

Americans in Transit

A Profile of Public Transit Passengers

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Summary

During the past two decades, public transit has experienced a marked revitalization as shown by the ridership trend in Figure 1.

In 1990 alone Americans took 8.8 billion transit trips and, on any average weekday, over 7.5 million people will ride on public transit vehicles.

This report explores the socio-economic characteristics of the transit-riding population; it describes the gender, age, race, ethnicity, income and trip purpose of the average public transit rider and searches for future trends. Briefly, the findings are:

- The majority of riders are female;
- 30.8 percent are black;
- 17.9 percent are Hispanic;
- 6.9 percent are senior citizens;
- 10.3 percent are age 18 or under;
- 1.2 percent are people with disabilities (this increases to 2.5 percent excluding New York City);
- 27.5 percent have annual family incomes below \$15,000 (38.2 percent excluding New York City);

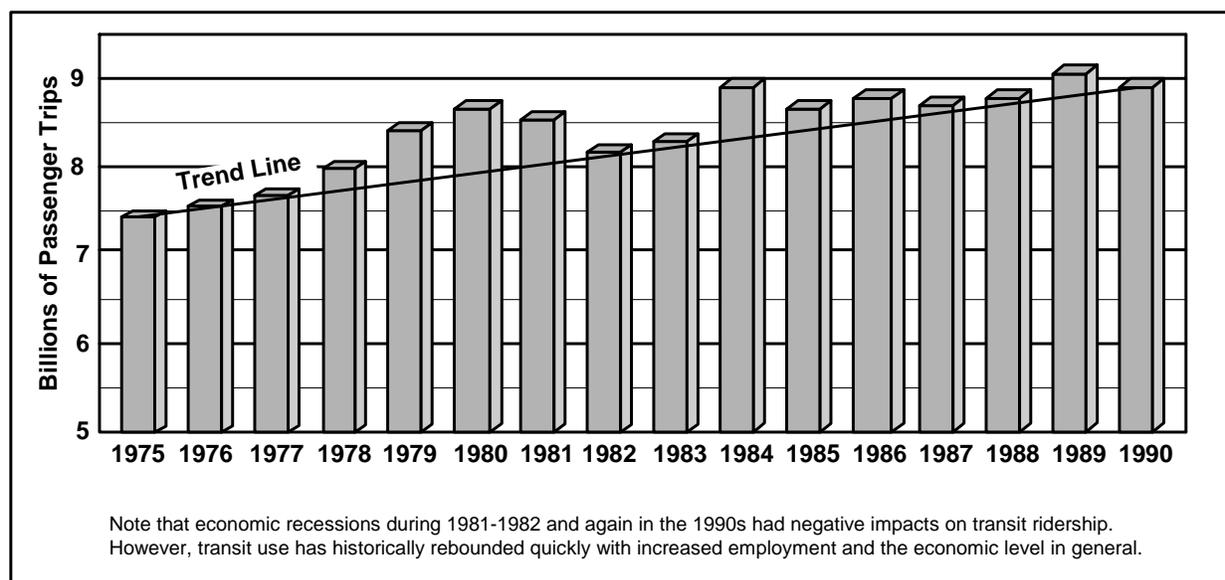
- work trips comprise 54.4 percent of all transit trips while medical and school trips comprise 5.5 and 14.6 percent respectively, and;
- over 16 million work trips are taken by transit passengers on an average weekday.

However, there are wide variations within this description. Specifically, small communities have much different transit use patterns than do large cities.

The national transit ridership profile, compared with current and projected Census information, imparts three major conclusions:

1. **Public transit disproportionately serves low income workers and minorities.**
2. **Transit performs a critical economic function in the journey-to-work.**
3. **The trend of increasing public transportation usage is expected to continue well into the 21st century.**

Figure 1. Total Transit Ridership, 1975-1990



Background

The ridership profiles in this report were collected from a survey of 136 U.S. transit systems in May, 1992. These systems ranged from New York's Metropolitan Transit Authority, which serves almost 27 percent of the U.S. transit market, to the Kings Area Rural Transit, which provides about 600 passenger trips daily in remote Hanford, California. This large and extremely diverse sample accounts for nearly 60 percent of the total U.S. public transit ridership. The national means were calculated with a weighted average formula and the transit systems' average weekday ridership is used as the weight for each observation. Thus, the national statistics are strongly influenced by the responses of the larger systems which carry the majority of riders.

In order to understand the ridership profile of transit systems serving less populous areas, the analysis includes survey responses grouped according to the population of the system's urbanized area or urban place.¹ This permits analysis and comparison of transit use patterns by community size. Again, the population group

means were calculated with the weighted average formula.²

Gender of Transit Riders

The U.S. Bureau of the Census reports that 48.8 percent of the U.S. population is male and 51.2 percent is female.³ Likewise, the national transit statistics reveal that 48.1 percent of all passengers are male and 51.9 percent are female. In smaller cities and towns, however, a distinct majority of riders are female. Figure 2 gives a breakdown of ridership by gender according to population group. It shows that about 60 percent of transit riders are female, in places below one million population. In fact, many rural transit systems report that over 75 percent of their riders are female.

Age of Transit Riders

The American population has been gradually aging from a median of 28.0 years in 1970 to 33.1 years in 1991.⁴ Furthermore, the number of persons age 65 and over is projected to increase 9.9 percent⁵ to 34.9

¹An urbanized area or UZA is a U.S. Bureau of the Census-designated area consisting of a central city of 50,000 inhabitants or more, or two adjacent cities constituting for general social and economic purposes a single community with a population of at least 50,000, plus surrounding closely settled territory, but excluding the rural portion of cities. An urban place is a U.S. Bureau of the Census-designated area consisting of incorporated political units or closely settled unincorporated areas outside an urbanized area.

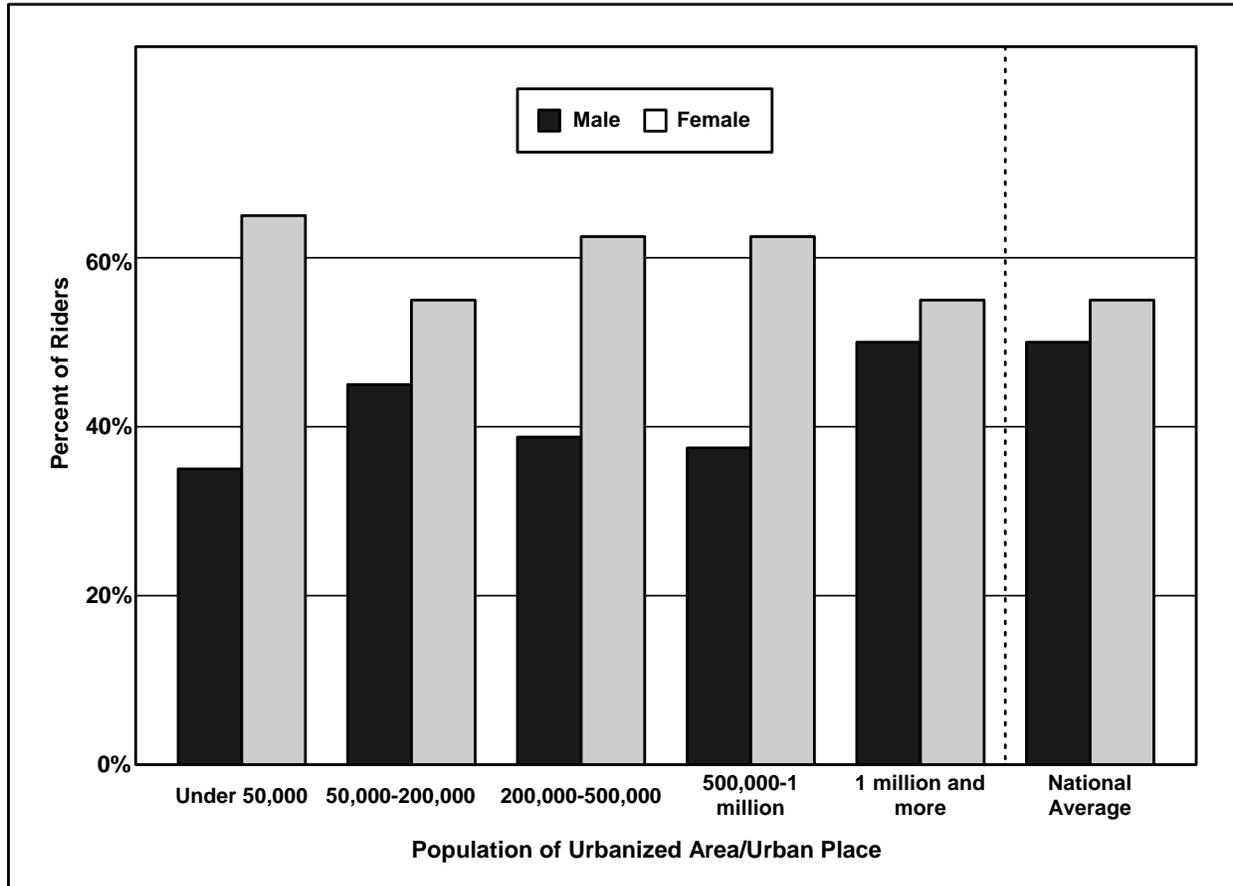
² A detailed explanation of the survey methodology and the statistical procedures is available from the American Public Transit Association, Research and Statistics Division.

³U.S. Bureau of the Census, Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1992, 112th ed., (Washington, DC: 1992), Table No.13, p.15.

⁴Ibid., Table No.12, p.14.

⁵U.S. Bureau of the Census, Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1991, Table No.18, p.16.

Figure 2. Gender of Riders by Population Group



million people by year 2000. This population phenomenon has been referred to as the "graying of America" and it will strain all services for the elderly, including public transit.

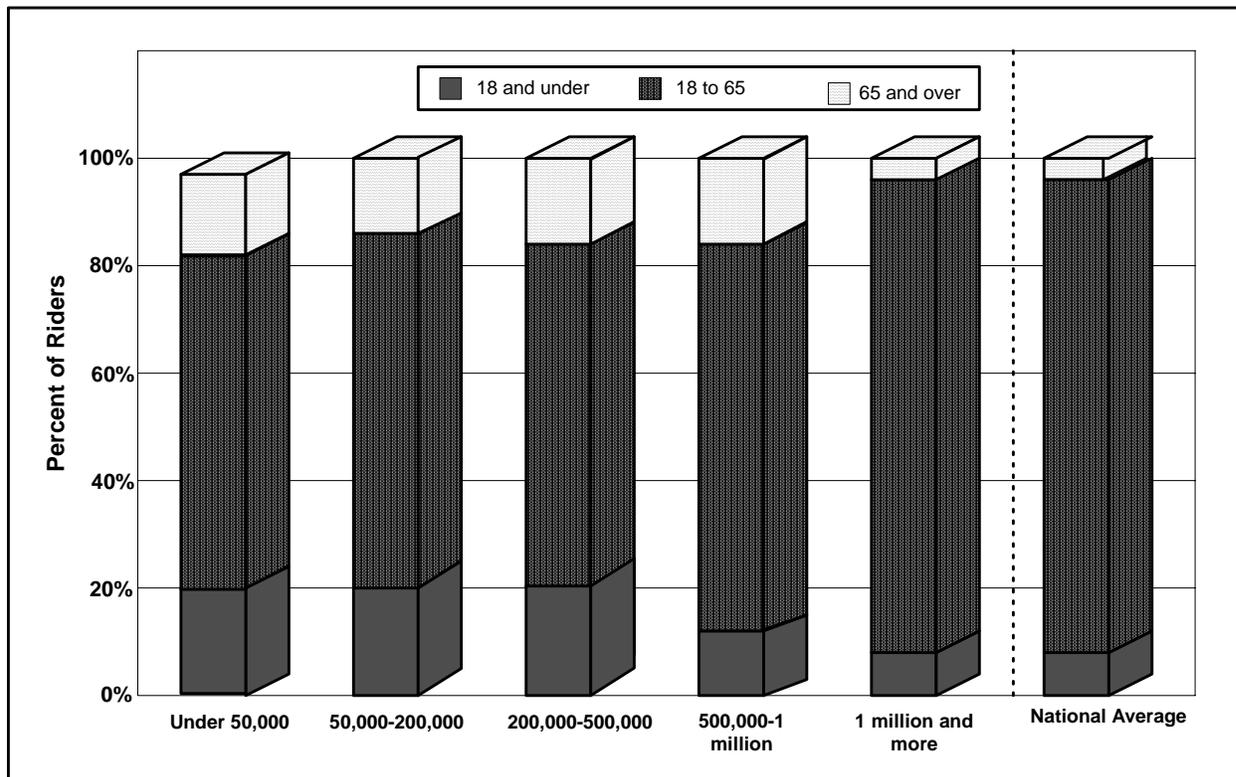
In Figure 3 one can see that at the national level almost seven percent of all transit riders are senior citizens. As with the comparison by gender, small cities and rural areas have a greater percentage of elderly riders. In communities of less than 50,000 population, 18 percent of passengers are 65 years old or older. This high rate of usage by senior citizens implies that transit performs an indispensable service for their medical, shopping, recreational and other non-work travel needs; it is not uncommon to

find that many seniors in rural areas rely exclusively on public transit for transportation.

Ridership by Ethnicity /Race

Ethnic and racial minorities are another large and important segment of the U.S. transit market. In places with population of 1 million or more, 48.7 percent of riders are black or Hispanic. In contrast, transit systems operating in areas below 50,000 population report that only 6.2 percent of riders are black and 9 percent are Hispanic. Nationally, 45.1 percent of riders are white, 30.8 percent are black, 17.9 percent are Hispanic and 6.2 percent are other. Clearly, minorities are transit users, disproportionate to

Figure 3. Age of Riders by Population Group



their population million shares.

A graph of the ethnic/racial composition of riders by population group (Figure 4) demonstrates that blacks, Hispanics and other minorities make up a larger percent- age of transit riders in the more populous areas. The proportion of white riders drops from 82 percent in places under 50,000 to 47.6 percent in UZAs from 200,000-500,000 population to only 44.7 percent in UZAs of 1 million or more population. What is also interesting is

that many systems serving small UZAs and rural places report a relatively high percentage of Hispanics.

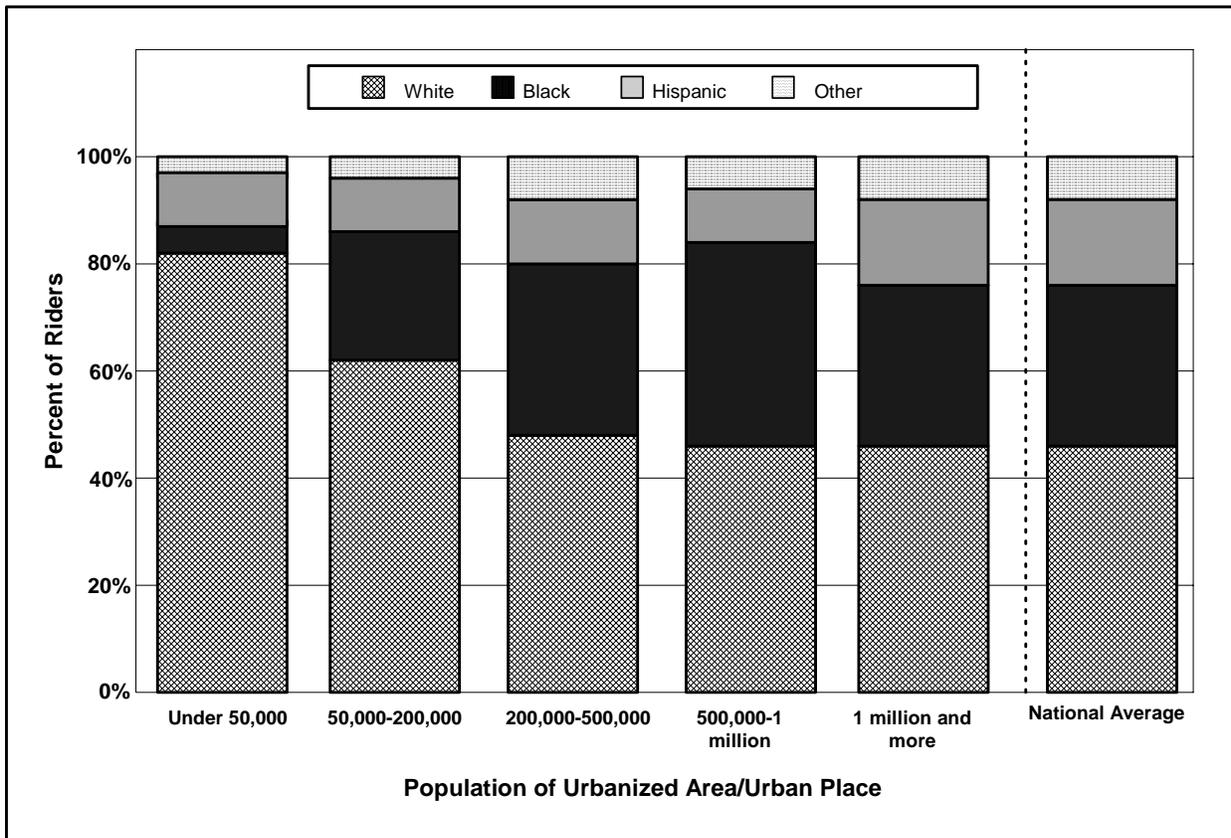
The U.S. Bureau of the Census projects the non-white population to expand to 17.4 percent of the total U.S. population by year 2000.⁶ Similarly, the Hispanic population, which has the highest birthrate,⁷ is expected to increase to 9.4 percent of the U.S. total by year 2000.⁸ Again, these Census projections give strong evidence of increased future demand for public

⁶Ibid., Table No.16, p.15.

⁷U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1992*, Table No.92, p.70.

⁸U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1991*, Table No. 15, p. 14.

Figure 4. Ethnicity and Race of Riders by Population Group



demand for public transit services.

Riders with Disabilities

The Americans with Disabilities Act makes it illegal to discriminate against anyone who has a physical or mental disability in the areas of employment, public services, public accommodations and telecommunications. Regarding transit, the ADA is a very important and far-reaching law because it is expected to dramatically increase the number of persons with disabilities who have access to public transportation.

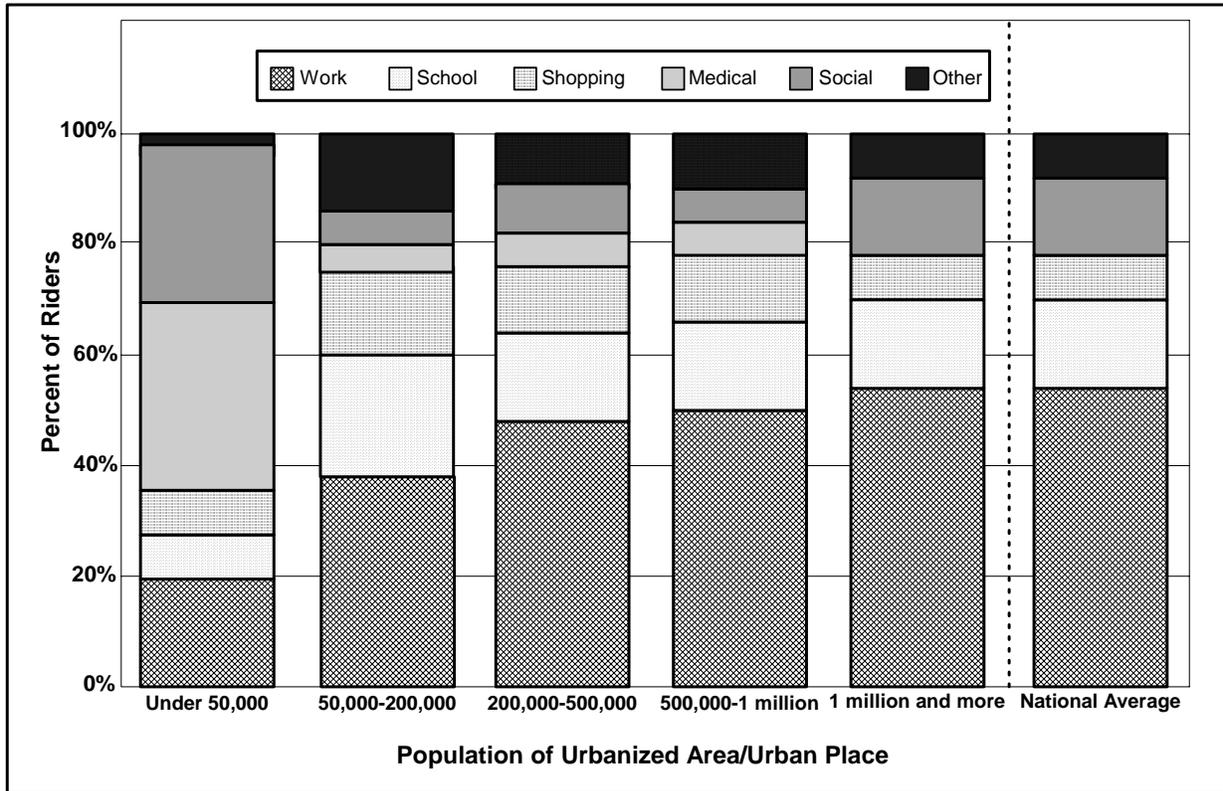
At the national level, 1.2 percent of all transit riders have disabilities. However, if one excludes the New York City Transit Authority,

the national average jumps to 2.5 percent. Table 1 shows that the percentage of riders with disabilities increases rapidly as community size decreases; it is not uncommon for 10 to 15 percent of riders in smaller places to have disabilities. As with the elderly, many people

Table 1. Riders with Disabilities

Population of Urbanized Area/Urban Place	Percent with Disabilities
National Average	1.2%
1 million and more	1.1%
500,000-1 million	1.4%
200,000-500,000	2.5%
50,000-200,000	6.0%
Under 50,000	5.2%

Figure 5. Purpose of Transit Trips by Population Group

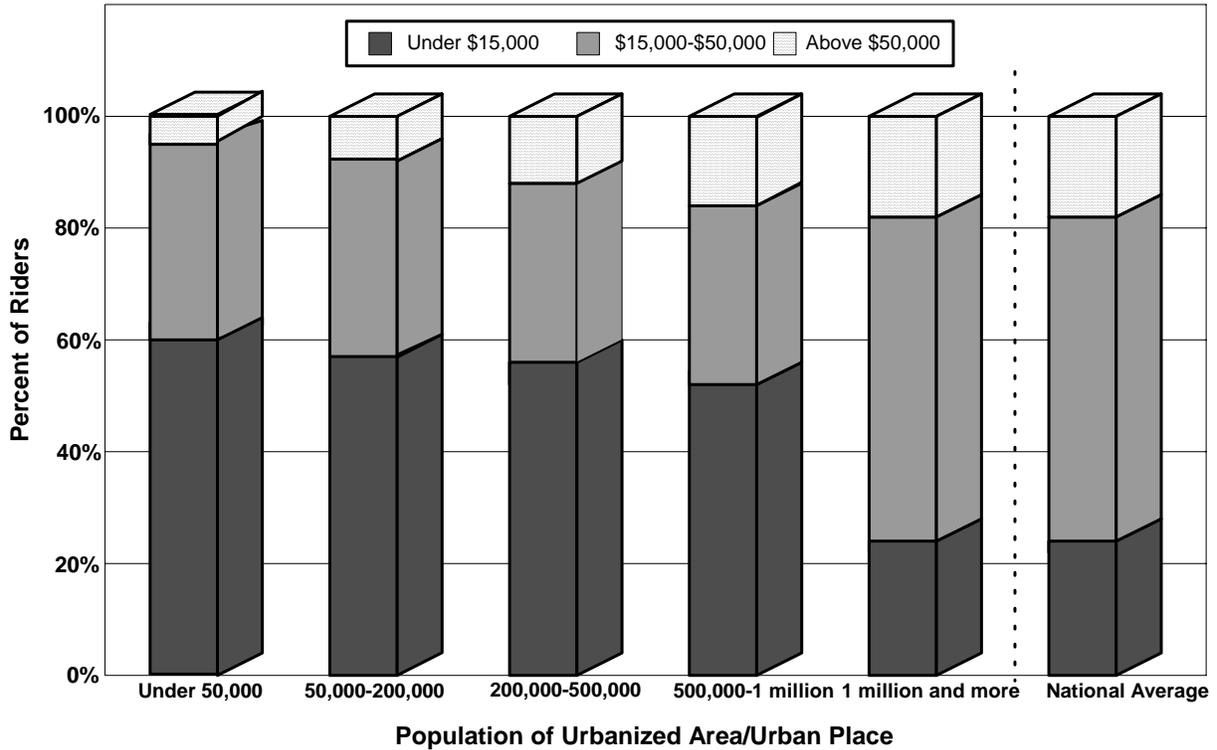


not uncommon for 10 to 15 percent of riders in smaller places to have disabilities. As with the elderly, many people with disabilities rely entirely on public transit for basic transportation.

Trip Purpose

Across America more than half of all transit trips are made to and from work. Another 14.6 percent are for school purposes and the remainder are trips taken for a variety of shopping, medical, social and recreational purposes. The variations in trip purpose are significant, however, when one looks at the transit use patterns in communities of different size.

Figure 5 presents a breakdown of transit trips by population group according to trip purpose. In areas of less than 50,000 population, 60.5 percent of trips are taken for medical and social/recreational purposes, while 20.5 percent of transit trips are for work. On the other hand, in areas of 1 million or more only 14.7 percent are medical and social/recreational trips, while almost 55 percent are work trips. The implications are unambiguous. The importance of transit in populous areas of the country, where 70 percent of total transit use supports business and educational activities, is predominantly economic. In smaller areas, the significance of transit may be most profound in a social rather than economic sense. In any case, both purposes

Figure 6. Annual Family Income of Transit Riders by Population Group

served in virtually every area where public transit service is provided.

Income Characteristics

Regarding the national ridership statistics, the income data in Figure 6 show that 27.5 percent of transit riders have an annual family income below \$15,000. If one excludes the New York City Transit Authority, then the percentage increases dramatically to 38 percent. This is nearly three times the 14.2 percent of Americans below the Census Bureau's poverty level of

\$13,924 for a family of four.⁹

Transportation economists believe that income and public transit use are inversely related, so that transit demand increases as income decreases. Accordingly, increasing poverty will result in an increase in transit use. The Census Bureau reports that in 1991 the number of Americans below the poverty line increased to 35.7 million -- the highest number since 1964.¹⁰ Furthermore, many economists believe that the U.S. economy is moving from an industrial orientation to a service sector orientation, where

⁹U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Poverty in the United States: 1991*, (Washington: 1991), P-60, No. 181. 11-16

¹⁰Ibid.

wages are generally lower. Thus, given the low income profile of transit users, increasing transit demand is highly likely.

The breakdown by population group is even more interesting. In places below 1 million population, more than half of transit passengers report family incomes below \$15,000 per year. Furthermore, in areas below 50,000 population, over 61 percent of transit riders have annual family incomes below \$15,000. Figure 6 also shows that there are high income passengers in every population group. Commuter rail service exhibits an especially large ratio of high income riders. **Nevertheless, it is the economically disadvantaged -- often without alternative means of travel -- who constitute the largest share of total public transit ridership.**

The National Ridership Profile and the General Population

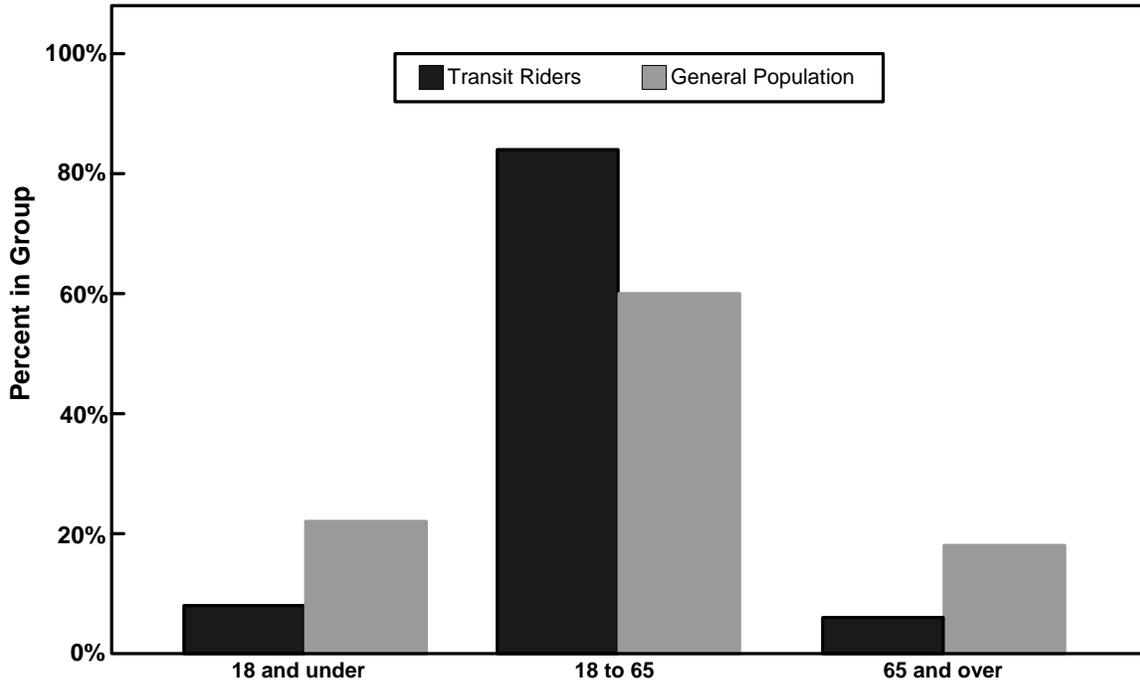
The 1990 census provides a wealth of information on U.S. demographics. It is

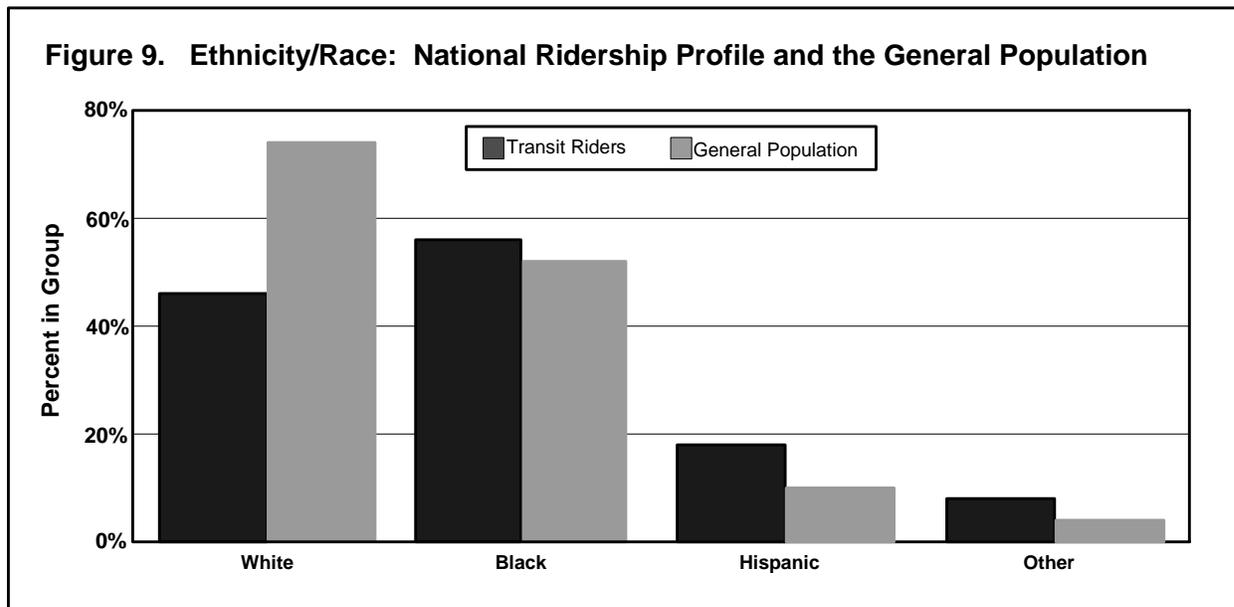
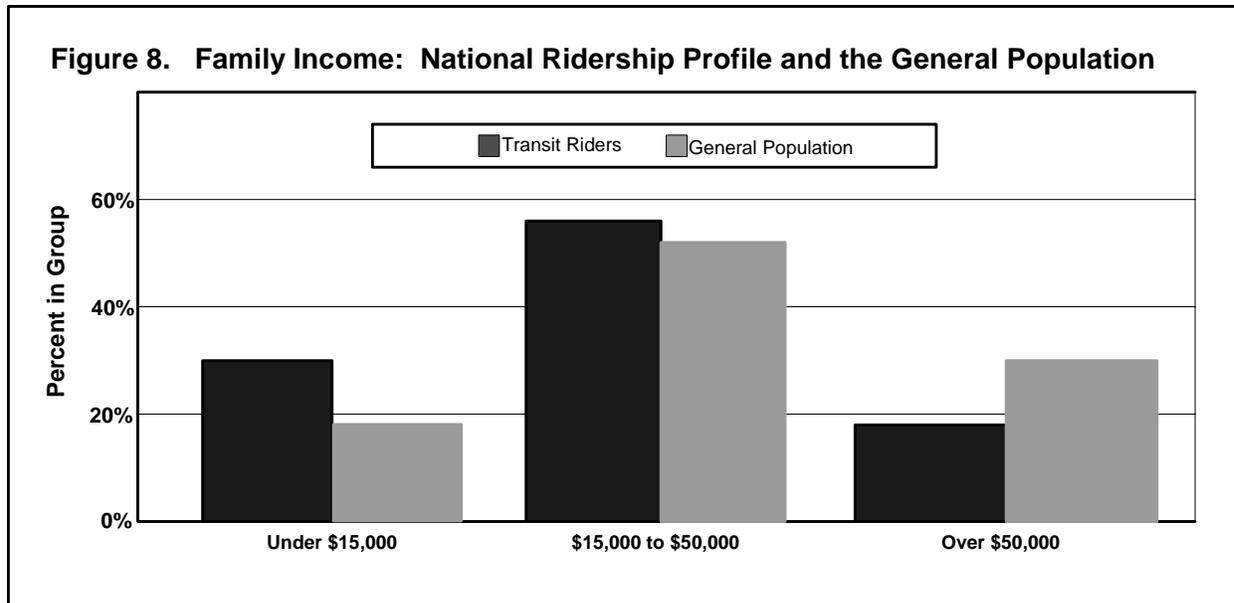
essential to the understanding of transit ridership characteristics to compare and contrast this general population data with the national transit ridership profile.

Figure 7 shows a comparison by age of the national ridership profile and the general population. Notice that the percentage of working-age transit riders (ages 18 to 65 years) is very high at 82.8 percent. In contrast the census statistics show that only 60.3 percent of the U.S. population in this age group. This reflects the dominance of the work trip in the national ridership profile and the importance of public transit to the working people.

Figure 8 compares the national ridership profile with the general population by annual family income. This graph shows that while 27.5 percent of transit riders have annual family incomes below \$15,000 only 16.9 percent of the general population are in this low income bracket. Correspondingly, the percentage of riders in the high income bracket is almost half that of the general population. This illustrates

Figure 7. Age: National Ridership Profile and the General Population





the relative importance of transit to lower and lower-middle class individuals.

Figure 9 charts the ethnic/racial composition of transit riders against the general population. Notice that the total percentage of black and Hispanic riders at 48.7 percent is over twice the

total percentage of blacks and Hispanics in the general population at 21 percent. Of course, this shows the relative value of public transit to minority groups.

Combined, the three graphs easily lead to this deduction: **public transit is disproportionately used by minority workers in low income jobs**

who depend on the local transit authority to bring them to the workplace.

Finally, the census data also points out that America is becoming increasingly urbanized. The percentage of the population in urban areas

has steadily expanded from 73.6 percent in 1970 to 73.7 percent in 1980 to 75.2 percent in 1990.¹¹ Naturally, public transit is best suited to serving urban communities and will be in greater demand as this trend also continues.

Conclusions

- 1. Minorities and low income workers constitute a large proportion of public transit passengers.** The comparison with the U.S. census data shows that these groups use transit at a much higher rate than their representation in the general population.
- 2. Public transit is part our nation's "social safety net."** For the elderly, women, students, people with disabilities, minorities and low income individuals, public transit is the primary, and many times the sole, means of travel.
- 3. Transit performs a vital economic service.** Nationally, the worktrip is the dominant trip by purpose, and most of these transit commuters hold low income jobs. Very simply, the economic stability and growth of many of our nation's urban centers depends on mass transit's ability to economically transport people to the workplace.
- 4. The characteristics of transit riders vary significantly from community to community.** The profile of the average rider in large urban areas is much different from that in rural areas. This lends credence to the point that transit serves a broad range of economic and social needs across the geographic spectrum.
- 5. Transit demand should continue to increase well into the 21st century.** The demographic projections of the U.S. population and the trend of increasing urbanization suggest that the number of people with transit-riding characteristics will continue to grow. Hence, demand for public transit services can also be expected to expand.

¹¹U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1992*, Table No.28, p.27.