

Free to Ride

“I used to pass people walking along the overpass...And I used to think to myself, “these people have to be idiots, to do something so stupid and dangerous.” I never once asked myself why they were doing what they were doing, or whether it could be another way.”

-- Chad Baker, attorney and former Beavercreek resident



[Website, Trailer, Educational Materials and Reviews](#)

Free to Ride (Jamaal Bell, Matthew Martin, and Max Chamberlain), winner of best documentary at the 2017 DC Independent Film Festival. Produced by Ohio State’s Kirwan Institute, the film explores the intersection between public transportation and civil rights as a community in Dayton, Ohio, grapples with injustices past and present. This modern-day Civil Rights saga began in 2009 when community members in Dayton, Ohio became aware of the danger faced by bus riders seeking to get across a busy interstate overpass in order to make it to their workplace, shopping, medical, and educational destinations along Pentagon Boulevard in the suburban community of Beavercreek. As racial tension continues to grow in the wake of the controversial deaths of young black men at the hands of law enforcement, *Free To Ride* is a promising story about how hard work, collaboration, and our accountability systems can yield fair and just outcomes for all.

THEMES:

- public transportation as a civil rights issue
- civic engagement
- whose voices are heard at the local government level
- equity and racism as tied together
- system of checks and balances
- transportation equity
- structural inequality

DISCUSSION PROMPTS:

- How do you get around?
- What public places, shopping centers, and governmental offices do you have access to?
- Are there any destinations that are not accessible in your community?
- Who decides when there are changes to the bus routes?
- How are community members involved in decisions about public transportation?

TERMS:

access	a means of approaching or entering a place
disparate impact	unintentional discrimination, occurs when policies, practices, rules or other systems that appear to be neutral result in a disproportionate impact on a protected group
equity	the quality of being fair and impartial
implicit bias	the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner
Title VI	of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits discrimination based on race, color or national origin in programs or activities which receive federal financial assistance

COMMUNITY RESOURCES:

- [COTA](#)
- [COTA and Title VI](#)
- [City of Columbus Office of Diversity and Inclusion](#)
- [City of Columbus – Americans with Disabilities Act Compliance](#)
- [How to Find Your Local Representative](#)
- [Transportation Equity Caucus](#) – a diverse coalition of organizations promoting policies that ensure access, mobility, and opportunity for all.
- [American Public Transportation Association](#) You can click on your home state to find public transportation near you.

THOUGHTS TO TAKE AWAY:

Every story has an angle. Be critical. Understand the bias. What is yours?

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY:

Compare and contrast how transportation has directly affected the everyday life of citizens in different cities, the relationships between citizens and their local government, and how racism is addressed, or not, through local transit:

COLUMBUS:

[“COTA Changes Cause Some Frustration, but Others Like Free Fares”](#)

The Dispatch reports on the transition and problems some commuters faced on the first day.

[“Data USA: Columbus, OH”](#)

Statistics from Columbus, from wage by race and ethnicity to poverty levels, and medical insurance coverage.

[“Neighborhood Inequality Particularly Profound in Columbus Area”](#)

Based on a study by the D.C.-based Urban Institute which ranks Columbus as the 2nd most economically segregated major metro area in the USA.

Columbus won the national Smart City Challenge, a multi-million grant from the U.S. Department of Transportation and from Vulcan to “fully integrate innovative technologies – self-driving cars, connected vehicles, and smart sensors – into their transportation network.”. Here’s what [the city](#), [Curbed Magazine](#) (with Columbus’s video presentation), and [the Dispatch](#) say about it.

BALTIMORE:

[“The Third Rail”](#)

In Baltimore, transportation directly related to racial and economic disparities. Problems came to a head at the Uprising in 2015.

It may use the case in Dayton as a precedent:

[“Maryland Robbed Transit to Pay for Highways, So U.S. DOT Launched a Civil Rights Probe”](#)

BOSTON:

Northeastern Univ.’s Dukakis Center for Urban and Regional Policy produced documentation, [Staying on Track](#), which is a framework and benchmark indicators report on achieving a sustainable transportation system in Greater Boston.

LOS ANGELES:

[“From Bus Riders Union to Bus Rapid Transit: Race, Class, and Transit Infrastructure in Los Angeles”](#) details local racial history that led to the [Bus Riders Union](#), the largest mass transportation membership organization in the US which campaigns and protests for the civil rights, environmental justice, public health, and legal rights of working class communities of color.

SAN FRANCISCO:

[“The Lowdown. Wealth Inequality by Transit Line”](#)

This includes a classroom activity, designed for middle school, that allows students to interpret data for major transit lines and the income disparities that exist in communities along those routes.

SEATTLE:

[“Seattle Bases Bus Fares on Income. The Interesting Question: Why?”](#)

In 2015, Seattle began pricing tickets based on passenger’s income. This Forbes article quotes an earlier NY Times one to discover the motivating factor, which interestingly compares to the case in Dayton.

CALGARY, CANADA:

[“Calgary Council Approves \\$5.15 Monthly Transit Pass for City’s Poorest”](#)

The city council voted unanimously for this new sliding scale. Do you think this is a viable solution?

NATIONAL STUDIES:

[“Public Transportation Barriers Help Maintain Inequality”](#) (video, 12 mins) lays out the transportation inequity problem that affects major U.S. cities.

[“How America’s Transportation System Discriminates Against the Most Vulnerable”](#)

This article provides a history of discrimination, considers cities across the US, including Dayton, and links transportation inequality to environmental concerns.

[“The 10 U.S. Metro Rail Systems that Lose the Most Money Per Passenger”](#)

This article lists the dollar amount lost per passenger in large U.S. cities, including Baltimore, Cleveland, and San Francisco.

ARTISTS ENGAGING WITH SOCIAL INJUSTICE AND TRANSPORTATION EQUITY

<p>VISUAL</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alan Nakagawa, 1st Artist-in-Residence of Los Angeles’ Department of Transportation because of his experience combining art and social issues • Raymon Sutedjo-The works with transit data and equity, creating a Transit Quality and Equity app • Transit: Creative Placemaking in Baltimore is a project that has had European artists design interactive bus stops • Art in Motion fuses “public art, public transit and public spaces” • Athens Area Arts Council created “You, Me, and the Bus: An Art in Transit Initiative” 	<p>FILM/ TV</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rochester Street Films: Transportation and Poverty spotlights how 3 people can barely afford the bus in Rochester, NY, and offers solutions for the city. • Back of the Bus – WNYC radio documentary compares transit inequality in Atlanta, St. Paul, Oakland, D.C., and Denver through first-hand accounts, while offering a historical context and contemporary scholarly views. • A Convenient Truth: Urban Solutions from Curitiba, Brazil offers cost-effective transportation and housing, and other innovations to alleviate poverty and work with the environment.
<p>LITERARY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Injustice” poem by youth writer, K.K. Johnson • Poetry on Buses accepts poems by children and professionals alike in King County, WA. It publishes poems in 8 languages in different modes of transit. • NYC Subway “Poetry in Motion” – presents poems on trains, that are matched with images of art from their collection. 	<p>PERFORMANCE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In What Language? Accompanied by music ranging from free jazz to hip-hop to minimalism, the music text confronts racial profiling and other injustices associated with the airport. • Miami City Ballet provides a free “Ballet Bus” to poor students, giving them access to dance classes. • Single Carrot Theatre tours audiences on a bus to experience a traveling production, “Promenade: Baltimore.”

ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDED RESOURCES:

[Highway Robbery: Transportation Racism and New Routes to Equity](#) offers cases since the Montgomery bus boycotts of chronic inequality

[Anthropology of Los Angeles: Place and Agency in an Urban Setting](#) argues that “contested cultures have a role to play in transportation policy and planning.”