The Geography of Convenience

Does the price of saved time spread out across places while goods prices stay uniform?

Working paper, draft v0.3, 26 November 2026. Not peer reviewed. Author: Worakarn Phaolaor

AI disclosure: AI tools assisted this work. Google Gemini was used in developing the research idea. Anthropic's Claude assisted with literature search, drafting, and citation checking. The author reviewed and is responsible for all content.

Abstract

Convenience is mostly someone else's time that you pay for: delivery, table service, speed. This paper asks whether the gap between high-wage and low-wage US places in the price of convenience has widened or narrowed. It builds a simple cost model. In it, the convenience premium depends on local wages, local rent, labor per unit, and markups, while the goods it comes with are often priced nearly the same everywhere (DellaVigna and Gentzkow 2019; Cavallo 2018). Forces that widen the gap are rent gaps, cost disease in services (Baumol 1967), and higher demand for time-saving where incomes are high (Becker 1965; Mazzolari and Ragusa 2013). Forces that narrow it are the faded urban pay premium for non-college workers (Autor 2019), recent wage compression at the bottom (Autor, Dube, and McGrew 2023), and platform fees that do not vary by place. The paper's prior leans toward widening, with low to moderate confidence. It states six tests, each with the data, the date, and the result that would prove it wrong. Sushiro, a Japanese conveyor-belt sushi chain that opened in New York in November 2026, serves as a case study. The paper uses no new data.

JEL: D12, J22, J31, L81, L83, R11 **Keywords:** convenience, service prices, regional price parities, Baumol effect, uniform pricing, food delivery

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1. Introduction

On 19 November 2026, Sushiro opened its first US store, near Times Square in New York (Jiji Press 2026; Nation Thailand 2026). Tuna and salmon plates cost $5, fatty tuna costs $10, and tipping is not expected. In Japan, press reports on the chain's October 2022 price change put the cheapest plate at ¥120 in suburban stores, ¥130 in semi-urban stores, and ¥150 in urban stores (BCN Retail 2022). At about ¥160 per dollar in mid-November 2026 (MUFG 2026), $5 is about ¥800, or 5 to 7 times the Japanese plate. Japanese prices include tax, while the New York price does not, so the true gap is somewhat larger.

Fish is traded worldwide, so fish alone does not explain that gap. Rent, wages, and service do, and they are local. This raises two questions:

1. How much of what people pay is for convenience rather than for the good itself?

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2. Has the gap in the price of convenience widened or narrowed between places where high wages are concentrated and places where they are not?

This paper focuses on the second question. Evidence on the first is thin, and Section 4.6 sets out what there is.

The argument has three steps:

1. Chains and online sellers often price goods nearly the same across places.
2. The convenience premium is priced locally, because it is made of local labor and local space.
3. Whether its spread across places widens depends on a race. Rent gaps and income-driven demand push it wider. Pay compression at the bottom and platform fees that do not vary by place pull it in. Automation may pull it in too.

The paper's prior favors widening, but that is a bet, not a finding.

The paper makes three contributions:

- It treats convenience as a labor-and-space good and links work on cost disease, the economics of time, and uniform pricing.
- It states tests that public data can settle, each with a date and a result that would prove it wrong.
- It posts them before the US Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) releases its 2025 regional price data, scheduled for 10 December 2026 (BEA 2026b).

The 2019 to 2024 data are already public. This paper has not computed the 2019 to 2024 spreads used in the tests, so their full results are unknown to it, but only the 2025 year is new data.

Section 2 defines terms. Section 3 sets out the model. Section 4 weighs the evidence. Section 5 covers the Sushiro case. Section 6 lists the tests, Section 7 the threats to validity, and Section 8 concludes.

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2. Definitions

Convenience. Paying someone else, or a machine, to save your time or effort.

Convenience premium. The price of the convenient version of a good minus the price of the plain version. Example: a meal's delivery-app price minus its in-store price.

Geographic spread. How far prices differ across places, measured as the standard deviation of log price levels across states or metros. The main official source is BEA's Regional Price Parities (RPPs). They are published for all items and for four parts: goods, housing rents, utilities, and other services (BEA 2024a).

Wage concentration. The clustering of high wages in some places.

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3. Framework

3.1 A simple cost model

Let the price of a convenient good in place r be

$$P_c(r) = P_g + \kappa(r), \qquad \kappa(r) = \mu(r)\,[\,w(r)\ \ell\,(r) + z(r)\,]$$

where:

- P_g is the price of the good itself, close to the same everywhere;
- $\kappa(r)$ is the convenience premium;
- $w(r)$ is the local wage and $\ell\,(r)$ is labor time per unit;
- $z(r)$ is other local cost, mainly rent;
- $\mu(r)$ is the markup.

Let $s = w\,\ell\,/(w\,\ell\, + z)$ be labor's share of convenience cost, taken at national averages. Taking logs around the national average gives, to first order,

$$\log \kappa \ \approx\ \text{const} + \log \mu + s\,(\log w + \log\ \ell\,) + (1 - s)\ \log z.$$

The spread of κ across places therefore has four sources:

1. wages, with weight s;
2. rent and other local cost, with weight $1 - s$;
3. labor per unit, with weight s;
4. markups.

These sources move together. High-wage places have high rent, which widens the spread. If automation arrives first where wages are high, it makes ℓ low exactly where w is high, which narrows the spread.

BEA does not measure κ. It measures prices of whole services, P_c. If P_g is the same everywhere, then to first order

$$\text{SD}(\log P_c) \ \approx\ \theta \cdot \text{SD}(\log \kappa), \qquad \theta = \kappa/P_c,$$

with θ, the convenience share of the price, taken at the national average.

Two points follow:

- For a convenient good, such as a delivered meal, $\theta < 1$, so measured price gaps understate gaps in the premium. For pure services, such as a haircut, $\theta \approx 1$, and the two spreads are the same.
- Measured spread over time can change for two reasons: the premium's spread changes, or θ changes, for example as more of the bundle becomes convenience. Tests over time pick up both.

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3.2 Forces

Force	Source	Effect on spread of κ
Rent. Housing costs differ more across places than other prices, and those gaps are linked to strict land-use rules.	BEA (2024b); Ganong and Shoag (2017)	Widens
Cost disease. Service productivity grows slowly while wages follow the wider economy, so labor-heavy services get dearer where wages are high. Baumol's result is about change over time and Balassa–Samuelson's is about countries. Applying them across places within one country is this paper's extension.	Baumol (1967); Balassa (1964); Samuelson (1964)	Widens
Demand. A higher value of time raises demand for time-saving. High-skill workers' spending raises demand for low-skill services in their cities.	Becker (1965); Mazzolari and Ragusa (2013)	Widens, via μ
Pay compression. The urban pay premium for non-college workers fell sharply. Low-wage pay rose fastest after 2020.	Autor (2019); Autor, Dube, and McGrew (2023)	Narrows, via w
Automation. Kiosks, conveyors, and app ordering cut ℓ.	Argument only; contrary evidence in Section 4.2	Narrows, if it arrives first where wages are high
Platform fees. Delivery-app markups are tied to platform commissions. If commissions are similar across places, this part of the premium does not track local costs.	Restaurant Dive (2020); Food On Demand (2023)	Narrows

Uniform goods pricing does not change the spread of κ. It matters because it leaves the convenience premium as a larger share of what still differs across places.

3.3 Hypotheses

- **H1 (widening).** Rent gaps and demand outrun compression, automation, and platform fees. The spread of the convenience premium across places grew after 2019.
- **H0 (narrowing or flat).** Compression, automation, and platform fees win, or the forces cancel out.

The paper's prior leans toward H1. Rent is the largest source of local price gaps (BEA 2024b), and state price gaps widened from 2019 to 2022 (Considine and Foerster 2025). Neither fact measures κ directly, and the 2019 to 2022 widening affected goods as well as services. The prior is therefore weak, and the tests in Section 6 decide.

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4. Evidence

4.1 Wages and incomes across places

From about 1880 to 1980, incomes in poorer US states grew faster than incomes in richer ones. Since about 1980, this income convergence has slowed sharply. Ganong and Shoag (2017) link the slowdown to rising housing costs in high-income places, which cut moves by less-skilled workers. Moretti (2012) documents the pulling-away of high-skill job hubs. This is a result about incomes, not about service-worker wages.

For the workers who supply convenience, the evidence points the other way:

- From 1990 to 2015, the urban pay premium for non-college workers fell sharply (Autor 2019).
- After 2020, a tight labor market raised low-wage pay fast enough to undo a quarter to a third of the four-decade rise in 90/10 wage inequality. Versions of the paper differ on the fraction. Tighter state labor markets saw larger low-wage gains (Autor, Dube, and McGrew 2023).
- The federal minimum wage has stayed at $7.25 since July 2009, while many high-cost states and cities set much higher floors. This works against compression across places.

The net effect on the spread of service-worker wages across places is not settled by this literature. Check C1 (Section 6) measures it directly.

4.2 Wages reach menu prices

Studies find that restaurants pass much of a rise in labor costs on to customers:

- After San Jose raised its minimum wage by 25 percent, menu prices rose about 1.45 percent, or about 0.06 percent for each 1 percent rise in the minimum wage. The authors call this substantial pass-through (Allegretto and Reich 2018).
- At McDonald’s, pass-through of labor costs is near full (Ashenfelter and Jurajda 2022). In the working-paper version, Big Mac prices rise about 0.14 percent for each 1 percent rise in the minimum wage.

The McDonald’s study also contains evidence against automation as a narrowing force. **Higher minimum wages were not linked to faster adoption of touch-screen ordering** (Ashenfelter and Jurajda 2022). If that holds more widely, automation does not arrive first where wages are high, and it narrows the spread less than Section 3 allows.

4.3 Goods prices are often uniform

Most large US grocery, drugstore, and mass-merchandise chains charge nearly the same prices across their stores, despite large local differences in income and competition (DellaVigna and Gentzkow 2019). Online, identical goods had the same price across ZIP codes 91 percent of the time on Amazon. At three large retailers that sell both online and in stores, the rate was 78 percent (Cavallo 2018).

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Two cautions apply:

- Both studies show uniform pricing at a point in time, not convergence over time.
- Goods prices are not equal across places in every sense. Once differences in the goods bought and the variety on offer are counted, food prices are lower in larger cities (Handbury and Weinstein 2015).

4.4 Overall price gaps across states

Price gaps between states have widened since the early 2010s, and they widened faster from 2019 to 2022 because high-price states had higher inflation (Considine and Foerster 2025). The same letter finds that goods and services inflation moved together within states. That cuts against a story in which only services spread out.

Over 2008 to 2020, some state RPPs moved by about 4 to 5 index points, for example New Jersey and Oregon (CRS 2022). In 2024, metro RPPs ranged from 83.6 in Monroe, Louisiana to 115.6 in San Francisco (BEA 2026a).

BEA describes housing rents as often the main driver of RPP differences (BEA 2024b). A test of this thesis must therefore look at the "other services" part, not the all-items index. Price gaps also bite hardest at the bottom: the spread of the local price index for low-income households is almost double that for high-income households (Diamond and Moretti 2021).

4.5 Restaurant prices in 2026

In the 12 months to January 2026, US prices of full-service meals rose 4.7 percent and prices of limited-service meals rose 3.2 percent (BLS 2026). Full service uses more labor per meal, so this fits the labor link in the model. It is national data and says nothing about geography.

4.6 What people pay for convenience

This is the weakest evidence. The brokerage firm Gordon Haskett compares delivery-app and in-store menu prices at 25 restaurant brands:

- In March 2023, the average delivery-app premium was 19 percent, up from about 10 percent in July 2020 (Food On Demand 2023).
- The premium was 26 percent at quick-service brands, 22 percent at fast-casual brands, and 11 percent at casual-dining brands.
- 23 of the 25 brands charged more on delivery apps.

These are menu markups before delivery fees, service fees, and tips. Press coverage ties them to platform commissions (Restaurant Dive 2020). The study is not peer reviewed and its method is not fully public. This review did not search systematically for peer-reviewed US estimates of the convenience premium, and none came up in the searches it ran.

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4.7 Evidence summary

Claim	Source	Type	Direction
Labor-heavy services get dearer as wages rise	Baumol 1967; Balassa 1964; Samuelson 1964	Theory, peer reviewed	Widening (extension to places)
Value of time raises demand for time-saving	Becker 1965	Theory, peer reviewed	Widening
High-skill spending raises demand for low-skill services	Mazzolari and Ragusa 2013	Empirical, peer reviewed	Widening
State income convergence slowed after 1980	Ganong and Shoag 2017	Peer reviewed	Widening (income, not service wages)
Urban pay premium for non-college workers fell, 1990–2015	Autor 2019	AEA Papers and Proceedings	Narrowing
Low-wage pay compressed after 2020	Autor, Dube, and McGrew 2023	Working paper	Narrowing
Labor costs pass through to menu prices	Allegretto and Reich 2018; Ashenfelter and Jurajda 2022	Peer reviewed	Supports the labor link
Minimum wages did not speed kiosk adoption	Ashenfelter and Jurajda 2022	Peer reviewed	Weakens automation as a narrowing force
Goods often priced uniformly within chains and online	DellaVigna and Gentzkow 2019; Cavallo 2018	Peer reviewed; working paper	Context
State price gaps widened, 2010s–2022	Considine and Foerster 2025	Federal Reserve letter	Widening, but goods moved too
Full-service prices outpaced limited-service, 12 months to Jan 2026	BLS 2026	Official data	Supports the labor link
Delivery-app menu premium averaged 19 percent, 2023	Food On Demand 2023	Industry, not peer reviewed	Weak; tied to platform fees

5. Case: Sushiro

Zone pricing at home. Since October 2022, Sushiro's cheapest plate has been ¥120 in suburban stores, ¥130 in semi-urban stores, and ¥150 in urban stores, according to press reports. The same reports cite food, logistics, and labor costs and the weak yen as reasons for the change (BCN Retail 2022; Food & Life Companies 2022). This review did not confirm that the tiers are unchanged in 2026.

Kura Sushi, its main rival in Japan, also prices by store. From 4 September 2026, its cheapest plate costs ¥110, ¥115, ¥125, or ¥145 depending on the store, with ¥110 at 313 of 551 stores (Kura Sushi 2026). Sushiro's tiers are explicitly higher in urban stores. Kura's release says only that prices differ by store. Both patterns fit a model in which local costs enter κ, though neither firm says which cost sets the tiers.

A format built to save labor, now in New York. In Japan, Sushiro's format is built around conveyor lanes and screen ordering, which cut labor per plate. The New York store asks for no tip. This review did

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not confirm how much of the Japanese format the New York store uses. The New York-to-Japan price ratio (Section 1) mixes rent, wages, tax, and exchange rates, so it does not measure the convenience premium.

Sushiro therefore shows both sides of the thesis: local pricing at home and a labor-saving format abroad. Whether it prices by zone as it expands in the United States is a test of the model's static link (P3), though not of H1 against H0.

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6. Tests

C0 and C1 can be run now. P1 to P4 are predictions about data not yet released.

"Beyond noise" means outside a 90 percent bootstrap interval that resamples states and draws each state's RPP from BEA's reported standard errors.

#	Statement	Measure	Data and date	Wrong if
C0	Across states, other-services prices are higher relative to goods where food-service wages are higher. This checks the model's static link only. H1 and H0 both predict it	Slope of log(other-services RPP / goods RPP) on log median wage for food preparation and serving jobs (SOC 35-0000). Reported with and without housing RPP as a control	BEA RPP 2024; BLS occupational wage data. Now	Slope is zero or negative in both versions
C1	The spread of food-service wages across states did not shrink from 2019 to the latest year	SD of log median wage, SOC 35-0000, across states	BLS occupational wage data, May 2019 and latest. Now	Spread fell beyond noise. Under the model, this is evidence for H0
P1	The spread of other-services prices across states widened from 2019 to 2025, by more than the spread of goods prices	Change in SD of log RPP across states, other services minus goods, from one BEA edition	BEA RPP 2025, scheduled 10 Dec 2026. Metros as well, if published	The difference is not positive beyond noise
P2	Full-service meal prices keep rising faster than limited-service	12-month CPI change to Dec 2027	BLS CPI, Jan 2028	Limited-service rises as fast or faster. A weak national check of the labor link, not of H1 against H0
P3	Sushiro prices by zone in the United States	Lowest regular plate price, excluding promotions, at each US store on the same date	Store menus, by 31 Dec 2028	No US store outside Manhattan prices its lowest regular plate at least 5 percent below Manhattan's. No new US store by then means untested, not wrong

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#	Statement	Measure	Data and date	Wrong if
P4	H1 holds through 2026	Same measure as P1, 2019 vs. 2026	BEA RPP 2026, expected late 2027	The difference is not positive beyond noise. A flat result counts as wrong

7. Threats to validity

1. **Changes in BEA methods.** In 2021, BEA moved utilities out of "other services," switched from multi-year to annual CPI data, and dropped seven item groups for volatility (BEA 2022). All comparisons must use one edition of BEA's estimates.
2. **Noise.** Annual RPP parts for small item groups rest on few price quotes, so state values carry sampling error. Noise adds to measured spread, and a change in noise can look like a change in spread. The bootstrap rule in Section 6 is meant to guard against this.
3. **Missing 2025 CPI data.** BLS did not collect October 2025 CPI data during the federal shutdown (BLS 2025). This may affect the annual price data behind the 2025 RPPs.
4. **Metro data may be limited.** In February 2026, BEA stopped publishing metro-area real personal income and consumption statistics, while still offering metro RPPs on its website (BEA 2026c). The tests therefore use states, with metros as a bonus.
5. **"Other services" is a rough stand-in.** It includes medical care, education, and more, not just convenience. Restaurant and delivery prices by place would give a cleaner test.
6. **Quality differs.** The same item may differ in quality across places.
7. **Cost and demand look alike.** Cost disease and demand both predict widening, so these tests cannot tell them apart.
8. **Thin case evidence.** Parts of the Sushiro case rest on press reports.

8. Conclusion

Many goods are priced nearly the same across US places, so a growing share of what still differs is local labor and space, and convenience is made of both. Whether the convenience premium has spread out since 2019 is a race. Rent gaps and income-driven demand push it wider. Pay compression at the bottom and platform fees pull it in. Automation may pull it in too, though the McDonald's kiosk evidence casts doubt on that. The paper's prior leans toward widening, and Section 6 says how that lean could fail, starting with BEA's release on 10 December 2026.

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