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Affordable Housing Residents in San Diego County Are Generally Satisfied With Transit Service, but There is Room for Improvement

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Issue

The State of California has increasingly considered the housing and environmental crises together by encouraging affordable housing development in transit rich areas.¹ As such, municipalities are encouraging the creation of affordable housing near transit lines² and metropolitan planning organizations are being called on to preserve transit-accessible affordable housing at the regional level.³ While much effort has gone into advocating for affordable housing in transit rich areas, research has yet to evaluate the experience of low-income residents at such sites. In turn, we surveyed 192 residents at six affordable housing sites geographically spread throughout San Diego County to understand their transportation experiences. All the developments were 100 percent affordable, contained at least 50 units, and provided both multifamily and senior housing.

Key Research Findings

Affordable housing residents were generally highly satisfied with transit service. Most approved of their distance to transit stops, the cost of transit, and transit travel time but less than half were satisfied with the environment around transit stops. Reasons for dissatisfaction with the transit stop environment includes safety concerns, lack of streetlights, poor sidewalk and drainage infrastructure, lack of benches for people with disabilities, and lack of maintenance and cleanliness (Figure 1).

Transit users in inner ring suburban affordable housing buildings reported higher travel times and lower satisfaction with distance to transit stops than those living downtown or in outer suburbs. Depending on the type of trip (work, errand, or social), travel times could be anywhere from 18 to 33 minutes longer for inner ring residents. Furthermore, 40% of inner ring residents were dissatisfied with distance to transit stops as opposed to 15% and 19% of downtown and outer suburban residents respectively. Both findings are likely due to the need to use a bus to get to trolley lines in inner ring suburbs.

Average travel times for transit users at affordable housing developments were higher than those who drove. Depending on their travel destination, affordable housing transit users experienced 13 to 20 minutes longer trip times than residents who drove (Figure 2) with those further away from downtown experiencing even longer trip times for work, errands, and social trips.

Residents reported that cost and accessibility as the biggest barriers to taking transit. Distance to a transit stop, the quality or safety of transit stops, and the timing or frequency of bus and transit lines were also mentioned.

Policy Implications

While previous studies claim that affordable housing should be located near transit rich areas, responses from affordable housing residents in San Diego County suggest that rail

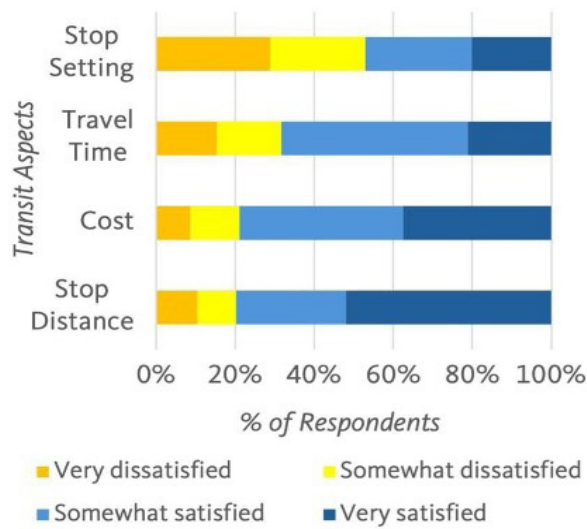


Figure 1. Resident Satisfaction with Transit Stop Characteristics

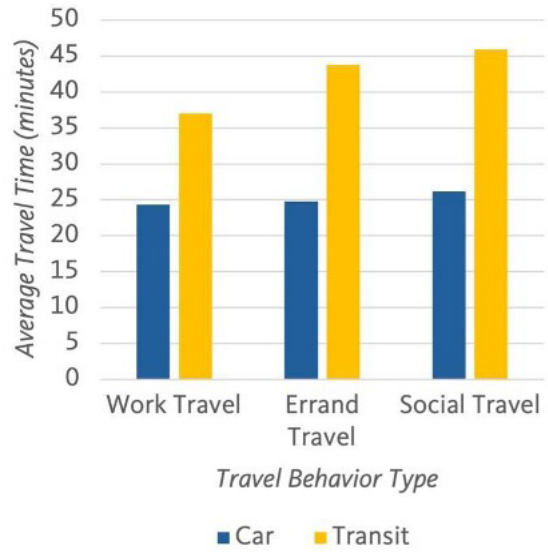


Figure 2. Average Travel Time by Travel Destination

expansion and affordable housing location are only part of the solution. Policy makers and transit providers should consider:

1. Supporting transit infrastructure in high opportunity areas in inner ring suburbs alongside downtown and outer suburban areas.
2. Expand and improve bus lines, pedestrian and cycling infrastructure, and medical transport to offer affordable housing residents more transportation options and lower travel times.
3. Educate senior, disabled, and low-income residents about subsidies. Transit providers, county and municipal governments, and relevant community-based organizations should work together to inform residents about these subsidy programs to decrease costs for these populations.

4. Improve transit stops, including better increased security and maintenance, safer sidewalks and crosswalks, and addition of benches and streetlights to not only increase transit usage by all residents, but also improve the walkability and safety of the surrounding areas.

More Information

This policy brief is drawn from the report “Affordable Housing and Transportation Cost Burdens in San Diego County” which can be found at www.ucits.org/research-project/2023-15. For more information about the findings, please contact Jennifer Nations at jnations@ucsd.edu.

¹California Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD) (2024). A Home for Every Californian: 2022 Statewide Housing Plan. <https://www.hcd.ca.gov/docs/statewide-housing-plan.pdf>

²City of San Diego (2021). General Plan Housing Element, 2021-2029. https://www.sandiego.gov/sites/default/files/he_final_screen_view_june2021.pdf

³Parker, M.E., Chapple, K., and Park, Y. (2023). Strategies to Preserve Transit-accessible Affordable Housing in Southern California. UC Office of the President: University of California Institute of Transportation Studies. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7922/G2BV7DXR>

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