

Working in America

Getting to Work: Improving Public Transportation for America's Workers, Employers and Economies



Transportation is one of the largest sectors in the economy and has a significant impact on nearly all other sectors. In 2007, the United States spent approximately \$2.4 trillion, or 17% of GDP, on transportation; not including lost income from time spent commuting. This was approximately the same as the nation's spending on health care.¹

Beyond training and education, transportation is one of the critical pieces in ensuring that low and moderate income workers can connect to good quality jobs. In addition to transporting goods and services, transportation is the means by which job opportunities and economic mobility become attainable.

In 2009, 6.9 million workers—or about 5% of workers nationally—relied primarily on public transportation as their means of getting to work.² This proportion is lower among non-metropolitan area residents at just 0.5%.³

In the 100 largest metropolitan areas, 700,000 households without access to a car also lack access to public transportation. In the same areas, only 24% of households with access to an automobile are low-income.⁴

¹ Winston, Clifford, "On the Performance of the U.S. Transportation System: Caution Ahead," *Journal of Economic Literature*, 2013 (Vol. 51:3; 773-824), <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/articles/2013/09/performance%20transportation%20system%20caution%20ahead/performance%20transportation%20system%20caution%20ahead%20winston.pdf> (accessed 26 September 2014).

² McKenzie, Brian, United States Census Bureau, "Public Transportation usage Among U.S. Workers: 2008 and 2009," *American Community Survey Briefs*, October 2010, <http://www.census.gov/prod/2010pubs/acsbr09-5.pdf> (accessed 26 September 2014).

³ Brown, Dennis, "Public Transportation on the Move in Rural America," U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2004, <http://pubs.nal.usda.gov/public-transportation-move-rural-america> (accessed 26 September 2014).

Workers have long commutes, especially on public transportation. Of workers that do not work at home, over 8% had one-way commutes of 60 minutes or more in 2011. Of all commuting transportation modes, public transportation had the highest percentage of workers with commutes of 60 minutes or longer (23%). Conversely, in the group of workers who do not work from home whose commutes are *less than* 60 minutes, only 3.7% rely on public transportation, compared to 81.5% that drove alone.⁵

Lengthy commute times via public transportation are particularly difficult for low-income workers. Low-income jobs disproportionately require workers to work nights or weekends, during which public transit routes run less frequently or not at all. Lengthy commutes pose numerous challenges for the working poor, including increased child care costs, and less time for family or education.

While public transit can mean long commutes, driving to work creates a high cost burden for the working poor. The working poor that drive have the highest proportion of their income going towards transportation among all workers by modes of transportation. In 2003, the working poor who drove to work were estimated to spend approximately 8.4% of their income on commuting costs.⁶

Jobs in low- and middle-skill industries are less accessible for the typical metropolitan commuter than in high-skill industries. Although there is great variability in job access across metropolitan areas, the typical metropolitan resident can reach only about 30% of jobs in their metropolitan area using public transportation within 90 minutes. For low- and middle-skill industries, only about 25% are accessible via public transportation within 90 minutes, compared to a third of jobs in high-skill industries.⁷

Moving closer to one's work frequently does not reduce transportation costs for low- and moderate-income workers due to a spatial mismatch between affordable housing and areas of job growth. For every dollar saved in housing costs, it is estimated that working families across the economic spectrum spend 77 cents more on all of their transportation costs.⁸

Due to a spatial mismatch between housing and jobs and a disproportionately higher cost burden of using a car and/or lack of access to cars, low- and moderate-income individuals are less likely to have access to good job opportunities. Low-income individuals and families are disproportionately located in central cities and rural areas and public transportation routes rarely take workers from inner cities to suburban employers. Although the decentralization of jobs slowed down following the Great Recession,⁹ the steady decentralization of jobs that characterized the mid-2000s has influenced the spatial mismatch between low-income communities and geographical areas of job growth.

⁴ Tomer, Adie, "Transit Access and Zero-Vehicle Households," Brookings Institution Metropolitan Policy Program, August 2011, http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2011/8/18%20transportation%20tomer%20puentes/0818_transportation_tomer.pdf (accessed 26 September 2014).

⁵ McKenzie, Brian, United States Census Bureau, "Out of State and Long Commutes: 2011," *American Community Survey Reports*, February 2013, <http://www.census.gov/hhes/commuting/files/2012/ACS-20.pdf> (accessed 28 September 2014).

⁶ Roberto, Elizabeth, "Commuting to Opportunity: The Working Poor and commuting in the United States," Brookings Institution Metropolitan Policy Program, February 2008, http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/reports/2008/3/14%20transportation%20puentes/0314_transportation_puentes.pdf (accessed 26 September 2014).

⁷ Berube, Alan, et al. "Missed Opportunity: Transit and Jobs in Metropolitan American" *Metropolitan Opportunity Series*, 12 May 2011, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/reports/2011/05/12-jobs-and-transit> (accessed 26 September 2014).

⁸ Lipman, Barbara, "Something's Gotta Give: Working Families and the Cost of Housing," Center for Housing Policy, *New Century Housing* (Vol. 5:2) http://www.nhc.org/media/documents/somethings_gotta_give.pdf (accessed 26 September 2014).

⁹ Kneebone, Elizabeth, "Job Sprawl Stalls: The Great Recession and Metropolitan Employment Location," *Metropolitan Opportunity Series*, 18 April 2013, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/reports/2013/04/18-job-sprawl-kneebone> (accessed 26 September 2014).