

Report: Lower-income New Yorkers suffer the greatest mass transit hardships

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An independent study by two economists at the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, Nicole Gorton and Maxim Pinkovskiy, concluded that lower-income New York City residents experience more transit interruptions and delays than those with higher incomes when using the services of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority. The MTA is the state agency that runs the city bus and subway system as well as two commuter railroads.

The use of the subway system in New York lends itself to a fairly comprehensive social analysis. As the report says: “Roughly half of employed New Yorkers living in the Bronx, Brooklyn, Manhattan, or Queens rely on the subway to get to work each day. The subway is one of the few commute methods where the distribution of incomes among riders roughly reflects the distribution of incomes throughout the city ... even though all of these subway users are riding the same trains and waiting in many of the same stations, commute experiences (and especially commute duration) vary widely. What drives these differences?”

To answer this question, the study began by noting that New Yorkers who use the MTA are more likely to be poorer than those who can avoid it by using a taxi or walking.

For mass transit users, there is a correlation between having a lower income and the length of time spent in the buses and subways. House prices and rents are higher in those areas that have the best transportation access. There is, in fact, an inverse relationship between household income and commute times.

The authors suggest that it is worth the extra cost, if a rider’s income is high enough, to pay for higher-cost housing that is in an area with access to several subway lines that allows the commuter to choose the one that is running the best at any given time of the day.

Generally speaking, higher-income residents will pay the extra housing costs in order to be able to spend the shortest commuting time possible. This is to avoid longer commutes, which increase the chances of train delays. Furthermore, those who are compelled to work late-night shifts, which tend to be lower paying, are also more likely to be delayed by subway track repair and maintenance that frequently is done during these hours.

Because the poorest sections of the working class travel longer distances to work, they expose themselves more intensively than higher-income riders to the decay of mass transit. As the report observes, “Spending more time on the train necessarily increases the risk of experiencing some kind of service disruption.” For these workers, a train delay can be costly in terms of losing income due to missed work and can ultimately lead to the worker being fired. This problem is aggravated by the fact that these workers cannot afford to use alternative means of transportation such as taxis or Uber. Extra time spent commuting by the poorest New Yorkers also translates into less time to spend tending to their health, education, and spending quality time with their families.

New York’s subway system has been deteriorating for years. Since 2012, when weekday on-time performance was 85 percent, it has dropped to 66 percent. There were 85 major weekday train delay incidents this May compared to 75 a year prior.

The significance of Gorton and Pinkovskiy’s report is that it demonstrates, that while all city residents have been suffering from the crisis of public transportation, it has been the worst for those with the lowest incomes who can least afford it.

Recently appointed New York City transportation chief Andy Byford has proposed a Fast Forward Plan

that will cost \$37 billion over 10 years to fix the subway, including modernizing the antiquated signal system.

At issue is how this could possibly be funded, considering that the MTA has a long-term bond debt of about \$40 billion, a figure which is projected by several studies to get significantly higher in coming years. It is precisely this bond debt which has been cited by the MTA to justify increasing the fare about 4 percent every two years, with plans to continue to do so for the indefinite future.

The WSWs spoke with workers and students in the predominantly working-class Flatbush neighborhood of Brooklyn who related their frustrating experiences with the bus and subway system.

Karelle, a journalism student at Brooklyn College, said: “I have had experiences with bus delays that can last from 30 minutes to an hour when I used to go to Kingsborough Community College. Then when they do come, the buses are very crowded and cramped. There is not enough room to move around. Also, I have seen people not able to get on the bus because they do not have enough money to pay.

“Due to bus delays, I have been late to class sometimes as much as 20 to 30 minutes. The teacher would let me in but said that I shouldn’t do it again. Since attendance counts for 20 percent of my grades, lateness does hurt.

“I come from a low-income family, so I do not have the money to take a taxi or Uber. My mother is a certified assistant nurse and my father does janitorial work, and they support my tuition, books and lunch. Now that I am going to Brooklyn College, tuition is higher by about a thousand dollars a year than it was at Kingsborough Community College.

“When I graduate, I do not know if I will get a job. Journalism is all about who you know, not what you know.”

Sasha, who is working at Sprint, said, “I have to take three trains to get to work and it takes me more than an hour.

“In my 10 years working, I have experienced train delays on the B, D, A, 3 and 4 trains due to signal problems, overcrowding, people committing suicide by jumping in front of trains. Today, I was five minutes late to work due to a bus delay.

“Train delays have caused me to lose three jobs: with

a design company, at a doctor’s office, and in real estate. I can’t just take a taxi or an Uber.

“If you come late, the employers say, ‘Why don’t you leave earlier?’ They should give you a 15-minute grace period, not to take advantage, but when there is a real train delay, which happens so often.”

Kurt, a construction worker, said, “The L train that I take from Canarsie to get to work is not reliable and it is getting worse. It frequently takes an extra 10 minutes to get to the station from the yard. I take the L at 5:23 a.m. and then I have to take two more trains to get to my job in the Hudson Yards. The possibility of delays is greatly increased waiting for a connection.

“Sometimes I leave my house 15 minutes earlier and I am still late. I am supposed to sign in to work at 6:30 a.m., but due to train delays, I have been late once or twice a week. This results in losing a half an hour pay, which a couple times a week is very costly.

“The fare is too high already and it keeps going up. The higher the fare, the worse the service. Next year they are planning on shutting down the L train and that will create more serious problems for my traveling.”

Khalid, a worker at Best Buy, complained: “Weekend travel is too slow. I take the 3 or 4 trains from the Utica station stop. The problem is that if there is track or signal problem at that station, then both lines can go out of service.

“If you are late, my employer is not compassionate because they always say that you should have left earlier. I have friends who have lost their jobs due to train delays. They don’t have the money to take a taxi or Uber.

“They have only one option: the train, and if it is out of service, then they have a big problem with their job and financial security.”



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