



Living Near Good Transit May Make You Happier

ERIC JAFFE SEP 12, 2013 54 COMMENTS



Jason Cao, a transport policy scholar at the University of Minnesota, has conducted a [short but tidy study](#) that demonstrates just what good public transit can mean to a person's life. His findings, in a word: satisfaction.

Cao focused his research on the Hiawatha light rail line in Minneapolis (lately called the Blue line instead). The line runs 12 miles between the downtown area and the Mall of America, carrying travelers to major sports stadiums, entertainment districts, and the international airport. Weekday ridership has already exceeded predictions for 2020 [by 30 percent](#).

That's some good transit. The key question, in Cao's mind, was whether it was so good that it had a measurable impact on the well-being of people who live nearby.

Cao sent questionnaires to households in the Hiawatha corridor. Respondents rated the quality of transit in their area (namely, service quality and accessibility) as well as the quality of their lives (how satisfied they were). To form points of comparison, Cao sent the same survey to residents of four other corridors: two in urban areas with transit but no light rail, and two in suburbs with similar demographics but no transit.

What he found spoke to the power of living along the rails. People in the Hiawatha corridor had higher ratings on questions related to the quality of their lives compared to people in the other four corridors. These were items like "In most ways my life is close to my ideal" and "The conditions of my life are excellent." In short, they were satisfied with their lives.

Cao believes this high quality of life emerged primarily through the quality of the light rail. When he controlled for transit service and regional access, for instance, the advantage in life satisfaction disappeared — a clear sign, to him, that service and access were responsible for this satisfaction in the first place. Contentment with travel was leading to contentment with life.

The reasons for this finding may vary. Perhaps residents enjoyed the train itself, or perhaps they enjoyed the access to great social and cultural destinations it afforded them. The distinction doesn't much matter. What's clear is that much of the satisfaction derived from living in the Hiawatha corridor comes from the high level of mobility that good light rail provides.

Writing in the journal *Transportation*, Cao concludes:

... [T]he Hiawatha corridor impacts travel satisfaction through its influences on residents' perceptions of transit access and service and their perceived easy access to activity destinations. ... Further, perceived accessibility to destinations has a direct effect on satisfaction with life.

The study is an important pivot in the understanding of transit's role in everyday well-being. There's not much research out there on this connection, and what does exist tends to focus on the [negative psychological impact of commuting](#). A few studies have found a strong connection between [well-being and cars](#), but examinations of transit have been exceedingly rare.

The most persuasive study, prior to Cao's, suggests that the satisfaction he found with light rail in the Hiawatha corridor may hold true for rail transit more generally.

In his 2011 doctoral dissertation [[PDF](#)], the transport scholar Eric Morris ([not always a fan](#) of public transportation) found that rail transit had a surprisingly strong connection with personal well-being. Whether or not a person lived within a mile of a rail station had a greater impact on his or her quality of life than whether or not that person owned a car. It's not that people who lived near rail were naturally happier than others, Morris concluded, but that the rail itself *made* them happier.

Together these intriguing bits of research suggest that well-planned transit can be more than a ride — it can be a positive emotional force.

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