

SUMMARY

Snapshot + Qualitative Assessment of Transportation-Related Disparities

Portland Bureau of Transportation, 04.14.2021

Overview

In 2019, PBOT launched *Moving to Our Future*, a new strategic vision for Portland’s transportation system that aligns bureau-wide operations with three core goals to be achieved over the next three to five years: safety, moving people and goods, and asset management. Overarching these primary goals is a commitment to anti-racism and carbon reduction in all agency policies, plans, and projects. In support of these objectives, PBOT is working toward the creation of a transportation justice and equity framework and the integration of anti-racism and equity into its Transportation System Plan (TSP)—the long-range plan that guides policies and investments in Portland over the next 20 years.

As part of this work, the PBOT planning team has conducted research and analysis to create a disparities “snapshot” to help the bureau understand how the city’s transportation system does and does not meet the needs of everyone in our community. Through two separate phases, the project team worked to collate quantitative and then qualitative information to attempt to answer the following questions:

1. **What sorts of transportation-related disparities presently exist in Portland?**
2. **What factors beyond transportation lead to disparate outcomes for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), low-income, and immigrant communities, Portlanders with disabilities, and other underserved community members?**
3. **What are the root causes of these disparities?**

Through this research, the project team has focused on centering the needs identified through existing community outreach and related community-led planning and organizing efforts. With that in mind, the following themes have emerged: access; safety; environmental health; gentrification and displacement; affordability; and community ownership. These issues, however, are very intersectional. Many—if not all—of them inform or are related to others, and even community partners have identified any sort of prioritization among them as challenging. As such, there is no implied hierarchy to these themes.

This summary is organized into the following sections: an overview of current conditions and overarching trends in Portland demographics to help situate this work; a section devoted to each of those themes identified above; root causes of these barriers and disparities; and emerging data gaps and recommendations.

Current Conditions + Overarching Trends

We know that Portland is growing. From 2009 to 2019, the city’s population grew by 17.5%, or almost 100,000 people. With that growth has come increased diversity. BIPOC communities now make up 22.6% of the city’s population, a growth of 1.4% of the population share over the last decade—an increase of over 29,000 people of color. The most notable increases have occurred among Asian, Hispanic or Latinx, and biracial or multiracial groups.

Portland Population Growth 2009-2019:

+17.5%, or +96,303 residents

+1.4% BIPOC share, or
+29,402 people of color

We also know that geographic concentrations of BIPOC communities are located in East Portland—the most diverse district in the city—and portions of North Portland, especially around the Peninsula. These trends are growing, too, with concentrations of populations of color increasing in East, Southwest, North, and other suburban areas as they decrease in historic Albina and other inner neighborhoods.

11.3% of Portlanders presently lives with a disability.

Concentrations of households of Limited English Proficiency (LEP) roughly overlap these areas, with higher concentrations in East Portland. Overlapping these areas, too, are concentrations of households with incomes lower than the citywide median. On top of this, 11.3% of Portland’s population presently lives with a disability.

We also understand that Portland’s infrastructure is not equitably distributed through the city, with many areas—particularly in East and Southwest Portland—still lacking the streetscape or built environment community members need to safely access mobility options to meet their daily needs.

Access

It is easy to see, then, that many of these underserved Portlanders face barriers to access. In conversations with community members, some key and repeated barriers emerged. They include issues with transit around a lack of direct connections from places people live to where they need to go, leading them to transfers, long rides or commutes, and sometimes being forced to drive to work, school, grocery stores, or other destinations—if that option even exists.

This is particularly important because BIPOC households in Portland have less access to cars than white households. Particularly striking is the number for Black or African American households, of which 27% lack any access to a personal vehicle—more than double that of white households. BIPOC Portlanders, then, are more transit dependent than white Portlanders; they make up 35% of all transit riders while making up, again, 22.6% of the city’s population.

27% of Black or African American households have no access to a car, compared to 13% of white households.

BIPOC Portlanders make up **35% of transit riders** but comprise 22.6% of the population.

In 2017, transit commute times for BIPOC residents **were over 10% higher** than for white Portlanders.

On top of this, transit speeds have decreased since 2000 in the metro, affecting commute times for these communities. As of 2017, public transit commute times for BIPOC Portlanders were over 10% higher than for white Portlanders. Many of these community members work jobs outside of the city center or work hours when buses come less frequently, making transit rides cumbersome or impossible.

These underserved Portlanders, including many low-income and BIPOC residents, still drive less than Portlanders as a whole—especially in East Portland. As a group, then, they produce fewer climate impacts, endanger fewer people, and produce less local environmental impacts than other residents while being disproportionately impacted by the actions of other groups, individuals, and industries in the right of way—in physical safety, environmental health outcomes, and more.

Safety

Barriers to safety include more than just physical safety in our streets, but they do include that too. In 2018, a majority—56%—of traffic deaths in Portland occurred in low-income areas or in neighborhoods with higher concentrations of BIPOC populations. East Portland, where many of these communities live, contains most of the high crash intersections in the city—28 of the top 30 are located on or east of 82nd Avenue. People walking in East Portland are 2.5 times more likely to be killed in traffic crashes than those in the rest of the city.

In 2018, **56% of traffic deaths** in Portland occurred in neighborhoods with higher concentrations of BIPOC or low-income residents.

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While BIPOC and immigrant participants in previous outreach efforts have identified infrastructure deficiencies—particularly around sidewalks, transit stops, and streetlighting—as clear community needs, safety is more than just physical traffic safety for these residents. In fact, some participants of the *Walking While Black* focus groups—convened during the development of *PedPDX*, the city-wide pedestrian plan—thought the conversation about physical safety misguided because of more pressing community concerns. These concerns include experiences of microaggressions and bias in the right-of-way, fear of hate or bias crimes in streets or on transit, disparate treatment by police and transit enforcement, and other incidents affecting these community members’ perception of safety and leading them to feel unwelcome, unsafe, and insecure in our streets, public spaces, and on transit.

In a controlled experiment at PSU, **Black pedestrian were passed by 2x as many cars with wait times almost 1/3 longer** than white participants.

Black Portlanders make up 18% of all traffic stops in the city while comprising less than 6% of the population.

Quantitative data backs up these experiences. In a controlled experiment at Portland State University of racial bias in drivers, Black pedestrians were passed by twice as many cars and had wait times almost a third longer than white participants. Perceptions of over-policing and bias are also not unfounded. Recently published data indicates that Portland has the fifth highest arrest disparities by race or ethnicity in the United States. Black Portlanders, particularly, are impacted most disparately—making up 18% of all traffic stops in the city while comprising less than 6% of Portland’s population.

On top of this, the police response to protests and uprising after the murder of George Floyd in 2020—and continuing to this day—should be of concern to PBOT. They occur in our streets, of which PBOT is the primary steward. Our Black residents and other communities of color have chosen to utilize our streets as places to gather in order to exercise—as some community partners have expressed—their Constitutional rights to address grievances.

Environmental Health

Another theme that relates to safety and security in streets is environmental health. The transportation sector is the largest contributor to greenhouse gas emissions in Portland; this share is increasing. In 2018, transportation sector emissions in Multnomah County were 6% higher than 1990 levels; research indicates that climate change affects low-income and BIPOC residents disproportionately—and will continue to in the future.

Diesel particulate and Nitrogen Dioxide (NO₂) concentrations are higher along high-volume roadways in the city, with census tracts of higher BIPOC populations coinciding with significantly higher levels of these pollutants. We also know that BIPOC communities are concentrated—and in some cases increasing due to displacement—near some of the biggest polluters in the city as they decrease in areas with lower levels of pollution. This impacts health outcomes for these residents. BIPOC Portlanders are disproportionately represented in groups with asthma, heart disease, and hypertension.

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These disparities are linked to the built environment and access to public space, active transportation options, healthy food, and other markers of complete neighborhoods. However, infrastructure improvements alone are insufficient to solve these problems—both due to aforementioned issues of safety and also other barriers to active transportation, including cultural stereotypes, lack of reliable storage facilities for bicycles, and an association among some residents of color between bike lanes and gentrification.

Gentrification + Displacement

As mentioned previously, BIPOC population shares are increasing in East and North Portland and decreasing in areas of the city with more reliable transit, infrastructure, and complete neighborhood amenities. For those displaced due to gentrification—some of which results from transportation and other government investments and policies—they are separated from more than just infrastructure and

Displaced residents are **forced to travel longer distances, utilizing worse infrastructure, to get the support they need.**

services; they are also severed from their social support networks and community connections people need in order to survive and thrive. Lacking ease of physical mobility through the city, these displaced residents are forced to travel longer distances, utilizing worse infrastructure, to get the support they need in childcare, to commute to work, or in order to attend community gatherings.

These individuals and communities displaced due to gentrification or historic, present, or future transportation or other public investments experience something called “root shock.” Coined by Dr. Mindy Fullilove, root shock refers to the traumatic stress reaction to the loss of some or all of one’s emotional ecosystem. Root shock diminishes social, emotional, and financial resources and capital; it can also increase risk for stress-related diseases including depression and heart attacks.

For those displaced in Portland, the risk of its occurrence again is real. Now that inner parts of the city have gentrified, East Portland living costs have also increased. In that district, 97% of low-income renters—those most at-risk for displacement—live in census tracts already experiencing early or mid-stage gentrification.

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Affordability

A major barrier to access and mobility is affordability. In Portland, households on average spend 12% of their income on transportation. Low-income households spend significantly more, utilizing on average 25% of their income on transportation costs; these costs are considered affordable if they are 15% or less of household expenses.

Low-income households in Portland **spend on average 25% of their income on transportation**, 13% more than the average Portland household.

Even with discounted opportunities, transit and transportation costs are a barrier to use and access; many BIPOC and low-income Portlanders have expressed that even low-cost tickets are a barrier and burden to their use of transit. Youth in the county feel similarly, expressing the need for free youth passes in order to ensure access and mobility through the city. This barrier goes beyond transit ridership, with participants of outreach about bicycling expressing costs of bicycles as a common barrier.

However, a recent evaluation of the Transportation Wallet offered by PBOT suggests that financial support of such programs does encourage the use of new mobility services and increases access for participants. Some recipients of the Transportation Wallet expressed increased mobility—communicating access to destinations they otherwise would not be able to get to. So, the potential of financial support to reduce or eliminate costs for transportation show promise in increased mobility.

Community Ownership of Planning + Decision-Making Structures

Many of the impacts of environmental injustices on BIPOC and low-income communities result in part from lack of representation or effective participation in the process; as decisions are made that impact these communities, they often experience disparate costs while other areas and communities benefit. This may sound theoretic or conceptual, but Portlanders of color have expressed feelings that PBOT's

Portlanders of color have expressed feelings that **PBOT's priorities are not aligned with their community interests.**

priorities are not aligned with communities' and that outreach often occurs after the agency has decided to build a project in their area—without consulting community members about their visions for those spaces or their needs more broadly.

On top of this, mobility and access barriers are multidimensional and relate to how a person is affected by processes, institutions, and structures within broader society. Because certain groups and individuals have been systematically excluded from processes, planning, and the benefits of decisions, planners and policymakers must be responsible for the policy delivery to change these disparities; it is not the responsibility of those individuals negatively impacted.

Root Causes

The root causes of these disparities and barriers are intersectional and are embedded in our systems and institutions. Most prominent among these is the centering of a white, Eurocentric, and often white supremacist perspective within our city's, state's, and nation's history, historic and current planning, and many—if not all—public processes and systems. As such, is it impossible to address these challenges successfully without first effectively addressing racism.

It is impossible to address these challenges without **effectively addressing racism.**

Historically, in Portland—and in cities across the country—transportation and land use decisions and investments legalized segregation and perpetuated exclusion. From redlining to the proliferation of freeways and the interstate highway system that literally tore apart developed BIPOC—and particularly Black—communities nearer the center of cities in the name of “urban renewal” and in support of suburbanization and the private automobile, centralized planning and decision-making have centered the needs of white residents while forcing communities of color and low-income residents to shoulder the bulk of the costs and negative impacts.

In Portland, more recently, public investments have led to gentrification and displacement. Transportation investments like the Yellow Line, in lower-income neighborhoods, are a double-edged sword. While they can have positive impacts on communities like improved access and mobility, they also have the potential to lead to or exacerbate gentrification, increasing living costs, and displacing vulnerable residents to areas lacking amenities. These infrastructure improvements have the potential to reinforce structural racism by centering white comfort and needs; they do this by failing to center the histories, contexts, and existing needs of the communities in which they are built while instead focusing on exclusively mitigating the negative impacts of those investments themselves.

Transportation investments in low-income neighborhoods are a double-edged sword. They can improve access and mobility, but they can also exacerbate gentrification and lead to displacement.

A recent concept to describe systemic exclusion from mobility is called “purplelining.” Coined by Dr. Destiny Thomas, purplelining is the process through which specific groups and spaces in cities have been intentionally deemed expendable due to racial, cultural, or economic locations on the spectrum of socio-economic privilege. People are purplelined as a result of both structural and collective efforts to control means to mobility and movement, which are quintessential components of dignity, social cohesion, and wellness.

Many of these intersecting factors that affect health, functioning, and quality-of-life outcomes in our community are referred to in public health as social determinants of health (SDOH). SDOH are broad and overlapping and include environmental factors, the built environment, social and community context, systemic discrimination and racism, access to education and health services, and more. These overlapping factors, while outside of the control of individuals, contribute *more* to their health and quality-of-life outcomes than do personal decisions or other personal factors.

Emerging Gaps and Recommendations

Data Gaps

We want to understand how BIPOC communities, low-income residents, Portlanders with disabilities, and other underserved community members presently use our transportation system. However, the project team was unable to find reliable disaggregated quantitative data or substantial qualitative outreach focusing on current use for these community members. Some of this data may exist, but we still recommend pointed outreach and data collection at a localized level. Another gap is a tendency for qualitative data collection to focus on barriers and needs more than habits or daily use of the transportation system. Furthermore, we have identified a data gap regarding non-commute trips.

A deeper dive into transportation affordability is also necessary. We know that the combination of housing and transportation costs combined as a percentage of household income is a best practice for measuring affordability. The project team was unable to find this data in any reliably updated form, and none of it was available disaggregated by race or ethnicity. A metric is currently in development at PBOT, however.

More data is needed to center the experiences and needs of Portlanders with disabilities. The project team does not claim to have found all existing sources through research, but this gap is broad and a more robust addition of information regarding these community members is needed.

Recommendations from Research

Because of the nature of this research, the recommendations expressed below are broad. The project team has attempted to center the needs of community members as expressed while consolidating them to common recommendations for processes at PBOT. For more specific needs of specific communities, we recommend reading the *Summaries of Qualitative Sources* created for this project.

It is necessary for PBOT to include BIPOC communities and other underserved and under-engaged communities effectively in the process of both short-range and long-range planning. These community members should be at the table as early as possible, rather than just at predetermined points in the process. Many existing processes center the participation of particular Portlanders—including technocrats and those familiar with those processes and the systems built for them—and focus on predetermined outcomes rather than co-creation with communities. This feeling has been expressed by many members of our community.

Many existing planning processes **center the participation of particular Portlanders** and focus on predetermined outcomes **rather than co-creation with underserved communities.**

Transportation planning and project implementation **should seek to do more than just mitigate impacts** or avoid further harm from those plans and projects on communities.

Transportation planning and project implementation should seek to do more than just mitigate impacts or avoid further harm from those plans and projects on communities. An overarching equity lens in planning should consider the cumulative impacts of market dynamics, historic and existing context, and community needs in order to work to remedy historic and existing disparities while working to fulfill community visions for their neighborhoods.

Gentrification and displacement are *not* inevitable. Effective participatory and community development techniques can help communities build capacity against involuntary displacement through community building, placemaking, and co-creation of spaces. These methods can be utilized as transformative tools that help communities build capacity, community, and resiliency in the face of change.

Effective participatory and community development can **help communities build capacity against involuntary displacement.**

Transportation decisions **cannot solve these social inequities alone**. Policy and planning should focus in tandem on relational policies and projects at other agencies.

Despite being a major contributor to the fabric of communities, transportation decisions cannot solve these social inequities alone. Policy and planning in transportation should focus in tandem on relational policies and projects outside of PBOT’s immediate purview—such as those in other public agencies—to help achieve more equitable outcomes for our communities.

For community partners, the core goals in *Moving to Our Future*—safety, asset management, and moving people and goods with overarching considerations of equity and climate impacts—are intersectional and overlapping. As a result, prioritization of funding allocation is challenging. However, with the knowledge of some of the barriers and root causes listed above, it is the hope of this project team that PBOT’s work toward transportation justice through community-supported and community-owned planning processes can help guide the agency’s investments to help solve some of these problems by centering the visions and existing needs of our most underserved community members.

Last—but perhaps most important—is the need to validate this research and these findings within the community. While we have worked as consciously as possible toward reflecting the challenges and needs expressed by BIPOC, immigrant, and other underserved Portlanders, we acknowledge that our identities always inform our work. Furthermore, we fully understand that community members are the experts of their own lives, experiences, and communities.

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Resources

The information provided in this summary is sourced from the following working drafts of documents produced through the earlier stages of this research:

1. [Memo regarding the Snapshot Table on Transportation-Related Disparities](#) overviewing the quantitative data collection, collation, and analysis;
2. [Snapshot Table on Transportation-Related Disparities](#) detailing quantitative disparities, sources, and gaps;
3. [Qualitative Assessment of Transportation-Related Disparities](#) reviewing themes from the assessment and a review of the sources utilized.