

Chicago Tribune

Transit deserts' don't serve workers, study says

Jon Hilkevitch Getting Around | August 3, 2014

About 1 out of every 10 people in **Cook County**, roughly 438,500 residents, live in "transit deserts" that are cut off from fast, frequent train and bus service, according to a new analysis that for the first time identifies dozens of Chicago-area mass transit dead zones and maps them in relation to major job clusters.

The study, conducted by the Chicago-based urban research group the **Center for Neighborhood Technology** using census and other data, found that four of the Chicago region's five big employment areas are in suburbs that are not well-connected to high-quality transit, making them difficult to reach without a vehicle. Those four job centers make up the northwest corridor past **O'Hare International Airport, Lombard, Naperville** and **Oak Brook**.

As a result, many low-income individuals are spending hundreds of dollars each month on car ownership in order to travel to entry-level jobs, the study's authors said.

While commuters heading downtown, especially those who live near **CTA** or **Metra** rail lines, still are relatively well off using public transit, in spite of delays sparked by frequent train breakdowns and track slow zones, widening service gaps have emerged on the fringes of the bustling corridors to the **Loop**, concluded the study, which was obtained by the Tribune before its public release this week at transitfuture.org/transitdeserts.

The study, key findings of which are disputed by the CTA, defined a transit desert as an area that has a high demand for transit but that is more than a half-mile from a rail stop, or at least one quarter of a mile from some form of express bus service or at least a bus route that offers service every 15 minutes or less. The study also points out areas that fall short of its transit-desert definition but are still critically underserved.

"We claim that we have a world-class transit system, but do we really? We really don't when you look at our hub-and-spoke system and all of the gaps that are between the spokes," said Jacky Grimshaw, a transportation expert who is vice president for policy at the Center for Neighborhood Technology. Grimshaw is also a member of the CTA board.

She said many people who rely on transit are spending excessive amounts of time getting to low-paying jobs. Only about one-fourth of all the jobs in the six-county area are accessible by transit trips that take less than 1 1/2 hours each way, the study found.

Roughly 90 minutes each way is how long it takes Erin McMillan to get to work each day — and longer if service is slow, he said. McMillan rides a bus to a train to another train and finally to another bus on his daily commute from **Hyde Park** to **Little Village**, where he works as a youth counselor at **SGA Youth & Family Services**.

McMillan, 32, said the techniques he teaches his clients to cope with stress and control anger are also useful to him as he navigates on foot and on the CTA **No. 55 Garfield** bus to the **Green Line**, which he boards at **Garfield** and rides downtown and transfers to the **Pink Line**, exiting at **Pulaski**, where he waits for the **No. 53 Pulaski** bus to take him near his office.

The daily commute to his old job took even more time, he said, adding that more express bus routes are needed.

"It gets really annoying waiting for up to 30 or 40 minutes and then three of the same buses come along at the same time," McMillan said.

The transit-deserts study coincides with efforts by officials at the Center for Neighborhood Technology and elsewhere to invest more than \$20 billion over the long term on more than 15 major projects to expand CTA rail lines and introduce faster bus service across the CTA service area, which covers Chicago and almost 40 suburbs.

Advocates in that campaign, called Transit Future, acknowledged that \$20 billion is a lot of money. They pointed out, however, that in 2008 **Los Angeles** residents approved a referendum proposal to increase the sales tax by one-half penny to raise \$40 billion for new transit lines.

The new reality is that local governments need to generate more money to leverage a static or shrinking amount of available federal funding, said Ron Burke, executive director of the Active Transportation Alliance, an automobile-alternative advocacy group that is promoting Transit Future.

"Up to this point, I think transit leaders in the Chicago area have come up short in effectively funding and maintaining the transit system. We are overdue for a revamp," Burke said. "Our vision here is to raise enough local money so we can match federal grant money."

Transit Future's array of proposals include some that are new and other previously considered by transit agencies. They include a bus that would connect Midway Airport and O'Hare and a Brown Line extension that would link up with the Blue Line heading toward O'Hare.

Cook County, which the groups behind the study say should lead the charge in expanding Chicago-area service, welcomes the conversation about improving mass transit, County Board President Toni Preckwinkle said Friday.

But Preckwinkle said "it is premature to commit to any specific revenue source in support of these improvements." The county's long-range transportation plan, which is being developed with a focus on transportation's role in spurring economic growth, will "tackle some of these same issues," she said.

The transit-deserts study found service lacking in areas with high rates of poverty on the south and southwest edges of Cook County, as well as in sections of some middle-income and affluent suburbs north and northwest of Chicago.

Community leaders on Chicago's Far South Side have for decades advocated on behalf of a roughly 5 1/2-mile extension of the **Dan Ryan** branch of the CTA **Red Line** to bring rapid transit to the city's southern border. Yet **Roseland**, **West Pullman** and other predominantly African-American neighborhoods through which the extension would run represent only a sliver of the locations on the study's transit-desert map.