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Project Title:
Measuring equity in public transit
service: LA Metro and the Post-
Decree Era

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Task Manager:
Bradley Mizuno
Transportation Engineer (Electrical)
bmizuno@dot.ca.gov

Measuring equity in public transit service: LA Metro and the Post-Decree Era

Explore what extent do the arguments made in the 1994 legal case, Labor/Community Strategy Center, et al vs. Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority, continue to remain in the post-decree era (2010-2020).

WHAT IS THE NEED?

California transit agencies have made equity and racial justice a major transportation goal. This research will examine the implicit biases against very low income and bus riders of color that led to the 1994 landmark case, Labor/Community Strategy Center, et al vs. Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority. The case resulted in a settlement between the parties in October 1996 and a federal civil rights consent decree that limited fare increases and expanded bus service in Los Angeles, among other negotiated community benefits. The concerns raised in the 1994 case remain salient concerns empirically and among transportation advocates in light of national discussion about race and privilege and the disparate impact of COVID-19 communities of color.

WHAT ARE WE DOING?

Our key research question is: to what extent do the arguments made in the legal case that led to the consent decree continue to remain in the post-decree era (2010-2020)? We expect to find that many of the concerns raised in that case remain to be salient concerns empirically and among transportation advocates. The research is relevant to Caltrans priority research topic on racial equity and the LA Metro Consent decree. Implementing a racially equitable and just transportation agenda requires institutional changes to overcome inequality and systemic racism. The purpose of the research is to provide timely and relevant insights to transit agencies as they prioritize institutional changes in response to the expanding national discussion about race and privilege in the United States.



DRISI provides solutions and
knowledge that improves
California's transportation system

The zeitgeist of the LA Metro consent decree looms large in discussions of transportation equity and transit justice in the United States. Scholars in transportation, civil rights, and environmental justice point to the Bus Riders Union and 1994 lawsuit as a rare and powerful example of grassroots activism achieving success challenging government discrimination. Some of the primary concerns of the 1994 consent decree appear to still hold even over ten years after the decree was allowed to expire; namely the claim of disproportionate investments in rail expansion over bus service. As an example, from 2000 - 2016, vehicle revenue service hours for LA Metro rail increased by over 150%, mainly through capital project openings. In that same time period, vehicle revenue service hours for Metro buses increased by less than 5%. LA Metro's most recent on-board survey demonstrate that bus riders are more likely to be people of color and lower income than their rail riding peers. This research is not intended to rehash a body of previous research on the consent decree. Rather, it will take a descriptive look back at the last ten years and the post-decree era to try to provide recommendations for LA Metro and other transportation agencies who seek to improve equity outcomes in their agencies going forward.

WHAT IS OUR GOAL?

The research will use a mixed method approach, involves four brief tasks, and will deliver a white paper and 2-page policy brief. The tasks are as follow:

1. Engage with interested agencies in this research and collects background research on the case, including identifying and assessing relevant arguments and data used in the court case;
2. Produce a descriptive analysis of annual demographics and service characteristics of Metro bus and rail service in Los Angeles County from 2010 to 2020;
3. Conduct a small set of interviews with those involved in the original case and just transportation equity efforts in Los Angeles;

4. Produce white paper and summary 2-page policy brief.

WHAT IS THE BENEFIT?

This research will synthesize findings into a policy brief and will use/develop a transportation equity framework (race and class equity). The report will provide an overview of transport equity issues raised in the 1994 case, summarize to what extent these same issues remain, and provide recommendations to better incorporate equity and justice concerns into transit service allocation.

WHAT IS THE PROGRESS TO DATE?

The following was accomplished during this past quarter:

1. We engaged Caltrans staff at the start of the project, as well as other interested agencies as identified by Caltrans.
2. We conducted an extensive review of case records and drafted review of legal arguments and data sources used by the plaintiff against the defendant, including shortcomings of the Title VI assessments.
3. We assessed secondary data availability, compiled data, and conducted quality assessment of information on changes in rider demographics using on-board surveys; (2) ridership estimates from LA Metro, (3) service levels measured as annual revenue service miles from the agency reports in the National Transit Database.
4. We began compiling a contact list of key stakeholders for outreach to participate in the qualitative component of the research.