

TRANSPORTATION, URBAN FORM, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE IN MEMPHIS

*Charles A. Santo, Ph.D/Chair & Associate Professor
University of Memphis Department of City and Regional Planning*

INTRODUCTION

“Transportation Emerges as Key to Escaping Poverty”

-New York Times, May 5, 2015

This recent *New York Times* headline summarizes a common theme among current academic research – and confirms a common sense understanding of urban issues (Bouchard, 2015). The article refers to a Harvard study that concludes that transportation access has a more significant effect on social mobility than factors such as crime, education, and family structure (Chetty & Hendren, 2015). In cities like Memphis, which is both poor and geographically sprawling, this connection between poverty and transportation is magnified.

In Memphis, low-income neighborhoods are dispersed – they are not necessarily proximate to downtown or in high-density areas like they are in older, larger mono-centric cities. Residents in these communities are disconnected from entry-level jobs both by distance and by inadequate transportation systems. In fact, the dispersion of population and jobs makes it more difficult to provide an adequate transit system, and a cyclical problem emerges: Limited municipal investment in transportation options exacerbates household underemployment and degrades quality of life, while continuing poverty and underemployment erodes the ability of local government to make adequate investment in transportation options.

Transportation, as a factor that affects social justice, encompasses both mobility and accessibility. Mobility refers simply to one’s ability to move around (i.e., can I get there?). Accessibility refers to the ease with which one can reach desired destinations – and therefore considers proximity of destinations to one another and to home (Litman, 2010). For example, a person who has a job close to home and a grocery store along the way to the job might not have better mobility but does have better accessibility. Accessibility is a product of urban form and land use patterns.

In Memphis, the story of the transportation-poverty relationship is the story of urban form, geographic stratification, and spatial inefficiency. And it is conditioned by the geographic size of the city, historical patterns of population and wealth decentralization, and the industrial structure of the



local economy.

Current Local Conditions

The Memphis Area Transit Authority (MATA) is the region's only provider of public transit. The vast majority of its users are transit dependent. MATA buses and trolleys serve an area of 311 square miles located almost entirely in the City of Memphis with almost no access to suburban jobs or amenities. A 2011 analysis by the Brookings Institution (Tomer, Kneebone, Puentes, & Berube) explored how well public transit systems connect residents to jobs across the top 100 metropolitan areas; Memphis ranked 69th. The study found that for the typical Memphis commuter, only 26 percent of jobs are reachable by transit in less than 90 minutes, and only five percent are reachable in less than 45 minutes. But these findings are not simply a reflection of a poorly designed transit system – they are also a function of the area's urban form and industrial makeup.

Memphis is a geographically large city (about as large as Boston, Philadelphia, St. Louis, and Cleveland combined) with a thinly spread population. For example, while Memphis has a population of about 656,000 spread over 324 square miles, Boston's similar population, 640,000, fits inside 90 square miles. Due to aggressive annexation and suburban sprawl, Memphis has twice the land area of Detroit, but only half the population density. The lack of density makes efficient (in terms of both time and costs) transit difficult. Without a critical mass of potential riders (people) or destinations (e.g., jobs) along a corridor, it is difficult to provide service that is frequent enough to be convenient.

A decentralization of population mirrored by a decentralization of wealth, has contributed to increasing fiscal burdens and inefficiency, and has driven a growing inequality between parts of the region. Recent data show that the Memphis metropolitan area has the second highest level of income segregation among large metro areas (Florida, 2014). In 2010, the poverty rate of Memphis (27%) was nearly four times as high as that of the rest of Shelby County (7%). The typical household in Germantown, the county's wealthiest suburb, lives on an income three times that of the typical Memphis household.

Memphis is an auto-centric metropolitan area with a high degree of job sprawl. According to the Brookings Institution, only 12 percent of the metro area's jobs are located within three miles of the central business district, and nearly half are located more than 10 miles from downtown (Kneebone, 2013). Simply put, a decentralized population means decentralized jobs and decentralized travel demand patterns.

Memphis' reliance on logistics jobs contributes to the problem. Memphis is home to FedEx and claims the world's second busiest cargo airport and one the country's largest inland ports. Since 1980, 20 percent of the metro area's job growth has been in logistics. The most common Bureau of Labor Statistics occupational category in Memphis is "material mover or hand laborer." Logistics jobs tend to be low-wage and difficult to access, with many located in warehouses that cluster near an intermodal freight transfer facility in the southeast corner of Memphis that is not well served by transit. These jobs also require "off-peak hour" shift times and tend to be coordinated through temp

agencies, factors that make it difficult for potential workers to coordinate transportation.

The sprawl of the Memphis area has contributed to another kind of job growth because it has required new retail and service industry employment. These local-serving industries (which don't bring new money into an economy or drive economic growth) have represented 47 percent of Memphis area job growth since 1980. Two-thirds of those jobs have been in suburban localities. These patterns have contributed to a spatial mismatch between where low-income residents live and where jobs are available.

Part and parcel with sprawl and the current industrial structure, transportation investments in Memphis have been primarily made to facilitate the movement of goods or cars, with little consideration of pedestrian infrastructure. An inadequate pedestrian environment makes it difficult for transit users to get to stops or to get from stops to final destinations. The warehouse jobs that are prevalent in Memphis exacerbate this problem because such facilities are large, located far from the street, and by their nature create low-density environments.

A final impediment to successful transit provision in the context of decentralized jobs is the fact that while MATA is the region's only transit provider, it remains a local transit authority as opposed to a regional transit authority. This means that all of the local funding for transit operation comes from the City of Memphis, and MATA has no capacity to provide service to suburban areas despite the continuing decentralization of jobs.

What all of this means for the relationship between transportation and financial resilience can be summarized in one statistic: the median income for transit users versus that of drivers. National trends show only slight differences in median income for workers who commute via public transportation versus those who drive to work. (The national median income for driving commuters is about \$35,000 compared to \$31,000 for transit users.) But in Memphis, a low density, sprawling city, with a heavy reliance on logistics jobs, the earnings gap between transit riders and drivers is vast. Census data from 2012 shows that in the Memphis metro area, the median income of those who relied on public transportation was \$16,450 – less than half the \$34,200 median income of those who drove to work.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY CHANGE

Moving Toward Solutions

Here are some general level recommendations that should be considered as starting points for more detailed exploration and/or as referrals to relevant work that is currently underway in this area.

- ***Make Transportation Central to Economic Development Planning and Policy.*** Currently, when we think of transportation as it relates to economic development in Memphis, we think of the logistics industry and the Aerotropolis concept: transportation as a means of moving packages.



But transportation is also what links households to jobs; therefore, improving inadequate mobility and accessibility should be considered essential and central to economic development policy. In fact, the city's economic dependence on logistics contributes to spatial inefficiency and transit-to-work challenges. Large warehouses limit density and make it difficult for transit to provide stops to get users anywhere near the front door, and temp agency work placements and odd shift hours make it difficult for potential workers to plan for transit use.

- ***Pursue Regional Transit Funding.*** As noted above, MATA is a local as opposed to regional transit authority. This means that all of the local funding for transit operation comes from the City of Memphis, and MATA has no capacity to provide service to suburban areas despite the continuing decentralization of jobs. In addition, even within the city, there is no specifically dedicated local funding source for MATA. This is a paralyzing problem. While politically challenging, the creation of a regional, multi-jurisdictional, dedicated funding source for MATA would improve the reach of transit in the Memphis area and open new employment opportunities for transit dependent residents. A state law created by Tennessee Senate Bill 1471 in 2009 allows for the creation of regional transportation authorities and for the development of dedicated revenue streams, subject to voter approval.
- ***Review and Pilot Select Transportation Demand Management (TDM) Approaches.*** Transportation Demand Management actions are designed to reduce (or manage) the number of people who commute by driving alone, and to do so without large infrastructure investments. Implementation of TDM approaches can occur at the local area level, or at the employer level, making area businesses a partner in addressing transportation needs. Examples of employer-level TDM approaches include: employer shuttles, employer-subsidized transit passes, and parking cash-outs (e.g., instead of providing “free parking” to employees, employers can provide a pay incentive to employees who do not require a parking space).
- ***Look Beyond the Bus and Fixed-Route Transit.*** There is a tendency to think that addressing transportation needs for those in poverty means providing better bus service, but the implied notion that the car is for the middle-class and the bus is for the poor is regressive and limits the realm of imagined solutions.

Nationally, about eight percent of metropolitan area workers use transit to get to work. The figure of low-income workers is not much higher, at about 10 percent. Poor workers tend to rely on automobiles for the same reasons that middle class workers do – transit is less convenient. This is especially true in cities like Memphis, where a lack of density limits transit frequency and traffic congestion is minimal (i.e., below the threshold at which driver would consider transit more convenient).

Substantial research indicates that cars are an important piece of the link between transportation and household financial resiliency (Blumenberg & Waller, 2003, pg. 6). The most robust recent research on mobility and poverty was conducted by the Urban Institute, *Driving to Opportunity* (2014). The study examined outcomes among participants who received housing choice vouchers as

part of the Moving to Opportunity Fair Housing program or the Welfare to Work Voucher Program. The findings indicate important differences in residential location and employment outcomes between participants who had access to automobiles and those who were transit dependent.

Suggesting strategies that could put more cars on the road is somewhat antithetical to sound planning ideology. However, past planning practices and development patterns have created a system that privileges those with automobiles. It would be inequitable to suggest that the poor carry the burden of planning principles and work their way out of poverty without the same opportunities available to the middle and upper class.

Strategies that fit this approach would include both car sharing programs and programs designed to put ownership of reliable personal vehicles within reach. Car sharing or short-term rental services such as ZipCar could provide expanded opportunities for low income residents because they require users to pay only for the transportation that they use. Internet access and access to checking accounts and credit cards presents an obstacle for many who might otherwise use car-sharing services. Some services allow paper applications, and some partner with local credit unions to help users get checking accounts.

Suggestions regarding expanding access to personal vehicle ownership will require policy change beyond the local level.

- Researchers with the Urban Institute suggest combining rental housing vouchers with subsidies for automobile purchases as a possible approach to expanding options for low income households.
- Current state “vehicle asset limitation” policies related to safety net programs raise the cost of car ownership for the poor, and must also be addressed. In Tennessee, the vehicle asset limit for federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) benefits is \$4,650. If a household owns a vehicle worth more than this amount, the value above the limit is counted as a liquid financial asset and affects eligibility for benefits. Many states have done away with vehicle asset limitation rules after federal policy changes in 1996 allowed more flexibility.
- The state’s current policy of suspending driver’s licenses for unpaid criminal court debts creates an impassible barrier for many Memphians. If these policies are not changed, solutions that include support, through public or private funds, must be employed to address this issue.
- Finally, programs geared toward supporting personal vehicle ownership must consider issues such as reliability, insurance costs, and lending practices. Low-income car buyers might become subject to predatory lending or face subprime rates.



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