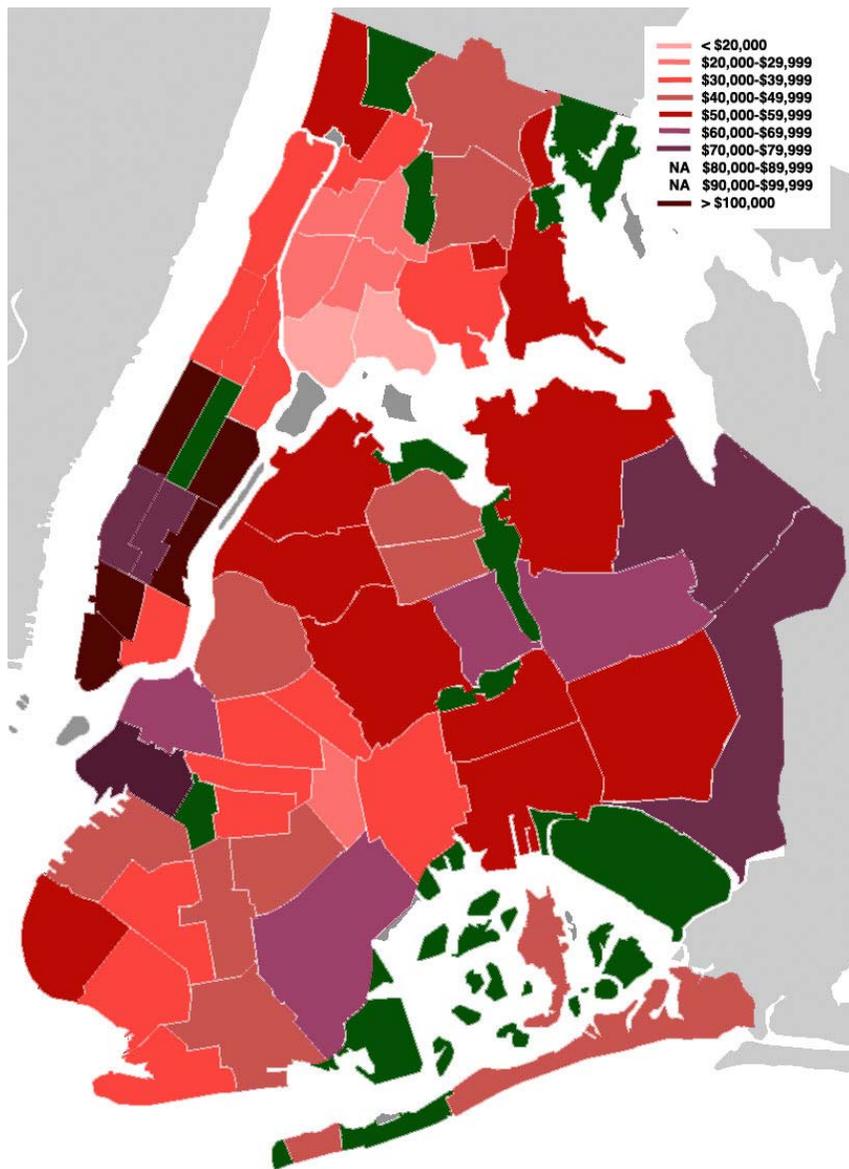




Musings on a zone-based fare proposal

By [Benjamin Kabak](#)



This map shows New York City's Community Boards shaded by median household income. [Click to enlarge.](#)

As the MTA has struggled to find money, its fare policies have increasingly come under the microscope. Without substantial state support, the only way the MTA can close its budget gaps is through fare hikes or restructuring the way we pay. The current flat fare is a solution that serves to equalize the amount everyone pays to ride the subway. While discounted unlimited ride cards give some folks a benefit, the base fare is the same from Inwood to the Rockaways.

Across the world, different subway systems treat fares different. We have to travel no further than Washington, D.C., to find distance-based fares, and London's Underground is famous for its fare zones. In D.C., the further one needs to travel, the more the ride will cost. In London, the further away one gets from the central business district, the more one must travel. If a straphanger's ride doesn't enter Zone 1 but crosses multiple zones, the fares go up accordingly.

Recently on SAS, as I discussed [how high the fares could go](#), those who comment on the site wondered about a zone-based fare system. Our system's turnstiles can be configured for swipes upon exit, and the fare system could be reconfigured for zones or distance. (The comment thread begins [right here](#) and continues on for a bit.)

Now, my objections to zone-based fares cover a few topics. First, while distance- or zone-based fare systems are in place elsewhere, they seem prevalent in systems that cross city limits. The London Underground extends well beyond the City of London, and in fact, the local governmental unit that makes up the City is all in Zone 1. In D.C, however, distance-based fares pay no attention to city boundaries.

But because so many people — 5 million per day — use the subway system to get to work and because the city would not exist as a major economic hub without the subway, a distance or zone system seems inherently unfair to me. It penalizes people because there isn't enough space on the island of Manhattan for all of us.

My second complaint involves the map at the top of this post. Using the Furman Center's [2009 State of the City report](#), I color-coded community board district by median annual income. Perhaps I could have used colors that were more contrasting, but in general, the darker the shade, the richer the community board. As a baseline, the two South Bronx communities in light pink have median annual incomes below \$20,000 while the Upper East and West Sides are above \$100,000.

If you were to overlay a subway map on top of this socioeconomic representation of the city, it becomes tougher to justify a zone fare. Suddenly, the richest folks in the city are the ones who are closest to work and can most afford to pay higher. In Brooklyn, the poorest residents down in the Coney Island area live furthest away, and in Queens, Astoria and its neighbors to the south are richer than those from Flushing who are further away from the city.

Only in the Bronx would a distance-based fare make sense because incomes rise as we head north, but even then, the folks in the South Bronx make around 18 percent of what those who live in the East and West 80s in Manhattan do. If the subway is supposed to be a public good that allows for people of any income bracket to get to their jobs in a cost-efficient way, New York's socioeconomics seem to make a zone- or distance-based fare highly problematic.

Ultimately, I don't think zone-based fares are the answer for New York City. Once upon a time, when richer folk left the urban core for the supposed comforts of the suburban sprawl, a zone system might have made sense. But in today's New York, those who can least afford to pay would be forced to hand over more dollars under a zone fare regime while the city's wealthiest don't. Unless the MTA were to create a convoluted fare system that pits intraborough Manhattan travel against interborough travel, we'll be stuck, for better or worse, with a flat fare system.