

Contact: Donna Maurillo
831-234-4009
donna.maurillo@sjsu.edu

Mineta Transportation Institute Study: “How Do Low-Income People Get Around Town?”

Many families still stressed, so transportation policies need better assessment tools.

San Jose, Calif., February 21, 2011 – The [Mineta Transportation Institute](#) (MTI) has just released its Research Report 10-02, [Getting Around When You’re Just Getting By: The Travel Behavior and Transportation Expenditures of Low-Income Adults](#). Principal investigators Asha Weinstein Agrawal, Ph.D., and Evelyn Blumenberg, Ph.D., asked how people with limited resources pay for cars, public transit, and other means of travel, and how their transportation behavior changes during periods of falling employment and rising fuel prices. She and her research team conducted in-depth interviews with 73 adults to examine how rising transportation costs impact low-income families.

“The interviews examine four general areas,” said Dr. Agrawal. “These include travel behavior and transportation spending patterns; the costs and benefits of alternative travel modes; cost management strategies; and opinions about the effect of changing transportation prices on travel behavior.”

Several findings emerged. First, most low-income households are concerned about transportation costs, even if they don’t own cars. Low-income individuals who receive transportation subsidies (such as free transit passes) have the fewest concerns, but they still report anxiety about maintaining their subsidies. Also, low-income individuals actively and strategically manage household resources to survive on very limited means and to respond to changes in income or transportation costs.

Further, in making mode-choice decisions, low-income travelers – like higher-income travelers – carefully evaluate the costs of travel (time and out-of-pocket expenses) against the benefits of each mode. Some low-income individuals in the sample also were willing to endure higher transportation expenditures – such as the costs of auto ownership or congestion tolls – if they believed that they currently benefit or would potentially benefit from these increased expenses.

And last, low-income households find ways to cover their transportation expenditures. However, many of these strategies had negative effects on lifestyles, such as greater stress and anxiety, reduced expenditures on necessities such as food, inability to participate in discretionary activities, and spatial entrapment in the neighborhood around their homes.

Fundamentally, the best way to address this transportation burden is through poverty-alleviation programs, the report noted, but many of these programs – such as broad income transfers – are expensive and politically unpopular. Therefore, the researchers concluded, it is also important to support transportation-related policies that help low-income households ease their transportation expenditure burden.

“On the basis of our findings,” said Dr. Agrawal, “we generated three transportation-related recommendations. First, transportation policies can mitigate the hardships of poverty and the high costs of transportation. In general, low-income families would benefit from policies that reduce their transportation cost burden without also limiting their mobility.”

Second, she said, research on transportation expenditures by poor people is underdeveloped, primarily because of inadequate data. Better data are needed to determine accurately the transportation expenditures and incomes of low-income households, and the data should be linked to residential

neighborhood location. The expenditure data also must be disaggregated into more detailed expenditure categories that are potentially relevant to transportation policy.

She concluded by noting, “Evaluations of low-income transportation burdens cannot focus solely on costs. Complete analyses should consider the time and money costs of transportation, as well as the benefits from different types of travel. Existing research tends to emphasize the costs without integrating an assessment of the variable benefits of accessibility.”

The full report can be downloaded at no charge from <http://www.transweb.sjsu.edu/project/2806.html>

ABOUT THE PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATORS

Asha Weinstein Agrawal, Ph.D., is Director of the MTI National Transportation Finance Center and also Associate Professor in the Department of Urban and Regional Planning at San José State University. Her research interests in transportation policy and planning include transportation finance, pedestrian planning, and planning and transportation history. She has a BA from Harvard University, an MURP from the London School of Economics and Political Science, and a Ph.D. from the University of California at Berkeley. For a complete listing of her publications, see www.sjsu.edu/faculty/weinstein.agrawal/

Evelyn Blumenberg, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor of Urban Planning in the School of Public Affairs at the University of California, Los Angeles. Professor Blumenberg’s research examines the effects of urban structure—the spatial location of residents, employment, and services—on economic outcomes for low-wage workers, and on the role of planning and policy in shaping the spatial structure cities. She holds a bachelor’s degree in political science from the University of California, Berkeley, and a master’s degree and Ph.D. in Urban Planning from the University of California, Los Angeles.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH TEAM

Sarah Abel is a graduate student earning her Master’s degree in Urban and Regional Planning at San Jose State University.

Gregory Pierce is a Masters student in the Department of Urban Planning at the University of California, Los Angeles.

Chuck Darrah, Ph.D., is Chair and Professor in the Department of Anthropology at San José State University.

ABOUT THE MINETA TRANSPORTATION INSTITUTE

The Mineta Transportation Institute (MTI) was established by Congress in 1991 as part of the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) and was reauthorized under TEA-21 and again under SAFETEA-LU. The institute is funded by Congress through the US Department of Transportation’s (DOT) Research and Innovative Technology Administration, by the California Legislature through the Department of Transportation (Caltrans), and by other public and private grants and donations, including grants from the US Department of Homeland Security. DOT selected MTI as a National Center of Excellence following competitions in 2002 and 2006. The internationally respected members of the MTI Board of Trustees represent all major surface transportation modes. MTI’s focus on policy and management resulted from the Board’s assessment of the transportation industry’s unmet needs. That led directly to choosing the San José State University College of

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