

Transit Deserts in Chicago's Southside

Recognized as the nation's second-largest public transportation system, the Chicago Transportation Authority, or the CTA, consists of eight train lines and 149 bus routes that connect the city above ground and under. To outsiders, the City has an almost perfect and modern transportation infrastructure, as it boasts 224.1 miles of track and 1,500 trains. However, the harrowing reality that has come to light over the past few years is the evident inequality of the city's transportation system which has patently shut out low-income neighborhoods. Consequently, most residents in these areas have found themselves confined to zones that lack easy access to education, employment opportunities, goods and services such as grocery stores, hospitals, etc.

As planners have become increasingly aware of the menace plaguing many low-income areas, the term "transit desert" has become a progressively more familiar term to describe the parts of a city with limited transit options availability. These "deserts" are zones within a city that are distinguished by poor public transportation, i.e. faraway bus and train stations, limited sidewalks and bicycles, and substandard road infrastructure.

The Southside neighbourhoods are typical examples of transit deserts in the City of Chicago. The south side of Chicago is no stranger to the world. It is an area of the city known nationwide for its pedigree of violence and high crime rates. It is reported that the area's violent crime rate is a whopping 154 per cent higher than the national average. Many attribute this to a lack of resources. Presently, the CTA Red and Green lines, which serve the Southside of the city, stop at the 63rd and 95th streets, respectively, which are very much afar from the Southern perimeter of the city- a clear indication that the city's transportation planners have designed the transportation system in a way that has intentionally cut off the Southside from the rest of the town.

Chicago's Mayor, Lori Lightfoot, is well aware of the existing transportation inequalities and deficiencies in the city, as she notes in a report released in May 2019 that "current access is not equitable."

For four years too long, the City has had discussions about a \$38M contract to extend the Red-line from 95th Street to 130th Street to solve the transit deserts in the Southside. Though this seems to be a positive step forward, one can only hope that the City follows through with its extension plans.

The Southside residents are distressed over the unnecessarily long commutes they are forced to make. One resident states, “I find it to be a grave injustice that the people who live in my district do not have equal access to a public transit system that would allow them greater opportunities to thrive.”

We can only hope that the City hears the plight of Southsiders and shifts its focus from boasting to the outside world that it is home to one of the top transportation systems in the US and instead shifts its focus to promoting connectivity within the city and its neighbourhoods, regardless of income and race. Therefore, ensuring that each community has access to affordable transit allows them to access jobs, schools, hospitals, supermarkets, and other essential services.