

Transit Rights for Citizens

The right for local governments to provide citizens
with fast and easy local transit infrastructure

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Historical Paper

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“Transport drives economic and social development. Transport connects people to jobs, health services, and education and keeps the wheels of commerce turning.”

—Kofi Annan, Former Secretary-General of the United Nations¹, Recipient of the 2001 Nobel Peace Prize.

Every day, billions of people drive private automobiles to work, social gatherings, school, and so much more.² Private automobiles are more efficient than their predecessors: horses. However, private automobiles are inefficient at moving large amounts of passengers because they can usually only fit five people at most, pollute the environment,³ cause millions of deaths each year,⁴ and take up precious space. Public transportation takes less space, is faster, is better for the environment,⁵ is more accessible and is more economically viable. So why do we use private automobiles? Citizens should have a right for urban cities to give them access to quick and easy transit infrastructure, and local governments should be responsible for providing it. When cities reach Universal Basic Mobility (UBM) these systems connect people with opportunities, improve urban livability, foster equality, help create more metropolitan cities, and

¹ Kofi Annan, "From global agreements to global actions: Moving towards a future of sustainable transport," speech, August 23, 2016, Kofi Annan Foundation, last modified August 23, 2016, accessed December 28, 2024, <https://www.kofiannanfoundation.org/publication/sustainable-transport/>.

² United States Department of Transportation, "National Household Travel Survey Daily Travel Quick Facts," Bureau of Transportation Statistics, last modified May 31, 2017, accessed December 29, 2024, <https://www.bts.gov/statistical-products/surveys/national-household-travel-survey-daily-travel-quick-facts>.

³ Washington State, "Reducing air pollution from cars," State of Washington Department of Ecology, accessed December 29, 2024, <https://ecology.wa.gov/issues-and-local-projects/education-training/what-you-can-do/reducing-car-pollution>.

⁴ Naomi Thomas, "Traffic Accidents Are Eighth Leading Cause of Death Globally, According to WHO | CNN," CNN, last modified December 7, 2018, accessed January 6, 2025, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/12/07/health/who-road-safety-report-intl/index.html>.

⁵ Tina Hodges, "Public Transportation's Role in Responding to Climate Change," ed. Jarrett Stoltzfus Stoltzfus, Federal Transit Administration, U.S. Department of Transportation, last modified January 2010, accessed December 30, 2024, <https://www.transit.dot.gov/sites/fta.dot.gov/files/docs/PublicTransportationsRoleInRespondingToClimateChange2010.pdf>.

play a vital role in the fight against climate change. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) has stated it as a civil right,⁶ and many other nations and organizations consider it so. So, why is America behind?

Public transportation as a right is key for densely populated urban areas like New York. Helping out 55% of New York citizens who don't own private automobiles⁷, and from 1975 to 1998, New York had up to an average of one billion riders annually.⁸ The shortage of citizens with private automobiles creates a significant dependence on transportation. The number of public transit commuters in New York is so high that Manhattan's population doubles during the daytime. This reliance on public transit is essential for New Yorkers who want to access concerts, significant events, gatherings, shops, and more and has been for the last century. It's also crucial for those living in suburban areas to access big cities without driving many miles. Historically, many opportunities would have been lost without this access to transportation. The MTA (Metropolitan Transportation Authority) recognizes this principle and covers most of New York. Their mission statement states that the MTA "preserves and enhances the quality of life and economic health of the region it serves through the cost-efficient provision of safe, on-time, reliable, and clean transportation services".⁹ Cities must have reliable, fast, and convenient public transportation systems to help reduce congestion and eliminate the need for private automobiles.

⁶ The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, "Establishing that Access to Public Transportation System is a Basic Civil Right," NAACP, last modified 2016, accessed January 26, 2025, <https://naACP.org/resources/establishing-access-public-transportation-system-basic-civil-right>.

⁷ "Car Ownership in NYC: By the Numbers," infographic, June 2024, accessed January 8, 2025, <https://www.hunterurban.org/>.

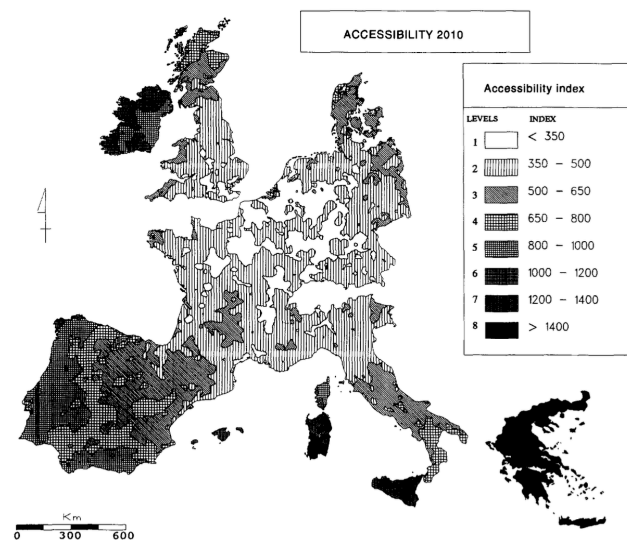
⁸ Mitchell L. Moss et al., *Subway Ridership 1975-2015*, 4, March 2017, accessed January 14, 2025, <https://wagner.nyu.edu/files/faculty/publications/State%20of%20Subway%20Ridership%20-%20Mar717.pdf>.

⁹ Metropolitan Transportation Authority, *Metropolitan Transportation Authority Mission Statement, Measurements, and Performance Indicators Report Covering Fiscal Year 2020*, 2, 2020, accessed February 3, 2025, <https://www.mta.info/document/78951>.

Historically, European areas have prioritized the expansion of public transportation, specifically rail networks, and have treated it as a right. These efforts in the last century have helped create modern-day European and Asian transportation systems that are affordable, inclusive, fast, efficient, and can bring a rider practically anywhere. As of 2021, over 60% (24.6% in rural areas and 36.4% in suburban) of Europeans live in low-density areas.¹⁰ These low-density European towns are often hundreds of miles apart, and car travel is inefficient. These systems help European rail growth, as seen by the rapid increase in rail ridership in the last 30 years. In 1990, there were only 15 billion pkm (passenger-kilometres) on the high-speed rail; however, in 2016, it reached over 124 billion pkm.¹¹ With access to European train networks, a person who lives in a rural area 30 minutes away from Paris can visit Barcelona in just five hours total.¹² The graph on the right, taken from

*“The European high-speed train network: Predicted effects on accessibility patterns”*¹³,

shows that accessibility is exceptionally high in most of Europe. Accessibility across Europe is crucial to allow these suburban areas to access other countries cheaply and efficiently. This growth has been essential for rural communities to access urban cities and



countries when other forms of transport are often inaccessible. Without the European Union

¹⁰ European Union, "Urban-rural Europe - introduction," Eurostat, last modified July 2024, accessed January 15, 2025, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Urban-rural_Europe_-_introduction.

¹¹ European Court of Auditors, *Special Report: A European high-speed rail network: not a reality but an ineffective patchwork*, 2018, accessed January 25, 2025, <https://op.europa.eu/webpub/eca/special-reports/high-speed-rail-19-2018/en/>.

¹² Javier Gutiérrez, Rafael González, and Gabriel Gómez, "The European High-speed Train Network," *Journal of Transport Geography* 4, no. 4 (1996): 229, [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0966-6923\(96\)00033-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0966-6923(96)00033-6).

¹³ Gutiérrez, González, and Gómez, "The European," 235.

prioritizing transportation as a right, these cities may be traveling thousands of miles by car or even taking slower methods.

Transportation is especially crucial for youth. 22% of Toronto youth ride transit to school.¹⁴ Private automobiles are inaccessible to youth, especially those under the driving age, and public transportation is the only way for them to get around. Young adults under the age of 30 are more likely to use public transportation and other alternative forms of transit, according to a journal¹⁵; teens and young adults have less education and work experience and lower incomes, which makes them more sensitive to the high price of private transport and rationalizes public transportation. In Kingston, Ontario, when teens were taught about public transportation's benefits, there was a 20-fold increase in bus ridership from just 30,000 to over 600,000.¹⁶ According to an assessment run by the Los Angeles Department of Health, providing public transportation free to youth increases attendance, increases freedom and mobility for students, allowing them to be more independent, decreases citations and arrests, helps families have more disposable income, decreases traffic volume congestion and decreases injuries.¹⁷ Increasing public transportation access also allows youth to feel safer. In a survey done in Beacon Hill (one of the most diverse neighborhoods in Seattle), students expressed concerns that they would get hit by private automobiles and that there would be a lack of public transportation infrastructure.¹⁸ These youth expressed that fast, easy, free, and safe mobility is the best definition of mobility

¹⁴ Raktim Mitra and Ron N. Buliung, "Exploring Differences in School Travel Mode Choice Behaviour between Children and Youth," *Transport Policy* 42 (August 2015): 10, accessed January 28, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tranpol.2015.04.005>.

¹⁵ Anne Brown et al., "A Taste for Transit? Analyzing Public Transit Use Trends among Youth," *Journal of Public Transportation* 19, no. 1 (2016): 50, accessed January 27, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.5038/2375-0901.19.1.4>.

¹⁶ Federation of Canadian Municipalities, Green Municipal Fund, accessed January 27, 2025, <https://greenmunicipalfund.ca/case-studies/case-study-kingston-gets-more-youth-riding-public-transit>.

¹⁷ Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, *The Potential Costs and Benefits of Providing Free Public Transportation Passes to Students in Los Angeles County*, by Lauren N. Gase, Amelia DeFosset, and Tony Kuo, 5, accessed January 27, 2025, http://www.publichealth.lacounty.gov/chie/reports/Transit_Passes.pdf.

¹⁸ Evalynn Fae T Romano et al., "'No One Should Feel like They're Unsafe,'" *Family & Community Health*, August 276, 2022, 5, accessed January 27, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1097/fch.0000000000000344>.

access and emphasized they spend most of their time in community spaces, not at home. The risk of crashes from automobiles is higher among teens ages 16–19 than among any other age group.¹⁹ With more transport to these spaces, more youth can access such spaces, and it creates a better environment.²⁰ All of these have actions that lead to better outcomes: decreased traffic leads to reduced greenhouse gases and a better environment, or increased funds to schools, allowing students to be more engaged and improving the quality of schools. In San Francisco, approximately 63.1% of youth highly agree that free transit is helpful to young people in their area,²¹ with 60% of youth riding transit infrastructure five or more times per week.²² With so many young people who want and *need* to ride transportation, it's key for government agencies to do what so many other countries do and provide access. Imagine a world without access to transportation for youth; so many young people would miss out on incredible opportunities and can't get to gatherings, fairs, and other social events.

Transportation as a right also ties closely to accessibility for those with disabilities; in the 1970s and 1980s, when the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) passed, equal access to public transportation for those with disabilities was required by the federal government in the United States.²³ ADA includes this because public transportation is often the only method of independent transportation for a person with disabilities. Governments can achieve this by implementing a Universal Basic Mobility (UBM) system. The concept of UBM is simple: providing a foundational level of mobility to all members of society, regardless of factors such as

¹⁹ U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention., "Risk Factors for Teen Drivers," Teen Drivers, last modified April 25, 2024, accessed January 27, 2025, <https://www.cdc.gov/teen-drivers/risk-factors/index.html> .

²⁰ Romano et al., "'No One Should,'" 277.

²¹ William Riggs and Jessie Escobar, *Opportunities to Expand Transit Ridership Among Youth: Lessons from San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency*, 14, accessed January 27, 2025, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3998565 .

²² Riggs and Escobar, *Opportunities to Expand*, 17.

²³ King County, "Access Transportation," King County Metro, accessed January 6, 2025, <https://kingcounty.gov/en/dept/metro/travel-options/accessible-services/access-transportation> .

geographic location or income level, through partnerships and policies.²⁴ UBM allows a person with disabilities to connect with the transportation grid to get around to shops, medical services, gatherings, and events. In a survey, Oakland citizens indicated that they used Oakland's UBM most frequently to commute (66%), for errands and shopping (23%), and for medical appointments (8%).²⁵ However, it doesn't stop there; it also allows those in impoverished areas, those without a house, people of color, and other minorities less likely to own a private automobile to access transportation. Many need this access to commute, get groceries, or run errands.

The concept of UBM can also include providing discounts to minorities, and countless cities in America are currently exploring this model. One minority, impoverished Portland citizens, have been receiving grants from the Portland government for discounts on public transportation since 2017. There are eight UBM pilots across the United States at the time,²⁶ and the number is rapidly increasing. For a good reason, working families in the 28 largest metropolitan areas spend 29% of their income on transportation.²⁷ 19% of Blacks and 13.7% of Latinos lack access to private automobiles.²⁸ With so many without private automobiles, many will be denied opportunities, can't receive proper education, access healthcare, and buy basic needs. Costs for vehicles can also be significant; riders can save over 13 *thousand* dollars a year by using public transportation instead of driving, and since 2019, the average cost of purchasing new private automobiles has increased by 30 *percent*. At the same time, monthly public transit

²⁴ "Universal Basic Mobility Primer," It's America, accessed January 7, 2025, https://itsa.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Universal-Basic-Mobility-One-Pager_Final.pdf.

²⁵ Department of Transportation, *A Survey of Universal Basic Mobility Programs and Pilots in the United States*, by Angelly J. Tovar, et al., 27, March 1, 2024, accessed January 8, 2025, <https://rosap.ntl.bts.gov/view/dot/74301>.

²⁶ Department of Transportation, *A Survey*, 17.

²⁷ Lexer Quamie, "Transportation Equity a Key to Winning Full Civil Rights," *Race, Poverty and the Environment* 18, no. 2 (2011): 2, JSTOR.

²⁸ Quamie, "Transportation Equity," 2.

fare prices have not increased since 2020.²⁹ Public transportation as a role helps ensure social equality, creating more fair rights. Public transit also provides economic relief to those living paycheck-to-paycheck or in poverty. It can make a significant difference, enabling them to be more economically free and allowing them to spend on other necessities.

Additionally, public transportation crucially benefits rural towns and communities. Older Americans make up a significant portion (17 percent) of rural populations.³⁰ Mirta M, a senior in Chapel Hill, NC, when asked in a study, said:

*“There is a point in everyone’s life in which driving becomes difficult or all together impossible due to normal aging. For this reason alone, it is a smart investment to improve public transit infrastructure/services as a way of promoting healthy living for the whole community, including that of the increasing senior population. Personally, thanks to public transportation I can keep an active professional and social life.”*³¹

There are hundreds of thousands of senior citizens facing this same problem, and it affects disabled seniors as well who can’t drive at all. Judith L, a senior citizen from Idaho Falls, ID said:

*“I’m a disabled senior citizen. I depend on public transportation to get around -- from everything to errands, shopping, medical appointments and other basic, everyday essentials that others take for granted. I simply can’t afford to get around without public transportation.”*³²

Rural citizens with medical conditions are 50% more likely to ride transit to get to places. Public transit can also help rural areas economically. It can help reduce parking costs for businesses. Transportation also saves lives in rural communities, which account for 49% of traffic fatalities, by getting people off roads and on a safer option.³³

²⁹ *Transit Savings Grow As Auto Costs and Gas Prices Increase*, 1, September 2023, accessed January 26, 2025, <https://www.apta.com/wp-content/uploads/APTA-POLICY-BRIEF-Transit-Savings-09.27.2023.pdf>.

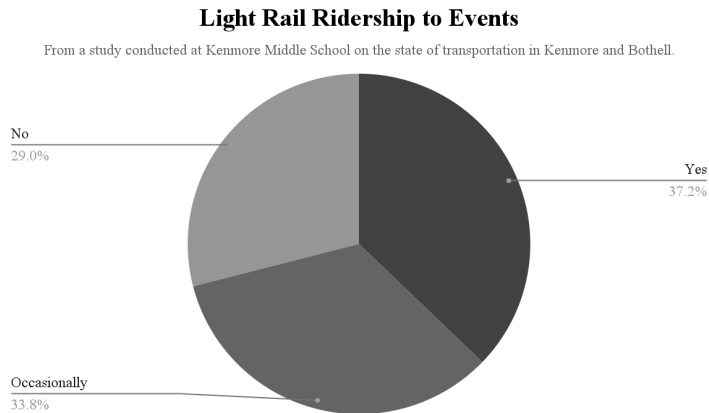
³⁰ Todd Litman, *Public Transportation's Impact on Rural and Small Towns*, 6, accessed January 26, 2025, <https://www.apta.com/wp-content/uploads/Resources/resources/reportsandpublications/Documents/APTA-Rural-Transit-2017.pdf>.

³¹ Litman, *Public Transportation's*, 8.

³² Litman, *Public Transportation's*, 10.

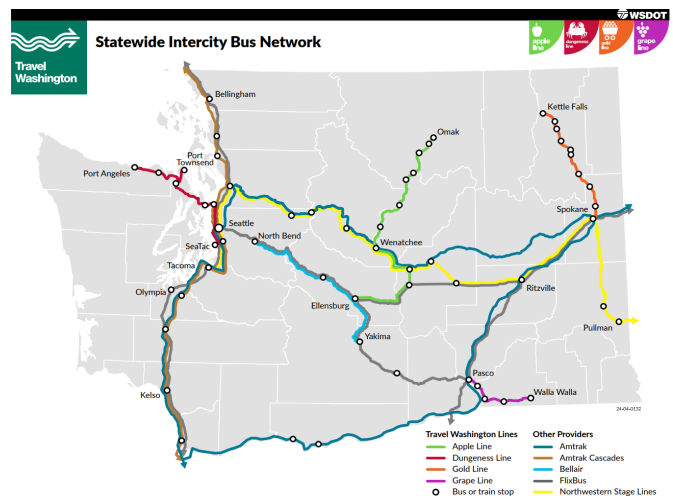
³³ Litman, *Public Transportation's*, 18.

The graph below shows a survey conducted this year, where almost 40% of Kenmore (a suburb near Seattle) middle school



students ride light rail to concerts, sporting events, and more³⁴ A great example of a working rural transportation system is Washington's state-wide intercity bus network, which connects many

rural towns. Below is a Washington State Department of Transportation chart showing the intercity bus network.³⁵ The intercity bus connects rural towns across Washington and significantly improves rural Washington's economy. Hotels, banks, farmers markets, and more are being developed near these transit centers. With so many rural towns and elders depending on public transportation, it's key that America helps out those who often don't have other transportation methods and live too far away for alternative options by providing regional transit.



Transportation as a right also improves the economy; the economy grows with a more expansive network. Every one billion dollars spent on public transit creates approximately

³⁴ Aram Shiva et al., Data for a survey done by Kenmore Middle School students in collaboration with Sound Transit on increasing youth ridership (unpublished data set, November 15, 2024) accessed January 26, 2025.

³⁵ Ryan Packer, "WSDOT Report Proposes Expansion Path for Washington's Intercity Bus Network," The Urbanist, accessed January 27, 2025, <https://www.theurbanist.org/2025/01/06/wsdot-intercity-bus-network-expansion/>.

50,000 jobs and an additional *five billion in GDP*.³⁶ In Los Angeles, an extra 140 billion dollars in additional business sales and over \$60 billion in additional wages were introduced due to their implementation of a long-range transportation plan.³⁷ Transportation is also suitable for people commuting; private automobiles can be costly, but the average cost for public transit is only \$1.56.³⁸ The average car's annual cost (not including gas) is at least \$6,000 a year.³⁹ \$1.56 times 365 is only around \$569 a year, and many don't commute daily! The cost of transportation is only 9% of private automobile transit. Public transportation costs are often 10x cheaper than private automobiles, so why does America still depend on private automobiles?

In conclusion, the history of public transportation as a right spans back to European and Asian transportation, specifically helping non-urban towns, and is one of the biggest reasons New York has so many successful people. It's especially crucial when considering youth and their lack of access to automobiles, making them rely on public transportation to get around, allowing students to feel safer, and reducing traffic congestion. So many people with disabilities and older adults can't drive a car. They can't get around, especially if they don't have family around, making them rely on public transportation to move around, such as these UBM systems. Public transportation is also crucial in sustaining stronger economies, helps humanity achieve its goal of decreasing climate change and greenhouse gas emissions, and saves millions of lives each year. Public transportation isn't just a service; it's a key tool in a fairer, safer, environmentally sustainable, and economically stable world. As we enter a new age, it's time for

³⁶ Economic Development Research Group, an EBP Company, *Economic Impact of Public Transportation Investment. 2020 Update*, 3, April 2020, accessed January 26, 2025, <https://www.apta.com/wp-content/uploads/APTA-Economic-Impact-Public-Transit-2020.pdf>.

³⁷ *Public Transportation's Role in the Knowledge Economy*, iv, accessed January 28, 2025, <https://www.apta.com/wp-content/uploads/Resources/resources/reportsandpublications/Documents/APTA-PT-Knowledge-Economy.pdf>.

³⁸ Economic Development Research Group, an EBP Company, *Economic Impact of Public Transportation Investment. 2020 Update*, 19, April 2020, accessed January 26, 2025, <https://www.apta.com/wp-content/uploads/APTA-Economic-Impact-Public-Transit-2020.pdf>.

³⁹ Economic Development Research Group, an EBP Company, *Economic Impact*, 20.

policymakers to recognize public transportation access as a right and allow for equitable and accessible infrastructure for all. Let us, together, move towards a better and more accessible tomorrow.

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