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The Transit Effect: A Decade of Change at LA Metro Rail Stations



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Issue

In 2016, Los Angeles County initiated a 15-year plan to revolutionize its transportation infrastructure, investing billions to reshape regional mobility. This vision aims to diminish reliance on private cars in favor of alternatives like public transit, walking, and cycling. In doing so, the initiative intends to create a more sustainable, livable urban environment. Making this vision a reality entails more than expanding transit – it demands significant shifts in land use policy to encourage dense, transit-oriented development (TOD) near stations. However, bureaucratic obstacles persist, hindering efforts to create transit-friendly communities.

Despite transit expansion, per capita ridership has declined. To encourage greater use of public transit, Los Angeles's sprawling, car-centric landscape necessitates high-density development around transit hubs. While promising for affordability and emissions reduction, densification raises legitimate concerns around displacement and gentrification. The impact of transit-oriented development on neighborhoods continues to be a subject of debate, with mixed findings on affordability and stability effects. Navigating these challenges requires balanced approaches that prioritize community engagement, equitable development, and displacement mitigation. Comprehensive solutions must accommodate diverse local needs, ensuring that growth promotes economic development in neighborhoods without displacing existing residents.

The synergy between transportation investments and land use planning is critical to fostering vibrant, amenity-rich

neighborhoods where people can live, work, and play in close proximity to public transit options. Accordingly, this study examines the relationship between neighborhood change over time and fixed rail transit in Los Angeles, focusing specifically on LA Metro stations built between 2010 and 2020. Findings from this study inform a final list of recommendations on how to further enhance existing policies related to existing transit-oriented development across Los Angeles.

Study Approach

The study aimed to answer three main questions. Namely, (1) Does the establishment of a rail station lead to significant changes in adjacent communities compared to average Los Angeles neighborhoods without a rail station? (2) Do these changes indicate positive or negative shifts over time? (3) Did the installment of a rail station in 2010 have different long-term effects compared to the installment of one in 2020?

To answer these three questions, the study utilized American Community Survey data from 2009 to 2022 at the census tract level, focusing on demographics, housing, and mode choice variables. Analysis involved comparing changes in census tracts within a half-mile radius of stations built between 2010 and 2020 to average changes across all census tracts located within the city of Los Angeles. Additionally, three stations were selected for deeper examination based on qualitative measures such as safety improvements, displacement risk, and mode choice (Figure 1). This qualitative analysis aimed to provide context for understanding larger neighborhood changes and their effects.

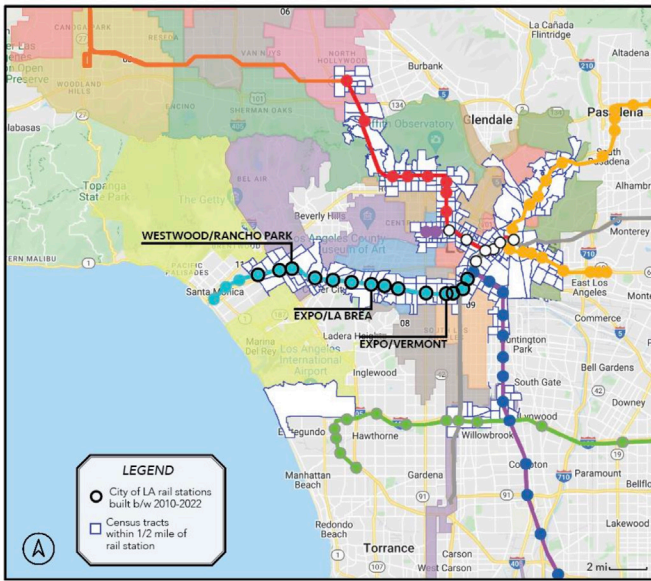


Figure 1. Study areas located within half mile census tracts of rail stations in Los Angeles

Key Findings

- Impact on Demographics and Density:** The introduction of rail stations contributed to increased racial diversity and a significant increase in population density in surrounding areas, reflecting broader cultural shifts and the potential for rail stations to attract a more diverse population due to improved accessibility (Figure 2).
- Improvements in Education and Economy:** Station areas saw a greater increase in educational attainment and median household income compared to the broader city, indicating potential gentrification in these areas.
- Changes in Commute and Transportation Patterns:** Both station areas and the city experienced shifts toward longer commutes and increased remote work, highlighting the lasting impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Public transportation usage declined both near station areas and citywide, however, these declines were less significant in transit-adjacent areas.
- Housing and Urban Development Patterns:** Substantial increases in median gross rent and home values near stations suggest high demand for housing in these transit-adjacent areas. Station areas had a higher concentration of newer housing stock, indicating ongoing demand and urban renewal efforts.



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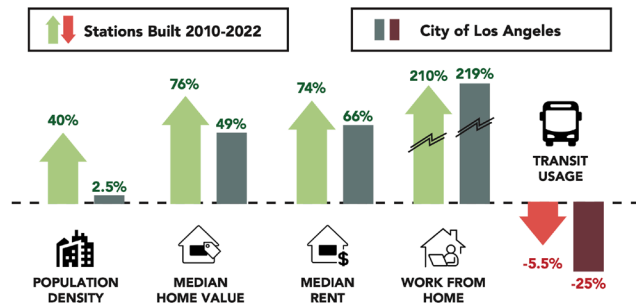


Figure 2. Key findings comparing areas surrounding stations built between 2010 and 2022 to the City of Los Angeles more broadly

Recommendations

Building off of Los Angeles' existing TOD policies and considering the findings from this study, decision-makers should consider the following recommendations:

- Encourage diverse housing types near transit stations:** Promote mixed-use zoning along transit corridors to enhance amenities and increase density with diverse multi-family homes and accessory dwelling units. Embrace innovative housing models like community land trusts, co-living, and modular housing to address various housing needs and improve affordability.
- Implement robust anti-displacement measures:** Protect low-income residents from gentrification by requiring higher percentages of affordable units in market-rate projects, giving residents in the surrounding neighborhood preference for new affordable units, and strengthening rent control measures. Extend rent control to newer buildings to ensure affordability, and advocate for broader tenant protections.
- Promote economic development and increase job access near transit stations:** Implement local hire policies to reduce local unemployment and foster economic stability, while also building stronger community ties and enhancing local workforce skills through training programs.
- Expand monitoring and research of TOD areas:** Conduct additional research on residential and travel behavior changes to better understand the implications of TOD. Focus on vehicle miles traveled (VMT) and travel behavior before-and-after evaluations. Finally, incorporate monitoring requirements for developments benefiting from L.A.'s Transit Oriented Communities program incentives to refine strategies for promoting sustainable, inclusive development.

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