CENTER ON URBAN POVERTY AND SOCIAL CHANGE

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Automobile Access and Public Transit Usage Among Welfare Recipients

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A key assumption in much of the discussion about improving job access for welfare recipients is that welfare recipients depend disproportionately on public transit for travel. The argument is often made that this dependence limits the ability of former welfare recipients to seek employment in parts of the metropolitan area that are poorly served by public transit. In turn, these limited job opportunities may lead to lower employment propensities, lower earnings, greater rates of job loss, and higher rates of return to public assistance. This report is the first in a series of *Briefing Reports* that examines the impact of geographic location, dependence on public transit, and job access on the labor market outcomes and residential mobility of former welfare recipients.

Data Sources

Data on the degree to which AFDC recipients depend on public transit is not readily available, particularly at the local level. In this briefing report, we use data from the 1990 Census of Housing and Population (The five percent Public Use Micro Sample, PUMS) to estimate several key pieces of information concerning welfare recipients. In particular, we estimate access to automobiles, utilization of public transit, and travel times to work. The census data are micro level data, making it possible to develop extremely detailed tables describing particular subsets of the local population. However, the data are now ten years old, and do not precisely measure several key concepts of interest. For example, the census question about public assistance income includes both AFDC and SSI income and as such it overstates the number of persons on AFDC. In addition, the census questionnaire asks about income from received from public assistance at any point in time last year (the census was taken in the spring of 1990, so last year refers to 1989). This concept does not translate very well to an AFDC caseload at a point in time. Given the dynamic nature of the caseload, a much larger number of persons will have received public assistance during a years time than during a single month. In general, persons who indicated on the census that they received public assistance income are probably financially better off than a typical

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person on AFDC at a point in time. (For example, at least some of the people who report receiving public assistance income last year have since exited from AFDC, while the AFDC caseload at a point in time remains on assistance). Thus, we expect our estimates of auto access to be conservative. Another problem with census data is that, although there is a question about the availability of automobiles, it is not possible to determine if a specific person within the household can use the auto to commute to work. For example, it is not known if the auto is in working condition, covered by insurance, and if the adult in question has a valid driver's license and liability insurance. Finally, the automobile availability question refers to a point in time (at the time of the census), not to an entire year. Nevertheless, with all these problems, the census represents a good source of information about persons on public assistance.

From the PUMS, we selected a sample of all adults (persons age 18 and over) who lived in the eight-county Cleveland consolidated metropolitan statistical area (CMSA). In addition to Cuyahoga County, the other counties include Ashtabula, Lake, Geauga, Portage, Summit, Medina, and Lorain. We divided persons by their home addresses into three geographic regions: the City of Cleveland, the rest of Cuyahoga County, and the other seven counties. For those who were employed, we similarly divided persons by their place of work. Our analysis was conducted for all persons, persons below the poverty line, and persons who reported some public assistance in 1989. Obviously, the last two groups are likely to include significant overlap, and the "below the poverty line" group is considerably larger than the public assistance group.

Findings

In Table 1, we report the percent of persons who live in a household with access to at least one automobile. In addition, for those who are employed we report the percent of persons who commute to work by driving alone, the percent who use public transit, and the percent who walk to work. Public transit includes bus and rail but excludes car pools and taxis. Our results in Table 1 are broken down by place of residence and further broken down by poverty status and public assistance utilization.

The results are quite consistent with expectations. For residents of any area, auto access is lowest for those who received public assistance income and those below the poverty line. Moreover, auto access is lowest in the City of Cleveland and highest in the suburbs. Among Cleveland residents below the poverty line or with public assistance income, auto access is strikingly low – only 45 percent of all persons in this category are members of a household where there is an available automobile. When looking at the journey to work mode for these persons, the figures are consistent with the automobile access measure. Just over 50 percent of those employed and below the poverty line were able to drive to work. A similar figure applied to those with public assistance income. Based on these figures, we conclude that between 50 percent and 55 percent of the AFDC population in City of Cleveland does not have an automobile available for a potential commute to work. For those currently on AFDC, this is likely to be a conservative estimate. For AFDC recipients in the suburbs, the figure is likely to

be somewhat higher. Perhaps 65 percent of welfare recipients in the suburbs have automobile access.

In the City of Cleveland, the lack of automobiles means that between one-quarter and one-third use public transit to commute to work. A surprising finding is the extent to which Cleveland residents below the poverty line depend on walking to work. Nearly 15 percent of employed persons in this category walk to work. Auto access and dependence on pubic transit are improved in the suburbs, however, it interesting to note that poor persons and welfare recipients are much worse off than all other workers.

The implications of the lack of automobile access are reflected in restricted job opportunities and longer commute times. Table 2 breaks down the travel time by mode, by place or residence and by poverty status and welfare recipiency. Travel times for persons who use public transit are typically double the travel times for automobile commuters. Thus, welfare recipients and persons below the poverty line pay a big price for their dependence on public transit.

Finally, Table 3 breaks down the usage of automobiles versus public transit for the journey to work by both the place of residence and by place of work. Clearly, public transit is quite feasible for some combinations, but not others. Generally, there is relatively high usage for Cleveland-to-Cleveland commuting, Cleveland-to-Cuyahoga Suburbs, and Cuyahoga Suburbs-to-Cleveland. There is not much public transit usage for commuting within the Cuyahoga Suburbs. Moreover, there is virtually no commuting via public transit across county lines (in either direction). How much does this lack of automobile access restrict the ability of welfare recipients to reach jobs? And, does restricted access to jobs result in worse labor market outcomes for welfare recipients? These topics will be addressed in future *Briefing Reports*.

Table 1. Access to Automobiles and Journey to Work Characteristics, Cleveland CMSA, 1990

	City of Cleveland		
	All Workers	Workers Below Poverty Line	Persons with Welfare Income in 1989
Percent with Access to Automobile	76.3%	45.9%	43.6%
Method of Commuting to Work			
Drove Alone	78.4%	53.4%	50.3%
Public Transit	14.4%	26.3%	35.2%
Walked	4.8%	14.4%	10.3%
Average Commute Time (minutes)	22.9	23.1	24.8

	Cuyahoga County Suburbs		
	All Workers	Workers Below Poverty Line	Persons with Welfare Income in 1989
Percent with Access to Automobile	94.2%	71.0%	66.3%
Method of Commuting to Work			
Drove Alone	89.6%	68.5%	71.6%
Public Transit	5.6%	10.5%	22.5%
Walked	2.2%	14.2%	3.6%
Average Commute Time (minutes)	22.5	19.5	24.3

	Outside Cuyahoga County		
	All Workers	Workers Below Poverty Line	Persons with Welfare Income in 1989
Percent with Access to Automobile	95.0%	76.2%	73.1%
Method of Commuting to Work			
Drove Alone	93.3%	70.6%	72.6%
Public Transit	1.1%	3.6%	14.3%
Walked	2.6%	18.6%	5.8%
Average Commute Time (minutes)	21.7	17.7	22.3

Source: 1990 Census.

Analysis by: Center on Urban Poverty and Social Change, Mandel School of Social Science, Case Western Reserve University.

Table 2. Travel Time by Mode, Place of Residence, and Income Level, 1990

	City of Cleveland		
	All Workers	Workers Below Poverty Line	Persons with Welfare Income in 1989
Method of Commuting to Work			
Drove Alone	20.9	20.5	20.0
Public Transit	36.6	34.8	35.0
Walked	12.1	13.2	9.1
	Cuyahoga County Suburbs		
	All Workers	Workers Below Poverty Line	Persons with Welfare Income in 1989
Method of Commuting to Work			
Drove Alone	21.6	19.2	20.6
Public Transit	40.4	37.6	38.3
Walked	11.0	6.7	13.1
	Outside Cuyahoga County		
	All Workers	Workers Below Poverty Line	Persons with Welfare Income in 1989
Method of Commuting to Work			
Drove Alone	21.5	19.2	21.0
Public Transit	37.1	29.3	32.1
Walked	8.9	9.2	10.1

Source: 1990 Census.

Analysis by: Center on Urban Poverty and Social Change, Mandel School of Applied Social Science, Case Western Reserve University.

Table 3. Travel Mode by Place of Residence, Place of Work and Income Level, 1990

	Residents of City of Cleveland					
	All Workers		Workers Below Poverty Line		Persons with Welfare Income in 1989	
	Drove Alone	Bus	Drove Alone	Bus	Drove Alone	Bus
Place of Work						
Cleveland City	72.6%	17.4%	46.3%	27.5%	43.5%	37.4%
Cuyahoga Suburbs	84.1%	13.4%	77.4%	22.6%	39.8%	43.8%
Other Suburbs	90.4%	7.9%	72.5%	22.9%	72.5%	27.5%

	Residents of Cuyahoga County Suburbs					
	All Workers		Workers Below Poverty Line		Persons with Welfare Income in 1989	
	Drove Alone	Bus	Drove Alone	Bus	Drove Alone	Bus
Place of Work						
Cleveland City	86.6%	12.4%	73.4%	20.4%	63.7%	36.3%
Cuyahoga Suburbs	91.4%	1.9%	71.2%	7.0%	69.9%	15.8%
Other Suburbs	91.3%	1.6%	65.3%	5.9%	76.8%	14.4%

	Residents of Other Suburbs					
	All Workers		Workers Below Poverty Line		Persons with Welfare Income in 1989	
	Drove Alone	Bus	Drove Alone	Bus	Drove Alone	Bus
Place of Work						
Cleveland City	96.6%	3.1%	96.8%	3.2%	100.0%	0.0%
Cuyahoga Suburbs	99.7%	0.1%	89.5%	0.0%	100.0%	0.0%
Other Suburbs	92.8%	1.0%	69.6%	3.6%	71.2%	15.0%

Source: 1990 Census.

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