

Public transit is second-class transportation

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Urban transit is one of the most heavily subsidized industries in this country. Taxpayers cover well over 90 percent of the costs of running VIA Metropolitan Transit, San Antonio's transit agency.

Now that ridership has collapsed due to the coronavirus pandemic, transit advocates are desperate to come up with new reasons why taxpayers should fork over even more to keep empty buses running.

The latest reason is that it is "social justice" to give low-income minorities, some of whom are too poor to afford a car, subsidized rides to work.

"Lack of access to accessible, affordable, rapid, reliable transportation has contributed to these inequities" between Black and white households, says Massachusetts Rep. Ayanna Pressley, who wants to repair the damage by making transit free.

Addressing inequity must include "VIA and our riders — on average, a person of color who takes the bus to work, does not have a car and has an income below the poverty line," Hope Andrade, VIA's chair, wrote in a recent op-ed. Andrade wants taxpayers to increase subsidies to VIA.

I have news for Pressley and Andrade: Public transit is second-class transportation. It is slower, less convenient and more expensive than driving. Policies that encourage low-income people to remain dependent on transit effectively lock them in steerage while everyone else travels first-class.

Transit is based on an obsolete business model of taking people to and from downtown. A hundred years ago, most jobs were downtown, but today only 4 percent of jobs in the San Antonio urban area are located downtown.

That means transit doesn't work for most people. University of Minnesota researchers calculate that the average resident of the San Antonio urban area can reach almost three times as many jobs in 20 minutes by auto as in 60 minutes by transit.

Andrade's claim that the average person of color who rides transit to work doesn't have a car tugs at our heartstrings, but it's not true. According to the Census Bureau, fewer than 7,200 people in the San Antonio urban area who commute by transit lived in a household with no car. The data don't say what race those people are, but they do say that about 20,000 San Antonio-

area workers commute by transit, of which all but 2,700 are people of color. So most people of color who use transit do have access to a car.

The Census Bureau also says more San Antonio-area workers who don't have cars nevertheless drive alone to work than take transit: 7,742 vs. 7,163. Another 4,251 carpool. How do people who don't have cars drive alone? The data don't say, but they probably use employer-supplied vehicles. What this means is that transit doesn't even work for people who don't have cars.

People who buy brand-new cars, pay full financing charges and replace them every five years spend a lot more than riding transit. But you don't have to buy a new car: The average car on the road today is nearly 12 years old, which means many cars will last longer than 20 years.

One calculation concludes that buying a 10-year-old car, driving it for five years and replacing it with another 10-year-old car can bring costs down to as low as 20 cents a mile. Carpooling reduces costs per passenger-mile even more.

Making transit free creates an illusion that it is less expensive than driving. But since VIA gets most of its revenues from sales taxes, which are regressive, free transit only means that low-income people are disproportionately paying for a transit system that most of them don't use.

The problem for low-income people is not that transit is expensive. Instead, the problem for many is that the hurdles required to buy a car are high. Banks typically ask close to 20 percent interest on used-car loans for people who have poor credit.

Yet helping low-income people who don't have a car acquire one will do far more for social justice than offering free transit. A 2014 study published by the Urban Institute found that low-income families with cars had better housing and better jobs, and were less likely to fall back into poverty than those without cars. Another study found that closing the Black-white auto ownership gap would eliminate nearly half the Black-white employment gap.

A Dallas nonprofit called On the Road Lending helps low-income people buy cars with low-interest loans. It reports that most people they help end up reducing their transportation costs and increasing their incomes.

Low-income people and minorities should not be made into second-class citizens. Instead, people who care about social justice should give them the opportunity to use the same first-class transportation almost everyone else uses: automobiles.

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