

Equity Benefits

Full Report: Measuring the Economic Benefits of Rural and Small Urban Transit Services in Greater Minnesota

Transit promotes equity within a community by giving the opportunity for people of all abilities, incomes, and situations to access work, health care, shopping, recreation, and other services and activities. It increases opportunities for people who are economically, physically, and socially disadvantaged. Specifically, disadvantaged groups include low-income households, carless households, youth, older adults, people with disabilities, and racial and ethnic minorities, including immigrants. Transit serves a disproportionately higher percentage of these population groups.

Transit riders from six Greater Minnesota transit agencies were surveyed to collect information regarding the benefits of these services. This included riders from one urban system, St. Cloud Metro Bus, and five rural providers – Paul Bunyan Transit, Southern Minnesota Area Rural Transit (SMART), St. Peter Transit, Timber Trails, and Trailblazer Transit. Responses demonstrated the extent to which transit promotes equity.

Demographics of Transit Users

Table 1 shows the percentage of transit riders belonging to transportation-disadvantaged or minority groups. The rural estimates are based on the results from rider surveys from the five rural case studies, and the urban estimates are based on the St. Cloud rider survey. As the table shows, transit serves a disproportionately higher percentage of these populations. For example, among the entire Greater Minnesota population, 20% have household incomes below \$25,000, 6% do not have any vehicles in the household, and 12% have a disability. However, among transit riders, 75% of rural riders and 66% of urban riders have household incomes below \$25,000, about two-thirds do not have a vehicle, and 63% of rural riders and 49% of urban riders have a disability. Transit also serves a disproportionately higher percentage of minorities and older adults.

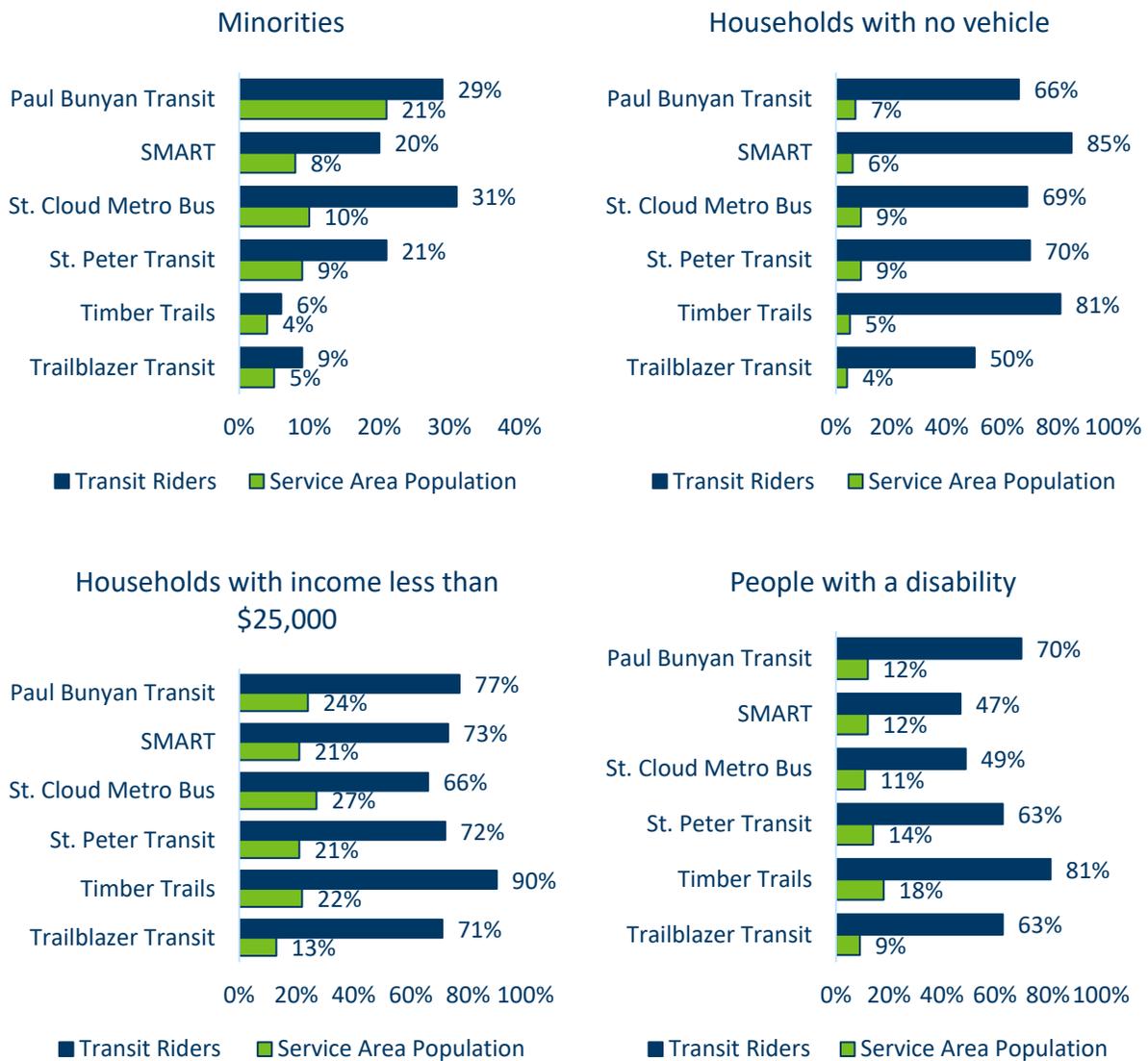
Table 1. Demographics of Population and Transit Riders in Greater Minnesota

<i>Population Group</i>	Rural Transit Riders (%)	Urban Transit Riders (%)	Greater Minnesota Population (%)
<i>Minority (non-white)</i>	18	31	8
<i>Income less than \$25,000</i>	75	66	20
<i>Income less than \$50,000</i>	92	89	43
<i>No driver's license</i>	74	72	NA
<i>No vehicles in household</i>	66	69	6
<i>Disability</i>	63	49	12
<i>Age 65 or older</i>	27	21	17

NA=not available

The results are further demonstrated by Figure 1, which compared demographics of transit riders for the six case study agencies to the demographics of the service area populations.

Figure 1. Comparison of Demographics Between Transit Riders and General Population



Reducing Accessibility Gaps and Increasing Average Access Levels

The primary benefit of transportation investment is that it provides access to opportunities. However, the distribution of these benefits is not always fair or equitable. Access levels vary based on income, ability to drive, and access to quality public transit. Conventional transportation planning has tended to be most beneficial to those who drive the most, which does not well serve transit riders in Greater Minnesota.

Most transit riders in Greater Minnesota use the service because they cannot drive or do not have access to a vehicle, and because it can be difficult to get a ride from others. Overall, about one-third of riders surveyed said

they would not have made their current trip if transit was not available. Most others would have relied on family or friends for a ride, taken a more expensive taxi or ride hailing service if available, or walked.

Investment in transit clearly helps reduce accessibility gaps and improve average access levels. Results from the case study surveys show that transit in Greater Minnesota serves a disproportionately higher percentage of disadvantaged populations. If transit was not available, these population groups would be disproportionately affected, putting them at a significant disadvantage. Transit is clearly shown to reduce the accessibility gaps between these population groups and the most mobile individuals, while increasing average access levels. This is a benefit of transit that cannot be easily expressed in monetary terms.