

To Fight Racism, Transit Has a Key Role

Black Lives Matter protests are showing how city leaders and transit agencies must reprioritize infrastructure investments, a public transit official argues.

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A bus with a mural of Harriet Tubman on it arrives at a public viewing for George Floyd in Houston on June 8, 2020. *Photographer: Andrew Caballero-Reynolds/AFP via Getty Images*

One hot day in my hometown of Riverside, California, 25 years ago, I finally discerned the source of the clicking sound I often heard as I walked down the city's sidewalks – it turned out to be people in nearby cars locking their doors at my approach. The drivers saw their vehicles as a source of freedom and a space of safety; they saw me, a young Black man on a sidewalk, as a threat.

At that moment, I understood those cars not just as a polluter of my neighborhood, but as a social barrier as well. And I realized we would never see or understand one another in a community geared toward auto-oriented spaces.

More than 50 years ago, Martin Luther King, Jr. called urban public transportation “a genuine civil rights issue.” But as the recent wave of protests against racial inequality illustrate, the U.S. has so far failed to address the implications of racist transportation investment and policies. The nation’s infrastructure investments have promoted systemic racism, impacting generations of African Americans. King’s comments resonate with me, not only because I’m now the director of policy development and research at the American Public Transit Association, but because my family experienced it firsthand.

My mom grew up in South Los Angeles and was there during the 1965 Watts uprising. As the flames burned and looting went on for nights, her household ran low on food. My mother asked my grandmother, “Should I go and get us food like everyone else is doing?” My grandmother said, “We do not do that in this house.”

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In a deeply divided city, with limited public transportation options and racist laws on the books, many Black Angelenos could not participate in California’s 1960s boom. My grandmother cleaned homes, but since many of the better-paying jobs were hours away by bus, she had to work locally; thus, she made just \$5 a day. The family was treated like second-class citizens by those in charge, including the Los Angeles Police Department. At one point, they had to endure a misplaced police raid that destroyed their hard-won property – the officers had the wrong house, and there was no apology.

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After the 1965 uprising, my mother's family moved to Riverside, a distant exurb on the edge of the desert in Southern California. That was the community in which I was born and raised. I would need my family's values to make it through my journey with structural racism and white supremacy. The 1980s and 1990s were a difficult time for Southern California. The end of the Cold War led to the loss of hundreds of thousands of jobs as factories closed and military bases were downsized or "realigned" out of existence. The LAPD's treatment of black men lit the fuse of another uprising in 1992. And Governor Pete Wilson further inflamed racial tensions to win reelection in 1994. I started to see that systemic racism and homophobia were structures that one must contest through power and political persuasion.

I decided to learn how to best persuade power to concede to demands – first through protest actions and testifying to regulatory and legislative bodies, then through advocacy research experience. I acquired theoretical frames, with a degree from Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. And I entered public transportation as a career, to reestablish the public realm, provide the space for a new social contract to emerge, and connect communities to opportunity.

While recent events make it painfully clear that we may be as far from equity as we ever were, they have also revealed important lessons. As the nation reflects on Black Lives Matter, it must reprioritize its investments in people and places. Here's how public transit can play a more powerful role in this process.

1. **We need to address transit governance.** In some communities, the structure of governance leads to project decisions that promote the needs of predominantly white suburban commuters at the expense of communities of color with higher transit use and more supportive land use. Often a transit district that includes suburban communities may prioritize extensions of light rail lines into the suburbs over the more expensive but compelling transit needs of denser, more diverse urban communities.
2. **Transit advocacy is about a lot more than transit.** We may spend billions on a new light rail system, but if spending on the unhoused is insufficient, the trains will be full of homeless people. If communities shirk their duty to build and maintain sufficient affordable housing, displacement will remove those that most need and most use the

adjacent transit service. What is defined as a “transit issue” is now inclusive of the effective provision of all municipal services, as transit does not operate in a vacuum. A political action committee dedicated to the broader policy environment, while crafting messages and strategies more inclusive of voters of color, is necessary.

3. **Reform transit agency CEO recruitment.** Traditionally, transit operations experience has been a critical determinant in choosing a transit CEO. Today, however, the job has changed: It’s become more government affairs, community relations, and media-driven. The Black managerial class with those skills gets minted in MBA, law, and policy graduate programs with clear job pipelines after graduation. A mid-career professional from that pipeline is more than qualified for most transit agency CEO positions. However, the focus on prior operational experience puts these candidates at a distinct disadvantage, reducing the pool of applicants of color. Research shows that 60% of transit riders are of color. However, according to self-reported data from the American Public Transportation Association’s Transit CEO Committee, only 16% of CEOs are of color. The industry is missing out on people with personal experiences with the product and a political passion for justice.

Twenty-five years after realizing that racist drivers were using their cars as barriers against people like me, I can say that I am still treated differently, despite my best efforts. The difference between now and then is that I no longer feel alone. White allies are beginning to speak up and use their bodies to express their support for Black lives. (Researchers conducting preliminary demographic analysis of recent Black Lives Matter protests found that white demonstrators made up 61% of those surveyed in New York City, 65% in Washington, D.C., and 53% in Los Angeles.) It is clear that the national dialogue in the wake of the Floyd killing is not merely about state-sponsored police violence; there is a larger conversation about white supremacy and systemic racism underway. As a result, we have an opportunity to address the discriminatory systems endemic to our built environment, infrastructure investment decisions, organizations and industries. Our best shot to make progress on these challenges is right now.

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