Temporal Sampling Intervals and Service Frequency Harmonics in Transit Accessibility Evaluation

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ABSTRACT

In the context of public transit networks, repeated calculation of accessibility at multiple departure times provides a more robust representation of local accessibility. However, these calculations can require significant amounts of time and/or computing power. One way to reduce these requirements is to calculate accessibility only for a sample of time points over a time window of interest, rather than every one. To date, many accessibility evaluation project have employed temporal sampling strategies, but the effects of different strategies have not been investigated and their performance has not been compared. Using detailed block-level accessibility calculated at 1-minute intervals as a reference dataset, four different temporal sampling strategies are evaluated. Systematic sampling at a regular interval performs well on average but is susceptible to spatially-clustered harmonic error effects which may bias aggregate accessibility results. A constrained random walk sampling strategy provides slightly worse average sample error, but eliminates the risk of harmonic error effects.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of accessibility has been an active topic of research in fields related to transportation and land use for many decades (1, 2). Early implementations of accessibility evaluation were encouraged by rapid advances in computing power in the 1960s and 1970s (3), but were not able to provide detailed enough results, spatially and/or temporally, for use in many planning applications. Over the past decade, increased data availability and renewed interest in accessibility metrics have again encouraged the application of cutting-edge computing approaches to accessibility evaluation.

In the context of public transit networks, repeated calculation of accessibility at multiple departure times provides a more robust representation of local accessibility. However, these calculations can require significant amounts of time and/or computing power. One way to reduce these requirements is to calculate accessibility only for a sample of time points over a time window of interest, rather than every one. Many accessibility research projects already takes this approach.

Some benefits of temporal sampling are obvious: an accessibility calculation which is performed for every 5th minute requires only 20% of the computation effort as one which is performed for every minute. In addition to direct time and cost savings, making accessibility evaluation more tractable may increase its adoption in early-stage transportation or land use planning projects where planners benefit from quick feedback. Temporal sampling may also offer an opportunity to improve an accessibility evaluation in other dimensions, such as by increasing the spatial resolution or lengthening the temporal coverage, while maintaining the same overall project cost. However, all of these benefits come at the cost of decreased accuracy; additionally, this accuracy loss may not be distributed evenly over space or time. The goal of this analysis is to begin to identify and quantify those costs so that researchers and practitioners can make informed decisions when selecting parameters for accessibility evaluation project.

BACKGROUND

Accessibility, as defined by Hansen (1), measures the "opportunity for interaction" between people and places. Many specific implementations of accessibility metrics exist; Geurs and van Wee (4) provide useful categorizations of approaches to measuring accessibility. All accessibility metrics depend on measuring, calculating, or modeling the cost of travel, often expressed in terms of time. Most of the accessibility metrics discussed in this analysis are *location-based* metrics: they incorporate (sometimes very detailed) calculations of what opportunities can be reach from a given location at a given time. As an example, a typical accessibility metric might indicate that if a traveler departs from a specific intersection at 8:10 AM, he could reach 15,000 jobs within 30 minutes.

Public transit networks, like all schedule-based transportation systems, have two important constraints: you can only depart from specific places, and you can only depart at specific times. The latter is an important consideration when evaluating accessibility of transit systems. Accessibility calculation relies on travel time calculation, and travel times vary over the course of the day. Thus, the selection of a departure time, or departure times, impacts the final accessibility metrics. Until relatively recently, implementations of accessibility measures for public transit typically focused on single time points, assigning the accessibility achieved at one departure time to a location or traveler. Some studies expanded this approach to include several time points, typically hourly, over the course of a day. These approaches are reviewed by Owen and Levinson (5).

Since then, Geurs et al. (6) have identified "temporal dynamics in accessibility" as a rapidly-expanding field, and this is clearly demonstrated in the literature. Owen and Levinson (5) explicitly compares "continuous accessibility," calculated for every minute and then averaged over a time window, to single-departure-time metrics and demonstrates their ability to improve models of commute mode share. Similarly, Legrain et al. (7) employ accessibility averaged continuously over time periods for mode share modeling; Farber et al. (8) and Widener and Shannon (9) use accessibility calculated at every minute of the day to evaluate access to grocery stores.

Alternatively, accessibility is evaluated at a sample of time points and then aggregated, typically by averaging. Karner (10) demonstrates the application of a "highly resolved temporal metric" for transit accessibility in equity evaluation for federal grant programs, averaging 9 temporal samples selected from 15-minute bins over a two hour period. (This corresponds to the systematic sampling strategy evaluated below, with $f = 15$.) Tasic et al. (11) and Lei et al. (12) employ evaluation at multiple time points, but focus on access *to* transit facilities rather than accessibility *using* transit to reach destinations. Ding et al. (13) expand the temporal dimension of transit accessibility to cases where use of transit is limited by capacity, investigating how supply and demand for transit service fluctuate over the day.

Notably, none of these studies robustly defend the choice of temporal sampling strategy, or compare it against other possibilities — yet each required a decision about what specific time points to use. In many cases, suitability seems to be implied simply because sample points are spread evenly over time. However, this explicitly violates the principle of probability sampling and may introduce sampling bias; this risk is higher for time-series datasets that exhibit cyclical patterns (14) — which, as discussed below, is certainly the case with transit accessibilty data Figure 1.

In other cases, accessibility is evaluated continuously over time with the implication that more must be better — but perhaps equally meaningful results could be achieved with less computation effort? The time and computation resources required to implement detailed accessibility evaluations are rarely discussed, but they can be a significant barrier to implementation. In the *Access Across America: Transit 2014* project (15), the calculation of transit accessibility at 120 time points for 70,759 Census blocks in the Minneapolis–Saint Paul, MN statistical area was executed in parallel over many powerful computers; if run on a single high-end workstation, it would have taken approximately 30 hours to complete.

This computational complexity is not unreasonable for research projects or analysis programs undertaken by public agencies. But it is important to recognize that it may limit the impact that accessibility evaluation can have on transportation and land use planning. It is difficult to incorporate a calculation which may take many hours into sketch planning, scenario building, or alternatives analysis because any change to the model network requires an entirely new calculation. Interactive accessibility evaluation tools which provide a balance of fast enough and precise enough feedback in response to a network or land use change could dramatically change the way that planners interact with accessibility concepts. New algorithms for routing on transit networks (such as RAPTOR (16), already implemented in OpenTripPlanner) can improve response times; intelligent temporal sampling may also play a role.

DATA

The accessibility data used in this analysis were calculated by the University of Minnesota's Accessibility Observatory as part of the *Access Across America: Transit 2014* project. For Census blocks in the Minneapolis–Saint Paul, MN metropolitan area, the data indicate the number of jobs that can be reached within various time thresholds using a combination of walking and transit. Travel times are calculated on a combined pedestrian and transit network using transit schedules effective in January 2014, and include walking, waiting, and on-vehicle trip components. Job counts and locations are based on estimated published by the U.S. Census Bureau. Additional methodological details are presented in Owen and Levinson (15). This analysis uses the data for the 30-minute travel time threshold, chosen to correspond roughly to the national average commute time of 25 minutes (17).

A critical feature of this dataset is that rather than assuming a single fixed departure time, the accessibility calculations were repeated for every minute from 7:00 AM to 9:00 AM, for a total of 120 accessibility observations at each origin block location. Figure 1 illustrates the data for a single block group: the accessibility value for each minute indicates the number of jobs that can be reached within 30 minutes if a traveler departs at exactly that time. Accessibility increases as transit vehicles approach nearby stops and stations, then drops after trips depart due to the wait the before the next trip. This particular block shows a very pronounced cyclical pattern, with accessibility peaks occurring every 10 minutes. The location is near a station on Minneapolis' Blue Line LRT route, which provides frequent service and a fast connections to downtown.

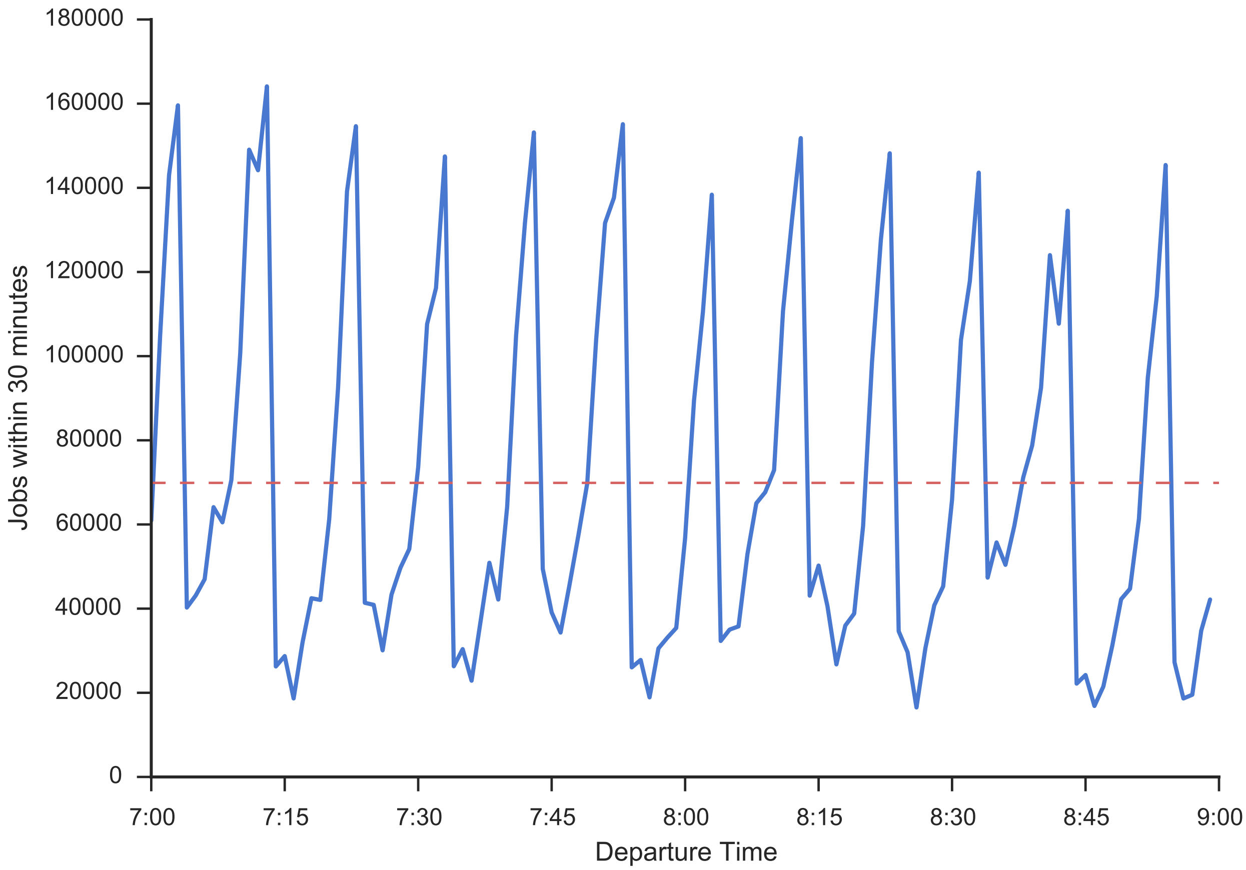

FIGURE 1 : Accessibility plot for a single Census block (270531088002012, near the 38th St. Blue Line station in Minneapolis, MN). For each departure time between 7:00 and 9:00 AM, the accessibility value indicates the number of jobs that can be reached within 30 minutes by walking and transit. The dashed horizontal line indicates the average accessibility value over the entire time period.

The data cover the entire Minneapolis–Saint Paul statistical area defined by the U.S. Census

Bureau, which includes those core cities plus many surrounding counties in Minnesota and Wisconsin. However, some of the suburban and most of the rural parts of this area are not served by a fixed-route transit system. From these locations, transit service has no impact on accessibility — the entire 30-minute time budget is consumed without ever reaching a stop or station. Therefore accessibility to jobs in these places, as represented in this dataset, is determined entirely by walking.

METHODOLOGY

Four sampling strategies are evaluated: systematic sampling, simple random sampling, hybrid systematic/random sampling, and random walk sampling. Because all of these sampling strategies contain a random element, each is repeated multiple times in a Monte Carlo approach and the results are averaged to provide an indicator of the overall performance of that strategy. In a single application of a sampling strategy, a specific sample pattern is generated and used to select, without replacement, a specified number of data points from the 7:00 AM – 9:00 AM accessibility data for a block. The sample average is compared to the data average as an indicator of sample error. The following sections describe each sampling strategy, and the performance evaluation methodology, in more detail.

Sampling Frequency

Each of the temporal sampling strategies explored in this analysis involves some variation on the concept of sampling frequency, which is expressed differently in each of the strategies. "Frequency" implies some degree of regularity, but the actual regularity of generated samples varies widely over these strategies. At the most fundamental level, the sampling frequency indicates the number of samples that will be selected from a window of time points: for a sampling frequency f, $\lfloor T/f \rfloor$ out of T total time point will be selected. Each of the sampling strategies described below is evaluated at sampling frequencies of 2 through 10 minutes.

Simple Random Sampling

This sampling strategy is the most straightforward: a specified number of sample times are selected at random, without replacement, from the time window. Because the selection is completely random, this strategy will often produce sampling patterns which are very unevenly distributed — a sample consisting of the first f time points is just as likely as f points evenly distributed over the time window.

Systematic Sampling

This sampling strategy involves selecting samples at a regular interval, defined by f, over the time window. To avoid bias and give each data point an equal chance of being selected, the first sample in the sequence is selected randomly from the first f time points. Thus, one application of this sampling strategy for $f = 5$ might produce the sequence 7:00, 7:05, 7:10, etc. while the next produces 7:03, 7:08, 7:13, etc. This strategy has the advantage that it is guaranteed to produce evenly-distributed samples. A disadvantage is that if the data itself is cyclical on a frequency which is a multiple of f, this strategy may produce a sample pattern which coincides only with peaks (or troughs), in which case the sample average could be significantly higher (or lower) than the data average.

Hybrid Sampling

This strategy begins with a systematic sample, starting with the first and selecting every fth sample thereafter. Next, a random offset based on the sampling frequency is applied to each sample point. This can also be regarded as a clustered sampling strategy, where sample candidates are clustered into bins with a width of f and then a single random sample point is chosen from each cluster.

The motivation behind this strategy is to avoid the temporal clustering of samples that can occur in simple random sampling while also avoiding the potential harmonic effects of systematic sampling. While it does avoid clustering on a large scale, it does not enforce any minimum distance between sequential samples, with the result that the gap between samples varies from 1 to $2f$. In the (unlikely) worst case, this sampling strategy might produce a sample pattern consisting of $\frac{1}{2}\ \lfloor T/f \rfloor$ pairs of adjacent samples, with a distance of $2f$ between each pair. Because adjacent sample points are likely to have similar values, the sample error in this worst case has the potential to be similar to systematic sampling at half the frequency.

Constrained Random Walk Sampling

This sampling strategy is based on a random walk, where each sample point is a random distance from the previous. The first sample point is randomly chosen between 1 and f, and then each random "next step" is constrained by a function of the sampling frequency, in order to achieve a mix of randomness and temporal dispersion. To choose each next sample point, a random offset between $\lfloor f/2 \rfloor$ and $\lfloor f + (f/2) \rfloor$ is added to the previous sample point, so that on average the next sample point is f greater than the previous.

One disadvantage to this sampling method is that it produces sample sets of varying size. For repeated trials, the average number of samples in each set approaches $\lfloor T/f \rfloor$. If a predictable number of samples is desired (for example to make computation times more predicable), the sample generation process can be filtered to discard sample patterns which do not contain exactly $\lfloor T/f \rfloor$ sample points.

Comparison of Sampling Strategies

Because the "ground truth" data are available in this analysis, each sampling outcome can be compared directly against the actual distribution, either by calculating the expected sampling outcome empirically or by estimating it using a Monte Carlo method. The simple random sampling, hybrid sampling, and random walk sampling strategies each incorporate a high degree of randomness and can produce extremely large numbers of specific sampling patterns. For example, simple random sampling of 24 data points from a population of 120 (a 10-minute sampling frequency) can produce over 10^{25} individual sampling patterns. Therefore, these sampling strategies are evaluated using a Monte Carlo method where the results of repeated samplings are averaged to estimate the expected outcome. In this analysis, each of these sampling strategies is repeated 1,000 times for each block and then averaged; this is repeated for each sampling frequency.

The systematic sampling strategy, on the other hand, produces far fewer specific sampling patterns – for example 10 in the case of a 10-minute sampling frequency. Therefore it is feasible to calculate the result of all possible sampling outcomes at all sampling frequencies, and compare the averages to the actual distribution.

The performance of the various sampling strategy and frequency combinations are evaluated based on how well they estimate the true average accessibility value for each block. A normalized root mean square error (NRMSE) metric is calculated within the context of each block, where the average accessibility estimated over repeated trials of each sampling method is compared with the true average. To compare aggregate performance over many blocks with different accessibility scales, each result is normalized using the data range for that block. Thus, the average sampling error is expressed as a percentage of the range of the true data for that block (Equation 1).

$$\text{NRMSE} = \frac{\frac{1}{n}\sqrt{\sum_{t=1}^{n}\left(\hat{y}_t - y\right)^2}}{y_{max} - y_{min}} \tag{1}$$

$$\begin{aligned}
\hat{y}_t &= \text{the average of sample set} t \\
y &= \text{actual average} \\
n &= \text{total number of sample sets}
\end{aligned}$$

As noted above, the study area contains many blocks where transit service has no impact on accessibility because no stops or stations can be reached within the 30-minute travel time budget. In these locations, accessibility is constant over time (walking speeds are assumed to not vary by time of day), and so the average of every sample, regardless of strategy, will be equal to the actual average; the sampling error will always be zero. To avoid diluting the results from blocks where transit does have an impact on accessibility, these "transit-less" blocks are excluded from the analysis of sampling strategy performance.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Figure 3 and Table 1 present the results for the systematic sampling strategy. The most striking feature is the clear harmonic error effects, seen most clearly at the 5- and 10-minute sampling frequency and to a lesser degree in the 2- and 4-minute sampling frequency. The corridor of high error near the center of these maps corresponds to the Blue Line LRT route, which connects the major job centers of downtown Minneapolis, the Minneapolis–Saint Paul airport, and the Mall of America. During the 7:00 – 9:00 AM weekday morning window used in this evaluation, this route operates on a 10-minute frequency, seen clearly in Figure 1. When sampling at a 10-minute frequency, the samples often fall on the peaks or troughs of the local accessibility pattern, and therefore produce sample averages significantly higher or lower than the data average. When sampling at a 5-minute frequency, every other sample hits these peaks or troughs, producing the same effect but to a lesser degree. There are corresponding spikes in the standard deviation of the NRMSE at both the 5- and 10-minute sampling frequencies Table 1, indicating increased dispersion in the sample results.

It is interesting to note the performance of the 7-minute sampling frequency with this strategy. It produces a slightly better mean NRMSE (2.73% vs 2.76%) and a lower standard deviation (1.06 vs 1.09) than the 6-minute sampling frequency, despite having fewer sample points. This suggests that the 7-minute sampling frequency is not harmonic with the typical service frequency of transit routes in the area.

The results for the simple random sampling strategy, presented in Figure 4 and Table 2, immediately demonstrate the role of increased randomness in sample selection. There are no harmonic error effects apparent, and standard deviation of NRMSE at the 5 and 10 minute sampling frequencies are significantly lower than for the systematic sampling strategy, indicating more consistent results. However, the overall performance of this strategy, as indicated by average NRMSE,

TABLE 1 : Performance of Systematic Sampling Strategy

	Sampling Frequency								
	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Median NRMSE	0.58%	1.16%	1.33%	2.24%	2.51%	2.53%	2.85%	3.25%	4.53%
Mean NRMSE	0.70%	1.31%	1.58%	2.61%	2.76%	2.73%	3.07%	3.51%	5.10%
S.D.	0.58	0.79	0.78	1.54	1.19	1.06	1.22	1.27	2.78

TABLE 2 : Performance of Simple Random Sampling Strategy

	Sampling Frequency								
	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Median NRMSE	2.05%	2.90%	3.55%	4.10%	4.58%	5.04%	5.42%	5.88%	6.14%
Mean NRMSE	2.04%	2.89%	3.53%	4.08%	4.56%	5.02%	5.40%	5.85%	6.12%
S.D.	0.50	0.70	0.86	1.00	1.11	1.23	1.32	1.43	1.50

TABLE 3 : Performance of Hybrid Sampling Strategy

	Sampling Frequency								
	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Median NRMSE	1.02%	1.64%	2.19%	2.69%	3.20%	3.66%	4.10%	4.62%	4.91%
Mean NRMSE	1.00%	1.64%	2.21%	2.72%	3.23%	3.71%	4.15%	4.65%	4.96%
S.D.	0.37	0.50	0.61	0.76	0.86	0.96	1.06	1.19	1.29

TABLE 4 : Performance of Random Walk Sampling Strategy

	Sampling Frequency								
	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Median NRMSE	2.58%	1.47%	1.90%	2.41%	2.84%	3.32%	3.70%	4.20%	4.51%
Mean NRMSE	0.70%	1.49%	1.93%	2.45%	2.88%	3.37%	3.76%	4.27%	4.59%
S.D.	0.58	0.34	0.45	0.57	0.67	0.81	0.91	1.07	1.14

is markedly worse. It is especially poor at shorter sampling frequencies (2–4), where its average sample error is over twice that of the the systematic sampling strategy.

The hybrid sampling strategy (Figure 5 and Table 3) improves on the performance of the simple random sampling strategy in both average error and standard deviation of error, while also avoiding harmonic error effects at the 5- and 10-minute sampling frequencies. The random walk sampling strategy (Figure 6 and Table 3) provides a similar further improvement. However, at non-harmonic sampling frequencies the systematic sampling strategy provides a lower average sample error (but a greater standard deviation) than either the hybrid or the random walk strategy.

Figure 2 summarizes the relative performance of all sampling strategies and frequencies. This chart clearly illustrates the variability in sample error at the 5- and 10-minute sampling frequencies when using the systematic sampling method. Overall, the random walk sampling strategy provides the best performance, as measured by average sample error and standard deviation of sample error, while also avoiding harmonic error effects. The systematic sampling method often performs very well, but appears to be strongly influenced by harmonic error effects that make its performance unpredictable.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that the selection of a temporal sampling strategy can have a significant impact on the results of accessibility evaluation, particularly if the chosen strategy does not avoid harmonic error interactions with the local transit network. Of the strategies compared in this analysis, a constrained random walk approach provided the best performance, as measured by sample error, while avoiding harmonic error effects. However, it is important to note that this comparison relied on sample strategy performance in the context of a single transit network. It is possible that each strategy could perform better or worse if applied to the transit network in a different city, and additional research may be useful in finding a strategy that is generalizable.

It is also clear that a systematic sampling strategy can produce very erratic results compared to other methods, and that it is susceptible to harmonic error effects due to interactions with the local transit network. It may be wise to avoid this sampling strategy, particularly in applications with a goal of analyzing the spatial variation of accessibility. Because harmonic error effects are associated with nearby transit service, they are inherently clustered spatially and would bias any spatial analysis efforts. Prime-numbered sampling frequencies (3, 7, 9) may reduce the risk of harmonic error effects when a systematic sampling strategy is used.

It may be interesting to explore sampling approaches which select different strategies and/or frequencies based on an analysis of the local transit service context. The systematic strategy gives the best performance in areas where harmonic error effects are not a concern; with minimal pre-processing of transit schedule data it may be possible to identify areas which are better suited to a particular sampling strategy or which would benefit from higher sampling rates.

Temporal sampling strategies provide an attractive trade-off: an accessibility evaluation sampled at a 5-minute frequency requires only 20% of the computing effort as one sampled at every minute, with an average sample error of only 2.5%. However, sampling strategy and sampling frequency should be selected with an understanding of how they may influence the spatial patterns of accessibility results.

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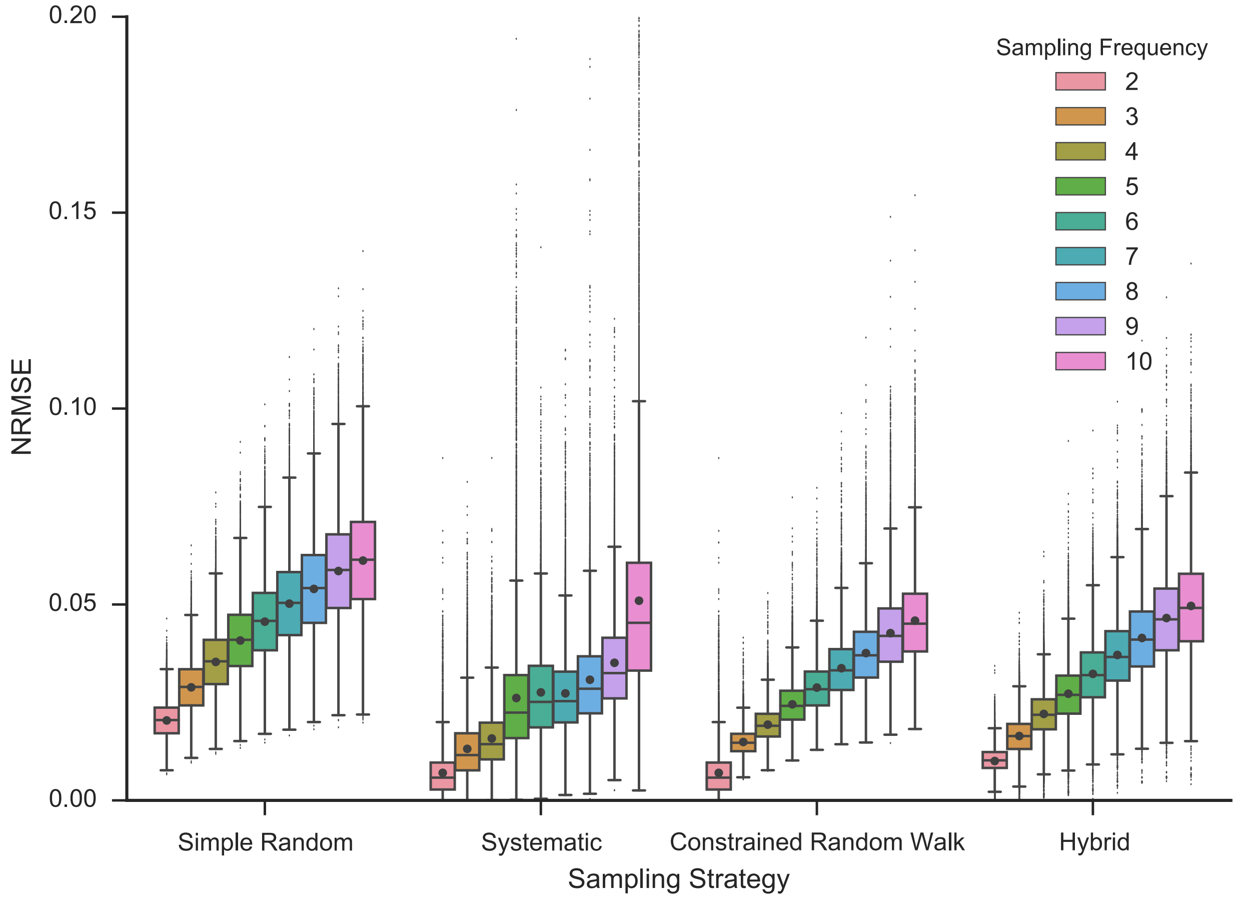

FIGURE 2 : Box plots for sampling strategy performance over all blocks at each sampling frquency. Boxes show inter-quartile range (25th – 50th percentile) with horizontal medial line; whiskers extend 1.5×IQR above and below. Outliers are plotted individually. Mean is indicated by a dot.

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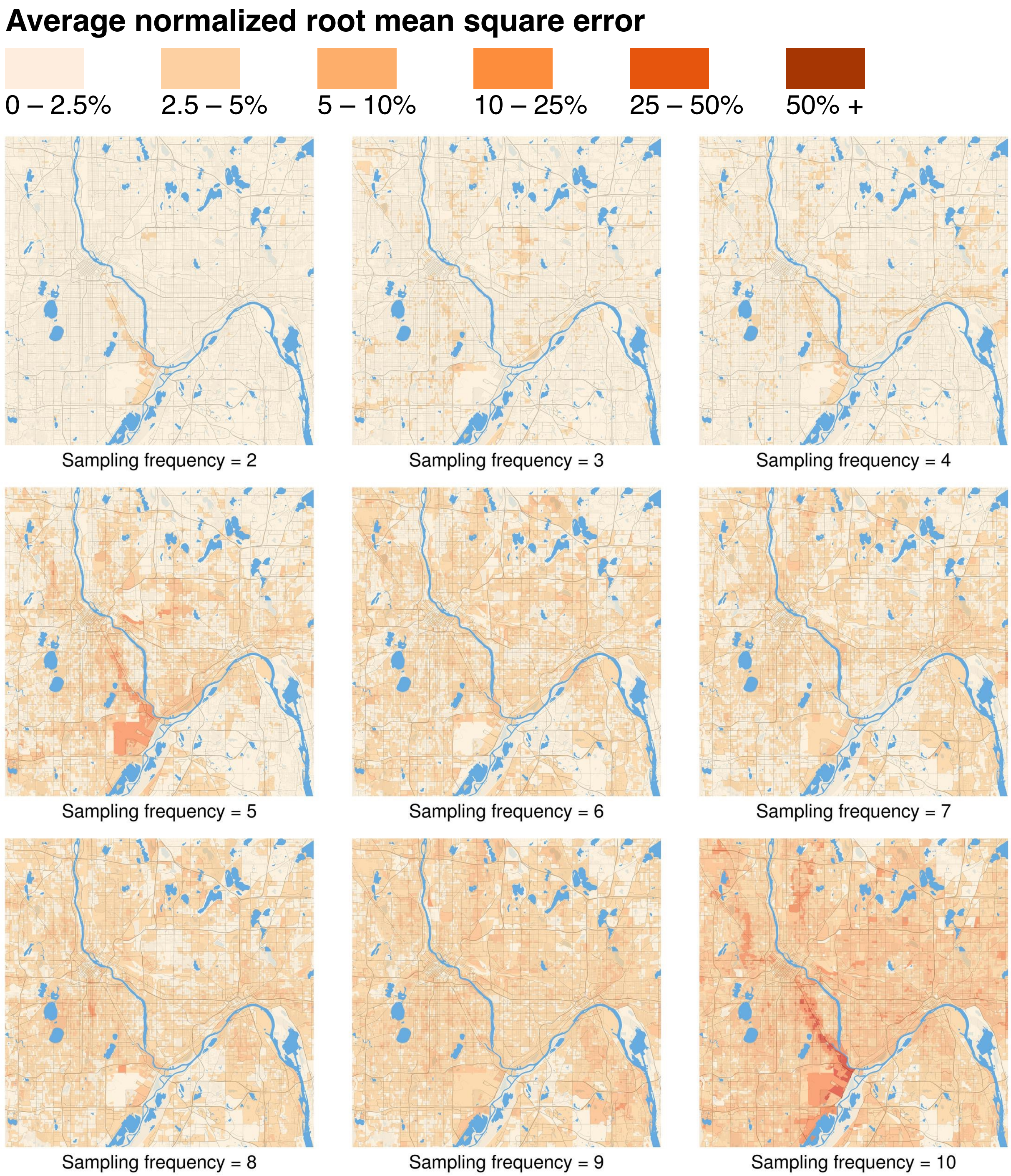

FIGURE 3 : Maps of block-level performance of the **systematic** sampling strategy, for sampling frequencies of 2 through 10 minutes. Darker colors indicate greater average sample error. Systematic sampling exhibits prounounced harmonic error effects for some sampling frequencies at some locations.

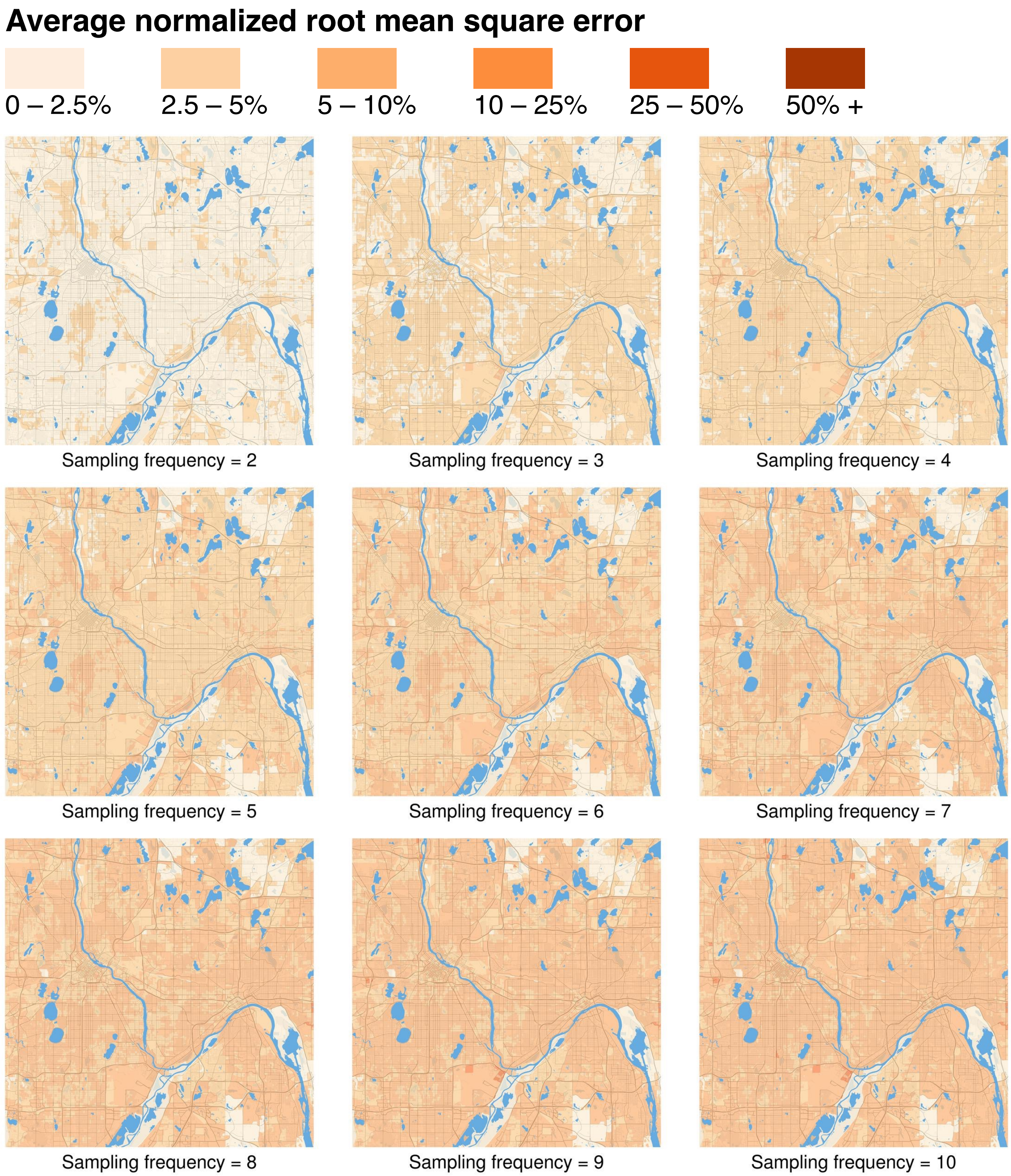

FIGURE 4 : Maps of block-level performance of the **simple random** sampling strategy, for sampling frequencies of 2 through 10 minutes. Darker colors indicate greater average sample error.

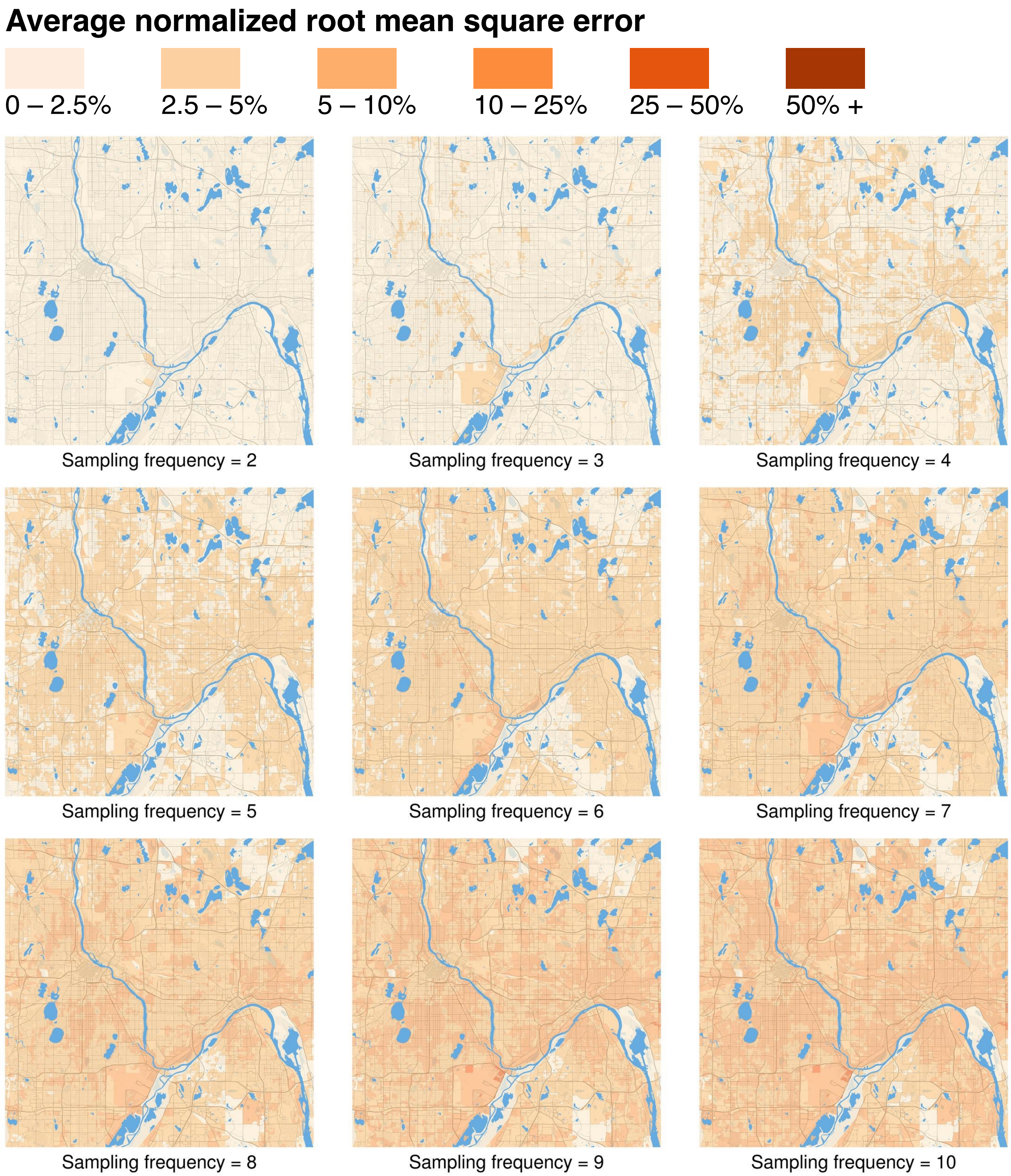

FIGURE 5 : Maps of block-level performance of the **hybrid** sampling strategy, for sampling frequencies of 2 through 10 minutes. Darker colors indicate greater average sample error.

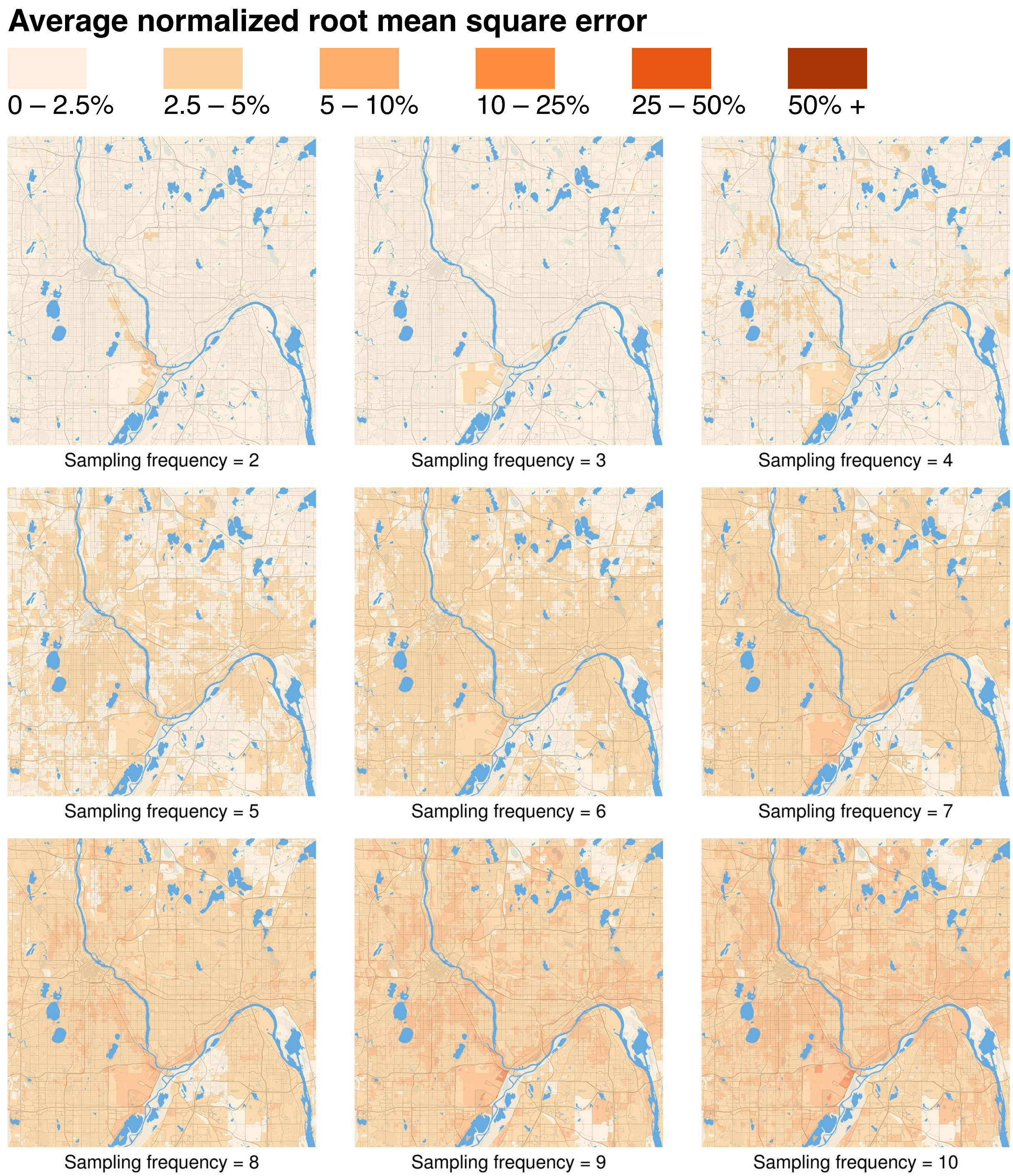

FIGURE 6 : Maps of block-level performance of the **random walk** sampling strategy, for sampling frequencies of 2 through 10 minutes. Darker colors indicate greater average sample error.