outer disruptions, including short-term and long-term disruptions. Short-term disruptions introduce temporary disturbances usually in only a part of the system. Prominent examples are traffic jams, extreme weather, and major social events. Short-term disruptions affect accessibility primarily by influencing the on-time performance, in the form of delayed or early arrivals. Long-term disruptions have persistent impacts on the reliability of the whole system, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and schedule changes caused by budget cut. Besides the on-time performance, long-term disruptions can also change the schedule, which create more nuanced patterns of unreliability.

Some prior studies discussed public transit’s accessibility unreliability. Wessel, Allen, & Farber and Wessel & Farber (*3*, *4*) assessed the unreliability of schedule-based accessibility with respect to retrospective real-time accessibility; they calculate schedule-based measure from transit schedule data and calculate retrospective real-time accessibility from historical real-time vehicle location data. They find significant unreliability in schedule-based accessibility. Nevertheless, retrospective measure assumes users know *a priori* the actual arrival time (*3*), which is only attainable after the event happens. Therefore, retrospective accessibility cannot be realized by a user. It does not represent the actual accessibility that a user experiences during operation, and the deviation of retrospective accessibility from schedule-based accessibility cannot accurately reflect accessibility unreliability.

In this paper, we use *realizable real-time accessibility* – a space-time prism measure that can be achieved by ordinary users (*5*). It uses both schedule and real-time data to simulate the decision-making process of users. It acknowledges users’ inability to use the actual arrival time *a priori* when planning their trips. The measure is a more accurate representation of users’ actual accessibility experience, and its deviation from schedule-based accessibility can be a good indicator for the reliability of the public transit system.

# Literature review

We review relevant literature in this section.

Outline for LR

1) Resilience

- General definition ("ability to handle and recover gracefully from shocks and disturbances")

- Transportation system resilience

-- different modes

- Public transit resilience

2) Public transit reliability

- Definition

- Measures

3) Factors affecting public transit reliability

-- Recurrent (eg, daily traffic)

-- Non-recurrent (e.g., mega events, shocks such as pandemics, floods)

4) Reliability as a measure of resilience

- can the system handle and recover reliability after shocks

- why important from a social/economic perspective

## Resilience

Resilience is introduced as the capacity of a system to maintain its functions during a disruption (*6*, *7*). As climate change, pandemics, and energy crises increase the risk and frequency of disruptions, transport resilience becomes a new focus of transportation focus. However, the definition of transport resilience can be rather heterogenous and nuanced. Most prior research agree that resilience includes two core functions: Robustness and recoverability (*6*, *8*, *9*).

Robustness – some papers also use adaptability and reliability, or vulnerability as an antonym – is the ability to maintain the disruption during a disruptive event. An ideal transport system should still maintain a minimum required performance when facing a disruptive event. Robustness is measured by the decline of a system performance index (*8*, *9*). Recoverability – some papers also use resilience or resiliency – is defined as the ability to return to its previous state in a timely manner (*8*). It is usually measured by the time from the disruptive event happens to the time when the performance recovers to pre-disruption level (*8*, *9*). The two aspects determine the transport system’s ability to resist, adapt to, and recover from the disruption.

Resilience is especially important to public transit systems due to its collective, time-dependent, and vulnerable nature. Its performance is very sensitive to disruptions

## Accessibility Reliability of Public Transit systems

Reliability can be defined as the variation of a public transit system’s performance (*9*); however, its specific definition can be quite nuanced, depending on the performance the index measures. Most of the prior research investigated travel time reliability (*9*, *10*). Carrion and Levinson (*11*) categorized the concept of travel time reliability into three categories: 1) centrality-dispersion, which measures the variation of travel time around the mean value; 2) scheduling delays, which measures the difference between preferred travel time and actual travel time; 3) average delays, which measures the difference between scheduled time and actual time, i.e., on-time performance of a public transit system. Travel time reliability represents the fidelity of the transit service; higher reliability means that a user can expect their incoming trips to abide by the scheduled or average performance.

Due to the direct link between travel time and accessibility, the reliability of accessibility can also be defined as 1) the variation of accessibility and 2) the variation between expected/scheduled accessibility and actual accessibility. Gu et al. (*9*) discussed transport reliability associated with accessibility, i.e., the variation of accessibility. D’este and Taylor (*12*) and Taylor and D’este (*13*) first introduce reliability and vulnerability with the idea of accessibility.

On the other hand, Wessel, Allen, and Farber (*4*) and Wessel and Farber (*3*) calculated the difference between delivered accessibility and scheduled accessibility as accessibility reliability. They retrospectively collected historical General Transit Feed Specification real-time (GTFS-RT) data to calculate actual delivered accessibility. They conclude that schedule-based accessibility is unreliable and cannot represent the actual experience of transit users. However, the retrospective measure assumes transit users know *a priori* the actual arrival time of vehicles, which is not attainable before the event happens. This also means the retrospective measure cannot be an accurate representation of users’ actual experienced accessibility.

To solve this issue, Liu, Porr, and Miller (*5*) introduced realizable real-time accessibility as a more realistic measure of transit users’ accessibility experience. The paper also introduced accessibility reliability as the difference between scheduled and realizable accessibility. The measure represents the degree to which expected measure overestimate actual accessibility, as well as the fidelity of public transit systems to deliver an accurate and reliable service. Reliability can also be used to measure resilience, namely robustness and recoverability of a transit system. Robustness can be measured by the decline of accessibility reliability or increase of accessibility unreliability during a disruption, while recoverability can be measured by the recovery period of accessibility reliability during a disruption. Note that unreliability as a system performance measure exists even without a disruption. We will use this theoretical framework in our following analysis.

## Disruptions and transit reliability

Depending on the effects, persistency, and frequency of the event, we can categorize all disruptions with multiple principles: 1) Short-term and long-term (*14*), 2) planned and unplanned (*15*), and 3) Recurring and non-recurring (*14*, *16*). These three categorizations are highly correlated with each other but not the same. In this paper, we adopt the short/long-term categorization based on the dimension of recoverability as we discussed above; we review the factors affecting public transit reliability in following paragraphs.

**Short-term disruption.** We define short-term disruption as the event that: 1) should be short in time span and will not exceed a day, which is the time unit of the operation of most transit systems; 2) usually will not change the schedule of the transit system. In that sense, short-term disruptions usually influence the unreliability by only on-time performance, i.e., delays and early arrival.

A primary example is traffic. As most public transit systems share same roads with other vehicles (except systems with dedicated bus lanes and subways), traffic on roads can significantly impact the on-time performance of the buses (*11*, *16*). Other examples include weather (e.g., disruptive rain) (*17*, *18*) and major social events (e.g., large social gatherings or even terrorist attack) (*19*). However, the research on this topic is still lacking. Due to the momentary nature of these events and lack of reliable high-resolution data, most prior studies did not measure the impact on accessibility and reliability.

**Long-term disruptions.**  We define long-term disruptions as the event that: 1) are longer in time span, which last from weeks to multiple years; 2) affect both the on-time performance and the timetable; 3) may land on a new normality, rather than returning to the pre-disruption state. The studies and data on long-term disruptions are more abundant due to their more profound and persistent effects compared to short-term disruptions.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a major long-term disruption, if not the most important one in this century, that has huge impacts on the public transit systems in the entire world (*20*). COVID-19’s significant negative impacts on public transit accessibility are reported by many papers. For example, Kar et al. (*21*) studied the public transit accessibility to essential services in 22 US cities and found significant declines; the paper also pointed out that the pandemic-related decline primarily impacts marginalized communities. In response to the disruption, transit authorities and government also enacted policies and system adjustments to resist the negative impacts. For example, Singh et al. (*22*) found COVID-19 pandemic has negative impact on the transit accessibility in Winnipeg, Canada but a new BRT system helps to increase the accessibility for underprivileged populations. Allen and Farber (*23*) found that newly opened ban locations increase food accessibility by 10% in Toronto during the pandemic.

Extreme weather events can also incur persistent disruption to public transit and transit accessibility. A prime example is flood and sea level rising caused by climate change. Li et al. (*24*) simulated the potential effect of a 100-year pluvial flood on Shanghai Metro, China and found universal decrease in accessibility. He et al. (*25*) found flood disruptions lead to increase in headways and loss of job accessibility in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo.

There are still huge gaps in this area. First, prior studies focus on the disruptions’ impact on accessibility, rather than reliability. Second, the studies on short-term disruptions are lacking. Lack of reliable high-resolution data source made it very hard to conduct empirical analysis on short-term disruptions. Last, few papers discussed the recoverability of transit accessibility. It is noteworthy that most introduced studies above only investigate the robustness of the system. Due to the availability of high-resolution real-time data, we now can address these gaps in this paper accordingly.

# Method

We present our method in this section.

## Data

The primary data source in this paper is General Transit Feed Specification (GTFS) data. It is the de facto standard to transmit real-time information (*26*, *27*). The data have two data standard, GTFS static and GTFS real-time data, which contain the schedule timetable and real-time timetable, respectively (*28*, *29*). Based on the two data, we can calculate the scheduled and actual arrival time for any buses at any stop. We focus our study area to Central Ohio Transit Authority (COTA) bus system in Columbus, Ohio, USA. We collected GTFS static and GTFS real-time data from COTA’s application programming interface (API) from May 2018.

## Accessibility Measure

Accessibility is a diverse concept that can measure different aspects of mobility (*30*); in this paper, we focus on the measure of physical accessibility in a transit system. Physical accessibility measures the physical limit of a transit user given a time budget, namely how far a user can go by using transit service. It is a primary indicator of the useability of the transit service.

We use a well-established time geography measurement – space-time prism (STP) – to quantify the physical accessibility. It represents the envelop of all potential space-time paths; we treat bus stops as single origins and calculate the prisms from each single origin with a departure time to all possible destination (*31*). In practice, we use implicit STP – the number of accessible stops from a stop give a time budget – as the accessibility measure (*5*). First, we introduce a decision variable to determine if a user can arrive at a stop within the time budget.

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| --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | (1) |

where represents whether a user can arrive at stop from stop at time point within the time budget , and is the shortest travel time between stops and starting from a time point .

Note that the travel times between two stops in the transit network are also determined by the arrival time. This is due to the time-dependent nature of transit networks (*32*, *33*). To calculate the travel time, we developed a time-dependent Dijkstra algorithm to solve this special routing problem. We use a first-in-first-out (FIFO) rule to make the generic Dijkstra algorithm, which is only applicable to static network, compatible to transit network with dynamic costs (*34*, *35*). The rule assumes a vehicle leaving an origin stop will never arrive later at the destination stop than another later vehicle. We calculate if COTA system indeed satisfies the assumption, and 95% of the buses do hold the rule.

We thus define implicit STP as:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | (2) |

where represents the implicit STP from stop at time point , while is the set of all time budgets and S is the set of stops. The implicit STP measures the accessibility to network nodes.

## Unreliability measures

We define unreliability of transit accessibility as the normalized difference between the schedule-based accessibility and the actual experienced physical accessibility. Schedule-based accessibility represents the promise that the transit authorities make to users, which cannot be perfectly kept under most circumstances due to on-time performance loss.

However, the definition of actual experienced physical accessibility can be nuanced. As we already discuss in the previous sections, retrospective real-time STPs are not feasible for ordinary users to finish in practice. To construct a realistic accessibility measure, one must only use information that is obtainable before the users use the transit system to calculate the travel times. Liu, Porr, & Miller (*5*) introduce realizable real-time accessibility. It is calculated in two steps – planning and implementation – to better represent transit users’ actual decision-making process. During the calculation process, the algorithm will first plan the trip according to buses’ scheduled arrival time and then implement the plan with actual arrival time (*5*). In other words, the realizable real-time accessibility measures the accessibility in the scenario with no real-time information, while retrospective accessibility measures the accessibility in the scenario with perfect real-time information. Realizable accessibility is a more realistic measure of users’ actual experienced physical accessibility.

We thus introduce accessibility unreliability:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | (4) |

where is the scheduled STP starting from a time point , is the realizable STP, is the schedule-based number of accessible stops, and is the realizable-based number of accessible stops. The unreliability represents the accessibility a transit system loses during operation compared with the schedule.

## Short-term Disruption: College Football Games

Football is one of the most popular sports in the US; about 22 million viewers watch the final college football game in 2022 (*36*). Columbus is the seat of the Ohio State University, whose football teams are among the most competitive teams, and the Ohio Stadium in its campus is one of the biggest stadiums in the US.

Ohio State gamedays includes home and away games, which are hosted in Columbus and other cities, respectively. Columbus hosts college football games (i.e., home games) from September to December every one or two weeks, which attract more than a hundred thousand viewers to the stadium before the pandemic (*37*). Home games create high traffic around the Ohio Stadium, creating a short-term disruption to the local public transit’s on-time performance and accessibility. Away games are also popular but far less crowded than home games.

Therefore, we select all home and away game days in 2018 and 2019 from September to December and calculate the accessibility unreliability respectively. We also choose some Saturdays without a home and away game in the same time period.

## Long-term Disruption: the COVID-19 Pandemic

For the case study, we also focus on Columbus and COTA as our study area. Since Jan 2020, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has persistent and significant impacts on transit systems across the whole United States. The city of Columbus reported its first three cases on March 9, 2020; local authorities declared the state of emergency on March 11, 2020, and enacted lockdown and curfew shortly after the date (*38*), which resulted in immediate decline of the ridership (*20*). The plunge in ridership also leads to service cut and schedule change later to adapt to staff shortage and economic difficulties (*39*). To investigate the distinctive impacts of different stages of the pandemic, we select all the Wednesdays during Feb 15, 2020, to Jan 1, 2022.

We divide the whole period into three periods: pre-pandemic (before March 11, 2020), lockdown (March 11 – April 13, 2020), post-pandemic (April 13, 2020 – Jan 1, 2022).

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