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Unknown author

## The real reason American public transportation is such a disaster

*This article is part of a [series about the past, present, and future of commuting in America](#).*

The US spends a *ton* of money on public transportation. So why is it so terrible?

American buses, subways, and light rail lines consistently have lower ridership levels, fewer service hours, and longer waits between trains than those in virtually every comparably wealthy European and Asian country. At the same time, a [much greater percentage of US public transit costs](#) are subsidized by public tax dollars.

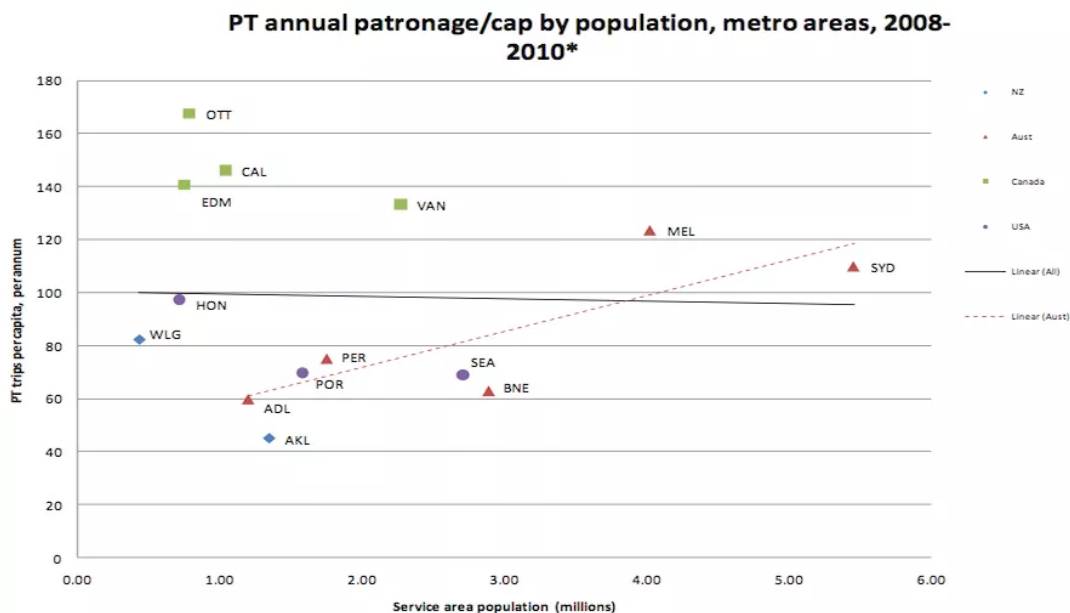
In other words, we pay more for transit and get far less — basically the worst of all worlds.

Many people try to explain this paradox by pointing to US history and geography: Most of our cities and suburbs were built out after the 1950s, when the car became the dominant mode of transportation. Consequently, we have sprawling, auto-centric metropolises that just can't be easily served by public transportation.

But there's a problem with this explanation: Canada. This is also a sprawling country, largely built for the automobile. Canadian cities' public transit systems, however, look very different.

"Canada just has more public transit," says transit consultant [Jarrett Walker](#). "Compare, say, Portland to Vancouver, or Salt Lake to Edmonton, or Des Moines to Winnipeg. Culturally and economically, they're very similar cities, but in each case the Canadian city has two to

five times as much transit service per capita, so there's correspondingly more ridership per capita."



Larger cities generally have higher transit use — but this chart shows that Canadian cities (in green) have much higher public transit (PT) trips per capita than American cities (purple) of the same size. ([Ian Wallis Associates](#))

Although history and geography are partly to blame, there's a deeper reason why American public transportation is so terrible. European, Asian, and Canadian cities treat it as a vital public utility. Most American policymakers — and voters — see transit as a social welfare program.

## Suburban sprawl is only part of the problem



(George Rose/Getty Images)

Visit a dense European city with excellent public transit, and the problem might seem obvious: America's sprawling, car-based development.

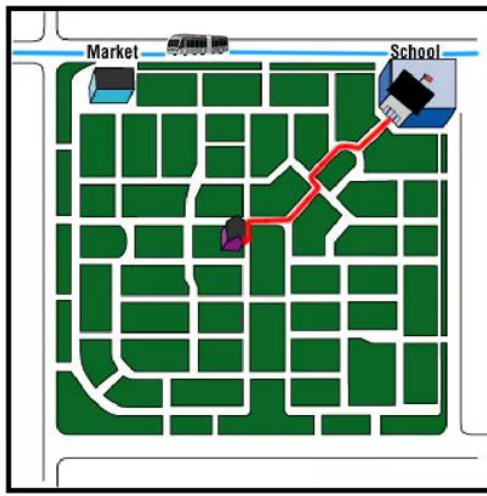
There's some truth to that. Most American cities — especially those outside the Northeast and Rust Belt — are relatively new, so they were built mainly with the car in mind. They're sprawled out, with cul-de-sac-heavy suburbs instead of a tight grid.

All this makes cost-efficient and fast transit way more difficult. After all, it [costs more](#) for a rail or bus line to serve the same number of people spread across a wider area. Highways, curving roads, and cul-de-sacs also make it difficult to reach bus stops, metro stations, and other destinations on foot:





Driving-only transportation pattern



Walkable connected transportation network

The fact that older US cities with prewar street grids (like New York, San Francisco, and Chicago) have the [highest levels of US transit ridership](#) seems to support this argument.

Still, this isn't the whole story. A closer look at transportation history in other countries challenges the idea that post-1950s development alone made bad transit inevitable in the United States.

**Historically, other countries combined suburbs with better transit**



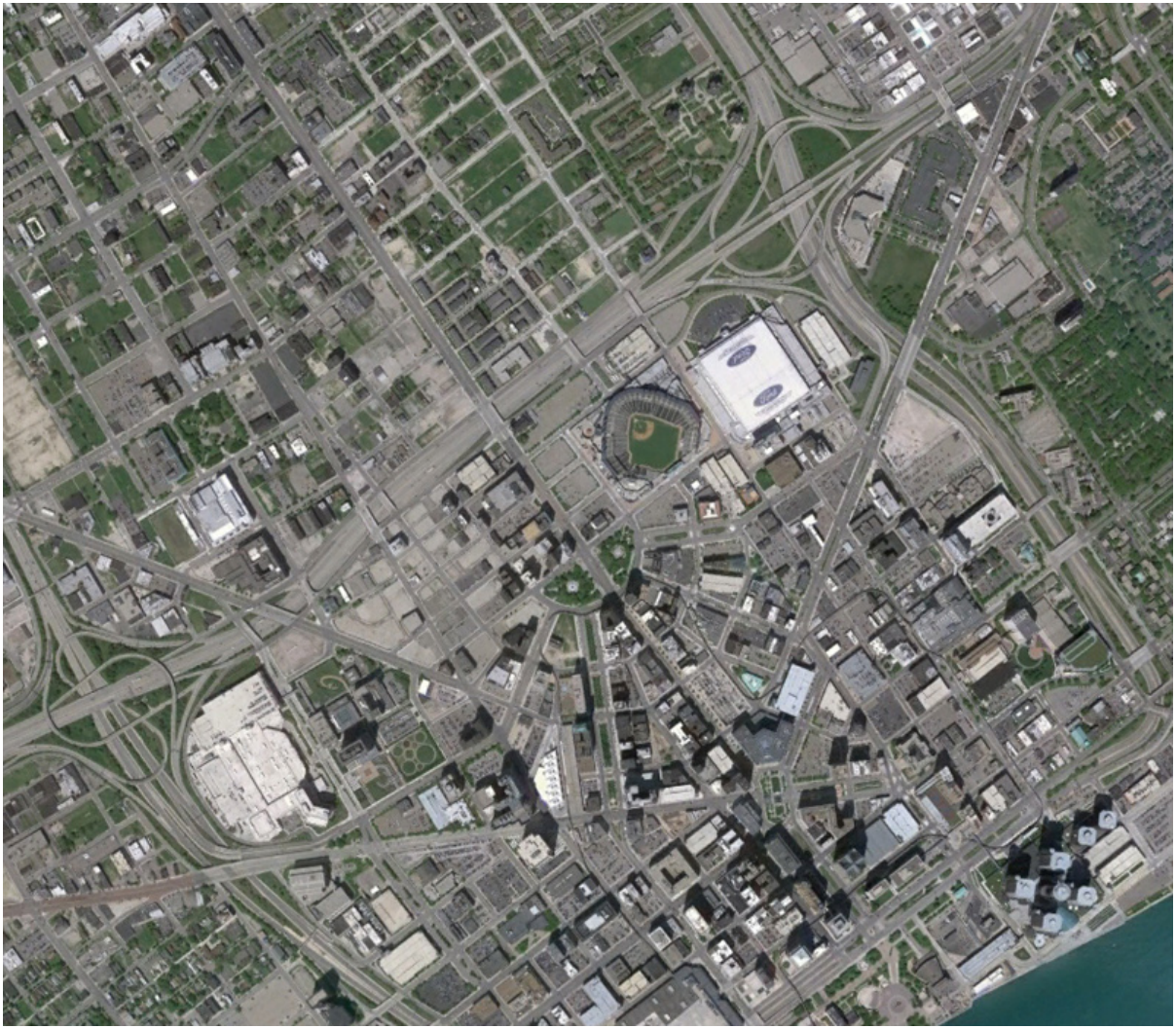
Toronto's Go Train. (Marcus Oleniuk/Toronto Star via Getty Images)

"If you looked at the United States, Canada, France, the UK, Germany, and Australia, in the 1950s, they were all on the same trajectory — they were all racing toward automobile dependence," says [David King](#), a professor of urban planning at Columbia University. "But then in the 1960s, you start to see a divergence."

During this era, many cities in Europe did their best to preserve preexisting transit systems and expand them to growing suburbs. Separately, many newer cities in Western Canada invested more in light rail lines and quality bus service, even as they were being designed for automobiles. As a result, all these places still have much higher levels of transit ridership today than US cities of comparable size and density.

Meanwhile, in the United States, newer cities in the West and South expanded without nearly the same level of corresponding investment in public transportation. And even some of the country's existing big cities — which had been laid out well before the car — willfully destroyed their existing transit systems, [ripping out streetcar lines](#) and [building highways](#) to speed commutes from the suburbs.







Downtown Detroit, in 1951, versus today. ([Shane Hampton](#))

"In 1912, Boston had this great public transit system, with four subway lines and streetcars that fed it," says transit blogger [Alon Levy](#). "Then they spent the next 60 or 70 years destroying it."

## **A major problem: US cities see transit as welfare**

This divergence between the United States and Europe can be traced to the 1950s municipal takeover in many US cities of private streetcar and bus companies, which had largely gone bankrupt.

There were a few different reasons for the decline of these transit services. The companies were locked into contracts that prohibited them from raising their fares and required them to maintain the roads, while increasing levels of car traffic made streetcars painfully slow. "Once just 10 percent or so of people were driving, the tracks were so



crowded that [the streetcars] weren't making their schedules," transportation historian [Peter Norton](#) told me for [an article on streetcars](#).



Decommissioned streetcars awaiting destruction in Los Angeles, 1956. ([Los Angeles Times photographic archive](#))

When cities took over these companies (and converted their streetcar lines into buses), it was with the notion that they'd maintain these systems as a sort of welfare service — mostly for people who couldn't afford to drive. Outside of a handful of cities like New York and DC, that mentality has remained in place. Nowadays, many local politicians don't see transit as a vital transportation function — instead, they think of it as a government aid program to help poor people who lack cars.

On the one hand, this mentality has led cities to heavily subsidize public transit: In most cities, no more than [30 to 40 percent](#) of operating costs are covered by fares, more than the vast majority of cities around the world. But there's a huge downside to viewing public transportation as welfare — it prevents local agencies from charging high enough fares to provide efficient service, effectively limiting transit to those who are too poor to drive.

"Transit in the US is caught in a vicious cycle," says King. "We push for low fares for social reasons, but that starves the transit agency, which



leads to reduced service." In a sense, it's the same dilemma faced by the streetcar companies 70 years ago.

This is one of the root reasons why so many US cities' bus and rail systems — even the ones that have relatively extensive networks and many stops — have limited operating hours and frequency. "It's considered okay if the bus comes every half hour if it's a lifeline for people who literally can't afford anything else," Levy says.



(Pat Greenhouse/The Boston Globe via Getty Images)

It doesn't have to be this way. Transit systems in cities like London and Toronto, by contrast, have higher fares and more frequent service, making them attractive options for people who own cars. In theory, there's no reason this couldn't work in the United States. Witness the recent rise of [microtransit](#), which includes startups like [Chariot](#) and [Bridj](#) charging \$5 to \$8 for more reliable express bus rides.

So how do other cities get away with charging higher fares while still making sure poor people have reliable transportation? Strategies vary, but it's not impossible. In Paris, for instance, [each municipality is legally obligated](#) to pay the transit agency the difference between its fares and operating costs, allowing it to strive for efficient service while

keeping fares down. Other cities, [like Seattle](#), have experimented with charging cheaper fares for people with lower income.

## The US political system is also biased against public transit



There are other quirks of American politics that have arguably led us to underinvest in transit. Because it's often seen as welfare, investing in mass transit has become a politically charged issue — with conservatives unwilling to spend on what they see as a social program for the urban poor.

This doesn't really happen in other countries, at least not to the same extent. While there's some debate over transit spending in Canada and Europe, politicians on the right are much less hostile to the idea — it's much more of a bipartisan cause, like, say, road building in the US. "It's just not as politically controversial to build public transit elsewhere," says Levy. "The left tends to be more pro-transit than the right, but they both ultimately support it."

Meanwhile, a few structural elements of American governance exacerbate anti-transit attitudes. For one, the federal government plays a big role in driving transportation policy. And due to the makeup

of the Senate, federal policy is often heavily [biased toward rural interests](#), instead of urban priorities. That plays out in all sorts of ways: The postwar directive to [demolish urban neighborhoods to build highways](#) came from the Department of Commerce, not from individual cities, and has been carried out by the Department of Transportation. By contrast, in Canada, there is no corresponding national department, and regional bodies have greater say in transportation planning.

Even simple things like the location of state capitals can make a difference. In Australia, every state's major city is also its capital — so state funding often aligns with the priorities of that city. Compare that with New York or Illinois, where lawmakers reside in Albany and Springfield, and are far less well-acquainted with the value of transit in their major metropolises.

## Is there any way to improve US public transit?



Los Angeles's Metro Expo light rail line. (Ambient Images/UIIG via Getty Images)

"In attracting riders to transit, frequency is the biggest thing, followed very closely by reliability," says King. "If you don't have those, people



won't trust the system."

Other countries have often managed to improve both these measures without spending more money — but in the US, the idea that transit is welfare has generally prevented this sort of innovation.

For instance, bus stops in the US are [spaced very closely together](#), compared to elsewhere. Spreading them out would [increase bus speed and frequency](#), but can be politically difficult because it's seen as harming seniors and disabled riders. In Europe, however, much higher numbers of them ride buses with greater stop spacing — because the buses come more often and are more reliable.

Other sorts of cost-neutral changes include routing buses so as to ease transfers from one part of the city to another, rather than forcing all riders to transfer downtown, and increasing bus service in more heavily populated areas, while sacrificing the number of total stops.

Still, after many years, there is some reason for optimism. US transit ridership has [gradually been ticking upward](#), even if it's nowhere near European or Canadian levels. And some experts are optimistic that transit agencies are becoming more willing to experiment. In February, for instance, the [city of Houston implemented a number of changes](#) to its bus lines that had been suggested by Walker — making the system less oriented toward downtown and increasing the ease of transferring to go from one suburb to another.

**Correction:** This article previously stated that the Department of Transportation laid out the routes for US urban highways. They were designed by the Department of Commerce, and implemented by the Department of Transportation after it became its own agency.

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**VIDEO: 220 years of population shifts in one map**

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