

## **Black Perspectives: North Lawndale and Everyday Lived Experiences on Public Transportation**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Black people's experiences on public transportation in the new millennium weren't and aren't detached from our experiences with racism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, public transportation moves racism across time and space. Public transportation today is a fixed space and a mobile public place where Blacks have unequal experiences in terms of time, quality and speed of service, bodily movement, and leisurely enjoyment. The experiences are personal, and the racism is institutional with social and everyday consequences. Sustainable and advanced transit systems aid urban growth and sustainability (Logan and Molotch 2007). Much of the research on transportation has focused on operations and implications in fixed spaces of the system such as system layout, planning, and access as they relate to race and class inequalities (Brand, Lowe, and Hall 2020; Bullard 2005; Farmer and Poulos 2019; Golub, Marcantonio, and Sanchez 2013). These prior works clearly document that urban transportation systems contribute to less transportation access for Blacks and Latino/a/e communities; lower property values for underserved areas and segregation and spatial inequities. Furthermore, historical examinations of public transit systems, transportation funding, and priorities show that public transportation in the United States has worked as a project of exclusion that is intensely experienced by Black and Brown communities. These systems and practices evidence differentiated services and planning and do not provide equal access to transit prosperity but instead reproduce inequities, while serving as spaces where legacies of inequalities are perpetuated (Purifoye 2017, 2020).

This project and report seek to advance transportation and urban research and discourse that has primarily focused on transportation policies and on the design and planning of systems and services. We begin this effort by focusing on the everyday lived experiences of Black transit users in a majority-Black community area in Chicago, North Lawndale. This report presents findings and analysis from 14 completed focus group interviews with Black transit users in North Lawndale. Although there was a cornucopia of information learned, this report prioritizes the major themes that were expressed across the focus groups either through direct questions or volunteer responses: safety and security; equity and equality; cleanliness and how these experiences are embodied. We end with a discussion of what the responses tell us and how they can be used to improve overall experiences. We conclude with recommendations for the Chicago Transit Authority (CTA), the Chicago Department of Transportation, and the Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT).

#### *A Matter of Place*

North Lawndale is located on the West Side of Chicago. The population is a little over 31,000 with a Black population of seventy-six percent (CMAP 2025). North Lawndale residents have access to various public transportation routes including two 'L' trains, the Pink and Blue Lines, and several buses. Twenty-one percent of North Lawndale residents reported using public transportation to get to work, compared to nineteen

percent for Chicago as a whole (CMAP 2025). North Lawndale is close to I-290, one of the expressways that was built by bulldozing through a Black community (MPC 2023). A mid-2000s gentrification effort had begun in part because of the community's Greystone buildings, but this effort was slowed by the housing mortgage crisis. This housing effort matters, as it coincides with CTA creating the Pink Line in 2006. We know from prior work that gentrification and transit initiatives are bedfellows (Purifoye 2020). North Lawndale's storied history, including its connection to the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights movement, the pathway of historic Route 66 that moves through the community, and the ongoing active efforts of North Lawndale Community Coordinating Council's (NLCCC) Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, situates this community area as a good choice for this study into Black perspectives on public transportation in Chicago.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### *Focus Group Interviews*

Participants were recruited through flyer advertisements (see Appendix A) that were passed out at various outreach events and near and on public transportation. Flyers directed them via a QR code to a registration form. The research team scheduled the groups and emailed the participants with the Zoom code and the time of the interviews. We completed fourteen focus groups 2024-2025, although dozens were scheduled.<sup>1</sup> Interviews took place via Zoom at various times of day to accommodate as many riders as possible.

Focus groups took place October -November 2024 and July 2025. They were conducted by two members of the research team. Due to unforeseen circumstances, 2025 interviews were conducted solely by the Co-Principal Investigator. Focus group questions organized around the following topics: 1) Public transit use questions; 2) Typical transit experience; 3) Public transit and time; and 4) Public transit parity and disparity (See Appendix B). Depending on the number of participants, all questions were asked verbally but for larger groups, the first set of questions on public transit use were polled in the interest of time.

Responses were audio-recorded and then uploaded and shared in password protected files. An outside transcription service, Rev, transcribed the interviews. They were then compiled and uploaded into an online qualitative software platform Dedoose and then coded before analysis.<sup>2</sup> Project partners created inductive, thematic codes for analysis in Dedoose.

## **SUMMATIVE FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS**

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<sup>1</sup> We scheduled nearly thirty focus groups but we either had sessions of no-shows or no registrants.

<sup>2</sup> In 2024 we suspected that several of the participants may not have been North Lawndale residents or CTA users. This led to a pause in the focus groups while the research team strategized on the best way to avoid repeat users and to better insure validity of the responses. The decision was made to require that cameras be turned on. In July 2025 we resumed the interviews and had no repeat participants and responses also suggested that these participants were actual North Lawndale residents and actual transit users.

Participants expressed overall satisfaction with CTA and their ability to navigate the city. However, they also expressed disappointment, concern, and questioned equity in bus service, cleanliness, and geographic inequities. Most participants' travel is inter-neighborhood, but a few mostly just travel in North Lawndale. They mentioned traveling downtown and that it's often cheaper, due to downtown parking rates, to take the train or bus as a motivation for using CTA, and for some, not having a personal car. This is aligned with CMAP data that shows that sixty-five percent of North Lawndale residents have access to at least one car (CMAP 2025). Below we focus on some of the highlights from the interviews that center on the main themes of safety and security, equity and equality, and cleanliness and how they experienced these as embodied measures. Afterward, we share participants' suggestions for improvements and conclude with a discussion on how this study's findings can be used by transit agencies, CDOT, and IDOT.

### **SAFETY AND SECURITY AT THE INTERSECTION OF SPACE AND PLACE**

*“If they can be just more, I don't know, present far as just safety wise, just knowing that it's more safety out there will make people want to ride it. And that's what I mean when I say about how can I feel more safer or things of that...” (7-14-25)*

#### *Buses and Bus Stops: Spaces and Safety*

Several participants take the bus in and out of North Lawndale. They noted several different routes that they use such as the #157, the #82, and the #12. For many of these riders, the exposure to others while waiting shapes their perception of safety. Bus stops are often open, meaning there isn't a shelter, and that means that someone can come up to them from all sides. It also means there is no shelter from the weather. This open exposure may shape some of the anxieties that were mentioned. One rider expressed that at the bus stop “I feel vulnerable like something can happen.” (7-15-25)

There are often long waits for buses, regardless of what the Ventra app or the text message may tell them. One rider expressed that the unreliable nature of the app, such as when ghost buses happen, makes them feel less safe. Whereas another rider noted that they rely on the app to be accurate in order to mitigate the amount of time they are standing at the bus stop waiting.

Another rider noted that ghost buses are particularly problematic:

*“But I noticed at one of my old jobs when I was taking the bus, I would run into this issue where I would track the bus and the bus would say it would be coming and then it wouldn't come. And I was like, “Okay, what's happening?” And then I remember, I think I ended up seeing that there was this phenomenon called ghost buses, which I didn't even know was a thing where if you look and one of my coworkers actually showed me this, were like, yeah, they have a tracker and the tracker would just go off and you're like, “Wait, what's happening?” (7-17-2025)*

Not being able to rely on the Ventra system for timeliness means that riders are not only exposed for longer than planned times, but ‘being late’ anxiety and stress become part of their transit experience. The vulnerability is not ameliorated when riders think they’re about to board to safety, as they plan out their time at the stop, but instead now are unsure of how long they will have to wait. This highlights the impact of place, space, and transit. Being in a place may not be the primary source of anxiety, when the place is home, but not knowing how long you must be on-guard or super aware of your surroundings can create stress.

Riding on the bus, for some, doesn’t make the rider feel safer. As one noted: “No, I really don’t. The bus driver, they can’t really do nothing if something going on. They not allowed to be armed or anything and it’s no security on the bus, it’s just a free-for-all.” (7-15-25)

Buses allow for more options to disembark than a train, because there is less space between stop options. However, once the bus is in motion, riders are at least temporarily trapped with not only strangers, but the behavior of strangers. This often produces **transit anxiety** - a type of anxiety that builds from being in a mobile space of strangers where movement, restricted body space, and confinement are happening all at once and where individual controls are limited (Purifoye 2026). This anxiety is often tied to feelings of safety, leaving some riders to avoid the system altogether as this rider noted: “And some buses I won’t even take because, at certain times, I feel like it’s just super unsafe and that’s why I don’t ride the Red Line.” (7-15-25)

Riders expressed that they often are just not comfortable, not just because of the strangeness of other riders, but also from what may happen once they disembark:

“If I’m riding a bus, I’m trying to [see if it’s safe] or not really to get off there. If it’s not safe, then I might ride another block, keep on going and get off up the block. Or if it’s raining ... I expect to see a bus shelter to take shelter if it’s inclement weather or something like that. And just safety, that’s the number one.” (7-15-25)

For some riders, the bus was perceived as safer than the train. Again, this could be because there were more choices for exiting.

“First of all, let me reiterate [...] I had an experience on the CTA train maybe three years ago. So now that’s why I only ride the bus. (7-17-25)

This rider also added: “I definitely consider CTA, or the bus as being the safest route as possible because it’s more open, it’s more freely. And besides, I always sit behind a bus driver anyway. Even if the seat is not available, I’ll just stand there.” (7-17-25).

Unlike the train, where technically someone can enter the car mid-transit, from another car, this cannot happen on the bus. Further, the design of the bus situates the riders closer to the driver and cameras, and technically emergency services when called, then a train or train platform. At the same time, riders also understood that the driver’s ability

to respond in certain ways to incidents is also limited. Some respondents suggested that it is the bus drivers' responsibility to keep them safe beyond a safe driving trip, while others contend it is not their job to jump into the fray or "take a bullet" for a passenger (11-21-24). This matters in the discourse on the Black experience as the majority of bus drivers who drive routes that serve majority-Black communities are also Black. This highlights the risk they are also exposed to, reminding us that the Black perspective on transit should include that of bus operators who also experience dilapidated bus stops and shelters, uncleanliness at the stops, uncleanliness and smells on the bus, and *transit anxiety*.

Perceptions of lack of service or 'service barely there' can also be shaped by bus schedules and perceived unreliability such as what this rider noted:

"In North Lawndale we got 16th Street, the bus barely run. I think they run every hour, every two hours. And then Ogden, I don't think that bus still run on Ogden anymore, probably every hour, every two hours. Don't run on Sundays. [...] Then when school would start back, they'll be running back-to-back. But Ogden and 16th Street, those buses barely run. Yeah." (7-14-25)

So, safety and security are extended beyond ideas of violence or harm but also feeling of reliability. They are not mutually exclusive. Comfort with the system and on the system is not disentangled from schedules, as riders noted, and not disentangled from feeling secure and safe.

Trains provide for a different type of transit experience than buses. Train stations themselves may be shady, but the platforms are relatively clean and busier than a bus stop. Riders noted this as well. Further, as they noted, the train comes more often. But the trains' material dynamics and the designs can make the train, albeit convenient, more worrisome as noted here:

"So I had a work-related meeting downtown. I work for Mount Sinai Hospital. I took the Western bus to the Blue Line and it was like maybe 8:00 in the morning. So I get on the first available car [inaudible 00:11:33] because it comes down the long steps, the first available car, and I'm figuring 8:00 in the morning, it's going to be peoples all over, no seats available or anything. But to my surprise, it was very empty and there was six individuals on the train and two of them were smoking marijuana. And I was like, "Oh my God, what did I just step into?" And of course, the other guys I believe are homeless, I just don't want to assume nothing. So it went to medical district and I got off the train and I said, "No, I'm not finna do this." I'm not a scary guy, but I'm well-caused, reflective, friendly, but the fear that overcame me at the time, and I swore I'll never take the train again." (7-17-25)

Once the train doors close, riders are basically stuck for at least half-a-mile depending on the distance between stops. There are metal coverings over the handles of the in-between train car doors to discourage movement between cars. This rider was stuck on

the train and with all the questionable activities. As he noted, it impacted his experience so much so that he vowed never to take the train again.

Others noted that they enter the train with a plan to maximize their feelings and perceptions of safety. This rider spent considerable energy on this:

“I've developed an approach to riding the train and it's evolved. When I was younger, I gave no thought to safety or concern. As I've gotten older though, I noticed that when I ride the train, I prepare to ride the train. I make sure my phone is away because I know that's an issue on the CTA, snatching phones, grabbing phones. I make sure I'm alert. I sit where I can see, I'm watching who's getting on and who's getting off. I put on what I call my you don't want to mess with me face so that nobody wants to try me. And then it depends on what line I'm riding. I usually ride the Pink Line, which has a reputation of being fairly safe. But if I'm on the Red Line, I make sure I take extra precautions because I've known the Red Line to be a source of a problem for decades now.” (7-17-25)

This begs the question, *are the riders more acutely aware of transit safety issues because of micro-level experiences than the more macro-level understandings about safety from the transit agency or the city?* Although riders did not express an expectation of perfect safety or security, their concerns not only meant stress but also that their rides are more than commutes: they are strategic journeys where the right to security and comfort is not afforded.

A decades-old decision by CTA may have heightened some of the transit anxiety. One passenger noted: “Again far as my safety depends on what time I'm going there and where am I going because I still would have some type of shadow to be paying attention if I'm on public transportation, any form, especially the train because it's so excluded. You have the conductor is here, not the conductor, but the motorman and so I just have to be cautious when I'm getting on that.” (11-9-24).

CTA decided decades ago to eliminate the position of the person who opened and closed the doors (“CTA to Leave Train Conductors at the Station 1997”). This person was not just an extra person for security (eyes on the platform) but also could assist the train conductor in various ways. Although they could not monitor every car, they were able to see some things and respond to things that having only one transit personnel on a train eliminates.

Many of the respondents, while not finding the train perfect, preferred it over the bus and also believe that it is safer because of the design of the station and platforms.

“And you're standing there waiting while on the train, it's an elevated platform. So stuff could be happening beneath you, but you're above ground so you're not thinking about it as much was something that I always considered, especially when I was younger. I always liked the train a little bit more just because it just seemed like, okay, I can get somewhere quicker because the train runs every I think it's like 10, 15 minutes while the bus traffic could be slow, an ambulance could be coming, it could be a funeral procession, things could be happening on

the streets. And I like moving because you never know what might be happening, especially when you're in some rougher neighborhoods in the city. So I would say I prefer it a little bit more or I consider a little bit more safer, but I can understand how the bus can be safer as well.” (7-17-25)

For this rider, he was aware of the trains’ safety limitations but also saw frequency of service as a measure of safety and with the likelihood of less chances of disruptions because of street happenings.

Other riders noted that they take the train not only because it is quicker, but because they believe it is safer.

“Safety is something that's very important in my transportation experience with dealing with either the train or the bus. Personally, I feel that the train is safer. I don't know if that's because there's a more consistent pace of the train that comes than the bus, but I don't know, I feel a sense of more of a safety as it relates to taking the train versus when I do when I take the bus.” (10-11-24)

Another rider noted: “My experience on a train, again, I will prefer the train than the bus, just because, one, I just feel like it's cleaner. For some reason in my mind I feel like it's safer. Lighting is very important. I feel like a lot of bus stops, they have dim lights, which is a safety issue, if you're walking late or is it going somewhere at nighttime. For the most part, the train platform is more lit in the bus stop.” (10-11-24)

Yet again, the riders are expressing ‘feelings’ of safety. We discuss the embodied aspect of the transit experience later, because it shapes so much of how riders perceive their lived experience and their decisions to use public transportation.

Happenings near transit spaces also were discussed in terms of safety and overall transit experiences.

“Okay, so for me when I get on the train, say first I get on at Forest Park, right? So it's like the end of the end. So I say first I get on there and I get off Blue Line, where could it take me to? Somewhere, okay, nope, that's the Green Line. That's where the Green Line is. Lake Street, man, you get off right there, there's so many people that be downstairs, I don't even want to call them out their name. Just different people, different people, a lot of addicts and sellers and liquor stores on corner. So, you got to think about how that looks, there's a lot of people, cars, it's on Lake Street, crashing, poles.

It's busy, it's very busy, it's very dangerous right there, I feel like it's not safe to exit there. But that's the stop. And that's where you would want to get on the bus to get on the Pulaski bus to get down there to the North Lawndale area, because that's where I would be going. And it's a lot of commotion at the stops. There's a lot of people, there's a lot of traffic, there's a lot of chaos. You could have some people on the corner fighting, disagreeing. You got people drinking early in the morning. It'd be a lot. But then when you get off the bus, it's a little more, it

depends on what you get off the bus, it's a little more. It depends on where you get off at. But I try not to get off on, you know how the side block versus the corner let off spots, I try not to get off on corners. I would get off the block before or sometime before, and just make cuts to go where I want, so I won't get off at the corner because I don't like corner stops.”

Other riders were also keen on which stations are problematic and how they are unsafe, while they also are unavoidable for their transit needs.

“Well, when I board the Chicago transportation, it's like, how could I put it, it's very calm near where I board at, near 18th and Pulaski, but when I exit near the Blue Line on Pulaski and transfer over to the train, it's just like a mess, up and through that line. It's just a lot of zombie looking. It looked different through there. It'd be a lot of people crowding the train station, seeing people jump over the train stations, and stuff right there. It's different right there. That's where I head to when I'm heading to my school, and then when I get to this, I take the Blue Line to get on to the last stop. It's kind of like trickling down that way. First it didn't used to be like that, I learned somebody got shot near Des Plaines where I normally take to get to my school classes at. But it's just the city. It's all the same to me.” (11-21-24)

This participant highlights how they see the ride as more than just a transit experience, but an experience of being in the city itself in noting “but it's just the city.” He also relates this awareness of the city, transit, and his well-being with his experiences as a Black man. Being Black in public spaces and the risk to Black men in particular is noted in the literature. Being on public transportation does not reduce the risk but increases it in many instances (Purifoye and Brooms 2025). For Black men, this risk shapes some of their transit anxiety as noted here:

“For me, safety is a big part of traveling because especially in Chicago, safety is a big part for me. I mean, of course I got to make it back home to my family. So when it comes to riding public transportation, especially the Red Line train and the Blue Line trains and things like that at night, it get kind of cautious. So by me being a young black man who's not concealed to carry it is very scary for me. (11-21-24)

Other people shape feelings of safety and security along with the ability to control one's own space. If the spaces are open, like there isn't a bus shelter, the rider is exposed to more potential disruptions. How passengers are waiting and how they experience the space when they disembark from the bus or the train also matters.

Riders were attuned to how they felt about transit spaces - buses, platforms, and stations - but also expressed that they create strategies to deal with the challenges because they still needed to get to their destinations.. As we discuss in the recommendations section, safety is a major deficit area for CTA and the city, while at the same time, riders formulate their own strategies for navigating these realities. As they also discuss, and transit crime data shows, safety concerns are not equally experienced



throughout the system and the burden of danger weighs heavily on Black riders (Purifoye 2020). These disparities are weighty in the same communities situated in historic redlining, disinvestment, and transportation racism (Reft et al 2023; Smith et al. 2020; Steil and Arcaya 2023).

## **EQUITY AND EQUALITY**

*“Of course we're not given a fair treatment, we're in North Lawndale.” (11-9-24)*

Discussions about inequality and equity often focus on the services themselves, such as frequency of buses, access to buses, and trains and arrival times from start to finish. However important these areas are, services that promote security and a sense of safety, dignity, and care are also important. North Lawndale residents noted service inequalities and inequities that include vehicles, stations and routes, along with perceived inequities in care of the individual. Participants were asked if they believe that transit is equitable across the city, meaning that no matter where you live, services are fair. Overall, residents do believe services are mostly equitable, because one pays the same price for fares and can eventually reach their destination. However, they are cognizant of timeliness, cleanliness, and safety disparities. They also expressed an awareness of a difference between public transit on the West Side compared to the North Side and downtown in particular. As noted earlier, this highlights racial disparities because of the hyper-racial segregation in Chicago, with the west and south side community areas having the higher percentages of racially minoritized communities.

Train stations presented accessibility issues that often were not present with buses once all buses were equipped with the kneeling option (so that those differently abled or those with strollers could more easily board). Consistently broken elevators, and escalators, means that riders may not be able to safely reach the train or their destinations.

*“Okay, that has not worked at Kostner so long and that hasn't. At Central Park, the elevators are never not working either up or down. One way or another. You're not getting on those elevators at Central Park, and that Polk, I'm talking about what I lived experience that you always say. Sometimes in Central Park, when I go visit my mom or go to the farmer Ogden, those elevators are not working either up or down. They're not doing one or the other. On Polk that happens frequently. I'm not for sure they turn them off, I'm not for sure why. But a lot of times at Polk you will have to do the elevator because the escalator is not working.” (11-9-24)*

When asked if they thought neighborhoods have equal amounts of service, and that no neighborhood had more service than others, responses were mixed but not necessarily in a traditional way, meaning they believed there is a level of equality but at the same time, geographically there isn't. In other words, they noted an awareness that everyone had access to transit but that where one lives is connected with a resources and

particular transit options. This highlights perceptions and realities of what is mostly equal but with residues of inequalities as demonstrated:

“I think so. They have the service but, some areas, they get it more frequent. I'd say that.” (7-15-25)

Another rider presented a very detailed explanation:

“I think for the most part, yes. I do think downtown gets probably the best treatment because they just have so many options, varieties of spice of life. So they have so many options and so many buses they can just move way more freely. Where in North Lawndale we just have the Pink Line. If you go a little bit further, you have the Blue Line which is a lot further away. So you have to decide which way you're going. You have the 18 bus, you have the 157 buses on Ogden. So we have some stuff [...] downtown for sure probably has the best treatment because up north it can get hard, you have the Brown Line, maybe the Purple Line that runs express for so long, and then the Red Line goes north too.

But I do feel like downtown, if you live in that section like West Loop, South Loop, you have probably the best experience with the CTA because you just have more options than everybody else. You don't have to make a hard decision where everyone else has to go, "Oh, I only have this bus or this train," and you have to decide if you're going to wait for the bus or you're going to walk that three, four blocks to the train, and you have to balance that out and you have to make sure. [...] I just feel like downtown probably gets the best treatment of the CTA.” (7-17-25)

An awareness of unequal services can shape system satisfaction responses. It also highlights how riders experience the inequalities in real time, while they spend time trying to reduce their travel times, increase options, and safely arrive at their destinations, as they expressed. Further, the service inequalities manifest in route options but also in time inequities. Reduced control of one's time can be perceived many different ways.

#### *Inequitable routes and time:*

Time equity is something important to consider when examining transit experiences. Prior research highlights how Black and Brown communities have less service, but high ridership, or older and dirtier buses that may also be unreliable due to maintenance or heating/air issues (Farmer and Poulos 2019; Purifoye 2026; Lowe, Stewart, and Purifoye n.d.). As previously stated, when residents were asked about their rides and how long their commutes are, many mentioned long commutes, even when traveling just within or geographically near to North Lawndale.

“So I travel to work and to my doctor's appointments and I normally take the 157 and that goes straight through where I live because I live in North Lawndale. But going down Ogden, it's the longest trip ever I've ever had in my life on the bus. I don't know what's happening on that street, but it is just like, it's always traffic in

the morning and in the evening. I'm going to work, I work right there in East Garfield Park. And so it's just really one shot, you know what I'm saying?

I take two buses, but the longest part, it takes me to get from Pulaski or down to Kedzie about 35 to 40 minutes. And you know how short that is? That don't make sense. That's the biggest part of my ride. Kedzie bus come, then the longest thing for that is the wait, but the ride is quicker, but the wait is longer. So it shouldn't take an hour to get to work, but it does. Now if I take the train, I'm out of the way, I still would have to come back. It just makes no sense. So, oh my god, it's just crazy. So thank you. Sometimes you just want to say something about it. Right?" (11-21-24)

Participants affirmed that more frequent service would give them better control of their time, and they see this as advantageous.

"The bus in North Lawndale seems to be slower. There seems to be... I don't know what the issues are, but the bus is nowhere nearly as equitable and as time efficient as the train is. If you spend your \$5 and all you need to take is the train, you can go anywhere in the city all day long in a very timely manner. But if you have to catch a bus, there are other factors, traffic being one of them, that are going to play into that. So, the buses aren't anywhere near as good in North Lawndale, but the train anywhere in the city, if you can get on the train, \$5 you can go all day long and it's a great deal." (7-17-25)

Some participants were not aware that CTA had several express bus routes because the West Side has none. Express routes are time savers and provides riders with better control times.

"To be honest with you, I didn't even know express buses still existed until you just said it. I just assumed that they had all gone away because we don't have them." (7-17-25)

When asked how express buses into downtown could potentially impact people's lives, for the most part participants saw it as a potentially positive impact and a service they would use:

"It'd be safe to them. We all left to move and all that stopping and people don't want to pay or it's an altercation, you just keep going straight to that stop." (7-14-25)

"Yeah, that sucks that we don't have an express bus because that would probably help a lot. Because especially when some buses will run where I'll wait for the number 18 bus and I'll see two or three 12 Roosevelt buses pass and I'm like, "Why are there so many Roosevelt buses, but there's only one 18 bus?" So maybe if one of those Roosevelt buses was an express bus, maybe that could open up the lane for another 18 bus [...] Because Roosevelt is a pretty big street. It's pretty popular too and I see a lot of people, those buses are always packed for the most

part. That's why I think they get the double-decker buses that hold more people because there's a lot of people that take it. So maybe if a Roosevelt bus was an Express bus, that'd be really cool. I think a lot of people would appreciate it because it seems like Roosevelt is a pretty big street for us. Especially coming through the West Side, coming through North Lawndale, Roosevelt's a pretty significant, [inaudible 00:35:18] a significant street for us, so maybe that would be really nice." (7-17-25)

Express buses can reduce transit anxieties because there are less options for disruptions. Further, once the bus is running express, riders don't have to be concerned about who may be boarding next. Express routes also increase the likelihood of shorter commute times and better arrival times. However, one respondent recalled some of the problems with express buses in the past:

"They still have expresses but I remember I used to take the 54 Cicero and they had a X54 and that would go from ... It would go express and I found out that it was a lot of problems with that when people would get on and they didn't notice that it was an express bus and they complain so bad that, the bus drivers, they had to let them off. And once you open those doors, people can get on or off and they tell them it's an express, they don't care. Because I've seen people, when they want to get off and the bus driver won't let them off, they let they self off. They go in the back, they pull the emergency handle and then they just get off. And if the bus is rolling, like I've seen before, the bus is rolling, you pull that emergency handle down, the bus is going to stop, it's going to slow into a stop without the bus driver's control. So, that's pretty dangerous." (7-15-25)

Regular presentations of various express bus routes could reduce chances of bus confusion as people adapt to knowing their area has various options and where it is clearly displayed and communicated through the onboarding announcements that were not part of the technology of the buses ten to twenty years ago.

#### *Unequal protections and care*

Not all participants found the system equitable. Some expressed a belief that they experience inequitable services because of where they live, in North Lawndale.

"I don't think it's equitable at all. I don't think, because again, we're dealing with what's happening in what area. Is it more shopping area over here? So if the time is going to be more frequent, are we going to have more buses or more buses or more trains to connect? Of course we're not given a fair treatment, we're in North Lawndale." (11-9-24)

Another respondent also tied the inequity to where one lives.

"I don't think it's equitable across the neighborhoods like she said. One the cleanliness, that's a big one. Two for safety, I would say lighting... Outside that the availability of some buses, I noticed a lot more bus shelters up north and

downtown than I do out west, where they just may be a bus stop but not necessarily a bus shelter.” (11-20-24)

Not being treated fairly is not only a justice or equity issue but also connects to the safety issues that were interwoven into many of the participants' responses.

“I remember they used to have the CTA police and sometimes they would get on and they would ride for a certain time and then they get off. But I noticed that they was only doing that not in the hood, you know what I mean? I never really saw ... They did it but not as frequently as they would maybe if you was in the Lincoln Park area or the Gold Coast or something like that. Those areas, they ride the bus and they make those passengers feel safe. And I guess, when you get to the west side or I'm going to say North Lawndale or Austin area, they wouldn't ride so often as they would in another area.” (7-15-25)

“Not at all. It's not. It's a big difference from the West Side to going all the way up north. I frequently going back and forth from out where I live to going back up north on CTA, and it's a huge difference. The people on the bus, the drivers' attitudes are different. Safety concerns are totally different, but yeah, it's a big difference.” (11-20-24)

“The other stops, I'd say for instance, I'm taking the blue line to the red line. So from the Red Line from Jackson, Clark, once you get to Addison going north, I think the service is much better or I would say, because you don't have that many people going that way. Once you cross Addison, I feel much safer sometimes. Because it's like all the activity is back my way. But once you cross Addison, the atmosphere totally change.” (7-14-25)

“I guess I would say that it's not very positive in my area. Let's say if you're on the North Side, you may get off a bus shelter. There's artwork at the shelter, there's artwork on the corner near the bus stop. It is just aesthetically more pleasing, and it looks nicer out west. Like I said, you're lucky if you have a shelter available or at least a bench. Maybe we could have some artwork on some benches or something that could just add color to the bus stops and the culture on the West Side.” (11-20-24)

Safety and aesthetics were connected themes as the above responses show. Tree-lined streets, well-lit bus stops, clean stations and artwork were part of the discourse on equity and safety and riders' overall experiences and perceptions of the system. Cleanliness, in particular, mattered a great deal to participants and also suggests that the lack thereof was undignified and left them feeling uncared for by CTA.

### *Equity and Dignity*

Equity and equality are more than about fairness or sameness but also shape **spaces of dignity**. Being treated like *you* matter as much as a person in a whiter and wealthier area of the city is not a benign desire, but one that can alter overall senses of belonging. As this respondent noted, equity makes you feel included:

“And yeah, just seeing express buses I think as a whole would be nice just for the community. Just for the morale of the community, I think it would be cool to have an express bus. I think people would be happy to take the express bus. Think how many kids would be excited to take the express bus going to school or coming home from school? I think it will uplift the community in a very special way. This just says, “Oh I can take the express bus.” That’s kind of cool and neat like I never had this before. I think it would be nice to have one in North Lawndale for sure.” (7-17-25)

“Because maybe they’re thinking of what they have projected a number that is not so many jobs or some of us that’s not needing a public transportation to get to jobs because they may think that we don’t all work.” (11-9-24)

“So I don’t think I would be the best... I think that it’s important that public transportation is available and accessible. I do think that it’s important for there to be some type of standard and that there are large disparities and limitations in different areas of the city simply just because of where in the city it may be located and which populations in terms of race live in certain areas of the city because I can most certainly agree at that the closer you get to downtown and that the Lincoln Park, North Side area does look nicer. You don’t feel as unsafe. There is more sheltering, it’s a lot cleaner. The service that you receive is a lot more friendly and professional, a lot more willing to help, a lot more knowledgeable, and that is not the same feel that I get in other areas of the city that are highly populated with minority populations.”(11-20-24)

When bus routes were eliminated in North Lawndale, it not only impacted how the residents could move, but it also denied certain experiences to their children and for some of them, this mattered as well. Riders saw certain transit options as dignified because it gave or gives them choices, as the prior quote shows. They also saw routes as more than just rides, as demonstrated by this rider when she was asked a follow-up question after earlier mentioning that a route she had used was eliminated:

“Oh, that’s the way I really took downtown. As I was growing up as a young lady, that’s the way took to... We utilize, I should say, we utilize the Ogden bus and it was safe, it was convenient, it was family oriented, you would know, see neighbors on there and it was safe. You didn’t have to be a rocket scientist to know you could take the Ogden bus here and it was very convenient, very, very convenient. Downtown I could go, I could go to Cicero, I could go a lot of different places, but a lot of different places with the Ogden bus [... ] Even when my daughter was enrolled in Chicago Hope, if that bus would’ve been running when she was a student there, we’re right here at Kostner, she would only would just have to from her house, walk to the Ogden bus if it would’ve stayed in existence and it could have took her to the door of her school. When they took it away, she never got a chance to experience that. But when they taken it away, I was like, “Oh, this would’ve been so convenient if it was Ogden bus.” She probably got tired of me saying that, but we would just walk out and we could get

to the school and the next, after they'd taken it away, she would have to take the train to Polk, get off at Polk and then take the bus to her school. So it was very inconvenient and it shouldn't have been taken away at that time. At no time, it should have been taken away. (11-9-24)

This rider continues to use CTA but bemoans the experience as not as pleasant and convenient as it was in the past. Nostalgia and current disparities can shape overall satisfaction with the system, although it may be regularly used, as this rider noted and as riders expressed dissatisfaction with other changes in earlier included quotes.

### *Equity and Vehicles: Crowdedness*

Like in many mostly Black neighborhoods, smaller and older buses are more frequently used than articulated and newer buses (Purifoye 2026). Older buses not only add to environmental hazards as they move through the community, but when they are overcrowded because they are small and service is infrequent, the idling of these buses contribute additional harms. Smaller and less frequent buses can easily result in more crowded and longer rides, due to the extra time it takes for passengers to load and disembark. Ongoing crowdedness or regular crowdedness can lead to dissatisfaction or an overall negative perception of the system as highlighted by these respondents' comments:

“I can't stand crowded buses and sometimes, if they crowded, the bus driver will drive right past you because the bus is crowded. I guess they figuring where you going to fit or you got to wait for the next one and then that type of stuff would make people late, make people frustrated. And then, when the next bus comes, what do you think the passenger's going to say to that bus driver? Hey, man, your friend, he just freaking left me [inaudible 00:20:30] and he may even give a false report on that bus driver just to do stuff. (7-15-25)

“The regular buses, they mostly crowded. But if those are slinky buses out there, that mean they need to be out there and they need the extra space.” (7-15-25)

“Because I believe I get off at around five. Everybody's getting off at the same time, so I think it's just rush hour. There's no getting around it [...] I wish that there was another bus directly or immediately right out there so I could get on that one if there was some more space, but unfortunately, it's like, yeah, or I'm hoping it's not raining or anything like that.” (11-20-24)

Although respondents were mixed in their views on the overall parity in the system, most believe the system is mostly equitable, even if it takes longer in some places, the rides are less comfortable, or the stations are not equally maintained. This suggests that perhaps the system has more issues of inequalities that warrant further review.

## **EMBODIMENT**

*“I believe that my everyday walking around Chicago is pretty stressful, even though I’m a very hopeful person for everybody. But because I run into some of these situations that it’s stressful. It’s stressful to walk and to move around Chicago.” (11-21-24)*

Transit experiences are beyond issues of just getting from point A to point B. Riders embody their everyday lived experiences in ways that are of import when examining their perspectives. What they see, how they feel, what they smell, shape not only transit anxieties, but feelings of safety, dignity, equity, and exclusion. Participants discussed various embodied experiences, but some that were most salient included cleanliness, aesthetic care, stress and comfort, safety, and anxieties from unreliable service.

### *Cleanliness*

Waiting and riding experiences shape how we feel. Participants often mentioned cleanliness, filth, unpleasant smells, and unsightly stations and stops. Riding and waiting in clean spaces is an issue of dignity. It is undignified in a civil society for riders to have to navigate excessive dirt, trash, and putrid smells. This indignity is illuminated when riders notice that it is often restricted to the same redlined communities of yore, while they discuss how they see differences in downtown and northern areas of the city.

“Cleanliness. When you say I go to the Pulaski Green Line, it’s always a bunch of people standing out there. Somebody’s always in the way, go up north to say the Belmont Brown Line, not as many people standing out there, and you don’t smell strong urine and all that stuff. It’s a big difference.” (11-20-24)

Others noted the differences in cleanliness between trains and buses.

“I would have preferred to have been on the train. I feel like the train is well-lit. Well-lit area, where you can see, again, the times, where the train is coming. For the most part they keep the platform clean. And then when you get on the train, normally it is clean. You may have a time or two where it may be a little funky or whatnot, but for the most part, I personally feel like it’s a cleaner experience than the buses.” (10-11-24)

“I don’t like getting on the train or the bus smelling pee all the time. That just [inaudible 00:39:09] and it’s very inconsiderate, they just throw the trash. Been times I’m on a bus and there’s beer cans on the back of the bus if somebody was drinking beer and just left a tin can half empty. So now you smelling pee and alcohol. Beer, stale beers. It’s annoying, especially if you got kids. It’s a problem with kids.” (11-20-24)

“Well, personally, my preference, I can’t stand a bus. The train is my go-to, if I had to choose. Obviously if I can’t, if I have to take the bus, then I got to do what I got to do. And the reason being, because I asked myself that, I feel like the train, it feels cleaner. Versus the bus sometimes can be smelly, it can have an odor. It



feels as if it's slower in terms of getting to your destination or where you're going.” (10-11-24)

“I think cleanliness, just because I've never seen bleach being used before to clean any public anything, and I saw that on the train, and that's the only place that I've ever seen it. I think that's something that could be used as a best practice, especially with the seasonal change with us in parking in winter, it was snowing today. So just in terms of trying to keep germs down and being able to support good public health practices. It will be really nice to, in terms of just the standard, what I see downtown and what I see going closer toward the North Side in terms of sheltering and the maintenance of the shelters at certain bus stops, I think would be superb because I don't think too much of that is going on in certain areas.” (11-20-24)

Cleanliness is seen and smelt thus embodied. Carrying this in the body while also riding buses that are old, slow, or late can intensify not being cared for or not having equitable care throughout the system while also having an unpleasant ride. The embodied experience is important in the discourse on perceptions of public transportation as riders brought these topics up when asked about safety and the environment around their bus and/or train stations.

### *Dignity*

Waiting in filth is not dignified. Waiting at dilapidated stations is not pleasant or respectful. The feelings of differentiated treatment based on geography (and in Chicago that also means race given the racial geography of the city). Noticing that every rider is not experiencing the same unpleasantness (places, people, and vehicles) does not create feelings of belonging or care or respect or safety.

“But I'm grateful for that, brother. But also Doc, they need to know that North Lawndale is up and coming, but we have peoples here that goes out and work. Not everybody's here looking for a free ride. **We should be afforded the same assets in the same respect and thoughtfulness as they get downtown in the Loop.** [...] We need the same dignity and respect that you guys give to the South Loop. Safety. I know we outside and it's hard and people's going to come and go, but why we can't have them to stop the CTA cars come and patrol the bus stops?” (7-17-25)

“We need to have people at the stops that's friendly and want to help, that want to help.” (11-9-24)

“So I don't think it's fair. The quality of service is not fair all over. So in my neighborhood in North Lawndale, if I take the Pulaski bus and even sometimes the 157 bus, the bus driver waves at you, say, “Do you want me to stop?” And if I don't respond or if I don't see him, he'll keep on moving instead of stopping at the stop sign. But when I'm downtown or I am in the downtown area, the Loop area, they're stopping at every stop. They're not motioning to see if someone wants the bus to stop. I think that they should stop at every stop sign. Every stop they

should stop the bus stop. And so that's the reason why I don't, but I have seen the difference in the two, from one neighborhood to the next.” (11-21-24)

*Transit anxiety and safety as embodied*

Other embodied experiences were related to transit anxieties. Some of the *transit anxiety* is shaped by time and light meaning time of day and also darkness. The darkest from the night and lack of proper lighting are concerns that impede feelings of safety.

“So I agree with what was previously said is the activity on there via people. I've been on the train where it was two young men who had guns and they were saying what they were going to do with their guns. And I was feeling like I was a fly on the wall. I didn't want to move because I didn't know if they would've pointed them towards me. And so that was the longest, I would say 10 minutes of my life. And I was affected for weeks and I wouldn't say even a few months afterwards because of it, because I was afraid of my life. And then I've even have on the bus the same situation. So it's people because I experienced it was quite a few things. Right now I just went blank because when I thought about the two young men with the guns, that kind of threw me off. But yes, it's people with the behavior of people. Yea.” (11-24-24)

“Hey, yes, I do consider safety one of, well, a good aspect for me and that's why what I'm doing about it is I choose not to use public transportation at certain times. Meaning, you wouldn't catch me out there after say six because I would be afraid of what can happen. And by it getting dark so fast now I try not to really move around as much in certain areas and using public transportation.” (11-21-24).

“Just because safety is always a concern no matter what mode of transportation an individual decides to use when traveling from one point to the next, but when you are coming in close contact with other people going to and fro in the public in different areas, depending on what are going on in those areas of town, you just want to be able to be safe and sound while you're traveling to and fro whether it's crowded or if you're just going into an area where something traumatic may have happened or some type of crime or if there's construction. Just being aware when you're traveling back and forth on public transportation. So that's always a concern.” (11-20-24)

“A lot of the places on the West Side, as far as the bus stops, just seemed very dark, and especially in the wintertime when it gets darker faster, adequate lighting is for sure a problem.” (11-20-24)

Riders identified markers that they used to determine if something or if a place is safe. Here they communicated embodied responses to the space and their sense of safety.

“Just a feeling that I get. I grew up on the west side North Lawndale so my spidey senses are always up, my antennas are always up, they never down and you got to keep your head on the swivel to survive. So, I'm looking for everything. Before I even get off, I'm paying attention. I'm paying attention to everything, I'm not in my phone or any of that stuff. You got to be paying attention because you never know who getting on the bus, who getting off the bus and you got to be mindful.” (7-15-25)

“Yes, it impacts me. I have to be honest. It does. I get depressed sometimes to see my people, our brothers and sisters, in the state that they're in, then what I have to go through to get to my sanctuary, which is my house, that I have to feel this way, be on high alert. I feel depressed sometimes. I feel, I don't know, disoriented. I don't feel safe. It just really affects me. It's a gamut of things that happens to me while on my way, from just exiting the train, exiting the bus, coming back home.” (11-24-24)

Reliable/unreliable service is also embodied and impacts riders' experiences, even when the bus is early.

“It makes it very difficult to just plan the day, especially if you were supposed to be somewhere at an exact time that already just putting you in a pretty bad space to begin with and then because if you got there at a certain time and the bus was supposed to be there and then you see the next bus that's supposed to come and you start to wonder if that bus is actually going to show up at the time it's showing as well. So it builds a lot of anxiety towards your trip.” (11-20-24)

“Coming too early that's an inconvenience because what [name deleted] said is I planned my ride at a certain time. If I got to be out the house by 1:45, so the bus will get there by 1:50. If I'm coming down the street and it's 1:46 and then the bus is going past, I just missed my bus and I have to wait another 12 minutes for the next bus. So that's a big inconvenience if the buses are too early.” (11-20-24)

Considering riders' perspective of public transportation with consideration to their feelings of safety, cleanliness, other passengers, and aesthetics can provide more thorough analyses of what is working and what needs improvement when trying to increase usage and satisfaction with the system.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

*“Especially because Chicago has one of the better CTA systems, one of the better public transit systems, not just in the country, but in the world. You see just how many buses there are, how many trains there are, how everything's interconnected. And it really is convenient at times.” (7-17-25)*

Focus group participants voiced what we would consider as moderate to high level of satisfaction with public transportation in Chicago. They noted they could get to where they needed to go, they had more than one option of travel in some cases, and that even

when things were not the best in North Lawndale, they did experience and witness how transit could be better when visiting downtown and the North Side.

### **Improvements**

Participants were given the opportunity, at the end of the interview, to offer suggestions on how CTA could improve. The responses varied, while at the same time some of the major themes, such as safety and cleanliness, persisted. Better use of technology and communication were also stressed.

“To be honest with you, I think the CTA needs an ad campaign that promotes all the things that it can do for people. It can be super efficient if you don't want to deal with parking and congestion and possible tickets. You can get to pretty much any point in the city in a very reasonable amount of time at a very low cost. You've got these passes that you can go all over the city all day long for \$5. They really need to promote all the amenities that they actually bring to people.

They need to promote that and I think they need to promote the new safety measures and the things that they're doing to make it more comfortable and more secure for everybody. And if they put together like a promotional package, especially during the summertime when the festivals are going on, when Taste of Chicago is going on. The news comes on and say, "We're going to have fireworks 4th of July, you might want to take public transit." The CTA should be doing that saying, "Come out to the lake, use public transit." They should be promoting themselves and what they provide to the city as a whole. (7-17-25)

Improvements in how information is shared is of import:

“I've been on a bus, this was years ago where something happened and they had to reroute. I was completely lost because I was so used to just stick into my route. So then I need a way for you to be able to tell me, "Okay, here's how you can still get to your route." When I'm driving my car, my GPS, I make a wrong turn, she corrects me. We need that kind of fluid information when we're traveling, especially in the city, especially in the wintertime, so that we can make decisions and then adjust on the fly and that'll alleviate a lot of stress and a lot of tension for people when they're trying to figure out how to get where when things are happening so fast.” (7-17-25)

“They need to be more knowledgeable about the reroutes in construction. That's a big thing too. On my way to work I shouldn't almost be at work and then all of a sudden you turn in a different way then I have to walk two or three blocks out my way to get back to my post because you didn't know that it was going to be a reroute or you didn't let everybody know there was a reroute before I got on the bus. That's the big thing. (11-20-24)

Respondents want agencies to demonstrate care for passengers and how they move through transit spaces. This would include improving the material spaces so that rides are more comfortable, pleasant, and dignified:

“And I think that's what everyone just wants as a whole. And a lot of people go, "Ugh, CTA." Like, "Okay, the elevator is not working or the escalator is not working." We talk about that stuff more than actual improvements to the CTA and that shouldn't be what they want. It should be more like, "Hey, the train's a little bit faster." Or, "We had the detour and it was really quick." Or, "The bus is running more often." Instead of seeing an 18 bus every hour, now it's every 20 minutes at least. It's just slow improvement that show that, "Hey, we care, we're trying to make it better for everybody." And that's all what we really want in the end.” (7-17-25)

“I just would want them to know to remember they're still in business because we access their trains, their buses because it's a given right to us and it's something they put out here, but they need to have more of a... If it was me, if I was there, put themselves in our shoes or anyone. The safety is so important because it came across my mind. I was standing at Kostner the other day getting ready to go to the doctor and this young passenger just came and had his bike and he just put the bike over them, turnstile, he jumps it. So what happened to security? This is happening every day. So that's kind of something too. But back to the question is, I would want them to know that it's needed. **Public transportation is needed in this area. We need to be safe, we need to have a clean environment.**” (11-9-24)

Safety remained critical in responses related to improving the system:

“They can listen to residents to see what time it is and what they need to do and build some, like a report. What time of the day are you seeing this, open ears or eyes to see when something is happening. Add more police officers, which may not happen, not only on the platform. I've seen them on there for five minutes come away that the person in the booth and they leave. So what kind of protection is that? They signing a paper and they walking off. I think it should be more presence of officers actively, not just standing there but walking them the carts. Not just to be on one cart or just to be a presence at the platforms periodically through the day. Not just on Kostner, just throughout the entirety of the trains. Not just pink, green, blue because we won't have so much crime. It's sad that people are on the train and you see it three times on the news when someone's been assaulted even though it's cameras on there what, I just think it's that they need more security.” (11-9-24)

“My suggestion is, I've noticed the ticket agents, in my day, it was called ticket agent. I don't know what they called now, but they're in the booths and they're not paying attention or they're on phones or they're reading or they don't want to come out the booth because that's part of their job to assist outside the booth. They want to wait till the train is almost coming and come out and say what. I don't know how their training is and that should be a thing and more helpful. Not saying every... You have to build a rapport like, "Oh, she comes every day," or something... however it may be, they need to have more resourceful people that

they're paying that's sitting in their booth to assist the commuters. So that I do see is a major problem, major problem.

Sometimes they don't have information for you. Not saying that we all should know everything, but if you are in that position, you should be trained the right way. I don't know what their training is, but sometimes we can ask a question for a commuter, maybe they don't want to or they don't care to or they may not know. I don't know what the three options are, but it needs to be more of a resourceful person that's sitting in the booth that's being payroll by public transport, the transportation, is what I'm saying. More attentive because now we are all in a challenging time. You can't give a description of a person that just did these things if you are not paying attention because it's for our safety, you're the first person that's supposed to notice for our safety. So that's how I feel about that.” (11-9-24)

“And I believe that when they come to the table together to try to figure out what's next to do with our modes of transportation, they have to really think about the safety of the citizens and what's the best thing that they can do for the citizens who patronize these means of transportation. They should come without a bias-ness. It shouldn't be anything about race. It shouldn't be anything about age or all of that or any backgrounds. It should be, they come with unbiased-ness and then work together, to think about how they can move things forward that everybody is safe and that everybody would benefit from whatever they do.” (11-21-24)

“For me, overall, mainly safety. Making sure that everyone feels comfortable using your commutes, your trains, your buses. Cleanliness, too. Because, oh my gosh, it'd be so much on the... I don't know, I just feel like if the bus driver was to stop the bus and be like, "Oh my gosh you can't do drugs on this bus, or you can't," but blase skip, they're going to get beat up or something. That is so sad. I feel like they need security on every route.” (11-21-24)

“Because everybody doesn't have vehicles, so we do rely on this public transportation to get back and forth. The bad, again, is the cleanliness and the safety. A little wait isn't bad, but also maybe just up your game. Put a lot of people on routes, schedule people, give other people chances to get in there, and I don't know, equal something out. Because some of the rides do be a long time, and it do be risking your safety, as well as other people's safety. So yeah, just step your game up, CTA, government people, all that she's talking about.” (11-21-24)

Better lighting around all public transportation properties, although it may be costly, could go a long way in reducing this level of transit anxiety and would require collaboration between transit boards, municipalities, CDOT, and IDOT. At the same time, it could improve overall transit use measures. One rider noted how they spend part of their bus ride looking around before getting off at night, which means that the problem is also situated on the vehicles themselves through the passengers' perceptions and anxieties. This could impact overall satisfaction with the system because it is

happening while in transit and while exiting the bus or train station, thus impacting notions of safety and security as well.

Riders also seemed keenly aware of the stops/stations that are a problem and wanted to mention them in the improvements discourse. More than one participant mentioned that the Jackson and Pulaski stations are troublesome.

“But then when I get off at Jackson you could basically buy anything you want to buy when you get off the Jackson stop, from socks to towels to weed to drugs, to anything. It's like down in the Jackson, the red line tunnel, it's another world down there.” (7-14-25)

“Unfortunately for me right here at Kostner, so it's not a lot of activity. It's not a lot of... I don't see a lot of people hanging around, so it's just in and out for me there. But at Pulaski, it's a different story. I can get off at Pulaski, it's a lot of loitering because maybe that's the area and that environment, you kind of tense or some people may tense or just be again on the lookout, like looking over your shoulder. Far as cleanliness, I do see where I'm boarding at on carts and it's clean. Pulaski may be a little shaky in other places. That's the environment that I could see, quiet here. But Pulaski and forward, it's kind of busy. Even at Polk I've noticed there's a lot of, maybe because of homelessness, but anyway. Polk is kind getting a little busy too as I'm exiting to go to the doctor. So I do see that too.” (11-9-24)

#### *Technology improvements:*

Depending on how a rider is traveling, there are technology aids along the way such as numbers to text for bus arrivals, LED displays with train and bus arrival times, and the Ventra app. Respondents noted use of this technology, but also pointed out that when they are inaccurate, it can present additional problems for them. The inaccuracy can create feelings of anxiety and being unsafe, as noted earlier. Consequently, riders offered suggestions for improvement in this area as well.

“The Ventra app sucks. It doesn't do anything. Like what he was saying where I put in some of my favorite stops, I put in the 18 bus, I put in Central Park Pink Line stuff and I've made it a favorite, but it doesn't do anything. You don't get any push notifications, you don't get anything that's happening. (7-17-25)

“I think something that would enhance my experience would be maybe phone chargers or wireless charging stations around the city or at bus stops. Sometimes you're just out and you're having an emergency and you're pretty much just out of luck if there's no charger or if there's not anyone at the front desk who's available to help you. You find out very quickly how homeless you could look when asking for help. So sometimes a lot of people don't help you because of how you may look and something like that.

So I think the opportunity to have either more charging stations, as well as emergency contact poles. If you're riding on public transportation, I think we all

have the right to feel safe and to feel like we'll get a quicker police callout or response, and we won't have to wait around for it. Most times, if something is to happen on public transportation, your best option is to just get off and then just figure out another route to go home. But honestly, you're probably not waiting for the police to come because they may come too late.” (11-20-24)

“Yes, along with the charging stations, I think Wi-Fi access would be amazing on public transportation. Whether or not it's the train or the bus, just being able to have access to Wi-Fi, I think that'd be great too.” (11-20-24)

Technology isn't necessarily the only or best answer for improvements. One rider noted that needing to use one's phone can create another problem. “again that would introduce more theft. I got to pull my phone out to do the QR code, then that's going to let somebody know I got my phone. When I get on the train, I'm hiding. I'm just saying, not saying it may not be a good thing. I know that's what we heading to with the QR code, but I think that's what a lot of times where we all have dropped the ball, that everything has to be... What should I say?” (11-9-24)

At the time of the interviews, the Ventra app does not allow for users to toggle between using their phone to pay their fare or a physical card. It must be one or the other. One respondent noted that having to choose between the phone and a physical card is problematic. The limited choice means that if a rider's phone dies or is shut off, they cannot use their Ventra transit card as an alternative. This can unexpectedly place the rider in an unsafe position and unable to travel.

*Cleaning up the stations and vehicles can go a long way:*

The demarcation of class status is often attached to aesthetics and appearance. Public spaces and places, and thus public transportation properties and vehicles, are not immune to these same demarcations and considerations. Part of the embodied experiences on public transportation is shaped by sensory experiences such as what riders see and smell as they move through stations, depots, and transit vehicles. As noted earlier, respondents were bothered by dirty buses and unkempt 'L' stations and bus stops. This was reiterated in their suggestions for transit improvements:

“It would look like that, everything, even what [name deleted] said about cleaning, making sure it's clean. Because, straight out in the morning, some of the buses are not clean. You get on the bus early in the morning, it still got stuff all on. You just pulled out the barn. How is it nasty?” (11-21-24)

“That means that your crew is not cleaning well, you're not checking after them. So, that means you don't care where you're sending this bus to. Some of them pull out right there on our side of town. That means that they came straight from the barn to us. And it was like that. Care. Secure us. I think caring means that you care about the experience that's on your bus, you care about what happens to the people on your bus. And safety and cleanliness are number one and two, right?” (11-21-24)



“Not necessarily about the transportation part, because they're doing a good job for getting us there and getting us back to where we need to go. But like they was talking about how dirty the trains and things is, start passing out jobs. It's people who's coming home and getting out of, because me personally, I just come home, but people getting out of jails and coming home, get them the jobs to clean up them trains, and get them an opportunity to do that type of stuff.” (11-21-24)

### **Matters of Race**

*“I feel that buses and trains in my environment have too many delays vs. in a more white dominant area and services are having upgrades [that] are accurate” (10-17-24)*

Chicago is one of the most segregated cities in America. A history of redlining, racial covenants and block-busting have left an indelible mark on the city's neighborhood demographics and resources. This coupled with highway placements that developed through the bulldozing of Chicago's Black, Brown and immigrant neighborhoods has disconnected many of the city's residents from rich resource potentials (MPC ReConnecting Communities).

Race is not tangentially related to space but intertwined in ways that shape life outcomes and experiences along with health (Steil and Arcaya 2023; Williams, Lawrence, and Davis 2019). Where you live not only shapes how you live but life outcomes (“How Neighborhoods Shape Health and Opportunity”). Respondents want equity as part of the improvements. They don't want it just for themselves but city-wide as many note such as in this example: “I think just doing more improvements to show that okay, we're trying, we're putting money into the city, we're doing... We're trying to make your ride a little bit better. I think that's what everyone really wants is just for all the communities to feel like, “Oh hey, I'm commuting. I'm buying my 30 day, I'm buying my one day. They're trying to make my ride a little bit better.” (7-17-25)

### *Race and Place*

Respondents often commented on their experiences and perceptions of a difference between the West Side and the North Side. Although some respondents traveled south during various trips, they did not express that this was an area of abundant resources, better services, and cleaner trains or buses. Chicago's residential geography shows that the south and west sides have a largely racially minoritized population, with a few exceptions such as parts of Hyde Park and Kenwood, and that the North Side and down are overwhelmingly White or more racially diverse. That respondents perceive the North Side as the space with the abundance of transit care and services, we see that transit is then understood, at least in part, through a racialized lens that is also geographically situated. This is not a surprise as prior research supports the respondents' understanding and perceptions of transit disparities in Chicago, and other large cities (Brand, Lowe, and Hall 2020; Purifoye 2017, 2020).

### **How does this matter for CDOT and IDOT?**

*Inter-neighborhood travel* – Most respondents are traveling outside of North Lawndale. Some mentioned road conditions, especially during the winter. As we know, highways were built through Black neighborhoods not only disrupting their way of life but also disrupting networks and leaving residents to embody the dynamics of highways created this way. Further, these same communities tend to also have neglected roadways or their historical significance, such as Route 66 as part of North Lawndale, receive lackluster promotions compared to other areas of the city. One of the partners on this project, Ms. Rochelle Jackson, chair of NLCCC’s Transportation & Infrastructure committee, has noted this on numerous occasions and in related meetings. Black and Brown residents in these same disrupted communities also often experience the longest, as shown in this project’s quantitative analysis, most uncomfortable, and most undignified commutes on public transportation. These rides are accompanied by sites of neglected roads, fractured underpasses, and noise pollution from the highways that run through their communities. Further, these same areas experience disparate heat vulnerabilities, which intermingle with emissions and heat from older idling buses that are seen more in racially minoritized neighborhoods (“Risk-based Vulnerability Assessment” CMAP 2025). IDOT can help to assuage the impact of the historic racism that continually shapes these experiences. Prioritizing safe and beautiful roadways in neighborhoods like North Lawndale can help. Promoting the neighborhoods historic significance through investments in the roads and promotion of its Route 66 geography can also bring investment and revenues to the neighborhood. Noise pollution walls may also serve as not only an environmental investment but could promote the message that IDOT understands the embodied harms of “urban renewal” from I-290 and other congestive routes that impact North Lawndale (and neighboring Little Village).

One respondent also noted that there could be landscaping completed to help with transit experiences such as planting more trees:

“And then another thing too is, because we suffer from a lot of urban heating due to lack of certain trees by certain bus stops in the summertime, that's another thing. So just kind of looking at where our bus stops are, if they're around shaded areas where people, so people don't pass out or get strokes or anything like that. So, those would be some of my suggestions or ideas.” (10-11-24)

Respondents expressed concerns with the roads and disparity in maintenance and offered suggestions such as:

“Lighting and maintaining that, and even just being new to Chicago and understanding what the streets look like. And when I see the speed camera tickets, and when I see... Or what's another one? Well, the speed cameras and when you go through the red light. I'd like to know where that money is going and if it's not going anywhere significant, how it could be used to help some of these areas and support financially some of these areas that we're discussing today, because that's all about going back and forth on the road and impacts the public.” (11-20-24)

The goal of IDOT's purposeful and attentive investments should not be to spark or usher in gentrification but to be regenerative and to design infrastructure improvements that would also include public transportation and road and highway collaborative improvements.

### **A NOTE ON RACE AND POLICING**

Passengers often expressed concerns about safety and/or security. Although this was a repeated concern, we want to also note that we are not promoting a heavier surveilling and policing of racially minoritized passengers who have historically received this abundance of policing as alleged perpetrators and not protections as citizens. Equiticity, a partner in this project states the following:

Equiticity recognizes the heightened safety and security concerns Black people in North Lawndale have regarding transit. We also recognize these concerns often move Black people to feel compelled to own a car or use ride hailing as safer transportation alternatives. Equiticity does not support a traditional police enforcement strategy to improve transit safety. Instead, our racial equity movement supports a more comprehensive, community-centered, non-punitive, and layered approach to safety. A racially equitable approach to transit safety should deprecate police enforcement and elevate a range of safety strategies that center equity, dignity, reliability, visibility, socialization, and trust. These elevated strategies include a transit ambassador program, increased presence of transit agency staff, well-lit stops, frequent and reliable service that minimizes long waits, clean vehicles, functioning elevators, and mental health practitioners and other trained social services support. Community-based organizations and residents at the neighborhood level must co-own the work, in full partnership with transit agencies, to increase safety on transit in North Lawndale.

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**About the author:** Dr. Gwendolyn Purifoye is an assistant professor for racial justice and conflict transformation in the Keough School of Global Affairs at the University of Notre Dame.



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We are asking for your feedback on public transit as part of a collaboration between the University of Illinois Chicago, the University of Notre Dame, Equiticity and the North Lawndale Community Coordinating Council. The Illinois Department of Transportation is funding the project. Principal Investigator Dr. Kate Lowe [katelowe@uic.edu](mailto:katelowe@uic.edu); Co-Principal Investigator Dr. Gwendolyn Purifoye [gpurifoy@nd.edu](mailto:gpurifoy@nd.edu).

## APPENDIX B

### Focus group interview protocol.

Project: “Black Perspectives and Creating More Positive Public Transit Experiences in Chicago.”

#### **Public transit use questions.**

1. How many have used CTA, in totality, for at least 5 years?
2. How many of you are current CTA users, even if you only use it for a day or two a week?
3. How many only use the bus (CTA)?
  - a. How many only use the train (CTA)?
  - b. And how many use a combination of both?

#### **Typical transit experience.**

4. For your needs, do you find CTA/public transit convenient? If yes, how so? If no, why not?
5. Is safety something that you consider as part of your public transportation experience? If yes – can you explain why and how you go about this? If no - why not?

#### **Public transit and time.**

6. Where are you normally traveling to when you use public transportation (work, school, store, appointments, church, leisure/entertainment etc.)?
  - a. Is the commute intra-neighborhood or inter-neighborhood?
  - b. How long is your average trip/commute?
  - c. What destination takes you the longest to reach?
7. What factors into the time and the length of your trip (weather, late buses, crowdedness, etc.)?

#### **Public transit parity and disparity.**



8. Do you think public transportation in Chicago is equitable (where no matter where you live, the quality of the service is fair)?
  - a. Explain your answer
9. What would make you more likely to ride the CTA or ride it more often?
10. What are your thoughts about the environment surrounding where you wait, board, and exit buses/trains?
11. Here we would like you to tell us what you want the City, CTA, and CDOT to know about your experiences moving around the city (by car, train, bus, bike, scooter, or walking) and how you see these agencies working together and impacting your transit experiences.