

One City Two Systems: The Hidden Transit Inequality of Staten Island

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Introduction

New York City is known for being one of the most connected cities in the world and for having an extensive infrastructure. Subways, buses, and long-distance railroads allow citizens to easily travel to jobs, internships, school, and other countless opportunities provided throughout the area. However, this level of access does not extend to Staten Island, one of the 5 boroughs that make up NYC. Often referred to as the forgotten borough, Staten Island is disconnected from the rest of the city, largely due to the lack of a successful transit system.

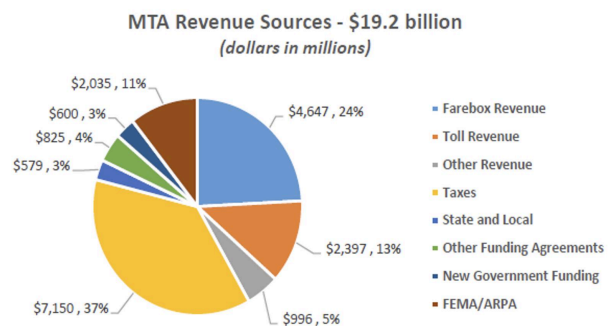


The disparity in access isn't just an inconvenience but a reflection of the inequities the borough faces in comparison to the rest of the city. It limits the opportunities of every citizen, especially our youth, who depend on public transportation. Staten Island has significantly fewer MTA vehicles, routes, and reliable service, which results in longer commutes, fewer opportunities available, and the borough getting left behind.

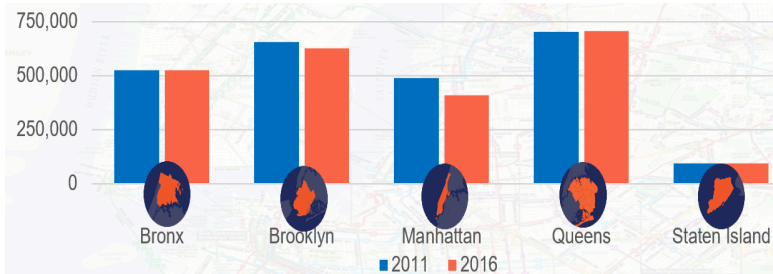
The Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) must focus on rectifying the situation through the implementation of a Transit Equity Allocation Policy. It would concentrate on reallocating funding and prioritizing the expansion of the transit system for Staten Island. Without intervention, this issue will worsen, and residents will feel the growing gap between boroughs as it falls behind.

How The NYC MTA System Operates

The MTA receives plenty of funding, but it is its distribution that harms the boroughs. The allocation is based on ridership, simply put is derived from the population density and the number of riders each borough hasⁱ. While this may seem fair, Staten Island has a significantly lower population and contains more citizens who drive. But using this as a basis to determine funding is unfair because it is a result of a cyclical issue.



Since the borough has fewer transit options, fewer people use them, resulting in less ridership. Additionally, the excess use of cars is not just a personal choice but becomes necessary when you cannot rely on public transportation. The manner in which we currently function does not take into account these relatives and leaves us with almost no financial support despite the fact that the finances are readily available.



This image represents the average weekday ridership on local bus routes, 2011-2016, showing just how little Staten Island is forced to rely on the buses and why our funding is so skewed.ⁱⁱ

Who The System Fails

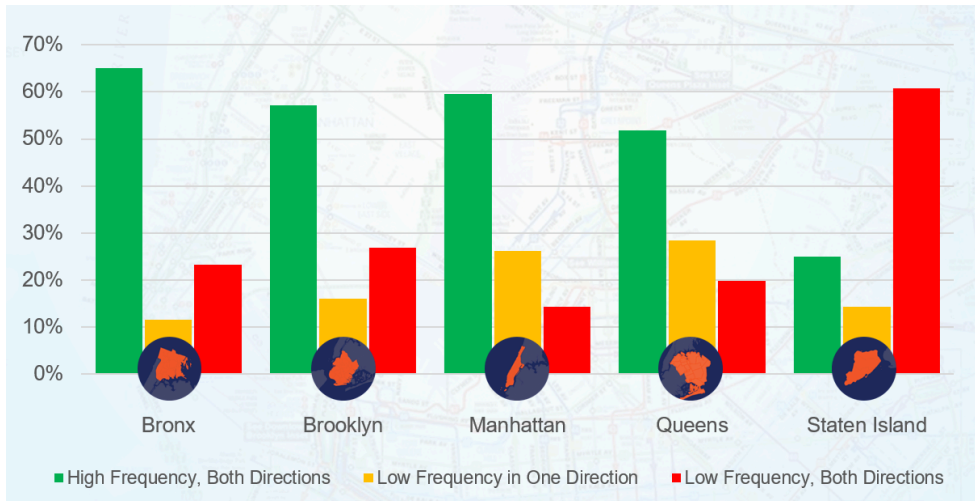
While the lack of reliable access to public transportation negatively affects everyone, it is most harmful to our youth. Children and teenagers who either do not have access to a vehicle or are too young to drive face the repercussions. According to Slate this leads to increased school absences, lack of participation in extracurricular activities, and the loss of countless opportunities, such as jobs and internshipsⁱⁱⁱ.

In other boroughs, children do not face the same difficulties, allowing them to travel freely and independently. Here, most of the youth rely on their parents to get to their destinations or are left to find their own solutions to a systemic issue, often abandoning opportunities they can't reach on their own.

Beyond affecting the youth's connection within our community, it is affecting every citizen's connection outside the borough. We are extremely isolated in comparison, which means we are sheltered from environments outside our own and have a narrower view of the world. By being so isolated, we are constrained to the rare opportunities offered in our borough, while outside of us, they have unlimited access to the possibilities all 4 boroughs offer.

The Transit Gap

These issues are revealed once we look at the data. In 2024, Staten Island's bus system completed only 90.6% of its scheduled peak-hour trips, compared to 95.9% in other boroughs^{iv}. On top of that, only 44% of commuters in Staten Island reported that they were satisfied with their experience using our transit system^v. These are not the only statistics reported, but they do reflect a bigger issue occurring. The MTA is failing to serve our citizens significantly more than others.



This image shows the share of bus routes with infrequent service during AM rush hour, by boroughⁱⁱ.

Unlike the rest of the city, we are highly dependent on buses since we only have one train. When the buses we are meant to rely on delay our travels even more, it is an obvious choice to negate that option, leaving us isolated^{vi}.

A key argument made for our lack of transportation is that, as an island, it is inherently harder to be connected. Yet when we take a look at Manhattan, another island, they are the hub of our city and the most interconnected borough. This proves that Staten Island is capable of maintaining a successful transit system.

Borough Isolation

Staten Island did not earn the title of the forgotten borough just because of its position, but rather as a consequence of its isolation from the other boroughs^{vii}. The lack of transportation does not just affect citizens within the island but also harms relations outside of the island.

Currently, to travel to another borough, you are left with the options of driving, using the Staten Island Ferry, or taking a SIM bus. All options are costly in their own way. If you drive, you are subject to congestion pricing. The Staten Island Ferry takes an excessive amount of time, only coming in 30-minute increments, and the SIM is costly in comparison to other MTA prices. On top of that, you are most likely going to transfer to reach your specific destination, as these modes of public transportation only leave you in Manhattan. For many residents, especially students and lower-income citizens, these options are out of the question^{viii}.

Transit Equity Allocation Policy

To address these issues, the MTA should implement a Transit Equity Allocation Policy that pushes for Staten Island to receive an equitable amount of funds. This policy would ensure that each borough receives an exact equal minimum amount of funding instead of mainly relying on ridership to dictate distribution. By ensuring we all receive a certain amount no matter the population, we begin to resolve the issue because sometimes seeking equality is unfair when it is equity that we truly require^{ix}.

Key aspects of this policy would include

- Fair Funding Allocation
- Increased express bus routes at a lower cost
- Extensive Bus Routes
- Improved Bus Service

This policy focuses on equity because solely functioning on equality has failed our borough and left us falling behind the rest of the city. By providing Staten Island with increased funding, we will be able to improve our infrastructure all around. This would help create more and cheaper express bus routes, providing easier access to the other boroughs and the opportunities they provide. Within the island, increasing the amount of bus routes would focus on areas that have schools and community centers so that our youth are able to mobilize independently. Addressing these main issues, along with improving the bus service we already have in place, would support our borough tremendously, and every resident is ready for this to happen SI reports^x.

Conclusion

Staten Island's lack of reliable transportation shows the systematic inequality the borough faces within NYC. Limited access to transit options, having unreliable service, and inequitable funding are all barriers that restrict residents' access to education, employment, and opportunity.

To remedy the situation, we must call upon the MTA to implement an equitable policy such as the Transit Equity Allocation Policy described above. Without any action, the gap between the boroughs will only grow, but if we intervene now, Staten Island can lose its title as the forgotten borough and become an integral part of the city.

End Notes

ⁱMetropolitan Transportation Authority. “Budget: Capital Program Overview.” Accessed April 19, 2026. <https://www.mta.info/budget>.

ⁱⁱNew York City Comptroller. “The Other Transit Crisis: How to Improve the NYC Bus System.” Accessed April 19, 2026. <https://comptroller.nyc.gov/reports/the-other-transit-crisis-how-to-improve-the-nyc-bus-system/>.

ⁱⁱⁱSlate Z. “Transportation Access and Education.” Accessed April 19, 2026. <https://slatez.org/transportation-access-education/>.

^{iv}“Staten Islanders Suffer From Bus Slowdown and Increasing Wait Times.” *THE CITY*, April 23, 2025. <https://www.thecity.nyc/2025/04/23/staten-island-mta-bus-wait-times-slow/>.

^v“New MTA Survey Shows Majority Unsatisfied With Local Bus Service on Staten Island.” *Silive*, January 2025. <https://www.silive.com/news/2025/01/new-mta-survey-shows-majority-unsatisfied-with-local-bus-service-on-staten-island.html>.

^{vi}“People vs. the Staten Island Bus Network.” *Urban Omnibus*, March 2016. <https://urbanomnibus.net/2016/03/the-people-vs-the-staten-island-bus-network/>.

^{vii}“Staten Island: NYC’s Forgotten Borough.” *Thrillist*. Accessed April 19, 2026. <https://www.thrillist.com/lifestyle/new-york/staten-island/staten-island-forgotten-boroughs-of-ny-c>.

^{viii}Urban Institute. “How Commuters with Low Incomes Use Public Transit and How One City Expanded Ridership.” Accessed April 19, 2026. <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/how-commuters-low-incomes-use-public-transit-and-how-one-city-expanded-ridership>.

^{ix}TransitCenter. *NYC Transit Fact Sheet*. June 2021. <https://transitcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/NYCFactSheet.pdf>.

^x“More Buses Added for Select NYC Express Routes, Including Staten Island.” *Silive*, April 2024. <https://www.silive.com/news/2024/04/mta-approves-adding-more-buses-for-select-nyc-express-routes-including-on-staten-island.html>.