

Equity in transit-oriented development (TOD): A thematic and policy analysis of Chicago's plans

by

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Abstract

This research analyzes the extent to which the priorities of Chicago's regional transit-oriented development (TOD) plans address equity-related concerns. While TOD is promoted as a sustainable urban tool, offering benefits such as increased transit accessibility, modernization, and walkability, there are potential equity concerns. As cities adopt TOD strategies to improve public transit access and mobility, there have been critiques about who benefits and who does not.

This qualitative research utilizes existing secondary data from five Chicago region plans, published between 2010 and 2022. Using thematic and policy analyses, similar themes and policy recommendations were identified to understand how Chicago frames and addresses priorities, rather than evaluating outcomes from policy implementations. All five plans agreed that key priorities are the preservation of affordability, increasing mobility, strengthening the transit system, accessibility, and expanding pedestrian-friendly communities. The plans published from 2010 to 2016 did not prioritize equity but had broader goals for regional transportation. In contrast, the plans published from 2018 to 2022 shifted the region's focus towards equity.

This research aims to contribute to ongoing conversations about the effects of transit investments and whether Chicago mitigates or reinforces patterns of spatial inequalities, or if they represent equitable and inclusive development.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) is an urban planning strategy that creates compact, mixed-use, and walkable communities centered around public transportation. Specifically, TOD integrates housing, amenities, and public spaces within walking distance of public transit stations/stops to improve mobility, accessibility, and quality of life. Existing research and planning have shown that there are many benefits to TOD for people, communities, and the environment. This includes improving accessibility and mobility, reducing transportation costs, promoting walkability and health, supporting economic growth, and enhancing environmental sustainability (City of Chicago, 2021; CMAP, 2010; Metropolitan Planning Council, 2015). However, while TOD can foster equity and community development, its success depends on policies that address equitable development, affordability, displacement, and gentrification to ensure all communities also benefit.

Cities, like Chicago, have shifted their focus to Equitable Transit-Oriented Development (ETOD), which ensures that the benefits of TOD are available to all people, regardless of socioeconomic status (City of Chicago, 2021). This transition towards prioritizing equity in development is necessary because studies in the past decade have started to recognize the impacts of TOD and how it is affecting neighborhoods and affordability (MPC, n.d., City of Chicago, 2021). ETOD shifts the focus on equitable development because it addresses how traditional TOD may increase property values, which leads to disparities from gentrification and potential displacement (City of Chicago, 2021).

This report specifically focuses on the Chicago region, and in 2021, the city of Chicago introduced its first comprehensive policy plan on ETOD to ensure that all residents benefit from public transit investments in neighborhoods that increase walkability and compact development.

The city of Chicago (2021) states that “ETOD is both a process and a type of development,” aimed to guide investments that address racial justice, public health, economic, and climate challenges (p. 5). Chicago has shifted its focus on identifying priority areas that need transit investments and access the most. Priority areas have higher rates of racial and ethnic marginalized communities and lower-income households. Ultimately, the Chicago region’s plans stress regional mobility, affordability, community engagement, and mixed-use development near transit hubs.

The Metropolitan Planning Council (MPC, n.d.) argues that “transit should be an amenity for everyone” (para. 6). Public transit infrastructure and projects are integral components of urban planning and are critical to discuss and analyze because of their direct impact on communities. Understanding the planning priorities and policy recommendations for TOD projects in Chicago is significant because these plans reveal the region’s focus and values. Therefore, it is essential to assess how such projects impact individuals and households across different socioeconomic backgrounds, as well as what disparities currently exist or what may emerge. Equitable development matters because public transit connects people to the opportunities everyone deserves (MPC, n.d.). ETOD emphasizes strategies that direct new investments and amenities into disinvested and vulnerable communities, aiming to reduce socioeconomic inequities.

To understand the planning narratives centered around TOD and other public transit investment projects, this report focuses on the Chicago region, which is one of the largest metropolitan regions in the nation. The Chicago region has roughly 8.5 million residents, and the city of Chicago has a population of 2.7 million (CMAP, 2025, p. 3). This research analyzes five TOD-related plans at the regional, county, and city governmental levels to examine whether

priorities and policy recommendations align or not, and if equitable development is mentioned. Two out of the five plans cover the seven-county Chicago region, one plan covers Cook County, and the last two plans cover the city of Chicago or a community area. Collectively, the five plans offer insight into how different agencies propose, plan, and recommend strategies for public transit investments and projects, highlighting shared priorities and differences.

This qualitative research relies on secondary data from published official planning documents rather than collecting new data. This approach provides a critical lens for understanding how equity issues are acknowledged or overlooked in official regional and city planning documents. The analysis examines whether equity concerns are addressed in Chicago's planning efforts or if it's neglected. This report also reviews how TOD-related plans and policy recommendations reflect themes such as land use, housing affordability, mobility, strategic planning, accessibility, and sustainability. These concepts helped frame the research question: how are equity-related issues addressed within the priorities and strategies of Chicago's transit-oriented development (TOD) plans?

The first section of this report, the literature review, lays out the foundation of transit-oriented development (TOD) with five sections. First, there is a brief introduction to the early stages and history of TOD and common themes. Second, two common theoretical frameworks centered around urban planning and TOD are explained: New Urbanism and Smart Growth. Third, the common trends and benefits of TOD are examined. Fourth, the relationship between TOD and equity-related issues, such as gentrification and displacement, is described, and their roles in public transit investments. The fifth and last section briefly reviews background information on Chicago and summarizes the five Chicago region plans. Next, the second section is the methodology, which includes the data analysis methods. The third section is the findings,

which outline four key themes and multiple priorities and policy recommendations. The four key themes are (1) land use, housing, and mobility; (2) transit infrastructure and strategic planning; (3) equity, accessibility, and community engagement; and (4) sustainability, pedestrian-friendly infrastructure, and economic development.

By linking urban planning with community development, this report seeks to address a gap in research on how TOD impacts vulnerable populations. Equitable development is not just about expanding transit access, but also about mitigating displacement and ensuring affordable housing near transit corridors. As TOD projects become more relevant in Chicago and other cities, the concern remains whether these initiatives truly benefit all communities or primarily serve more affluent or higher-income neighborhoods. This perspective stresses the urgency of equitable and inclusive planning practices that prioritize areas that have been historically disinvested in while balancing regional social and economic growth.

While TOD's benefits may be well documented, such as improved mobility, economic growth, and sustainability, there is still not enough research on the negative impacts on the community. Equitable Transit-Oriented Development (ETOD) is a new and evolving framework that will continue to shape future public transit plans, making it especially important to examine the priorities and policy recommendations in planning documents. This report emphasizes the need for Chicago and other cities to prioritize equitable principles in TOD-related planning strategies and policies to ensure that these projects benefit all communities.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

This literature review provides the foundation for understanding transit-oriented development (TOD) and its relationship to equity in urban planning. TOD has emerged as a widely adopted framework for linking land use, housing, and transportation, with the promise of creating more connected, sustainable, and livable communities. At the same time, scholars, practitioners, and planners have raised concerns about the potential for TOD projects to contribute to spatial inequality, affordability challenges, and uneven access to benefits for disadvantaged communities. The literature review has five sections: history of the TOD concept, two major theoretical frameworks, common trends and benefits, an overview of equity-related issues, and summaries of five Chicago area plans, which provide the local policy context for this report.

2.1 Early TOD, History, and Themes

Peter Calthorpe coined the term transit-oriented development (TOD) in 1993 when he published *The New American Metropolis*, a book “to address the ecology of communities” (Carlton, 2009, p. 1). He focused on transit-induced transformation of urban cities and argued that TOD was a solution for regional growth and a sustainable community design. Calthorpe and other urbanists “promoted a certain vision of community: affordable, environmentally sustainable, and with a superior quality of life,” and “argued that access to rail transit played a pivotal role in the advent of such an urban way of life” (Jamme, Rodriguez, Bahl, and Banerjee, 2019, p. 409). In the 1980s and 90s, the idea of transit-oriented development in urban planning was formed, and since then, it has evolved into many different variations regarding themes and topics. Initially, the concept of TOD was about regional growth, sustainability, and moderate to high-density development near transit stations.

Even though Calthorpe invented the “transit-oriented development” label, he did not invent the concept. Existing frameworks before the 1990s included Ebenezer Howard’s *Garden City Model* from 1898 and Clarence Perry’s *Neighborhood Unit* from 1929 (Chapple and Loukaitou-Sideris, 2019, pp. 13–15). In the 1930s, when the streetcar was developed, it became an increasingly big part of mobility in cities and suburbs, and it expanded into transit-accessible areas (Chapple and Loukaitou-Sideris, 2019, p. 14). After the 1960s, the private automobile industry began to grow; many streetcars around the U.S. were demolished, while highways and interstates were expanded and developed. Thus, the sprawling nature of U.S. metropolises grew as car-oriented developments became more prevalent. In the 1970s and 80s, the reinvention of transit accessibility began to reappear in cities as there was significant growth in rail networks (Chapple and Loukaitou-Sideris, 2019, p. 14). Around that time, two theoretical frameworks rose – New Urbanism and Smart Growth – paralleled with significant growth in rail; those two frameworks will be discussed later.

While Calthorpe focused on the community, TOD later extended to focus on urban planning, transportation, land use, and urban design. It “emerged as a response to some of the unpleasant derivatives of the suburbanization that characterized postwar development” (Chapple and Loukaitou-Sideris, 2019, p. 13). Bernick and Cervero’s concept of TOD in 1997 promoted the notion of *transit villages*, having mixed-use commercial areas and housing surrounding transit stations, which integrated the idea of a “true community” near a transit station (Chapple and Loukaitou-Sideris, 2019, p. 18; Jamme et al., 2019, p. 412). This evolved the idea of TOD, which connected the initial idea from Calthorpe’s focus on creating sustainable communities, and it added emphasis on design characteristics, transit access, and policy incentives.

2.1.1 Common TOD Themes

With the rise of TOD projects that emerged in the late 20th century, the Center for Transit-Oriented Development (CTOD) was formed in 2004 to evaluate such projects (CTOD, n.d.). CTOD created a collective consensus about the strategies of TOD among stakeholders, transit agencies, government, and analysts/researchers (CTOD, n.d.). The early ideas of TOD can be argued to have identified “community building as the end goal, and sustainable urban forms, supportive policies, and public-private partnerships as the means to achieve this goal” (Jamme et al., 2019, p. 412). More current ideas for TOD include integrating local and regional planning processes on various environmental, social, and economic issues. The international organization, the Institute for Transportation and Development Policy (ITDP), promotes sustainable and equitable transportation worldwide, emphasizing high-quality transit systems, advocates for transit policy, and provides technical expertise for cities and governments (ITDP, n.d.). The ITDP also notes that worldwide, there is a theme of incorporating public transit with mixed-use and high-density development near transit stations and supporting pedestrian-friendly areas.

There are many other common themes and topics relating to TOD. Jamme et al. (2019) researched this by reviewing hundreds of pieces of TOD literature to understand the common themes and topics. The authors used coded language and narrowed the main TOD themes and issues into nine categories: (1) Policy, Planning, and Implementation, (2) Land Use and Transportation, (3) Community Development, (4) Smart Growth and Sustainability, (5) Urban Design, (6) Market Responses, (7) TOD Concept, (8) Health, and (9) New Technologies and Communication. The category – policy, planning, and implementation – contributed to 35% of the literature, whereas the category – land use and transportation – had 29% (Jamme et al., 2019, p. 413). Jamme et al. (2019, p. 412) explained that the term “development” has different

understandings; some focus on urban development outcomes (land or real estate development), and others focus on processes or principles (sustainable development). Therefore, there are different ways to define development and TOD themes, with some related to sustainability, community, and land development, and some related to other areas.

Aside from common themes of TOD in literature, Chapple and Loukaitou-Sideris (2019, pp. 19–22) state that there are five stakeholder categories related to TOD: environmental, transit agencies, local governments, housing and community advocates, and developers. For environmentalists, TOD could reduce the expansion of sprawl in outside areas to preserve greenfield and agricultural land and to create a more sustainable urban infrastructure that conserves energy and reduces air pollution, which closely follows the Smart Growth framework. For transit agencies, TOD increases transit ridership, enhances household transportation affordability, and capitalizes on expansive public transit investments. For local governments, the focus is on having compact urbanism, infill development, city revitalization, and reduced traffic congestion. Advocates for housing and community emphasize the social objectives of TOD, such as increased housing affordability, more housing options, mixed-income neighborhoods, improved mobility for low-income households, and more affordable transportation. Lastly, developers view TOD based on how it impacts and benefits the economy, such as increased property values, higher rents, and higher profits from building leases.

Ultimately, there are many ways to research, analyze, and view TOD in literature, so it is important to understand the varying perspectives between transit agencies, local governments, policymakers, stakeholders, advocates, and developers. Based on the varying perspectives in literature or planning documents, each one would also have varying priorities and recommendations.

2.2 Theoretical Frameworks

This next section discusses the theoretical framework and foundations of TOD and urban planning. In the 1980s and 90s, topics relating to urbanism, public transportation planning, and TOD literature became more prevalent, and there is no single framework. There are two prominent frameworks, which significantly influence TOD practices: New Urbanism and Smart Growth. Both frameworks shaped the development of TOD as a planning strategy centered around transit. The other framework is the TOD Standard framework, developed by the Institute for Transportation and Development Policy (ITDP) to provide a shared framework and promote greater consistency in how TOD principles are applied (ITDP, n.d.).

TOD combines regional planning, city revitalization, suburban renewal, and walkable neighborhoods, and extends beyond solving transit issues to address broader urban planning concerns (TOD Institute, n.d.; Yen, Mulley, Chen, and Chiou, 2024). However, TOD research has not explored some other related perspectives, such as public health, accessibility, travel behavior, inclusive design, and other multidisciplinary approaches (Jamme et al., 2019).

2.2.1 New Urbanism

The New Urbanism movement emerged in the early 1980s in the U.S. to rethink suburban development and car dependency. It reimagined urban living in response to the negative economic, health, and environmental consequences, and reexamined the American Dream to seek alternative models for urban living (Jamme et al., 2019, p. 411). The movement promoted principles rooted in traditional urban patterns, including walkable blocks, mixed-use development, and accessible public spaces (Congress for the New Urbanism, n.d.). It advocated zoning reforms, thoughtful urban design, and the revitalization of underutilized spaces. Its

holistic approach integrates design, policy, and collaboration among various stakeholders to create sustainable communities that enhance economic, public life, and overall well-being. Although New Urbanism contributed significantly to shaping TOD and compact urban design, it has faced criticism for environmental determinism, which is the idea that urban design alone can shape social behavior (Congress for the New Urbanism, n.d.). Critics argue that while well-designed spaces can encourage walkability and community interaction, broader factors like affordability, systemic inequalities, and governance must also be addressed. Despite these critiques, New Urbanism remains a foundational framework in contemporary urban planning theory and practice, especially for its influence on policies promoting more inclusive and sustainable development.

2.2.2 Smart Growth

Alongside New Urbanism in the 1990s, Smart Growth emerged and sought to address the consequences of sprawl, traffic congestion, and environmental degradation (Chapple and Loukaitou-Sideris, 2019, p. 15). Like New Urbanism, Smart Growth prioritizes compact, mixed-use development that brings housing, jobs, and amenities into closer proximity. Its goals include revitalizing downtowns, preserving open space and farmland, ensuring housing affordability, and offering diverse transportation options.

Cities implementing Smart Growth adopted tools such as urban growth boundaries, infill development, and higher-density design (Smart Growth America, n.d.). Seattle, for example, was the first city to document a comprehensive plan guided by this framework in 1994, setting a model for sustainable urban planning (Yip, Ramezani, Meijering, Tillema, & Arts, 2024). While Smart Growth varies from place to place, cities often follow some key principles, including mixed-use land, offering diverse housing choices, creating walkable neighborhoods, and

fostering distinctive communities (Smart Growth America, n.d.). The goals of Smart Growth are to ultimately promote equitable and environmentally responsible development and remain an approach that addresses modern urban challenges.

2.2.3 TOD Standard Framework

Early models of New Urbanism and Smart Growth influenced the Institute for Transportation and Development Policy (ITDP, n.d.) to develop a TOD Standard Framework. ITDP describes eight principles of TOD, how they form the TOD Standard Framework, and other objectives and metrics that guide project assessments. This is a potential tool to provide a shared, comprehensive framework for evaluating plans by developing inclusive, efficient, and accessible urban environments.

The eight principles of TOD are walking, cycling, connect, transit, mix, densify, compact, and shift (ITDP, n.d., Eight Principles of TOD section). The first principle is *Walking*, which ensures safe, comfortable, and pedestrian-friendly environments. Walking is essential for sustainable mobility and community interaction. *Cycling* promotes protected and convenient cycling infrastructure, offering an affordable and efficient transport option that extends access to amenities and services. *Connect* emphasizes a dense network of short, direct, well-integrated pedestrian and cycling networks, making neighborhoods more accessible and convenient. *Transit* ensures that public transport is easily accessible, affordable, and reliable. *Mix* supports diverse land uses and inclusive growth among residents of differing socioeconomic statuses and demographics. *Densify* and *Compact* optimize population density and urban design organizations to support transit, reduce commute distances, and resource consumption. Finally, *Shift* prioritizes other transportation modes over car usage, reducing car dependency and reclaiming space for

people. By integrating these principles, TOD fosters efficient, sustainable, inclusive, and environmentally friendly cities.

2.3 Trends and Benefits

Understanding the broader trends and benefits of TOD in the U.S. is essential for contextualizing current planning practices. TOD has gained some popularity in cities like San Francisco, Los Angeles, Seattle, Chicago, New York City, and Portland, where developers often consider changes in demographics, lifestyle, and market demands. As mentioned, there has been an upward growth in TOD and other transit investments, and increased municipal planning around TOD policies has contributed to the growth of funding for transit infrastructure and investments. With this increase in funding, “transit-focused plans generally have more potential to garner broad support than similar redevelopment plans lacking a transit element” (Rayle, 2015, p. 534). Therefore, some municipalities have found it easier to attract federal funding for transit-related projects, which represents a positive trend for implementing and promoting TOD initiatives.

Closely related to these investment trends are demographic patterns that shape demand for TOD. Chapple and Loukaitou-Sideris (2019) state that “national surveys have shown that compact development is particularly appealing to two groups: younger, college-educated adults and lower-income individuals” (p. 28). Since these groups are more likely to support transit developments, it is important to note that promoting density looks different in every city, as local contexts influence how communities react and adapt to new developments.

In addition to demographic and investment trends, equity has emerged as a central theme in discussions about TOD’s benefits over the past decade. The Metropolitan Planning Council (MPC) and the Institute for Transportation and Development Policy (ITDP) argue that TOD

should be more equitable. MPC (n.d.) emphasizes reducing the “barriers to equitable development near transit through robust public engagement, education, providing technical assistance, and advocating for policy change” (para. 3). From this perspective, the critique that TOD may not consider equity is becoming more of a priority to addressing possible consequences and challenges that may disproportionately affect disadvantaged households.

2.3.1 Benefits of TOD

The Metropolitan Agency Council (MPC) and the Institute for Transportation & Development Policy (ITDP) explore and evaluate the benefits of TOD. TOD “benefits people, cities, and the environment,” and transit should be an amenity for all (ITDP, n.d., para. 1; MPC, n.d., para. 2). According to MPC and ITDP, there are five key benefits to TOD: economic, accessibility and mobility, environmental sustainability, health and safety, and equity and community development.

2.3.1.1 Economic Benefits

TOD can contribute to some economic benefits by reducing household transportation costs, increasing property values, raising retail sales, and offering greater access to project funding (MPC, n.d.). Households in transit-accessible areas spend significantly less on car ownership, gas, insurance, and maintenance. With reliable public transportation, households may reduce the number of cars they own or eliminate the need to own a car. This may be beneficial because transportation and housing costs are burdens to households. MPC (n.d.) states that households in TOD areas can save up to \$10,000 annually on transportation costs. Additionally, property values are 40% higher near transit. The high or increase in property values does not benefit household costs, but they may benefit the economy for local governments by generating increased tax revenues. Additionally, businesses in transit-friendly areas often see retail sales up

88% due to experiencing higher foot traffic (MPC, n.d.). Lastly, TOD projects can attract other investments in the area from developers.

2.3.1.2 Accessibility and Mobility

The second benefit of TOD is that it can improve accessibility and mobility by providing people with higher connectivity between home, recreation, opportunities, and amenities. With more emphasis and priority on public transit, it would lead to higher frequency and a more well-integrated public transit system, which can reduce travel times, increase reliability, and make commutes more efficient. Unlike car-dependent areas with lots of sprawl, TOD neighborhoods are designed for multimodal transportation and pedestrian-friendly streets.

If there is a higher priority on mobility, this connectivity can ensure people can travel more easily, have more than one travel option, and increase access to employment opportunities and services. MPC (n.d.) states that residents near transit can access 24% to 50% more job opportunities than residents who do not live near transit. With increased mobility, this can provide greater accessibility for residents and riders, especially for vulnerable riders, such as seniors, young children, people with disabilities, low-income individuals, and more.

2.3.1.3 Environmental Sustainability

The third benefit is environmental sustainability, which emphasizes minimizing the negative impacts of sprawling development and reducing road congestion and pollution. Promoting multimodal options, reducing car usage, and encouraging higher ridership on public transit all contribute positively to environmental outcomes. Sprawl-driven land consumption not only increases car dependence but also degrades critical natural resources and habitats; TOD combats this by encouraging mixed-use and denser developments that use land more efficiently and preserve open space (ITDP, n.d.).

Another environmental benefit related to reduced car dependence is the decrease in congestion and emissions. Since cars have limited capacity compared to buses or trains, the ratio of riders per car is significantly lower, leading to greater fuel consumption and higher emissions. In contrast, transit systems are more efficient: public transportation can lower household transportation emissions by 78% (MPC, n.d.). Beyond lowering gas emissions, choosing public transit over cars reduces other pollutants that contribute to poor air quality and other issues.

Finally, TOD contributes to broader goals of climate resilience and energy efficiency. Compact and walkable communities reduce reliance on fossil fuels, conserve energy, and promote infrastructure investments that are more sustainable over the long term (CMAP, 2010, p. 27). By reducing the vehicle miles traveled (VMT) and supporting sustainable mobility options, like biking and walking, TOD can help prioritize issues relating to the climate and environment.

2.3.1.4 Health and Safety

The fourth benefit of TOD is that it can improve residents' health and safety by increasing the walkability of denser neighborhoods and transit-accessible areas. A higher walkability score correlates with residents' health improvements, such as lowering obesity rates threefold by creating more spaces for people to be multimodal and advocating for a more walkable community (MPC, n.d.). TOD can enable active mobility and foster environments that improve mental, emotional, and physical well-being. In contrast to TOD, urban sprawl reinforces longer commutes between amenities and home, and forces people to use inactive forms of transportation: cars. Sprawl can negatively impact people's health, such as exposure to harmful pollution, limiting physical activity, implications for people's mental and emotional health, and may decrease access to leisure time. Promoting walkability ultimately "enables physical activity,

outdoor engagement, and social interaction, all of which can improve mental and physical health” (ITDP, n.d.).

Safety is another important component of TOD’s benefits. With less reliance on cars, cities can often prioritize pedestrian-friendly infrastructure and traffic-calming measures, which reduce collisions and fatalities. “When people are centered in the design of neighborhoods and streets, streets are safer” (ITDP, n.d.). Beyond traffic safety, TOD can also strengthen perceptions of public safety by creating more dense and mixed-use neighborhoods, possibly reducing the risk of crime in isolated areas. Public spaces that are more active and have higher accessible transit hubs can enhance feelings of security. In this way, TOD not only makes streets physically safer but also supports a broader sense of community well-being.

2.3.1.5 Equity and Community Development

Lastly, both MPC and ITDP argue that TOD can promote equity and community development. Not all TOD plans and projects promote equitable development, so ITDP recognizes that TOD is not automatically equitable. However, “TOD can help address socio-spatial inequity to better meet the needs of marginalized populations to access opportunities and strengthen social networks” (ITDP, n.d.). TOD can shift in the right direction, with increasing density, accessibility, and walkability, but without equitable planning, TOD can contribute to displacement and gentrification.

To prevent higher inequities with TOD, this is where equitable transit-oriented development (ETOD) comes in, which has been described previously. ITDP (n.d.) explores some strategies that could encourage equity, such as reducing parking requirements to lower construction costs, preserving housing affordability, and promoting accessibility. These

strategies reflect a broader concern with aligning TOD not only with mobility goals but also with community development priorities.

Ultimately, the priority of equity and community development in TOD projects intersects with multiple other issues, such as housing affordability, accessibility, land use, and public policy. Even though MPC and ITDP mention equity as a benefit of TOD, it is not inherently equitable, but that is the purpose of this report: to recognize that with thoughtful and targeted planning, TOD can strengthen social and economic networks within communities for all.

2.4 TOD and Equity-Related Issues

While TOD infrastructure and projects have some benefits, there are also disadvantages and unintended consequences. Neighborhoods and communities are directly impacted by TOD projects, so recognizing that there may be some people who do not benefit from TOD is important. As previously mentioned, TOD can lead to higher property values, thus increasing the costs for businesses and residents. Since TOD is relatively new, there has been little existing research that has studied the changes and possible issues over the last decade. The two main equity-related issues for TOD are gentrification and displacement. There are some limitations to understanding gentrification and displacement, since both are difficult to quantify, and there has not been enough time for case studies on neighborhood changes.

The social impacts of TOD cannot be fully understood without examining the interconnected issues of gentrification, displacement, and spatial inequality. These processes shape who benefits from transit investment and who is left out. While TOD aims to create accessible and sustainable communities, it can also produce unintended consequences by restructuring neighborhoods in ways that may potentially displace vulnerable residents. This section reviews definitions of gentrification and displacement, explores how they relate to spatial

inequality, and considers the role of public transit investments in shaping equity-related outcomes.

2.4.1 Gentrification

In *Gentrification and Displacement as Global Phenomena*, Chapple and Loukaitou-Sideris (2019) extensively describe how gentrification and displacement have unfolded globally and within the U.S., particularly with the introduction of new transit systems. Gentrification may be viewed as an urban transformation or restructuring of capital and people. Also, it is often framed as a form of revitalization that selectively targets specific neighborhoods for new investment, often attracting higher-income residents while displacing lower-income, long-term residents.

In the U.S., Chapple and Loukaitou-Sideris (2019) argue that the study of gentrification is often reduced to “upscaling the neighborhood’s socioeconomic context rather than the investment upgrading its built environment” (p. 46). This framing of gentrification highlights demographic and economic shifts while concealing other structural forces, such as capitalism, racial exclusion, and inequality. Chapple and Loukaitou-Sideris (2019) argue that there is invisible yet interconnected forces of wealth accumulation, policy decisions, and historical segregation patterns, which continue to shape the uneven development of cities, reinforcing displacement and exclusion (pp. 39–40).

2.4.2 Displacement

Displacement is closely tied to gentrification, but is distinct. It occurs when “any household is forced to move from its residence by conditions which affect the dwelling or immediate surroundings” (Chapple and Loukaitou-Sideris, 2019, p. 49). It is often difficult to determine the extent to which a resident’s decision to move is voluntary or coerced by these

external pressures. These external forces may be physical or non-physical. Physical forces can include forced evictions, utility shut-offs, or extensive rehabilitation and redevelopment projects that render housing unaffordable or uninhabitable. Non-physical forces include the “sense of loss of place or belonging, erosion of cultural cohesion, loss of community supports, and/or diminution of political power” (Chapple and Loukaitou-Sideris, 2019, p. 48). These forms of displacement can be just as impactful as physical displacement. As this may gradually destabilize communities and push long-term residents out, there are subtle social and cultural shifts rather than clear economic changes.

Economic forces also play a significant role in displacement. Rising rents, increasing property taxes, and other financial pressures often exclude lower-income households from gentrifying neighborhoods. Chapple and Loukaitou-Sideris (2019) define “exclusionary displacement” as “a situation where a household is not permitted to move into a neighborhood based on conditions that are beyond their control (e.g., price increases)” (p. 50). This reshapes neighborhood demographics over time through competition for housing, which gives the advantage to wealthier residents, excluding lower-income households who can no longer afford to live in the area. Chapple and Loukaitou-Sideris (2019) conclude that “research has generally confirmed that exclusionary displacement is occurring in gentrifying neighborhoods: newcomers are typically wealthier, Whiter, and of higher educational attainment, and those leaving are more likely to be renters, poorer, and people of color” (p. 51). Similarly, Yip et al. (2024) found that displacement disproportionately affects ethnic minorities and older adults, reinforcing existing inequalities (p. 945).

Although gentrification and displacement are often connected, displacement is not always a direct or predictable outcome of gentrification (Chapple and Loukaitou-Sideris, 2019, p. 51). It

can occur before, during, or after investments in the neighborhood, depending on economic, social, and policy-driven conditions. These processes of displacement are rooted in U.S. history: past colonial aggression and racialized policies. Those have created patterns of exclusion and marginalization, making displacement an ongoing reality rather than a temporary consequence of gentrification. This shows that it is important to reexamine where those investments are being used, especially in cities where communities may be historically segregated by ethnicity and income.

2.4.3 Spatial Inequality

The concepts of gentrification and displacement tie directly into the broader issue of spatial inequality. Spatial inequality refers to the uneven distribution of resources, services, and opportunities across areas, often linked to historical patterns of segregation, disinvestment, and systemic inequities (Morrill, 2015; Mueller, Hilde, and Torrado, 2018). These disparities are evident in access to quality housing, public transit, and economic opportunities between neighborhoods, privileging higher-income communities while marginalizing low-income communities.

In urban planning, spatial inequality is reflected in where investments are made and who benefits. Because TOD often directs infrastructure improvements toward select neighborhoods, it risks reinforcing these historical divides and disproportionately targeting certain communities. One consequence is residential gentrification, where transit-oriented investments displace households that may be more reliant on public transit. Understanding spatial inequality is essential for assessing the equity impacts of TOD. This is important because TOD can be a key priority for policy decisions, so it is also necessary to analyze the impacts of its initiatives.

Without intentional equitable planning, TOD can reproduce or deepen existing spatial inequalities by displacing vulnerable residents from transit-accessible areas.

2.4.4 Role of Public Transit Investment in Equity Issues

The link between transit investment and neighborhood change has often been overlooked. Chapple and Loukaitou-Sideris (2019) note that previous research has hardly mentioned the role of transit investment as a driver for gentrification and displacement. Historically, in the mid-20th century, urban planners and redevelopment projects shifted towards bulldozing entire blocks for new commercial and residential development, which led to “destroying communities and catalyzing neighborhood transformation” (Chapple and Loukaitou-Sideris, 2019, p. 44). These infrastructure upgrades transformed and altered the community regarding demographics, housing affordability, and accessibility.

More recently, community activists and urban planners became more concerned with introducing developments around transit, as it could lead to gentrification and displacement. As Chapple and Loukaitou-Sideris (2019) observed, “the implicit and expressed fear of advocates and low-income communities is that the higher property values and rents will inevitably push out disadvantaged residents living near transit stations” (p. 53). This is transit-induced gentrification and displacement, where TOD projects increase land and property values and attract wealthier, car-owning residents, pushing out lower-income or transit-dependent households (Yip et al., 2024, p. 948; Chapple and Loukaitou-Sideris, 2019, p. 54).

This dynamic transit-induced gentrification raises justice-related issues. Outcome justice relates to who benefits and who is harmed: TOD may improve transit accessibility overall, but disproportionately displaces those most reliant on it (Yip et al., 2024). Then there are concerns about process justice and who is involved or participates in the planning process. The

government and property developers often dominate decision-making, while residents and local businesses have limited involvement. Both forms of justice suggest that there is a limited focus for addressing spatial inequities faced by disadvantaged residents, by limiting who has power and voice in the decision-making process.

Even though there has been limited research in the U.S. on transit-induced displacement, there have been a couple of studies. In 2010, there was a study from Pollack, Bluestone, and Billingham that covered 12 metropolitan areas. It was found that neighborhoods near transit, built between 1990 and 2000, experienced increases in median household income, housing prices, and rents rather than in non-transit neighborhoods (Pollack, Bluestone, & Billingham, 2010). There was other research in cities such as San Francisco, Denver, and Bangkok, which linked TOD with increased income levels, housing costs, and education levels post-TOD development (Yip et al., 2024).

One of the most relevant existing studies to this research topic is from Chapple and Loukaitou-Sideris, which is mentioned in their 2019 book, *Transit-Oriented Displacement or Community Dividends*. Chapple and Loukaitou-Sideris (2019) focused specifically on regional planning efforts in the San Francisco Bay Area, analyzing the unintended consequences of neighborhood changes after TOD projects. The focus was whether TOD projects lead to displacement or community dividends; it was concluded that the realities of this question are highly complex, and there is no simple relationship between transit and displacement. It was stated that there are two sides to these projects: benefits and consequences. New developments near transit may offer community dividends, such as increased accessibility and potentially more density. On the other hand, Chapple and Loukaitou-Sideris (2019) state that it is critical to implement policies to ensure that existing residents are protected from future displacement,

whether it is at a small scale or slow pace. It is argued that regions and cities should consider policy transfer for anti-displacement policies and programs, which should be emphasized to ensure that historically disinvested communities benefit from such new transit investments.

Furthermore, the extent of gentrification varies depending on the type of TOD and the characteristics of the surrounding neighborhood, and how change manifests is not the same across contexts. Chapple and Loukaitou-Sideris (2019) argue that behind “almost every story of new-build gentrification is state facilitation of market forces, and behind almost every story of the influx of new residents is an increase in income inequality that is concentrating wealth in relatively few households while disempowering the masses” (p. 60). In the U.S., power dynamics shape neighborhood change, often replicating and reinforcing historic patterns of oppression and racism (Chapple and Loukaitou-Sideris, 2019, p. 61). These dynamics are not only social but spatial, determining which communities are prioritized for investment and which are displaced or marginalized.

Lastly, building on equity-related issues, Yip et al. (2024) note that although many existing studies suggest TOD contributes to gentrification, additional factors must be considered before establishing a direct correlation. For example, community dynamics, built environment characteristics, and planning or policy frameworks all influence outcomes. Without deliberate anti-displacement strategies, TOD projects risk reinforcing spatial inequality by replicating the uneven distribution of transit accessibility and excluding vulnerable populations from the benefits of TOD.

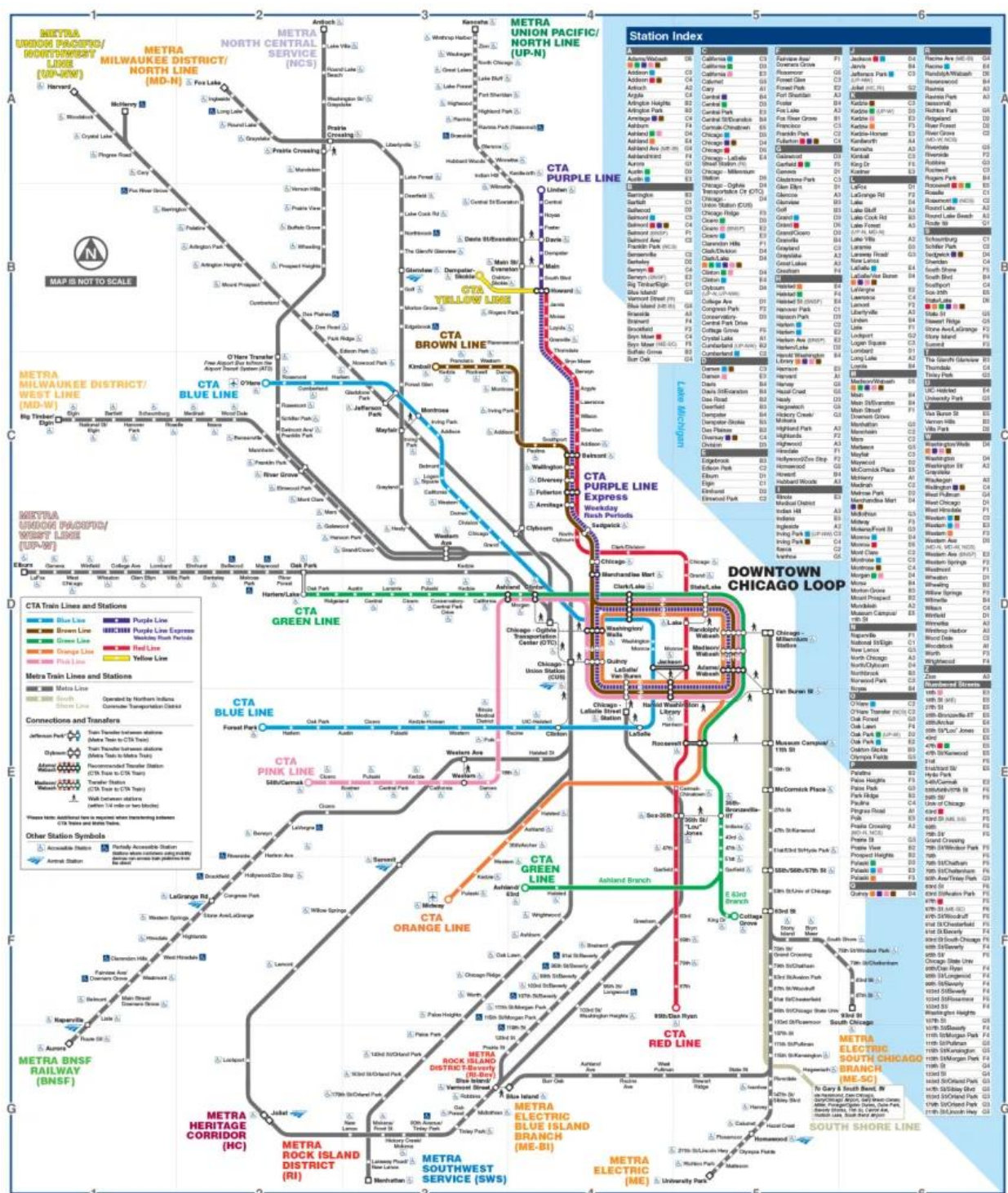
2.5 Chicago’s TOD Policies and Plans

Chicago is the main geographic region focused on in this report. Chicago has historically been transit-oriented, with development patterns shaped by its extensive streetcar and rail

systems since the 19th century. There were early transit investments that encouraged residential and commercial growth near stations, making transit hubs an important part of the identity and community of neighborhoods (CNT, 2013). After World War II, Chicago shifted toward automobile dependency, dismantling its streetcar network and reducing transit investment. As previously mentioned, this was a nationwide phenomenon. By the late 20th century, community advocacy to preserve infrastructure, such as efforts to save the Lake Street “L” from demolition, helped revive interest in TOD as a strategy for neighborhood revitalization (CNT, 2013, p. 5). In 1947, the Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) was established to manage the city’s transit system, and shortly after, in 1974, the Regional Transportation Authority (RTA) was established to oversee the region’s transit system and funding.

To get an idea of how extensive the current regional public transit system is, the map below shows the different rail lines.

Figure 2.1. Chicago Region's Rail System ([RTA, 2025](#))



National and local trends in the late 20th and early 21st centuries moved towards more investment in public transportation, and Chicago reflected these shifts. Once Chicago's public

transit system became governmentally managed by the CTA, the city shifted its focus to the development of projects due to increased funding.

2.5.1 Chicago's Demographics and TOD

The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP) publishes a series of data profiles for every county, municipality, and Chicago Community Area (CCA), which primarily feature data from the American Community Survey (ACS) five-year estimates. Before examining Chicago and its TOD-related plans, it is important to have demographic context for the Chicago region, Cook County, and the city of Chicago. The CMAP (2025) region covers seven counties in the northeastern Illinois region, and the population is about 8.5 million; Cook County is about 5.1 million, and Chicago is 2.7 million.

The table below shows an overview of some demographics for the city of Chicago residents, which are relevant in understanding the context of Chicago; only the city of Chicago is reviewed because two of the plans analyzed focus on the city. This data is sourced from CMAP's (2025) community snapshot for the city of Chicago. Demographics include race and ethnicity, household income, mode of travel to work, vehicles available per household, population with a disability, and general land use.

Table 2.1. Chicago's Demographic Overview from 2019-2023 ([CMAP, 2025](#))

Demographic Category	Indicator	Value
Race & Ethnicity	White (non-Hispanic)	32.2%
	Hispanic or Latino	29.6%
	Black	28.0%
	Asian	7.0%
	Other/Multiple Races	3.2%
Household Income	Less than \$25,000	19.3%
	\$25,000 to \$49,999	16.7%
	\$50,000 to \$99,999	25.7%
	\$100,000 to \$149,999	16.0%
	\$150,000+	22.4%
	Median Income	\$75,134

Mode of Travel to Work	Work at Home	18.3%
	Drive Alone	46.0%
	Carpool	7.4%
	Transit	19.3%
	Walk or Bike	7.1%
Vehicles Available per Household	No Vehicle	26.7%
	1 Vehicle	45.0%
	2 Vehicles	20.9%
	3+ Vehicles	7.5%
Population with a Disability	Number of People	11.8%
General Land Use	Single-Family	19.9%
	Multi-Family	11.5%
	Commercial	4.8%
	Institutional	5.9%
	Mixed Use	1.1%
	Transportation	39.0%
	Open Space	7.2%

This data is all relevant to understanding the context of the city of Chicago and its residents because it shows median household income and any transportation-related data. When about 39% of land use in Chicago is used for transportation, that is a significant amount of space, so it is critical to analyze the impacts of transportation and infrastructure on communities.

Furthermore, to get an idea of the different TOD-related projects in Chicago, the map below is from Elevated Chicago's website, which was created by the Institute of Housing Studies at DePaul University. The map highlights projects from 2021-2024 and areas with the potential for higher or lower risk of displacement. The other aspect that is included on the map but is not included in this report is the Department of Housing's (DOH) TOD affordable housing projects.

Figure 2.2. Chicago ETOD Projects 2024 ([Institute for Housing Studies at DePaul University, 2024](#))

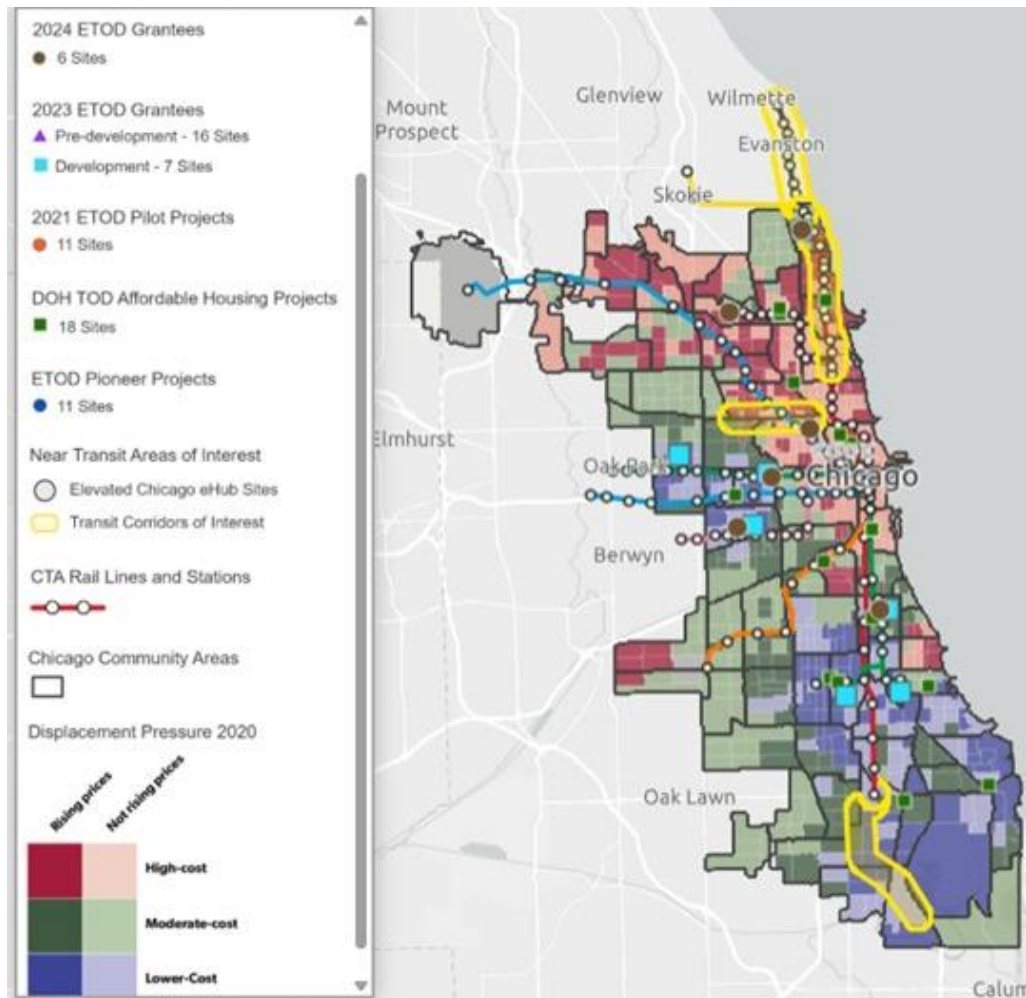


Figure 1 shows that there are notable differences between the high and low housing prices depending on the areas of Chicago. The north side displays that there are higher housing costs, the west side has moderate costs, and the south side has lower costs. This trend regarding housing costs and areas shows that some areas near transit projects or transit lines have rising prices and, therefore, have higher displacement pressures.

2.5.2 Study from the Center for Neighborhood Technology (CNT)

The Center for Neighborhood Technology (CNT) published Transit-Oriented Development in the Chicago Region: Efficient and Resilient Communities for the 21st Century

in April 2013 as a study, assessment, and action plan. This serves as a valuable guide and study for understanding TOD in the Chicago region from 2000 to 2010. The study evaluates TOD's performance and its impacts on the cost of living, housing, family stability, income, and employment opportunities, while addressing the uneven distribution of TOD benefits. Additionally, it compares different transit zones in the region, examines some case studies, and offers policy recommendations.

Between 2000 and 2010, TOD in the Chicago region played a significant role in promoting economic, environmental, and social sustainability. CNT emphasizes the need for strategic policy interventions to maximize the benefits of public transit investments, especially given the challenges and opportunities presented by the extensive transit network. Using the National TOD Database, CNT analyzed the performance of the city's 367 CTA and Metra stations to identify transit zones that successfully supported walkable, affordable, and sustainable communities (CNT, 2013, p. 8).

CNT (2013, p.3) recommended that the Chicago region adopt five key commitments: (1) create TOD zones by addressing local, regional, and federal land use policy barriers; (2) preserve affordable housing to ensure inclusivity across income levels; (3) align job centers with transit to reduce transportation costs, congestion, and pollution; (4) provide alternatives to car ownership, such as car-sharing, bike infrastructure, and walkable streets; and (5) prioritize TOD initiatives across agencies. By implementing these strategies, CNT argues that TOD can become a central pillar of Chicago's economic development and a tool to improve residents' quality of life.

2.5.3 TOD Ordinances from 2013 to 2022

From 2000 to 2010, Chicago experienced a decline in TOD development, despite various planning efforts at the regional and city levels related to transit infrastructure (CNT, 2013, p. 2).

These efforts gained relevance around 2013 when Chicago released its first TOD Ordinance, followed by revisions in 2015 and the most recent in 2022. The first TOD ordinance was from 2013, which provided the initial framework of TOD-related policies that now have many adaptations. In 2013, the ordinance “applied to a smaller zone of applicability, only affecting parcels within 600 feet of station entrances,” and allowed projects to increase their floor area ratios, but “did not include any specific additional benefits for projects with additional on-site affordable units” (MPC, 2015, Changes from 2013 TOD ordinance section, para. 2). The 2015 ordinance included having more incentives for higher-quality development near transit, off-street parking requirements, and affordability requirements to encourage new developments near transit (MPC, 2015).

2.5.3.1 Connected Communities Ordinance (2022)

The most recent ordinance is the Connected Communities Ordinance, adopted by the City Council in 2022. It aims at advancing equitable TOD and increasing transit accessibility in communities. The intention is to attract investment and create more opportunities “by encouraging and creating predictable standards for equitable development near transit” (City of Chicago, n.d., para. 3). It is considered one of the largest reforms for Chicago’s zoning code in decades, since it implements many of the recommendations for the ETOD Policy Plan in 2021, which is one of the five plans analyzed for this report and will be discussed later. The ordinance provisions are organized into three categories relating to developments near transit: create opportunities by expanding TOD incentives, improve street safety and encourage walkability, and increase housing opportunities, affordability, and accessibility.

There are eight sections of the Connected Communities Ordinance: parking, density, affordability, accessibility zoning bonus, people-friendly design, inclusionary application zoning

process, and addressing deconversions. The first section of the ordinance states that parking requirements must be flexible, and changes were made to the geographic and zoning eligibility. The geographic eligibility was expanded from a quarter of a mile to one-half of a mile from CTA or Metra stations, and a quarter mile from bus lines. The second section states a change to the existing TOD density bonuses; the same expansion of geographic eligibility of parking applies to density bonuses. The third section allows new opportunities to add residential density to TOD-eligible areas. The fourth section states that the ordinance “creates a zoning incentive for developers to build units that are accessible to people with mobility-related disabilities” (City of Chicago, 2023, p. 7). The fifth section about people-friendly design states the inclusion of new guidelines and requirements to promote safe public spaces for pedestrians and people with mobility-related impairments. The sixth section states the creation of a new way to require voting for certain residential zoning applications, known as inclusionary applications. Inclusionary areas have low amounts of affordable rental housing, as defined by the Affordable Requirements Ordinance (ARO). The last section discusses that communities facing displacement pressures, the ordinance “restricts low-density development in certain areas zoned for multi-family in TOD areas” (City of Chicago, 2023, p. 11).

This policy shift in the last decade led to many other studies by transit agencies, organizations, and real estate agencies examining the effects of areas close to transit stations. Transit agencies and regional/local governments in Chicago view TOD as a strategy and tool to strengthen the public transit system, increase ridership, and discourage urban sprawl.

2.5.4 Five Chicago Region Plans

This report focuses on five Chicago-area TOD-related or transportation plans. This section briefly summarizes each plan, specifically the planning process and the main goals. Some

of the plans are in collaboration with other agencies and organizations. The plans that will be reviewed and analyzed are published by the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP), Cook County Government, Elevated Chicago, the City of Chicago government, and the Regional Transportation Authority (RTA). CMAP and RTA cover the Chicago region, which is the northeastern part of Illinois and includes six counties: Cook, DuPage, Kane, Lake, McHenry, and Will. Out of these agencies and organizations, five plans will be reviewed and analyzed: CMAP's Go to 2040 Plan, Cook County's 2040 Long Range Transportation Plan, Elevated Chicago/CMAP/RTA's Logan Square Blue Line Action Plan, the City of Chicago's ETOD Policy Plan, and RTA's Transit is the Answer. These plans focus on either comprehensive regional plans, transportation, public transit, or ETOD-related plans.

2.5.4.1 Go to 2040 Plan (2010)

The Go To 2040 Plan, developed by the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP) in 2010, outlines a comprehensive vision for sustainable growth in the Chicago region, which is comprised of six counties. Chicago region's transportation infrastructure was built decades ago, so CMAP focuses its plan on the future of transit systems. Although Chicago's transportation system is globally recognized, the region struggles to keep up with other advancing and more modern international transit systems. One of this plan's central concerns is the modernization and improvement of the region's transportation infrastructure, which has struggled to keep pace with evolving economic and environmental demands.

This plan emphasizes that a reliable and efficient transportation system is foundational to regional equity, economic competitiveness, and environmental sustainability. The plan has four sections: livable communities, human capacity, efficient governance, and regional mobility. For the relevance of this report, only sections one and four on livable communities and regional

mobility will be analyzed. CMAP focuses on livability in communities, transportation infrastructure, economic growth, workforce mobility, and car dependence.

CMAP discusses barriers, benefits, and recommendations for livability and regional mobility. The section about livable communities includes analyzing access to amenities and opportunities, housing options, types of land use, pedestrian infrastructure, and more. The section about regional mobility is about modes of travel, residents should be able to travel quickly, and modernization. CMAP (2010) includes the importance of mobility because Chicago's congestion is one of the highest nationwide, with an annual cost of \$7.3 billion, and residents spend about "1.8 million hours in congestion every day" (p. 94). Overall, the plan focuses on livable communities, mobility, key aspects for improvement, recommendations, and capital projects.

2.5.4.2 Connecting Cook County: 2040 Long Range Transportation Plan (2016)

In 2016, the Cook County Board of Commissioners published a comprehensive plan regarding transportation needs, resources, priorities, recommendations, and actions. The county reviewed transportation trends and how they affected demographics and other neighborhood changes. While transportation demands may not shift dramatically in the short term, the many changes in long-term population, economy, and technology will significantly impact future transportation needs. The county recognized that the evolving trends must guide policy and investment decisions to ensure an adaptable and effective transportation system.

Cook County's population is about 5 million, with an estimated increase of over 850,000 residents by 2040, with growth concentrated in central Chicago and moderate increases across other areas (The Cook County Board of Commissioners, 2016, p. 14). This population growth will pressure the transportation system, requiring strategic adjustments to accommodate shifting

regional needs. Changes in population composition will also influence transportation preferences. Seniors over 65 years are expected to grow by 66%, increasing the demand for alternative transportation options as older residents seek alternatives to driving (The Cook County Board of Commissioners, 2016, p. 14).

Across all age groups, Cook County argues that residents nationwide are increasingly drawn to mixed-use, transit-oriented communities that integrate housing, retail, and offices. A 2014 Transit Center study found that 69% of respondents preferred urban or mixed-use suburban neighborhoods, compared to 60% living in such areas (The Cook County Board of Commissioners, 2016). Residents in these communities own fewer cars, rely more on transit, and benefit from lower transportation costs.

The county's plan highlighted the need to plan and ensure the transportation system remains responsive to demographic shifts. By anticipating growing demand for transit-oriented communities, the county can work towards meeting the needs of its residents and communities.

2.5.4.3 Logan Square Blue Line Action Plan (2018)

Logan Square is one of the 77 community areas in Chicago, and it is one of the growing communities that is known to be undergoing gentrification. There is some existing data, news articles, and community input regarding the ETOD plan in Logan Square. Elevated Chicago, CMAP, and RTA collaborated on the Logan Square Blue Line Action Plan. RTA manages and financially oversees any transit projects in the region, and "Elevated Chicago is a non-profit collaboration of 17 public, private nonprofit organizations... that have come together to build equity into transit-oriented development in Chicago by improving health, safety, climate resilience, and cultural vitality indicators of people of color living and working near transit" (Elevated Chicago et al., 2018, p. 7).

Aside from transit agencies, the community was involved in the planning process as well, such as the Community Table of local community organizations. “This action plan for the Logan Square CTA Blue Line station area builds upon collaborative, community-led solutions that address neighborhood displacement and inequities, particularly building upon local efforts” (Elevated Chicago et al., 2018, p. 4). Elevated Chicago, CMAP, RTA, and the Community Table collaboratively reviewed recommendations from past plans, discussed progress, identified goals and priorities, and developed strategies. The plan focuses on a range of critical community aspects, such as neighborhood spaces, economic development, housing, access and mobility, and health and environment.

This is the only plan out of the five that focuses on a specific area, which is the Blue Line station in Logan Square. The Blue Line is one of eight Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) rail lines. The Blue Line runs 26 miles from O’Hare International Airport (far northwest end of Chicago), through downtown, and then to the southwest end of Forest Park. The Blue Line is the only train line that is considered a subway because it is solely underground, and it is one of the two CTA lines that run 24/7.

The figure below shows the plan area, which aims to provide and facilitate equitable growth within a half-mile radius around the CTA Blue Line station. The plan describes equitable growth as “celebrating and prioritizing local culture and retention of current residents,” and recognizing potential displacement and other impacts of gentrification (Elevated Chicago et al., 2018, p. 2).

Figure 2.3. Logan Square Blue Line Action Plan Project Area ([Elevated Chicago, 2018](#))



This plan emphasizes two key goals: advancing ETOD and preserving spaces for long-term residents and businesses. It serves as a detailed, actionable guide for local community organizations and other partners. This includes strategies related to housing, mobility, economic development, health, arts, and identity, and specifications of implementation details like project type, timeline, funding sources, and potential barriers.

2.5.4.4 The City of Chicago: Equitable Transit-Oriented Development (ETOD) Policy Plan (2021)

The City of Chicago published the ETOD Policy Plan in 2021, following the first set of TOD-related ordinances from 2013 to 2015, to assess the performance of such TOD projects. The plan “was developed through an 18-month outreach process with a cross-sector of over 70 neighborhood, citywide, and regional stakeholders” (City of Chicago, 2021, p. 1). The City Council partnered with Chicago’s governmental departments of planning and development (DPD), housing (DOH), transportation (CDOT), and public health (CDPH), along with the Chicago Transit Authority (CTA), Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP), Metropolitan Agency Council (MPC), Elevated Chicago, and others. In 2019, the team of agencies reviewed the performance of 150 TOD projects since the first TOD ordinance in 2013.

Following the review of TOD-related plans from 2013 to 2018, there were four key findings regarding demographic shifts, housing impacts, transportation shifts, and job impacts. The first key finding was that the percentage of the population that was a minority was significantly higher in areas without TOD activity; 87% versus 47% (City of Chicago, 2021). The second key finding was how TOD impacted housing: “rent prices increased at a higher percentage in areas near CTA and Metra rail stations with TOD activity (18% for both) than in areas near rail stations without TOD activity (5-6%) and the city overall (11%)” (City of Chicago, 2021). The third key finding was that there were transportation shifts post-TOD because ridership citywide declined, but there was an increase at many of the stations located near TOD areas. In expanding TOD in areas, developers aim to reduce off-street parking spaces, expand the bike connectivity network, and reduce car ownership. Lastly, the fourth key finding was the impact on jobs. “Households in areas with TOD project activity have, on average, transit access to 1.73 times more jobs than households in areas without TOD project activity (as defined by jobs within 30 minutes on transit)” (City of Chicago, 2021). Between 2016 and 2019, 75,000

new jobs were expected to be created from TOD projects, mostly in construction, retail, and services (City of Chicago, 2021). Most of this job growth was concentrated where TOD activity occurred compared to non-TOD areas.

Aside from the key findings from 2013 to 201 TOD projects, this led to the development of the ETOD plan from 2021. The city of Chicago government defines Equitable Transit-Oriented Development (ETOD) as a strategy to ensure that all residents, regardless of race, income, or background, benefit from dense, mixed-use, pedestrian-oriented development near transit (City of Chicago, 2021). ETOD prioritizes policies and investments that “close the socioeconomic gaps between neighborhoods that are predominantly people of color and those that are majority White.” (City of Chicago, 2021, p. 5). “ETOD is both a process and a type of development that can help us realize this vision,” and to “facilitate an equitable recovery from the simultaneous racial justice, public health, economic, and climate crises our communities face” (City of Chicago, 2021, p. 5). Overall, this plan understands that achieving ETOD requires strong coordination and a shared commitment to policies that generate wealth and opportunity for all residents near transit.

2.5.4.5 Transit is the Answer (2022)

The Regional Transportation Authority’s (RTA) most recent strategic plan was published in 2022 and implemented in 2023. The RTA’s plan focuses on the region’s transit system to provide service that focuses on safety, frequency, reliability, and affordability. The vision of the plan is “safe, reliable, accessible public transportation that connects people to opportunity, advances equity, and combats climate change” (RTA, 2022, p. 22). The sections of the plan discuss collaboration and planning, transit and capital funding, advocacy items, action items,

measuring progress, and community engagement. All these sections in the RTA plan are relevant to the topic of this report and are all important to recognize regarding transit projects.

The RTA area covers about eight million residents. This strategic plan covers community and local planning and program management. The RTA provides funding and technical assistance for local governments to create and implement plans that support transit ridership, meet community economic development needs, expand job and housing accessibility, and improve overall transit experience. RTA's (2022) plan does mention equitable transit-oriented development (ETOD), and states that it "is development that enables all people regardless of race, ethnicity, income, gender, age, immigration status, or ability to experience the benefits of dense, mixed-use, pedestrian-oriented development near transit" (p. 103).

One of the RTA's largest programs is the Community Planning program established in 1998 to "encourage transit-oriented development (TOD) and improve transit access in communities throughout the region," and "aims to leverage our regions' transit line, bus routes, and other extensive transit assets to enhance local economies, equity, and quality of life" (RTA, 2025, para. 5). This program is a way to invest in communities. The RTA has collaborated on 239 projects to help "ensure that local land use decisions focus on maximizing the benefits of transit" and represents about \$25 million in investment from RTA, federal, and local funding sources (RTA, 2025, para. 3).

The opening introduction of Transit is the Answer Plan states that the region serves millions of people and transit is ready to change into a better system, lowers transportation emissions, fosters inclusive economic growth, increases ridership, and more. The RTA states three actions for success: secure increased funding for transit operations, deliver a set of new regional transit initiatives, and collaboratively begin development of three regional action plans

for program investments. The RTA gathered insight from public engagement and collaboration with the Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) and the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP) from 2018 to 2023. The goal was to build an inclusive plan that views public transit as a link between social infrastructure and the economy.

After the strategic plan was published, the RTA initiated the development of the Transit-Friendly Communities Guide, published in 2025. The guide was developed to provide a range of tools, strategies, and techniques that support, encourage, and educate “decision-makers about practical ways to make their communities more transit-friendly and ensure that all riders can travel safely and efficiently” (RTA, 2025, p. A). With the previous guide from 2012, *Setting the Stage for Transit Guidebook*, this updated guide incorporates newer concepts relating to commuter trends, affordable housing, and equitable TOD. With the 2025 guide, there were input focus groups (individuals from transportation agencies, developers, planners, etc.), municipal and county governments, nonprofit and advocacy organizations, and developers.

Chapter 3. Methodology

The purpose of this report is to assess how equity-related issues are addressed within the priorities and strategies of Chicago’s transit-oriented development (TOD) plans. The study uses a qualitative design that uses secondary data from official planning documents.

The analysis combines two methods: thematic and policy analysis. Thematic analysis identifies recurring themes, trends, and patterns, whereas policy analysis examines the goals and strategies of local and regional governments. Since TOD planning requires collaboration between transit agencies and municipalities, reviewing these interconnected plans allows for a greater understanding of how coordination occurs across agencies. By combining thematic and policy analysis, this report aims to assess whether TOD-related planning in Chicago reinforces social inequalities or promotes more equitable and inclusive development. Ultimately, this report contributes a critical interpretation of how equity concerns are or are not incorporated in Chicago’s TOD-related strategies.

The table below describes each of the five plans with the name of the plan, date of publication, the agency/contributors, and the service area.

Table 3.1. Five Chicago Region Plans

Name	Publication Year	Agency/Contributors	Service Area
Go To 2040	2010	Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP)	Chicago Region
Connecting Cook County: 2040 Long Range Transportation Plan	2016	Cook County Board of Commissioners	Cook County
Logan Square Blue Line Action Plan	2018	Elevated Chicago, CMAP, RTA, and community organizations	Logan Square Community (in Chicago)
ETOD Policy Plan	2021	City of Chicago Government	City of Chicago

Transit is the Answer	2022	Regional Transportation Authority (RTA)	Chicago Region
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3.1 Data Analysis Methods

Qualitative research was the best option for this report, since it is the most common method for analyzing official planning documents. Ford and Goger (2021) argue that “qualitative research can be a useful approach to understand how and why a given program or intervention may or may not work as intended and how to improve it from the perspective of stakeholders” (*Benefits of bringing qualitative research into policy* section, para. 1). In the context of this report, this research intends to understand the priorities and policy recommendations of Chicago’s TOD-related plans and how equity-related issues are addressed. The analysis looks at Chicago's plans, definitions, content, values, and policy recommendations. These analytical tools allow for an interpretive approach to understand the priorities and strategies of Chicago's plans.

Both thematic and policy analyses are used to identify patterns and evaluate policy recommendations in the five Chicago region TOD plans. Thematic analysis is a research method used to identify and interpret patterns and themes (Naeem, Ozuem, Howell, & Ranfagni, 2023). It involved multiple readings of each plan, initial coding, and grouping codes into broader themes. Policy analysis is an interdisciplinary approach to evaluating policy options by examining their social, economic, and political implications (Monash University, 2025). It identifies problems, expected outcomes, preferred policies, observed outcomes, and performance (Dunn, 2018). Together, these approaches allowed for both the identification of recurring themes and the interpretation of how they connect to broader policy goals, strategies, and outcomes.

The process of thematic analysis, as described by Naeem et al (2023), has six steps: “data familiarization; keyword identification; code selection; theme development; conceptualization

through the interpretation of keywords, codes, and themes; and finally, the development of a conceptual model” (p. 2). The process begins with familiarization, which includes initial and thorough readings of each plan, and is then followed by note-taking, such as highlighting specific quotations, statements, keywords, and coding them into short phrases.

The next steps are keyword identification and code selection. Naeem (et al., 2023) states that keywords play a central role in coding because they help convert data into meaningful units. The table below shows all the keywords and codes that were used as identifiers.

Table 3.2. Identified Keywords and Codes

Equitable transit-oriented development (ETOD)	Accessibility	Mobility
Transit investment	Land use and housing	Pedestrian-friendly communities and walkability
Policy implementation	Community engagement	Displacement and gentrification

The following step of theme development included organizing these keywords and codes into meaningful groups to identify patterns and relationships, which formed key themes and subthemes. The last step of thematic analysis included the conceptualization of keywords, codes, and themes. For example, each of the keywords or codes below is grouped under a single theme:

1. Theme 1: land use, housing, and mobility
 - a. Keywords/codes: mixed-use, compact, multi-family, affordable housing, land use, regional mobility, neighborhood spaces, access to opportunities, connectivity
2. Theme 2: transit infrastructure and strategic planning
 - a. Keywords/codes: transportation, public transit, planning, decision-making, regional transit system, modernization, maintenance, infrastructure
3. Theme 3: equity, accessibility, and community engagement

- a. Keywords/codes: equitable, accessibility, community development, engagement, public involvement, transit agencies, transparency
- 4. Theme 4: sustainability, pedestrian-friendly, and economic development
 - a. Keywords/codes: pedestrian, safety, sustainability, design, built environment, economic growth, car dependency, sprawl, alternate transportation options,

The second analysis method is policy analysis, which is a systematic process of producing and transforming knowledge to inform public decision-making (Dunn, 2018). The process, as described by Dunn (2018), consists of many parts: problem structuring, expected outcomes, preferred policy alternatives, monitoring observed results, and evaluating the effectiveness and value of those results. Dunn (2018) states that problem structuring is critical to begin with because it is the way an issue is framed, which determines the scope of policies, recommendations, and alternatives considered, and the expected outcomes.

The five plans differ by both publication year and governmental level (regional, county, and city), making it necessary to assess how their policy recommendations and priorities for transit infrastructure and TOD projects vary. For example, CMAP's 2010 plan predates Chicago's first TOD ordinances of 2013, resulting in less attention to equity compared to later plans.

Initially, keywords and codes related to TOD and equity were organized into categories, but then each set of keywords and codes was refined into specific connections and patterns. Furthermore, the connections between each plan's priorities and recommendations were considered, which informed the identification of key policies and broader themes. While some policy recommendations related to more than one theme, each was categorized under a single theme based on the context and stated intentions. Overall, combining thematic and policy

analyses provided a deeper understanding of how Chicago's TOD-related policies either reinforce or challenge how equity goals are incorporated into broader urban redevelopment strategies.

Chapter 4. Findings

This section presents the findings from an analysis of five regional and city-level Chicago planning documents, published from 2010 to 2022. The focus of this analysis is on how these plans address equity, transit-oriented development, mobility, and pedestrian-friendly communities. Two methods of analysis were used: thematic and policy. Both considered how the five plans related to one another and what priorities and recommendations overlapped. The findings are organized into four themes and several shared priorities that were reflected in the five plans. Within each key theme, there are some shared priorities and policy recommendations.

Table 4.1. Summary of Findings

Theme	Shared Priorities	Policy Recommendations
Land use, housing, & mobility	- Compact development - Affordable housing - Regional mobility	- Preservation of affordable housing - Expand multi-family units
Transit infrastructure & strategic planning	- World-class transportation system - Strengthen the transit network	- Strategically aligned transit investments with long-term regional planning - Investment in the expansion of high-quality public transit services - Promote comprehensive planning and evaluation of needs
Equity, accessibility, & community engagement	- Equitable access - Community engagement	- Support of equitable and accessible connections - Update ETOD plans and policies
Sustainability, pedestrian-friendly design, & economic development	- Walkability and pedestrian infrastructure - Reduce car dependency and alternate transportation options - Support economic growth	- Improve areas around transit areas

4.1 Land Use, Housing, and Mobility

One of the key themes mentioned in all the plans is land use, housing, and mobility. These topics were expected because they directly relate to transportation, infrastructure developments, and public transit investments. Recognizing the region's land use context is critical for understanding how it shapes infrastructure and where resources are distributed. As CMAP (2010) states, "access to transportation helps shape growth and construction," and it "affects the natural environment," meaning that "it's also essential to consider how transportation investments will drive land use and development" (p. 95).

Beyond land use and housing, mobility is a common priority among the plans. Mobility is defined as the distance from home to amenities and opportunities (CMAP, 2010; RTA, 2022). The plans argue that transit-friendly communities have many benefits: expanded housing options, and greater access to opportunities, such as jobs, education, and amenities. Within this broader theme, there are two subthemes: mixed-use, compact development, and affordable housing; and regional mobility and neighborhood spaces that connect homes to amenities. Each subtheme also includes a policy recommendation that reflects these priorities.

4.1.1 Mixed-Use, Compact Development, and Affordable Housing

A recurring theme in all five plans is mixed-use and compact development. The RTA and Chicago emphasize that dense, pedestrian-oriented development should be accessible to all residents. Cook County mentions that it has adopted Complete Streets ordinances to better integrate "land use planning and regulatory systems to support mixed-use, higher density developments" (The Cook County Board of Commissioners, 2016, p. 37).

Compact development is closely tied to affordability. The RTA frames the challenge of housing in terms of household costs: housing and transportation are the two largest expenses.

“Affordable housing is defined as housing expenses that are no more than 30% of household income,” where housing-related costs include rent or mortgage, insurance, and utilities (RTA, 2025, p. 66). The RTA (2025) states that “the need for affordable housing is growing while building affordable housing has become more challenging as the cost of land, construction, and financing has all increased” (p. 66). CMAP (2010) also emphasizes that “affordability of housing is strongly linked with available options for transit, walking, and bicycling” (p. 26). This connection is also mentioned in Elevated Chicago’s priorities to expand affordable and multi-family housing. Elevated Chicago (et al., 2018) argues the risks of losing affordability, noting that in Logan Square, “many homes in the area have been de-converted from multi-family to larger single-family homes, leaving a shortage of housing options. Being able to travel from one place to another is vital to the success, livability, and comfortability of a community” (p. 20).

Both the RTA and Chicago mention housing trends and strategies. Municipalities control zoning and land use decisions, which means local choices shape the built environment, transit operations, and residents’ daily experiences. Chicago (2021) explains that “ETOD can increase access and cut transportation time across the city for all Chicagoans by locating more housing, jobs, and essential services near transit” (p. 3).

From the city of Chicago’s ETOD plan, there was a section regarding the housing impacts from TOD projects from 2013 to 2018. Those projects produced “over 3,000 new affordable housing units,” which “were approved within TOD areas through the City’s Affordable Requirements Ordinance (ARO), which requires that new development receiving city support set aside a percentage of units as affordable” (City of Chicago, 2021, p. 8). Specifically, the ARO states that “developments with more than 10 units receiving zoning changes (including planned developments in a downtown zoning district), City land or City financial assistance must

make 10-20% of units affordable” (City of Chicago, 2021, Appendix F). However, most of the ARO units consisted of smaller units, such as studios or 1-bedrooms, which would not be able to accommodate more than one-person households. The city of Chicago’s government included affordable housing and the expansion of larger units to accommodate more households in TOD areas.

Building on this, the RTA (2022) advocates for maximizing “the value of transit and to making sure that there is equitable access to affordable housing near transit” (p. 103). An analysis of residential density around rail stations shows that recommended density levels could add more than 250,000 housing units in TOD zones, with the greatest potential on the South and West Sides, which are areas historically disinvested in (RTA, 2025, p. 4).

In conclusion, these plans frame compact, mixed-use development as an urban design strategy to support density. All five of the plans recognize that more affordable housing and units are needed, and so, this follows into the policy recommendation for how to address this priority.

4.1.1.1 Policy Recommendation: Preservation and expansion of affordable and multi-family housing in TOD zones

Overall, the plans from RTA, Chicago, and Elevated Chicago all share these policy recommendations: preserving unsubsidized affordable housing, expanding multi-family development, and ensuring affordability requirements are essential for making TOD equitable and sustainable. RTA (2022) specifically recommends these recommendations for this priority: acquiring land, identifying areas for development, promoting high-quality design, reducing regulatory barriers, and using inclusionary zoning to protect affordability.

The city of Chicago also addresses this priority of affordable housing through measures such as the Connected Communities Ordinance and Affordable Requirements Ordinance (ARO).

As mentioned previously, according to the ARO, areas that receive city funding, like TOD areas, require that new developments set aside a certain percentage of housing units as affordable (City of Chicago, 2021). In Chicago's ETOD plan, there are several policy recommendations for making ETOD required, easier, and more equitable. First, one of the recommendations is to identify and "allow small-scale multi-family housing in all TOD zones," which would meet the ARO requirements (City of Chicago, 2021, Appendix E). A second recommendation is to "strengthen affordability and accessibility requirements for city-supported housing development in TOD areas," which the city would advance through ARO updates and propose additional policy recommendations in the implementation process (City of Chicago, 2021, Appendix E).

Aside from regional agencies and the city, community partners also have goals regarding affordable housing. Elevated Chicago (et al., 2018) calls for an affordable housing task force in Logan Square, with multiple wards involved, to give residents more input in decision-making on development proposals. Elevated Chicago's recommendations include requiring larger unit types, linking housing and development planning, and collaborating with the Department of Housing to reduce displacement risks.

Collectively, RTA, the city, and Elevated Chicago recommend preserving and expanding affordable housing, promoting multi-family development, and implementing strong affordability measures. Coordinated efforts across regional and city agencies have contributed to expanding housing affordability in neighborhoods and advancing policies that prioritize equitable development.

4.1.2 Regional Mobility and Neighborhood Spaces that Connect Home to Amenities

Mobility is also elevated as a regional and local-scale concern, linking land use, housing, and transit planning. CMAP's (2010) plan emphasizes regional mobility as one of their four

central priorities, stating that when “residents are able to live near their jobs, it helps to reduce travel costs, pollution, and congestion,” and that neighborhoods should “support walking, bicycling, and access to transit... saving money for individuals, communities, and the region” (p. 24). This framing ties mobility not only to efficiency but also to equity and environmental sustainability.

Elevated Chicago (et al., 2018) also highlighted that while travel and mobility are essential to livability, existing systems often do not meet the standards of being equitable. The Logan Square plan evaluates transportation assets to identify community strengths and areas for improvement, with the goal of making mobility more inclusive. This reflects a more community-centered view of mobility, emphasizing accessibility and the quality of connections in the neighborhood.

Ultimately, the plans from CMAP, RTA, the city of Chicago, and Elevated Chicago understand that mobility is both a regional and local priority. The plans do have differing emphases: CMAP highlights regional efficiencies, while Elevated Chicago and RTA mainly focus on the equitable aspect of TOD and the communities that may be at most risk of exclusion. Cook County’s transportation plan is the only one out of the five that does not explicitly emphasize regional mobility or connecting residents to amenities. The other four plans do emphasize the importance of mobility for connecting residents to amenities, opportunities, and safe, accessible neighborhood spaces.

4.1.2.1 Policy Recommendation: Expand mobility and connectivity to be equitable

The mobility strategies proposed across the plans emphasize that equitable connectivity must be prioritized with regional efficiency. To achieve this, the plans from CMAP, RTA, Chicago, and Elevated Chicago recommend policies that enhance mobility and connectivity,

including investments in pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure. Improvements in mobility will increase safety and accessibility at transit stations while reducing travel costs for households. Framing mobility as an economic and equity issue highlights the importance of connecting residents to amenities and removing barriers for people who heavily rely on transit, for example, low-income and historically marginalized communities. To reduce disparities, policies should focus on creating inclusive neighborhood spaces, strengthening walkability, and ensuring equitable access to transit.

4.2 Transit Infrastructure and Strategic Planning

A shared understanding across the plans is that the transit system has seen little expansion since the 1990s, and Chicago is falling behind in prioritizing transit infrastructure. This is evident when comparing how other cities, such as New York, Los Angeles, Washington D.C., Boston, and San Francisco, have prioritized expansion over the past couple of decades (The Cook County Board of Commissioners, 2016). This is why the plans from regional and city agencies have made transit infrastructure and strategic planning a top priority. As stated in the plans, the first step in expanding the transit system is to understand the needs of communities and implement plans and actions.

The theme of transit infrastructure and strategic planning was mentioned in the plans from CMAP, RTA, Cook County, and Chicago, which are the regional and city agencies. There are two priorities: building a world-class transportation system focusing on modernization, maintenance, and strengthening the transit system. Each priority has a policy recommendation: to strategically align transit investments with long-term goals by prioritizing funding, and to invest in high-quality service and expanding and strengthening the transit system.

4.2.1 World-Class Transportation System: Modernization and Maintenance

CMAP, RTA, and Cook County explicitly state the importance of modernization and maintenance of existing transit systems. CMAP emphasizes the need to set strategic priorities and build a world-class transportation system to meet the region's changing needs. Its plan identifies outdated infrastructure as a critical issue and prioritizes modernization and maintenance over expansion. With Chicago among the most congested metropolitan areas, CMAP argues that investment in modernization will reduce congestion, strengthen communities, and support economic growth.

To expand on the idea regarding maintaining current systems, instead of expansion, CMAP and Cook County state that it relates to increasing cost-effectiveness and efficiency. CMAP (2010) states that “developing our existing communities and improving their livability is more cost-effective and resource-efficient than rapidly developing in areas that don't have adequate infrastructure” (p. 26). Cook County emphasizes the importance of modernization to improve efficiency, which includes the implementation of smart corridors, using tools like traffic signal interconnects, transit signal priority, and real-time fleet tracking (The Cook County Board of Commissioners, 2016, p. 77).

The RTA also prioritizes this but aims to bring the transit system to a state of good repair, which requires investment, funding, modernization, and maintenance. So, the RTA will evaluate its progress by checking whether the system is safe, accessible, useful, reliable, financially stable, and in a state of good repair.

4.2.1.1 Policy Recommendation: Strategically align transit investments with long-term regional goals by prioritizing funding for modernization and ongoing maintenance

Plans from CMAP, RTA, and Cook County specifically mention the policy recommendations of strategic investments and prioritizing funding on modernization and maintenance because those agencies oversee funding. The Chicago region has an expansive \$60 billion transit system, but most of it is aging and underfunded (RTA, 2022, p. 120). CMAP (2010) projects that 97% of the proposed transportation funding through 2040 will account for modernization projects (p. 91). It recommends committing more to public transit, which includes directing resources to maintaining and modernizing infrastructure, and having a multimodal approach to investments. This also includes making transit more accessible, expanding bus service, better coordinating service, adopting advanced technology, and making efficient operational improvements.

The plans stress that the region should evaluate road and transit investments, since there are limited resources, and it should be analyzed “based on the degree to which they impact the economy and livability” (CMAP, 2010, p. 98). CMAP (2010) argues that “maintaining and modernizing the existing system should take precedence over more costly expansions” (p. 98). Supporting maintenance includes small-scale infrastructure improvements, such as sidewalks, bicycle facilities, and bus shelters.

The RTA also emphasizes the need to maintain and modernize the region’s transit system. The RTA stakeholder working groups recognize “the need to invest in maintaining the system in a state of good repair, while distributing funds equitably and taking steps to modernize and improve the user experience” (RTA, 2022, p. 119). Currently, the regional transit system is facing potential 40% service cuts to its regional transit system because funding is not secured for the 2026 budget and the upcoming years (RTA, 2025). These massive service cuts would affect millions of riders, leading to the federal and state failure to invest in the region’s transit system.

RTA (2025) argues this will set back the regional economy, lead to labor shortages, deteriorate education and health outcomes, and leave the region not equipped to face crises of climate change and inequality.

Therefore, long-term investment is needed. Transit “infrastructure needs an annual investment of \$2-3 billion over the next 10 years to address chronic disinvestment and to get into a ‘state of good repair,’” (RTA, 2022, p. 120). RTA’s plan emphasizes the need to find funding through revenue and other sources because relying on fares is not an option since it conflicts with the RTA’s equity principles, such that fare increases would deter some riders from taking transit, thus decreasing ridership, especially among low-income riders. In the efforts to engage with what the community thinks about this issue, there were two main points: the RTA should pursue additional funding to maintain the transit system rather than cutting service, and that people prefer that the transit system be maintained and have increased investment.

Cook County also stresses the need to balance modernization with expansion, noting that every new project adds to long-term maintenance demands. Prioritizing this is considered a more efficient use of limited resources. Lastly, the Cook County Board of Commissioners (2016) argues:

Without such a framework to provide guidance, system performance will continue to fall short of expectations, changing preferences, and technological innovation. And funding will continue to be insufficient to maintain and modernize the transportation system, and distributed using outdated financial allocation formulas rather than changing demands or transparent performance criteria (p. 45).

4.2.2 Strengthening the Transit System

CMAP, RTA, Cook County, and Chicago all prioritize strengthening the regional transit system in their plans, focusing on greater strategic investment in public transit to improve regional mobility. The expansive system has about 1,500 miles of tracks, 7,500 buses, 400 stations, and 70 maintenance facilities (RTA, 2022).

One of RTA's top priorities is to secure more funding for transit operations. Through RTA's Community Planning program, there has been an investment of over \$22 million in local planning initiatives and regional collaboration with over 200 projects. As the plan notes, the "Community Planning program... has helped local governments plan for multi-modal, pedestrian-friendly, sustainable communities near transit stations and along transit corridors" (RTA, 2022, p. 103). Another initiative, Access to Transit, was created in 2012 to provide funding for local governments to build small-scale pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure projects to improve access to transit services. Since the city of Chicago's transit system is managed by the Chicago Transit Authority (CTA), the city is involved in strengthening the transit system and prioritizes this.

Despite these initiatives, the RTA (2022) acknowledges that "there is still work to be done across the region in continuing to maximize the value of transit" (p. 103). In response, the RTA (2022) states that transit-friendly design, such as pedestrian-oriented infrastructure and accessible built environments, is essential to strengthen the transit network and reduce car dependence. Cook County similarly highlights service gaps and areas that are neglected, so it is a regional effort and priority to expand the transit system. The county commits to assisting local governments with street design, physical infrastructure, and signal coordination to promote transportation alternatives (The Cook County Board of Commissioners, 2016). Overall, these

priorities all relate to strengthening the transit system as a regional mobility issue and a framework for aligning future investments.

4.2.2.1 Policy Recommendation 1: Invest in the expansion of a high-quality transit system and service

While modernization is a top priority among CMAP, RTA, and Cook County, another key policy recommendation is the need to expand and strengthen public transit into a high-quality service. As argued by the RTA, transit is the answer, and public transit is designed to serve the people.

CMAP highlights two major capital projects: the West Loop Transportation Center and the CTA Red Line South Extension. The proposal for the West Loop Transportation Center is to build west of the Chicago River and Lake Street, and the overall goal is to support multimodal gateways in the region. “While increasing capacity and improving operations for Chicago Union Station, the center will make it easier for residents and visitors to transfer seamlessly between commuter rail, rapid transit, buses, and intercity rail, including high-speed rail” (CMAP, 2010, p. 112). The other project, the Red Line South Extension, is one of the seven rail lines in the city that runs North-South. The project will extend the tracks 5.5 miles south to 130th Street, beyond where it currently ends at 95th Street. The extension is needed because the Red Line has the highest ridership of any CTA train line and operates 24/7. The goal is to increase connections, mobility, and accessibility while reducing reliance on bus-to-bus transfers.

The RTA (2022) similarly identifies seven immediate action items for improving the regional transit system: (1) make the transit system safer and more secure, (2) use new funding to create a fully accessible system, (3) provide more accurate travel information, (4) make paying for transit more seamless and affordable, (5) transition to zero emission regional system, (6)

assess the regional capital program in a new way, and (7) adapt bus and rail service to meet the changing needs of riders (p. 135). The key point from RTA is that transit is undervalued compared to car infrastructure and must be “preserved, improved, and expanded” (p. 38). High-quality transit systems are defined as safe, secure, accessible, affordable, reliable, and frequent (RTA, 2022). Also, by incorporating accurate rider information, equity and mobility justice, and service adaptations that meet the changing needs of riders. Similarly, Cook County’s plan complements this by identifying gaps in services and what areas need higher priority, and is committed to supporting local governments with TOD projects.

4.2.2.2 Policy Recommendation 2: Promote comprehensive planning and coordinated evaluation of needs

The second policy recommendation centers on comprehensive planning and coordinated evaluation of needs. CMAP’s (2010) plan “recommends supporting local planning through grant programs, infrastructure investments to implement plans, technical assistance, and collaboration between municipalities on shared priorities” (p. 31). The RTA recognizes that evaluating the needs and trends of ridership is critical to understanding the extent of the priority. Before 2020 or pre-COVID-19 years, “39% of transit riders across the region came from households with incomes under \$50,000,” and in 2021, it grew to 50%, “underscoring the importance of transit service for the region’s essential workers and for workers who have no other options besides transit to travel to their jobs” (RTA, 2022, p. 181).

The RTA’s Transit-Friendly Communities Guidebook provides tools and best practices for evaluating accessibility, promoting walkability, and implementing transit-friendly policies (RTA, 2025). This guide expands the idea for planning and evaluation through managing the regional transit system. The RTA states there is a need to collaborate with regional partners,

develop new regional transit initiatives, and evaluate service gaps. Its strategies include updated local comprehensive plans, encouraging redevelopment, seeking capital project grants, and implementing transit-friendly policies (RTA, 2025). The RTA also aims to collaboratively develop three new regional action plans and program investments to support the system.

In contrast, Cook County’s plan is a broader transportation plan, stressing the evolving mobility and transportation needs. The county commits to developing a comprehensive transit plan that complements the existing RTA and other transit agencies’ strategies. A key component of this effort includes strengthening collaboration with other regional transit systems to improve bus services on arterial roads and expressways (The Cook County Board of Commissioners, 2016).

Chicago’s ETOD plan similarly stresses these goals, emphasizing cross-sector collaboration and accountability. Its framework incorporates “a comprehensive view of ETOD to include public health, educational access, environmental justice, and safety metrics with information disaggregated by race, income, age, and disability where feasible” (City of Chicago, 2020, p. 21). This also includes elevating community voices, supporting equitable land use practices, and standardizing community engagement practices.

All four of these plans emphasize that strengthening the transit system is not only about large-scale capital investments, but also about comprehensive planning, strong collaboration to develop solutions, and continuous evaluation of needs to ensure transit remains equitable and effective.

4.3 Equity, Accessibility, and Community Engagement

These themes of equity, accessibility, and community engagement are central to the region’s TOD and transportation plans. Across agencies, there is broad recognition that

Chicago’s transit system has historically reinforced racial and socioeconomic inequalities through uneven investment, car-oriented zoning, and limited accessibility for some riders. In response, some of these plans emphasize that there is much more to do to make transit more equitable. TOD and investment projects should prioritize communities that have faced disinvestment and ensure that transit connects residents to opportunities.

The plans point to two major themes: improving equitable access to public transit and elevating community development and engagement. There are three policy recommendations: supporting equitable policies, updating policies and processes to mitigate the effects of equity-related issues, and updating the citywide ETOD plan. While each agency approaches equity in different ways, there is a shared understanding that transit must serve as an “economic equalizer” for the region, bridging disparities in mobility, opportunity, and representation (RTA, 2022, p. 30).

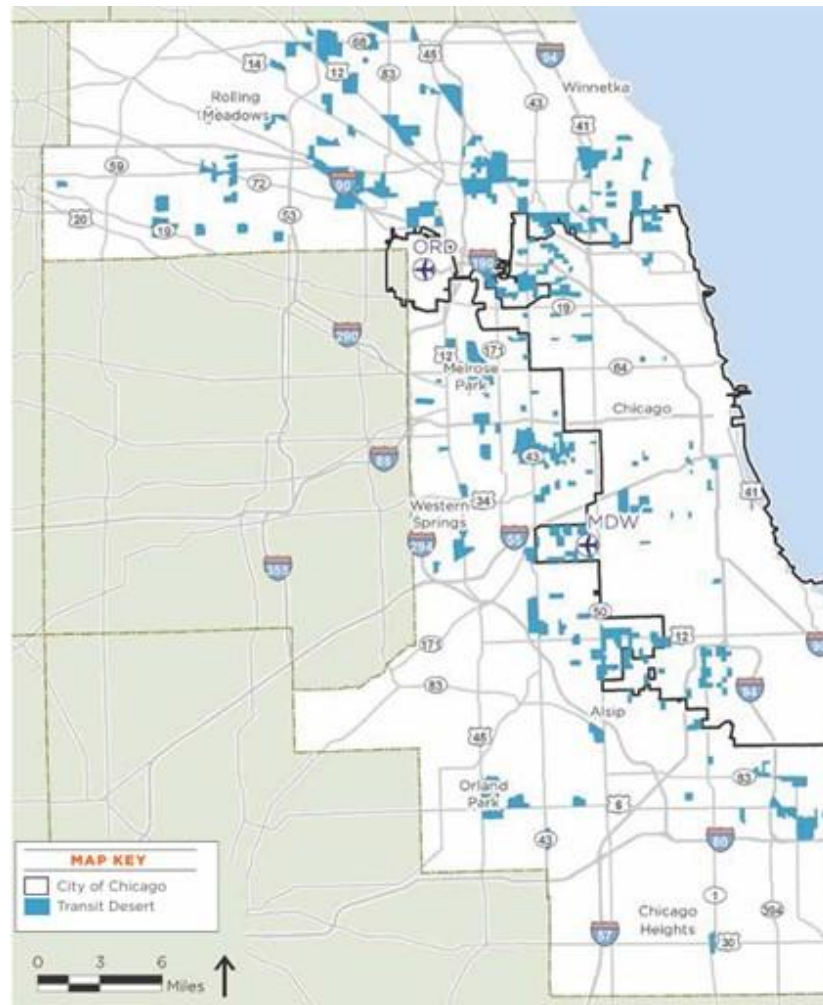
4.3.1 Equitable Access to Public Transit

In the past decade, Chicago has increasingly focused on accessibility standards and pushed for better ADA compliance at train stations. One of RTA’s key actions is to assess the regional capital program through the lens of racial equity and mobility justice. RTA emphasizes collaboration with regional and local transit agencies to strategically address historical disinvestment. Additionally, the RTA (2022) describes its approach for building a more equitable and inclusive direction, such as making capital improvements to equitably prioritize communities with the highest priority and including those communities directly in the decision-making process.

RTA aims to prioritize improving service and reliability in low-income neighborhoods, suburbs, and communities with a higher need for public transit. Similarly, Cook County’s

transportation plan highlights geographic disparities, showing that poorly served areas are concentrated in suburban regions and parts of the northwest, west, and south sides. The figure below illustrates that, and it should show where new investments should be targeted to achieve more equitable access.

Figure 4.1. Map of Areas Poorly Served by Public Transit ([The Cook County Board of Commissioners, 2016](#))



Chicago’s (2021) ETOD plan also discusses these disparities. It says that “areas near rail stations that are eligible for TOD benefits but that have not seen TOD project activity have 40% more residents of color, 23% more low-income residents, and 16% more residents with a high school education or less than areas with TOD project activity” (City of Chicago, 2021, Appendix

C). This uneven growth has contributed to racial and income disparities in TOD areas. Elevated Chicago (et al., 2018) also emphasizes safety and accessibility, advocating for pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure. In June 2022, Elevated Chicago and the Chicago Department of Transportation (CDOT) “announced the installation of concrete curb-protected bike lanes in pre-existing buffered bike lanes, such as those found on Milwaukee and Kedzie Avenues” (Elevated Chicago et al., 2018, p. 30). The plan states that these installations have provided greater access and safety on major roads in the community.

4.3.1.1 Policy Recommendation 1: Support policies that equitably and accessibly connect residents to transit and services

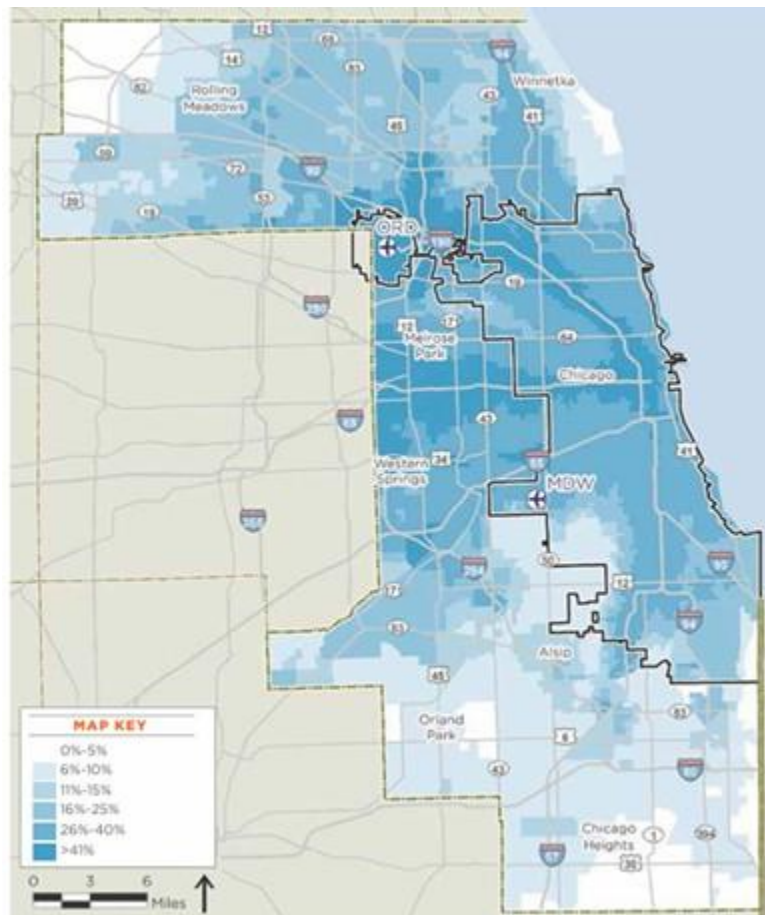
All five plans can agree that equity should guide policies connecting residents to transit and services. RTA explicitly recognizes that inequalities in the transportation system are linked to historical patterns of racism and socioeconomic disparity. RTA (2022) argues that all people deserve transit, and that transit is an “economic equalizer,” meaning that it “transports people to economic opportunities” and the “diversity of opportunities, such as jobs, education, and healthcare” (p. 28–30).

While the transit system is fully ADA accessible, it should be more flexible and adapt to changing needs. RTA (2022) emphasizes that accessibility should continue to extend beyond compliance, such as including more right-of-way, streetscape infrastructure, and sidewalks/trails that connect people in residential areas. Also, it includes “making choices about how to construct and maintain the built environment so that they don’t become hindrances as infrastructure ages and goes through wear and tear” (RTA, 2025, p. 50). However, shortages of staff and operators are a huge challenge to delivering frequent, reliable, and equitable service.

There have been some major initiatives aimed at addressing accessibility and equity. The CTA's All Stations Accessibility Program (ASAP), launched in 2018, partners with the RTA and commits to the modernization of non-accessible stations. ASAP includes improvements and rehabilitation of transit stations, such as elevators and signage. The Red Purple Modernization project completed six accessible rail stations in 2025, with priorities determined by a "score stemming from a needs and complexity analysis or in coordination with other anticipated projects" (CTA, 2024). The lower complexity scores may be more prioritized for shorter improvement plans, whereas high-complexity stations require longer-term project plans. Importantly, the funds for the RTA (2022) require that "at least 20% of their capital dollars [be directed] to projects focused on either equity or accessibility" (p. 171). Elevated Chicago (et al., 2018) also makes it a priority to address concerns regarding accessibility near transit, including maintenance of sidewalks, installing an additional elevator at the Logan Square Blue Line station, and having more seating available near transit stops.

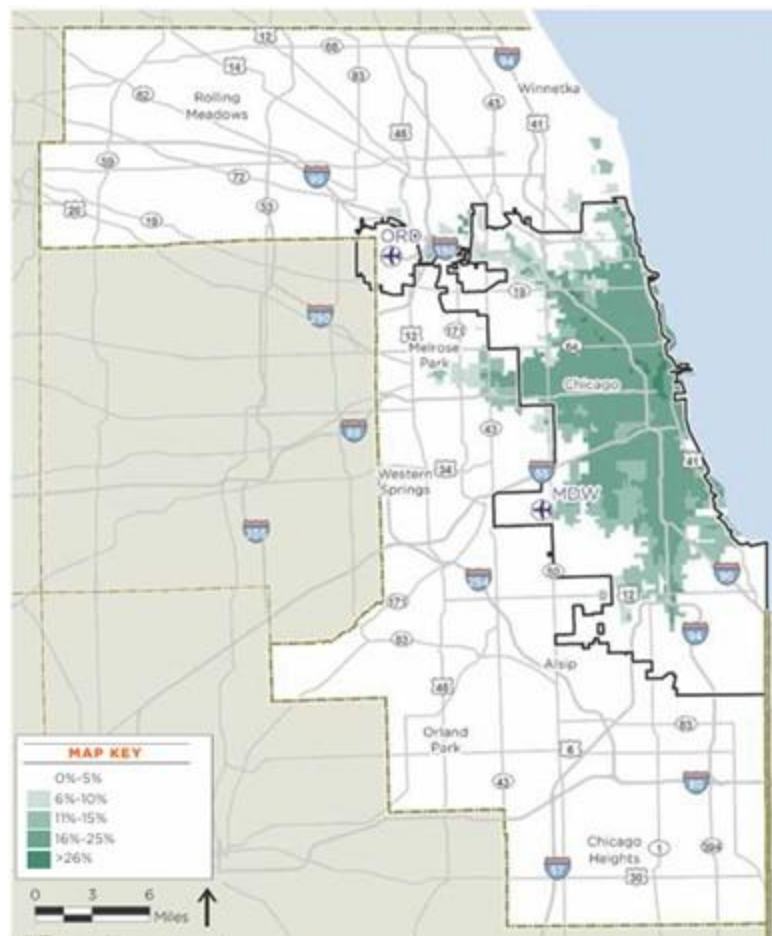
Cook County's plan further highlights unequal access in specific areas in Chicago, such as the South Side, which has higher inequality rates and lower access to quality transit (The Cook County Board of Commissioners, 2016). To achieve more equity, the county commits to evenly distributing economic growth and promoting equity in its policies and investments. To prioritize areas that are more vulnerable and more historically underserved, the county has a South Suburban pilot program to improve opportunities in South County (The Cook County Board of Commissioners, 2016). Overall, the county stated that other efforts will be made to increase and support funding in programs and services that increase access to services. In Cook County's plan, the two maps below illustrate job accessibility by car within 30 minutes of home and job accessibility by transit within 45 minutes of home (at 8 AM).

Figure 4.2. Job Accessibility by Car Within 30 Minutes of Home ([The Cook County Board of Commissioners, 2016](#))



These two figures are significant because they show the stark differences in job accessibility between car and transit commutes for residents within the county. Figure 4 shows that there is significantly higher access to jobs within a 30-minute drive for car travel. Compared to Figure 5, access to jobs within a 45-minute commute by transit is scarce outside of city limits. The map above (Figure 4) is expected, as there is a higher percentage of job access within city limits and on the West side, because it relates to commercial and business density.

Figure 4.3. Job Accessibility by Transit Within 45 Minutes of Home at 8AM ([The Cook County Board of Commissioners, 2016](#))



The map above illustrates that there is significantly less access to transit in the regions outside of the city, thus limiting opportunities for residents who do not own a car. Therefore, the county recognizes that to achieve better “equitable distribution of employment opportunities, the County’s economic development and transportation policies will be designed to create a climate conducive to business expansion and to making jobs more accessible to households everywhere” (The Cook County Board of Commissioners, 2016, p. 57).

Similarly, Chicago’s (2021) ETOD plan stresses that “ETOD can increase access and cut transportation time across the city for all Chicagoans by locating more... essential services near transit” (p. 3). As previously noted, Chicago’s rail stations are outdated and have aging

infrastructure, so there have been many projects focused on rehabilitation and modernization to make stations more accessible to all riders.

4.3.1.2 Policy Recommendation 2: Update policies and processes to mitigate the effects of equity-related issues

Three of the five plans explicitly addressed mitigating the effects of equity-related issues: RTA, the city of Chicago, and Elevated Chicago. Because the Chicago region recently expanded equitable TOD (ETOD), only the most recent plans since 2018 address the issues of gentrification and displacement, whereas CMAP and Cook County’s plans from before 2016 did not consider these issues. Chicago began shifting its focus towards TOD projects in 2013, so the plans followed that began reviewing and evaluating TOD projects. To summarize the important policies proposed to mitigate the risks of these equity-related issues, see the table below.

Table 4.2. Policy Recommendations for Mitigating Equity-Related Issues

Policy Recommendations	Agency & Plan
Equity should be prioritized in TOD projects to mitigate the effects of gentrification and displacement in existing communities (ETOD).	RTA’s 2022 plan
The development of a community engagement plan where communities and residents are included and involved in land use decisions.	RTA’s 2022 plan
TOD projects should utilize the ETOD Calculator.	RTA’s 2025 Transit-Friendly Communities Guide
More research should be conducted and updated regarding the beneficial impacts of ETOD to find best practices and solutions to resolve equity-related issues.	RTA’s 2025 Transit-Friendly Communities Guide
Build partnerships and collaborate with local community leaders to advocate for existing residents and businesses to advance ETOD to combat gentrification and displacement.	RTA’s 2025 Transit-Friendly Communities Guide
The city should advance racial inclusion, community wealth-building, and access to affordable housing and economic opportunities.	City of Chicago’s 2021 ETOD plan
TOD should have an equity lens.	City of Chicago’s 2021 ETOD plan
Avoid displacement by preserving “existing unsubsidized affordable housing within TOD zones” and “[streamlining] and [incentivizing] the production of multi-family affordable housing near transit.”	City of Chicago’s 2021 ETOD plan

“Prioritize the implementation of anti-displacement measures.”	Elevated Chicago’s 2018 plan
“Identify existing policies, best practices and, anti-displacement incentive programs for small businesses and tenants.”	Elevated Chicago’s 2018 plan

The table above shows that the RTA (2025) emphasizes that equitable approaches to land use planning and ETOD are needed, particularly for historically disadvantaged groups, such as “communities of color and indigenous people, people with disabilities, and older adults,” who are most often impacted when significant investments or TOD projects occur (p. 49). “History has shown that equitable transit-oriented development is particularly important in mitigating the effects of gentrification” (RTA, 2022, p. 103). RTA further ties its recommendations to expanding affordable housing and increasing accessibility in transit communities to help prevent displacement.

Additionally, the RTA (2025) argues that all TOD projects should utilize the ETOD Calculator, which “is a free tool that anyone can use to explore the relationship between a potential building design and the impacts it could have on the surrounding community. It provides information on demographic trends, community impacts, and transit benefits” (p. 50). On top of that, the RTA understands that there are other equity-related issues, such as redlining, public health risks, and environmental justice, and the continued collaboration among agencies and organizations are critical to build best practices and solutions. To combine agencies and organizations’ efforts to combat these issues, the RTA recommends that building partnership with each other is crucial to advance ETOD and to mitigate gentrification. So, “when communicating with developers, elected officials, and the community,” there should be a “collaborative effort to put forth a strong messaging approach” (RTA, 2025, p. 102). This

extends to collaboration with local community leaders and organizations to “combat the potential reality of permanent displacement due to gentrification” (RTA, 2025, p. 118).

Gentrification may have a negative connotation for a lot of residents in Chicago for past TOD projects. There was a quote in the city of Chicago’s (2021) plan from a member of the Active Transportation Alliance, and it stated that the negative connotation of gentrification was mainly “centered on big towers that are TOD, but they are not equitable. Most of them are market-rate apartments that are very inaccessible to low-income people” (p. 4). This is the issue that the city and other agencies are faced with, so the city also recognizes that gentrification and displacement are potential negative outcomes of TOD. “TOD without an equity lens can have negative health and economic impacts on current residents through possible displacement as a result of gentrification if proactive steps are not taken” (City of Chicago, 2021, p. 5). Chicago (2021) argues that emphasizing equity is essential because the benefits of TOD “will likely not be distributed equitably to those who need them most and can end up accruing to those already with wealth and power” (p. 5). Overall, the city argues that by advancing racial inclusion, community wealth-building, and access to affordable housing and economic opportunities, ETOD can help reduce structural racism and ensure that transit benefits are distributed fairly (City of Chicago, 2021).

Elevated Chicago’s plan, which focuses on TOD projects in Logan Square, takes a holistic approach by integrating strategies to support walkability and community accessibility while mitigating the impacts of gentrification and displacement. “Recognizing the opportunity to leverage the benefits of transit-oriented development (TOD) to contend with displacement and other adverse impacts of gentrification, the planning process for Logan Square sought to produce a strategic action plan that enables the community to achieve its goals as defined in this plan”

(Elevated Chicago et al., 2018, p. 3). The plan stresses the importance of a strategic action plan with shared vision and goals to address equity concerns and recognizes how most TOD investments have occurred in predominantly White northside neighborhoods. It advocates for redirecting resources to disadvantaged areas, especially the south and west sides, while addressing the pressures of displacement in Logan Square.

Elevated Chicago's plan has an action items table at the end, which pulls together all of the recommendations, tasks, and policy/program/infrastructure. There are some tasks and policy recommendations that describe the importance of supporting small businesses and residents by promoting existing anti-displacement policies, best practices, and incentive programs. Additionally, Elevated Chicago suggests many different tasks for programs to combat equity-related issues. One of the tasks is to continue with identifying the "connection between housing and development issues and address residential displacement risks" (Elevated Chicago et al., 2018, Action Items Table). Lastly, the plan recommends identifying current strategies, assessing local business needs, and exploring partnerships with organizations to strengthen equity-related policies.

4.3.1.3 Policy Recommendation 3: Update the citywide ETOD plan and policies to make ETOD implementation more equitable, required, and easier

Chicago adopted its first ETOD comprehensive plan in 2021, prioritizing the integration of ETOD into citywide planning. The city created a formal ETOD work group with an advisory structure to ensure continued collaboration between community stakeholders, regional partners, and government agencies to help implement ETOD. The city's work group developed around 50 policy recommendations coinciding with priorities relating to making ETOD more equitable, easier, and required. In relation, the RTA (2022) has five different working groups, which are

split between two technical groups and three stakeholder groups, and are used to “examine key topics for the plan, identify priorities, and develop recommendations” (p. 21).

Chicago states that this priority includes updating the TOD ordinance and policies to strengthen density, affordability, and climate resilience requirements when tailoring policies to neighborhood-specific needs. Other additions include equitable land use and zoning practices, urban planning designs that incorporate equity considerations, and incentives to support ETOD projects. Recommendations include developing a racial and health equity assessment process, strengthening housing requirements in TOD zones, establishing a framework for neighborhood land use plans, prioritizing investments in multimodal transportation, incorporating health and safety, and creating incentives for developers to pursue ETOD (City of Chicago, 2021).

Chicago’s framework aims to correct existing zoning laws that prioritize cars and reinforce systemic racism and economic disparities. Chicago notes that it is reshaping land use policies to promote equity, build community wealth, and improve health outcomes.

Chicago remains committed to advancing equitable TOD, focusing on desegregation and community wealth-building, regardless of transit access. Chicago should be well-positioned to implement meaningful changes through coordinated efforts across departments, agencies, and organizations. Supporting this effort, Elevated Chicago is an organization that solely focuses on equitable development and supports community engagement. It has secured a \$150,000 Partners for Place grant, which helps integrate ETOD principles into Chicago’s citywide planning process (City of Chicago, 2021, p. 35).

Lastly, the RTA recommends measuring progress, accountability, and tracking performance. This includes constantly evaluating the impact and effectiveness of the transit system, updating policies and plans, and increasing the sharing of information among other

agencies. Overall, Chicago's ETOD plan and support from RTA and Elevated Chicago's initiatives show that there is some commitment to integrating equity and affordability into citywide ETOD plans. Through coordinated policies, stakeholder collaboration, and targeted funding, Chicago's plans are leaning towards more inclusive and sustainable developments.

4.3.2 Community Engagement Between Residents, Riders, and Transit Agencies

Equity is not only about where investment is directed but also about how decisions are made. Community development relates to the idea of how transit investments affect and impact communities and residents. Not all plans specifically discuss community involvement and engagement, but the plans from RTA and Chicago do address this priority in the planning process. Overall, those plans state the importance of identifying existing assets and strengths, standardizing community engagement requirements, and working collaboratively with residents, riders, and transit agencies. Residents view transit as an agent of change to advance equal access to opportunity, equitable service, and build a safe, connected, and reliable network. As the RTA (2022) puts it, the people "see transit as the answer, and this action and advocacy plan reflects the region's diverse voices" (p. 9).

The RTA emphasizes tailoring engagement strategies to the strengths and institutions of specific communities. The RTA would expand its Transit-Friendly Communities Guidebook with tools for transit-friendly, equitable development and community engagement. The plan stresses transparency and two-way communication: "The RTA is committed to cultivating relationships between riders and transit agencies with two-way engagement that empowers communities' role in transit decision making" (RTA, 2022, p. 18). The idea is to keep the public informed about transit funding and spending, and to have community input in all aspects of transit planning.

Planning that focuses on equity on ETOD projects includes having “the capacity to elevate the community’s collective voice in the decision-making process and focus on community benefits” (RTA, 2025, p. 49). To elevate the community's collective voices, RTA says this includes forming committees, building support with data, elevating underrepresented voices, empowering youth leaders, creating a toolkit, and meeting people where they are. From this, Chicago’s plan pulls this all together and recommends that community engagement requirements, processes, and practices should be standardized across planning projects and city departments. This includes building on “agreed-upon engagement principles and recommendations, such as those developed by Elevated Chicago, and utilizing ETOD policies and projects as opportunities to test and pilot new engagement practices” (City of Chicago, 2021, p. 8). Chicago states that in response to the TOD ordinance in 2019, the city committed to expanding community engagement to increase inclusiveness, especially in neighborhoods most affected by TOD projects.

Aside from engagement, the RTA is committed to practical steps, such as evaluating its current outreach efforts, identifying ways to improve, and developing community advisory groups to provide feedback. This would include expanding the role of the RTA Citizen Advisory Board (RTACAB) to have stronger and more input from riders about transit planning and decision making, and to help track progress of the plan’s goals.

4.4 Sustainability, Pedestrian-Friendly Design, and Economic Development

Each of the Chicago region’s plans mentions the importance of building sustainable communities, improving pedestrian-friendly infrastructure, and economic development. Communities can “create built environments that are not only transit-friendly but also promote equitable economic development, public health, environmental sustainability, and an enhanced

quality of life” (RTA, 2025, p. 57). Pedestrian-friendly design is central to each plan’s goals because it promotes walkable neighborhoods and strengthens land use and transit systems. These efforts connect to three subthemes: walkability and pedestrian infrastructure, reducing car dependency and providing alternate transportation options, and supporting economic growth. By applying these strategies, communities across the region can enhance design, density, and diversification.

4.4.1 Walkability and Pedestrian Infrastructure

All five plans highlight the importance of walkability and pedestrian infrastructure, which are foundational to TOD and public transit systems. Chicago’s TOD ordinances and ETOD plan aim to “support walkable, livable communities by increasing neighborhood access” (City of Chicago, 2021, p. 3). This theme also connects with the other theme to increase neighborhood spaces and access to services, as walkability provides a broad framework for linking residents to public spaces, amenities, and opportunities.

Many cities are designed primarily for car travel, neglecting the expansion of pedestrian infrastructure. CMAP focuses on livability and mobility, noting barriers created by communities designed primarily for cars. As CMAP observes, the distance between home, work, and housing options often limits livability and mobility. Encouraging walkable environments and transit-friendly communities, however, provides many advantages, such as improving health, safety, comfort, and overall well-being. CMAP’s (2010) plan also focuses on expanding and improving parks and open spaces, recommending “that the region make significant, criteria-based investments in parks and open space — providing more parks in developed areas, preserving the region’s most important natural areas, and providing functional connections between parks and preserves by using the green infrastructure network as a design concept” (p. 41). Similarly,

Elevated Chicago encourages more walkability, prioritizes safer conditions for pedestrians, accessibility, and mobility. So, one of Elevated Chicago's action items is to redesign Logan Square traffic calming and other strategies to make the area more pedestrian-friendly.

Cook County's plan primarily promotes walkability through Complete Streets ordinances, which are committed to designing streets to accommodate pedestrians, bicyclists, and public transit users. The county frames these policies as central to supporting TOD and multimodal transportation options. Furthermore, Chicago's plan also links walkability with zoning and land use reform, with goals to improve design and promote walkability. This would include reducing off-street parking spaces, expanding the bike connectivity network, and reducing car ownership.

4.4.1.1 Policy Recommendation: Improve pedestrian-friendly infrastructure near and around transit stations/stops

The recommendation related to walkability is to improve pedestrian-friendly infrastructure near and around transit stations and stops. This policy recommendation relates heavily to one of the RTA's advocacy items: to "support communities' efforts to improve the area around their transit stations/stops and pursue ETOD" (RTA, 2022, p. 102). The RTA contributed and invested in projects that focus on small-scale improvements around transit stations and stops. RTA's previous plan, *Invest in Transit*, outlined its strategic goals from 2018-2023. Since the adoption of the previous plan before *Transit is the Answer*, the RTA (2022) has provided funding for 61 planning and technical assistance projects in communities to support TOD to address issues of walkability and mobility. Going forward, RTA aims to advocate for more funding programs to build more transit-friendly neighborhoods, such as promoting ETOD, mobility, and pedestrian infrastructure to make it easier and safer near transit stations/stops.

The plans that prioritize pedestrian infrastructure are from RTA, Cook County, and Chicago. Those plans emphasize the importance of walkable, livable communities and highlight how pedestrian infrastructure is essential to achieving their goals. Many neighborhoods and communities are designed primarily for car travel, which limits mobility, accessibility, and overall well-being. These regional and city plans prioritize pedestrian infrastructure in TOD planning to address barriers to improve health, safety, and comfort. This includes the regional and city-implemented principles from Complete Streets, which integrate pedestrian paths and connections to amenities, opportunities, and open spaces (The Cook County Board of Commissioners, 2016).

By embedding and implementing these design strategies and standards into TOD projects or other related ones, local and regional governments can better ensure that TOD promotes equitable access, supports the transit network, and strengthens the overall connectivity and sustainability of communities (RTA, 2022; City of Chicago, 2021).

4.4.2 Reduce Car Dependency and Have Alternate Transportation Options

Building on the priority of pedestrian-friendly design, all five plans point out the importance of reducing car dependency and creating safer and more reliable transportation options, such as walking, biking, and car sharing. The plans mention some consequences of car travel, and state that there are many benefits to prioritizing other transportation options.

There are some consequences of not prioritizing alternative travel options, such as limiting personal choices, higher air pollution, financial burden with transportation costs, and more. Cars will always exist and will continue to be the default mode of travel in most households in the region; however, “transit is far cheaper, reduces congestion, raises the value of nearby land, and is better for the environment” (CMAP, 2010, p. 94). The RTA (2022) argues

that transit is essential for sustainability and safety, noting that transit vehicles make up less than 2% of total emissions in the region. Additionally, there is a significant financial burden of car ownership: \$12,500 is the annual cost of commuting via car, while \$1,000 is the annual cost of commuting via transit, so in perspective, “households allocate 20% of their budget to transportation costs” (CMAP, 2010, p. 104; RTA, 2022, p. 34). This is a significant difference in the financial benefits of car ownership versus utilizing public transit. CMAP (2010) concludes that “by supporting transportation alternatives and shortening trips, our region can reduce the costs of congestion and travel for all residents” (p. 26).

Similarly, the City of Chicago and Elevated Chicago are committed to improving alternative transportation options, such as strengthening bike parking requirements and reviewing parking-related zoning policies. Elevated Chicago and Cook County both note that car-sharing services, like Zipcar, could reduce private car ownership and increase reliance on other modes of travel. Uniquely, Cook County’s plan encourages commutes with combined modes; for example, driving to the train station to take the train for “last-mile connections,” which can reduce the number of cars that are competing for limited parking spaces (The Cook County Board of Commissioners, 2016, p. 23).

Roughly 87% of households in the region own at least one car, so there are challenges to shift towards reducing car travel, given the strong car culture nationwide (CMAP, 2025, p. 9). In just the city of Chicago, about 74% of households own at least one car (CMAP, 2025, p. 9). Regardless of high car ownership in the region, almost half a million households do not own a car and thus solely rely on other modes of travel. Furthermore, due to the pandemic, there have been shifts to car and transit travel. The RTA (2022) states this “has resulted in more people today working from home or choosing to drive rather than ride transit than five years ago” (p.

33). Despite the changing trends in car and transit travel, all the plans recognize that other modes of travel should be a priority.

4.4.3 Supporting Economic Growth

Another theme tied to sustainability and economic development is supporting local economic growth. CMAP mentions that the Chicago region is one of the nation's largest economic centers, where planning must prioritize growth while addressing challenges. Its plan states that having a comprehensive regional strategy can “set the stage for economic growth in decades to come,” by fostering long-term economic opportunities (CMAP, 2010, p. 16). CMAP (2010) also links land use and housing with economic development, arguing that “to a significant extent, quality of life and economic prosperity are shaped by how well the region moves people and goods” (p. 94). This connects the relation between land use, livability, and transportation. It was noted that CMAP's capital projects will have many regional benefits regarding economic development and mobility.

The RTA (2022) emphasizes the role of public transit in inclusive growth, noting that “cities and large urban areas are taking a leadership role in making commitments to equity, inclusive economic growth, sustainability, and resiliency” (p. 8). It stresses that transit remains a critical part of the social and economic fabric, as it connects residents to jobs and opportunities. The RTA claims that without public transit and the connections that it enables, the level of current economic activity would not be possible. “Our transit system is an economic differentiator for the region – linking talent to opportunities, building economic resilience, and spurring growth” (RTA, 2022, p. 15).

Cook County's plan specifically highlights recent economic development efforts in the South Suburbs, designed to increase opportunities and expand access outside of the area. “To

fully realize equitable distribution of employment opportunities, the County’s economic development and transportation policies will be designed to create a climate conducive to business expansion and to making jobs more accessible to households everywhere” (The Cook County Board of Commissioners, 2016, p. 57).

Chicago’s plan shows many benefits and changes from TOD. From 2013 to 2018, “households in areas with TOD project activity have, on average, transit access to 1.73 times more jobs than households in areas without TOD project activity (as defined by jobs within 30 minutes on transit)” (City of Chicago, 2021, p. 5). Between 2016 and 2019, TOD projects were expected to generate 75,000 new jobs, primarily in construction, retail, and services (City of Chicago, 2021, pp. 8–9). On a regional scale, transit agencies supported about 126,000 jobs and generated \$5.6 billion in regional economic activity (RTA, 2022, p. 54).

Elevated Chicago also emphasizes economic development, distinguishing between desired and incompatible forms of economic growth. Desired development supports communities, while incompatible development risks displacement and disinvestment. “To ensure that compatible development comes into the neighborhood and that existing businesses are supported, Logan Square should take a holistic approach to economic development, which can help ensure Logan Square’s business growth and sustainability” (Elevated Chicago et al., 2018, p. 14). Ultimately, the plans argue that the economic benefits of TOD emphasize the need to prioritize inclusive development in future policies (City of Chicago, 2021; RTA, 2022).

Chapter 5. Discussion

To reiterate the research question: how do the priorities and policy recommendations of the Chicago area's transit-oriented development (TOD) plans address equity-related issues? This report examined five planning documents from the Chicago region, ranging from 2010 to 2022, to assess how equity is addressed in TOD and transportation planning. The analysis found that the five plans shared many similar priorities, including preserving affordability, improving mobility, modernizing the transit system, and supporting walkable, pedestrian-friendly communities. While regional plans such as those from CMAP and RTA emphasize long-term infrastructure and systemwide planning, the city of Chicago's government and Elevated Chicago explicitly focus on equitable development. This highlights how different agencies approach TOD from varying perspectives, balancing efficiency, growth, and social equity.

Furthermore, the analysis pointed out a broader evolution in Chicago-area planning, with more recent documents integrating equity as a central principle. Earlier plans largely focused on infrastructure and regional growth, whereas recent plans recognize the social consequences of TOD, including decreased affordability, displacement, and accessibility challenges. Embedding equity into TOD planning is increasingly seen as essential not only for protecting vulnerable populations but also for ensuring that new transit investments benefit entire communities. These findings suggest that without intentional, equity-focused implementation, TOD risks reinforcing existing disparities rather than promoting inclusive growth.

The transition and addition of equitable development have only been introduced to planning narratives within the last few years. The most recent policy implementation regarding equitable TOD is from 2022, which followed the first citywide ETOD policy plan from 2021. Even though there has been a shift in priority in the last few years, not enough time has passed to

evaluate if regional and city planning efforts have effectively responded to the growing concerns of equity in transit investments. This report only focused on the priorities and policy recommendations but did not analyze the region's policy implementation or outcomes. This section interprets the findings, considers research implications, potential future research directions, and challenges and limitations.

5.1 Summary of Findings

From the five plans, some key principles and findings are relevant to acknowledge from planners, policymakers, and researchers. The first is that equity should be structurally embedded in plans, ordinances, assessments, and any TOD-related projects. This is non-negotiable, as stated by Chicago and RTA; equity must be a central guiding principle for development projects of new public transit. Embedding equity at the regional and local levels can ensure that transit investments and TOD projects benefit residents across all income levels and geographies, especially in historically disinvested neighborhoods where inequities are more prevalent. Planners and government agencies must develop stronger equity evaluation tools to track progress and determine whether policies achieve the intended outcomes and goals.

The second key takeaway is that more partnerships across agencies are necessary to coordinate who manages what and how involved each entity is. Since there are different levels of management on public transit and TOD projects, there should be pre-defined roles clearly stated in each plan. Since TOD involves multiple institutions and government entities, such as housing, infrastructure, land use, and public transit, it is necessary to divide who manages what, either at the regional or local levels. Regional agencies, like CMAP and RTA, must define their roles in partnered plans with the city of Chicago or other local-level plans and projects. All five plans highlight the importance of inter-agency collaboration, so it is also important to know the roles

of each agency. This is related to the ongoing issue in the Chicago region, which is why there are two public transit entities: regional and city. There have been concerns related to the split management between regional and city public transit systems, and the possible recommendation to combine these two into one cohesive management of the regional and city public transit systems. As of today, the RTA and CTA are still separate agencies.

The third key takeaway, as stated by RTA, Chicago, and Elevated Chicago, is that community engagement should be standardized. This is important because engagement is often mentioned in planning documents, but having input from the residents is needed. For TOD to be more equitable, it is argued that engagement should be more transparent and inclusive. Some examples mentioned are resident advisory boards and community working groups, which could build more structure and organization to help standardize engagement practices. Residents are the most directly affected by transit investments and neighborhood changes, so their involvement in the decision-making or planning process is critical.

5.2 Interpretation of Findings

Since the city of Chicago is one of the top five most extensive public transportation systems in the U.S., the city's TOD plans are also quite extensive because it must accommodate millions of residents and riders. However, this report only focuses on what Chicago's agencies are prioritizing in their planning efforts rather than on policy implementation.

By examining five plans from the regional, county, and city levels, this analysis revealed which strategies are prioritized and where gaps exist, particularly in historically disinvested areas. While some Chicago region plans prioritized long-term regional growth or modernizing infrastructure, more recent plans emphasized equity and pedestrian-friendly designs. Even

though the service area for each plan differed, there were several shared priorities, intentions, and policy recommendations.

More broadly, the findings highlighted strong consensus among the plans from CMAP, RTA, Cook County, and the city of Chicago. Common priorities included preserving affordability, increasing mobility, strengthening the transit system, improving accessibility, and expanding pedestrian-friendly communities. Elevated Chicago shared many of these priorities, but since it was the only plan not solely managed by a transit agency or government entity, it reflected the goals and needs of a smaller-scale neighborhood plan.

5.2.1 Differences and Shifts in Priorities

Each of the five plans has its own project overview and goals, depending on the agency/organization and service area. Some of the plans' priorities and strategies are relatively similar, but not all solely focus on equitable development. CMAP's Go to 2040 (2010) is a comprehensive regional plan covering seven counties; the central focus is not on transit investments or equitable development, but rather long-range or regional planning. Cook County's Long Range Transportation Plan (2016) broadly focuses on transportation and multimodal infrastructure, so it does not necessarily address other concerns, such as inequities in communities.

Elevated Chicago's Logan Square Blue Line Action Plan (2018) is a collaborative effort that only focuses on one specific area, highlighting community-led solutions to address neighborhood displacement and inequities. The city of Chicago's first official plan regarding equitable development is the ETOD Policy Plan (2021), which focuses on zoning reform and prioritizing equitable TOD in citywide planning. Lastly, RTA's Transit is the Answer (2022) plan focuses more on modernization and maintenance of the regional transit system, financial

and funding priorities, and pedestrian-friendly communities. The RTA oversees the finances and regional transit system, so it considers and recognizes broader issues and challenges, such as equity, as a relevant concern for TOD and transit investment projects.

More recent plans from 2018 to 2022, Elevated Chicago, the city of Chicago, and RTA have shifted their planning focus to more critical hidden consequences of TOD planning, such as equity concerns. Those three plans all explicitly noted the priorities and goals of anti-displacement recommendations, combating the negative effects of gentrification, and how to address any other equity-related issues. With an understanding of equity, strategic planning, and sustainable transit systems, the extent to which these priorities are implemented may vary. On the other hand, older published plans from 2010 and 2016, CMAP and Cook County did not focus on equity in development, but rather those plans discussed broader transportation or regional planning focuses.

5.2.2 Implications for Equitable TOD

Plans from the RTA and the city of Chicago lay out the key principles and foundation of equitable transit-oriented development (ETOD) for existing and new TOD projects. Reorienting regional and city plans going forward towards an equity-oriented approach is argued as one of the solutions for delivering high-quality public transit service for all riders and residents. This can be interpreted by planners and policymakers that this shift towards equitable development reflects a necessary step to address negligence and disinvestment in areas that have historically been neglected, such as the South and West sides of Chicago. RTA was published a year after Chicago's ETOD plan, and it is the only one that explains that equitable development matters; not prioritizing equity in areas where there is investment or in TOD zones, brings consequences to the community and more vulnerable people, such as displacement and gentrification.

Lastly, these findings suggest that while Chicago-area planning efforts have recently acknowledged equity as a central principle, the degree of emphasis varies across government levels and transit agencies. Earlier plans prioritized broad infrastructure and regional growth, while more recent ones reflect a growing awareness of the social and hidden consequences of TOD, including affordability and uneven development patterns. This shift demonstrates that the Chicago area is evolving its planning focus, which recognizes the opportunities and risks of TOD. For planners and policymakers, there is a prominent implication: without an equity-centered focus, TOD may reinforce disparities rather than reduce them. Aside from TOD being perceived as a tool for efficiency and growth, with equity-focused implementation strategies, Chicago has the potential to ensure that TOD benefits all and is more inclusive.

5.3 Challenges and Limitations

This study explores how Chicago's transportation and TOD planning reflect and address equity concerns. While equity is becoming a more relevant topic in urban planning, several challenges emerged for this report. First, defining and measuring equity-related issues is difficult. There are many types of equity-related issues, and each plan addresses different aspects, such as housing, transportation access, gentrification, or displacement. For example, gentrification is a complex, multidimensional process involving socioeconomic, demographic, and physical changes. It is often measured indirectly through indicators like rising rents or shifting demographics. Displacement, particularly indirect or involuntary, is similarly challenging to observe and quantify. As Chapple and Loukaitou-Sideris (2019) note, establishing causal links between gentrification and displacement is difficult, especially when changes are gradual or informal. The findings may only partially address equity concerns, given the limitations of available data and updated Chicago plans.

There were some practical limitations for this report. The availability of updated plans and studies was a key limitation. CMAP's plan is over a decade old, while other plans – such as the TOD ordinances, Chicago's ETOD plan, and RTA's Transit is the Answer – are more recent but did not provide neighborhood changes. The impacts of TOD and transit infrastructure developments are not obviously seen immediately, but it takes time to understand the immediate effects. There is insufficient public data on TOD and neighborhood change, especially from recent policy interventions, and often not disaggregated by race, income, and geography. Nearly 90% of TOD projects in Chicago have occurred in majority-White, wealthier North and Northwest side neighborhoods (City of Chicago, 2021, p. 4). This skewing analysis is toward areas with visible development and less displacement. In contrast, South and West neighborhoods, where equity concerns are more pressing, have received fewer investments, leaving gaps in understanding.

Another limitation is this report's timeline. With less than a year to complete the report and conduct the analysis, the focus was mostly on themes and policies rather than long-term outcomes. This approach provides valuable information on how equity is framed in official regional and city plans, but may not fully capture lived experiences or the real-world effects of TOD policies and plans. Additionally, the reliance on government narratives introduces potential bias, as those sources may overlook inequities perceived or experienced by residents. Lastly, the experience and knowledge of data analysis, urban planning, and transit infrastructure are also limited. Thus, this report reflects a topic of interest rather than professional or academic knowledge of urban planning. Despite these challenges and limitations, this report contributes by highlighting how equity is conceptualized within Chicago's TOD and transportation plans. While

the analysis may not establish direct relationships, the key findings identify where plans have been addressed or failed to address equity-related issues.

5.4 Future Research

Some possible future research opportunities include neighborhood-level case studies, evaluation of equity-focused policy language in official documents, equity assessments, and comparative studies. The most prominent study that was used to help guide how to understand the complexities of the topic about equity is from the 2019 book written by Chapple and Loukaitou-Sideris. The researchers use global literature, empirical research on California, case studies of residential and commercial areas, neighborhood change processes, and recommend models for regional transportation (Chapple & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2019). Neighborhood-level case studies could combine quantitative data, such as property values, demographic shifts, and ridership patterns, with qualitative insights from residents, which could provide a broader understanding of how TOD impacts people.

Additionally, other future research could include the evaluation of how equity-focused policy language translates into policies. This could include analyzing whether ordinances and policy recommendations lead to outcomes, such as improved housing affordability, reduced displacement, and greater access to transit. At the beginning of this report, there is a lack of literature about this, which suggests that the relations between equity and TOD are relatively underdeveloped. Additionally, there is a lack of understanding of the lived experiences of residents and the long-term impacts of TOD. An equity assessment is another future research opportunity, which includes examining how equity commitments in policy documents translate into outcomes. This may include evaluating whether ordinances, zoning reforms, or investment strategies that result in improvements.

Lastly, comparative studies on different cities or regions could potentially help identify best practices for implementing equitable development. There is a lot of research around this issue worldwide, and every city or region may approach the issue of equitable development in a different way. There are unintended consequences of TOD, but it all depends on the built environment and the needs of the communities. All these argue that future research on TOD projects should be increasingly framed through an equity lens and community-level outcomes.

Chapter 6. Conclusion

Public transportation in the Chicago region serves millions of residents and riders, so why have 90% of investments and improvements been predominantly only on the North side? This is where the principle of equity comes into play. Even though the city has encouraged increased development around transit stations in the past decade, over 90% of development activity has occurred in predominantly White neighborhoods on the North Side (Elevated Chicago et al., 2018; City of Chicago, 2021). This report is significant because it questions the intentions of Chicago's planning efforts and critiques that there is not enough being done to prioritize the needs of all people; therefore, in the past decade, Chicago has reinforced spatial inequalities by not prioritizing historically disinvested areas.

Why should higher-income communities have more accessibility to amenities and opportunities and higher investment for new development projects than lower-income communities? TOD projects in Chicago may not have fully addressed the needs of the most vulnerable areas; therefore, it can be concluded that local agencies and governments have neglected certain communities. This implies that funding and resources are not being distributed evenly. To address the equity-related concerns, the Chicago area has recently begun to recognize this, especially from the city of Chicago's government, Elevated Chicago, and the Regional Transportation Authority's (RTA) plans published from 2018 to 2022. From those plans, it is a consensus that the first step towards community and policy change is the recognition that there are equity-related concerns with TOD and other investment projects. There will always be some equity-related issues with investment projects because all cities need to foster and accommodate new growth and development. The problem is that it is not as simple to balance new growth with equitable development. The Chicago region has not done enough yet and has currently failed to

strategically adapt to these new issues related to equity that have occurred from transit-oriented developments.

There is no quick solution to the growing concern surrounding transit-oriented development and its lack of equity, because meaningful progress takes time. The five Chicago region plans have a shared goal to transition towards a more concentrated and coordinated effort between regional, county, and city governments to address priorities relating to the public transit system and future investments and developments. Additionally, the region should collaborate on implementing long-term policies and investments that effectively prevent the reinforcement of inequities.

Regarding the shared priorities from all five plans, they all recognize that compact, mixed-use developments and pedestrian-friendly infrastructure are top priorities for communities to expand regional mobility, neighborhood spaces, and walkability. As mentioned, the newer plans from Elevated Chicago, the city of Chicago, and the RTA are the first to emphasize equitable development. Those agencies and organizations have shifted their policy recommendations towards mitigating the negative effects of gentrification, identifying anti-displacement strategies, and recognizing that there are inequities in where investments are made.

This report cannot conclude with simple or easy solutions on how to mitigate equity concerns with transit investment projects. From existing research and this report, it can be implied that inequity is inevitable among TOD projects because there will always be some who benefit and some who do not. Addressing equity issues is complex, especially when there is no one-size-fits-all legislation to apply to every TOD-eligible neighborhood and project. Each TOD action plan and project should be adapted to the characteristics of a community's cultural, socioeconomic, and built environment to fit the community's needs. The most relevant and

current action guide is from 2025; the RTA published a guide that outlines shared best practices, tools, and strategies for how to implement transit-friendly communities and how to adapt the guide to the community of focus.

The next step should be understanding the policy implementations and actions in TOD and other public transit-related projects. On October 31st, 2025, Illinois lawmakers passed the bill for funding public transportation for the upcoming years. This public transit bill gives \$1.5 billion for the regional public transit system (Ramos, 2025). It took most of 2025 for the bill to pass, and this was a critical update in local legislation regarding public transit in the region. “In addition to raising around \$1.5 billion, the deal will overhaul the Chicago region’s mass transit system by creating a new governing body to oversee the CTA, Metra and Pace called the Northern Illinois Transit Authority” (NITA) (Soglin, Olander, & Gorner, 2025). This means that the Regional Transportation Authority (RTA) will be replaced with NITA, “which will oversee the regional transit systems and be granted more power to set universal fares, services standards and schedules so the region operates on a one-network, one-timetable, one-ticket model for transit users” (Ramos, 2025). This passing of the bill was crucial for millions of riders because “the deal will prevent planned service cuts and layoffs on the CTA next year, according to the agency itself” (Soglin, Olander, & Gorner, 2025).

To conclude, the Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) will remain, and the regional transit system will now be managed by the Northern Illinois Transit Authority (NITA). The RTA will no longer exist, so NITA will be responsible for policy implementations and regional planning strategies. Hopefully, with secured funding and the change in management will not hinder any progress from the last few years regarding the shift in focus in equitable development and public

transit investments. Chicago should continue with updating TOD ordinances, completing equity assessments in communities, and executing evaluation plans to track progress.

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