

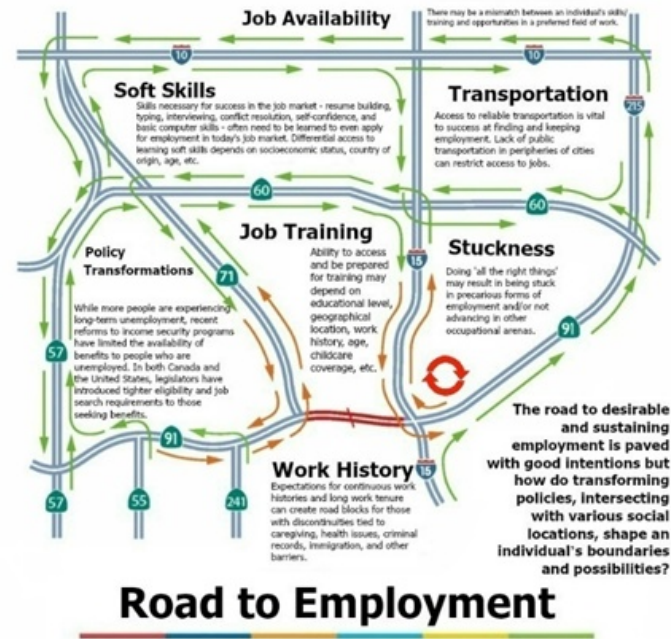
Tackling Long-Term Unemployment Through New Investments in Public Transportation: Insights from St. Louis, Missouri and London, Ontario

A summary of the SSHRC Research Project: *Possibilities and Boundaries in the Socio-Political Shaping of Unemployment: How Service Seekers and Service Providers Negotiate Long-Term Unemployment*.

Introduction

Long-term unemployment, officially defined as the proportion of the labour force aged 16 (15 in Canada) and older who did not have a job at any point during the last 27 weeks and has been actively looking for work over the past 4 weeks, remains high in both the US (around 2 million persons) and Canada (close to 300,000 persons). This report summarizes insights gathered from interview and focus group data with employment services providers in St. Louis, Missouri and London, Ontario. The findings of this report are based on data drawn from an on-going collaborative research project on long-term unemployment in St. Louis and London. *Possibilities and Boundaries* is a collaborative research project on long-term unemployment, with data collection occurring between 2014 and 2016. It aims to understand how policy and program changes since the 2008 recession have impacted employment services organizations and the strategies used by individuals to negotiate long-term unemployment.

This report reinforces and builds upon the insights gathered from key stakeholders during Phase 1 of this research that substantiate the need to address public transportation within solutions aimed at addressing long-term unemployment (see Fanelli, Rudman and Aldrich, 2016ab). Both key stakeholders and employment services providers identified several barriers faced by individuals who are negotiating long-term unemployment and seeking to become re-employed. Several of these are summarized in our 'Road to Employment' graphic, which was created based on initial interviews with key stakeholders in the employment services arena.



As can be seen in this image, stakeholders identified transportation as a key barrier to re-employment that was inequitably distributed in ways that reinforced the geography and persistence of long-term unemployment in low-income and historically racialized communities.

This summary illustrates crucial links between reliable, affordable and accessible public transit and opportunities for individuals to transcend multiple barriers to employment, thereby enabling access to a broader range of jobs, support services, child care facilities, and health centres. Overall, both key stakeholders and employment service providers noted how limited transportation networks exacerbate a weak job market as a result of the spatial mismatch between where jobs are located and people's means to get there. As a result, finding work is made all the more difficult for people in particular geographical locations and without financial resources to access other means of transportation.

Possibilities and Boundaries

Commuting Time and Access to Employment and Services

Access to transit infrastructure and commuting time has been identified in other research as a major factor in negotiating poverty and accessing broader public services and employment opportunities. As previous studies have shown, the longer an average daily commute, the less likely low-income families are to experience upward social mobility. Research undertaken by Raj Chetty and Nathaniel Hendren (2015) from Harvard University and the National Bureau of Economic Research has shown that the **RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TRANSPORTATION AND SOCIAL MOBILITY** is stronger than between social mobility and other indicators like crime, elementary-school test scores or the percentage of two-parent households. Moreover, in terms of racial inequities, nearly 60 percent of the 35-million daily public transportation rides in the US serve minorities, according to research undertaken by the American Public Transportation Association (USCB, 2013). Despite being only 12.5 percent of the population, African Americans are particularly dependent on public transit making up 33.1 percent of total transit rides.

The centrality of public transportation emerged most strongly in the data from St. Louis. According to the Brookings Institution's Profiles of Transit Accessibility in the Largest 100 Metro Areas, only 24 percent of the jobs in the St. Louis metropolitan area are accessible by a 90-minute transit ride (USCB, 2013). In this regard, St. Louis ranked 68th out of 100 metropolitan areas in terms of access to employment by means of public transportation. This was identified by respondents as a major barrier to employment:

"Transportation is a big factor. Most of our clients are using public transportation. And public transportation in St. Louis while good is not great, it doesn't go everywhere. And sometimes these bus rides are an hour, where it takes 15 minutes to drive. Usually folks are not happy about it, but they'll go along for the position. I think it does limit some people in their unemployment searches because they don't want to take four buses and an hour and a half each way, so I think that's part of it." (St. Louis)

As a result of inaccessible and cost prohibitive parking in the city core, when individuals who do have their own personal vehicles do decide to drive they often risk onerous tickets that could have significant implications:

"You might end up getting a ticket because you don't know how long you're going to be in here [the employment services centre]. You have customers that have a hard time getting here, even if they have a car. Then, some of them come down here and they have tickets. You look out the window and you see people's cars getting booted, and they're [the City] trying to – because the court is right down on the bottom of here...and for some people, a \$10.00 parking ticket means that you don't eat." (St. Louis)

Possibilities and Boundaries

The spatial locations of employment, employment services centres, and residential patterns, along with costs associated with transportation, result in a dilemma for many long-term unemployed individuals: dependence on long and unreliable public transit commutes, or high levels of indebtedness in order to maintain personal vehicle ownership. In both instances, this exacerbates the geography of poverty by reinforcing a dependence on personal automobiles, along with the high costs of ownership, maintenance, gas, insurance, potential parking tickets and so on, as well as constrains opportunities for those left with no choice but to rely on inadequate public transportation.

“Several of our clients are dependent on public transportation and it might take too long to get there or back. Or the transportation may not run to that area or after certain hours.” (St. Louis)

Although transportation challenges appeared less pronounced in the data collected in London, study participants also noted how transportation issues create challenges for negotiating long-term unemployment.

“I think financial issues definitely demotivate clients. If I’m suggesting that they do the simplest of tasks and they don’t even have enough money to get on the bus, that’s absolutely demotivating. So, that’s one thing that comes up often. And then when they’re demotivated and they’re not doing the simplest of tasks, it’s like a domino effect, Ontario Works is not going to provide them with a bus pass or even a person who has a vehicle, if they don’t have enough money, to pay for the gas in their vehicle. The simplest of tasks again become a very difficult thing to do...” (London)

Like St. Louis, individuals who use public transit in London to get to and from work had **LONGER COMMUTE TIMES**: 33 minutes on average versus 20 minutes for those with personal vehicles (NHS, 2011). A 2015 survey of London transit users revealed that nearly half of all riders used the service to get to and from work (Maloney, 2016). Even more telling, it found that **TWO OUT OF EVERY THREE** users chose public transit because they **COULD NOT AFFORD ANOTHER FORM OF TRANSPORTATION**. Financial strain and longer commute times thus appear to co-occur.

For long-term unemployed individuals, these challenges are amplified making even seemingly straightforward tasks, such as dropping off a resume or getting to a job fair, all the more challenging. This could have significant implications for individual morale and the ability to complete tasks on time, which may further constrain potential opportunities for employment. As well, service providers in London noted that long-term unemployed individuals could face a mismatch between the location and time demands of jobs and the availability of public transit:

“I’m really hoping they’ll [London Transit] make it more easily accessible to everybody. There are industrial areas outside of London that are on the outskirts, and there’s no bus that goes there, so there’s good paying jobs but our clients can’t get there because there’s no transportation there. And shift work is hard for them, like weekends, especially on a Sunday, the buses don’t run frequently.” (London)

Possibilities and Boundaries

Affordability and the Geography of Poverty

Access to and affordability of public transportation can either restrict or enhance opportunities for individuals based on where they reside. As has been a constant of both US and Canadian urbanism for some three decades, the most impoverished areas (often, also the most racialized) tend to also be the most transit deficient, leaving many with few options to access employment opportunities, social programs, goods and services elsewhere. As a participant in London discussed:

"Any challenges, any basic needs, we have to address, that could be housing, transportation, childcare, anything that's going to stop them from moving forward towards their goal, and then creating mini steps in order to achieve their end goal, which can be a long process or it can be a very short process depending on where they are in their life." (London)

Access to quality public transit has been shown to increase opportunities across a range of demographic indicators, including age, race, income and gender. However, this is made all the more pressing in **TRANSIT DISADVANTAGED** and low-income communities where being able to access an employment services centre, skill development, a job, flexible work schedules and hours, childcare and educational opportunities are limited. The absence of transit, then, makes it harder to deal with poverty, thereby reinforcing social immobility.

Public Transportation as Key Leveler

Policymakers often note the significance of education and jobs as a way out of poverty, however the missing link of **TRANSPORTATION INFRASTRUCTURE** to provide access to employment and schools is less commonly noted. Hence, addressing deficiencies in transportation could go a

long way in strengthening opportunities for accessing childcare, education and employment.

For low-income individuals and households, the high cost of vehicle ownership is not an option, making public transit the most viable means of transportation. Some employment services stakeholders noted making alternative meeting arrangements with long-term unemployed individuals as a result of the lack of transit infrastructure:

"I do a lot of my work through email and phones because a lot of clients don't have transportation, so I'm not going to say, 'Yeah, catch two buses because I have a question for you.' I'm not going to do that to them." (London)

In the absence of individuals' transit mobility, opportunities may be limited. As a employment services counsellor in St. Louis noted, the **"GREATER THE DISTANCE THE LESS OPPORTUNITIES THAT WE CAN PRESENT OR OFFER TO THEM [UNEMPLOYED INDIVIDUALS]."**

In other words, public transit can provide a means of negotiating long-term unemployment and poverty by providing opportunities for transcending the most common barriers to employment, such as a lack of accessible childcare and health care services, disabilities as well as access to quality and affordable food, in an efficient manner.

"There's employment out there. And I think that is where St. Louis City and St. Louis County are failing - as far as making the area more commutable, or more of a mass transit area. That hurts the city a lot, and I think it also hurts employment because people cannot get to these locations." (St. Louis)

Possibilities and Boundaries

Conclusion

The crucial link between transit infrastructure and access to jobs, education, social services, goods and resources is clear: the greater the accessibility, affordability and expanse of public transit, the greater the opportunities to escape the debilitating cycle of unemployment and poverty. The reverse is also true: longer commuting times and poor employment, education and residential integration goes hand in hand with social and physical immobility and constrains individuals' opportunities. Service providers and key stakeholders in both St. Louis and London identified expanded public

transportation as a key social leveler for finding employment and accessing affordable housing and vital services like child and health care. Respondents also noted how enhanced public transportation can ameliorate social and individual problems like community segregation and the concentration of poverty, which pose significant barriers to the social and economic progress of low-income families. All things considered, the data collected here points to affordable, accessible and expansive public transit as central to long-term unemployed individuals' pursuit of income security and new opportunities to make desired lifestyle changes.

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For further information visit: possibilitiesandboundaries.ca

