

The Public Transportation Network in Northeastern Illinois: An Analysis of Existing Conditions

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Introduction

Efficient, effective public transportation is at the heart of a competitive regional economy. With more than two million daily boardings on buses and trains operated by the region's three major transit systems, Chicagoland has the second-most used system in the United States. Yet ridership is down about 60 percent from half a century ago, and as this report documents, the Chicago transit network must be improved significantly in order to compete with other metropolitan areas and grow the economy. Governor Pat Quinn's announcement of a Northeastern Illinois Transit Task Force in summer 2013 offered a unique opportunity to evaluate the system's performance.

The Metropolitan Planning Council (MPC), which has played an important role in previous debates over the role and value of transportation in the Chicago region, is contributing to this important discussion.

As a first step, MPC conducted a review of existing conditions in the region from the perspective of system performance. The data and analysis included in this report provides a summary of MPC's findings on a subset of issues, from funding and spending to system reach and ridership. Though system governance and ethics are clearly important issues that the Task Force must review, these findings suggest that other, bottom-line issues must also be addressed to make Chicago's transit network world class.

Our primary conclusion is that the Chicagoland region underspends on transit operations and capital, both compared to its American and international competitors. Our region's economic competitiveness will suffer as a consequence, hindering our ability to attract jobs and grow. Governance and ethics reform should improve transparency and restore public trust, in the service of increasing revenue for a better-performing transit system.

Inadequate investment in the region's transit network results from decades of declining spending; in terms of daily operations, Chicago's transit service has had the least growth of any of its major competitors. We allocate 25 percent fewer public resources on transit capital than we did more than 20 years ago, despite a regional population that is almost 20 percent larger. And we have failed to expand our region's rapid transit network significantly, even as other metropolitan areas have invested considerably in growing their systems. Combined with land use decisions that have failed to reward locating homes and jobs near the existing transit network, most of the region's population now lives far from convenient public transportation, while at the same time, workers are demanding more and better service

The consequence has been a declining share of commuters using transit, and, despite an increase in ridership since the mid-1990s, gains are limited compared to those in other cities. If we are to achieve the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning's goal of doubling transit ridership by 2040 to 4 million daily riders, we have plenty of work to do.

Over the next few months, MPC will use this analysis to guide recommendations about ways to improve the Chicago region's public transportation system in the years ahead, including suggestions on potential new funding tools and improved regional planning decision making.

Funding for transit in Chicagoland is relatively limited, and the situation has worsened.

Compared to a group of 17 similar large metropolitan areas around the world, including three Canadian cities, three European cities and 11 American cities, Chicago’s transit funding per capita is among the lowest (Figure 1). Funding for transit operations includes money devoted to energy costs, labor and routine maintenance. In Chicago, this funding amounts to about \$250 annually per inhabitant (including subsidies and fares), and is lower than many U.S. competitors, including Philadelphia, Boston, Washington, San Francisco and New York. Only Sunbelt cities with considerably less transit ridership, and Barcelona, with considerably lower labor costs, provide less per capita funding for operations than Chicago. On the other hand, cities from Berlin to New York provide two times as much funding for transit operations per capita as does Chicago—and Paris and London more than three times as much.

Capital funding pays for the major reconstruction of lines, the purchase of new vehicles and the creation of new rights-of-way. Of the cities reviewed, only Atlanta, Barcelona, Miami and Philadelphia provide less per capita funding for system capital upgrades. Other cities, including New York, San Francisco, Paris, London, Toronto, Washington and Montreal, offer three to five times as much funding per capita on capital expenditures. In sum, the Chicago region is underinvesting in both the provision of day to day transit and upgrades necessary for the future.

This situation has deteriorated in recent years, as illustrated in Figure 2. When adjusted for inflation, only two U.S. regions studied provided less funding for transit capital expenses in

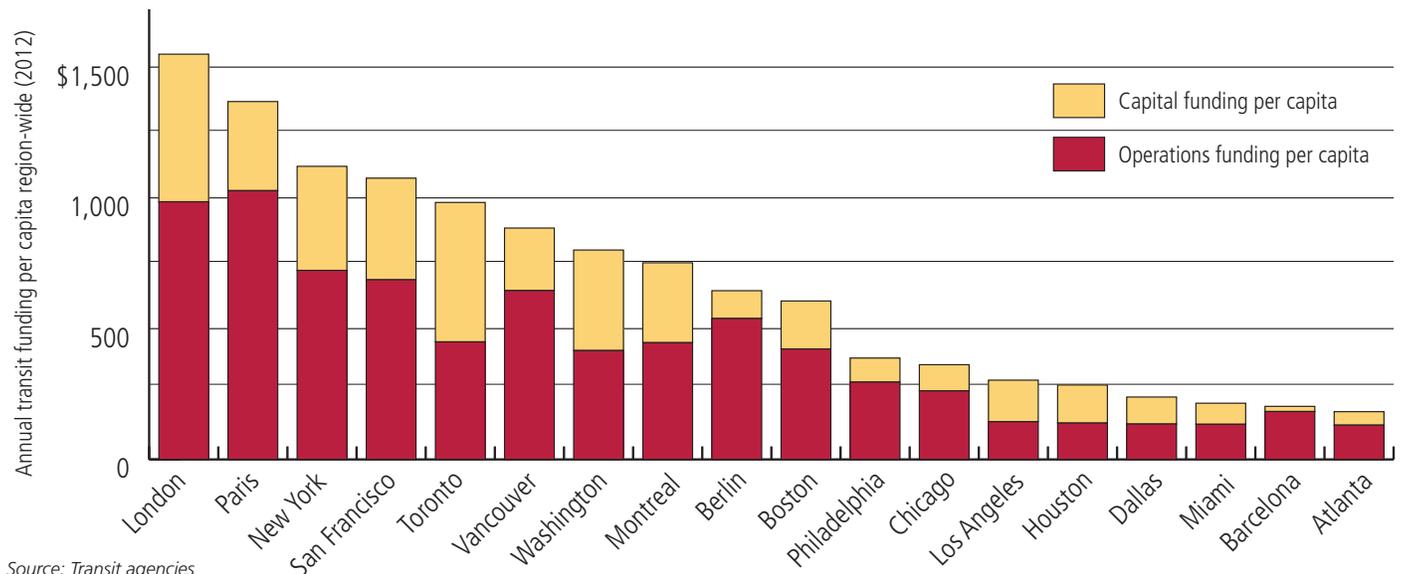
2011 than they did in 1991: the Chicago and Atlanta metropolitan areas. In fact, Chicagoland provides about 25 percent less funding now than it did twenty years ago. For a region with an aging, infrastructure-heavy rail system but a growing population, that is a significant problem.

Other regions with aging and extensive transit systems have managed to find considerable more funding to bring their networks into a state of good repair and provide for new extensions. New York and Philadelphia regions both devote about 50 percent more funding today to transit capital than they did twenty years ago. San Francisco devotes about 150 percent more funding on capital programs for its network than in 1991. These regions have identified the funds to invest in their future.

From the perspective of funding for day-to-day transit operations, growth in funding in the Chicago region has also been slow (Figure 3). It has increased by just 12 percent, inflation-adjusted, since 1991—despite a more than 17 percent increase in regional population over that period. This was the smallest increase in operations funding in all but one city studied. Regions with similar increases in population and transit networks as extensive as Chicago’s, including New York, Boston and Philadelphia, had considerably higher increases in operations funding over the period (33, 29 and 24 percent, respectively).

The limited increase in transit operations funding means that the Chicago region does not have the means to provide new services to carry a growing population. Most competitor re-

Figure 1: Per capita funding for transit, 2012 (all modes, all agencies)



Source: Transit agencies

gions are investing more in making sure that there are adequate buses and trains to move people around.

Transit operations in every American metropolitan area are funded in part by transit users and in part through subsidies. Chicago is no different; in total, including CTA, Metra and Pace, about 40 percent of transit funding is derived directly from users (there is an Illinois legislative requirement for a 50 percent farebox recovery that the agencies in sum do not quite meet). That is more than most competitor cities, including Philadelphia (37 percent), San Francisco (33 percent) and Boston (30 percent). This suggests that the major differences between Chicago and peer cities is not that riders elsewhere pay more (or even ride more, necessarily), but that other cities provide more of a public commitment through subsidies.

The Chicago region's sales tax for transit, which ranges from 1.25 percent in Cook County to 0.5 percent in the surrounding five counties, raises a substantial amount of local revenues for transit, representing the large majority of operations aid and much of the capital aid, which is supplemented by federal grants. Other regions, however, have a more diversified funding package. New York, for example, relies heavily on bridge and tunnel tolling, in addition to a payroll tax, to support its system. Most revenues generated from parking meters are allocated to transit in San Francisco. Vancouver, Canada raises a quarter of its transit funding from a regional gas tax. And London is funding a quarter of the costs of a new subway with a local property tax. These diversified sources allow these metropolitan areas to contribute to more frequent services and expanded capacity.

Figure 2: Change in total transit capital funding by region, 1991-2011

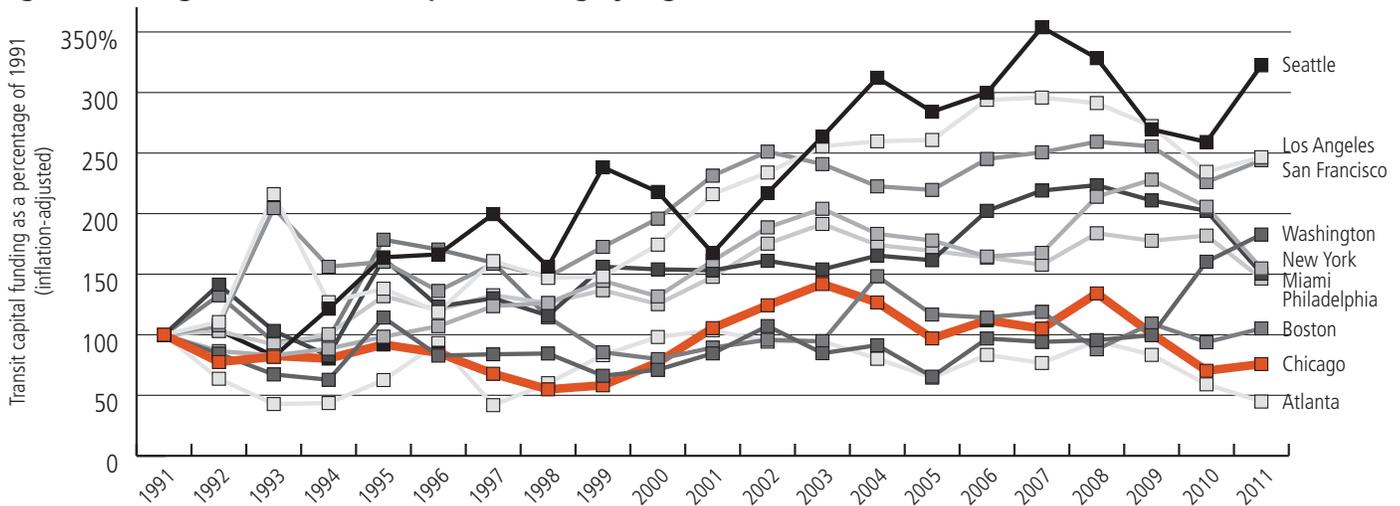
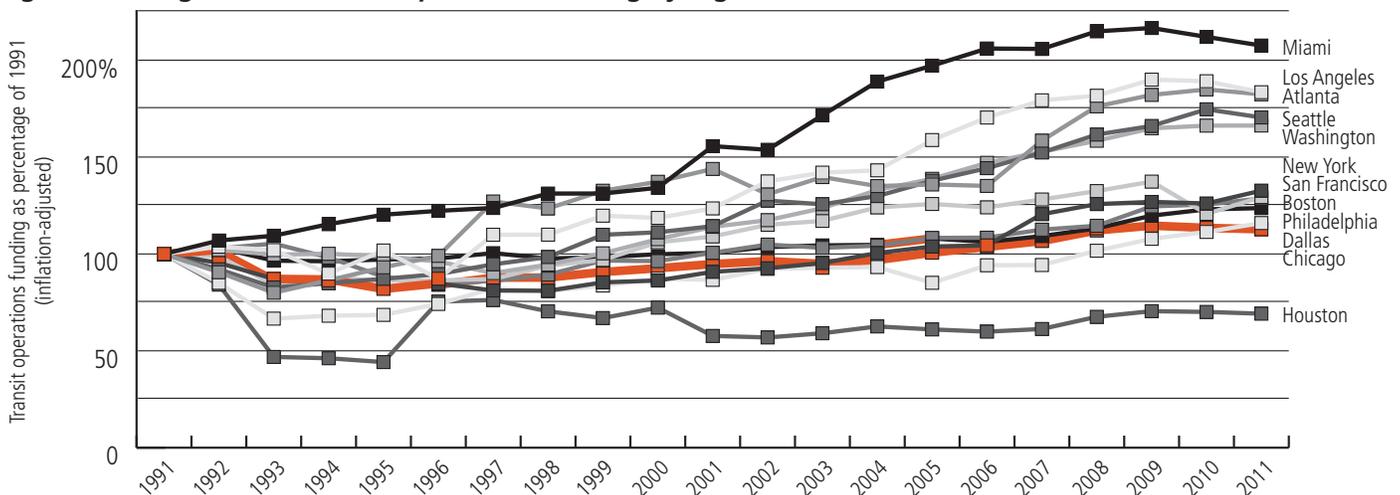


Figure 3: Change in total transit operations funding by region, 1991-2011



Source: National Transit Database

A lack of funding means limitations on operations growth.

The primary consequence of less funding for public transportation operations has been a limited ability for the region's transit systems to provide service that matches the needs of the population. A comparative analysis of transit agency services over the past two decades demonstrates that the lack of growth in system resources has produced a limited expansion of services to meet the needs of a growing population. In general, the increase in services provided has been slow compared to 11 similar large metropolitan areas since the early 1990s, but the situation has degraded even more significantly since the late 2000s due to a shortage of funding. Though other regions, particularly Atlanta and Miami, also suffered because of the effects of the recession, their services had grown significantly over the 1990s and early 2000s, unlike Chicagoland's.

Transit agencies use a variety of metrics to determine the level of service provided by bus and rail operations, and three metrics recorded by the National Transit Database are shown here. In each category, Chicago's growth in transit operations is lower than that of any other comparable large U.S. region.

In terms of total vehicle revenue miles, including CTA, Metra and Pace bus and rail operations, Chicagoland recorded 17 percent growth in miles traveled between 1991 and 2011 (the latest year for which there is information; Figure 4). The regions with the most growth in miles traveled were places with faster-growing populations, such as Seattle, Washington, Miami and Houston (100, 97, 96 and 87 percent growth, respectively). Though each of these metropolitan areas has a

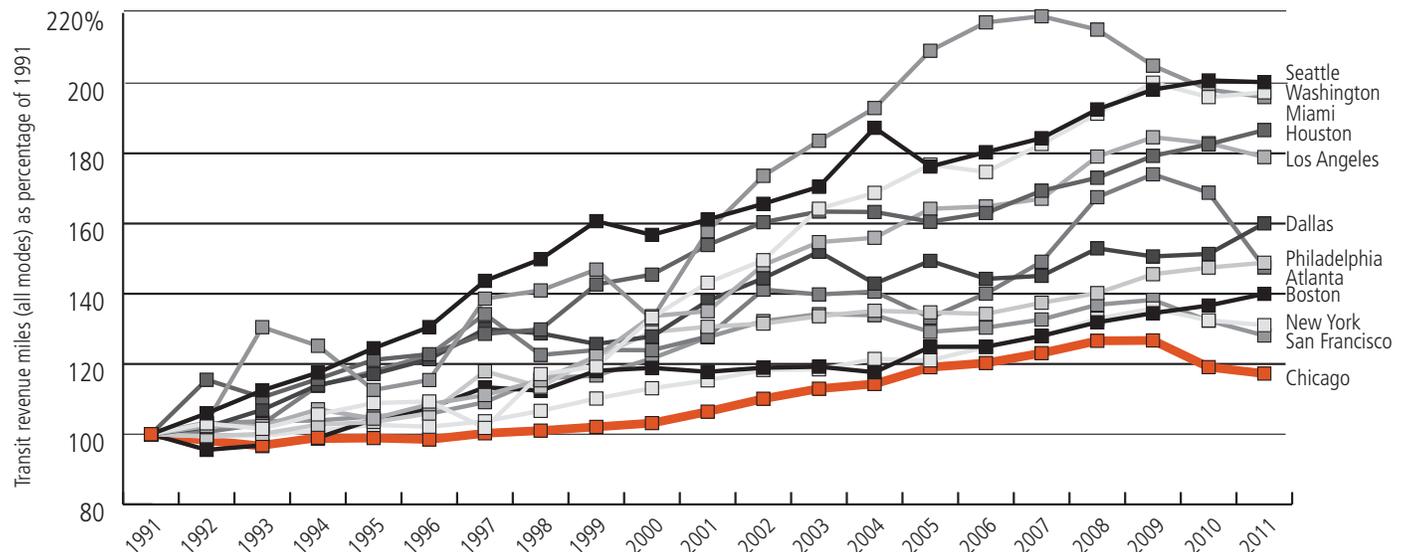
capital-intensive rail system, each is newer than Chicago's and thus may allow for a higher level of operations spending.

But old cities with extensive transit systems other than Chicagoland have funded far larger increases in transit mileage over that period. New York, Boston and Philadelphia, for example, increased their mileage by 31, 40 and 49 percent, respectively. Those regions have invested to provide significantly more effective, more frequent and more comprehensive services to their populations than the Chicago region has.

The same is true for the total vehicles operated in maximum service (Figure 5) and the total transit revenue hours (Figure 6). In terms of both criteria, Chicagoland comes last in terms of change since 1991. In other words, in terms of all common methods by which to measure transit operations levels, the Chicago region has failed to expand its offerings. This is a direct result of a lack of adequate funding.

The consequences of a limited increase in service for riders can be substantial. More funding for operations means providing more frequent buses and trains on popular routes, maintaining service on lines through transit-dependent neighborhoods and increasing service on lines that operate in suburban areas. Riders respond to the level of service offered on the transit system that is available to them and are far more likely to take advantage of a transit offering made available to them if they can rely on frequent service.

Figure 4: Change in total transit revenue miles (all modes) by region, 1991-2011



Source: National Transit Database

Better service also has positive economic impacts. According to a 2013 study by Daniel Chatman of the University of California and Robert Noland of Rutgers, a 10 percent increase in transit services results in a 1 to 2 percent increase in gross regional product (GRP). In Chicagoland, that means that \$250 million more annually committed to transit services could produce a \$5 to \$10 billion increase in GRP. Further, a 10 percent expansion in transit service produced a wage increase between \$53 and \$194 per worker, per year. The economic returns of investment are proven, yet increasing the level of service is only possible with additional funding from public sources.

One feature of the limitation on operations funding is that Chicagoland's transit system is geared overwhelmingly towards rush-hour commuters moving toward downtown Chicago. During off-peak periods (midday, evenings and weekends), of the region's rapid transit network only the Chicago L system provides service at minimum every 15 minutes. Even Metra's most popular line, the BNSF, runs only seven trains in each direction between 9 AM and 5 PM—and only nine trains roundtrip all day Sunday. The problem is sometimes an issue of conflict with rail freight operations. But on the Union Pacific-North Line, which runs on a corridor with virtually no freight, there are only ten trains departing daily from Ogilvie to points

Figure 5: Change in total vehicles operated in maximum service, 1991-2011

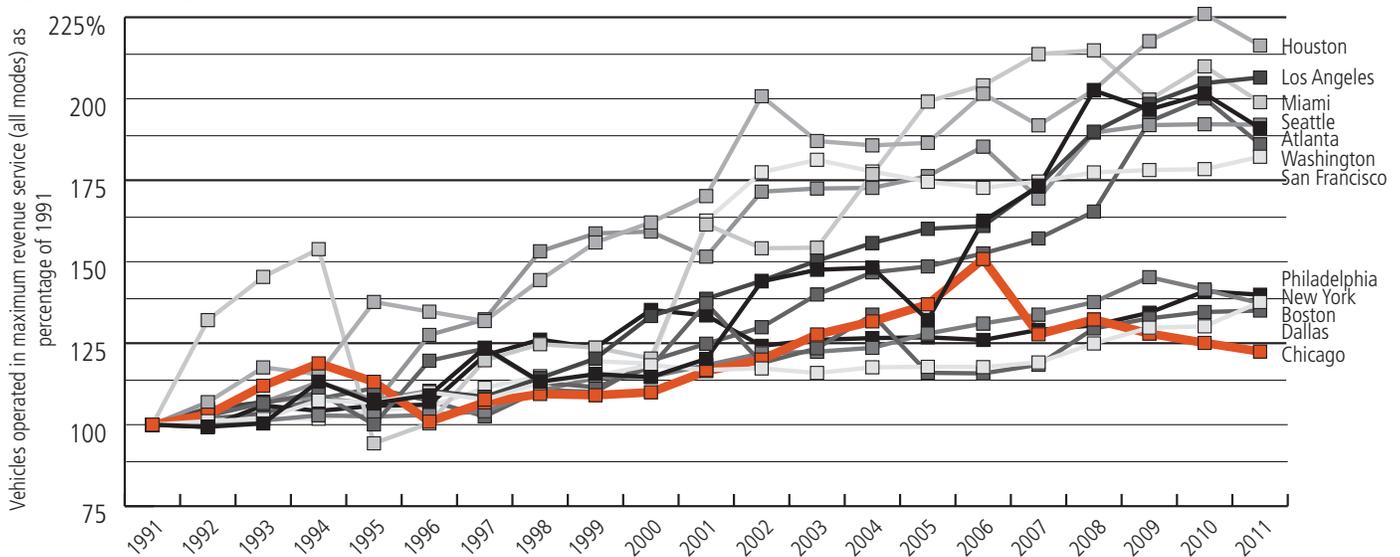
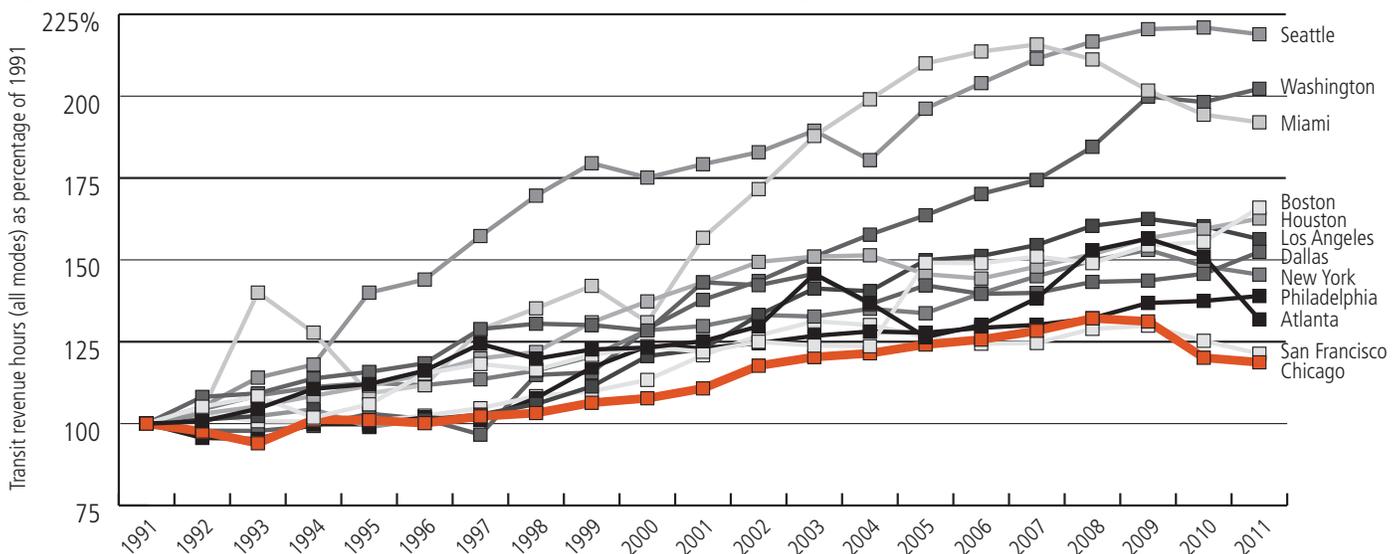


Figure 6: Change in total transit revenue hours (all modes) by region, 1991-2011



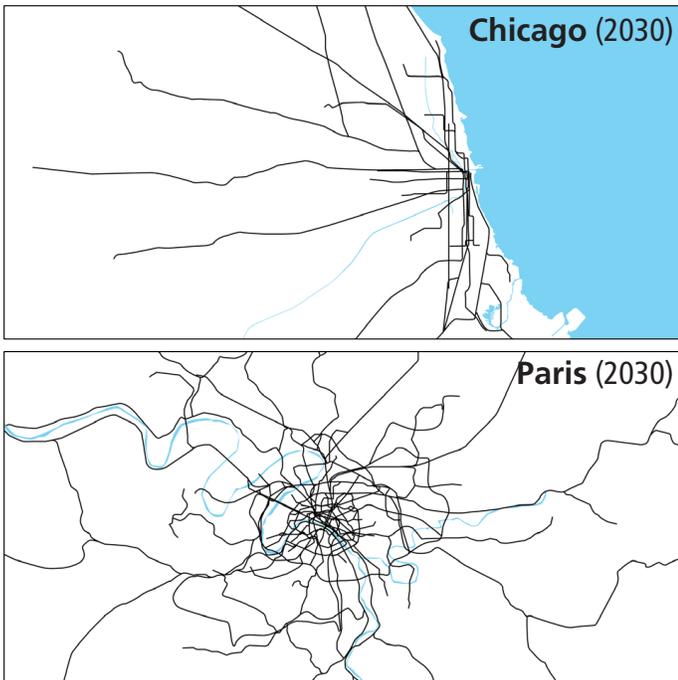
Source: National Transit Database

north between 9 AM and 5 PM; on Sundays, there are only ten trains overall. Similarly, the Metra Electric, which operates entirely on passenger-only tracks, operates trains only once an hour at middays and on weekends to most destinations.

But the number of people choosing to work alternative hours, growing populations of old and young people, people traveling for non-work reasons and the fact that most regional jobs are not in downtown Chicago means that a transit system that responds only to rush-hour needs will inevitably be less convenient than the automobile alternative. That is especially true for destinations in the suburbs, which are already geared towards drivers; a transit system with sparse transit connections and poor off-peak service will not pull many people in. The highway system, of course, does not cease to operate at mid-days and during the evenings. Why should the transit system?

Other systems have far more robust off-peak operations. Like Chicago, Paris, which has a similarly sized metropolitan area (10.9 million compared to Chicagoland's 8.7 million), has an extensive network of rapid transit lines (rail and segregated busway) operating to the city center, or planned to be constructed over the next fifteen years (though it should be noted that Paris' system allows more circumferential, or suburb-to-suburb connections, than Chicago's; Figure 7).

Figure 7: Comparative rapid transit service coverage



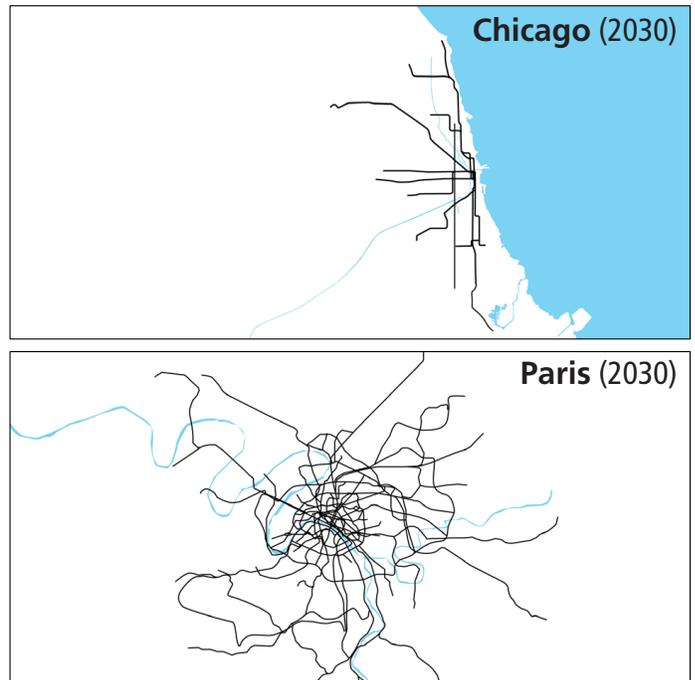
Source: Chicago and Paris maps and transit agencies. Same scale; includes projects expected to be complete by 2030 (such as Red Line South or Ashland BRT)

Yet, in terms of how much of this service operates off-peak at reasonable frequencies, Chicago and Paris are very different (Figure 8). Much of Paris' rail network continues to operate far into the suburbs at all times of day and during the weekends, all with headways of 15 minutes or less. This makes it possible to rely on fast, reliable public transportation to move all over the region without having to wait a long period for a train or bus to show up, no matter what time of day one is undertaking one's trip. In this regard, Paris is similar to other European metropolitan areas, such as London and Berlin. North American regions like New York and Toronto are also quickly developing round-the-clock frequent services on their commuter rail lines.

In the Chicago region, on the other hand, frequent, all-day service on rapid transit lines is almost entirely limited to the City of Chicago itself, isolating much of the suburbs. Even frequent slow bus service that operates in lanes shared with automobiles is limited to the center city. Because of its requirement to serve a huge area, in general, Pace cannot concentrate resources on guaranteeing frequent service on specific corridors.

A lack of operations funding means that expansion in service to ensure higher frequencies on Metra rail, and even Pace and CTA buses, is very difficult to accomplish.

Figure 8: All-day, 15-minute headway service



The transit system is disconnected from a large portion of the region’s population and jobs.

In 1950, most of the Chicago region’s population lived near its core; indeed, 65% of the 5.5 million residents of the metropolitan area lived within the City of Chicago itself and 82% lived within Cook County. The public transportation system then in place was designed to reach a large percentage of those inhabitants, as shown in Figure 9. The L stretched across a series of lines from the center of the city (including now-eliminated lines to Humboldt Park, Kenwood, the Yards and Bellwood). Meanwhile, a network of frequent and rapid interurban rail lines, which ran along L tracks when they reached Chicago, connected the center with destinations as far as Aurora, Batavia, Michigan City, Elgin and Milwaukee. This was supplemented with a system of commuter rail lines run by a series of private railroads extending in most directions. All in all, virtually everyone in the region lived close to a rail line, and, unsurprisingly, people took advantage of the resource.

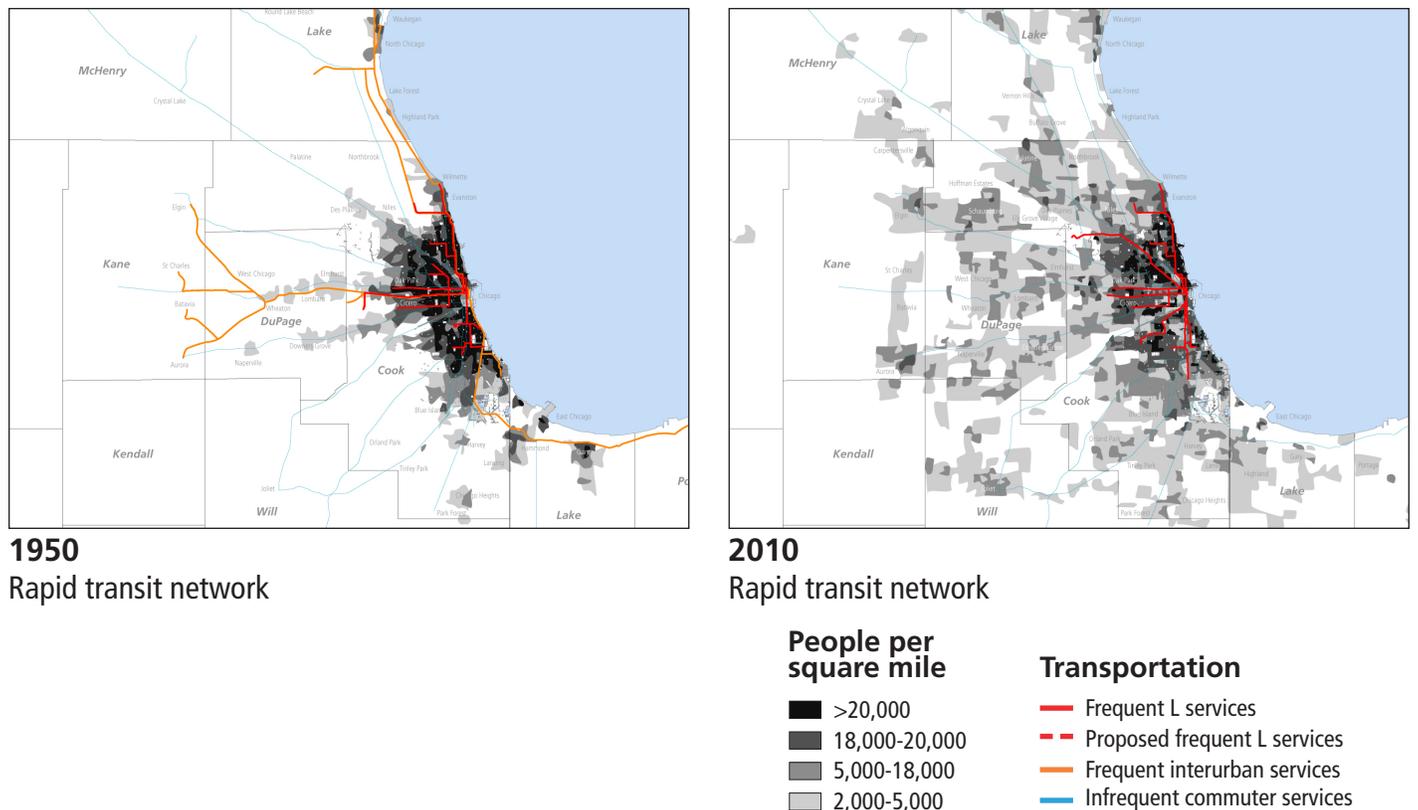
Since 1950, the length of the Chicago L system has increased by about 20 miles, in part thanks to the creation of the Orange Line to Midway Airport. But this improvement and several oth-

ers have been unable to fill the gaps in the region’s transit network and ensure the availability of fast, frequent public transportation to all of the area’s developed areas.

This lack of system growth, which applies equally to Metra and Pace, is a direct result of a failure to fund those agencies’ capital programs, which already struggle under the burden of maintaining a state of good repair on existing lines. A 2012 RTA study found that the three transit agencies have a collective maintenance need of \$30.9 billion over the next 10 years.

By 2010, the Chicago L system, which is the region’s most important frequent and all-day service, reaches just a small portion of the developed sections of the metropolitan area, since the populated sections of the region have now extended far past their boundaries in 1950, also shown in Figure 9. Only 57 percent of today’s regional population of 9.1 million lives in Cook County, and just 30 percent lives within the limits of the City of Chicago. But there have been few additions to the rapid transit system and only one new commuter rail line, the North

Figure 9: Change in reach of Chicagoland’s transit network, 1950 and 2010



Source: U.S. Census, historical Chicago-area maps

Central Service. The frequent interurban lines have been eliminated. Though Metra commuter rail services serve a significant portion of the region, service is only provided frequently during commute hours—and there are minimal provisions for travel on trips that do not involve the Chicago Loop at one end or another. In other words, while the Chicago metropolitan area has grown outwards and the commuting patterns of people have changed, the transit system has failed to respond adequately.

As of 2010, an MPC analysis of Census data shows that only 22 percent of the regional population, or 1.98 million people, live within a half-mile of stations on a CTA L line, Metra rail line or the future Ashland Avenue BRT. Only 8.5 percent, or about 770,000, live within a quarter mile of such stations.

The expansion of the region’s population has been matched by the suburbanization of the region’s workforce. In the 9-county core of the Chicago metropolitan area, including the 7 CMAP counties (Cook, DuPage, Kane, Kendall, Lake, McHenry and Will) and 2 nearby Indiana Counties (Lake and Porter), there were a total of 4.13 million jobs in 2011. About 12 percent of those, or almost 500,000, were located in Chicago’s Loop. That makes Chicago’s central business district the second-largest in the country after Midtown Manhattan. But an increasing-

ly large percentage of the region’s employees are spread out, with large concentrations of employment in areas from Evanston to Hyde Park and Northbrook to Elmhurst.

The suburbanization of employment has failed to follow the locations of the region’s major transit corridors, as illustrated by Figure 10. Just 31.8 percent of the region’s jobs are located within half a mile of a CTA or Metra rail stop, and just 20.6 percent are within a quarter mile. That leaves more than two-thirds of the region’s employees without easy access to a fast or efficient transit line. A recent Brookings Institution study noted that 82.2 percent of Chicago region jobs were located in neighborhoods with public transit service, but most of that access is provided by slow and often infrequent bus service. Few employees in these areas choose transit to get to and from their work locations because, fundamentally, that bus service does not take them to the places that they need to go every day.

Since the construction of the Interstate Highway System, job locations have frequently concentrated along the edge of freeways, rather than near the traditional transit network. This is one factor for explaining why so many of the region’s jobs are located away from either Metra or CTA rail facilities. Indeed,

Figure 10: Job locations and transit shed in Chicagoland (2011)



Source: U.S. Census

several areas stand out as heavy job locations aligned along highways but far from fast transit options. Examples include developments along I-290/I-88 between Oak Park and Downers Grove; those along I-90 between O'Hare Airport and Hoffman Estates; and those along I-294 between Des Plaines and Northbrook. For residents in these areas, transit options are limited, and when they are available, they are usually slow and do not connect them to the places where they want to go.

The failure to associate growth to the region's transit system has two sources: one, suburban growth has primarily come in the form of automobile-dependent sprawl with low densities, homogenous land uses and difficult-to-access or nonexistent transit services. This growth, common to much of the United States, has reduced the use of public transportation almost everywhere, but it has been particularly present in the Chicago region as the city has depopulated, even as suburban areas have expanded. Land use and transportation are fundamentally interdependent, and in the Chicago region, we have failed to address either issue in a manner that drives transit ridership.

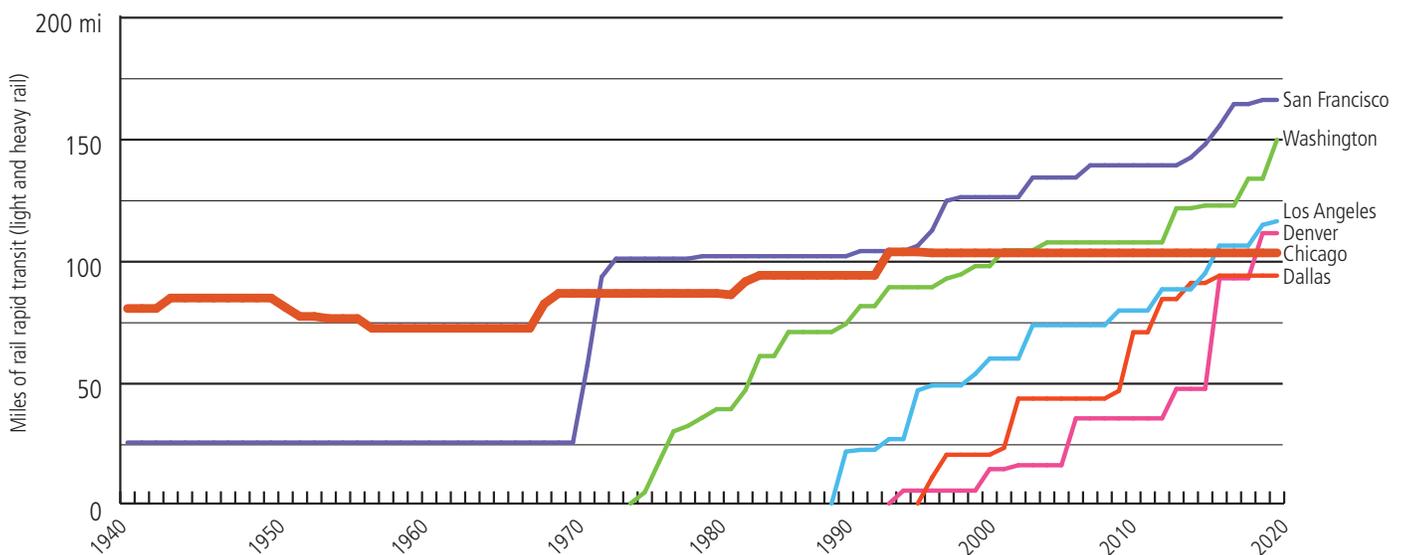
Two, the transit system has not been expanded into newly developed suburban areas far from the center of the city. The Chicago region has no expansions of its L system or Metra either under construction or funded. That puts it in the company of only Philadelphia and Miami among a review of 20 major American and European metropolitan areas. Other cities, from

Paris to Washington to Los Angeles, are currently investing in major new expansions of their frequent rail transit systems to serve more people. From this perspective, Chicagoland is being left behind—or at least is failing to expand its transit system to catch up with growth.

Figure 11 highlights some of the rail system expansions other U.S. regions have implemented since the 1970s. San Francisco, Washington, Los Angeles and Denver will all have longer heavy or light rail systems in operation by 2020 thanks to significant capital investments—and the Dallas region will not be far behind.

Moreover, despite mileage growth, Chicago's frequent rail transit system is in one way significantly smaller than it was in 1945. The number of stations served by the L has actually declined from almost 120 to about 70 over that period. Yet a 2011 study by University of California's Robert Cervero and others shows that transit ridership is highest in areas very close to stations. For every 100 residents living or 100 employees working within a quarter mile of a transit station, 34 or 68 new riders, respectively, are attracted to riding transit. Living or working more than a mile away from a station, on the other hand, attracts 15 or 30 new riders, respectively, to transit. In other words, because Chicago's L system has reduced the number of stops it serves, it has effectively become less useful to many potential customers.

Figure 11: Growth in frequent, all-day rail system route mileage, select regions, 1940-2020



Source: Transit agencies

Due to underinvestment, Chicagoland transit ridership is not keeping pace with peer regions.

The lack of funding to provide adequate transit service and fund the necessary expansion of the transit system has taken its toll on Chicagoland’s ability to attract people to use transit on a daily basis. Indeed, though Chicago was once known as the U.S. city with the largest streetcar system and a population that took advantage of it, neither the city nor the region has those characteristics any longer.

Compared to its international peers, including six in Europe and three in Canada, Chicagoland’s transit system provides very few riders per capita, as shown in Figure 12. For every 100 residents of the metropolitan area, CTA, Metra and Pace collectively provide about 25 rides per weekday on average. That’s quite low compared to San Francisco, which provides more than 40 rides for every 100 residents; New York or Montreal—where their respective transit systems offer about 70 rides per 100 residents; or especially London, Berlin and Paris, each of which have transit systems that provide more daily rides than residents.

It may be surprising that Chicago’s transit systems, which carry a collective two million daily riders, perform so poorly from this perspective compared to much of the international competition. Yet other regions with similar populations provide far more daily rides; London and Paris regions each have transit systems that carry more than 11 million riders a day. And To-

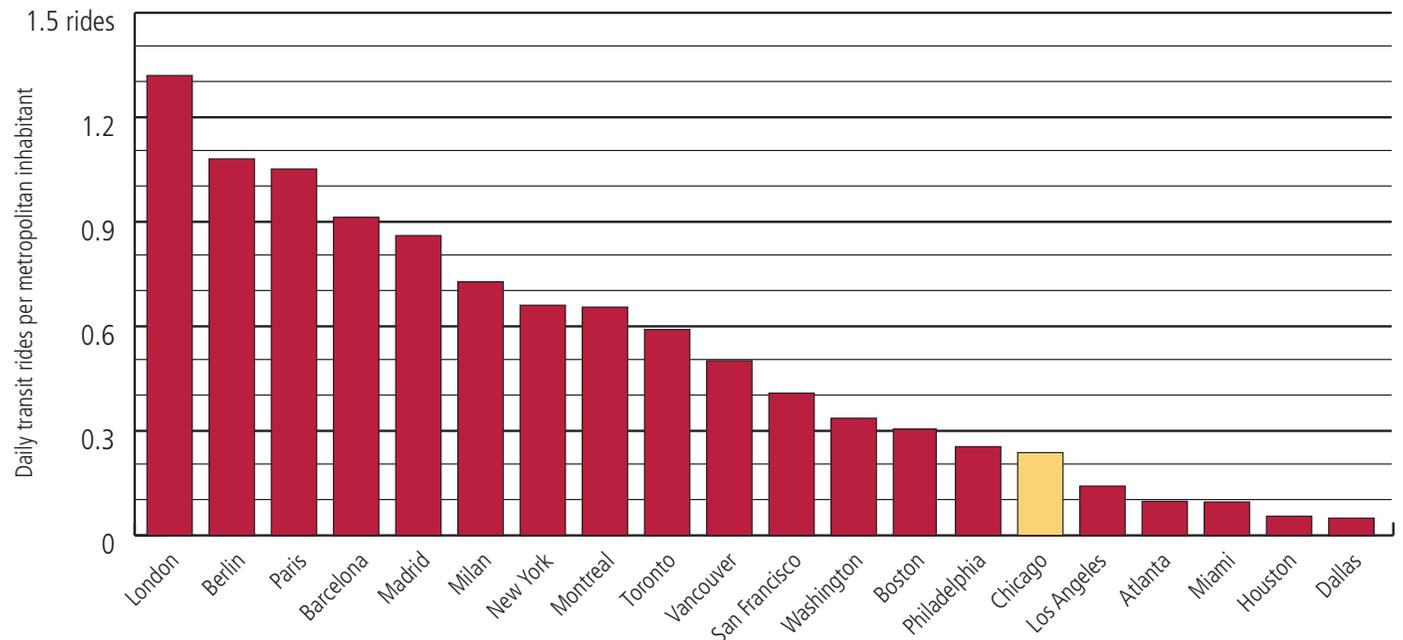
ronto and Montreal, with significantly smaller metropolitan populations than Chicagoland (5.1 and 3.8 million, respectively), nonetheless carry more daily riders.

Of 20 cities studied, only five Sunbelt cities—Los Angeles, Atlanta, Miami, Houston and Dallas—provide fewer transit rides on a per-capita basis than the Chicago region’s transit agencies do. Those regions developed more recently than much of Chicagoland and are therefore more oriented towards automobile commuting in terms of their land uses alone.

Overall, in the Chicago metropolitan area, only about 10 percent of the resident population uses transit to get to work, as documented in Figure 13. More than 70 percent of Chicagoland residents drive to work alone. That is a higher figure than many of Chicago’s competitors, including Portland, Boston, Seattle, Washington, San Francisco and especially New York and it costs real money. An analysis by the Metropolitan Planning Council found that the region loses \$7.3 billion annually in lost time and money due to congestion. Though Chicago’s drive-alone-to-work share is lower than competitor cities like Los Angeles and Dallas, the fact is that this region’s commuters rely overwhelmingly on their personal automobiles to get around the metropolis.

The three regions with the highest transit commute shares,

Figure 12: Transit rides per capita by region, 2012



Source: U.S. Census; Transit agencies

including New York, Washington and San Francisco, all have a more extensive rapid rail transit network than Chicago can boast. Each of these regions, unlike Chicagoland, is planning to increase their transit mode shares through comprehensive expansions of their transit networks. Each has already committed to billions of dollars' worth of new frequent rail extensions, as is Seattle, Boston, Portland, Los Angeles, Phoenix, San Diego, Atlanta, Houston, Minneapolis and Dallas.

Transit use in the Chicago metropolitan area is heavily concentrated among inhabitants of the City of Chicago and several near suburbs, such as Oak Park and Evanston. The only section of the region with continuous and extensive transit use for daily commuting purposes (more than 40 percent of commuters) is the north side of the City of Chicago, paralleling Lake Michigan. While services like Pace and Metra are designed to serve the suburbs, they do not attract much of the population, at least not nearly to the degree that the CTA does in the city.

In the City of Chicago overall, transit ridership is significantly higher when measured in terms of the share of commuters, as shown in Figure 13. All in all, the percentage of commuters who use transit to get to work in the City of Chicago is about 27 percent. In the U.S. context, Boston, San Francisco, Washington and New York each have significantly higher transit mode shares, however, indicating that even the City of Chicago, with

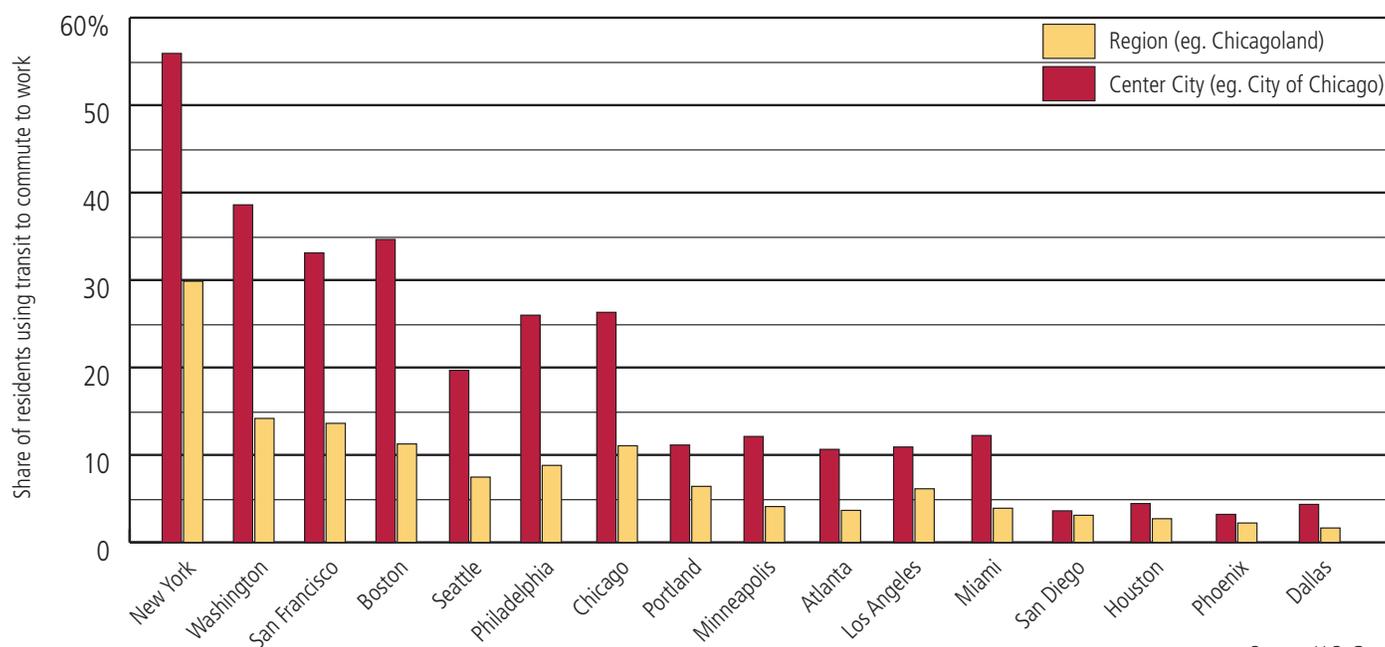
its extensive and well-used L, has the capacity to attract more people to transit.

When other sustainable modes of transportation are included—such as biking, walking and carpool—Chicago falls further behind. Despite having a higher transit mode share than Seattle or Philadelphia, when those other modes are considered, Chicago's position on this ranking falls. The most recent data indicate that more than 50 percent of residents of the City of Chicago drive to work alone.

Since 1980, the percentage of residents of the City of Chicago choosing to take transit to work has declined by five percentage points, falling from 32 percent to just 27 percent. Of the cities studied, that is the third-worst record in the country, falling ahead of just Minneapolis and Atlanta. Other cities—including Boston, Washington, Phoenix, Seattle, New York and Los Angeles—have seen the percentage of residents using transit to get to work increase over the same period. These figures suggest that the Chicago transit system is becoming less relevant even for the commute trips for which it is designed.

The declining use of the region's transit system is reflected in the use of the area's transit services, including CTA, Metra and Pace. All in all, annual ridership has declined by almost 20 percent between 1980 and 2012; overall, the system car-

Figure 13: Share of commuters using transit to get to work, 2012 (city); 2006 (region)



Source: U.S. Census

ries roughly 150 million fewer passengers annually than it did thirty years ago, which means it provides about 500,000 fewer weekday rides. Even so, the system has recovered dramatically since 1995, which represented the system’s low point. Since then, annual ridership has increased by 25 percent, as shown in Figure 14.

Over the period from 1980 to 2012, virtually all of the growth in ridership in the Chicago region has occurred on the CTA elevated system. While the CTA bus system carries 40 percent fewer passengers than in 1980 and Pace and Metra carry roughly the same number of passengers, the CTA rail system carries 50 percent more people than in 1980. These trends were most evident in the period between the mid-1990s and 2012, when the L system rapidly increased in ridership as the CTA bus system, Pace and Metra remained flat in terms of riders. To some degree, this is no surprise: Unlike the three other services, CTA’s L offers frequent, fast rapid transit at all times of day and on weekends. For today’s clientele—who demand options for commuting outside of peak hours—that makes a big difference.

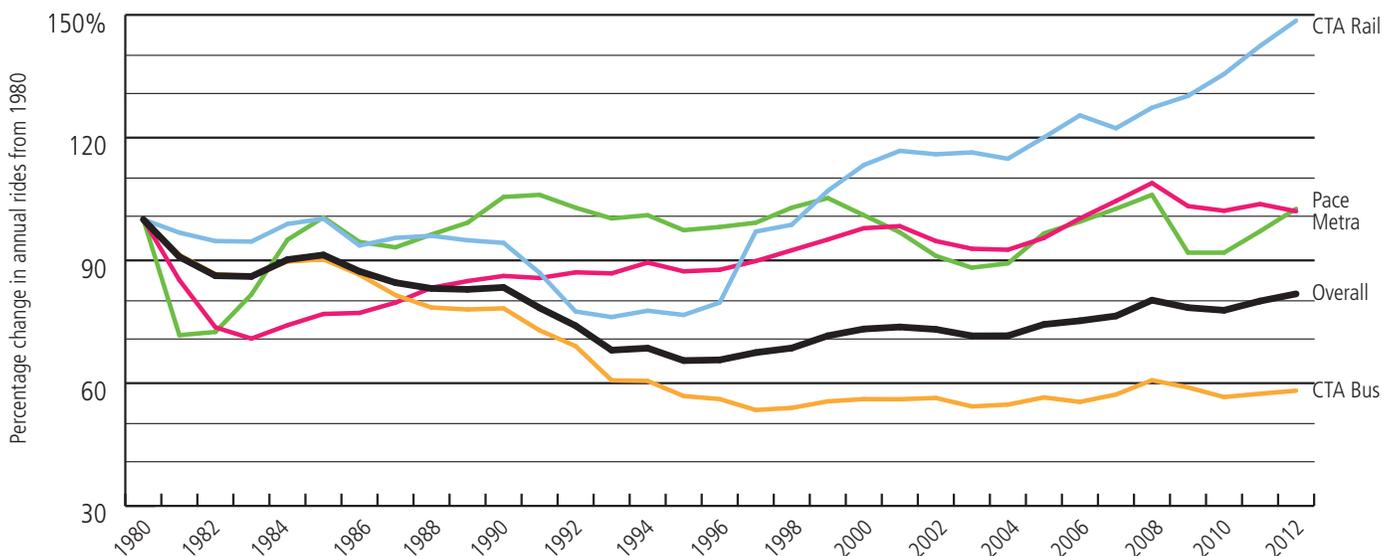
Even on the L lines, there are significant differences in terms of growth by location. While stations located downtown or in areas relatively far from the center (five miles or more from the Loop) had similar levels of ridership in 2012 as they did in

1980, the stations located between one and five miles away from the Loop (from Roosevelt to 47th Street in the south; from Chicago to Irving Park in the north; and from Halsted to Pulaski in the west) collectively serve 80 percent more daily riders than they did in 1980. Those trends are suggestive of the renaissance of sections of the city like the South Loop, Near West Side, Wicker Park and Lakeview. They are also indicative of the fact that people who live in mostly residential neighborhoods close to downtown—those who benefit from the most frequent, easiest to access services—are the people who are most likely to take transit.

Despite seeing significant increases in L ridership since 1980, the City of Chicago’s transit services still carry 20 percent fewer riders than it did in 1980, when bus services are included. Compare this to the New York City Transit bus and subway services, which operate exclusively within the City of New York and which are collectively similar to the CTA services. In New York, the urban bus and rail network attracts 40 percent more people than it did in 1980; most of that growth, like in Chicago, occurred on the rail rapid transit system, whose ridership increased by 65 percent during the period, as shown in Figure 15.

To some degree, it must be noted, these changes are a reflection of basic demographic change. While the City of Chicago

Figure 14: Change in ridership on Chicagoland transit systems (all modes), 1980-2012



Source: RTA

lost 10 percent of its population between 1980 and 2012, New York City is 18 percent more populous now than it was 30 years ago. Nonetheless, the growth in New York's transit use is far disproportional to its population gains, suggesting that that city's investments in a better performing transit system have paid off. There are clear economic benefits to developing the public support to fund a well-serviced transit network that is in a state of good repair and expanded to meet the needs of a growing population.

Comparisons between Metra and other commuter rail systems around the country point to similar trends, also shown in Figure 15. Between 1980 and 2012, Metra's ridership has remained virtually flat. On the other hand, New Jersey Transit commuter rail, which serves the suburbs of New York City and Philadelphia, has seen its annual ridership more than double. And Boston's commuter rail system (not shown), which extends into that city's suburbs in Massachusetts and Rhode Island, has seen its use more than quadruple. While Boston's metropolitan area population has increased by 44 percent between 1980 and 2010—far more than Chicago's 20 percent increase—New York's metropolitan area grew by just 21 percent during that period. Thus commuter rail ridership in those cities was more than simply a reflection of population gains.

Figure 15: Comparing agency ridership change, New York and Chicago, 1980-2012



Source: Transit agencies



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