

DEMOGRAPHIA

THE ILLUSION OF TRANSPORTATION CHOICE: DALLAS-FORT WORTH

A disproportionate share of people who commute on transit to non-downtown locations do not have access to cars. With less choice, low-income people without cars tend to walk further distances to access transit service. In some cases, walking for a longer distance could make it possible to avoid long transfer times and marginally reduce travel times. But for low-income people, there is little if any transit service to suburban locations that does not consume an inordinate amount of time. The situation is similar for low-income commuters to suburban locations in virtually every major metropolitan area.

The burden of commuting by transit to suburban locations is illustrated by the example of a low-income resident living within walking distance of Beckley and Overton in the southern area of the city of Dallas who works at suburban Irving Mall.

It is estimated that the automobile commute would require approximately 44 minutes for the 20-mile trip each way, for a total daily travel time of 1:28 (approximately 1.5 hours).

If the resident were instead to use transit (Dallas Area Rapid Transit [DART] buses, light rail and commuter rail), the trip would require 3:52, (approximately 3.9 hours daily) – almost 2.5 hours longer than the automobile commute time. Four boardings (three transfers) would be required:¹

- From a local bus to light rail.
- From light rail to commuter rail
- From commuter rail to a local bus

If the south Dallas resident instead worked 7.5 miles away in downtown Dallas, the commute time would be much less, because DART (like other transit agencies) provides more service to the central area. The round-trip commute to downtown would take 1:50 each day, compared to 0:44 minutes by car. Still, however, the necessity to transfer from bus to rail would make the trip considerably longer than by car. This illustrates the fact auto-competitive transit service is not available for many commute trips that begin in relative proximity to downtown.

¹ It would also be possible to make the trip on a cross-town route, which would avoid the downtown transfer. Two transfers would still be required, and the total daily travel time would approach five hours. The cross-town route takes longer because all of it is on local bus services, while the downtown Dallas routing takes advantage of express bus service at least in one direction.

If the South Dallas resident instead lived within walking distance of the light rail station (Kiest), the round trip transit commute to downtown would take 1:00 (a one-way trip of 6.0 miles). The faster travel time is made possible by the direct (no-transfer) service. But, the transit travel time is still 50 percent more than the round-trip auto commute time of 38 minutes. Thus, even where there is substantial transit investment, transit commute times may not be auto competitive.

Based upon 1990 data, it is estimated that:²

- 750,000 jobs were within a 45-minute automobile commute of Beckley and Overton.
- At most, 200,000 jobs are within a 45-minute transit travel time of Kiest Station.
- Even with the billion-dollar light rail system, it requires approximately 50 percent longer to reach downtown jobs from within walking distance of the Keist light rail station than by car.

² Based upon analysis of data in the 1990 Census Transportation Planning Package.