Understanding Mobility Justice in Chicago

Problem Statement

Transportation is essential for connecting people to economic opportunities, health care, educational resources, social life, and civic engagement, but extensive research has shown that the benefits of transportation are inequitable across race, income, and geography. Not only are the benefits inequitable, but people of color and low- to moderate-income residents disproportionately experience the harms of transportation—ranging from poor air quality to pedestrian traffic fatalities. Legacies of infrastructure investments that targeted communities of color are still visible in the highways, major thoroughfares, and trains that bisect many communities today. These transportation differences exacerbate a range of negative social outcomes, including health inequities, social exclusion, unemployment, underemployment, as well as community, police, and traffic violence. Despite knowledge about disproportionate benefits and harms, transportation interventions and traffic safety enforcement often replicate racial inequity by failing to confront the structural racism embedded in the transportation system and decision making processes. This mixed-methods research initiative will use the City of Chicago as a setting to examine how contemporary structural racism impacts transportation service levels, accessibility, affordability, quality, safety, decision-making processes, and investments. Findings will be useful and replicable for researchers, advocates, and policy makers locally and nationally.

Research Design

The first area of research will use quantitative and spatial analysis to holistically measure how transportation service and risk are distributed across the City of Chicago. The primary task will be to assess the equity of benefits and harms across race, ethnicity, income, and geography, and examine how other variables like economic hardship, age, sex, gender, and disability confound and interact with race. We will examine the distribution of benefits and burdens across all modes of transportation (automobile, public transit, bicycle, walking, and shared mobility) and for multiple destination types. Because transportation is only one part of the urban environment, we will examine how both the built environment (e.g., access to destinations, transportation infrastructure, and connectivity) and the social environment (e.g., exposure to community and policing violence) mitigate or exacerbate disparities. The research will also explore differences in transportation-related outcomes, including health inequities, poverty, limited mobility, traffic crashes and fatalities, and other harms. We will rely on publicly available datasets whenever possible so that our findings are immediately replicable, but we will supplement these data by purchasing proprietary datasets or collecting our own data as necessary.

Our second area of research will engage underserved and marginalized communities through action-oriented qualitative research. This will ensure that the diverse transportation problems and priorities, as experienced by people of color, are better reflected in transportation research and policy making. The project team will select a cross-section of low and moderate income communities of color facing different transportation service limits and risks based on the preceding analysis. In each selected community, the project team will partner with at least one neighborhood-based organization and conduct a series of focus groups to triangulate the quantitative measures and propose other assessments of transportation equity. The focus
groups and community engagement activities will also identify needed transportation interventions that are specific to varied community contexts and priorities.

The third area of study will assess planning, policies, and programs to identify actions to address structural racism in transportation service, interventions, and decision making. Given the disproportionate distribution of traffic fatalities among Black, Latino, and low- to moderate-income populations, there will be an in-depth assessment of traffic safety strategies, including research on the racial patterns of traffic enforcement actions for pedestrians, bicyclists, public transit users and drivers. In partnership with community-based organizations, this evaluation will pilot and evaluate small scale, community-built roadway improvements, designed to improve safety and livability. Drawing on existing research, the analysis will consider how metrics in the region’s transportation planning could systematically undervalue investments in communities of color. This research will incorporate a literature review and a scan of best practices for designing programs, processes and metrics to address racial equity and dismantle existing metrics and processes that replicate inequitable patterns of investment.

**Expected Outcomes**

This mixed-methods analysis of transportation racial equity in Chicago will inform local and regional stakeholders and serve as a replicable, holistic model for other communities. The quantitative analysis will measure and visualize the distribution of transportation access and harms through an online and interactive web mapping portal. The research study will also evaluate diverse community priorities and identify strategies for improving transportation using qualitative methods. This community engagement will result in additional metrics for analysis of transportation equity in Chicago and elsewhere. Like the quantitative analysis, these measures and strategies will be useful for the local area, but generate neighborhood and regional innovations that other cities could consider. Community partnerships will generate important insights into transportation needs and build the capacity of neighborhood-based organizations to engage in transportation decision making, thereby making the process more responsive to communities of color.

Based on the quantitative analysis, qualitative community research, and evaluation of transportation programs and investments, the research team will produce a series of policy briefs and guides on appropriate measures of and strategies to address structural racism in transportation service and decision making. Topics of the guides will include an assessment of racial equity, tools to address neighborhood transportation and traffic enforcement issues, strategies at various scales to address and reform transportation problems and planning processes. All guides and briefs will inform local decision making, while the comprehensive scope of the analysis will serve as a model for other locations. These documents will be distributed widely and housed online with the mapping portal.

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