

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

**Traversing the City: Examining the Impacts  
of Extended Commute on Student Wellbeing  
& High School Experience in Chicago**

By

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## ABSTRACT

Bridging education and transportation literature in the context of expanding school choice, this qualitative case study utilizes a student-centered epistemological approach to examine the impacts of extended high school commute on student experience and well-being. Fifteen semi-structured interviews with recent alumni of Lane Tech College Prep – a selective enrollment high school in Chicago – capture student perceptions to determine what commuters themselves believe to be the most salient consequences or benefits of extended school commute. This research is intended to unravel the connections between long-distance commuting and students' mental and physical wellness, academic performance, safety, and social networks, particularly examining disparities along racial, gender, and class lines. I argue extended commute, institutionally normalized by CPS' competitive choice model, disproportionately burdens students concurrently experiencing other forms of marginalization. As with other facets of schooling, interlocking identities shape commute experiences in a simultaneously raced, gendered, and classed experience. Students highlight increased stress, financial strain, social and academic barriers, and safety concerns as major themes. Despite these difficulties, long-distance commuters gain navigational, social, and resistant capital they deem highly valuable which contributes to their community cultural wealth. Recommendations for policymakers and educators include increased school- and district-level interventions to improve commute experience and mitigate its potentially deleterious effects. This work acknowledges students' resilience, but emphasizes the responsibility of school districts in supporting students who undertake extreme commutes to access essential public education resources and opportunities.

## INTRODUCTION

*“...this is a harsh reality that a lot of students from underrepresented neighborhoods have to face...I just wish people knew this is a bullet that a lot of us have to bite and go through, and there should be some more resources for us...some type of consideration for us.”*

- Lilo, 2-2.5 hour one-way daily commute<sup>1</sup>

Young people across the US do not have equal access to high quality educational opportunities. According to sociologist Carla Shedd, “Students in the city of Chicago (and many other urban and rural communities) have been consigned to a separate and unequal education simply because of where they live.”<sup>2</sup> A defining feature of navigating school as a young person in Chicago Public Schools (CPS) is the unequal spatial and racial distribution of educational

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<sup>1</sup> All interviewee names are replaced with pseudonyms; commute times in general reference one-way travel time

<sup>2</sup> Shedd, *Unequal City*. p.3

opportunities.<sup>3</sup> Students living on the South and West Sides of Chicago – overwhelmingly Black and Latinx young people from working-class, low-income families – have access to radically different neighborhood schools than their often well-resourced, wealthier, and whiter counterparts living downtown or across the North Side of the city. These vast differences in school quality and resources pave the way for district level school-choice policies aimed at expanding the portfolio of options available to CPS students. On one hand, choice policies diminish the link between home neighborhood and school location in the name of increased access for families that cannot afford to live near their preferred school, theoretically extending to more students access to elite institutions that affluent children have long enjoyed.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, choice policies can result in wide disparities in commute experience in highly segregated districts such as CPS.

Some students commute to school with relative ease and comfort or have the means to travel across vast distances at great speed – perhaps they live close enough to walk or bike, are driven daily by a caregiver with an amenable work schedule and car access, a parent-led carpool group, or perhaps they live one train ride away from their school. Other young people endure limited mobility and extraordinarily long – at times unsafe – daily journeys that cover little space but take incredible amounts of time.<sup>5</sup> For those that decide to navigate lengthy or complex daily journeys to and from school, their reality begs the questions: *how does extended<sup>6</sup> commute impact young people’s wellbeing and high school experiences? What motivates some young people to embark on these long daily journeys? And, do the benefits outweigh the costs?*

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<sup>3</sup> Shedd. p.3

<sup>4</sup> Phillippo, "A Contest without Winners." p.13

<sup>5</sup> Bierbaum, Karner, and Barajas, "Toward Mobility Justice."

<sup>6</sup> Throughout this study, 'extended' and 'long distance' commute are used interchangeably to refer to above average travel times. In the case of CPS, the district-wide high school commute was 29 minutes in the 2020-2021 school year. For the purposes of this study, long distance is defined as a one-way commute of 50 minutes or more.

A wide-ranging transportation literature has established mobility inequities across intersecting identities of race, place, income, and gender but has largely neglected youth – particularly marginalized youth of color or those from low-income households.<sup>7</sup> While there is a growing scholarly conversation around school commute, much of the literature from educational sociology, education policy, child development, and health have, to date, employed mainly quantitative methods. Strictly employing quantitative measures to determine the magnitude of commutes' impacts is only one side of the story, and effectively excludes student voice, experience, and expertise on issues of commute directly impacting them.

Focusing instead on a student-centered epistemological approach to studying high school commute, and in response to calls for deeper, qualitative study of commute experiences in education<sup>8</sup> and transportation literature,<sup>9</sup> the following case study bridges these two areas of scholarship by documenting students' extended commute experiences to Lane Tech College Prep, a highly-ranked selective enrollment high school in Chicago, IL. Semi-structured interviews capture student perceptions of commute's impacts on their high school experience and wellbeing to determine what long-distance commuters themselves believe to be the most salient consequences or benefits of extended high school commute. Although commute may seem inconsequential to educational outcomes, it is important to help researchers, educators, students, and their families better understand connections between long-distance commuting and students' mental & physical wellness, academic performance, safety, and social networks, which may contribute to stratified student experience along racial, gender, and class lines. This research also

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<sup>7</sup> Bierbaum, Karner, and Barajas, "Toward Mobility Justice."

<sup>8</sup> Burdick-Will, "Neighbors but Not Classmates"; Stein and Grigg, "Missing Bus, Missing School"; Stein et al., "Getting to High School in Baltimore."

<sup>9</sup> Chatterjee et al., "Commuting and Wellbeing"; Bierbaum, Karner, and Barajas, "Toward Mobility Justice."

contributes to urban school choice literature examining what motivates students' decisions to attend schools well outside their home neighborhoods.

In summary, I argue high school commute to Lane Tech High School (LTHS) is a simultaneously raced, gendered, and classed experience, institutionally normalized by CPS' competitive school choice model. The burdens of long-distance commuting and disparities in experience disproportionately impact students concurrently experiencing other forms of marginalization. For example, students of color, particularly Black students, experience the longest high school commutes and are impacted by socially-structured disparities in access to reliable public transportation infrastructure while female-presenting students frequently express being targeted in public spaces during their commutes for gender-based physical and sexual harassment. And, because students from economically-disadvantaged families often do not live in the relatively affluent neighborhoods surrounding the most academically selective of Chicago's public schools, commuting farther can become a financially, physically, and emotionally taxing burden. My findings indicate that despite the difficulties of extended commute, students who undertake these long or complex daily journeys to school gain navigational, social, and resistant capital they deem highly valuable that may not be acknowledged by schools, and yet contributes to their community cultural wealth.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, I argue school districts are in part responsible for the structural conditions necessitating and normalizing extended school commute, and can play a key role in supporting students who navigate extreme lengths to access essential public education resources and opportunities.

To preview the following sections, I begin by drawing from multiple disciplines to historically contextualize unequal school commute within CPS and examine the existing landscape

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<sup>10</sup> Yosso, "Whose Culture Has Capital?"

of literature on school commute – a relatively understudied aspect of high school experience. These three sections address *why* unequal commute exists, *which* students experience the longest high school commutes in Chicago, and *how* students may be academically, physically, and psychologically impacted according to existing research. Next, I present the current study’s theoretical frameworks, data, and methodology – including site and interviewee descriptions as well as a visualization of their commute routes. I then present my findings, and conclude with a summary, implications for policy and practice, and suggestions for future research.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Unequal Commute and School Choice in Chicago

*“Our racial history is part of our present, it is in our structures, its legacies can be felt in the ways schools are organized, in how neighborhoods are laid out, in the composition of our family trees, in the unconscious stereotypes that get primed when we mentally sort people along racial lines.”<sup>11</sup>*  
- Lewis & Diamond, *Despite the Best Intentions*

Imagine waking up before sunrise after only five hours of sleep to start your daily, nearly 13-mile, 1 hour and 30-minute journey to school by two trains, two buses, and on foot. This was 14-year-old Antonio’s twice-daily commute experience throughout his four years of high school to access one of Chicago’s highly-ranked selective enrollment schools.<sup>12</sup> Although extreme, Antonio’s experience is not unique. According to the 2020-2021 CPS Annual Regional Analysis,<sup>13</sup> 45% of high school students chose to attend school outside of the region where they lived. CPS reported an overall average one-way commute of 29 minutes for high school students, but approximately 11,800 students commuted 45-60 minutes, and nearly 5,900 students commuted over 60 minutes.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Lewis and Diamond, "Despite the Best Intentions."

<sup>12</sup> Antonio’s commute experience was documented for this study

<sup>13</sup> 2020-2021 ARA was selected because prior years did not include comprehensive analysis of commute data disaggregated by race and geographic region

<sup>14</sup> Chicago Public Schools, "District Overview - Annual Regional Analysis, 2020-2021."

The district acknowledged significant variation in commute time by region and ethno-racial identity.<sup>15</sup> The five geographic areas where the highest number of students experienced above average commutes included, in ascending order: the West Side, South Side, Far Southwest Side, Greater Stony Island, and Greater Calumet regions<sup>16</sup> These are exclusively South- and West-Side regions of the city where primarily Black and Latinx students live. Black students in particular disproportionately experience the longest and farthest high school commutes within CPS when compared to other ethno-racial groups.<sup>17</sup> This is not a commute disparity unique to Chicago, and in fact holds true in many large urban school districts such as Denver, Detroit, New Orleans, New York City, and Washington, DC.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, there is broad evidence documenting structural inequality of public transportation access and reliability in Chicago,<sup>19</sup> further marginalizing many low-income, Black and Latinx families that often rely on public transportation and make up the overwhelming majority of those enrolled in CPS.<sup>20</sup> In this section, I contextualize the current state of unequal high school commute in Chicago – disproportionately experienced by racialized and economically disadvantaged high school students – as stemming in part from state-sponsored residential and school segregation, competitive school choice policy, as well as the unequal spatial distribution of reliable public transportation and selective enrollment high schools.

### *Residential Segregation & Belated School Integration*

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<sup>15</sup> Chicago Public Schools, “District Overview - Annual Regional Analysis, 2020-2021.”

<sup>16</sup> Chicago Public Schools. p.46 - reference map of regions provided on p.4 of the CPS report. They organize the report according to 16 geographic regions aligned with Chicago Neighborhoods Now planning zones created by the City of Chicago’s Department of Planning and Development.

<sup>17</sup> Chicago Public Schools, *District Overview - Annual Regional Analysis, 2020-2021*. p.47

<sup>18</sup> Blagg, Rosenboom, and Chingos, “The Extra Mile”; Denice and Gross, “Going the Distance: Understand the Benefits of a Long Commute to School.”

<sup>19</sup> See for example: Nicoletti, Sirenko, and Verma 2022; Farmer 2011; Purifoye 2014 ; McKane and Hess 2022; Ermagun and Tilahun, 2020; Chung, Myers, and Saunders 2001

<sup>20</sup> Chicago Public Schools, *District Summary - Annual Regional Analysis, 2020-2021*.

Persistent racial and ethnic segregation matter for current day school choice policy formation and enactment.<sup>21</sup> Chicago ranks among the most highly segregated cities in the United States. White flight and residential segregation, often violently enforced by police and White communities,<sup>22</sup> can be partially linked to enduring school segregation; but, CPS superintendents and the Chicago Board of Education also purposely gerrymandered school boundaries, used mobile classrooms at overcrowded Black schools, and implemented double school shifts to avoid integration well after school segregation became illegal.<sup>23</sup> Inequalities in educational resources and opportunities resulting from this racial stratification dominate CPS decades later, contribute to the unequal distribution of the highest-ranked schools, and shape district-level school choice policy aimed at expanding educational access.

### *Competitive School Choice*

School choice programs aim to boost educational outcomes and increase the number of options available to students by allowing for enrollment beyond neighborhood attendance boundaries. However, education scholar Kate Phillippo argues school choice policy in Chicago “unintentionally sets students up for a high school admissions experience that widens socioeconomic inequality...”<sup>24</sup> The selective enrollment policy, better described as competitive school choice, requires all CPS students to “compete to access essential public educational resources.”<sup>25</sup> And while Chicago’s selective enrollment schools are more diverse than comparable districts, Black, Latinx, and low-income students remain underrepresented despite constituting the majority of CPS enrollment at large.<sup>26</sup> Students admitted to selective or magnet high schools may

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<sup>21</sup> Phillippo, *A Contest without Winners*. p.16

<sup>22</sup> Ewing, *Ghosts in the Schoolyard*. p.81

<sup>23</sup> Danna, “Policy Implications for School Desegregation and School Choice in Chicago.”

<sup>24</sup> Phillippo, *A Contest without Winners*. p.147

<sup>25</sup> Phillippo.

<sup>26</sup> Quick, “Chicago Public Schools: Ensuring Diversity in Selective Enrollment and Magnet Schools.”

benefit from access to greater educational opportunities, but increasing decoupling of home neighborhood and school attendance presents a significant opportunity cost: increased travel time.

### *Unequal Spatial Distribution of Choice Schools & Public Transportation*

Many urban districts like CPS rely on public transportation systems to move large numbers of students throughout the city each day, carrying existing inequities in transit access into student commute experience. There is broad evidence documenting structural inequality of public transportation access across Chicago;<sup>27</sup> people with the least access to public transportation infrastructure are generally minorities, those with the lowest levels of income, and the highest rates of unemployment.<sup>28</sup> Much like other societal structures, public transportation can further the entrenchment of “the privileges of the affluent” and the disadvantages of working-class people into the built environment,<sup>29</sup> and contributes to commute disparities most often impacting students living on the far South and West Sides.

Additionally, ‘choice schools’- or highly-ranked, desirable, & top-choice schools - are not equally distributed; rather, their locations are often closely linked to race and socio-economic status. In cities such as Chicago and Baltimore, selective-enrollment, magnet, and charter schools are often located outside of highly disadvantaged neighborhoods<sup>30</sup> necessitating longer commutes for those students most likely to rely on public transportation.<sup>31</sup> Lack of personal car access, caregivers with work schedules conducive to transporting young people to school, or economic

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<sup>27</sup> See for example: Nicoletti, Sirenko, and Verma, “Disadvantaged Communities Have Lower Access to Urban Infrastructure”; Farmer, “Uneven Public Transportation Development in Neoliberalizing Chicago, USA”; Ermagun and Tilahun, “Equity of Transit Accessibility across Chicago”

<sup>28</sup> Nicoletti, Sirenko, and Verma, “Disadvantaged Communities Have Lower Access to Urban Infrastructure.”

<sup>29</sup> Graham and Marvin, 2001 as cited by Farmer, “Uneven Public Transportation Development in Neoliberalizing Chicago, USA.” p.1154

\*Figure 1 Graphic from Farmer, 2011.

<sup>30</sup> Burdick-Will, Stein, and Grigg, “Danger on the Way to School.”

<sup>31</sup> Burdick-Will, “School Violent Crime and Academic Achievement in Chicago”; Stein et al., “Getting to High School in Baltimore.”

resources to relocate also contribute to disparities in commute experiences stratified along class and racial lines.

### **Student Commute**

While there has been some relatively recent focus on high school commute, it has tended to prioritize quantifying its possible impacts on academic performance rather than studying student experience or wellbeing. It is useful to group relevant research on school commuters into physical, academic, and psychological impacts - a particularly under researched area. Whenever possible, I draw from studies specifically on high school populations. Notable implications of extended school commute include reduced sleep and diminished physical safety, significant effects on transfer and absenteeism rates but not necessarily on academic performance, less time for structured activities, and effects on students' perceptions of injustice.

#### *Physical Impacts of School Commute*

There is a growing body of literature which suggests longer commutes have important implications for students' physical wellbeing; specifically, students with extended commutes experience reduced sleep (and at times, exercise) as well as increased physical safety concerns. These studies overwhelmingly suggest extended commute negatively impacts student physical health.

*Reduced sleep.* Adolescents, like children, require more sleep than adults and longer commutes likely impact the amount of sleep students get when compared to those that live close to school. According to an international body of child development, chronobiology, and educational planning research, there is an established connection between a student's long journey to school and a reduction in time spent sleeping and exercising.<sup>32</sup> Because lack of sufficient sleep has been

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<sup>32</sup> Fredriksen et al. 2004; Pereira et al. 2014; Voulgaris et al. 2019; Pradhan & Sinha 2017

documented to compromise learning, memory, attention, and abstract thinking skills,<sup>33</sup> a reduction in sleep for long-distance commuters may have troubling health or academic implications.

Aligned with the findings above, Fredriksen et. al studied the role of sleep in predicting psychosocial outcomes such as self-esteem and depressive symptoms of Chicago middle school students. Although younger than high schoolers, this study suggests students experiencing reduced sleep tended to exhibit lower self-esteem and heightened depressive symptoms.<sup>34</sup> Cumulatively, this research from multiple international contexts suggests long commutes are associated with less sleep for school aged commuters which can have deleterious impacts on students' psychosocial outcomes and physical health.

*Safety.* Actual and/or perceived danger along commute routes may in fact be a source of great anxiety and trauma for long-distance riders. According to the Chicago Consortium on School Research, there are clear divisions in perceptions of safety among different racial and ethnic groups in Chicago, with African American students reporting the highest pervasive sense of danger.<sup>35</sup> Mode and route of travel may in fact change the experience of commute for students. Shedd, in her study on high school commute, explains that “the paths you take each day in Chicago matter a great deal.” To most students in her study, shortcuts were less important than safety and avoiding gang territories in dispute was an important consideration.<sup>36</sup> Students feared harassment, physical danger, or arrest during their school commutes. Her findings align with research from other urban school districts, Baltimore for example, where approximately 33.5% of students who used public transportation to get to school did not feel safe during their commutes. A different study out of

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<sup>33</sup> Fredriksen et al., “Sleepless in Chicago.” p.85

<sup>34</sup> Fredriksen et al.

<sup>35</sup> CCSR research cited by Shedd, *Unequal City*. p.35

<sup>36</sup> Shedd. See preface, xii

Baltimore on commute found that students whose estimated routes required walking to or waiting at transportation stops on streets with high levels of violent crime were associated with higher rates of absenteeism throughout the school year; but, exposure to these same streets while riding public transportation was not.<sup>37</sup> In this scenario, riding on public transportation may provide additional safety that walking through particularly high-crime areas does not.

Sexual harassment and other forms of sexual violence in public spaces are everyday occurrences for women and girls around the world.<sup>38</sup> In a survey of college students across 18 cities worldwide, Ceccato and Loukaitou-Sideris found sexual violence in transit environments to be a common occurrence globally, yet ubiquitously underreported. The extent of harassment varied considerably across cities, by transit mode, and time of day – but in all cities, female students were by far more sexually harassed than male students.<sup>39</sup>

#### *Academic & Extracurricular Impacts of Commute*

Relatively recent attention has been paid to the impacts of high school commute on various academic outcomes. While there is evidence that commute influences rates of transfer and absenteeism, most studies also find little evidence to suggest that commute is correlated with negative academic performance, especially when commute provides access to higher quality schools.<sup>40</sup> Additionally, mode of commute may impact students' ability to participate in structured activities.

*Transfer, absenteeism, and academic performance.* Stein, Burdick-Will, & Grigg found that 9<sup>th</sup> graders in Baltimore public schools with more difficult commutes were more likely to transfer

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<sup>37</sup> Burdick-Will, Stein, and Grigg, "Danger on the Way to School."

<sup>38</sup> Ceccato and Loukaitou-Sideris, "Sexual Harassment in Transit Environments among College Students in the #MeToo Era."

<sup>39</sup> Ceccato and Loukaitou-Sideris.

<sup>40</sup> Hopson et al., "Transportation to School and Academic Outcomes."

than their peers with easier commutes at the same school.<sup>41</sup> Edwards provides causal evidence in her dissertation exploring school transportation effects on student attendance and achievement, finding that “being eligible for school bus transportation decreases the probability of being chronically absent especially for economically disadvantaged students by two to four percentage points.”<sup>42</sup> However, similar to Stein, Burdick-Will, & Grigg (2021), they found little evidence that district-provided transportation had an effect on student achievement.<sup>43</sup>

Blagg, Rosenboom, and Chingos also found longer school commute to be associated with increased likelihood of transfer - both during the school year and between school years - for younger students. In their sample of Washington, DC students where roughly three-quarters attend a school outside their neighborhood, longer commute was associated with a slight increase in absenteeism for all students.<sup>44</sup> In consensus with previous research, they found essentially no difference in sixth-grade test score outcomes between peers who travel different distances to the same school.<sup>45</sup> Taken together, this evidence suggests that school commute does have significant effects on transfer and absenteeism rates but not necessarily on academic performance, particularly when a longer commute provides access to greater educational opportunity.

*Structured activities.* A recent study on travel mode and participation in structured activities among U.S. teens, although limited by cross-sectional data that cannot definitively indicate causality and only applicable to teens above the legal driving age (older sophomores, juniors, and seniors), found that many teens – particularly low-income and minority teens who are less likely to have a car or a driver’s license than their whiter, more affluent counterparts – cannot reliably access structured

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<sup>41</sup> Stein, Burdick-Will, and Grigg, “A Choice Too Far: Transit Difficulty and Early High School Transfer.”

<sup>42</sup> Edwards, “Many the Miles to School.”

<sup>43</sup> Edwards. p.147

<sup>44</sup> Blagg, Rosenboom, and Chingos, “The Extra Mile.”

<sup>45</sup> Blagg, Rosenboom, and Chingos.

activities such as team sports, clubs, and paid work.<sup>46</sup> They find teens who use a car are far more likely than otherwise similar teens who walk, bike, or ride public transit to participate in structured activities which have been found to benefit young people developmentally. While limited by methodological approach, these studies nonetheless provide evidence of the downsides to long-distance commuting.

### *Psychological Impacts of School Commute*

*Chicago high school commute, identity formation, and perceptions of injustice.* As previously mentioned, psychological implications of school commute is a relatively understudied aspect of student experience. Carla Shedd argues Chicago high school students' perceptions of themselves and the larger social world are shaped, in particular, as they travel back and forth from school. Her work in *Unequal City*, the sole case study I have found pertaining to high school commuters, reveals how predominantly low-income Black students encounter obstacles their more affluent, White counterparts do not face. Shedd characterizes school commute as a formative site for identity development, perceptions of injustice, and students' beliefs about their potential for social mobility. She argues urban American teenagers learn as much, if not more, about social inequality during their commute at school. While the costs of extended commute are borne by many kinds of students, they especially weigh on those who cross racial and class boundaries and she posits this is especially true for the many thousands of students who travel more than two miles.

Crossing the landscape of vast economic and racial inequality, class stratification, segregation, and poverty shaping Chicago's regions provides long distance commuters with an "expanded frame" of reference; neighborhoods and schools that are mere minutes away can feel

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<sup>46</sup> Ralph and Iacobucci, "Travel Mode and Participation in Structured Activities among U.S. Teens."

worlds apart.<sup>47</sup> Shedd explains, the time and energy involved in achieving safe passage “is stratified by race, place, and circumstance” and disadvantaged teens who traverse the city daily may experience heightened awareness of their disadvantage as travel increases the recognition that their economic and educational opportunities are restricted by their place in the social hierarchy.<sup>48</sup>

Exposure to vastly differing environments raises students’ awareness of their own social positions and those of others, resulting in the development of a keen perception of injustice. Particularly for students of color, traveling to a highly-ranked, better-resourced school may present students with evidence of discrimination more so than students who do not. By comparing students who attend segregated schools to those who don’t, Shedd asserts those who cross boundaries are more likely to see discrimination than those who do not make these journeys.<sup>49</sup> Shedd’s work advances our understanding of urban school commute by evidencing how it influences student awareness of structural injustice and their civic identities. While not a weakness, Shedd’s focus on perceptions of injustice leaves questions surrounding other physical and emotional impacts of extended commute unanswered.

### **Adult Commuters**

While I recognize the limitations of comparisons drawn from research on other age groups or social populations, research on adult commuters can help temporarily fill existing gaps in the literature related to high school experience. Adult commute research indicates patterns of increased stress, spill-over into work performance, and decreased leisure activity associated with long commutes.

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<sup>47</sup> Shedd, *Unequal City*. p.31

<sup>48</sup> Shedd.

<sup>49</sup> Shedd. p.58

*Wellbeing and commute satisfaction.* Chatterjee, et al.'s review of over 100 international studies found consensus among researchers that longer commutes are associated with lowered mood and increased stress for adult commuters regardless of travel mode, with public transportation users reporting the lowest levels of satisfaction. Wide variance in commute experience suggests neighborhood context, mode of transport, age, gender, and presence or absence of company may be important factors influencing one's subjective commuting experiences. In some cases, commuting has been found to have positive benefits in terms of time to think and shift gears or time that can be used productively depending on the conditions of the commute. Having company is positively associated with commute satisfaction, but Chatterjee et al. suggest more research is needed on how commuters respond to dissatisfying commutes.<sup>50</sup>

*Spillover.* Another documented impact of extended commute for adult commuters is spill-over of mood into subsequent activities such as performance at work and home.<sup>51</sup> To my knowledge, there is no existing research examining the possibility of spillover from commute into a student's school day or academic performance. Assuming this remains true for younger commuters, unequally distributed effects of extended commute may impact performance in school, but more research is necessary to support this inference as it contradicts earlier presented research suggesting no correlation between commute and academic performance.

*Time deficits & reduced social capital.* Finally, longer commutes for adults are associated with a reduction in time spent in social and leisure activities. A study utilizing National Household Travel Survey data found higher commute times (>20 minutes) significantly associated with fewer

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<sup>50</sup> Chatterjee et al., "Commuting and Wellbeing." p.22

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

socially-oriented trips; the strongest associations among 90+ minute commuters.<sup>52</sup> This suggests that individuals with longer commutes may have less access to social capital when proxied as socially-oriented trips which may remain true for student commuters.

### Theoretical Frameworks

To understand how students varied social identities and positions shape their high school commute experiences, I ground my analysis in critical social and race theory - namely Hill-Collins' intersectional and structuralist approach to analyzing the institutional dimension of race, class, and gender inequality<sup>53</sup> and Yosso's formulation of community cultural wealth.<sup>54</sup> Critical theory "assumes an ontological position in which reality is shaped over time by structures such as social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, and gender constructs." These structures, as well as other institutional and cultural forces, interact dynamically to form the tapestry of people's material conditions, daily lived experience, and social life.<sup>55</sup> As Hill-Collins argues: by recognizing that the social world is constructed and thus can be shaped, critical social theory both explains and criticizes existing social inequalities with an eye toward creating possibilities for change.<sup>56</sup>

A rich lineage of Critical Race Theory scholarship informed the present study's epistemological and methodological approaches as well as my research questions and chosen theoretical frameworks. Guided by Solórzano's tenants of this perspective specific to education,<sup>57</sup> this study centers experiential knowledge drawn from the lived experiences of long-distance high school commuters, utilizes scholarship across disciplinary boundaries to historically contextualize and analyze the current racial dimension of unequal high school commute, and refutes claims of

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<sup>52</sup> Besser, Marcus, and Frumkin, "Commute Time and Social Capital in the U.S."

<sup>53</sup> Hill Collins, "'Toward a New Vision."

<sup>54</sup> Yosso, "Whose Culture Has Capital?"

<sup>55</sup> Paradis et al., "Critical Theory." p.842

<sup>56</sup> Hill Collins, *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory*. p.4-5

<sup>57</sup> Yosso, "Whose Culture Has Capital?"

equal opportunity or race neutrality by challenging Chicago's competitive selective enrollment model that spatially advantages those with racial, gender, and class privilege. In the conclusion, I offer practical policy recommendations suggested by long-distance commuters themselves in a collective attempt to improve future long-distance commuters' experiences and reduce educational inequality for this structurally marginalized group.

Students exist at multiple intersections of race, class, and gender and thus their commuting and schooling experiences are shaped by these distinctive, yet interlocking identities. In combination with the concept of intersectionality,<sup>58</sup> Hill-Collins offers a useful model to analyze race, class, and gender inequality through an institutional lens.<sup>59</sup> Systemic relationships of privilege and disadvantage institutionalized through the policies and practices of social institutions such as schools and government agencies illustrate this institutional dimension. I utilize this framework to ground my argument that long distance commute disadvantages LTHS students in patterned ways along interlocking racial, gender, and class lines that could be mitigated by increased institutional support.

Finally, I utilize Yosso's formulation of community cultural wealth and navigational capital, a critical race theory challenge to traditional interpretations of Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital. Bourdieu asserts "cultural capital (i.e., education, language, knowledge), social capital (i.e., social networks, connections) and economic capital (i.e., money and other material possessions) can be acquired two ways, from one's family and/or through formal schooling."<sup>60</sup> In education scholarship, Bourdieu's work has often been utilized to frame deficit logic to explain why marginalized students are disadvantaged and do not succeed at the same rate as White

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<sup>58</sup> Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color."

<sup>59</sup> Hill Collins, "Toward a New Vision."

<sup>60</sup> Yosso, "Whose Culture Has Capital?"

students. Yosso challenges Bourdieu's limited view of capital by defining community cultural wealth as "an array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression." I use and extend Yosso's conceptualization of community cultural wealth to include not only communities of color, but more broadly, spatially marginalized commuter students. Although long distance commuters acknowledged the burdens of their commute, they valued various forms of navigational, social, and resistant capital built along the way.

Yosso's forms of capital are not mutually exclusive, rather they intersect and build on each other. I extend Yosso's conceptualization of navigational, social, and resistant capital to the skills acquired through physical and social navigation of extended commute. She defines navigational capital as the "skills of maneuvering through social institutions," particularly those institutions not built with communities of color in mind. She provides the example of strategically navigating through racially-hostile university campuses where students "sustain high levels of achievement, despite the presence of stressful events and conditions that place them at risk of doing poorly at school." Yosso defines social capital as "networks of people and community resources. These peer and other social contacts can provide both instrumental and emotional support to navigate through society's institutions."<sup>61</sup> Finally, resistant capital refers to "those knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality."

In an analysis of students' efforts to transform unequal conditions in urban high schools, Solórzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) theorize that resistance may include different forms of oppositional behavior; for example, resistance in the form of academic withdrawal when students do not believe their culture or competencies are valued. However, when informed by Freire's

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<sup>61</sup> Yosso.

critical consciousness (1970), or recognition of the structural nature of oppression and the motivation to work toward social and racial justice, resistance may take on a transformative form.<sup>62</sup> Despite the difficulties of extended commute, I argue students who undertake these long or complex daily journeys gain navigational, social, and resistant capital they deem highly valuable which may go unrecognized by their school and yet contribute to their community cultural wealth.

## **DATA & METHODS**

To explore my questions regarding high school commute and its impacts on high school experience, I conducted and analyzed fifteen in-depth interviews with long-distance commuters that attended Lane Tech College Prep High School in Chicago, IL. Semi-structured interviews were conducted over zoom with these alumni between January and June, 2023. Participants were recruited online via alumni networks on social media. Participants were asked to complete a five-minute pre-screener survey to collect basic demographic and commute data from which I contacted participants and scheduled interviews with those that showed interest. The semi-structured interview protocol included questions about high school choice and the application process, commute specific questions, and questions about their perceived impacts. Additionally, there was a section of questions about commute strategies, Lane Tech's supports for long-distance commuters, and a series of speculative questions intended to generate policy recommendations (see appendix). On average, the interviews lasted one hour. Because the sample size is small, the purpose is not to draw generalizable conclusions about experiences that affect all long-distance commuters. Instead, my goal is better understand how extended school commute impacts high school experience, including how LTHS students perceive their school environments as supportive or unsupportive. The wide array of identities and experiences of this sample provides fertile ground

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<sup>62</sup> Yosso.

for the analysis of various intersections of gender, ethno-racial identity, socioeconomic status, and commute length.

At the beginning of each interview, I gained the participant's verbal consent for participation in the study as well as their consent to record the audio of the Zoom call. During the calls, I used Zoom's closed captioning function to obtain a transcript. The captions were not accurate, so I listened to each audio recording to correct transcription errors and lightly edited filler phrases such as 'like' and 'you' for clarity. Pseudonyms were used to protect their identities, which participants either chose themselves or I assigned randomly from lists of baby names according to their reported ethno-racial identity. I also anonymized any faculty, staff, or peer names that were mentioned throughout the interviews.

Utilizing the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA, I employed a grounded-theory approach similar to open coding called "eclectic coding"<sup>63</sup> as defined by Saldaña to code and analyze the fifteen transcripts. During my initial rounds of coding, I created tentative category lists derived from the data. I reconciled and condensed these lists using MAXQDA's "Creative Coding" tool, adding additional categories with each new transcript as the need arose. I also input demographic and commute data collected from the pre-screening survey into the embedded document variable function which allowed for side-by-side comparison of coded segments by variables such as commute length, gender identity, or Free or Reduced Lunch eligibility.<sup>64</sup> While I recognize the limitations of analysis via these static identity categories, it allowed for comparative analysis that would not otherwise have been possible. This qualitative analysis process allowed for thematic connections between the interviews and to establish patterns across cases.

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<sup>63</sup> Saldaña, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*.

<sup>64</sup> Any missing variables were derived from the interviews themselves. For example, two students did not know if they qualified for CPS' Free or Reduced Lunch program. I inferred they did not based on the median household income of their respective home neighborhoods.

*Positionality*

Before delving into the findings, it is important to briefly consider my positionality as the researcher in this study. My personal connection to Lane Tech High School as an alumna provided in-group access to recruit the 15 alumni interviewed for this study. A few of the participants made school specific references - for example, referencing teachers and administrators by name - suggesting my shared experience and knowledge of the school may have fostered a sense of trust. Alternatively, it could be argued that my history and network within LTHS deterred participants from candidly expressing their experiences; however, I received no feedback that this was the case. It is also possible that my visible identities (as a light-skinned, bi-racial, middle class, cisgender woman in her late 20s) influenced what participants felt comfortable disclosing.

*Site*

Lane Tech College Prep High School, formerly Albert G. Lane Technical High School, is a large, public, selective enrollment college preparatory high school serving seventh<sup>65</sup> through twelfth grade students. Founded in 1908 as a manual training school for boys, the now coeducational high school has become the largest magnet school in Chicago with more than 4,200 students in attendance yearly. It's green, 30-acre campus with Tudor Gothic style architecture, clock tower, 3 gyms, stadium, and an Olympic size swimming pool are situated in Chicago's North-Side, Roscoe Village neighborhood. Their website boasts robust curricular offerings with over 100 electives, including honors and AP courses. According to CPS' school profile website, "Lane has produced more PhD's than any high school in the nation" and provides "an especially broad array of academic and extracurricular offerings." Its student body in 2022 was 36.2% White, 34.8%

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<sup>65</sup> The Academic Center program established in 2011 provides a 6-year advanced curriculum for students beginning in 7th grade. Two students interviewed participated in the Academic Center program, and attended LTHS for 6 years rather than 4.

Hispanic, 10.4% Asian, 7% Black and 11.6% other. 36.6% of the student body was considered low income.

To attend one of eleven selective enrollment high schools in CPS, students are admitted based on an admissions exam and their grades from seventh grade. The first 30% of seats go to the top scoring students and the remaining 70% are divided among the highest scoring students in each of four socioeconomic tiers.<sup>66</sup> The district has acknowledged underrepresentation of low-income, Students of Color at its selective enrollment schools who may “lack the resources and know-how to navigate the high-stakes applications.”<sup>67</sup> Lane Tech does not have attendance boundaries, as it is a magnet school that draws students from across Chicago. Additionally, CPS does not provide transportation services for high school students unless they qualify through an IEP. Instead, students qualify for a reduced fare public transportation pass.

### *Study Sample*

All but one of the students interviewed were born and raised in Chicago. 8 identified as female, 4 as male, and 3 as non-binary or 3<sup>rd</sup> gender. The participants ethno-racial identities were reported as follows: 8 Latinx or Hispanic students, 4 White, 2 Black, and 1 Native American and Latinx student. Two-thirds of respondents qualified for CPS’ Free or Reduced Lunch program. Size and income of a family determines eligibility; for example, a family of four making about \$36,000 would qualify for free or reduced-price meals.<sup>68</sup>

Overall, students average one-way commute was 79 minutes.<sup>69</sup> I chose to collect data regarding length of commute in minutes rather than miles because the distance you can travel in the city varies greatly depending on the time and route of commute, and many people conceptualize

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<sup>66</sup> Vevea, “Applying to Chicago Public Schools?”

<sup>67</sup> Peña, “Chicago Aims to Revamp Its Admissions Policy for Selective Enrollment Schools.”

<sup>68</sup> Smylie, “Illinois Families Will Have to Prove They Are Eligible for Free or Reduced-Price School Meals.”

<sup>69</sup> Lilo’s commute was an outlier at 180 minutes. Excluded, the average commute was 71 minutes.

'length of commute' in time rather than distance. The average commute of White students was 67.5 mins and 83.2 mins for Students of Color. Students lived in a variety of neighborhoods, with 3 of 4 White students commuting from the North-Side of the city and 10 of 11 Students of Color commuting from the South- and West-Sides (see figure 1). All participants were alumni that attended LTHS for at least one full year within the past 5 years (2017-2022).

### Approximate Commute Routes

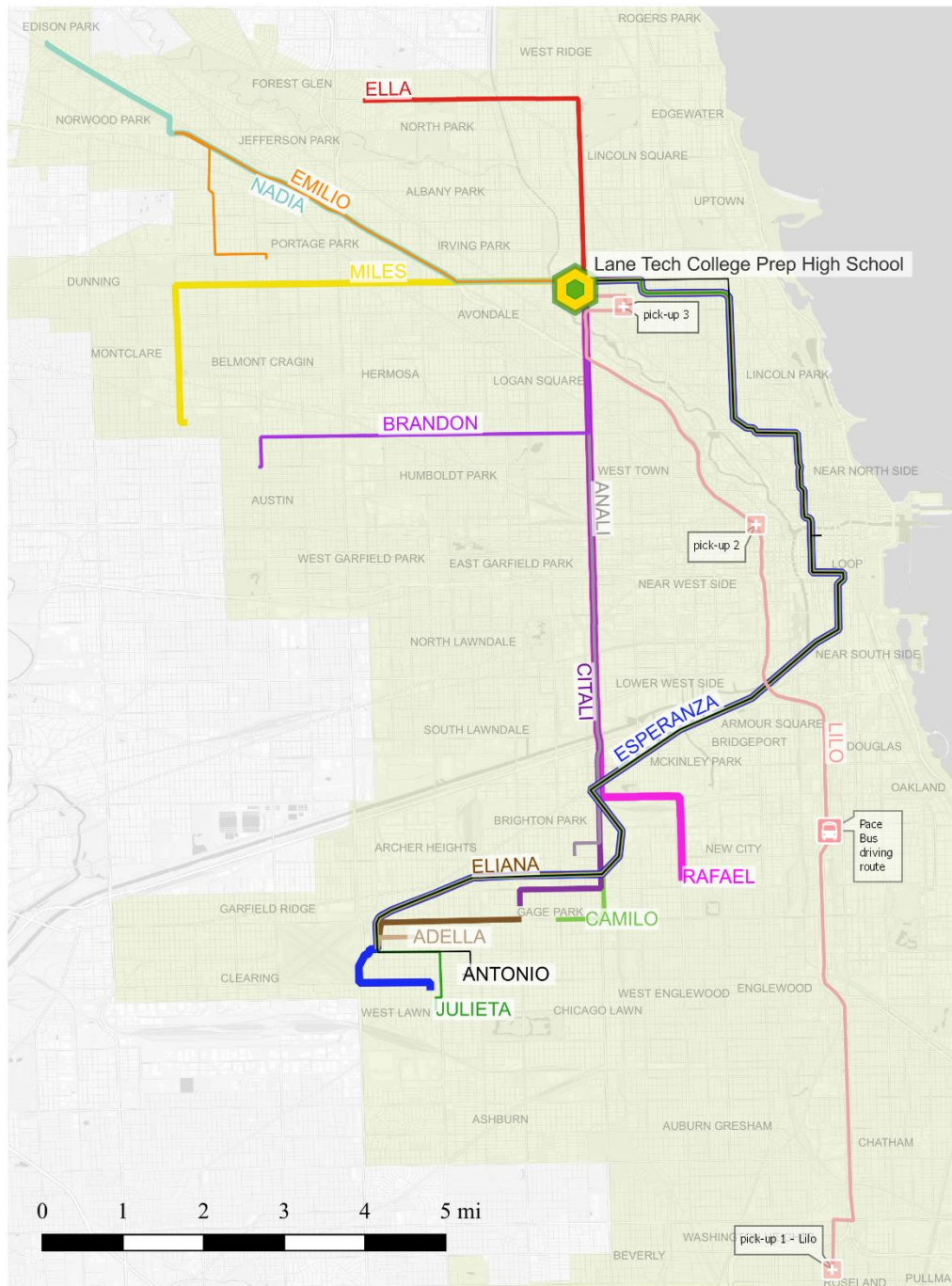


Figure 1. Visualization of study participants approximate daily commute routes based on interview data. Created via QGIS v3.26.3 and Google Maps. Chicago Community Area shapefile obtained from the Chicago Data Portal on 6/19/23

<sup>70</sup> Lilo had the longest commute at 180 minutes, and was ultimately provided pace bus services due to an individualized education plan. All other commutes are based on approximations of public transportation routes obtained from interviews. Differing widths of travel line have no significance beyond visibility of layered routes.

## **FINDINGS**

My findings support existing literature that extended high school commute can have detrimental physical, academic, and psychological impacts. As I illustrate in following pages, students varying gender, racial, and class identities or positions largely shaped how they experienced extended commute. Stress, financial strain, difficulty participating in school-based extracurricular activities, and varying degrees of academic impact emerged as prominent burdens across interviews borne most heavily by students of color from poor and working-class families. Lack of safety along commute routes was a concern for many, but female presenting students and students of color most often described feelings of hypervigilance and instances of physical or sexual harassment while in transit. While students acknowledged these challenges as impactful aspects of their high school experience, with some questioning their lack of access to equivalent educational opportunities near home, many emphasized and highly valued the navigational, social, and resistant capital they gained along the way and generally believed their high school experience at LTHS was worth traversing the city daily.

### **Perceived Impacts of Extended High School Commute**

Most students recalled spending much of their time listening to music, catching up on homework or sleep, and fond memories of socializing with friends during their daily commute. But these long-distance travelers also described navigating considerable challenges along their paths to school. Many of their struggles and stressors echoed existing literature documenting reduced sleep, lower mood, and time deficits associated with long commutes. Below, I focus on four domains consistently highlighted by this group of students: 1) stressors that amplified the negative aspects of long-distance school commute, 2) financial strain, 3) extracurricular participation, and 4) academic impacts.

### *I. Stress*

13 of 15 participants characterized their commute as stressful. Sources of stress commonly noted in the interviews that have already been established in transit literature included delays, traffic, and lack of control associated with congestion, crowding, and unpredictability. Timing multiple transfers, long wait times, and poor weather increased student anxiety. Complex routes, traveling alone, and lack of access to occasional rides further amplified commute stress. While risky, traveling after dark was largely unavoidable during the winter and when participating in after school activities (for an in-depth discussion of safety, see ‘seeking safety’). The two participants who did not believe their commutes were a significant source of stress, Miles and Citali, had relatively straightforward commute routes and a single transfer – both took only two busses. Citali had a consistent travel partner and could often rely on parental support for rides to and from her extracurricular activities. A common view amongst interviewees was that their commute experience was better with peers. Brandon even went out of his way to be with friends:

Sometimes you kind of don't mind taking the longer route, and making the long route even longer if you get to take it with friends because it makes the time go by just a little bit quicker. (Brandon)

It is well established that having company is positively associated with commute satisfaction. Taken together, these findings suggest complexity of route, travel partners, and access to rides or lack thereof may mediate long-distance commuter stress. Supports such as connecting students with travel partners, express routes to decrease the number of transfers and route complexity, as well as school organized ride share or carpool groups were suggested by students and may be effective for reducing commute anxiety.

### *II. Financial Strain*

Another striking finding that arose from the interviews in relation to commute stress was financial strain. Previous research suggests ethno-racial identity and socioeconomic status are tied

to the locations of choice schools and that Chicago's selective enrollment schools spatially privilege those living downtown and across the North-Side. Both Calarco and Lareau explore how class privilege translates into academic privilege in the form of increased teacher attention and enrollment in advanced classes.<sup>71</sup> I contribute to the dialogue on social stratification within schools by illustrating how class privilege protects students from additional commute stress stemming from financial instability.

The reduced-price student CTA fare is 75 cents for a single ride on school days between 5:30 am – 8:30 pm, and includes up to two additional transfers within 2 hours for no cost. While this may seem inconsequential for those of us with relative economic privilege, students from poor and working-class families interviewed described this as a significant burden and stressor throughout their time in high school. Commuting costs are higher for students with longer, more complex routes – especially for those with 3 or more transfers. And, for long-distance commuters like Julieta who participated in a before-school extra-curricular activity requiring her to “be on a bus or train by 4:30 or 5[am] at the latest,” the time restrictions on reduced fare many necessitate paying more. Antonio brought up the costs of transportation when asked how LTHS school could have supported him as a commuter student:

I felt honestly, the one thing that would have helped me the most to feel more welcome was probably passes. If we could have gotten free transit rides, that would have made a world of difference. I would only get 20 bucks a week. So, 15 of those have to go to CTA. And the rest of them I can like, ration it for Pop Tarts or something you know? So yeah, it was...I don't know...It was different for sure. I felt like Lane really just expects everyone to be there, and be there on time. And whatever is going on at home, you have to deal with it at home. Once you step inside the school you have to be on your shit. (Antonio)

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<sup>71</sup> Calarco, *Negotiating Opportunities: How the Middle Class Secures Advantages in School*; Lareau, “Cultural Knowledge and Social Inequality.”

Camilo and Brandon shared nearly identical experiences: \$20 a week in allowance, much of which went to commute fare. Antonio succinctly conveyed the message he inferred from the school's lack of support, which was feeling less welcomed and needing to 'deal with' the financial burden on his own. Implicitly, Antonio is critiquing a system that he believes expects students to leave their financial struggles at the door. For a student like Antonio who relies on two buses and two trains, transportation costs twice as much as it does for students with fewer transfers. Antonio's 3 dollars a day in transportation costs is \$15 a week; approximately \$570 a year.<sup>72</sup> To help alleviate this burden, he and his friends often adjusted their commute by walking long distances or taking a longer route to switch at one of the few stations offering free transfers (see Antonio's commute route in figure 1). He explained that his stress increased toward Thursday or Friday when his friends wanted to go out past the reduced fare hours or when he didn't have money on his card: "sometimes it was stressful. Because you're like, I want to hang out with my friends. But I don't know if I'll be able to get home. And that's gonna be stressful as well." Not only does his experience suggest transit fare is a stressor for poor students, but that it can also become a barrier to socializing.

In a similar vein, Emilio recalls feeling guilty asking his mother for transportation funds:

Sometimes I would just not have enough to pay for the bus, and it was nice that amongst my friends, we were all generally in the same socioeconomic situation. So, there was no ill will amongst us to be like: "Oh, can you just spot me for today...I'll get you next time." We would cover each other...

But there were sometimes I just didn't have someone there, so it would kinda be an emergency where I'd be like, 'hey, mom, can you please spot me \$5?' I don't know if you have it, but, if you have it, can you? or I'll have to figure it out otherwise. (Emilio)

Reduced fare and occasional help from friends were not always enough to alleviate Emilio's financial burden. Antonio, Camilo, Brandon, and Emilio's experiences worrying about transit fare

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<sup>72</sup> based on a 38-week school year (CPS 2022-2023 calendar)

and carefully budgeting starkly contrasted those with relative economic privilege who did not think much about paying. Miles provided a strong example of relative class privilege. When asked if they recalled any supports provided by the school for commuter students, they could not recall having to pay.

Miles: the Ventra cards...I loved that; that was really, really, great.

Interviewer: And, was that a discounted fare or completely covered?

Miles: I don't fully remember. I feel like it was completely covered. But I could be wrong. Let me look it up...[pauses] I'm not seeing anything about whether or not they [the school] were paying for it. It may have just been discounted. I'm not sure.

Likewise, Ella's parents set up a payment automatically refilling her card whenever it depleted. Ella and Miles did not have to worry about budgeting to travel for school; their relative class privilege protected them from additional commute stress induced by financial strain. Antonio, Camilo, Brandon, and Emilio each separately suggested financial support could have made their commuting experiences less stressful.

### *III. Extracurricular Participation and Socializing*

Many students discussed long commutes limiting their ability to participate in extracurricular activities and socialize before or after school. These findings are consistent with Ralph and Iacobucci's; teens who are drivers and passengers participate more often in structured activities than teens who use other modes of travel. Lack of car or ride access may keep them from participating altogether in extracurriculars known to benefit students developmentally. These findings illuminate how extended student commute can result in a loss of social capital.<sup>73</sup> However, some were still able to partake in their chosen activities. For those who did, sacrificing sleep, family time, or additional activities often proved necessary.

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<sup>73</sup> congruent with findings from Besser, Marcus, and Frumkin, "Commute Time and Social Capital in the U.S."

Julieta, Brandon, Ella and Camilo wished they could have participated in sports, but the early practices and late games combined with their commute proved unsustainable. Ella reflected when asked if Lane felt welcoming for long distance commuters like her:

It didn't feel accessible for me because I would have to get up at 5:45 every morning just to get to school. So, I couldn't do any morning activities or anything. I couldn't participate in any sports, and then it took me an hour and a half to get back from school, so I couldn't participate in any clubs [if] I wanted to be home by dinner. I wouldn't have time for homework. There were a lot of resources that were advertised as accessible but the timing just wouldn't work (Ella)

Ella later laments that she felt limited in her engagement in the LTHS community because she wasn't able to join clubs or make many friends outside of her classes. Students like Ella found it challenging to hang out on or around campus after school:

I couldn't have as much of a social life as many of my friends because, whereas they could hang out at school with friends and get back at a good time, I would have to leave as soon as the bell was ringing to even try and get home at the normal time that they would. (Ella)

By comparing her experience with her friends during the interview, Ella seemed to be mourning a 'normal' high school experience where she could spend time socializing after school but still get home at a reasonable hour. As a fellow Alumnus, I have fond memories of hanging out in the hallways and on Lane's large green lawn for hours after school, unknowingly acquiring social capital in the form of peer networks. As I later discuss, some students found ways to mitigate these losses by forming friendships along their routes and building communities of fellow commuters.

#### *IV. Academic Impacts*

Previous research on high school commute demonstrated significant effects on transfer and absenteeism rates but little on academic performance, particularly when a longer commute provides access to greater educational opportunity. I found similarly ambiguous results when exploring commute's impact on academic performance – seemingly no discernable patterns. Very

few students attempted to justify struggling with their academics as solely a product of a long commute. Rather, they provided nuanced explanations for the ways in which their academic performance suffered as a result. Students highlighted exhaustion and lack of time as academic barriers which occasionally spilled over into their school day.

*Being tired and time deficient impacts homework.* The long commute to and from school left some students feeling exhausted and time deficient which had indirect impacts on their academic performance. While many were able to maintain high grades, they often recalled sacrificing sleep. Some students made use of their commute to complete homework; others like Ella found it difficult to focus on anything that required much attention. Those that did work on their routes also acknowledged that the conditions were not ideal. Esperanza was able to complete homework when she needed to:

I had every app on my phone. I had Google slides; Google Docs, had Google drive. I had PowerPoint, Excel, everything I needed to do homework, So sometimes I would...If I was standing or sitting also played a big role. If I was standing, I did nothing but listen to music; you can't really do anything [else]. (Esperanza)

Although Esperanza could at times utilize her commute productively, she points out that traveling in crowded bus or train cars made this difficult. In contrast, homework was not an option for Citali:

[Commuting] make me feel very tired. I remember coming back and just being in a bad mood; tired because it was a long trip. And I just wanted to get home. I just wanted to relax. Even though I was on the bus doing nothing for an hour, I felt like I couldn't really relax. I couldn't do everything I wanted to do that I could have done at home. So, it made me tired and delayed. I could never read, I would get a little car sick...And I just can't, I need a quiet space to do homework. (Citali)

The conditions on public transportation are not always conducive to doing homework, a sentiment reflected by multiple participants. Exhaustion was commonplace, and spending over two hours a day commuting undoubtedly impacted some students' motivation and energy levels while studying.

*Commute spillovers into the school day.* Like Citali, most extended commuters recalled being exhausted; they had to wake up earlier and got home later than their peers. Students expressed this exhaustion occasionally spilling over into their school day. There is an established connection between a student's long journey to school and a reduction in time spent sleeping;<sup>74</sup> this is troubling as it may compromise learning, memory, and abstract thinking skills. Strikingly, I find long-distance commuting impacted some students' focus during school, led to inaccurate internalization of academic hardship, and occasional resulted in missed class time.

Raphael believes his concentration waned during the school day, illustrating one way long commutes may spillover into academic performance:

I felt like I was very sleep deprived because of the long commute. I don't know, I don't think it affected my academics as much. But, I was definitely tired a lot during classes. Especially the first couple of classes in the day - I was really tired. And by the end of the day, I was probably not paying too much attention to those classes as well. (Rafael)

Rafael was able to maintain a high GPA, yet acknowledged his focus likely suffered due to his commute.

When asked if he felt commute impacted his academic performance, Brandon recounted:

There were some times where my first period teachers understood I was late. Like, I should be paying attention in class, but they also understood that I was tired. Some of them let me nap just to catch up on sleep. And yes, that's nice for them to let me nap, but at the same time I'm missing out on the lessons. I call it a cop out answer because yeah, it did affect me negatively, but at the same time, I still could have found a way to push through the tiredness. (Brandon)

Brandon appreciated his teachers for letting him nap in class, but missed out on lessons and partially blames himself. He interprets diminished energy as a personal failure rather than a systemic one necessitating two hours of daily travel to access a high school with his desired

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<sup>74</sup> Fredriksen et al. 2004; Pereira et al. 2014; Voulgaris et al. 2019; Pradhan & Sinha 2017

characteristics: highly ranked and more diverse than his local, single-race elementary and high school options. Much like the students in Phillippo's study who internalized inaccurate academic identities rather than a structural critique of Chicago's competitive school choice process,<sup>75</sup> Brandon, too, partially internalized his lack of sleep rather than blaming systemic failures such as a shortage of well-distributed choice schools or supports for long-distance commuters. On one hand, he argued being a young Black man on public transportation meant he did not have the luxury of sacrificing his sleep for homework; for him, being sleep deprived was not worth the safety risks of falling asleep on public transit (see p. 37, racial differences in hypervigilance for more on Brandon's experience). He described struggling to keep up his grades and felt he had to choose between sleep or homework, yet took partial blame on himself for not 'pushing through.' Brandon illustrates how extended commute normalized by competitive school choice may similarly fuel internalization and self-blame of systemic inequality.

Finally, Camilo fell behind in his first period classes due to chronic tardies:

There were often times where I would be 30 minutes late, even 45 minutes. I would even miss the whole first period. So that set me back in like, what's going on in class? Or what's the next lesson about? And I would have to catch up on notes from other friends or from other classmates. So, it was definitely a drawback. It did set me back and I was on attendance watch for a good three months (Camilo)

When prompted to reflect on his role in being late, Camilo offered an implicitly political critique compared to Brandon's tendency to internalize blame. He refuted the idea that his late arrival was avoidable, and more directly attributed his late arrival to unreliable busses in his neighborhood. These stories highlight how extended commute may spillover into the school day, much like it does for adult commuters at work, and how it can impact academic performance.

## Seeking Safety

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<sup>75</sup> Phillippo, *A Contest without Winners*.

A prominent theme of avoiding violence arose across interviews, particularly for Students of Color and female-presenting students. Some sought safety before they entered high school through their motivation for school choice. Others perceived or encountered violence while in transit and adopted strategies for their protection. I find students' perceptions of and encounters with violence to be varied based on intersecting gender and ethno-racial identities.

### *I. Motivation for School Choice*

Students' motives for participating in the competitive school choice process to secure a coveted seat ranged from Lane's academic reputation and ranking, seeking greater ethno-racial diversity than their single race elementary schools, or a desire to meet new people and avoid cliques formed during elementary years. Students sought increased educational opportunity, academic rigor, and access to a large network of resources such as computer labs, large libraries, and specialized tech programs. Rafael highlighted high dropout rates, a lack of student focus on academics, class disruptions, and teacher burnout as his motivators. Many perceived their former elementary schools and neighborhood high schools as under-resourced with fewer specialized programs when compared to the selective-enrollment schools, and their perceptions were reinforced by visits to various open houses during the application process. Some relied on statistics and school report cards to inform their decisions, and others drew from their knowledge of a school's reputation.

More surprisingly, multiple interviewees expressed the desire to avoid neighborhood violence as a strong motivating factor in their high school search. Antonio recalled his family moving at a time when CPS changed its high school attendance boundary map. Although he lived two blocks from Hubbard, a nearby neighborhood school, his assigned school was Gage Park – a 20–30-minute commute from his new home. He explains:

So, it was either go to Gage Park and possibly become a gangbanger and experience a bunch of other stuff or go to Lane Tech. My parents did it out of safety, because they

knew I'm the only male in the family...I just wanted the best possible education that I could get. And I knew that at Gage Park I was going to be more worried about my safety than my education. (Antonio)

Antonio felt he only had two choices – encounter violence or secure a seat at a selective enrollment school. When asked how she felt commuting impacted her overall experience in high school, Esperanza stated:

I feel like I was more grateful for school. I chose to go to Lane, and I wanted better for myself...if it wasn't Lane, it was Hubbard, and Hubbard had metal detectors, clear backpacks, a uniform, fights every day. The only thing I think they were known for was their ROTC program. Which says a lot in itself. (Esperanza)

Antonio was frustrated that he could not attend Hubbard near his home, but according to Esperanza, even Hubbard was not a safe learning environment. Both felt their high school options were dichotomous; one option far less desirable than the other. Neither participant elaborated on how this perception of their neighborhood schools formed, but Lilo did.

Lilo attended a magnet elementary school and recalls the fear of her mother threatening to transfer her to the local school:

my mom, oftentimes to get me to behave correctly...she's like 'keep playin' and imma transfer you to the school across the street.' And that used to make me cry, because a lot of the neighborhood schools, the neighborhoods we lived in, the schools didn't get a lot of funding...And there would be a lot of fighting at those schools, like the school that was across the street. My neighborhood high school was [Percy] Julian High School, and it was one of the most violent high schools ever. My godfather, his friend was a teacher at that school, and a girl tried to fight the teacher. So, I was like, yeah...I did not want to go to that school. (Lilo)

Lilo's experience illustrates how a school's reputation may be transmitted by trusted adults. Both her mother and uncle invoked fear of her local schools. As Antonio, Lilo, and Esperanza illustrate, their anticipation of violence at their local schools and their desire for 'the best possible education' contributed in part to their search for a high school. By participating in the competitive application process and opting to travel across the city, these students were literally and metaphorically willing to go to great lengths to access what they perceived to be a safer and better educational experience.

These findings align with forthcoming research on school choice by Burdick-Will suggesting students from neighborhoods with high rates of violence may actively avoid their local schools as a form of social and physical protection.<sup>76</sup>

## *II. Raced and Gendered Perceptions of Safety*

The following section explores racial and gender differences amongst participants' perceptions of safety during their commutes. Existing research on student perceptions of safety in Chicago suggest clear divisions among racial and ethnic groups. Combined with my findings of increased commuting stress and financial burden for students from economically-disadvantaged families, I find ethno-racial identity and gender overlap to shape long-distance LTHS commuters actual and perceived safety along their routes. Students of Color detailed instances of interpersonal violence, whereas White students did not. Participants also expressed varying levels of physical discomfort and hypervigilance, with female identifying students and Students of Color feeling especially targeted and vulnerable. These differences in vigilance are significant because of its association with adverse mental and physical health outcomes such as heightened anxiety, fatigue, or physical strain.<sup>77</sup> Students employed a variety of strategies to keep themselves and their friends safe like forming commute partnerships and altering their routes.

*Racial differences in hypervigilance.* Students described instances of interpersonal violence ranging from verbal harassment and racial slurs to being robbed or sexually assaulted. White students in the study described feeling relatively safe or unaware of their surroundings more frequently and recounted fewer instances of transit violence during their interviews than Students of Color. Miles, a White non-binary-identifying student stated "I don't think there are any times I

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<sup>76</sup> Burdick-Will, working title: "Anywhere But Here: Neighborhood Violence and Local School Preferences in Baltimore City."

<sup>77</sup> Jones, Lewis, and Brown, "Navigating a Hyperracialized Space."

felt particularly unsafe.” When prompted to reflect on if they believed their racial or gender presentation played a role:

I had some experiences, not commuting, but still on the bus where I was, and I wanna carefully word this, but if I was in in a majority Black neighborhood, for example, and there were people acting erratically on the bus I would feel a little bit like I would be at risk of being targeted. But I don't think that's a particularly rational fear to have. When I was actually commuting, I felt totally fine, and I think if I was more...if I was visibly queer at all, I might not be fine. (Miles)

Miles rarely felt unsafe along his commute route and challenged his perceived lack of safety in Black neighborhoods as misplaced. He also theorizes that his cisgender presentation may have protected him from harassment along his route. Similarly, Antonio – a Mexican student – felt at risk of being profiled or targeted for ‘just being Hispanic’ on the North Side and used words to suggest he needed to remain vigilant. He stated frankly that he felt safer in his neighborhood surrounded by ‘people that looked like him’ and did not doubt whether his fear was rational.

Adella was the only White student interviewed commuting from the South Side. She and Julieta, a Mexican student, shared a similar route. Adella reflected:

I felt safe – like I didn't really care about what was going on around me. I think I care a little bit more now, cause I'm a little bit more socially aware of presenting as a woman because there have been times when I was commuting to school, and there have been creeps that like went up to me especially when I was alone, but for the most part, I felt safe.

Adella emphasizes her gender presentation’s role in her safety, but overall expressed feeling safe like Miles. Similarly, none of the White students in the study voiced feelings of hypervigilance. In contrast, Julieta expressed a need for vigilance along the same route as Adella and used words and phrases such as ‘wary,’ ‘uncertainty,’ ‘on edge,’ and ‘on alert’ particularly about commuting alone or after dark.

Brandon makes a compelling case that racialized students do not have the same luxury of ‘ignorance’ as White students:

Yes [my race played a role]. I grew up in a predominantly Black neighborhood, but I still knew all of the things that went down here. On one hand, I know how beautiful the neighborhood can be. And I know how much family and togetherness is here. But at the same time, I know all of the cons, and all of the negatives; the different kinds of robberies and shooting, and things of that nature. So sometimes ignorance is bliss. And growing up in a Black community being Black, you don't get the luxury of being ignorant...you don't have the luxury to not be observed. And you need to be able to pinpoint and see things before they happen so that you're able to either get yourself out of a situation before it happens or possibly protect people next to you and keep them from getting injured...So, whether I was listening to music on my commute or not, I was always being super observant and people watching just to make sure that there's no immediate danger that's going to befall me.

Brandon later confided that he was robbed at gunpoint early in high school which likely contributed to his hypervigilance while commuting. These patterned differences between Students of Color and White student's experiences with interpersonal violence and their levels of hypervigilance illuminate differences in actual and perceived safety along racial lines that can influence one's high school commute.

*Gender differences.* Female-presenting students, regardless of racial identity, recalled instances of gender-based transit violence without exception whereas male-presenting students did not. The young women recounted being cat-called, followed, hit on by older men, and photographed without their consent. Two young women in the study recounted highly explicit instances of sexual assault while commuting for school. According to Julieta, "being a high school girl, it's a very vulnerable thing to be in general because you're targeted more often. So, that's why I was always on alert." These findings align with research presented in the literature review which suggests gender and age influence the frequency of sexual violence in transit environments.

Lilo weighed in on the interplay between race and gender, and provides an example of a formative experience underpinning her beliefs:

Black women are very unprotected, but it's just something about being a young Black girl on public transportation...there's a really big target on you and you're also just not as

protected as your peers are being protected in those public spaces; like if they are getting harassed by an older man, and things of that nature. (Lilo)

She later continued: I remember one time somebody was following me, and I tried walking up to this White woman. I was like, can you please help me? Just act like you know me, cause she was about to go into this Chase building, and I wanted to go in there with her. I didn't want to go in there alone, because he still could bother me. And, she acted like she couldn't help me...at all. So, this guy still followed me, and I had to go somewhere else to get him off my back.

Lilo characterizes her racial and gender identities as a liability in public spaces whereas Ella believes her gender put her at risk but her whiteness served as protection.

I feel like I had a lot of privilege in being white. It sucked because I was going to be treated differently as a girl walking along, but I was much safer in being White then I would have been any other race. (Ella)

These passages illustrate how the experiences of young men and women differed, with women encountering more harassment and interpersonal violence during their commutes. Additionally, the participants highlighted how various intersections of race, gender, and age overlapped to shape their safety while in transit.

### *III. Strategies of Protection*

Students employed a variety of creative tactics to improve their commute experience including carrying less to ease physical strain, bringing snacks to alleviate loss of meal time, and backtracking on crowded routes to secure a coveted seat. They also highlighted strategies to increase their sense of safety like traveling with peers, trying to blend in, or adjusting their routes.

Citali had a consistent travel partner that she believes increased her sense of safety:

My friend and I would literally either take turns taking a nap, taking a nap together, or catching up on homework. But either way, when I was with them, I always felt like at ease, you know, like my guard was down. I'll say, those naps really hit on the train...I never felt uncomfortable, I never felt unsafe, I think, because I was with my friend. Regardless if she was asleep or not, she was me. And we were there together. (Citali)

She also recalls: I always think back to like, if I made myself more quiet, dude. I mean, if you make yourself less visible. I guess maybe in the back of my head was to blend in and not catch attention. Maybe I did do that a lot.

Traveling with a peer and trying to make herself less visible were Citali's strategies of self-defense. She was one of the only female presenting students that did not express feeling unsafe along her route, which she largely attributed to having company. Rafael's route depended on his needs, including safety:

I took different routes to Lane, depending on whether I was riding alone, or whether I needed to get to school the fastest or whether I went to sleep on the bus, which, thinking back I probably shouldn't have done that. (Rafael)

Students' routes mattered; faster was not always the operative. Congruent with Shedd's findings, "shortcuts were less important than safety." Some, like Brandon, were willing to take a longer route if it felt safer, especially at nighttime.

Sometimes leaving there, you leave late. Coming back to this neighborhood at nighttime is always a gamble. So, that made it a little bit more risky. Which actually altered my decisions on which bus routes I would take. The North Avenue bus drops me off closer to home than the Cicero bus did. So, if I'm leaving when I know it's going to be nighttime, I would never take the Cicero bus because of that. There's a little bit of a danger factor once night falls. (Brandon)

Brandon and Rafael altered their routes to avoid areas they deemed unsafe. Citali preferred to stick to a single route, travel with a friend, and tried to blend in. Regardless of the method, these strategies were initiated to protect students from transit interpersonal violence patterned along ethno-racial and gender lines.

### **Do the Benefits Outweigh the Costs?**

Thus far my findings, along with previous school commute research, have focused mainly on the negative aspects of extended school commute. While the commuters I interviewed acknowledged the difficulties they faced, many also believed there were meaningful and lasting benefits. For some, commuting provided downtime to relax or decompress, catch up on sleep, and complete homework; or, it offered the opportunity to practice time management skills, explore new places

in the city, build community, and develop a sense of independence. Rafael illustrates many of the recurring themes students highlighted as benefits:

I guess it was nice to have a different place to do work. You know, even if it was on a bus seat or a train seat, or to like, read. It was also nice to just relax a little bit. Sometimes I was just so tired from school, so I got to talk with friends and talk about our days, talk about what was stressful in our classes or, you know, maybe even have some discussions on what we learned. So, there was definitely some down time that was just nice to have, that I wouldn't have had otherwise if I had a shorter commute or if I had just gone home directly...I also learned a little bit more about like time management and also navigating through the city. Because when I left Lane and went to University of Chicago, I realized that not many people know how to ride the CTA. And I basically knew most of the stops along the trains and buses. (Rafael)

Rafael appreciated a change of scenery and an excuse to relax or socialize. He also brings up honing his time management and navigational skills during his high school commute. Students commonly expressed gaining navigational skills, expanded social networks, resilience, and access to an educational experience that made their commute worthwhile. I utilize Yosso's concept of community cultural wealth to highlight three forms of capital this community of commuters developed and deemed highly valuable: navigational capital, social capital, and resistant capital. Finally, I address whether or not students believed their lengthy commutes were worthwhile.

### *I. Navigational Capital*

Two thirds of the students interviewed discussed the development of their navigational skills as a benefit of long-distance commuting in high school. Adella clearly articulated a spatial interpretation of navigational capital when asked if there were benefits to her commute:

A) I know how to take public transit, and as simple as it sounds, I know a lot of people are afraid of it, makes them anxious, or they just don't understand how to use it. B) I've gotten a little bit more familiar with Chicago itself, with how it's laid out...And if somebody says Western Blue line, I know where that is; I can geographically pinpoint where places are. And it does help when I want to find a venue, or when I need to be somewhere. I feel like with driving, it also helped a little bit; I feel like I can make my way around. (Adella)

AnaÍ gained a sense of independence from her commute which translated to other geographic contexts:

In a peculiar enough way, it made me much more independent; I knew how to navigate public transportation very well. I was in New York City last week for the very first time. And I had literally zero problems navigating both how to get, just walk around. And then the public transport lines, because I just know, from going places in high school not having a car, how to navigate public transportation very well. I've never had an issue with it. (AnaÍ)

And Julieta observed differences in this capability between people who drove and those who had to commute via public transportation:

I see differences in my friend group alone, in people who had been driven around their entire life and people who took the train just like I did and our ability to know what direction a street is in. Like, if I were to say from where I'm standing right here, Halsted is in that direction. All my friends who have been driven around their entire life can't do that same thing. Being able to see that difference and being able to know how to navigate my city is definitely a necessary skill. And I'm glad that I was able to foster that through having to use public transportation. (Julieta)

Emilio, like Rafael, appreciated how commuting forced him to practice time management skills and planning ahead that carried over into his future post-secondary education:

It taught me a lot about time management as well, it's just born out of necessity. It also taught me a lot about how to prepare for my day and how to do that prior to the day starting, you know? Do that the night before. Have your bag out clothes out, everything, so you're ready to go always. Stuff like that, I carry on in college and it helps me a lot. (Emilio)

These young folks illustrate how high school commute allowed them to learn about the city's neighborhoods and streets, and to become more confident and independent when navigating public transportation systems. Julieta astutely compares commuters and non-commuters to demonstrate how their experience provided them with capital non-commuters could not access. I contend these skills are a form of navigational capital, born in part by maneuvering through a schooling experience and transportation policy not designed with long distance student commuters in mind. Navigational capital acknowledges individual agency within institutional constraints and many of

these students were able to ‘sustain high levels of achievement, despite the presence of stressful events and conditions that place them at risk of doing poorly at school.’<sup>78</sup> Students appreciate being able to later call on the navigational skills they gained through high school commuting.

## *II. Social Capital*

Although students often lamented a loss of time that could be spent with friends on school grounds, especially those students who did not feel comfortable risking nighttime travel, many found an alternative way to build social capital during their commutes. Some initiated peer groups that functioned as powerful support systems to make the commute experience feel safer. Others fondly recalled strengthening existing friendships and building new ones along their routes that otherwise may not have formed. Brandon believes it helped him socialize and make new friends:

Interviewer: Would you say there were benefits or positive aspects of your commute?

Brandon: Yeah, for sure. It definitely made me a little bit more social. There were a couple of times where I made friends on my commute, because sometimes you just happen to see the same people are on the same route with you. And they're like, ‘Okay, well, since we're going this way, I've seen you all week, maybe we can talk and be friends.’ It makes things a little bit less lonely. So, becoming a little bit more social, a little more outgoing, and creating new friends on the commute is definitely a pro.

Adella adds her long commute made her friendships “10 times stronger...we had that one thing in common – we were looking for friends taking the same route home, so I think that's like the most memorable thing whenever I think of the commute...we're all just hanging out on this hour-long trip home.” Nadia participated in an ensemble that required her to travel farther than LTHS into the city and explains building a community of commuters:

I was definitely the one who initiated, along with other students and peers, going together to places that we needed to get to after school, and having, like an actual community group, or some people to travel with...Like, when I was going to rehearsals downtown...if I didn't have friends from band who were going with me, I had friends who just lived that way, and we'd all wait for each other, and at least start our commute

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<sup>78</sup> Yosso, “Whose Culture Has Capital?”

together which, like 1) was just more pleasurable and 2) made everybody feel safer, too.  
(Nadia)

Yosso's extended formulation of social capital as networks of people and community resources<sup>79</sup> are reflected in Adella, Nadia, Brandon, and Nadia's experiences. They fostered and activated social capital to provide both instrumental and emotional support to navigate commuting challenges such as safety concerns and loneliness. Without exception, interviewees believed commuting with peers made the experience more enjoyable.

### *III. Resistant Capital*

Resistant capital refers to knowledge and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality and is grounded in legacies of resistance to marginalization.<sup>80</sup> For some students, that resistance may include forms of oppositional behavior like the "non-compliant believers" in Carter's 2005 study.<sup>81</sup> However, when informed by a recognition of the structural nature of oppression, resistance can take on a transformative form; cultural knowledge of the structures of racism or inequality can inspire motivation to work toward social and racial justice.<sup>82</sup> Shedd documented the phenomena of heightened awareness of social injustice for urban student commuters who cross Chicago's vast landscape of inequality. I build on these findings by illustrating how some students transformed this recognition into motivation for social change. Citali's experience illustrates this concept of transformational resistant capital:

South Side to the north side, I saw every neighborhood...And you just see how the demographics change, how there's different settings outside. It drove me insane. Like, you literally pass Madison and you're in a whole different place. Since then, I was noticing it. And I was just like, well, that's annoying. How come this? How come that? The differences are so, so obvious. (Citali)

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<sup>79</sup> Yosso builds on and extends the concept of social capital most famously defined by James Coleman (1988).

<sup>80</sup> Yosso, "Whose Culture Has Capital?"

<sup>81</sup> Carter, *Keepin' It Real*.

<sup>82</sup> Solorzano and Yosso, "Maintaining Social Justice Hopes within Academic Realities a Freirean Approach to Critical Race/LatCrit Pedagogy."

Citali's experience aligns with Shedd's findings that students crossing neighborhood boundaries in Chicago develop an expanded frame of reference from which to view social inequality. She continues:

And that gave me a big point of interest for my future studies and the topics that I like to learn about. Once I got curious in that space and looked up on my own, it was like, 'Oh, wow'...redlining, gentrification, and all that stuff was so highlighted to me on my ride to school; like, [points] 'example, example, example'... But I was like, okay, economics would help me understand what and how that happened and how to fix it. And yeah, that's how I chose to do economics [in college], because of that...And I think that type of mindset came from my commute to Lane. (Citali)

Citali believes exposure to economic injustice during her daily journey transformed into motivation to address economic inequality. Eliana describes a similar experience of coming to terms with disparities in access to educational resources:

Now coming to back and forth, just the heavy realization that, like, why couldn't I have been closer to the school? Why couldn't I have had the same access to the same resources that these people, including me, have access to here closer to home. I felt like that opened my eyes...And it was a little bit of a guilt trip, too, because I'm like, I know, I'm able to come here. But I know there are other students who would totally be able to be at Lane from my own neighborhood if it just wasn't for the commute time...Like, why are we in this vicious cycle of selective enrollment high school schools taking, you know, the good students, the high achieving students from their own neighborhoods and depleting their own neighborhood schools and those resources in terms of test scores, and just taking them out of that system. I was very much aware of the cycle that was at hand, but at the end of the day, I was like I can't do anything about it. I can't change the whole system by myself. But if at least I'm aware of it, I can move forward and help other people be aware of that, too. (Eliana)

According to Yosso's theory, maintaining and passing on the multiple dimensions of community cultural wealth is a facet of resistant capital's knowledge base. Although Eliana feels a lack of agency in tackling the larger issue of educational inequality, she critiques the competitive choice model which has been scrutinized for syphoning the city's high performers from local schools and hopes to pass on her knowledge of this structural dimension of inequality.

Finally, I find long distance commuters believe they developed resilience that fostered a belief in their ability to accomplish challenging tasks. According to Eliana,

[My commute] definitely made me a little bit more, I guess, determined to do more stuff outside of my own capabilities. You know, it was a little bit of reinforcement that like, 'oh, well, you travel for almost two hours to and from school every day. What's to say can't do XYZ? Surprisingly, I was able to handle this. If I'm able to handle this, I can handle a lot. (Eliana)

Utilizing Yosso's language, these young commuters "learned to be oppositional with their bodies, minds and spirits" in the face of spatial inequality and commute experiences shaped by race, gender, and class dynamics. Upon reflection, they articulated gaining valuable transferrable skills and the development of a critical consciousness they appreciated and could draw on in the form of navigational, social, and resistant capital contributing to their community cultural wealth.

#### *IV. Worth the Trip?*

These students undoubtedly experienced challenges as long-distance commuters, but they also generally believed the benefits outweighed the costs. When asked if they believed their experience at LTHS was worth the commute, 12 students strongly believed their extended commute was worthwhile, 1 was unsure, and 2 did not. Julieta cogently explains why she felt it was worth the trip:

I know that I was jealous of friends who just live a 15 minute walk away. I was, I was jealous. But, you know, I wouldn't change anything about what my commute was because it made me into a more resilient, independent individual. But like, if there was a more empathetic air around, surrounding it from the people who were in charge of providing us an education and fostering a better school environment [for long distance commuters], it would have made everything that much easier and not as debilitating. (Julieta)

Julieta does not believe she would have had access to the same resources or be where she is now without her time at Lane. She recognized the benefits of a highly-resourced education and the resilience and independence gained from commuting, yet wished for more support.

Interestingly, the 3 students who were ambivalent or unsure about this question openly expressed struggling academically while at Lane and having low GPAs, which they partially ascribed to their commutes. Ella was unsure if her experience was worth the commute, but also experienced familial instability and chronic migraines while in high school. Antonio thinks he would have been better off attending Hubbard, two blocks from his house, rather than the school assigned by CPS – Gage Park – instead of Lane. He believes he could have taken advantage of sports and had a more manageable workload with more time for homework. And Lilo expressed the strongest belief that her 180-minute commute was not worth traversing the city. Her experience as the longest commuter in the study suggests some commutes may in fact be too far, and that commute compounded with other barriers to academic success may contribute to these students' positions.<sup>83</sup> For them, the benefits may not have outweighed the costs. Their academic hardship and dissatisfaction with their experiences mirror findings from research on post-secondary students suggesting lower grade point averages are strongly tied to decreased retention, student success, and graduation.<sup>84</sup> Regardless, the majority of students believed their daily travel was worthwhile, and every student interviewed maintained the position that institutional supports could have lessened commute's detrimental impacts as I address in the conclusion.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

##### *Summary of Findings*

Research on school commute has become increasingly relevant in the context of expanding school choice that often results in increased distance and time required by students to travel between home

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<sup>83</sup> Lilo also attributed her experience at LTHS as not worthwhile due to racist interactions with peers and ableist interactions with school staff that did not honor her disability accommodations. She was the only student interviewed that transferred out of LTHS before graduation.

<sup>84</sup> Shah, "Examining the Relationship between Commute and Student Success at an Urban Four-Year University."

and school. It impacts students' lives, twice a day, every school day, consuming considerable amounts of time for the tens of thousands of CPS students experiencing above average<sup>85</sup> high school commutes and disproportionately weighs on Black and Latinx young people. My findings support existing literature that extended high school commute can have detrimental physical, academic, and psychological impacts. First, stress was a major theme across the interviews with LTHS students. As previously documented, crowded busses and trains, traffic, and unpredictability decreased commute satisfaction. Complex routes with multiple transfers, poor weather, traveling alone, and lack of access to occasional rides also amplified commuter stress. Students with relatively straightforward routes, parental involvement in their transportation, and consistent travel partners used more positive language and did not characterize their commutes as stressful.

Second, financial strain from transit costs emerged as a prominent barrier for students from poor and working-class families. Commutes with three or more transfers doubled the cost of commuting. These students had to carefully budget, find ways to reduce transit costs by walking, or rely on their friends to 'cover them,' exacerbating already stressful commutes. By comparing lower and higher income students, I illustrated how relative class privilege protected some from this added strain.

Third, some students mourned missing out on extracurricular activities and socializing before or after school due to their commutes. While they attempted to get involved in structured activities, time deficiency and nighttime travel proved unsustainable. Those students that did find ways to partake sometimes had to sacrifice sleep, eating, or other activities like family time. In addition to clubs and sports, some felt they could not stay on campus to socialize, which I argue caused them to lose social capital.

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<sup>85</sup> Chicago Public Schools, "District Overview - Annual Regional Analysis." 2020-2021. p.46 CPS reported the average high school commute was 29 minutes during the 2020-21 school year.

Fourth, many students were able to maintain high academic performance but recognized indirect and direct academic impacts. Extended commute required great energy and time expenditures. This, at times, necessitated students choose between sleep and homework, hindering a few interviewees' academic motivation altogether. Additional sleep loss in an already rigorous academic culture occasionally spilled over into the school day and effected concentration, falling asleep in school, or missing lessons due to chronic late arrival. Two commuters also found tutoring to be inaccessible due to their travel responsibilities.

And fifth, students sought safety. Even before becoming long distance commuters, some students were in part motivated to secure a selective enrollment seat as a protective strategy to avoid neighborhood violence. Along their daily routes, student experiences with transit interpersonal violence and their perceptions of safety were patterned along ethno-racial and gender lines. White students did not express the same levels of heightened hypervigilance and violent encounters as Students of Color and female presenting students. Lilo's experiences as a Black girl on public transit illustrated the intersectional interplay of gender, race, and age on her time in public spaces. Nearly every female student recalled an instance of sexual harassment, and two in the study were sexually assaulted while in transit to or from school. Many adopted strategies for safety by traveling with peers, trying to blend in, or adjusting their routes.

Upon embarking on this study, I hypothesized students would largely focus on the negative impacts of their commutes. And while they did acknowledge the above noteworthy barriers, students highly valued the navigational, social, and resistant capital they gained along the way. Strong spatial skills and the ability to navigate public transportation systems developed along with a sense of independence and time management that carried into future educational endeavors. I contend these high school commuters' acquired skills are a form of navigational capital that non-commuters could not access, born in part by a high school experience and district transportation

policy not designed with their support in mind. Many countered their initial loss of social capital by fostering and activating social networks which made the experience safer and much more pleasant. They fondly recalled forming new friendships and strengthening existing ones during their long daily journeys. Finally, heightened awareness of social inequality from a wider lens from which to view it impacted some young peoples' educational trajectories and fostered a desire to pass on their knowledge. Students made it clear they wanted me to highlight their stories of resilience in spite of structural constraints, and that most believed their overall high school experience at LTHS was worth their commuting challenges.

### *Recommendations for Policy and Practice*

Administrators, district leaders, and educators “often assume that schools work and that students, parents and community need to change to conform to this already effective and equitable system,”<sup>86</sup> but I find the landscape of competitive school choice and lack of supports for long-distance commuters places them at an institutionalized disadvantage that could be remedied. 14 of 15 students believed LTHS school did not do anything to support them as long-distance commuters and all students believed the school and district could take action to improve their wellbeing and safety. The few that didn't have concrete ideas often said “well, I don't know what could have been done other than living closer to the school,” illustrating how systemic social inequality in a competitive choice system has been normalized, making it difficult for them to imagine that things could be otherwise. Although not explicitly, they were also acknowledging their desire for access to the same opportunities closer to home. Others, like Eliana, directly questioned their lack of access to the same educational opportunities offered at LTHS near their homes.

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<sup>86</sup> Yosso, “Whose Culture Has Capital?”

This group of students highlighted what could be changed to improve their commute experiences. Supports they suggested included district-level action in the form of increased financial support for student transportation or creation of school transit hubs where students living far from their schools could receive transportation services. Students also identified school-level policies that could help lessen their commute burden. One was to intentionally connect groups of students with similar routes for safety and company; this could be accomplished by schools with free, open-source GIS software to map student home addresses and suggest travel partners. Parent-coordinated carpools were initiated by two families in the study to relieve commute stress, but multiple students suggested LTHS could play a role in facilitating the formation of such groups. Some desired time in school to decompress after stressful commutes and dedicated time to work on homework, nap, or eat so they could better engage in class. Particularly in the mornings, students wished they were able to grab breakfast even if they missed regular distribution. These interventions may mitigate possible negative spillover into the school day.

Another idea was the implementation of a student intake survey that enables educators to identify students experiencing long commutes as an early intervention technique. Some suggested hybrid options to tune in for class when dealing with unavoidable delays and remote options for extracurriculars. The pandemic and subsequent remote schooling illustrated that these supports are possible. Students explained how more bus lanes or express routes could have improved accessibility and decreased time spent traveling; these investments would likely benefit many adult public transportation users as well. They also wished for more conversations around extended commute and understanding from their teachers. Finally, students desired acknowledgement of their efforts and continued dedication to seeking what was in their eyes, the best possible education. Regardless of the specific context, some students will inevitably experience longer

commutes than others, and schools can provide supports for those experiencing above average commutes to partially mitigate the negative aspects of extended school travel.

### *Future Research*

Further research on high school commute is important in an era of increasing school choice, as unequal commutes may contribute to ongoing stratification of students' school experiences. In particular, further examination of the academic implications of extended commute is necessary to demystify the complex relationship between school choice, commute, academic achievement, and post-secondary success. Additionally, while I do not delve into this topic here, my interviews suggest closer examination of possible relational strain with and selective noticing of late arrival by first-period teachers may be fertile ground for deeper analysis. I invite other scholars to contribute to the growing body of scholarly work unraveling seemingly non-educational factors that contribute to educational inequality, such as extended high school commute, that impact students' lives and schooling experiences; because, "the injustices that face children and families beyond the four walls of a school building nevertheless affect their learning and their well-being."<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Beyond Schools Lab - <https://www.beyondschoolslab.org/>

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## Appendix

### A. Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

#### *General*

- Did you grow up in Chicago?
- Why did you choose LTHS over your neighborhood high school?
- You mentioned you lived in \_\_\_\_\_ neighborhood, did you always commute from this neighborhood? (if there was variation, what were the differences?)
  - o How would you describe your neighborhood? How did the neighborhood around LTHS and the neighborhoods you traveled through differ from yours?
- You were coming in from well outside the school's neighborhood, did you feel like LTHS was welcoming for students like you? (alt: did you feel like you belonged/fit in?)
- What was your experience with public transportation before high school?
- Did you graduate? What year?

#### *Commute*

- Tell me about your typical daily commute...Route? Transfers? How long?
  - o Was it the same throughout HS? Did it change?
  - o What was memorable about your commute?
- How did you feel during and after your commute?
  - o Was your commute stressful? Why or why not?
  - o Did you feel safe during your commute? Why or why not?
    - Do you think your race or gender played a role? (alt: do you think your commute might have been different as a Black man, or a young Latina woman?)
- Did you experience any difficulties or challenges during your commute? If so, how did you respond?
- Were there benefits or positive aspects?
- How did you spend your time while commuting? (alt: what did you do during your commute?)

#### *Impacts*

- How do you think commuting impacted your experience in high school?
  - o How often were you late or absent? (Do you think your commute was related?)
    - Relationship with 1<sup>st</sup> period teacher? How did this make you feel?
- Do you think your commute impacted your performance in school? Why or why not?
- Were you able to participate in activities before and after school?

- How was your life outside of school impacted by your commute?
- Did teachers or school staff ever ask about your commute? Were they aware? Sympathetic? (alt: Do you think your relationships with school staff were impacted by your commute?)

### *Responses*

- Did you use any strategies to make your commute better or easier? (alt words: more bearable? enjoyable?) ex: changing route, commuting with a friend, carpool
  - o What would have made your commute experience better?
- How might your high school experience have been different with more support for students like you experiencing long commutes?
  - o If your commute was interrupted by the pandemic, how did not commuting change your school experience?
- Did your school or teachers do anything to support you as a commuter?
  - o If no, what could LTHS have done to support you?
- If you could go back and tell your teachers or principal about your commute, or about how being a commuter impacted your experiences, what would you tell them?
  - o “What do you wish they had known?”

**LAST Q: WAS IT WORTH IT?** Do you think your high school experience was worth the commute experience?

B. Recruitment Graphic



**DID YOU EXPERIENCE LONG OR COMPLEX COMMUTES WHILE ATTENDING LANE TECH HS? I WANT TO INTERVIEW YOU!**

I am conducting a case study about the impacts of extended commute on high school experience at Lane Tech. If you regularly commuted 45+ minutes to LT within the past 5 years (2017-2023)\* please consider using the link or QR code so I can reach out!



[bit.ly/hscommute](https://bit.ly/hscommute)

questions? DM me or email **Katherine Shah** at [kbshah@uchicago.edu](mailto:kbshah@uchicago.edu)  
\*must be 18 or older to participate

this study is not affiliated with LTHS or CPS, but they will be provided with the findings

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