Transit Access Barriers Study

Executive Summary

December 2025

Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Authority

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Introduction

Bridging Possibilities is a Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Authority (GCRTA) planning initiative focused on understanding transit access and the barriers that limit it. Bridging Possibilities is GCRTA's approach to creating intentional and strategic solutions to areas that have experienced persistent poverty and improving the alignment between transportation and daily needs. This Executive Summary brings together the findings from Report 1 (Existing Conditions), Report 2 (Identification of Barriers and Recommendations), and the appendix to provide a consolidated overview of the study.

A summary of the recommendations is provided on the next page to showcase the most impactful opportunities for removing barriers, as identified by riders, stakeholders, and peer research.

Persistent poverty for this analysis is defined as a census tract that is greater than or equal to 20 percent of the population living in poverty in all three of the following datasets:

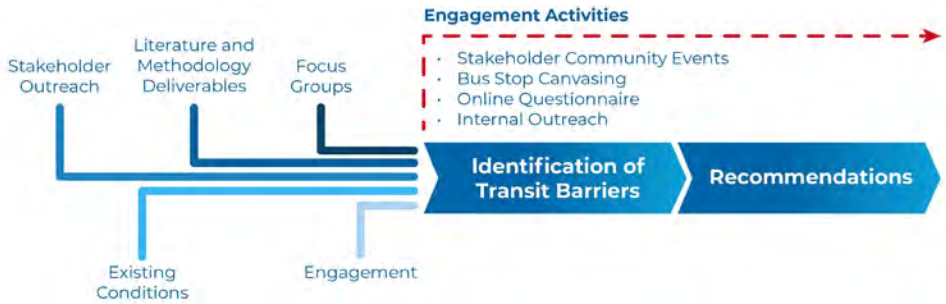
a) 2000 decennial census
b) 2006-2010 5-year data series available from the American Community Survey (ACS)
c) 2018 - 2022 5-year data series available from the ACS

ACS was used after the 2000 decennial census due to methodology and collection changes that began in 2010.

GCRTA was awarded the Federal Transit Administration's (FTA) Areas of Persistent Poverty program in 2022, dedicated to the planning, engineering, or development of technical or financing plans for projects in areas of persistent poverty. This report seeks to analyze the relationship between poverty and transit in Cuyahoga County by reviewing the history of poverty through relevant works, analysis of existing data, and original research. It seeks to understand demographic trends by identifying where concentrated poverty is located, reveal transit barriers, and provide recommendations to overcome those barriers, recognizing that improvements benefiting those in persistent poverty also enhance the experience of riders across the system regardless of income.

The Planning Process and Timeline:

This planning process focused on engaging the community, identifying transit barriers, and providing research and understanding to improve access to public transportation.



Summary of Recomendations

The recommendations below reflect the most effective strategies for removing transit barriers identified through this study.

Economic Relief Recommendations:

1. Preserve the value of transit.
2. Standardize and clearly communicate transfer policies.
3. Evaluate and adjust transfer windows for equity and ease.
4. Implement fare capping through an equitable outreach strategy to improve affordability.
5. Develop and launch a Mobility Wallet Pilot Program.

Transfers & Connection Issues

Service Availability

Community Investment & Beautification Recommendations:

1. Coordinate with municipalities to improve pedestrian access and streetscapes.
2. Strengthen partnerships with municipalities to clarify roles in transit infrastructure.
3. Integrate with the 311 system for simplified reporting.
4. Enhance transit waiting environments with additional infrastructure.
5. Refine internal roles to support a robust shelter cleaning program.
6. Implement a tracking tool to improve accountability and transparency.

Cleanliness & Maintenance

Safety

Empowering Community Voices Recommendations:

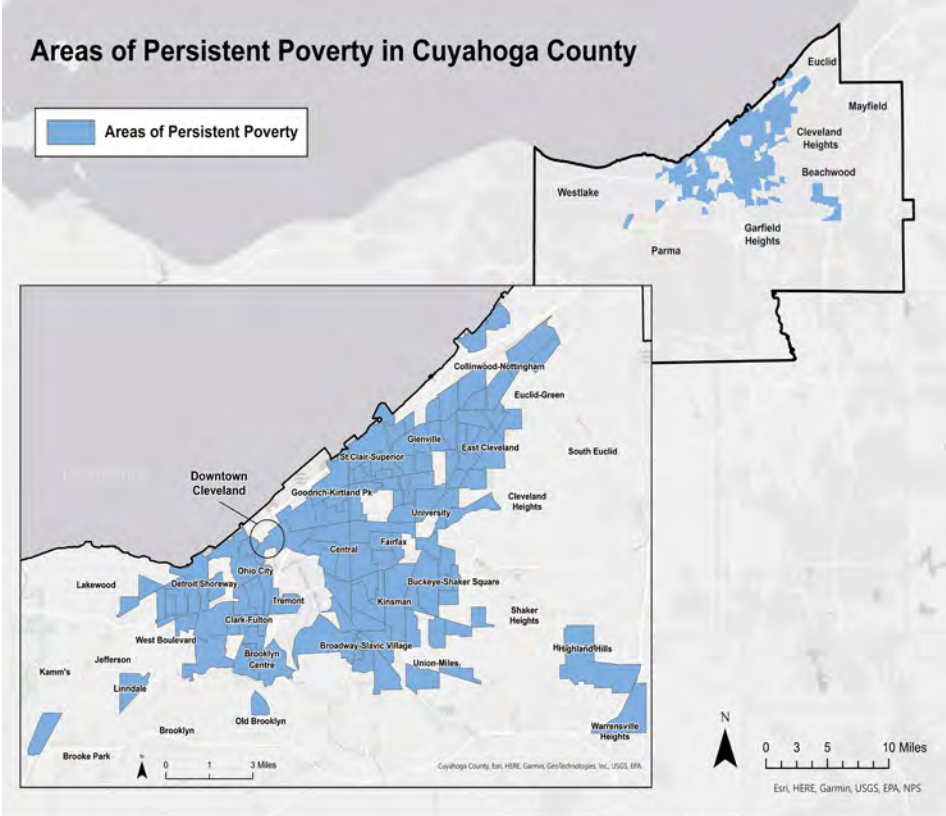
1. Provide rider education through onboard and waiting area tips.
2. Identify and promote family-friendly transit policies.
3. Establish multiple communication channels for riders and stakeholders.

Communication & Information

Existing Conditions

Poverty exists throughout Cuyahoga County but disproportionately affects certain residents and neighborhoods, especially within the City of Cleveland. The historical context of poverty in the region has created barriers to economic vitality, which, compounded by generational imbalances, have led to areas of persistent poverty shown in Figure 1.

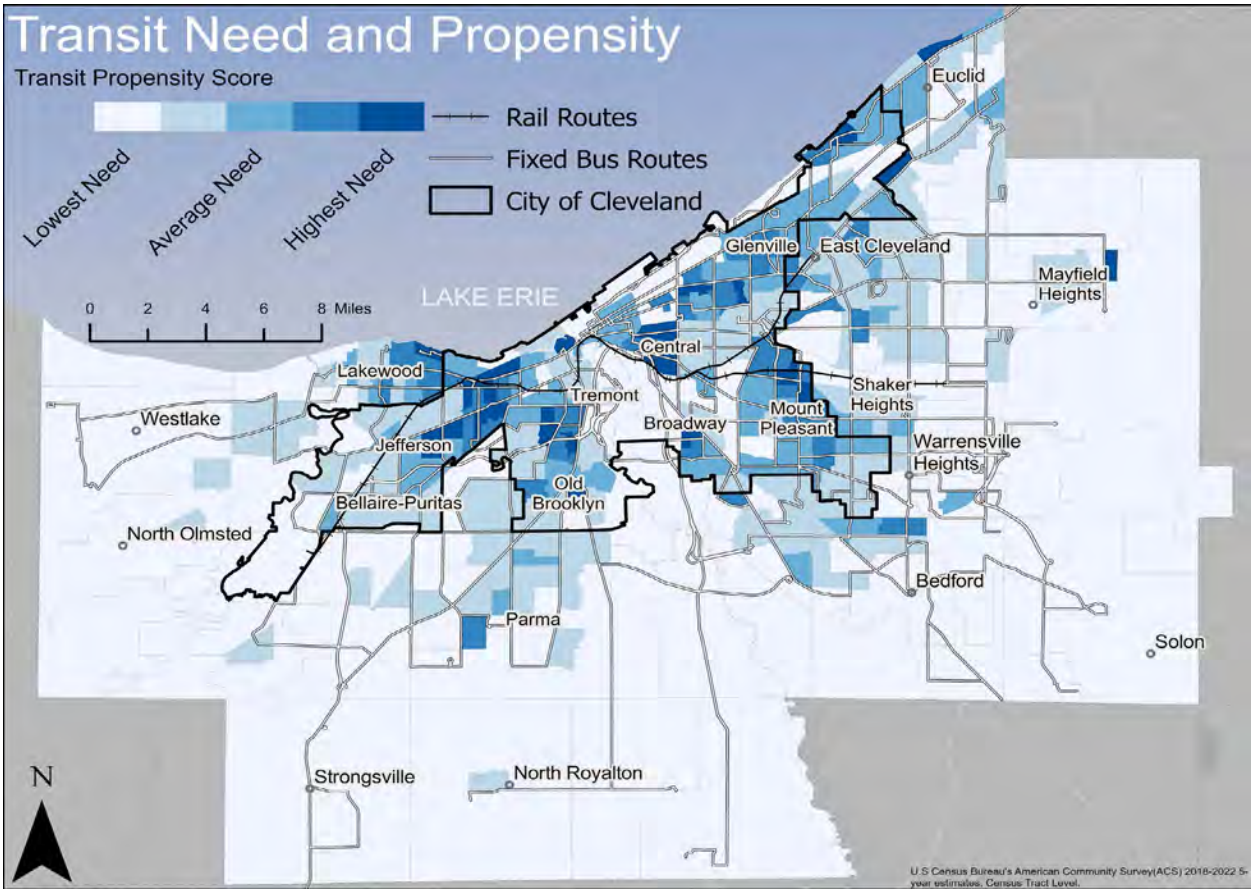
Figure 1. Areas of Persistent Poverty in Cuyahoga County



The highest concentration of persistent poverty in the region is found within the City of Cleveland, particularly in its Central and Eastern neighborhoods, as well as in several inner-ring suburbs. Residents in these areas are more likely to depend on public transit, especially those without access to a personal vehicle, individuals living on limited incomes, people with disabilities, and older adults facing mobility challenges.

To better understand the concentration of transit needs, factors such as low income, minority, people with disabilities, zero vehicle households, and senior populations were combined into a transit propensity index, shown in Figure 2. This index mirrors the areas of persistent poverty, with the greatest need appearing in Cleveland's east side and parts of the near west side, particularly in the southeast along the Broadway and Miles corridors, as well as in the eastern neighborhoods along Cedar, Central, Woodland, and Kinsman corridors and their adjacent suburbs. On the west side, high concentrations are also found along Detroit, Lorain, and West 25th corridors.

Figure 2. Areas of Persistent Poverty in Cuyahoga County



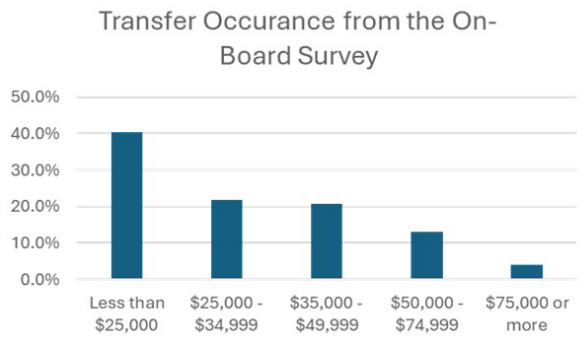
Since transit needs are concentrated along these corridors, the fixed-route bus network plays a critical role in providing mobility within these neighborhoods. As shown in Table 1, fixed route service is the backbone of the system, accounting for approximately 73% of all transit trips. These bus routes traverse through neighborhoods that experience persistent poverty and provide connections to jobs, healthcare, and other daily needs.

Table 1. 2024 GCRTA Ridership by Transit Mode

Transit Type	Route	Unlinked Passenger Trips	% Total Ridership
Bus	Fixed Route Bus	18,187,961	73.1%
Rail	Red Line	3,151,597	12.7%
BRT	HealthLine	2,080,030	8.4%
Rail	Blue/Green Line	080,055	3.2%
Paratransit	Paratransit Services	670,090	2.7%
TOTAL		27,897,733	100%

People with limited means who take GCRTA sometimes require multiple routes to complete a trip. A 2023 GCRTA On-Board Survey revealed that riders earning less than $25,000 a year are more likely to transfer as depicted in Figure 3. Although transfers have overall reduced since the 2021 NextGen Service Change, it is more likely that those who transfer are experiencing poverty.

Figure 3. Annual Income of Transferring Riders



To continue to support riders, GCRTA has created and implemented several operational programs, policies, and investments to improve access and better connect the community. Programs such as Baby on Board, Connectworks, UPass program, and Cuyahoga Community College Workforce Initiatives improve the relationship between the transit agency and institutions that serve communities. GCRTA has also invested millions of dollars in infrastructure to improve the reliability and safety of its transit system, redeveloping rail and bus stations to create destinations within its neighborhoods. These efforts address immediate transit needs and contribute to long-term community revitalization. However, opportunities still exist to improve transit access and remove potential barriers that may exist in historically disadvantaged communities.

The Engagement Process

A robust engagement process connected over 350+ community members through a collection of various events and touchpoints, including stakeholder and community focus groups, community sponsored events, bus stop canvassing, and a community questionnaire. The project team also met with internal staff including executive leaders, operations and management, and operators to provide a diverse set of internal perspectives. There were three periods of engagement at the beginning, middle, and end of the planning process. Collectively, these efforts captured many viewpoints and meaningful details, backing the existing conditions of research with lived experiences. While outreached focused on areas of persistent poverty, feedback received was consistent in many ways with challenges experienced by riders across the system.

Internal Engagement

The internal stakeholder group included meetings with staff members that provided input from representatives with diverse responsibilities from departments, including planning, operations, external affairs, and service management. GCRTA leadership formed the Executive Committee to support the project and offer insights regarding the purpose, vision, and overall goals. This group helped to narrow the focus of transit barriers and provide insight into existing processes and procedures. Additionally, operators shared their perspectives and provided feedback.

Community Focus Groups

GCRTA partnered with local organizations across Cuyahoga County in November 2024 and engaged with over 250 residents through a dozen community focus groups. These sessions offered trusted spaces for individuals, many from areas of persistent poverty, to share their firsthand experiences with transit. The focus group conversations highlighted challenges and showcased potential transit barrier locations within the system.

Stakeholder Focus Group

Meetings with external stakeholders provided input from representatives of various governmental organizations and non-profits that work within the community. This group focused on creative solutions of how partnerships can alleviate barriers within these communities.

Summer Community Markets

During Summer 2025, GCRTA met residents at various hosted events on the east and west side and were able to learn from over 40 individuals who utilize public transit or may have transportation challenges.

Bus Stop Canvassing

Engagement at bus stops within areas of persistent poverty allowed GCRTA to speak directly with riders where they live and work while riding public transit. Stops were selected for high ridership and transfer activity. In total, about 50 riders shared insights on how to improve the transit system.

Bridging Possibilities Engagement Methods and Tools

Emerging Themes and Identified Barriers

Engagement activities identified 30 specific barriers. Many of these barriers are interconnected, allowing them to be grouped into several key themes. These themes represent the most frequently raised concerns from riders and stakeholders and informed the development of recommendations, which incorporate peer agency best practices:

Cleanliness & Maintenance

Transfers & Connection Issues

Safety

Service Availability

Communication & Information

Recommendations

A brief overview of these recommendations was provided earlier in the Executive Summary. The sections below describe each focus area in greater detail.

There are opportunities within the transit network that could potentially alleviate financial and social hardships while increasing transit usage and improving the narrative of transit. The recommendations are organized into three focus areas that reflect the most common needs expressed throughout the transit access barriers of study. These opportunities include providing economic relief for customers through fare media enhancements, investing and beautifying neighborhood transit stops to create safe and welcoming waiting environments, and continuing to engage with riders to better understand and respond to their transit needs.

Economic Relief

Poverty throughout Cuyahoga County illustrates the need for economic relief, with more than one in four census tracts in the County and over half in the

Economic Relief Recommendations:

1. Preserve the value of transit.
2. Standardize and clearly communicate transfer policies.
3. Evaluate and adjust transfer windows for equity and ease.
4. Implement fare capping through an equitable outreach strategy to improve affordability.
5. Develop and launch a Mobility Wallet Pilot Program.

Timeframe

Short 2026 - 2028

- Improve fare communication across platforms.
- Partner with stakeholders to distribute fare media in underserved areas.
- Promote use of EZFare and Transit App for fare access and updates in underserved areas.
- Form a taskforce to guide equity-focused fare capping implementation.

Medium 2029 - 2031

- Launch fare capping system

Long 2032 - 2034

- Continuously evaluate and adjust the service network based on community needs.
- Mobility Wallet Pilot Program

Responsibilities

Champion: GRCTA

- Programming and Planning
- Customer Experience
- Service Management
- Office of Management and Budget
- Revenue

Supporting Partners:

- Community Stakeholders
- City of Cleveland
- Municipalities
- Cuyahoga County

Community Investment and Beautification

The City of Cleveland consists of 34 distinct neighborhoods and is part of Cuyahoga County, which includes 59 municipalities. Many of these areas are served by transit routes and feature physical transit infrastructure such as shelters, stations, and transit centers within their communities. Providing amenities at transit waiting areas helps ensure customers have a safe and comfortable place to wait. Features such as shelters, seating, lighting, trash receptacles, and concrete pads are highly valued. Transit customers consistently express a desire for these amenities at all transit locations.

Community Investment & Beautification Recommendations:

1. Coordinate with municipalities to improve pedestrian access and streetscapes.
2. Strengthen partnerships with municipalities to clarify roles in transit infrastructure.
3. Integrate with the 311 system for simplified reporting.
4. Enhance transit waiting environments with additional infrastructure.
5. Refine internal roles to support a robust shelter cleaning program.
6. Implement a tracking tool to improve accountability and transparency.

Timeframe

Short 2026 - 2028

- Improve shelter cleaning processes with a focus on equity and rider feedback.
- Strengthen municipal relationships to define roles and responsibilities.
- Prioritize shelter upgrades based on ridership, location, and transfer points

Medium 2029 - 2031

- Launch a shelter tracking system with a customer feedback interface.

Long 2032 - 2034

- Continue leveraging streetscape enhancements to improve safety in high-ridership corridors.

Responsibilities

Champion: GRCTA

- Programming and Planning
- Service Management
- Facility Management
- Operations
- Customer Experience
- Information Technology

Supporting Partners:

- NOACA
- City of Cleveland
- Municipalities
- Cuyahoga County
- Utility Providers
- Neighborhood Groups

Empowering Community Voices

Listening and responding to customers is central to GCRTA's mission of connecting with the community. By treating riders as partners, the agency builds trust and transparency and ensures service changes and improvements reflect rider's needs. Meaningful engagement, especially in communities experiencing persistent poverty, whether through focus groups, community events, or other channels ensures customers feel heard, valued, and included in shaping solutions.

Empowering Community Voices Recommendations:

1. Provide rider education through onboard and waiting area tips.
2. Identify and promote family-friendly transit policies.
3. Establish multiple communication channels for riders and stakeholders.

Timeframe

Short 2026 - 2028

- Establish a taskforce of internal and external stakeholders focused on family-friendly transit improvements.
- Expand the online feedback form to capture broader rider input beyond service complaints.
- Launch a stakeholder advisory committee with biannual meetings to address transit access issues.

Medium 2029 - 2031

- Develop a text-based customer service tool for real-time issue reporting.
- Introduce annual Customer Experience Plans to monitor and enhance rider satisfaction.
- Implement policies that support family-friendly transit practices.

Long 2032 - 2034

- Refine strategies based on feedback from Customer Experience Plans.
- Continue upgrading vehicle infrastructure to better accommodate strollers and mobility devices.

Responsibilities

Champion: GRCTA

- Programming and Planning
- External Affairs and Administration
- Customer Experience
- Information Technology
- Legal

Supporting Partners:

- City of Cleveland
- Municipalities
- Cuyahoga County
- Neighborhood Groups
- Customers

Conclusion

Bridging Possibilities brought to light the challenges individuals living in neighborhoods of persistent poverty face and outlined strategies to overcome these barriers, reinforcing GCRTA's role in connecting customers to the resources, services, and jobs they depend on. Challenges related to cleanliness, service availability, safety, and communication require GCRTA to not only focus on improving transit operations but also supporting economic mobility and expanding opportunity for all.

Developed to be both attainable and impactful, some recommendations can be achieved through clearer communication, stronger community partnerships, and refining processes already in place such as shelter cleaning, family-friendly policies, and customer communication channels to create a more inclusive rider experience. Other recommendations will require long-term planning and investment, including the adoption of fare capping and account-based ticketing as well as expanding the shelter and neighborhood improvements at bus stops. Together, these targeted strategies combined with clearer communication and collaboration will improve the transit system for those who rely on it most.

Looking ahead, successful implementation will require ongoing engagement with riders, operators, and stakeholders as well as accountability and investment. By addressing the needs of those in persistent poverty, GCRTA and its partners can transform today's barriers into tomorrow's opportunities.