

Issue Brief: North Lawndale Outreach Results

Research demonstrates quantitatively (Ermagun & Tilahun, 2020) and qualitatively that (Lowe et al, 2023; Purifoye 2020), Black Chicagoans have worse public transportation access to jobs, parks, grocery shops, and other essential services than White residents. Accessibility to these destinations, of course, is a function both of transit systems and the spatial distribution of such destinations, which is racially and spatially inequitable. To promote fairness, both with time and mobility, we must change transportation decisions since “race-neutral planning processes exacerbate disparities” (Barajas, 2021, p. 2). Black residents and their institutions and community groups are essential to providing more equitable transit. Furthermore, Black neighborhoods have exhibited considerably greater persistent transit use during COVID transit ridership decreases (Liu, Miller, and Scheff 2020). While ridership on the Chicago Transit Authority is diverse and no group accounts for the majority, Black riders account for a sizable share of ridership (CTA, 2025).

Black transit riders and potential riders may be understood through transit usage analysis, but that is just one approach. This project centers solutions around Black public transit riders and potential riders' patterns and priorities, which can help stakeholders build knowledge about and solutions for improving public transit experiences and utilization by Black Chicago residents. As part of a larger mixed-methods project that includes quantitative analysis of Chicago data and community focus groups, this issue brief summarizes broad-based outreach in the North Lawndale neighborhood of Chicago.

Methods & Research Experience

We conducted outreach to capture a wider set of perspectives than our focus groups. We were able to conduct outreach in person 34 times, including 14 events, visiting local businesses eight times, and doing transit outreach 12 times. We conducted outreach initially without a participation incentive from June 8, 2024, to November 24, 2024. With limited responses, the project purchased \$10 Walmart gift cards. Cards were distributed with surveys from December 6, 2024, to June 25, 2025, when outreach was complete. All outreach resulted in 144 survey responses to the five open-ended questions below, as well as 29 uploaded images related to questions 2 and 3:

1. Do you ride the bus or train in North Lawndale? Or do you want to?
2. What is the best part of riding the bus or train in North Lawndale?
3. What is the worst part of riding the bus or train in North Lawndale?
4. What is the most important change you want to see to bus and train service in North Lawndale?
5. Do you live in North Lawndale?

The outreach process for the research project utilized various methods over 13 months. Engagement efforts were initially directed towards community events in the summer of 2024, with the team doing outreach at high-traffic locations, including train stop entrances, local community events, and popular gathering spaces. The survey was only accessed online; either participants would input results or researchers filled out the survey with participants' responses. Laptops and printed handouts were supplied for immediate survey completion, while flyers, candy, and other welcoming elements were employed to enhance visibility and approachability.

In the Fall of 2024, outreach efforts transitioned to focus on transit-based engagement. The team distributed flyers at bus stops, utility poles, and train stations along significant corridors, including W. 16th Street, S. Kilbourn Avenue, S. Kostner Avenue, and Cermak Road. Efforts included traversing the Pink Line between Kedzie and Kostner stations, as well as utilizing the 157 Ogden/Streeterville bus route. Low ridership and limited participant interest rendered this approach less effective. Community members who decided not to complete the survey cited a variety of reasons to not participate, including skepticism and concerns about scams, which were brought up. The concern that the outreach was a scam was an issue when we approached members of the community outside bus stops and on the train. The distrust continued even after we provided Walmart gift cards as incentives.

Collaborations in March of 2025 with local community leaders affiliated with literacy and violence prevention organizations markedly improved engagement. Intermediaries enhanced introductions, bolstered credibility, and offered access to further outreach opportunities. The team received invitations to participate in several community events, including church gatherings, organizational meetings, barbecues, and festivals. The collaborative efforts resulted in numerous survey responses. The following summarizes results by question, with responses to each question grouped by inductively defined codes/themes.

Findings

What is the best part of riding the bus or train in North Lawndale?

The North Lawndale community has multiple connecting bus routes available and train stops along the Pink Line. Below we highlight four of the most common themes centered in participant responses: a) convenience and access; b) route and service proximity; c) riding experiences; d) commuting interactions.

Convenience and Access

The rider's experience is determined by how convenient CTA is in the North Lawndale community. Some of the riders discussed how it helped them get in and out of the neighborhood, but they hoped that the accessibility to transit would not diminish over time. Riders were most excited about the convenience: "It is very convenient to go to places," with routes to downtown, local medical facilities, green spaces, and grocery stores in nearby communities. In North Lawndale, which has higher percentages of low-income residents, affordable CTA service plays a vital role in advancing equity by making reliable transportation accessible to all. "Going home in peace," riders shared how they enjoyed moving around Chicago in peace and having less stressful trips than in Chicago traffic allows them to travel without having to worry about parking or accessing what is available just off the stop. "The best part of riding the buses/trains is that whenever in a hurry, I know that I can rely on the CTA to get me to where I need to go and how to get there safe and sound without having any issues and enjoying certain scenery," another rider shared. Transit opens opportunities for North Lawndale in every direction, making consistent CTA service an essential part of the community's ability to thrive, move, and enjoy equitable citizenship. Centering the rider's experience is key to maintaining this access, as will be discussed in the following section.

Route and Service Proximity

It is not enough to just have bus and train service in a community, but residents' ability to quickly reach stops and stations should also be considered. The routes in North Lawndale have incorporated multiple bus stops and train stations. One rider shared that, "there are several different routes," which can reach various parts of North Lawndale and connect them to the neighboring communities. "The accessibility. There is a Pink line and a Green line are so close! Also, there are long blocks but enough bus stops where I do not have to walk too far," a rider shared. The accessibility to the Blue Line nearby also enhances access.

Furthermore, a rider shared, “adding new bus stops will make it the quickest way to get around.” The ability to quickly travel frequent buses can help riders significantly. According to the survey results, the journey from point A to point B shows that taking the train is easy. Also of note is that bus rides take too long, so walking several blocks to reach a bus stop or after exiting adds to a rider’s commuting time. When train stations and bus stops are far to reach for riders, it can not only mean a more exhausting trip (especially in inclement weather) but if the buses are infrequent too, the rider will have a long walk and a long wait. The relationship between the routes and their frequency will be discussed in a later section.

Riding experience

Riders’ experience on the CTA is influenced by factors such as interactions with the bus driver and a rider’s level of comfort using the service. Many riders use the CTA for its efficiency in how quickly it can move through the communities,” making it to your destination on time,” a rider shared. The access to other transit options, combined with its proximity to downtown compared to other Black community areas, sets North Lawndale apart. The community enjoys having views of the skyline while commuting to work. This also allows them to see different parts of the city. Multiple community members described how “I believe the best part is seeing the skyline,” or that they enjoy going sightseeing or to the beach, as well as participating in downtown events, like those for Saint Patrick’s Day. A rider share “the best part of riding the CTA is listening to your music and vibing”, creating a less stressful and more peaceful experience moving throughout the city. Also, the ability to observe the neighborhood, its changes, activity, and daily life, creates small but meaningful moments of joy that can significantly enhance the rider experience, because it connects them to their community. In addition, there were some comments like “nothing is the best part,” “nothing,” and “no best part.” This will be explained later in the following questions. These findings highlight that trips are not just about reaching one’s destination, but that what they see along the way is also part of the experience. Thus, riders are not just seeing North Lawndale but also experiencing a particular type of connection to the city itself.

Community Interactions

Multiple community members discussed how they enjoy interacting with fellow community members while riding the CTA. A local rider shared that the ability for “seeing and meeting new people,” and learning who else is in their community on their route is something that they value. Respondents highlighted the diversity of riders on the bus, including older adults and families with children. They underscored the need for community spaces where all residents can move about freely and safely. These community interactions are connected to the ‘Relevance to the Rider’ section and highlight how the route’s design benefits North Lawndale residents, who recognize and

value this connection. However, some reported that individuals who hop on the bus can create a disruptive environment due to being unhoused or facing mental health issues. These disruptions can affect interactions on the CTA negatively. A rider shared that they have to, “convince our elderly and people with children,” to ride the CTA sometimes, due to those interactions. The interaction disrupts connecting with the community, because they have to consider if its convenience is worth the disruptive environment mostly for vulnerable community members.

Other Responses

Multiple community members discussed how they had family members and friends who also used to ride the CTA and/or had worked for the CTA. They discussed how times are changing. The CTA was once a safe experience and a good place to work but is no longer a part of the current experience. They discussed how the transit routes are a necessity, a rider shared, “I lived here for my 20s in a great neighborhood. My dad retired from CTA.” Both the reliability of service and riders’ experiences of safety have influenced how community members rely on the CTA and how they discuss usage.

What is the worst part of riding the bus or train in North Lawndale?

Across survey responses, four themes emerged from the participants when asked about the worst part of riding the bus or train in North Lawndale: a) safety; b) cleanliness; c) timeliness; and d) a range of negative personal experiences. Of the four themes safety and personal experiences were standouts. Safety themes were also mentioned in responses to other survey questions.

Safety

The first mention of safety came from a youth organizer who explained why some young people in the neighborhood avoid taking the bus or train. This interaction became the first signal to look back as a reference for reasoning and understanding when reviewing the survey responses around safety. Formally and informally, the fear of being harmed while using the bus or train appeared in many respondents' feedback. One respondent stated "The possibility of violence" as the worst part about riding transit.

The unfortunate pattern of riders' continuous sense of danger on transit encompassed many perspectives among the respondents. Some respondents mentioned witnessing altercations on transit. Others expressed their anxieties about waiting at specific stops, specifically at night. "Sometimes I don't feel safe at night" was a repeated sentiment. One respondent explicitly expressed it as, "The danger as a Black female riding alone," in response to the prompt about the worst part of riding transit.

Survey respondents' responses showed a clear emotional toll on the experience of riding transit. A couple of respondents brought up examples of drug users and passengers who demonstrated erratic behavior when taking the bus. While erratic behavior is not always an indicator of violence, the perceived threat of passengers who are under the influence of substances or visibly unstable left passengers feeling uneasy.

Cleanliness and comfort

The level of cleanliness of all aspects of the bus and train was a point of frustration for respondents. Mentions of unpleasant smells, trash, and overall dirty buses were common comments and how transit "is always dirty" as one respondent described their experience was not uncommon. Respondents expressed qualms regarding riders who are unhoused or under the influence, contributing to unclean conditions on transit with a respondent who simply put, "People dirty up the bus". Passengers who use transit sometimes leave trash behind without cleaning up. And so, a consideration of how safety and discomfort from the lack of clean transit are often concurrent which warrants further examination.

In certain instances, the unclean bus or train was not the only problem. Respondents made comments such as, “Dirty buses and terminals” acknowledging the level of neglect and cleanliness regarding the infrastructure from the perspective of the riders. Other comments mentioned the lack of bus shelters and bus shelters with broken heating elements, no place to sit or other deferred maintenance issues. Common sentiments that conditions could be improved if the transit system did more to maintain the infrastructure was mentioned just as much as lack of cleanliness.

Timeliness

The unreliable scheduling of transit was commonly mentioned as the worst part about riding the bus or train. One survey respondent highlighted their frustration with the unpredictability: “Sometimes its inconsistent. It doesn't match the time. The bus is more inconsistent”. Some reported frequency is limited to what seemed to be once an hour or not at all, adding to the lack of reliability for riders who are using transit to travel.

Respondents mentioned a lack of consistent times and crowded buses multiple times, “The worst part is the wait times.” Respondents mentioned how the bus does not match the scheduled time, resulting in them having to wait longer than anticipated. One person shared their frustration about how during mid-route on the bus the drivers change shifts, adding more time to their trip.

The issue of timeliness was not just an inconvenience but an added uneasiness for some respondents. A worry of potential danger for some riders exhausted, risking their safety remaining stationary for long periods of time for their bus or train, added to an existing anxiety. “They don't come soon enough” as one respondent put it leading to a heightened feeling of uneasiness waiting for the train or bus.

Other Negative Experiences

There were many comments that did not fall specifically into the created theme but did speak to the overall emotional and social dynamics of transit experiences. Respondents mentioned disrespect from other passengers and even from the CTA operators, and others explained encounters with rude people. Some noted how drivers ignored and failed to wait for bus riders. A respondent explained, “There's no respect. And that includes the conductors on the bus and train”. Another respondent mentioned “the bus drivers are rude. Not all of them but some of them,” sharing a common occurrence for riders with drivers dismissing them.

Comments were also made about the transit infrastructure, including inadequate bus shelters, and the lack of seating and inaccessibility for elderly groups. Also, the

overcrowding on the bus made it difficult to maintain personal space, and it was difficult to sit near riders who were under the influence of substances.

However, some respondents mentioned the worst part about taking the bus or train was “Seeing homeless people that are in need” on transit. While the presence of the unhoused made some feel unsafe and uneasy, some respondents expressed compassion for those who were also using transit.

What is the most important change you want to see to bus and train service in North Lawndale?

Regarding the last question in our survey, five central themes were identified when asked what could be the most important changes to public transit that they would like to see: a) timing and reliability; b) enhancing safety; c) expanding routes and service hours, d) cleanliness; and e) the overall experience of riders. While respondents had overlapping comments regarding the themes that were identified, the overarching feeling was frustration and a desire for a better system.

Timing and Reliability

A frequent comment about desired changes was improving the timing and reliability of buses and trains. Many respondents described long gaps between buses, which made travel difficult and unpredictable, compounded with safety concerns. One respondent made it clear, “I want to see more accurate schedules for both transportation and safety measures for passengers”. The lack of reliability causes discouragement when trying to plan for day-to-day travel.

Respondents highlighted a need for a higher frequency of buses, an accurate schedule that matches arrival times, with one respondent specifically noting, “Buses being available on Saturdays and Sundays on certain routes, mainly #157”. A desire for faster overall service with, “More accurate timing,” fewer delays and shorter trip times was mentioned throughout. Respondents envision buses that come every 10 minutes to create a better transit system.¹

Safety and Security

Safety was a consistent theme throughout the respondents’ answers in all questions asked, including responses to the most important change to see. Some comments mentioned specific safety regarding how bus operators need to drive more safely, while others spoke more generally about improvements in feeling safer alone or at night.

Some respondents mentioned adding security with police. Others suggested trained security as a better fit rather than an increase in police, with one respondent explaining “Maybe trained security for an extra layer of protection.” Violence prevention strategies and not just police presence can make people feel safer with alternative safety measures.

¹ Much of the outreach was before the CTA’s high frequency bus network announcements. Route 82 Kimball/Homan serves North Lawndale and is part of the network as of Fall 2025.

Route Expansion and Service Hours

Another area of concern is coverage and accessibility of existing bus routes. Many respondents want more buses and better connections to important destinations for them to get to, “More of them that goes to the hospitals.” The #157 bus route was specifically mentioned as needing extended hours with weekend service to serve respondents working late shifts. A respondent noted, “I wish they ran longer into the night for people that work later in the evening”, indicating the need for some riders for third shift work.

The change respondents wanted was direct routes to make transit more convenient, and others mentioned increasing overall network improvement to increase their independent mobility across the city with a respondent highlighting “Right now it is valuable for me to move around”.

Cleanliness

Cleanliness remained a recurring point in what could be improved. Riders want cleaner buses, stations, and stops with regular maintenance: “Cleaner, less congested” according to one respondent. With cleanliness, a respondent made the connection to safety, saying, “Cleanliness. It sets the stage for security,” implying that a cleaner environment would create a system that is safer for riders. Other respondents simply wanted a regular cleaning of transit, “I want to see a clean up; it isn’t clean”, referring to both inside and outside buses and trains.

Other Priorities

The other changes suggested included comfort and accessibility of infrastructure. Warmer waiting areas during winter, more seating, upgraded buses with more space, accessibility, access for riders with disabilities, and easier navigation of crowded spaces for the disabled were all broadly noted. Suggestions of lower fees for transit were also mentioned. Better coordination among transit staff and riders were suggestions, with a respondent explaining, “More workers on the bus and train working together. More help on the train and better cooperation”. A couple of respondents had concerns and a desire to address homelessness on transit by providing potential resources. Riders expressed many changes that could improve the experience of transit with one respondent emphasizing “Care for your riders”, a reminder that the transit system needs to value the people using it.

Conclusion

The responses from the surveys gathered in North Lawndale point out the reality of transit for residents. Experiences and concerns with safety, timing, and reliability were

repeated challenges for daily riders. Alongside community well-being, transit riders expressed frustration of long delays and under maintained conditions of transit and stops. These accounts reinforce existing research on Black communities that face significant disparities and disinvestment. While comments mentioned problems and issues, there were also ideas for improvement. More frequent and reliable service, expanded routes and hours, and infrastructure to set the stage for a maintained, clean environment were common priorities.

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Acknowledgements

This policy brief is part of a collaborative project with principal investigator Lowe (University of Illinois Chicago) and co-principal investigator Dr. Gwendolyn Purifoye (University of Notre Dame). North Lawndale Community Coordinating Council Transportation Committee Chair, Rochelle Jackson, the Center for Neighborhood Technology and Equiticity are project partners. The Illinois Department of Transportation is the primary funder of the overall project, and funds from the UIC Institute for Research on Race and Public Policy funded participant gift cards. Brianna Makumbi and Zach Grand collected the data and wrote this brief. Pamela Morehead and Dwayne Morehead were active community partners/mediators representing Openbooks and UCAN.

December 2025