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by [Mike Maciag](#) | February 2017



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For New York metro residents who take public transportation, a door-to-door commute averages about 51 minutes. That's much longer than the 29 minutes typically spent by those who drive alone. Similar discrepancies exist around Los Angeles, where despite the region's traffic woes, drivers arrive at work an average of 22 minutes faster than public transportation riders. In nearly every metro area, driving to work remains far quicker than using a bus or train, taking less than half as long in some places.

Across the country, transit systems are seeking to attract new customers as the latest national statistics show stagnant ridership. Cutting down on commute times represents an opportunity to serve more riders who otherwise have a choice in how to get to work. "Operating speed is going to be important for customers, so if they want to compete in that market, they need to be more competitive," says Steven Polzin of the Center for Urban Transportation Research. "Time is important to folks across the full economic spectrum."

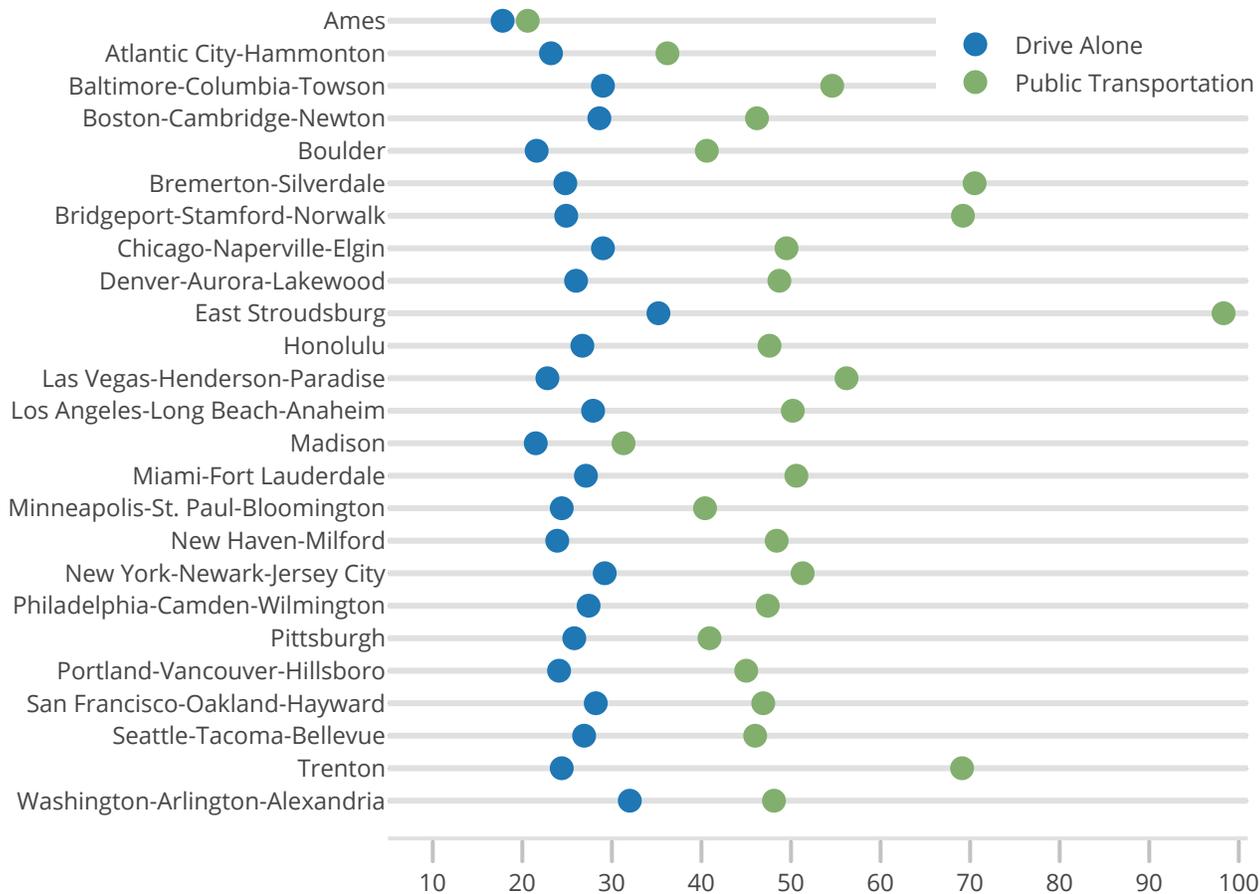
Governing compiled the most recent Census survey data measuring total commute times, including travel to stations and the time spent waiting for buses or trains. In the 25 metro areas where public transportation accounts for the largest share of all commuting, riders reported commute times an average of 1.9 times greater than those who drove alone. Similar gaps exist in regions where public transportation isn't as prevalent. College towns are about the only areas where public transportation commute times mirror those for auto commuters.

Of course, those taking public transportation where service is limited are bound to be in for longer commutes. But cities with robust transit networks still show numbers that lag well behind driving. Comparing travel times more narrowly within the 25 municipalities -- rather than entire

metro areas -- where public transportation is most prevalent, commutes average 1.5 times longer than driving (about 15 minutes).

A metro area's overall commute times partly reflect its different types of transit. Commuter rail passengers spend an average of 69 minutes traveling to work, far longer than those taking bus or light rail. Accordingly, areas relying more on heavy rail, like Bridgeport-Stamford-Norwalk, Conn., report lengthier commutes overall. The Census data doesn't consider distances traveled, which can also vary greatly.

Average Commute Times: Driving vs Public Transportation



Time shown (in minutes) for 25 metros where public transportation accounts for largest share of commuting.

The majority of time spent commuting actually isn't taken up by riding. Wait times for all transit trips nationally average around 10 minutes, according to the latest data from the Department of Transportation's National Household Travel Survey. When added to the time it takes to get to and from transit stations, this exceeds the average time riding.

There's a lot that transit agencies might do to attract more riders who aren't transit-dependent. Research suggests improvements in service quality, including speeds and wait times, have about twice as much effect on ridership as fare adjustments. Riders traveling during off-peak times are more sensitive to changes in frequency of trains or buses than those who commute during rush hour.

Over the years, bus systems sometimes increase the number of zigzag routes through neighborhoods, accommodating more stops but slowing down commutes. Transit agencies are now simplifying and straightening their routes to speed them up, Polzin says. Investments in

faster light rail and bus rapid transit systems should further curb travel times. And for many, service reliability is just as important. To this end, real-time information systems, such as those supporting smartphone apps, help reduce uncertainty.

Faced with declining ridership, the Metropolitan Transit Authority of Harris County, Texas, which includes Houston, recently took the radical step of redesigning its entire bus network. The agency restructured it into a new grid system with straighter routes. “To take an average speed of a route from 12 to 14 mph is actually a big deal,” says Kurt Luhrsen, the transit agency’s vice president of service planning.

A survey found riders didn’t have a long wish list of capital improvements. Rather, improving and increasing the frequency of bus service was the top concern. So the agency roughly doubled the number of routes running every 15 minutes or less and upgraded service on weekends.

The revamped bus network, which required just a 4 percent budget increase, launched in August 2015. The results so far are encouraging: Weekday ridership has stabilized after declining for years, and is up about 10 percent on Saturdays and more than 30 percent on Sundays.

The new network isn’t just about saving time. It’s also opened up job opportunities for those who are now within walking distance of frequent service. “The goal,” Luhrsen says, “was to connect those places of density within the system -- to get people to jobs, to get them to schools, health-care facilities ... seven days a week.”

Drive Alone: 4,682,071 (+/- 11,668)

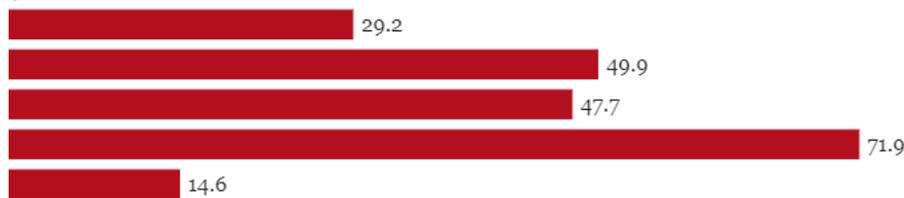
Bus or Trolley: 731,828 (+/-6,645)

Subway or Streetcar: 1,768,855 (+/-10,276)

Commuter Rail: 364,383 (+/-4,514)

Walk: 567,237 (+/-6,053)

32% of all commuters.



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