



Why More Northeast U.S. Travelers Take the Train Instead of a Plane, in 2 Charts

In-vehicle travel time is more productive and less stressful travel time.

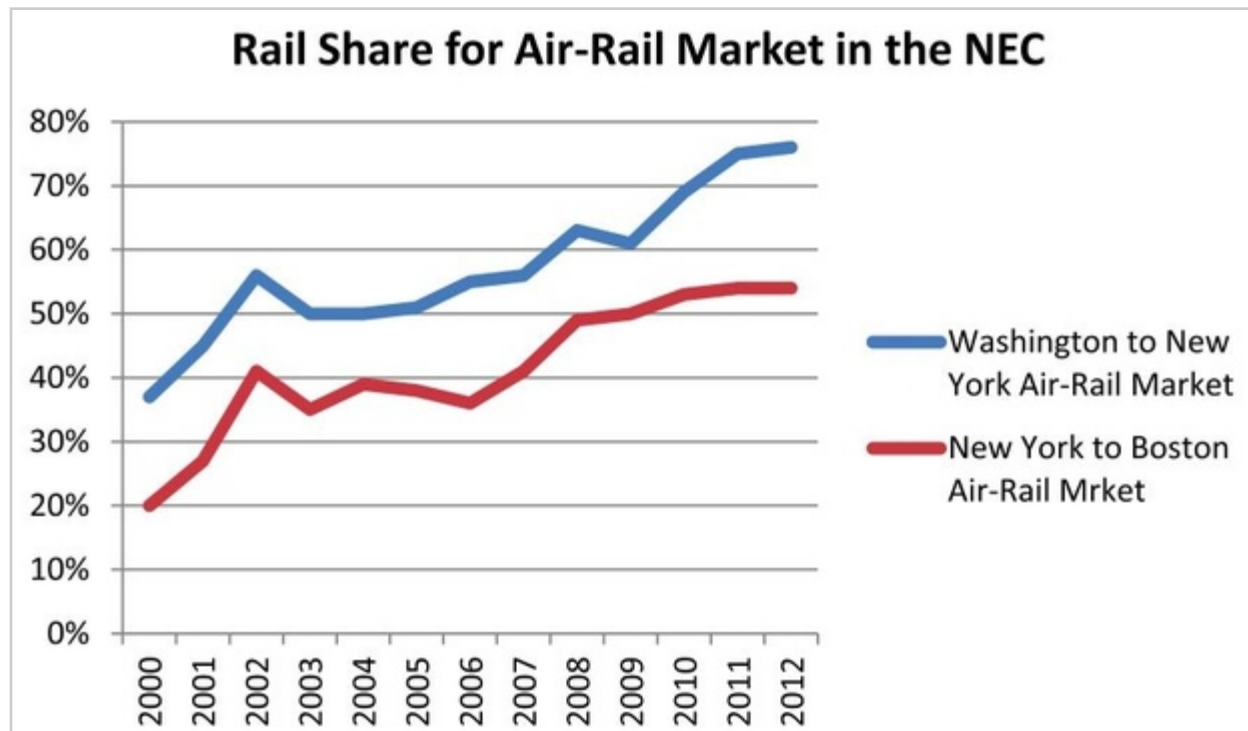
ERIC JAFFE | [@e_jaffe](#) | Nov 26, 2014 | [32 Comments](#)



Holiday travelers scurry through Amtrak's Union Station in Washington, D.C. (AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite)

Just in time for the busiest travel day of the year, we [get a great chart](#) from [Camille Kamga](#), director of the University Transportation Research Center at CCNY, showing Amtrak's gradual conquest of the air-rail market in the U.S.'s Northeast Corridor. In 2000, passenger rail captured about 37 percent of this

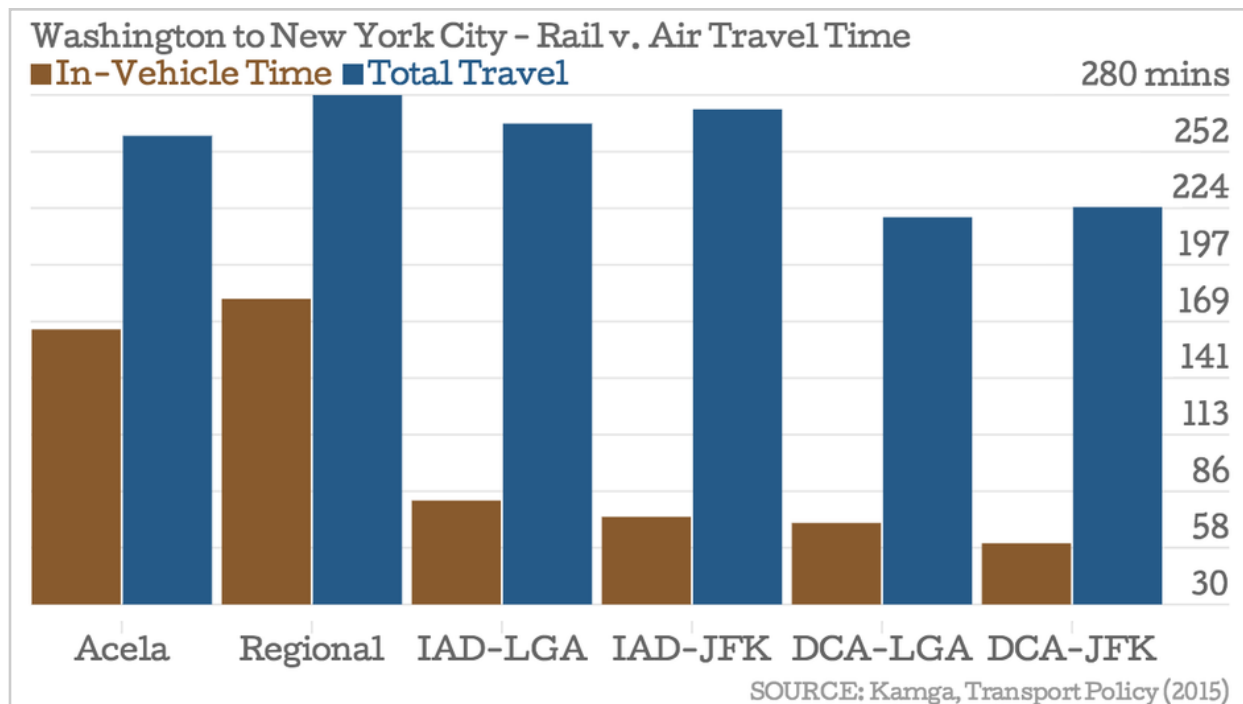
market between New York and Washington, and 20 percent between New York and Boston. By 2012 those figures had reached 75 percent and 54 percent, respectively:



Kamga (2015), *Transport Policy*

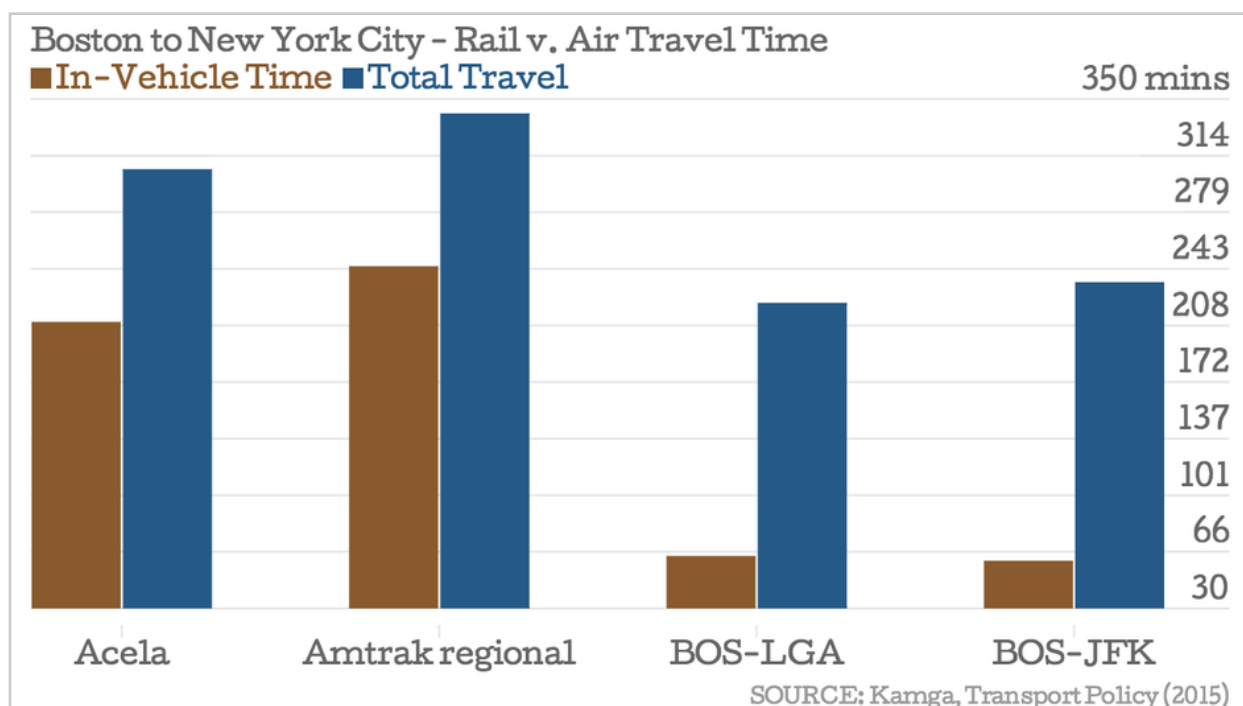
That's an enormous sea change in intercity transportation, and one that [continues to shift](#) in Amtrak's favor. Why? The answer, in large part, is that [train time is more productive than plane time](#). Whereas most of the travel time on Amtrak occurs in your seat during the ride, most of the total time spent flying requires a long list of what Kamga calls "pre- and post-flight inconveniences": getting to and from the airport, bag check or check-in, security lines, and waiting.

Using Kamga's numbers, we've charted the in-vehicle time and the total travel time on various air and rail options between New York and Washington, stripping out wait times and ground transportation times. The numbers show the clear advantage for the train on in-vehicle, even as total travel times remain similar:



Modes include Amtrak's Acela and Regional train services, and commercial flights between Dulles (IAD) and National (DCA) airports in Washington, D.C., and JFK and LaGuardia (LGA) airports in New York. (CityLab)

Charting the numbers from New York to Boston, we see the same pattern but to a lesser degree. Air has a clear benefit on total travel time in this part of the corridor—hence the smaller market gap, compared with New York to D.C. But the in-vehicle time remains heavily slanted in Amtrak's favor, which seems to be enough for many travelers:



Modes include the Amtrak train services as well as flights to Boston's Logan airport. (CityLab)

You can quibble with some of Kamga's figures. (He puts the in-vehicle time of the Amtrak Regional between New York and D.C. at 3 hours flat; I'm looking at a ticket right now that puts the same trip at 3 hours, 25 minutes.) But the larger point remains: on both ease of travel and potential productivity, rail holds a large competitive advantage over the plane. And that's on mobility alone, without factoring in other benefits to city economies or transport sustainability.

This isn't groundbreaking insight, of course, but it's still the type of behavioral truth that should guide regional policy moving forward. Kamga says the shift toward relatively slow intercity passenger rail is all the more reason to believe that [true high-speed rail](#) would have a major impact on transportation [in the Northeast](#). Not only would faster trains maintain their in-vehicle advantage over planes, but they'd cut into the gap in total travel time, too. Here's Kamga's take:

A transportation paradigm shift is underway in the United States as travelers move away from cars and planes and toward other forms of mobility, including rail. ... Rising Amtrak ridership, which is up even without HSR, points to a growing market for the kind of fast and reliable intercity rail service that HSR could provide.

Safe travels this Thanksgiving. And hopefully swifter ones in years ahead.

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About the Author



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