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Weighing the Necessity of Public Transportation in Post-Covid America

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic impacted a variety of facets of American and global daily life. These include sectors involving but not limited to education, basic goods and services, healthcare, economics, and transportation (“How the COVID-19 Pandemic Has Changed Americans’ Personal Lives”). One of the most impacted but overlooked areas of concern is the crisis that public transportation has experienced through the course of the pandemic. As many areas of public life are returning to some normalcy, public transportation is still struggling to regain its footing, and public transit’s ridership numbers remain at a fraction of what they were before the onset of the pandemic (Parker et al. 53, 54).

While the pandemic greatly disrupted and reduced public transit, across the United States public transportation use had been steadily on the decline since the early 2010s (Berrebi et al. 140). In a nation increasingly dependent on private automobile ownership, where infrastructure is being expanded to accommodate more and more cars, what becomes of public transportation? What does the future of public transportation as a public necessity and a public service look like for Americans? And what of America’s marginalized people, those who rely on public transportation to get to work, to family, to basic goods and services; what becomes of this segment of the population that doesn’t have the money to own or maintain a car (Sanchez 834)? The decline of public transportation could result in disastrous consequences across the nation as

the lives of the already marginalized are thrown into further tumult and uncertainty. As Janette Sadiq-Khan and Seth Solomonow of *The Atlantic* put it “Not everybody rides transit, but everybody is dependent on those who do.”

Car Ownership Eclipses Public Transit

Public transportation has, in part, been on the decline because car ownership across the United States has never been more affordable. As Ralph Buehler, an associate professor in urban affairs and planning at Virginia Tech’s Alexandria Center, states “...compared to other Western countries, Americans enjoy a low cost of driving—in terms of lower taxes on gasoline, vehicle registration, and the purchase of new cars” (10). Buehler also cites that “...overall lower population densities and more low-density suburban sprawl...” (10). This renders a great deal of public transportation inefficient because the lack of people means that public transportation has difficulty moving large groups at once. Additionally, American road capacity and an abundance of parking spaces has also perpetuated a car-centered culture (Buehler 10).

While these infrastructural factors have played an important role in fostering widespread car ownership, they are perhaps superseded by a culture, based on the ideals of the American Dream, that has made car ownership desirable in the first place. Throughout a great deal of the first half of the 20th century the possession of a car represented the attainment of a material component of the American Dream. In the American psyche, the automobile sat alongside a white picket fence and a suburban home, stereotypically packaged as emblematic of the average citizen having attained a certain level of comfort, wealth, and freedom in society. Having a car *was* success, but that has changed. Ownership of a car is no longer a symbol of wealth, or of having achieved the American Dream; the car has transformed into the very instrument necessary for the pursuit of the success that it once represented. As Megan M. Flanery writes

“Ownership of a vehicle and a home are key in attaining the level of autonomy and freedom that are essential to gaining independence as an individual, American citizen” (14). The car has evolved into a “symbol of individual freedom,” as first advertised by car companies, and then touted by American culture itself (Young 10). The merging of car ownership with the notion of “freedom,” a value that has primacy in America, has resulted in the automobile taking precedence in the infrastructure of the country at the expense of almost all methods of public transportation. Public transportation, in contrast with the symbol of freedom, has gained the status of “welfare for the poor” (Stromberg) by both citizens and politicians. When the cultural context of recent history is taken into consideration, it’s little surprise that there has been a general disregard and disuse of public transportation cultivated in American society.

The History of Public Transportation in America

The decline of American public transportation has a history that extends farther back than Covid-19. The belief that America and public transit are incompatible was driven by mass suburbanization and inefficient land use following the second World War. Public transportation started to decline in the 1950s when government funding prioritized highway infrastructure through the “Federal Aid Highway Act” which made driving more accessible for the average American (Young 12) However, public transportation was still servicing large segments of cities in the first half of the 20th century. According to Bloomberg journalist Tony Frangie Mawad, the decline of public transit in the 1960s coincided with the “deindustrialization and suburbanization” of many cities across America. Despite a period of revival in the 1970s and 80s, public transportation fell out of favor. Governments treated public transit not as an essential public resource, but rather as a “welfare service — mostly for people who couldn't afford to drive” (Stromberg). The combination of a negative perception of public transit along with

underfunding led to infrastructural problems with buses, trains, and streetcars such as fewer routes and neglected maintenance.

American culture places great emphasis on individualism at the expense of public works and services. Public transit is once such service that has not only been economically neglected but has also garnered a bad reputation because of the people who use it. Amanda Hess highlights part of the cause for this bad reputation, saying that “as minority bus ridership rises, the racial stigma against the transportation form compounds” (“*Race, Class, and the Stigma of Riding the Bus in America*”). Public transit is also not seen as an integral part in getting from place to place. Buses are seen as a nuisance to car owners. There’s a logic that if you ride the bus, you are automatically seen as someone who is poor, or struggling in some fashion. You’re seen as in the way and dependent on the government. These two factors have perpetuated a stereotype surrounding public transit and those who utilize it. Hess elaborates on the stigma around public transit, say that because supposedly only marginalized people use it, anyone else who does is seen as impoverished and outcast (“*Race, Class, and the Stigma of Riding the Bus in America*”). This notion ties into welfare and the idea that American public transportation only exists as a barebones service to the most destitute of American society, perpetuating a cycle of neglect.

The Impact of Covid-19 on Public Transportation

At the height of Covid-19, public transportation received the most drastic decrease in use out of all methods of transportation, with ridership numbers being cut in a matter of days. This is due to a number of factors, but primary concerns stemmed from the coronavirus being transmissible from a person while no symptoms are shown, along with the confined and enclosed spaces within public transportation vehicles which contributed to their disuse (Tirachini and Cats 2, 4).

An additional factor such as automobile-based services like Grubhub, Uber, and Lyft, have also seen a proliferation in the last ten years, and these companies saw continued growth at an unprecedented level during the pandemic (Freytas-Tamura). Today, a person can buy just about anything online, and have it delivered directly to their doorstep, whether that be meals, clothing, necessities, groceries, luxury items, etc. As a result, people go out less and if they do, many are not using public transit to get where they need to be (“*COVID-19 Has Changed Online Shopping*”). The car offered a safer alternative in an age of social distancing. Additionally, with the rise in car-centered services, people did not need to purchase or maintain their own vehicle in order to utilize the advantage that cars offered. The prominence of cars pushed the waning system of public transportation further into the recesses of American consciousness during the Covid-19 pandemic.

A variety of class constructs influenced the use of public transportation during the pandemic. According to a study by Wilbur et al. (qtd. in Parker et al. 56) among high-income people, transportation ridership declined by 77%, while among low-income people the number declined by 58%. An additional analysis by Liu et al. (qtd. in Parker et al. 54) “found that higher proportions of women, Hispanics, African Americans, and over-45-year-olds were associated with higher continuing demand for transit.” This initial data reveals that in the midst of a global pandemic, a significant subsection of the American population, specifically marginalized, elderly, and minority groups, had to continue to utilize public transportation despite the pressing health risk. Tirachini and Cats are also apt to point out that the “people who leave public transportation are mainly those who have the option to do so... while those who continue to travel by public transportation are largely people with lower incomes” (7). Further data reinforces this disparity: “23.5% of transit riders did not have access to a household vehicle...”

(Parker et al. 55, 56). These numbers highlight the sheer necessity of public transportation. The people already in danger of Covid-19 exposure further risked their lives and the lives of their families in order to get to where they needed to be. Those who still had to rely on public transit were now more important than ever, because they were working essential jobs that required them to be at their places of work in person.

The Covid-19 pandemic has also taken its toll on public transportation funding, leading to the increased burden of an already weakened system. As Tirachini and Cats explain, “In a matter of weeks, the COVID-19 pandemic became the largest economic crisis for public transportation services in decades. The severe decline in public transportation demand due to COVID-19 has been combined with increased costs due to new hygiene and cleaning standards” (6). On top of a drastic reduction in ridership, additional spending was needed to meet the demands of disinfection, which all but crippled the finances of public transportation agencies. Furthermore, as DeWeese et al. (qtd. in Parker et al. 54) points out, “While a few agencies have been able to increase service frequency to allow for social distancing on transit, most agencies have reduced service levels, decreasing frequency and sometimes cutting or merging transit routes.” The merging and cutting of routes, coupled with lowered frequency is part of the paradox that public transportation finds itself in and it does not bode well for the future. Fewer routes, less frequency, and overall, less dependability will only exacerbate the decline of public transportation ridership. As Parker et al. states, regarding transit ridership, “...passenger volume due to COVID-19 are lasting past the recovery of many other forms of transport.” (56) and it’s not difficult to understand why.

The Future of Public Transportation in Post-Covid America

Public transportation and the people who rely on it face a series of complex challenges in the years following post-pandemic America. For one, people still don't know when the routes, halted during the pandemic, are going to come back into service. Thousands of people across the nation continue to be effectively stranded and are finding it difficult to get from one place to another (de la Garza). For others, the questions of health and safety remain a heavy weight on their minds. Buses may take more passengers than is recommended, nullifying attempts to keep everyone socially distanced (de la Garza). Some passengers may not wear masks appropriately while others may not be vaccinated. When buses do socially distance, it can mean that passengers end up having to wait twice as long to simply get on a bus (de la Garza). Would-be passengers and passengers reliant on public transportation are left wondering when the system will go back to being safe, reliable and efficient. Some are wondering if the system ever was.

Lack of funding is another factor that public transportation agencies have been grappling with for many years but has only been worsened by the pandemic. These agencies will continue to struggle with this issue, so long as social distancing and reduced ridership remains in place. One example that reflects the severity of the issue, is King County Metro, the government agency servicing Seattle's public transit. The agency reported that it's expected to lose over \$600 million in revenue through 2022 which would lead to drastic service cuts, if not total bankruptcy (de la Garza). Additionally, according to the US Department of Transportation, around \$105 billion will be needed to cover the repairs of the nation's public transit system ("Biden Plan to Boost Public Transit Funding"). These factors have strengthened the voices of critics and public officials who have raised the question of whether or not public transportation is even worth saving.

However, the \$25 billion for public transportation in the CARES Act (passed in March of 2020) demonstrated that all hope and concern for public transportation in America is not lost. As of November 6th, 2021, Congress passed the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, which, as the White House briefing room has described, is “a once-in-a-generation investment in our nation’s infrastructure and competitiveness” (“Fact Sheet: The Bipartisan Infrastructure Deal”). The bill allocates a colossal \$1.2 trillion to American infrastructure, with \$89.9 billion going to public transportation over the course of the next five years. The White House claims that this is “the largest investment in public transportation in U.S. history” (“Fact Sheet: The Bipartisan Infrastructure Deal”). The funding will not only address the mounting “maintenance and repair backlog” but will seek to “...expand public transit options across every state in the country” (“Fact Sheet: The Bipartisan Infrastructure Deal”). \$66 of the \$89.9 billion will go directly to the revitalization of Amtrak. Areas with existing railway systems will receive crucial “modernization” of infrastructure, while plans will be undertaken to expand Amtrak to locations outside of its current range. Looking to post-pandemic America, the bill “...positions rail to play a central role in our transportation and economic future” (“Fact Sheet: The Bipartisan Infrastructure Deal”). The remaining \$33 billion will be invested in other methods of public transit. The government also seeks to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from buses and public vehicles through a large-scale transition to electric vehicles over the coming years. This incentive would likely be coupled with a potential move toward faster, and more autonomous and contactless buses.

Perhaps the most important initiative in the plan is to “improve accessibility” for communities of color, the elderly, the disabled, and other marginalized peoples who have depended on public transportation both before and during the pandemic. If these infrastructural

plans follow through, Americans could witness a complete overhaul of their transportation systems and networks, a true “once-in-a-generation” endeavor, the likes of which the United States has never seen (“Fact Sheet: The Bipartisan Infrastructure Deal”). For people who struggle to get to work, to obtain basic goods and services, to see and visit family, for the already marginalized individuals, families, and communities who have found themselves stranded and further isolated by the pandemic, this could be their lifeline back into society, their chance and hope of equity in America.

Discussion

The pandemic’s impact and influence on public transportation has thrown back the curtain and has painfully highlighted the disparities among people that are found across the nation. A significant proportion of poor, elderly, and marginalized people have had to rely on public transportation throughout the Covid-19 pandemic in order to sustain their livelihoods. For them, public transportation has not been a choice, it has been a necessity. As the United States returns to a sense of normalcy in a post-Covid world, as sectors of education, manufacturing, business, etc. return to life, public transportation is still struggling to regain its ridership. Those people who rely on public transportation have had to suffer reduced routes, prolonged wait times, and at times a complete dismantling of service as transportation agencies grapple with financial crisis. For these individuals and communities, simply going back to “the way it was” isn’t good enough. Public transportation in America drastically needs a complete overhaul and revitalization of its system to address the issues that were afflicting it both before and during the pandemic, and those issues which will surely persist in the future if nothing is done. However, there is hope. Now, more than ever before, public transportation has found itself in the limelight. It’s integrity as a public good, as a public service, and all the people who so vitally rely on it, has

been so starkly revealed. The fate of public transportation is now in the hands of politicians and policy makers, of activists and of the general public. It will be through their action or inaction, that decides whether or not America builds and revitalizes the safe, efficient, and reliable network of public transportation it so desperately needs and on which it so crucially depends.

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