



Measuring equity in public transit service: LA Metro and the Post-Decree Era

Project Objective

California transit agencies have made racial equity and justice a primary transportation goal in response to the expanding national discussion about race and privilege in the United States and the disparate impact of COVID-19 on low-income communities of color. The objectives of this research include providing an overview of the issues raised in the 1994 landmark civil rights class action against the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transit Authority (LA Metro) by a coalition of transportation advocates led by the Labor/Community Strategy Center. The suit charged the agency with unlawfully discriminating against transit-dependent low-income bus riders of color in its allocation of public transportation resources. This research aims to provide an overview of the issues raised in this landmark legal decision, summarize to what extent these issues remain, and provide recommendations to better incorporate racial and social equity and justice concerns into transit service allocation at LA Metro and other transit agencies.

Problem Statement

The landmark civil rights suit led to a consent decree in 1996 that limited fare increases, expanded bus service in Los Angeles, and negotiated other community benefits. The coalition of transit justice advocates utilized the legal system over several years to challenge agency policies and win improvements for transit-dependent low-income bus riders of color at LA Metro. Nearly thirty years have passed since the original lawsuit. This time provides an opportunity to revisit the original legal arguments and analyze how some core issues, namely disproportionate investments in rail expansion over bus service, and other concerns, have remained. Our primary research question is: To what extent do the arguments made in the legal case that led to the consent decree remain in the post-decree era (2010-2020)?

Research Methodology

The project uses a mixed-method approach that draws on three primary sources of information. The first source includes case and legal records to identify the legal arguments and data sources used by the plaintiffs against the defendant to inform subsequent data collection efforts. The second data source comes from a small set of interviews with individuals knowledgeable about the legal actions and racial equity policies with LA Metro today. The final source of information uses data from various sources to provide a descriptive analysis of demographics and service characteristics in the periods before, during, and after the consent decree in Los Angeles County.

Results

We conclude that many arguments made in the case that led to the consent decree remain concerns for advancing transit justice in Los Angeles today, as evidenced by the themes within the legal summary, interviews, and data analysis.

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The legal summary outlined the main arguments advanced in the legal actions, which relate to the need to ensure all transit patrons, without regard to race, color, or national origin, have equal and equitable access to LA Metro's public transit system. This decree re-committed LA Metro to ensure that they met the letter of the law for Title VI. The impetus for the decree was the civil rights lawsuit that alleged that fare increases approved by the LA Metro board created an unfair burden and disproportionately discriminated against minority bus riders. LA Metro agreed to meet numerous objectives during the ten-year monitoring period. The primary victories included maintaining fares and passes at pre-increase levels, improving bus service, and reducing bus crowding by purchasing new buses.

Whether LA Metro had met the agreed-upon expectations was a significant source of conflict throughout the monitoring period, especially at the end of the ten-year window. After the LCSC appealed the decision to end the decree, the court ultimately decided that LA Metro had complied with the consent decree terms and allowed it to expire in 2006. Similar arguments of racial discrimination continued as plaintiffs filed a Title VI complaint with the Federal Transit Administration following the decree's end. The FTA concluded that LA Metro needed to strengthen its approach to analyze the impacts of construction projects on low-income and communities of color and to create quantifiable service standards for all transit modes. Similarly, the FTA required LA Metro to adopt new definitions for service changes requiring a Title VI analysis.

Our interviews highlighted these past issues and how they remain in today's context, including how some issues have evolved. For example, organizations are now advocating for fare-free transit. Bus service concerns largely remain, and interviewees suggested that bus service standards focus on setting and meeting standards about service reliability, frequency, accessibility, and affordability.

All interviewees agreed that the case was an inspiring and historic victory for advocates across the country. Legal changes at the federal level about who can sue on civil rights grounds changed the ability of other organizations to follow the path that led to the consent decree. Nonetheless, the momentum from the lawsuit, consent decree, and FTA complaint laid much of the groundwork and leadership development for people and organizations that continue to advocate for transit justice today.

Finally, the data analysis of the decree and post-decree years further demonstrates the connections between issues raised in the early 1990s and today. The rail system continues to carry a greater proportion of white, higher-income riders, and people of color are much more likely to be bus riders. Transit ridership on LA Metro remains largely comprised of low-income people, but bus service continues to serve a very low-income base, especially relative to rail riders.

Policy Recommendations

Throughout the transportation landscape, many people still view the consent decree and the legal actions as a groundbreaking shift of power that allowed a coalition of advocates to shape the spending and policies of a transit agency. This research underscored this victory's importance in its positive effect in Los Angeles for low-income people of color, for building a foundation of transit justice advocacy in Los Angeles, and its impact outside the region. Public transit connects low-income people of color and access to opportunity. Future work must continue strengthening those connections for bus and rail riders. We offer the following set of recommendations to Los Angeles Metro, other transit agencies, transportation departments, and others with policy-making and oversight authority:

1. Work to address the persistence of systemic racial disparities in transit planning and service.
2. Agencies with regulatory and funding authority should work to set transit service standards to avoid ever-present battles over lack of service.
3. Agencies with oversight authority at the state and federal levels need to exercise their Title VI oversight authority and proactively investigate racial disparities in transit planning and service.