Chapter 5

From College to the City: Implications of Rail Transit on the Movement of the Young, College Educated Into the City Center

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ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on how investment in the American rail infrastructure has shaped changes in the population and residential patterns. Specifically, the chapter examines the association between commuter rail systems, urban rail transit systems, and the movement of the college-educated young into the inner city. Two hypotheses are proposed about the characteristics of rail systems and the relationship to the growth in the percentage of young college graduates residing in close-in neighborhoods. Using a sample of central cities within the 51 largest metropolitan areas in the U.S., the chapter compares the growth in young college graduates (ages 25 to 34 years) across cities with the different transit configurations. Using correlation analysis, the chapter explores the relationship between the presence of rail transit and the residential location choices of this population group. In the discussion and conclusion, the findings are summarized and implications for policy and sustainability are discussed.

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INTRODUCTION

American cities experienced disinvestment and economic decline in the early decades of the post-World War II era when many in the middle class moved to the suburbs, leaving behind low-income residents and a deteriorating inner city. This produced an ongoing crisis in central cities as American cities, which tend to rely on property taxes to meet many of their responsibilities (Garvin, 1996), saw their housing stock and tax base deteriorate.

The mass migration of affluent urbanites to the suburbs had other adverse consequences. It fostered the widespread purchase of automobiles for commuting, which ultimately produced today’s transportation bottlenecks, congestion, and infrastructure breakdowns. It consumed large amounts of farm and wild land, requiring the building of many miles of roadway with detrimental effects on the landscape and increased greatly the number of miles Americans drive (Gillham, 2002). Many of the affluent, college-educated, middle-class Americans now endure the wasted time and frustration of long commutes and time spent in traffic when driving into the city centers where many professional jobs are located.

In recent years, many cities have responded by adopting economic development policies to improve accessibility to the city center by fostering development closer to the city center through investments in light rail, transit-oriented development, and various downtown amenities. Presumably, these would attract talented, affluent residents and improve the tax base. Urban theorists assert that transportation accessibility to the urban core is one of the key generators of economic growth (Glaeser, 2011; Polèse, 2013). In their research on American cities, Florida and Adler (2018) found that the most advantaged Americans, primarily those with college degrees, tend to “locate in the most economically functional and aesthetically desirable places—in and around the urban core, along transit routes, close to universities and knowledge institutions, and along waterfronts and other natural amenities.” (p. 610)

Rail transit, in particular, is often advanced as a means to attract high-income residents to downtown areas. Presumably, higher income residents will upgrade the housing stock and the overall inner-city tax base, rendering the inner city more prosperous and attractive to higher income residents. In addition to its contribution to sustainable city finances, rail transit can generate environmental sustainability, especially when it fosters high density development around transit stops. It can reduce the average urbanite’s carbon footprint along with the number of miles he or she drives each year (Glaeser, 2011). In contrast to suburban sprawl, new lane miles may not be needed. All of this can enhance the quality of life and even contribute to a healthier populace because urban transit riders tend to get more physical activity as they walk to and from rail stops (Frank, Engelke, & Schmid, 2003).
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