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Equity Atlases: How Data and Maps Can Illuminate Transportation and Equity

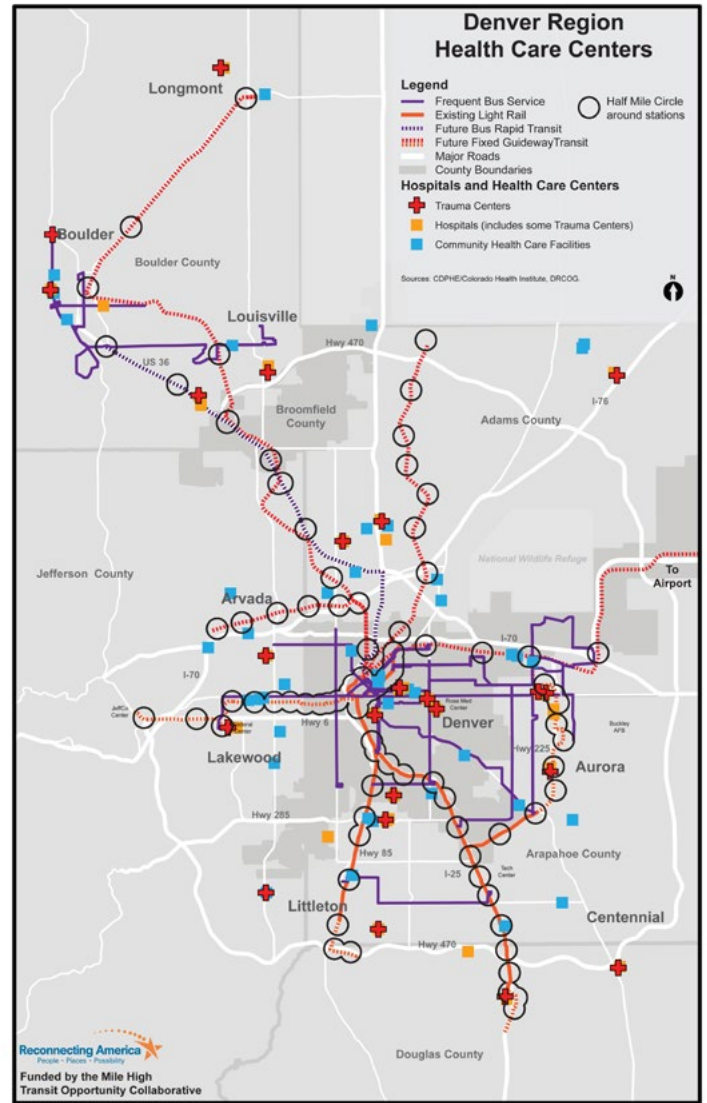
A picture (or a map!) is worth a thousand words – and this is especially true when trying to capture the complexities of communities and convey what they need to thrive. Community advocates need to understand how transportation, housing, and other features affect people’s abilities to live healthily, support their families, and get around. Equity atlases can be a great tool to help.

Equity atlases map out existing transportation options, housing, jobs, schools, and other community amenities, allowing us to assess which neighborhoods are rich in resources and where there are gaps in goods and services.¹ They take abstract numbers from sources like the Census Bureau and turn them into a visual where we can more easily understand our communities and ensure that we are considering numerous interrelated aspects when making or advocating for decisions. Equity atlases can be especially useful when trying to understand transportation access, relationships between housing, jobs, and transportation, and what needs to happen for equitable investment. And equity atlases are great resources for those who want to understand their communities, but may not have access to the data and tools to do so.

What Is An Equity Atlas?

An equity atlas is a report that consists of a number of maps that show the relationships between different determinants of health and well-being and the geography of a region. Equity atlases are most often prepared at the regional scale, but can be used at other scales, from city to national, as well. Content varies depending on who is preparing the equity atlas and what the intended uses are. Some components typically included in equity atlases are:

- Demographics: population density, populations of color, household composition, income levels
- Jobs and Economics: job centers, employment density, transit access to jobs
- Education: graduation rates, school achievement levels, higher education facilities
- Health: air quality, fresh food access, food deserts, parks and open space



The map above highlights the relationship between availability of transportation options and health care centers. Source: Denver Regional Equity Atlas.

- Housing: housing affordability, housing tenure (renter v. owner), age of housing
- Services and Amenities: proximity to financial and retail services, proximity to public and human services
- Transportation: transit access, walkability, bikeability



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Equity atlases are often accompanied by a report or analysis of the maps that help interpret what we are seeing and provide considerations and potential directions. In an ideal world, equity atlases should be a living document updated regularly. Some communities have turned their equity atlas into an online interactive tool that allows users to create maps, layer information on top of each other, and zoom in on specific neighborhoods or corridors.



Existing Equity Atlases

- Denver: www.denverregionalequityatlas.org
- Los Angeles: www.losangelesequityatlas.org
- Portland: www.equityatlas.org
- Atlanta: www.atlantaequityatlas.com
- New York: <http://prattcenter.net/research/transportation-equity-atlas>
- National Equity Atlas: <http://nationalequityatlas.org/>

Case Study: Metro Atlanta Equity Atlas

The Metro Atlanta Equity Atlas (referred to as MAEA) was developed to provide insight on issues of access and opportunity in the region. MAEA includes nearly 200 maps in eight key categories of community well-being – demographics, economic development, education, environment, health, housing, public safety, and transportation. MAEA is accompanied by a report that describes the state of Atlanta in the eight categories, highlighting key statistics and key issues. The report also includes case studies that show relevancy at the neighborhood level and further detail equity issues. Finally, the report provides recommendations for translating the maps and data into action. The MAEA was created in collaboration with over two dozen organizations and included community engagement in the process to ensure the tool was relevant and useful for residents and organizations.²

Atlanta's [Transit-Oriented Development \(TOD\) Collaborative](#) is using the equity atlas to call out the region's jobs-housing divide. In Atlanta, most low-income workers live in the western and southern parts of the city, far away from the region's jobs in the downtown and northern parts. By mapping job access disparity, the TOD Collaborative is using the MAEA as a tool to convince local leaders to prioritize affordable housing and community investment near MARTA stations so that low-income workers can live closer to the region's jobs.



How Can You Use Equity Atlases to Address Transportation Equity?

Equity atlases are valuable tools for many people interested in better understanding their communities, including policymakers, advocates, and community members. An equity atlas can:

1. Bring Together Stakeholders

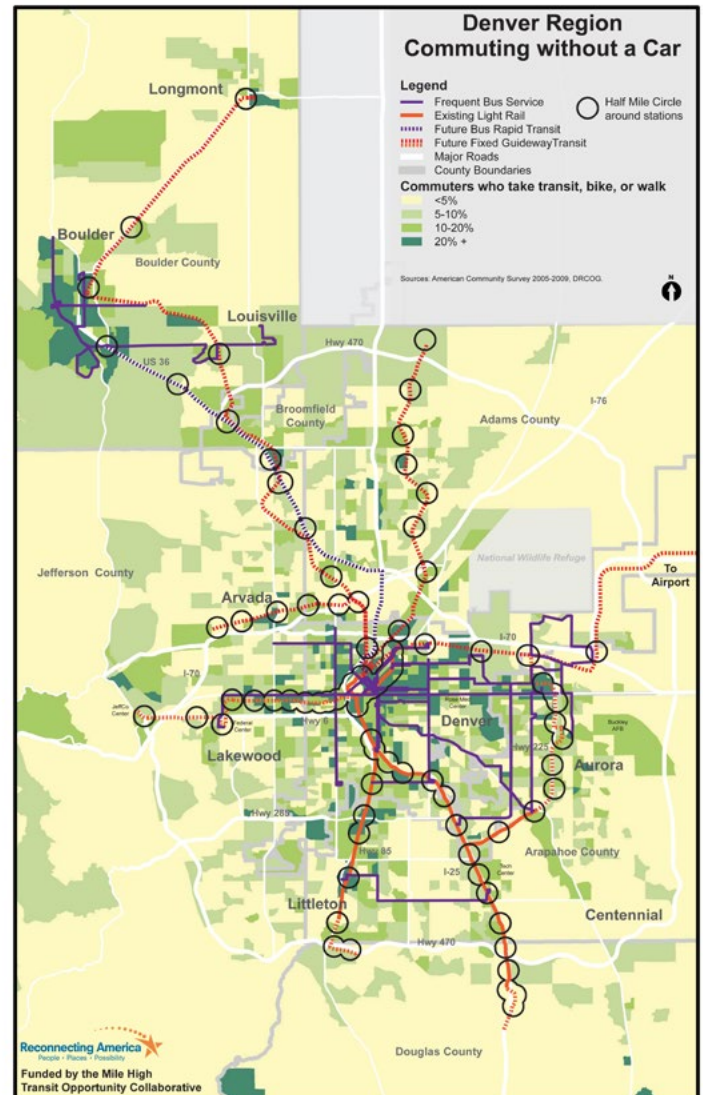
By visually mapping the relationships between different issues, stakeholders can better see, for example, how preschool facilities are laid out in a region and how they do and don't intersect with where people work. An equity atlas can help bring together regional stakeholders by showing them how working together would better leverage their resources and capacity. For example, the [Denver Regional Equity Atlas](#) served as the call to action for forming [Mile High Connects](#), a collaborative of nonprofits, funders, and financial institutions working to ensure that the region's \$7.8 billion investment in [expanding the transit system](#) improves access to opportunity for all. All of these groups had been working on social equity issues for years, but the Equity Atlas helped them see how their work intersected.

2. Drive Advocacy

An equity atlas can bring crucial attention to equity issues. In many cases, an equity atlas helps identify communities vulnerable to displacement or gentrification because of new real estate and infrastructure investments. For example, in Los Angeles, the [LA THRIVES](#) collaborative is using their equity atlas to make the case for greater investment in affordable housing near transit by highlighting spatial disparities in existing affordable housing stock. Advocates have also been able to identify where existing policies such as rent control ordinances need to be better enforced.

3. Steer Investment

Lastly, the data and maps contained in an equity atlas can help decision makers adjust their activities and investments. In Denver, creating an equity atlas has helped investors in the [Transit-Oriented Development \(TOD\) Fund](#) identify sites near transit for affordable housing investments, highlight gaps in [existing small business and neighborhood incentive programs](#), and promote the use of a fund for sites near transit stations that are within food deserts.



The example above maps the relationship between availability of transportation options and the percentage of commuters who take transit, walk, or bicycle. Source: Denver Regional Equity Atlas

References

- 1 Bill Sadler, Putting Equity on the Map. Living Cities, April 2014. <https://www.livingcities.org/blog/540-putting-equity-on-the-map-measuring-access-to-opportunity-with-an-equity-atlas>.
- 2 Partnership for Southern Equity, About MAEA, <http://atlantaequityatlas.com/about-maea>.