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From Doorstep to Bus Stop: Ridesharing as a First-Mile/Last-Mile Transit Connection

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Since the introduction of the Model T in 1908, American culture has been dominated by cars. The vast majority of U.S. households (92%) have at least one vehicle available for personal use, and 22% of households have three or more vehicles. This means most Americans are accustomed to the curb-to-curb service provided by personal vehicles. Yet, American dependency on personal vehicles costs 42,000+ (2022)[1] deaths annually from motor vehicle crashes equaling $340 billion—on top of climate-damaging air pollution[2] and literal days wasted in traffic (the average commuter in Los Angeles spent 119 hours[3] stuck in traffic in 2019). More and more Americans are increasingly recognizing the benefits of using public transportation, but the first-mile/last-mile problem and other issues may prevent them from leaving their cars at home. **Could rideshare services like Uber—in collaboration with public transit—fill the first-mile/last-mile gap and increase transit use?**

The First-Mile/Last-Mile Problem

Unlike with personal vehicles, an individual using a bus or train will likely have to travel farther than their driveway on foot. Some major cities have up to seven[4] bus stops per mile which equates to about 750 feet between stops (still 15-25x the 30-50 feet for a standard suburban driveway). Of course, this is true only for ideal scenarios in large cities, which discounts the 46 million[5] Americans living in the nation's rural counties and 175 million in suburbs, who need to travel much farther to access transit.

This is the first-mile/last-mile (FMLM) problem. If the nearest transit stop is a mile from home and the last another mile from work—how do you fill this two-mile gap safely and efficiently?

Public transit systems are highly effective at transporting large groups to designated locations but often fall short of providing the curb-to-curb convenience of personal vehicles.

The first-mile/last-mile problem might be particularly acute for marginalized groups—such as people with disabilities,[6] Black and indigenous folks, and low-income travelers—who ride transit at higher rates, may be less likely to be dropped off or picked-up from transit stations, and may be more likely to live in areas where walking or cycling to a station might be more difficult due to infrastructure or safety issues.

Indeed, a variety of infrastructure, social, and economic barriers add to the FMLM issue. Sidewalks and crosswalks may be in disrepair or few and far between—they might not even exist in an individual's neighborhood. Many in rural and even suburban areas lack sidewalks, which makes traveling by anything but car feel more precarious. Even when sidewalks and other supportive infrastructure like bike lanes exist, they may not work for everyone. Those who use canes or wheelchairs or strollers, for instance, may have more trouble navigating these spaces, especially

if they are not designed for their use and/or are in disrepair. And they likely are, considering the number of U.S. roads[7] and bridges[8] that need maintenance.

If a neighborhood lacks reliable sidewalks, bike lanes, and crosswalks, it may feel safer to travel by car. (Although transit use is statistically much safer[9] than traveling by car.) In the long term, planning that focuses on creating dense, walkable, mixed-use spaces near transit—commonly referred to as transit-oriented development (TOD)—can create safe, sustainable cities.

But what about closing the first-mile/last-mile in existing communities, especially suburban and rural ones where the first-mile/last-mile might be even farther? **Rideshare connections might help transit systems address current limitations and improve first-mile/last-mile connectivity.**

The Clear Benefits of Public Transportation

Public transportation is more than just a way to get from point A to point B—it's a cornerstone of economic growth, environmental sustainability, and personal well-being. The Federal Transit Administration (FTA) reports that more than 10,000 new workers entered the public transit industry in 2023. The Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates **16.0 million persons** (10.3% of the U.S. labor force) worked in the transportation and warehousing sector and related industries (e.g., automotive manufacturing), and total employment in the industry is increasing; in 2023, it reached its highest level since 1990.

The more people on buses and trains, the fewer in cars, which means transit reduces congestion and thus reduces the time wasted stuck behind the wheel, too. In the U.S., more than 6 billion[10] gallons of fuel at an estimated cost of $20 billion are wasted each year due to all combined idling. How much does transit use reduce congestion? One study[11] analyzed traffic conditions during a 2003 35-day transit strike in Los Angeles to assess just that. By examining freeway traffic delays before, during, and after the strike, researchers found that average delays increased by 47% during the strike, with even greater impacts—ranging from 53% to 90%—on freeways parallel to transit lines. Although this measurement is two decades old, it undeniably demonstrates the impact of transit on congestion, which has likely only increased in years since as populations have.

Across the U.S., about two[12] out of every ten adults living in urban areas (18%) say they seldom or never drive, along with 7% of those who live in suburban and 8% in rural areas. Among lower-income families, this number is closer to 19%. Younger Americans (those under 30) are much less likely to drive (15%) than other generations. Although public transportation use is often still stigmatized,[13] transit increases mobility options, especially in mobility deserts and for those who do not drive.

Where the first-mile/last-mile problem persists, rideshare may be able to close this gap and improve mobility with a special eye for people with disabilities, elders, and in places/times where traditional transit might be unavailable.

Rideshare + Public Transit as a FMLM Solution

Ridesharing (often associated with major names such as Uber and Lyft) is a service that matches riders with drivers of vehicles for hire through mobile applications or websites. Ridesharing (also called ridehailing or just "Uber") became popular in the 2010s as smartphone apps became ubiquitous, with "Uber" evolving into a proprietary eponym for the industry. Ridesharing is also sometimes called "ridesourcing" and operators known as "transportation network companies (TNCs)."

At first glance, rideshare might seem to be a competitor to public transportation—just another use of personal (often single-occupancy) vehicles. However, some transit agencies have been exploring the potentials of rideshare not as a competitor but as a collaborator to boost transit ridership and accomplish the ultimate goal of getting everyone from A to B, safely and efficiently.

A 2016 survey[14] of over 4,500 ride-hail users by the American Public Transportation Association (APTA), supported the notion of ridesharing as a FMLM solution: most rides were substitutes for private auto trips—not transit trips. Further research[15] out of UC Berkeley showed that ridesharing can serve as a valuable supplement to transit, particularly in low-density areas with sparse transit coverage and limited active transportation infrastructure. Ridesharing can also support mobility during times when transit might not be readily available or when vulnerable riders might not feel safe[16] waiting alone at a station (e.g., between 10pm and 4am).

Public transit means avoiding hours sitting in congested traffic, especially when there are dedicated bus lines (or tracks for rail). It's safer and better for the environment and personal health. Although more research needs to be done about whether rideshare collaboration with public transit actually increases public transit use, existing pilot programs show there is significant potential for this type of collaboration to close the FMLM gap, especially in certain circumstances.

FTA's Mobility on Demand Program: Benefits

In 2023, the FTA published a report synthesizing their findings from their Mobility on Demand Sandbox Program.[17] The program, which concluded in 2016, provided a platform for transit agencies to explore innovative multimodal mobility solutions by integrating emerging technologies with traditional public transportation services. These pilot studies explored how tech and transit could combine in 11 different cities to improve and expand mobility. The report offered insights for the planning, implementation, operation, and evaluation of tech-driven mobility initiatives that aim to improve first-mile/last-mile mobility through multimodal strategies, including through collaboration with private sector partners of bikesharing, carpooling, and ridesharing.

The FTA report[18] posited that 10 of the 11 pilot studies (five of which included some collaboration with TNCs) helped address FMLM issues, and many also improved payment processes, improved access for riders with disabilities, decreased personal vehicle use, reduced travel or wait times, improved multimodal trip options, decreased fuel emissions, and decreased the overall cost of public transit systems.

Many of the MOD Sandbox pilots specifically explored public-private partnerships with ridesharing services to solve the first-mile/last-mile problem, extend/expand regular service, and provide

supplemental paratransit service. Particularly, the FTA MOD pilots in Dallas, Texas; Los Angeles, California; Pinellas County, Florida; the Puget Sound region and Pierce County of Washington State; and Tucson, Arizona all incorporated ridesharing partnerships and demonstrated a variety of mobility benefits for the communities served. The following table* outlines a few of the pros and cons found of these pilots as mentioned in FTA and independent reports; they are not comprehensive but meant to give an idea of the potential of ridesharing and transit collaboration.

Transit Org.	Location	Rideshare Partner	Improvements	Challenges
Dallas Area Rapid Transit (DART)[19] | Report[20]	Dallas, TX	Uber	Improved first and last mile connectivity to DART transit, increased satisfaction among DART transit users, enhanced service for passengers with disabilities	Lack of available drivers, data sharing/privacy
Pinellas Suncoast Transit Authority (PSTA)[21] | Report[22]	Pinellas County, FL	Lyft	Improved paratransit service/ mobility; increased the flexibility of departure times for users	Lack of national data standards creates a number of technical challenges, undefined/ inadaquate metrics
Pierce Transit[23] | Report[24]	Pierce County, WA	Lyft	Potentially increase in new transit users; improved perception of services; reduced wait times	Marketing and definitions of “travel zones”
Valley Metro[25] | Report[26]	Tucson, AZ	Lyft	Attempted single multimodal payment system app	Data sharing/privacy

**This table reflects a partial summary of the FTA pilot case studies and does not reflect current programs offered by TNCs.*

Cumulative results from the pilots demonstrate that partnerships between transit agencies and TNCs may facilitate a variety of benefits for transit users, including potential improvements to: FMLM connections, paratransit service, wait times, travel times, seamless connectivity/payment, and more.

Introduction of FMLM service in the area of Tacoma, WA led to an estimated 30% reduction in vehicle miles traveled. In the same pilot, one user reported getting rid of a personal vehicle as a result of the pilot, while some in the post-pilot survey said they acquired a car or were considering doing so because the program ended, indicating that the service had, at least in part, replaced the mobility typically provided by personal vehicles.

FTA’s Mobility on Demand Program: Challenges

The FTA MOD pilots from around the country indicate significant promise when it comes to public-private partnerships with TNCs to close the FMLM gap and advance mobility in our communities—and they also reveal a number of challenges that will need to be addressed in the building and maintaining of these types of partnerships going forward.

Two core issues seem to be 1) defining (and thus analyzing and using) the metrics critical to closing the FMLM gap, and 2) overcoming problems that might arise in any public-private partnership or merger, especially those involving technology, privacy, and data-sharing.

Several FTA pilot programs encountered challenges in collaborating with the private sector, particularly in contracting with the ridesharing companies. Some struggled to establish partnerships through traditional contracting and vendor agreements due to concerns related to open records laws and non-disclosure agreements.

Public-private partnerships often encounter challenges in establishing data-sharing agreements. The data collected from the FTA pilots showed difficulties in contracting and negotiating data agreements with TNCs. In some cases, partners were unable to reach an agreement. In others, agencies adapted by refining their data-sharing requests—reducing reporting frequency, using more aggregated data, and incorporating higher levels of geospatial detail—to balance the need for evaluation with protecting consumer privacy and proprietary vendor information.

Additionally, somewhat unfortunately, the benefits of such partnership-led programs are not always black and white. The FTA pilots in Los Angeles and Puget Sound found that FMLM shared ridesourcing service (through Via) actually led to a net *increase* in VMT, energy consumption, and CO2 emissions. The cost-effectiveness of the same pilot varied as well with shared ridesourcing "most cost-effective on an hourly basis, but less cost-effective on a per trip basis." However, these challenges have not been insurmountable; instead, current programs have used these findings to guide and refine their approaches.

The FTA's Mobility on Demand Program has ended, but the FTA has since introduced the Enhancing Mobility Innovation (EMI) Program, which builds upon the MOD program and is continuing as of the time of this publication. As of January 17, 2025, the EMI Program FTA awarded the Monterey-Salinas Transit and the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey a share of $1.25 million EMI grants to advance mobility solutions. These investments highlight the FTA's ongoing commitment to fostering innovative mobility solutions that improve access, efficiency, and sustainability in public transportation.

While the early lessons from the FTA's MOD Sandbox Program—many of which stem from initiatives in the mid-to-late 2010s—remain valuable, it is also important to recognize that the landscape has evolved. Since the pandemic, many agencies have scaled their use of TNC-based FMLM solutions, as well as microtransit services that often serve similar roles. Approximately 80 transit agencies across the country partner with TNCs on FMLM or complementary mobility programs today. These newer efforts have benefited from the lessons of earlier pilots. Looking at newly launched programs as well as programs that began early and have continued to operate (e.g., such as those at PSTA and DART) could provide further lessons in future studies looking at long-term programs.

Spotlight: Uber's Collaborations to Advance Mobility

Ridesharing companies have their own perspectives on such partnerships. TNC Uber published a perspective[27] highlighting their collaborations with Dallas Area Rapid Transit, New York Metropolitan Transportation Authority, and Marin Transit and showcasing how public-private partnerships foster a "more integrated, responsive, and resilient transportation ecosystem that serves the needs of more riders."

The Uber report expresses the critical need for these kinds of partnerships to fill the first-mile/last-mile gap and to provide mobility to underserved communities where traditional public transportation may be unavailable or too infrequent. In 2021, there were 634,400 completed Uber trips through transportation agency partnerships for underserved communities, 1,589,600 in 2022, and 3,049,400 in 2023. The importance of same-day, on-demand services for seniors and people with disabilities is also becoming more apparent, and Uber has taken action to fill the gaps where traditional paratransit might be lacking.

One of their most notable partnerships is with Dallas Area Rapid Transit (DART) on the development of its GoPass app. DART, recognizing that traditional public transit was not fully meeting the mobility needs of the growing Dallas community, integrated Uber into its microtransit and paratransit services to improve efficiency and rider experience. Using the FTA Mobility on Demand Sandbox grant, DART's GoLink microtransit service incorporated rideshare options and integrated them into the GoPass app. As a result, DART launched GoLink in 2018, offering more flexible transportation options.

The shift toward transit agency and TNC partnerships has faced some hurdles, including resistance from traditional transit advocates concerned about privatization, regulatory challenges in contracting and data sharing, and concerns over equitable service access. Additionally, competition between public transit and TNCs raises questions about long-term sustainability, fare structures, and whether these partnerships enhance transit ridership.

Lucia Phan, Program Manager at Uber who previously worked at Los Angeles Metro and Orange County Transportation Authority, hopes that more transit agencies will give working with Uber and other private partners a chance. In an interview with MTI staff, she said, "If we frame everything as competition, we lose sight of the rider. Our communities have diverse needs, and by working together, we can create more inclusive, flexible, and effective transportation solutions. It's not about who delivers the ride—it's about whether people can get where they need to go."

Traditional transit agencies may not have the capacity or funding that private TNCs have, but they provide critical mobility service, regulatory oversight, and public accountability that ensure safe, inclusive, and affordable mobility. Uber has worked with transportation agencies to meet unique goals and challenges, improve FMLM connections, optimize microtransit and paratransit, streamline dispatch operations, and support the development of efficient mobility-as-a-service apps.

The partnership between DART and Uber was a strategic alliance that leveraged the strengths of both organizations. DART focused on infrastructure development, long-term planning, and system coordination, while Uber provided a flexible solution to accommodate fluctuating ridership, particularly during peak hours and special events. This collaboration demonstrates the significant potential of the TNC-transit approach to mobility.

In early 2023, DART fully integrated Uber into the GoPass app using Uber's API, streamlining the rider experience by eliminating the need to switch between apps. Now, when eligible GoLink trip requests are fulfilled by Uber, riders can seamlessly track and pay for their journey within the GoPass app. Currently, about 70% of GoLink riders book their trips through the GoPass app, and approximately 67% of users have opted to use Uber for their GoLink rides.

Considerations for Future Programs

Public transportation managers are shifting from overseeing single-mode services to becoming multimodal mobility managers. They now focus on integrating different transportation modes to create more efficient and accessible "complete journeys" for users.

At a broader level, these managers collaborate with public and private stakeholders to assess diverse community transportation needs. Addressing the requirements of commuters, seniors, and those facing financial or physical challenges requires more research and thorough analysis. Despite varying needs, users prioritize convenience, safety, and affordability. The key challenge is identifying gaps in the current system and developing solutions to bridge them.

TNCs do not have to be competition to transit. Rideshare can be another tool in the box of options available to meet mobility needs. The following table summarizes a few ongoing collaborations between TNCs and transit agencies across the country.

Rideshare Org.	Transit Org.	Program/Service	Description/Benefit
Pace[28] / IL	Uber, UZURV	Rideshare Access Program (RAP)	flexible, on-demand complement to paratransit / improved mobility for people with disabilities
Pinellas Suncoast Transit Authority (PSTA)[29] / FL	Lyft, Uber	Direct Connect	discounted ride to/from select locations to connect to transit / improved FMLM connections
Regional Transportation District (RTD)[30] Denver / CO	Lyft, Uber	Access on Demand	flexible, on-demand supplement to paratransit / improved mobility for people with disabilities
Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA)[31] / MA	Lyft, Uber, UZURV	The Ride Flex	flexible, on-demand supplement to paratransit / improved mobility for people with disabilities
Regional Transportation Commission (RTC) Washoe[32] / NV	Lyft, Uber	Uber Rides	subsidized voucher program for seniors, people with disabilities, and veterans / improved mobility for vulnerable populations
Omnitrans[33] / CA	Uber	Mobility Services	subsidy for seniors and people with disabilities / improved mobility for vulnerable populations
Valley Metro[34] / AZ	Uber, UZURV	RideChoice	subsidized paratransit for seniors and people with disabilities / improved mobility for vulnerable populations
Charleston Area Regional Transportation Authority (CARTA)[35] / SC	Lyft, Uber	OnDemand	subsidized on-demand services for seniors and people with disabilities / improved mobility for vulnerable populations
Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Authority (RTA)[36] / OH	Lyft, Uber	Connect On-Demand	subsidized on-demand where fixed-route service is unavailable or limited / expanded service
TriRail[37] South Florida Regional Transportation Authority / FL	Lyft, Uber	Ride Partner Service	subsidized service to/from transit / improved FMLM connections
Metrolink[38] / CA	Uber	Service disruptions	vouchers for service disruptions / improved FMLM connections & rider retention during transit outages

TNC-transit agency collaborations should keep equity and accessibility at the forefront of planning, accounting for smartphone and bank requirements, cost and affordability, digital literacy and language barriers, and reaching those who need it most. Who gets left behind when the FMLM gap remains?

TNCs could help serve riders who use mobility aids like wheelchairs or travel with service animals, but only if the vehicles are equipped and prepared to do so. An estimated[39] 10% of LA County residents had a disability, and 11% of households lacked a smartphone. These groups may be disproportionately represented among transit users—LA Metro's Fall 2019 on-board survey found that 40% of its riders did not own a smartphone. Rideshare fares can be expensive, particularly in areas with high demand, potentially pricing out low-income travelers who rely on affordable transit options—unless the program plans for this and provides subsidies.

Findings[40] from the FTA pilot in Los Angeles revealed that the program successfully provided thousands of rides to and from transit stations in its first year, but its impact on disadvantaged groups was less clear. Survey data showed that program users were predominantly white and more likely to own smartphones and have bank accounts compared to the broader transit-riding population. Thus, this particular pilot indicates that while subsidized ride-hail services are needed, the program's design does not significantly improve mobility access for vulnerable groups.

Newer programs attempt to address some of these challenges. To support the estimated 9% of all Americans who do not own a smartphone (and thus who cannot access apps that would enable them to interact with these TNC-transit collaborative services), both Uber and Lyft offer solutions designed to bridge this communication gap. Uber Central[41] allows agencies with call centers to book rides on behalf of customers who don't have smartphones. In this model, the rider simply calls the agency, and a dispatcher books the ride for them. Once confirmed, the rider receives a Short Message Service (SMS/text) or Interactive Voice Response (IVR) call with their trip details. Lyft Concierge[42] offers a similar service for agency partners. Uber also provides a call-in option for general consumers (not tied to an agency program), allowing them to book rides without a smartphone, as long as they have a phone capable of receiving SMS messages.

There needs to be more data and research to fully understand how transit-TNC collaboration can help solve the FMLM problem. Existing research indicates that ride-hail trips do not consistently increase in areas or times with limited transit service. While some studies suggest ride-hailing complements[43] transit, while others find no correlation or indicate it replaces[44] transit trips. When riders do choose ride-hailing over transit, time savings—particularly reduced walking and waiting times—are a key motivator.[45]

There also needs to be an understanding of and plan for TNC-related labor concerns such as issues of gig work, wages, and benefits for rideshare drivers. This is amplified by regulatory and policy issues, such as those in California under AB 5, which impacts whether workers are treated as employees or as independent contractors.

Although there are challenges for such collaborations, including funding, regulatory and policy challenges, and public-private partnership dynamics, closing the FMLM gap means enabling more Americans to fully engage with the world around them and pursue economic opportunities. Future programs should consider developing guidelines and metrics to be shared and building on existing success of collaborations like that between Uber and DART.

Conclusion

Does rideshare and transit collaboration help close the first-mile/last-mile gap? Yes, although the effectiveness of the collaboration depends on factors such as service availability, cost, accessibility, and integration with existing networks.

Does this collaboration increase transit use? Maybe, but this result is less clear cut, and further research is needed to determine impact. **While research gaps remain, the evidence from such partnerships so far indicate that ridesharing has the potential to expand traditional transit service into more communities and enhance travel options and services to create more comprehensive mobility solutions.**

Everyone deserves to safely get from A to B, from home to work and school, to the library or hospital, to the park and movie theater, to live their lives and seek out opportunities. Any program or collaboration that enhances mobility, especially for underserved populations, should be wholly considered and integrated to benefit communities of all kinds. **The future of mobility depends on multimodal transportation systems that improve connectivity, accessibility, sustainability, and efficiency.**

Endnotes

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