

1 **EXPLORING THE EFFECT OF AUTONOMOUS VEHICLES ON TRANSIT**  
2 **RIDERSHIP**

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6 **Amin Mohamadi Hezaveh**  
7 University of Tennessee, Knoxville  
8 311 JD Tickle Building, TN 37996  
9 Phone: (385) 259-5148  
10 amohamad@vols.utk.edu

11

12 **Candace Brakewood**  
13 University of Tennessee, Knoxville  
14 320 JD Tickle Building, TN 37996  
15 Phone: (865) 974-7706  
16 Email: cbrakewo@utk.edu

17

18 **Christopher R. Cherry**  
19 University of Tennessee, Knoxville  
20 321 JD Tickle Building, TN 37996  
21 Phone: (865) 974-7710  
22 Fax: (865) 974-2669; Email: [cherry@utk.edu](mailto:cherry@utk.edu)

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**1 ABSTRACT**

2 Autonomous Vehicles (AV) are a new mode of transportation that provide the ability to  
3 communicate with other vehicles and intelligent road infrastructure. Although several studies  
4 have shown the potential benefits of fully AVs on mobility and safety, its effect on the overall  
5 transportation system is generally not well understood. One mode that could be heavily  
6 affected by AVs is public transit. In this study, we establish a framework based on the four-  
7 step travel demand model to explore the potential effects of AVs on ridership. By reviewing  
8 the current literature on AVs and breaking down the four-step model, the likely results are a  
9 reduction in transit ridership with the probable migration of travelers from public transit  
10 toward using AVs. Extra comfort and privacy of AVs, compared to public transit, could  
11 increase the relative utility of AVs, which ultimately could lead to travelers shifting from  
12 transit toward AVs. Low costs of Shared AVs (SAV) and microtransit AVs have the potential  
13 to adversely impact transit ridership by attracting travelers from traditional public transit  
14 services. AVs also remove mobility barriers for captive riders, which may cause migration of  
15 a portion of these travelers toward AVs or micotransit. In contrast, AVs could increase the  
16 capacity of existing roads and reduce delays at intersections, which could benefit public  
17 transit by cutting in-vehicle and out-of-vehicle travel times, which would positively impact  
18 ridership. In summary, the overall effects of AVs on transit are unclear and require  
19 significantly more research, but this framework begins to shed light on this emerging issue.

20

21 *Keywords:* Public Transit; Autonomous vehicles

22

## 1 INTRODUCTION

2 Autonomous vehicle (AV) technology has the potential to transform road transportation in the  
3 coming years (1). Several studies indicate that autonomous vehicles may impose both  
4 negative and positive externalities on the transportation system (2). In order manage AVs'  
5 externalities, particularly minimize the negative externalities, researchers, policymakers, and  
6 practitioners need to study the impacts of AVs, particularly their effects on other elements of  
7 the transportation system such as roads, parking, and public transit (3-5). Widespread  
8 adoption of AV technology in automobiles has the potential to have widespread effects on  
9 other modes of transportation. This paper focuses on developing a conceptual framework to  
10 assess the potential impacts of fully autonomous cars on public transit systems by identifying  
11 changes in the relative utility between modes of transportation.

12 According to the Society of Automotive Engineers (SAE), vehicles can have six levels of  
13 automation (6). The first level has no automation, and the driver is fully in charge of driving  
14 tasks. As the level of autonomy increases, the driving responsibilities transfer from a human  
15 driver to the vehicle. Eventually, in Level 5, when full automation takes place, the vehicle can  
16 drive without a human driver or any occupants. Level 5 vehicles will likely make  
17 fundamental changes in the transportation system both on the supply and demand side.  
18 Connected and autonomous vehicles (CAV) will be able to communicate with other vehicles  
19 in the transportation system as well as road infrastructure. This ability will enable AVs to  
20 perform based on real-time data of the surrounding traffic conditions, which could increase  
21 the efficiency and reliability of autonomous vehicles (7).

22 Shared autonomous vehicles (SAV) or autonomous taxis are another forms of AVs that  
23 have the potential to provide low-cost on-demand services for those who cannot afford an AV  
24 (6; 8-10). These services may play a substantial role in transportation systems by providing  
25 convenient last-mile solutions, which could facilitate multimodality (10). Microtransit is also  
26 a hybrid of AVs and transit system. Microtransit is similar to current services such as taxis  
27 and ridesharing (e.g., Uber, and Lyft) (6; 9; 11) with the aim of maximizing the utilization  
28 rate of autonomous vehicles.

29 Although there is skepticism about the positive impacts of AVs on transportation systems  
30 (6), one needs to consider that AVs may provide independent mobility to non-drivers, reduce  
31 the stress of driving, and could eventually be a solution for congestion, traffic operations,  
32 safety, and pollution problems (8; 9; 12-16). Due to the unique characteristics of AVs, many  
33 studies predict fundamental changes in travel behavior of road users. These changes in travel  
34 behavior may significantly influence individual trip rates and lengths as well as mode choice.

35 One of these transportation modes is public transit, which is typically reliant on subsidies  
36 and regulations particularly in areas with low density. Compared to personal vehicles, public  
37 transit has several benefits for society (17; 18). Public transit can improve mobility and  
38 transportation system resilience; and it can reduce congestion, emissions, and fuel  
39 consumption. It also provides affordable transportation alternatives for low-income  
40 neighborhoods (17; 18). Most public transit service is characterized by four features – it  
41 consists of regularly scheduled vehicle trips, is open to all paying passengers, with the  
42 capacity to carry multiple passengers whose trips may have different origins, destinations,  
43 and purposes (19). Broader definitions of public transportation services also include other  
44 related forms of shared transportation services. For example, paratransit is a form of transit  
45 with flexible routes and scheduled particularly for those who are unable to use the regular,  
46 fixed route transit service that serves their region (20). Ridesharing (e.g., hire and drive) and  
47 taxis (e.g., hail or phone-taxi) are other forms of paratransit (21). These services are available  
48 for-hire and usually require reservations in advance.

49 AVs have the potential to change traveler behavior, and it is expected that these changes  
50 will affect the performances of public transit and paratransit. Also, one may expect that

1 changes in travel behavior and heavy investment in intelligent transport infrastructure  
2 necessary for AVs will substantially affect service efficiency, service effectiveness, and  
3 financial information, and therefore, affect transit ridership. However, the extent and  
4 magnitude of AV effects are not known (8; 22).

5 Many of these attributes, such as financial indices and fleet size, are subject to exogenous  
6 factors such as the availability of local and state funds, which reflect local/state policies.  
7 Others such as service effectiveness and service efficiency are a function of transit demand or  
8 policy (i.e., number of an unlinked passenger trip). A handful of studies have evaluated the  
9 potential impact of AV technologies on various aspects of transit service, including changes  
10 in technology used in public transit, effects on transit stakeholders, land use, infrastructure,  
11 and reductions in delay (22-26); however, to the best of our knowledge, no prior studies have  
12 investigated the changes in transit ridership due to the emergence of AV technology in  
13 automobiles. Reductions in transit ridership could adversely affect operations of transit  
14 agencies, particularly in terms of revenue. Understanding the potential effects of AVs on  
15 travelers' behavior may help public transit agencies to develop solutions to prevent or  
16 minimize potential adverse effects, such as drops in transit ridership.

17 This study aims to qualitatively evaluate potential changes in public transit ridership due  
18 to the emergence of fully AVs (Level 5) on roads. Although there are many metrics to  
19 evaluate the future of public transit, this study focuses on changes in the transit ridership. In  
20 order to evaluate the effects, it is essential to develop a framework that is sensitive to changes  
21 in the transportation system to forecast travel demand.

## 22 **ASSUMPTIONS**

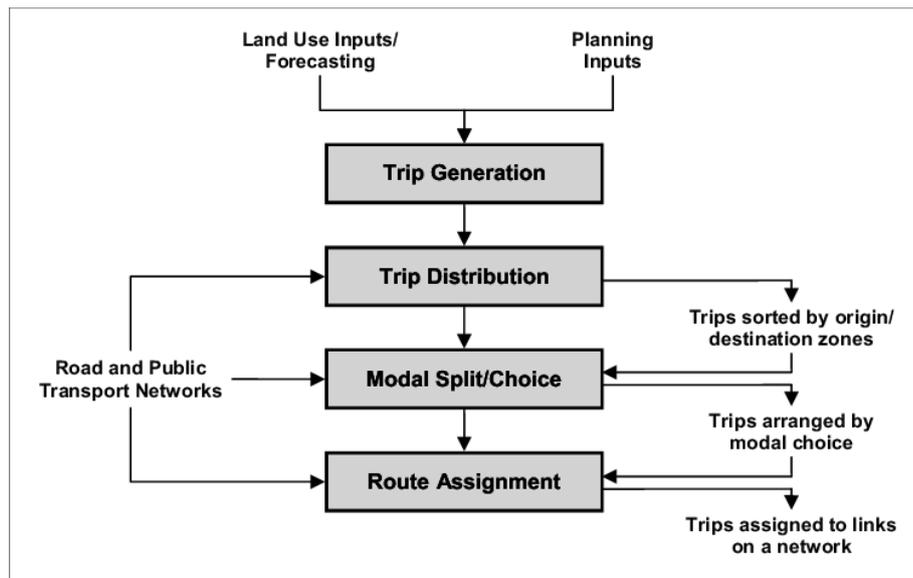
23 In order to evaluate the possible effect of AVs, there is a need to make many strong  
24 assumptions regarding changes in the factors influencing both transportation supply and  
25 demand. In this study for the sake of developing a framework, we assume that AVs are fully  
26 autonomous (Level 5) and are able to communicate with other AVs and intelligent road  
27 infrastructure. Moreover, AVs have large enough market penetration to have impacted the  
28 majority of travel decisions in an urban area. Likewise, there are no significant changes in  
29 sociodemographic variables. In addition, there are no major changes in transportation  
30 infrastructure except those that are necessary for the performance of the connected  
31 autonomous vehicles.

## 32 **FOUR-STEP MODEL FRAMEWORK**

33 Although several methods and frameworks have been designed to forecast transportation  
34 demand, we use a traditional four-step travel demand model. The four-step model consists of  
35 trip generation, trip distribution, mode split, and traffic assignment (or route choice, at the  
36 individual vehicle level) (27; 28). The trip generation model describes the frequency of  
37 origins or destinations of trips in each zone based on trip purposes as a function of  
38 sociodemographic variables, land use, and household demographics. The trip distribution  
39 model matches trip makers' origins and destinations based on the relative attractiveness in  
40 each pair of origins and destinations. Mode choice provides information about the  
41 transportation mode that trip makers use to travel between their desired origin and  
42 destination. This model is often based on the concept of utility (i.e., a traveler chooses the  
43 alternative that maximizes his/her utility function (28)). The utility is calculated based on the  
44 travelers' sociodemographic characteristics and attributes of available alternative modes for  
45 the traveler. The fourth step is traffic assignment; it is different from the previous three steps  
46 because it relies highly on the quality and availability of transportation infrastructure and is  
47 sensitive to changing performance based on congestion. In this step, travel demand loads are  
48 assigned to links in the transportation network based on the principles of the equilibrium (29;

1 30). FIGURE 1 shows the traditional four-step model.

2



3

4 **FIGURE 1 Traditional four-step model, adapted from Evans, Burke and Dodson (31)**

5

6 The primary factors that affect transit demand will be investigated for each step of the  
 7 traditional 4-step travel demand model. This section examines how AV characteristics could  
 8 impact each of these steps and their resulting effects on transit demand.

9

### 10 **Trip Generation**

11 Once full automation is possible, Level 5 AVs will be able to provide mobility to those  
 12 formerly unable to drive. The disabled, elderly, unlicensed, and perhaps even children will  
 13 realize newfound independence, thus likely increasing trip-making rates (8). While some of  
 14 these trips would likely have occurred by other modes (e.g., public transit, cycling), AVs  
 15 should help eliminate a mobility barrier for these individuals. Hence one may expect higher  
 16 trip rates for these groups of individuals.

17 Furthermore, convenience and comfort are two of the main factors that affect trip  
 18 generation (28), and it is likely that the perceived burden of in-vehicle travel time will fall as  
 19 former drivers are freed to pursue other tasks, while reducing driver stress and increasing  
 20 comfort (e.g., (9; 32; 33)). These factors should increase both the convenience and relative  
 21 utility of AVs in comparison to the other modes of transportation. It also improves user  
 22 experiences and individuals' willingness to travel more and could eventually yield higher  
 23 trip-making rates.

24 Additionally, the ability to communicate between AVs and infrastructure could yield more  
 25 efficient traffic flows and transportation system operations, leading to an effective system  
 26 capacity increase (15; 34; 35). Bearing in mind that travel time is one of the main factors in  
 27 travelers' perception of cost (36) and equilibrium between supply and demand curve in  
 28 transportation, we may see a shift in the supply curve that leads to an increase in travel  
 29 demand. An elasticity-rebound effect would likely be seen in response, with other vehicles  
 30 filling up the newly added capacity. Simply put, as the cost of travel falls due to faster travel  
 31 times, more people will travel (37). Although the additional capacity may be realized without  
 32 adding new lanes, it still increases and therefore has the potential to increase travel demand.

33 Using similar principles, AVs could change monetary travel costs, thus impacting trip  
 34 generation. AVs might drive more efficiently than conventional vehicles, AVs could relocate  
 35 while unoccupied to cheaper or free parking (11) and shared AV (SAV) travel could be

1 cheaper than taxis (9; 11) or eventually even household-owned vehicles (38). Yet fuel costs  
2 may increase, and the cost of the vehicle could be higher from added electronics and possibly  
3 larger sizes. SAV users may also take fewer trips since the fixed cost of the vehicle would be  
4 embedded in the marginal price of the trip (11). That is, the cost of a year's worth of trips via  
5 SAVs might be cheaper than by a personally owned vehicle, but once the vehicle has been  
6 purchased, marginal trips could be cheaper than if taken by SAV (17). Reductions in travel  
7 cost also have the potential to increase trip rates.

8 In summary, while there is a good deal of uncertainty surrounding many of these trip  
9 generation outcomes, the majority of these factors point towards AVs leading to an  
10 anticipated increase in trip-making rates. Therefore, one can anticipate that these trips are  
11 likely to be taken by AVs rather than other modes of transportation.

## 12 **Trip Distribution and Land Use**

13 Many of the CV- and AV-related factors impacting trip generation could similarly affect the  
14 trip distribution. As was mentioned in the previous section, due to the increased convenience  
15 of AVs in comparison to current modes of transportation, one may expect a reduction in  
16 sensitivity to in-vehicle travel time. As a result, travelers would be willing to spend more  
17 times in vehicle; therefore, they would be willing to travel more often as well as farther  
18 distances. Improvement in system efficiency also provides additional capacity that could  
19 enhance the aforementioned effect. If AVs' passengers are willing to travel long distances and  
20 spend more time in vehicles, one may expect an expansion of cities (i.e., urban sprawl) where  
21 housing costs are cheaper. Urban sprawl has negative impacts on transportation systems –  
22 increased VMT, total network travel times, and increased fuel consumption and emissions are  
23 among these negative externalities. This problem could be more concerning in regions with  
24 weak land use regulations.

25 One study found that density (and trip intensity) was key to SAV success and particularly  
26 crucial for ridesharing applications that increase average vehicle occupancy and therefore cut  
27 travel costs (39). Therefore, one may conclude that SAVs could encourage higher urban  
28 density, while non-shared AVs would encourage sprawl (40). Indeed, this may lead to  
29 simultaneous densification of cities and exurban expansion (41).

30 In summary, urban sprawl is a function of SAV and AV market penetration and highly  
31 relies on land use regulations and urban economics. Regardless of land use regulations, AV  
32 features could increase the willingness of individuals to travel farther to destinations. In the  
33 case of urban sprawl and considering geographical coverage of public transit, it is likely that  
34 public transit route lengths may increase to cover longer distances. Bearing in mind increases  
35 in route lengths and increases in the number of stations, one may expect longer in-vehicle  
36 travel times. As a result, the relative utility of public transit may decrease compared to AVs,  
37 SAVs, and microtransit. This change could adversely affect transit ridership.

## 38 **Mode Split**

39 Since AVs provide unique characteristics for their users, one may expect the highest impact  
40 on mode shift and changes in the distribution of travel mode choices. AVs will introduce a  
41 new travel mode option for many. The emergence of AVs could broadly change road users'  
42 choice for travel (22).

43 Transit users can be categorized into two distinct classes – captive and choice riders (42;  
44 43). The first group, captive users, have few other competitive alternatives rather than public  
45 transit. This could be due to lack of driving ability, individuals' financial situations, or travel  
46 distances that make alternatives unrealistic. In the case of captive users who lack driving  
47 abilities, it is possible that many of them shift from public transit, cycling, or walking toward  
48 AVs (8; 9; 44) to gain more independence, increase their privacy, security level, or reduce  
49

1 their travel time.

2 In contrast, the choice rider may use public transit to engage in activities other than  
3 driving. This group of travelers may be more sensitive to changes in the system, and its  
4 characteristics such as comfort, convenience, safety, and reliability may be more important to  
5 them compared to captive riders (43). Public transit offers these benefits to transit riders.  
6 However, fully AVs may also offer these advantages to occupants. As a result, the relative  
7 utility of public transit could decline in comparison to AVs. Moreover, due to the lower  
8 occupancy rate in AVs, the level of privacy, comfort, and security may be higher than public  
9 transit, which is an advantage for AVs. Therefore, one may expect a shift from public transit's  
10 choice riders toward AVs.

11 Microtransit may also be affected by AVs. Microtransit services could also be used as  
12 low-speed demand-responsive connector/feeders to line-haul mass transit systems, potentially  
13 resulting in increased transit usage (45). On the other hand, they can perform as a main mode  
14 of transportation for road users to commute between their origin and destination.

15 Travel cost is also an important factor in travelers' mode choice. One of the main  
16 premises of AVs is lower cost of transportation due to effective use of transportation assets  
17 and infrastructure (22). As a result, the cost of travel in the transportation system is expected  
18 to decline (6; 8). There are several estimates of travel costs in the future, and they are all in  
19 agreement that self-driving vehicles will be cheaper than owning a personal vehicle (22).  
20 Litman (9) compared the operations cost of autonomous and human-driven vehicles and  
21 concluded that public transit should be slightly cheaper than AVs and slightly higher than AV  
22 rideshare. Although one needs to bear in mind low AV rideshare rate results from high vehicle  
23 occupancy (three to six passengers) (46), which may not always be the case particularly in  
24 lower density areas.

25 Considering the similar cost of AVs, SAV, and public transit, one may conclude that  
26 choice rider travelers are likely to switch from public transit toward AV personal modes in  
27 order to gain more utility by reducing their travel time (both in-vehicle and out of vehicle  
28 travel time) and more comfort and increase their privacy level. This mode shift from public  
29 transport toward AVs could be large, particularly in cases that public transit travel times are  
30 not competitive with personal vehicles (22). In addition, shared AVs have the potential to  
31 reduce vehicle ownership (47; 48); this reduction may encourage individuals who do not  
32 have a car to use public transit as an alternative to SAVs.

33 In summary, the majority of the AV mode-choice impacts on the transportation system  
34 indicates that the relative utility of AVs will increase in comparison to public transit. This  
35 could adversely affect public transit ridership by mode shift, particularly from choice riders.

36

### 37 **Traffic Assignment**

38 Several studies showed that connected AVs are able to communicate with other vehicles on  
39 the roads and transportation infrastructures to boost their mobility by avoiding delays on  
40 roads, especially at intersections (15; 34; 49-52). Moreover, due to special characteristics of  
41 AVs (such as platooning), operational road capacity of the existing road could increase since  
42 AVs are able to travel closer together (53; 54). This could lead to shorter travel times for AVs  
43 if the added operational capacity exceeded the increases in AV-induced demand. Public transit  
44 could also benefit from extra capacity, which could lead to shorter in-vehicle travel times and  
45 better reliability.

46 Likewise, re-entry and intersection delay are two of the main sources of delay in public  
47 transit (55). Connected vehicles could enable public transit to minimize or effectively  
48 eliminate (in some cases) these delays by using transit signal priority (TSP) (56).

49 As it was stated earlier, the additional capacity of the road could have a secondary effect  
50 that increases travel demand. This additional demand on roads has the potential to adversely

1 cancel out the mobility advantages of AVs and impose additional congestion to the  
2 transportation system, which could negatively impact network travel time. Additional delay  
3 could adversely impact transit reliability and schedule adherence.

4 AVs could improve mobility if travel demand does not change drastically; in this  
5 situation, public transit could benefit from a reduction in travel time and improving the  
6 relative utility of public transit.

7

## 8 **SUMMARY**

9 Autonomous vehicles have the potential to transform personal vehicles and significantly alter  
10 the entire transportation system. Table 1 and Table 2 show a summary of key elements  
11 pertaining to the effects of AVs on transit ridership for each stage of four step model. Taking  
12 all of the outcomes together, it seems likely that the negative impacts on public transit  
13 ridership may outweigh the positive ones, suggesting a possible decrease in overall public  
14 transit ridership.

15

1 **Table 1 Factors Influencing Transit Ridership (Trip Generation and Trip Distribution)**

<b>Four step model Stage</b>	<b>Changes</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Effect on the transit system</b>	<b>Effect on transit ridership</b>
Trip generation	Increase in-vehicle convenience and comfort	Reduce the perceived burden of travel time	Increase trip rates, excessive travel demand could cause more congestion, which increases transit delay	Negative effect
	Remove mobility barrier and provide accessibility for all users (e.g., disabled)	Enable road users to drive by themselves	Captive riders may shift toward new modes such as SAV or microtransit	Negative effect
	Higher speed and improved mobility	Reduce delay and increase road capacity by using real-time data	Increase travel demand; excessive travel demand could cause more congestion. a secondary effect is that travel time decreases for public transit	Both positive and negative
	Travel cost	Reduction in travel costs by reducing in-vehicle travel time; increase productivity in a vehicle.	Increase travel demand; people traveler use AV as a mode to commute. A secondary effect is that travel time decreases for public transit	Both positive and negative
Trip distribution	Increase in-vehicle convenience and comfort	Reduce the perceived burden of travel time by engaging in other activities, reduce driving stress	Longer trips and Urban sprawl Longer transit routes which end up with more stops and longer routes for public transit	Negative effect
	Shared AVs	Increase utilization rate of AVs; affordable for those who cannot purchase AVs.	Increase population density, a dense network, density has a positive impact on ridership	Positive effect

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1 **Table 2 Factors Influencing Transit Ridership (Modal Split and Traffic Assignment)**

<b>Four step model Stage</b>	<b>Changes</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Effect on the transit system</b>	<b>Effect on transit ridership</b>
Modal split	Increase in privacy and comfort	Better in-vehicle experience by reducing driving stress, engaging other activities, and increase travelers' privacy level compared to public transit	Increase AVs utility and decrease in relative utility of public transit	Negative effect
	Remove Mobility barrier and provide Accessibility for all users (e.g., handicapped)	Travel independence for those who are not able to drive without others help	Increase AVs utility and decrease in relative utility of public transit; new option for a portion of captive riders	Negative effect
	Delay Reduction	Reduce vehicle travel time and unnecessary delays by using real-time information	Decrease public transit in-vehicle time and increase the relative utility of	Positive effect
	Microtransit	A new form of Transit; a hybrid form of AV and Transit	Could be used as demand responsive connector feeder for mass transit. Also could be used as a competitive mode for public transit.	Both positive and negative
Traffic assignment	Increase capacity of existing roads	Shorter travel time: reduce in-vehicle travel time, better schedule adherence	Increase road capacity, which leads to shorter in-vehicle travel time and improvement in schedule adherence	Positive effect
	TSP – speed at intersections	Reduce delay at the intersection by prioritizing public transit movement	Decrease both in-vehicle and out of vehicle travel time, improvement in schedule adherence which increase the relative utility of public transit	Positive effect
	Re-entry delay this is speed (in the lane)	Get back to main traffic sooner	Decrease both in-vehicle and out of vehicle travel time, improvement in schedule adherence which increase the relative utility of public transit	Positive effect

2

## 1 CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

2 Previous studies have indicated that AVs could provide safe, comfortable, and convenient  
3 transportation to road users. Moreover, due to the connectivity and communication with other  
4 vehicles and intelligent transport infrastructure, it is expected that they will provide enhanced  
5 mobility in comparison to the human-driven vehicles. Improvements in mobility could  
6 decrease public transit delay, which could eventually improve transit operations and perhaps  
7 improve its competitiveness. Additionally, AVs introduced in paratransit modes to the  
8 transportation system could play both as a competitor and feeder to public transit.

9 Breaking down the four-step model indicates that public transit could benefit by reduced  
10 travel times on the network due to higher roadway capacity due to AVs and reductions in  
11 delay of re-entry and at intersections. Additionally, extra road capacity could help public  
12 transit to improve their adherence to schedules. These changes are likely to have a positive  
13 impact on public transit ridership by increasing the relative utility of public transit. However,  
14 one needs to consider that the additional capacity on roads could be occupied by excessive  
15 demand, which leads to excessive congestion and eventually increases both in-vehicle and  
16 out-of-vehicle travel time.

17 Due to the lack of drivers in the autonomous vehicles, formerly transit captive riders may  
18 be able to use AVs on their own. As a result, these groups may switch from other  
19 transportation modes (e.g., public transit, bicycle) to AVs. This could be also the case for  
20 choice riders if AVs deliver higher privacy levels, speed, and comfort at similar prices to  
21 public transit. As a result, choice riders may consider AVs or SAVs as an alternative for their  
22 commutes.

23 There are many areas for future research, such as the role of AV-related policy and  
24 legislation on public transit ridership. Notably, the future of public transit is not fully reliant  
25 on AV technology and travelers' behavior; yet it may be shaped by policy initiatives emerging  
26 from legislative and administrative actions of various levels of government (22). It is  
27 necessary to explore the current and future policies and legislation and how they may shape  
28 the future of public transit. Moreover, considering the history of public transit and how it has  
29 evolved to its current form, one may expect changes in public transit services once AVs  
30 become a widespread reality. In summary, transportation planners, policymakers, and transit  
31 agency leadership need to prepare for the coming of AVs and plan for their future effect on  
32 transit systems.

## 34 CONTRIBUTIONS

35 The authors confirm contribution to the paper as follows: study conception and design: Amin  
36 Mohamadi Hezaveh, Candace Brakewood, Christopher Cherry; data collection: Not  
37 Applicable; analysis and interpretation of results: Amin Mohamadi Hezaveh, Candace  
38 Brakewood, Christopher Cherry; draft manuscript preparation: Amin Mohamadi Hezaveh,  
39 Candace Brakewood, Christopher Cherry. All authors reviewed the results and approved the  
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