



Getting Around When You're Just Getting By: The Travel Behavior and Transportation Expenditures of Low-Income Adults

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Increasing fuel prices, combined with the deep economic downturn, have renewed concern about the burden that transportation costs place on poor Americans. Moreover, low-income travelers

have been at the center of recent debates over the fairness of proposed transportation finance instruments such as congestion pricing and gas-tax increases. Despite these concerns, relatively little is known about how low-income households manage their transportation costs while also preserving their desired level and quality of mobility. This study begins to fill that gap by exploring the challenges low-income residents face in covering their transportation costs.

Study Method

The analysis is based on in-depth interviews with 73 low-income adults living in or near the City of San José, California, in the San Francisco Bay Area. The sample was diverse by many criteria, but overrepresented individuals with extremely low incomes. (Some were homeless; many relied on food banks and/or public benefits and services.) The interviews centered around four general areas of interest: travel behavior and transportation spending patterns; the costs and benefits of alternative modes of travel; transportation cost management strategies; and opinions about the effects of changing transportation prices on travel behavior.

Findings

Key findings include the following:

1. Most low-income households are concerned about their transportation costs.
2. Low-income individuals actively and strategically manage their limited household resources in order to survive and respond to changes in income or transportation costs. They do so by using strategies such as (a) modifications to travel behavior, (b) creative cost-covering strategies, (c) careful management of household expenditures, including transportation expenditures, and (d) reductions in discretionary spending.
3. To make mode-choice decisions, low-income travelers carefully evaluate the costs of travel (time and out-of-pocket expenses) against the benefits of each mode available to them.
4. Some interviewees were willing to accept 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.
5. Although low-income households find ways to cover their transportation expenditures, many of these strategies create hardship.

Policy Recommendations

Members of low-income households can minimize their transportation expenses by forgoing travel, and many do. However, such short-term financial strategies can limit access to needed destinations and entail longer-term costs to quality of life.

Public policies can help to mitigate the hardships associated with the high costs and low quality of transportation experienced by the poor. While the qualitative nature of the research precludes generalizing from the findings, the data suggest policy strategies to:

1. Decrease the out-of-pocket costs associated with both automobile and public transit use. This might include efforts to reduce costs per ride and to provide payment options that spread periodic lump-sum costs over time.
2. Improve the performance of public transit relative to the travel needs of low-income households by addressing the major obstacles they face in using public transit—slow speeds and inconvenience.
3. Enhance the reliability and public awareness of transportation assistance offered by both public agencies and nonprofit organizations.
4. Better support the informal transportation networks that flourish in low-income communities.

In addition, we propose various strategies for collecting new data that would allow policymakers to assess which policies would most effectively and efficiently ease the transportation burden for low-income families.



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About the Principal Investigators

Dr. Asha Weinstein Agrawal is Director of MTI's National Transportation Finance Center, and Dr. Evelyn A. Blumenberg is Associate Professor of Urban Planning in the UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs.

To Learn More

For more details about the study, download the full report at transweb.sjsu.edu/project/2806.html