

TRANSPORTATION AND RACISM

Through the years the voices of Indigenous, Black, and People of Color have largely gone unheard or ignored as cities and regions considered investments in traffic, safety, and transit. The struggle for racial desegregation of transportation has a long history, as powerful whites controlled the movement of people of color.

The Indigenous people were stripped of their ways of travel for food, trade, and to visit families – disrupting their trade networks caused food shortages and starvation. Many nations were forced to relocate to “reservations” far from their homelands. These lands were mostly wasteland which did not support the animals, plants or even the soil to grow the food that nourished them. The United States government created a situation where Indigenous people became dependent on them or as it has been said, it became a forced great white father/child relationship.

The three major kinds of infrastructure in the United States that contribute to the separation of certain groups of people, are housing, education, and transportation. Of these, transportation receives the least attention, yet people must get from place to place. Historically, mobility has not been available to all, or available only in a way that has channeled some people to specific places with inequitable opportunities, sometimes involuntarily and even in chains.

Historians and social experts in transportation are beginning to understand the magnitude of the role transportation policy, urban planning, and public infrastructure construction as well as both private and public financing have played in a century-long unraveling of a Black American middle class dating back to the post-civil war reconstruction era.

In 1896, the United States Supreme Court wrestled with the question of the different treatment accorded blacks and whites. In *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the Supreme Court examined the constitutionality of Louisiana laws that provided for the segregation of railroad car seating by race. Homer Plessy, the plaintiff, was arrested for boarding a "whites-only" train car in New Orleans to protest segregation on Louisiana's railways. The court upheld the "white section" and "colored section" Jim Crow seating law, contending that segregation did not violate any rights guaranteed by the Constitution.

When the urban planner Robert Moses began building projects in New York City during the 1920s, he bulldozed Black and Latino homes to make way for parks, and built highways through the middle of the minority neighborhoods. According to one biography, Moses even made sure bridges on the parkways connecting New York City to beaches in Long Island were low enough to keep city buses — which would likely be carrying poor minorities — from passing underneath.

But Robert Moses was no outlier. The highways and public spaces that shape our cities were often intentionally built at the expense of Black, Latino and other minority citizens. Robert Bullard, a professor of urban planning and environmental policy at Texas Southern University, says race has played a central role in how cities across the United States developed - and in how they continue to grow.

Issues related to transportation were integral to the civil rights movement of the 1960s, embodied in the Montgomery Bus Boycott and Freedom Rides. John Lewis and the young Freedom Riders exercised their constitutional right of interstate travel at the risk of death. Greyhound buses were attacked, and some were burned. Over the years, many of the barriers have not disappeared overnight or evaporated with time - discrimination still places an extra "tax" on people of color and poor people who need safe, affordable, and accessible public transportation.

All forms of transportation have been used to enable and implement racism. Highways were created to enable segregated suburbs. Traffic laws are often used by police as a pretext to pull over and search people of color. Projects that claim to enhance "walkability" sometimes have unstated goals of gentrification. And, port facilities and railroads put disproportionate burdens on Black and Hispanic neighborhoods.

Then came the planners of the interstate highway system – this began to take shape after the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956 provided funding to United States cities to build a network of freeways, necessitated by greater automobile use nationwide. These planners and the governments also routed highways directly, and sometimes purposefully, through Black and brown communities. In some instances, the government took homes by eminent domain which left a deep psychological scar on these neighborhoods that lost homes, churches and schools.

These policies and practices over the years have led to the destruction of thriving neighborhoods, eviction of minorities, and negative health effects, showing that governments chose highway development over public transportation and they continue to have inequitable effects. The highways restrict the ability to access social and

economic opportunities - jobs, education, health care services, places of worship, and especially places like grocery stores. All around the country these interstates have also bypassed capital for these communities. These inequities give new meaning to the term “structural racism.”

One example is St. Paul, Minnesota’s **Rondo Neighborhood** which was the center of the black community for much of the 20th century. The neighborhood consisted of a working-class community, supported by social clubs, religious organizations, community centers and a thriving business community. It was demolished between 1956 and 1968, to make way for the construction of the I-94 freeway.

Some participants in our Margaret Garner presentation shared other examples of neighborhoods that were destroyed:

- Richmond, Virginia where Interstate 95 goes right through a Black community
- Cape VER DIAN in Rhode Island
- And the highway through the Anacostia area of the District of Columbia

But there has been some successful resistance. One example from Washington, DC where the phrase "no white men's roads through Black men's homes" came from and was the rallying cry for folks in DC who resisted it. Other successful efforts were in New Orleans and Greenwich Village in New York.

Transportation is basic to many quality of life indicators such as health, education, employment, economic development, access to municipal services, residential mobility, and environmental quality. In the United States, communities do not receive the same benefits from transportation advancements and investments. And, despite the heroic efforts and the monumental social and economic gains made over the decades, transportation remains a civil rights issue.

Because not all transportation is created equal. Cities often base plans for bus routes, highways and other infrastructure on a premise that some communities have more worth than others, with urban planners following the path of least resistance – “minority communities were already disenfranchised”, having no say in how their neighborhoods were developed.

Little to no infrastructure funding means those in Black neighborhoods live with poor roads, little access to public transportation and more. You go to Black and brown communities, you go to lower-income communities and you do not see many sidewalks

or many designated pedestrian crossings. These types of streets are like mini highways where the speed limit is 35 or 45.

Along with the systemic nature of this problem, social racism also plays a role in the rising number of traffic fatalities for people of color. There are three major reasons Black people bear the brunt of roadway injuries: infrastructure, design and racism. Predominantly Black neighborhoods are also less likely to have warning signs and other safety mechanisms.

And as stated before, many high-speed highways are in or go through communities of color. From 2010-2019, Black pedestrians were 82 percent more likely to be hit by drivers. And a study from 2017 from the University of Nevada found that drivers are less likely to slow down or stop for Black pedestrians than they are for white pedestrians.

Any progress that has been made is that laws have changed around practices like housing segregation, but minorities are still being excluded from planning decisions. The dynamic at play is "highway robbery," with minorities paying taxes at the same rates as white citizens, but those dollars then subsidize racist patterns of development.

Intersection of race, equity and public transit

More than half a century after Rosa Parks refused to move to the back of the bus in Montgomery, Alabama, prompting an 11 month boycott that led to integration of that city's bus system, it is a sad reality that African American, Latinos and other riders of color continue to struggle for safe and equitable access to transit. It is no accident that one of this nation's most famous acts of civil disobedience took place on a bus.

From funding, planning and infrastructure, to design and policy, many transit agencies essentially have built two systems with different standards for "choice riders" and "dependent" riders (that is to say white and Black). This dual mandate has never really gotten reconciled in the world of transit, and still shapes transit operations today. The terms of "dependent" and "choice" riders sound neutral but can lead to policy with racist impacts. It is a dated and inaccurate way of thinking about transit ridership.

Public transit remains unaffordable and inconvenient for many who are dependent upon it - people of color, youth, older adults, and people with disabilities. Public transit over the years has also been equated with people of color, crime and poverty. For example, when the Metropolitan Atlanta Transportation Authority (MARTA) was created it was a running joke that MARTA stood for Moving Africans Rapidly through Atlanta.

Regarding transit inconvenience and discrimination, my aunt who lived just across the city line from Detroit Michigan in Grosse Pointe in the 1950s, would watch the Black women get off the bus at the city boundary and from there they had to walk the rest of the way to their domestic jobs – the bus could not go into the white suburbs.

These unjust planning practices have also cut Latinos off from opportunities for health and wealth. Many low-income Latinos have been pushed into neighborhoods further from transport hubs to maintain housing affordability so the ability to access jobs, essential services, and social networks has changed. They are less likely to have access to an automobile than other groups, are more likely to use public transit for commuting to work and tend to live farther away from their jobs—making walking or biking to work more challenging and is compounded by transit fare affordability, reliability, and route insufficiency.

Unfortunately, the industries specifically employing high numbers of Latinos such as agriculture, construction, and manufacturing, have demonstrated the greatest shift to the suburbs. Other jobs include landscaping, home cleaning services, and childcare, are also frequently located in suburbs and so they have to deal with poor public transit access. This is called spatial mismatch of employers and employees.

Other inequities:

- The city of Denver built an expensive light rail for low ridership suburban routes while the busiest transit route in the city, where the higher capacity of rail would have the most benefit, is a bus in mixed traffic.
- The typical local bus stop in the United States is often without a bench, a shelter or an ADA boarding pad, even though none of these are expensive compared to what is spent on other transportation projects.
- Suburban park and ride lots always have canopies to shade waiting riders or shelter them from rain.
- Agencies typically plan service so that every commuter rail rider gets a seat, while buses are planned to be standing-room only at rush hour.

These show that agencies (and cities) don't really care about the "dependent riders."

There have been movements for racial and environmental justice that have removed "invisible statutes" by changing the routes of freeways and transit systems and opening

up access to clean, affordable and efficient public transportation to minority communities.

One model in Los Angeles back in 1996, is that organizers and local residents filed a class-action lawsuit against the Metropolitan Transit Authority to stop it from diverting federal funding to a light rail line in the predominantly white suburbs. An out-of-court settlement forced the MTA to build 278 new environmentally friendly buses and provide cheaper, safer bus rides for minority and poor residents.

We can reduce disparities and improve equitable outcomes for residents with limited transit opportunities by removing an unequal commute. Transit equity has a direct impact on racial justice.

Some Laws, Policies and Procedures

Policies as mundane as infrastructure and accessibility represent another frontier in the struggle. The fight for fairness and equity lives in our social and urban policies that have a long history of racial bias and inequities infused in transportation planning.

At the federal level, **the US Department of Transportation** must ensure nondiscrimination under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. **Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964** prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, and national origin.

Any recipient of federal-aid dollars is required to certify that they are following the Civil Rights Act.

Another requirement is Executive Order 12898:

Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations which was signed on February 16, 1994.

Its purpose is to focus federal attention on the environmental and human health effects of federal actions on minority and low-income populations with the goal of achieving environmental protection for all communities.

This Executive Order addresses persons belonging to any of the following groups which are defined as:

- Black: a person having origins in any of the black racial groups of Africa.
- Hispanic: a person of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central or South American, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race.

- Asian American: a person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, the Indian subcontinent, or the Pacific Islands.
- American Indian and Alaskan Native: a person having origins in any of the original people of North America and who maintain cultural identification through tribal affiliation or community recognition.
- Low-Income: a person whose household income (or in the case of a community or a group) whose median household income is at or below the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services poverty guidelines.

Title VI of the Civil Rights Act and Environmental Justice Requirements apply to all transportation decisions and is supposed to be integrated into every transportation decision - from the first thought about a transportation plan to post-construction operations and maintenance.

When I worked at a Regional Planning Agency and then at the Michigan Department of Transportation, I was required to have public meetings for any transportation plan or project. These public meetings are required for individual transportation projects, the State 5 year plan and the State 20 year plan. These plans also included non-motorized transportation plans for multi-use trails, sidewalks, and walkable community and Complete Streets planning.

Also, the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) must work with all state departments of transportation, Metropolitan Planning Organizations, transit providers, and other local agencies to **ensure that Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and environmental justice considerations** are integral to all surface transportation activities.

Communities in Atlanta, the San Francisco Bay Area, Chicago, New York and Boston have had successes through grassroots campaigns, lawsuits and administrative complaints under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act. Ultimately, these victories are about making sure that access to the city, to nature, bike lanes and walkable neighborhoods are not just the domain of the white middle and upper classes but are open to nonwhite and poor people as well.

Suggested Public Responsibilities

Transportation agencies cannot fully meet community needs without the active participation of well-informed, empowered individuals, community groups, non-governmental organizations, businesses and academic institutions.

And for Communities to Design a More Equitable Transit System they need to:

- *Plan with consideration for housing affordability and improve access to and from affordable housing.*
- *Collaborate with historically overlooked communities for deep and meaningful community engagement.*
- *Prioritize transit service for vulnerable communities.*
- *Decriminalize fare evasion.* It has been suggested to have designated and trained transit agency staff to deal with fare evasion and not the police departments.

To wrap up:

President Biden's infrastructure plan includes \$20 billion for a program that would reconnect neighborhoods cut off by historic investments, targeting 40% of the benefits of climate and clean energy infrastructure investments to disadvantaged communities. But of course, the President has and will face major challenges in trying to rectify historical inequities.

We can see that race frequently explains which communities receive the benefits of our transportation system and infrastructure, and which communities were and are continually being forced to host the burdens.

Transportation systems have really led to racial disparities and discrimination, which are reinforced daily from highways, roads, bridges to sidewalks, trails and public transit. The United States continues to make it harder for people of color to access and take advantage of the many opportunities there are in this country.