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Ensuring Safety: The Cure to America's Inadequate Public Transportation?

The history of public transportation scarcity in the United States is a long and complicated one. While many implications have arisen from this level of subpar public transportation; one principal consequence as a result of this issue would undoubtedly be the chokehold it places on minority populations, such as women, people of color, and disabled persons. While it is true that technology has further advanced the feasibility of public transit in recent years, few applications of this have emphasized the necessity to accommodate disadvantaged persons as mentioned before. While these issues on the lack of public transportation may seem indicative of the US' geographical context, the opposite would be the case. In reality, public transit scarcity is a relatively new issue, especially regarding the nation's historical context.

As formerly mentioned, before the year 1950, the United States possessed a higher rate of public transport trips per capita than Germany, which would sound implausible due in part to the reputation that Germany possesses today concerning public transit availability (pg. 1 HCP Final Draft). Additionally, many have proposed that when this trend of public transportation shifted within the United States, many negative implications have arisen in the US because of the decline of its public transit systems, particularly regarding the nation's economy. For instance, according to the public policy newspaper Politico, "Aging public transit infrastructure in America leads to lost time in travel and makes a region's economy less productive...a lack of

productivity causes a decrease of \$180 billion in America's GNP, which includes a loss of \$109 billion in household income and 162,000 jobs over the same six-year time frame referred to earlier." As evidenced by the quote, it can be inferred that inefficient public transportation systems in the United States lead to less economic prosperity through wasted time on additional travel. With a variety of angles regarding public transportation being conveyed here—the need for a solution to this ongoing problem—is ever more apparent.

With that being said, many have proposed various solutions to combat the issue; however, there is one specific solution that stands out among others. This solution proposed involves the reduction of crime in public transit systems as a means to increase its feasibility for at-risk groups. Putting this solution forward would be especially beneficial in metropolitan areas such as New York City or Chicago, where violent crimes committed on public transit systems are quite common. Putting this solution forward to reduce the amount of crime prevalent in these transportation systems could incentivize the utilization of public transit. As a result, new demand for the implementation of transportation systems across the nation could be generated; thereby creating an effective solution to the problem of public transportation scarcity here in the states. Additionally, we already have pre-existing examples of public transit systems in other countries that accommodate this solution into their urban planning at a large scale, such as in the city of Hong Kong, as evidenced by the figure to the right. Much of the sentiment expressed here in this solution can be compared to those of Martha Nussbaum in her book *Creating Capabilities*. In her book, Nussbaum utilizes the appeal of ethos to inform her audience about how contributive her work has been in forming human development indices as well as how ethically imperative it is for a society to adopt said approach to achieve social justice (pg. 2 CA Final Draft). As aforementioned here, Nussbaum's so-called "Capabilities Approach" can be applied to champion

social justice for at-risk populations such as people of color, women, and/or children, particularly in this insurance through the increase of security in public transportation systems across the US.

To coherently understand why the solution of increasing the security of the US public transit is essential, we must first consider the individuals who are negatively impacted by this issue the most, and how it inflicts socioeconomic consequences on these populations over time. For instance, according to a 2015 survey conducted by the PEW Research

Center, the percentage of American adults who rely on public

transportation varies by demographic to a great

extent. As evidenced by Figure 2, the

percentage of African Americans utilizing

public transit sits around 25 percent whereas

White Americans only account for about 7

percent of the individuals who utilize public

transportation regularly. (pg. 4 HCP Final

Draft). The low rate of White Americans

utilizing public transportation is a telltale sign

that urban planning within the United States is heavily dependent on the demographics of that

particular area, and this was not by coincidence. Since public transportation can often be seen as

an unsafe mode of transportation, especially in metropolitan areas where violent crime is often

more prevalent, this makes minority populations that rely on these forms of transit even more

vulnerable. As such, the viability of a solution that addresses this issue—directly and

indirectly—sounds ever more appealing.

Public transit use varies by demographic group

% of U.S. adults who say they take public transportation (like a bus, subway or train) on a daily, almost daily or weekly basis



Figure 2: Infographic displays the utilization of public transportation by different races/ethnicities.

Figure 1: Shows a transparent barrier preventing boarding passengers from being pushed onto subway tracks.

One immediate way this solution can be incorporated directly into public transportation systems across the US is through the implementation of increased safety measures in everyday public transport. Take, for instance, the mention of Hong Kong's subway system, collectively known as the Mass Transit Railway, or the MTR, for short. In this immensely vast network of different subway tracks and routes—which happens to serve about 2.46 million people each day—the urgent need to maintain a safe yet efficient mode of transportation for the citizens of Hong Kong was quickly realized. Ergo, the government of Hong Kong decided to heavily invest in security measures to help circumvent this, which include glass barriers that prevent individuals from falling onto subway tracks—either inadvertently or deliberately. In addition to this, the government of Hong Kong also makes many strides in maintaining a hygienic setting for their subway stations, making sure to accommodate the needs of individuals who are possibly at risk of contracting contagious illnesses in a high-traffic area. Measures taken by the MTR to increase the cleanliness of their subway system are likely to contribute to the consensus in the scientific community that public transit is not a significant vector of pathogen spread. In fact, in a peer-reviewed study conducted in 2020, it was determined that “[There is] no evidence of a positive relationship between city-level transit ridership and influenza/pneumonia mortality rates, suggesting that population level rates of transit use are not a singularly important factor in the transmission of influenza” (Howland, Renata E., et al., 2020). Knowing this, it wouldn't be much of a stretch to assert that Hong Kong excels in preventing the transmission of influenza through these intensive hygienic procedures in its transit system(s). Moreover, taking actions such as these of course, not only decrease the number of harmful incidents that occur in Hong Kong's subway, but it also changes public perception of the viability of the MTR, which in turn

increases the number of individuals who use the public transit system, making the incentive to utilize it increasingly evident.

With that being said, the implementation of a solution this widespread has not been without cost. The Mass Transit Railway can afford to maintain this level of safety and hygiene through small train fares. While these fares are affordable for the average commuter in Hong Kong, they are not free, which is a key difference between many other public transit systems in the United States which operate at a loss (Earth.org, 2023). Moreover, the MTR utilizes an efficient contactless card system for its passengers which has been adopted by a variety of other country's transit systems, with Tokyo, Japan employing a nearly identical system for their high-speed rail, known as the Shinkansen. One central reason this solution should be adopted rather than others is simply the amount of coverage for disadvantaged groups that would arise from opting in. Furthermore, the theoretical framework imposed by Nussbaum's "Capabilities Approach" works

eloquently in this solution by affirming that "Capability is thus a kind of freedom: the substantive to achieve alternative functioning combinations" (pg. 2 CA Final Draft). Conveyed here, this solution would allow disadvantaged populations such as people of color, women, or children to choose public transportation as an alternative means of daily commute without the fear of being oppressed, aiding in their capabilities immensely.



Figure 3: The Mass Transit Railway of Hong Kong prides itself on maintaining a clean and hygienic environment for its passengers (Wong, 2020).

Another clear and present example of this solution being put into fruition would be the implementation of public safety officers in the Los Angeles Metro System, which manages a variety of bus, light rail, and subway systems. This public transit agency, headed by the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority, or METRO for short, employs a multitude of transit security officers to facilitate the boarding process of passengers as well as address any potential dangers/threats on any metro buses or trams while they are in transit. By doing this, the METRO system strives to maintain a level of safety for its passengers, especially minorities, who as aforementioned, are the most reliant on these modes of transportation for commuting purposes. The execution of this level of security has become especially relevant in recent years, as the number of crimes against minorities in public—particularly against Asian Americans—has increased. As a matter of fact, in just the year 2022 alone, there were a total of 158 assaults on bus operators – an increase from 115 in 2021 (Carey, 2023). That figure, of course, does not even include the number of assaults on LA’s Metro system that did not involve bus operators, which likely is an even higher number. Therefore, it is evident that some level of transit security is needed for a metropolitan area that inhabits a population of over 9.83 million people.



Figure 4: This image depicts a transit security officer aiding a passenger navigate the METRO rail system.

Although the previously mentioned solution has been proven to accomplish the task of making public transit more viable in the United States, many have argued that alternative solutions to the issue, such as increasing ride frequency, would be more effective in achieving

the same outcome, and there is some validity to these statements, especially when viewing from a cost/benefit approach. Take for instance, the city of Ottawa, Canada, which was able to convert its outer commuter rail lines into trains that arrive every 15 minutes, for a total cost of \$16 million (Earth.org, 2023). The cost for the implementation of this project was relatively low compared to Ottawa's collective transportation budget of \$707 million (Huston, 2023).

Comparatively, while employment costs associated with hiring transit security officers in Los Angeles County have been difficult to estimate, a 2017 article by the Los Angeles Times remarked on a new security plan for the metro system which came in at a staggering \$797 million: a figure higher than the previously mentioned transportation budget of Ottawa as a whole. This security plan consisted of an overhaul of the former Los Angeles County Sheriff officers who previously patrolled the county's metro system, replacing them with better-qualified enforcement officials. As conveyed here in the comparison between both local government initiatives, the measure of instilling security into a public transit system can be a costly endeavor, at least when compared to simply making the transit system more frequent. However, one implication that should be kept in mind is the ability for comparisons such as these to be skewed in a biased manner. To elaborate, the city of Ottawa has a population of about 994,000 whereas the city of Los Angeles has a population of 3.89 million. Additionally, the 2017 initiative encompassed not only the transit system in the city of Los Angeles but the county as a whole, which collectively possesses a population of 9.83 million—which is nearly a 10 times difference when compared to Ottawa. It could even be surmised that applying an increase in rider frequency at a scale that accommodates the collective area of Los Angeles County could end up surmounting the cost of adding additional security measures. Therefore, while there is some validity to finding alternative forms of solving the problem of public transit scarcity in the US; it

is evident that applying such alternative solutions could be heavily dependent on the area where they are implemented, much more so than increasing the safe use of public transit.

In summary, while there are various other solutions out there that pledge to increase the efficacy of public transit, few yield as many positive results as instilling passenger safety within public transit, especially here in the United States. As we have seen these measures take precedence in other countries such as Hong Kong, Japan, and the like, it would be fair to assume that the United States could immensely benefit from implementing these measures on a similar scale for its public transit systems, in both metropolitan, suburban, and even rural areas. By putting this solution into action, disadvantaged populations will finally have the opportunity to utilize public transportation at truly unprecedented levels of safety and efficiency. This will ensure that public transit accommodates not only the urgent needs of our current generation but the ones that will follow suit in the foreseeable future.



Figure 5: This image displays an OC Transpo Bus, which is managed by the city of Ottawa, Canada.

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