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**Transportation Barriers to Employment:  
Southeast Asian Welfare Recipients in Los Angeles and Fresno Counties**

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## **1. Introduction**

As a result of the recent restructuring of the U.S. welfare system, millions of welfare recipients have entered the paid labor market. In response, public agencies have established programs to transition recipients into the labor market or else risk dramatic increases in poverty. While access to transportation affects welfare recipients' ability to find and retain employment, relatively little is known about the relationship between transportation and welfare usage, particularly among ethnic and racial subgroups of the population.

This study relies on survey data from two California counties, Los Angeles and Fresno to examine the travel patterns and barriers of welfare recipients across racial and ethnic groups, focusing specifically on the transportation issues facing Southeast Asians. The findings show that Southeast Asian welfare recipients are more—not less—reliant on automobiles for their travel than other racial and ethnic groups. While this finding might suggest that low-income Southeast Asian families do not face transportation difficulties, evidence from the surveys show otherwise. Some Southeast Asian households do not have automobiles. Moreover, Southeast Asian respondents reported the greatest difficulty with their travel largely because they face numerous auto-related transportation problems, the most apparent is the age of their vehicles. Two-thirds of auto-owning Southeast Asian respondents owned vehicles that were over ten years old and 61 percent had trouble maintaining their vehicles.

The findings of this study suggest that policies to facilitate the economic incorporation of low-income families—including Southeast Asian households—must include efforts to facilitate access to automobiles and, in particular, access to reliable

vehicles. For Southeast Asian recipients living in dense urban areas, transit agencies must devote greater attention to providing language assistance to those with limited English language proficiency. Finally, additional data are needed to better understand the travel patterns and barriers of Southeast Asians and to evaluate existing programs to meet their transportation needs.

## **2. Southeast Asians and Poverty**

In the aftermath of the Vietnam War and the collapse of the governments of Laos and Cambodia, millions of refugees fled Indochina, the vast majority entering the United States. Since the 1970s, over a million Southeast Asian refugees migrated to the United States from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2004). Migration from this area of the world peaked in the 1980s and has since waned; yet Southeast Asian refugees comprise the largest group of refugees to settle in the U.S., thirty-seven percent of all refugees since 1971. Data from the 2000 U.S. Census show that California is home to 39 percent of all U.S. Southeast Asians, almost three quarters originating from Vietnam.

Many refugees in the early group of arrivals came from households with relatively high socioeconomic levels and, therefore, arrived in the U.S. with both education and work experience. However, the second wave of refugees, commonly known as “boat people,” came from a wider range of socioeconomic backgrounds and was less prepared to enter the U.S. workforce since they had, on average, limited education and professional work experience and little English language proficiency. Although the economic integration of refugees typically increases with the assimilation associated with

length of U.S. residency (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2002), Southeast Asian poverty rates remain high. As Table 1 shows, all of the Southeast Asian ethnic groups in California have poverty rates higher than the statewide average of 14 percent. Hmong residents have the highest poverty rates, exceeding 50 percent and, at 18 percent, Vietnamese residents have the lowest.

| <b>Table 1: California Poverty, Public Assistance, and Family Income (2000)</b> |                     |                          |                                      |
|---|---------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------------------|
|   | <b>Poverty Rate</b> | <b>Public Assistance</b> | <b>Median Family Income (1999\$)</b> |
| California  | 14.2%               | 4.9%                     | \$53,025                             |
| Cambodian   | 40.8%               | 37.3%                    | \$26,183                             |
| Hmong   | 53.2%               | 50.2%                    | \$24,372                             |
| Laotian   | 32.2%               | 32.5%                    | \$29,755                             |
| Vietnamese  | 18.0%               | 15.5%                    | \$49,114                             |

U.S. Census (2000). Summary File 4.

Since the passage of the Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act in 1975, economic assistance to Southeast Asian refugees primarily has been channeled through the welfare system. With welfare reform—and the passage of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act—Congress substantially restricted federal welfare benefits to new legal immigrants to the U.S. However, refugees remain eligible for public aid. They can receive SSI, food stamps, and Medicaid during their first seven years in the United States and welfare as well as state and local benefits during their first five years. Changes in federal law, however, may have created an unintended “chilling effect,” suppressing the welfare usage of eligible refugees confused about program rules and fearful of the negative consequences of program participation (Fix and Passel, 2002). While welfare usage rates among refugees declined

sharply subsequent to welfare reform, evidence suggests that much of this decline was due to improvements in the economic status of refugees (Potocky-Tripodi, 2004).

Although declining, public assistance rates among Southeast Asians in California remain high, significantly higher than for other racial and ethnic groups. According to figures from the 2000 Census, over 50 percent of Hmongs, over 37 percent of Cambodians, and over 32 percent of Laotians received some form of public assistance. Vietnamese had the lowest rates of assistance, 15.5 percent, a figure that is still 3 times that of the state average.

A number of studies have examined the economic adaptation of Southeast Asian refugees and, in particular, the determinants of employment, income, and welfare usage (Bach and Bach, 1980; Ong and Blumenberg, 1994; Potocky-Tripodi, 2003, 2001, 1997; Potocky and McDonald, 1995). These studies show that educational attainment, sex, household structure, citizenship status, and years living in the U.S. contribute to economic assimilation. For example, refugees with higher educational attainment either prior or subsequent to immigration have better economic outcomes than those with less education. Single parent households and households with numerous children fare worse than two-parent households and households with fewer children. On average, men fare better than women; and citizens fare better than non-citizens. Finally, length of residence in the U.S. is strongly and positively related to economic status, as it is also correlated with other aspects of assimilation such as English language acquisition.

While a growing body of scholarship has examined the effects of demographic, acculturation, residential location, and health characteristics on the economic adaptation of Southeast Asian refugees, few studies have focused on the transportation barriers and

needs of this population group. Yet evidence from the small, but growing, literature on the travel patterns and behavior of immigrants suggests that refugees—particularly low-income refugees—may face unique transportation issues. Although auto use among immigrants increases with time spent in the U.S. (Myers, 1996), low-income immigrant groups are disproportionately reliant on public transit. There are multiple explanations for this finding. Low incomes may prevent poor immigrant families from purchasing or maintaining automobiles; and some immigrants may be less likely than others to have had drivers' licenses, driven cars, or owned automobiles in their countries of origin.

There is also evidence of cultural differences associated with transportation behavior. For example, in some countries women are much less likely to possess driver's licenses or to know how to operate vehicles than U.S. women (Pisarski, 1999) and, therefore, may be less likely to purchase or drive automobiles once in the U.S. Cultural differences also may influence the use of transit services. In focus groups with Latino, Somali, and Hmong immigrants in Minnesota, Douma (2004) finds that Latino immigrants are more open to transit and "social" types of travel, compared to Hmong immigrants who place a greater value on privacy.

### **3. Survey and Research Design**

To examine the transportation behavior and needs of Southeast Asian welfare recipients, data were drawn from two telephone surveys of the transportation patterns and barriers of welfare participants in two California counties – Los Angeles and Fresno. Los Angeles County is located in Southern California and is one of the largest metropolitan areas in the country. In contrast, Fresno County, located in California's agricultural

heartland, includes a medium-sized metropolitan area and a sizeable non-urban population.

The surveys were conducted from December 1999 through February 2000 in Los Angeles and in May and June 2001 in Fresno. Respondents were asked to complete an abbreviated travel diary in which they described the first five trips they took on the day prior to the survey including their destinations and travel modes. They were then asked a series of questions related to their work, job search, and childcare travel and their use of automobiles and public transit. Finally, respondents were asked to identify auto- and transit-related policies and programs that would best meet their travel needs.

As Table 2 shows, more than half of the sample is Hispanic (52%), 27 percent is black, 18 percent is white, and 4 percent is Southeast Asian. The data include 127 Southeast Asian welfare recipients. In Los Angeles of the 1,645 surveyed, 23 were Southeast Asian, 21 from Vietnam. In Fresno, Hmongs were oversampled comprising 99, or almost one-fifth, of the 502 respondents. In addition, the Fresno sample includes three Laotians and two Cambodians. Although the sample of Southeast Asians is relatively small, it is large enough to describe some of the unique transportation needs facing this population.

Table 2 also includes key characteristics of the sample by race and ethnicity. As the data show, overall the sample is predominantly female since the welfare program disproportionately serves single parents with children. However, California has a small program for two-parent households and, therefore, as indicated by the data, includes some families with men. Since Southeast Asian refugees qualify for the program based



on their refugee status, they are more likely than other welfare households to have two parents.

| <b>Table 2: Demographic Characteristics of Sample by Race and Ethnicity</b> |                        |                 |              |              |
|---|------------------------|-----------------|--------------|--------------|
|   | <b>Southeast Asian</b> | <b>Hispanic</b> | <b>White</b> | <b>Black</b> |
|   | 4%                     | 52%             | 18%          | 27%          |
| <b>Sex</b>  |                        |                 |              |              |
| Male  | 67%                    | 14%             | 21%          | 7%           |
| Female  | 33%                    | 86%             | 79%          | 93%          |
|   |                        |                 |              |              |
| <b>Education</b>  |                        |                 |              |              |
| Less than High School   | 67%                    | 57%             | 23%          | 20%          |
| High School   | 33%                    | 43%             | 78%          | 80%          |
|   |                        |                 |              |              |
| <b>Children</b>   |                        |                 |              |              |
| 1 child   | 35%                    | 23%             | 35%          | 31%          |
| 2+ children   | 20%                    | 29%             | 38%          | 33%          |
| 3+ children   | 45%                    | 47%             | 27%          | 36%          |
|   |                        |                 |              |              |
| <b>Non-English Speakers</b>   | 68%                    | 38%             | 16%          | 0%           |
|   |                        |                 |              |              |
| <b>Employment</b>   |                        |                 |              |              |
| Currently employed  | 74%                    | 52%             | 50%          | 51%          |
| Job Search  | 12%                    | 22%             | 19%          | 30%          |
| Not working/ not searching  | 12%                    | 25%             | 32%          | 19%          |
|   |                        |                 |              |              |
| <b>Total (weighted)</b>   | 78                     | 1,021           | 358          | 527          |

Consistent with the broader literature on Southeast Asians, the findings show that Southeast Asians tend to be more linguistically isolated than other racial or ethnic groups in the sample. Approximately 70 percent of Southeast Asians were non-English speakers compared to 40 percent of Hispanic respondents. Additionally, Southeast Asian respondents were more likely to have less than a high school education compared to respondents from the other three racial or ethnic groups. Sixty-seven percent of all Southeast Asian respondents had less than a high school education. With respect to

family size, the distribution of Southeast Asian households by number of children is bimodal. Thirty-five percent of Southeast Asian respondents live in families with only one child; this figure is similar to that of Non-Hispanic whites (35%) and much higher than for Hispanic households (24%). However, compared to non-Hispanic White and African American families, Southeast Asian households are more likely to have three or more children, a figure that rivals the percentage among Hispanic families. Forty-seven percent of Hispanic families have three or more children compared to 45 percent among Southeast Asian and only 36 and 27 percent among African Americans and Non-Hispanic whites respectively.

A higher percentage of Southeast Asian respondents were working than any other ethnic or racial group. However, this finding may be due to the overrepresentation of Southeast Asian men in the sample.

#### **4. The Transportation Patterns and Barriers of Southeast Asians**

Over 90 percent of Southeast Asian respondents commute by automobile and 84 percent owned their automobiles; both of these figures are much higher than for all other ethnic and racial groups in the sample, including Non-Hispanic whites. Auto ownership does not necessary mean that household drivers can use a vehicle whenever they might need one. Although a very high percentage of households have automobiles, oftentimes adults in low-income households must share vehicles since there is frequently less than a one to one relationship between household cars and drivers. For example, among Southeast Asians in the sample, there are .4 automobiles for each household adult 18 years or older. Despite this figure, Southeast Asian respondents reported very high levels

of unlimited access to automobiles; sixty-two percent stated that they could use a vehicle whenever they needed. In contrast, only one-third of African American respondents reported unlimited access to automobiles and 58 percent reported no access to personal vehicles at all.

These figures suggest that Southeast Asians do not have difficulty traveling to their destinations since they can use a vehicle whenever they require one. Yet Southeast Asians were the most likely to report travel difficulties. Over half stated that they had difficulty traveling compared to approximately 42 percent of Blacks, Hispanics, and Non-Hispanic whites. One reason for their travel difficulties may be their ownership of old vehicles, in this case defined as vehicles that are more than 10 years old. Sixty-six percent of Southeast Asian respondents reported having an old car compared to 50 percent of non-Hispanic Whites, 38 percent of Hispanics, and only 24 percent of African Americans. Therefore, although Southeast Asian families are more likely to have reliable access to vehicles, they also are more likely to have automobiles that are old and in need of continual maintenance and repair. Not surprisingly, when asked to name two of the biggest auto-related problems they face, 61 percent of Southeast Asian respondents stated that they had problems maintaining their vehicles.

| <b>Table 3: Travel and Transportation Characteristics by Race and Ethnicity</b> |                        |                 |              |              |
|---|------------------------|-----------------|--------------|--------------|
|   | <b>Southeast Asian</b> | <b>Hispanic</b> | <b>White</b> | <b>Black</b> |
| <b>Commute Mode</b>   |                        |                 |              |              |
| Car   | 91%                    | 66%             | 75%          | 57%          |
| Transit   | 2%                     | 24%             | 13%          | 30%          |
| Other   | 7%                     | 9%              | 11%          | 13%          |
| <b>Car Ownership</b>  |                        |                 |              |              |
| Does not own car  | 16%                    | 45%             | 29%          | 58%          |
| Owns car  | 84%                    | 56%             | 71%          | 42%          |

|                       |     |     |     |     |
|-----------------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| <b>Auto Access</b>    |     |     |     |     |
| Limited access        | 22% | 19% | 22% | 9%  |
| Unlimited access      | 62% | 36% | 49% | 33% |
| No access             | 16% | 45% | 29% | 58% |
| <b>Borrow Vehicle</b> |     |     |     |     |
| Difficult to borrow   | 91% | 84% | 79% | 83% |
| Easy to borrow        | 9%  | 16% | 21% | 17% |
| <b>Age of vehicle</b> |     |     |     |     |
| Young car             | 34% | 62% | 50% | 76% |
| Old car               | 66% | 38% | 50% | 24% |
| <b>Ease of Travel</b> |     |     |     |     |
| Difficult travel      | 53% | 43% | 42% | 42% |
| Easy travel           | 47% | 57% | 58% | 58% |

A set of logistic models were used to predict two different outcomes measures for the entire sample (controlling for race and ethnicity) as well as for four major ethnic and racial groups—Southeast Asians, Hispanics, African Americans, and Non-Hispanic Whites. The first set of models predicts the likelihood of employment controlling for sex, English language proficiency, education, unlimited access to a personal vehicle, ability to borrow a vehicle, the age of the vehicle, and the county (either Fresno or Los Angeles County). Existing studies suggest that each of these variables should influence employment outcomes. For example, men tend to be employed at higher rates than women; non-white welfare recipients tend to have greater difficulty finding employment compared to white recipients; and human capital measured by English language proficiency and education tends to be positively correlated with employment.

Transportation options and, in particular, access to automobiles can also affect the employment outcomes of welfare recipients (Cervero, Sandoval, and Landis, 2002; Danziger et al., 2000; Ong 1996, 2002). In these statistical models, three auto-related variables are included to incorporate different aspects of auto accessibility. The first auto

variable measures not only whether there are automobiles in the household but whether recipients can use these vehicles whenever necessary. Second, many welfare recipients do not own vehicles but yet report that they commute to work by automobile. Therefore, the models also include a variable identifying how easy it is for the recipient to borrow cars. Finally, access to vehicles may not positively affect employment if the vehicle is prone to mechanical difficulties and cannot reliably transport recipients to their destinations. The age of the vehicle is a proxy for reliability; old cars are defined as those 10 years or older.

| <b>Table 4: Determinants of Employment</b> |                                |           |          |           |          |         |
|--|--------------------------------|-----------|----------|-----------|----------|---------|
| Variable                                   | Description                    | Total     | SE Asian | Hispanic  | White    | Black   |
|  |                                | Model 1   | Model 2  | Model 3   | Model 4  | Model 5 |
| Intercept                                  |                                | -0.750*** | 1.477    | -0.651*** | -0.481   | 0.686   |
| Sex  | Female                         | 0.282*    | -0.804   | 0.419*    | 0.054    | 12.57   |
| Black                                      | Black                          | 0.134     |          |           |          |         |
| Hispanic                                   | Hispanic                       | 0.240     |          |           |          |         |
| Southeast Asian                            | Southeast Asian                | 1.283***  |          |           |          |         |
| English Proficiency                        | Speak English                  | -0.147    | -0.299   | -0.094    | -0.241   | 12.57   |
| Education                                  | High School+                   | 0.308**   | 0.416    | 0.255     | 0.234    | 0.455   |
| Unlimited Auto Access                      | Can use a vehicle when need to | 0.928***  | 1.480**  | 0.879***  | 0.917*** | 1.02*** |
| Borrow                                     | Easy to borrow                 | 0.177     | -0.733   | 0.103     | 0.303    | 0.304   |
| Age of Car                                 | Old car                        | -0.137    | -0.448   | -0.077    | -0.076   | -0.200  |
| County                                     | Los Angeles                    | 0.033     | -0.662   | 0.085     | -0.076   | 0.216   |
| *** p > .001 ** p > .01 *p > .05           |                                |           |          |           |          |         |

Table 4 reports the results of the five models. Model 1 includes the total sample controlling for race and ethnicity. This model shows that Southeast Asians are more likely to be employed than non-Hispanic whites. With respect to the transportation variables, unlimited access to automobiles was a strong and statistically significant predictor of employment for each of the racial and ethnic groups. However, it is important to acknowledge the issue of causality. Having access to automobiles may

increase the likelihood that welfare recipients find and retain employment. Conversely, employment may provide welfare recipients with the resources to purchase vehicles. Neither the age of the vehicle nor the relative ability to borrow a vehicle was a significant predictor of employment for any of the racial and ethnic groups.

| <b>Table 5: Ease of Travel – Difficulty of travel for work or job search</b> |                                |          |          |          |          |          |
|--|--------------------------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| Variable   | Description                    | Total    | SE Asian | Hispanic | White    | Black    |
| Intercept  |                                | -0.287   | -2.609** | -0.368   | -0.449   | -12.625  |
| Sex  | Female                         | -0.157   | -0.362   | -0.034   | -0.635   | -0.471   |
| Black  | Black                          | 0.01     |          |          |          |          |
| Hispanic   | Hispanic                       | -0.035   |          |          |          |          |
| Southeast Asian  | Southeast Asian                | -0.283   |          |          |          |          |
| Family Size  | 3+ members                     | -0.114   | -0.873   | -0.159   | 0.154    | -0.106   |
| Job Search   | Searching for Work             | 0.052    | 0.037    | 0.0132   | 0.798*   | -0.168   |
| English Proficiency  | Speak English                  | -0.046   | 0.395    | -0.1499  | 0.006    | 13.025   |
| Unlimited Auto Access  | Can use a vehicle when need to | -0.345*  | 0.618    | -0.364   | -0.442   | -0.562*  |
| Borrow   | Easy to borrow                 | -0.346*  | 0.998    | -0.118   | -0.931*  | -0.661*  |
| Age of Car   | Old car                        | -0.203   | 1.322*   | -0.022   | -0.131   | -0.773*  |
| County   | Los Angeles                    | 1.606*** | 2.374**  | 1.383*** | 2.751*** | 1.432*** |
| *** p > .001 ** p > .01 *p > .05   |                                |          |          |          |          |          |

Respondents were also asked to rate their ease of travel. A second set of logistic models examines the determinants of difficulty of travel. As Table 5 shows, among Southeast Asians the only significant predictor of difficulty was age of the vehicle. Respondents with older vehicles had greater difficulty with their travel.

## 5. Findings and Analysis

The study shows the variation in transportation patterns and behavior by race and ethnicity. Southeast Asian welfare recipients in this sample are more reliant on private vehicles than other racial and ethnic groups. While additional research is necessary to

explain this finding, there are a number of potential explanations. The finding may be due, in part, to the sample; eighty-two percent of the Southeast Asian respondents are from Fresno County where Hmong were oversampled. In general, auto reliance among welfare recipients is much higher in Fresno than in Los Angeles since the county is smaller, less densely developed and, therefore, has less an extensive public transit infrastructure.

However, even among the Fresno sample, auto use remains much higher among Southeast Asians than the other three racial and ethnic groups. A number of factors might explain this finding. First, among the four population groups, Southeast Asian households have the greatest number of adults – close to three adults per family compared to just over two adults in Hispanic and white households and less than two in black households. Since additional adults in the household can oftentimes translate into additional wage earners, Southeast Asian recipients might be more likely to have the incomes necessary to purchase automobiles. Another explanation may be related to the intra-metropolitan residential location patterns of low-income Southeast Asian families. They may be more likely than other low-income households to live in job-poor neighborhoods where cars are the only reasonable travel option.

Finally, English language difficulties also may deter Southeast Asian welfare recipients from using public transit and, therefore, compel them to rely on automobiles. Sixty-eight percent, or more than two-thirds, of Southeast Asians in the sample had limited English language proficiency. In a community study of transportation issues in Fresno County, researchers found that limited English language skills made it difficult for Southeast Asian adults to navigate the transit system “...where most of the information,

materials, signage and staff assistance are provided in unfamiliar languages (Odyssey, 2004:3).” Language barriers can limit travelers’ knowledge of the transit system thereby increasing their overall levels of uncertainty and fear and reducing the likelihood of transit ridership. Recent advances in mode choice modeling have incorporated the role of cognitive processes—such as fear and uncertainty—in influencing travel behavior (Ben-Akiva et al., 2002).

The data also suggest that information on commute mode or the presence of household vehicles is not sufficient information in determining whether low-income families face transportation barriers. Numerous welfare recipients live in households with automobiles but have limited access to them since they must compete with other household drivers for use of the car. Further, low-income households may only have the financial resources to purchase old vehicles that are more likely than newer vehicles to have mechanical problems and, therefore, be unreliable. With respect to Southeast Asian welfare recipients, the age of household vehicles—disproportionately 10 years or older—was a significant obstacle to travel.

## **6. Policy and Research Prescriptions**

The findings, therefore, suggest a number of important policy prescriptions and recommendations for further research. Unlimited access to automobiles is associated with employment across all ethnic and racial groups. Therefore, policies to facilitate the economic incorporation of low-income families—including Southeast Asian households—must include programs to facilitate access to automobiles. To increase automobile ownership among welfare recipients, state legislatures that have not done so



already must simply eliminate the vehicle asset limitation. Approximately one-half of all states deny public benefits to welfare recipients who own vehicles worth more than a set dollar value, despite federal regulations giving states the flexibility to raise or eliminate this asset limitation; two thirds of all welfare recipients live in states that maintain a vehicle asset limitation (Urban Institute, 2001; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2000). Further, Sullivan (forthcoming) finds that eliminating the vehicle asset increases auto ownership among low-income single mothers; a shift from a \$1,500 vehicle exemption to a full vehicle exemption increases the probability of owning a vehicle by 20 percent for low-educated single mothers.

Vehicle ownership programs also show some promise. In response to the employment-oriented focus of current welfare programs, a growing number of public and non-profit agencies have established programs to help low-income families purchase automobiles. These programs include a variety of strategies such as providing loans for auto purchases, maintenance and repairs; leasing programs; and automobile ownership programs in which agencies and organizations acquire vehicles and, then, transfer them to needy families (Wong, Ma, and Hayden, 2003). According to the National Economic Development and Law Center ([http://www.nedlc.org/center/car\\_ppd\\_car\\_map.htm](http://www.nedlc.org/center/car_ppd_car_map.htm)), there are approximately 60 low-income auto ownership programs in the U.S. of which eight are in California. Although most existing programs are new and relatively small making it difficult to evaluate their effectiveness conclusively, emerging evidence suggests that vehicle ownership programs contribute to better employment outcomes for participants and should be supported (Brabo et al., 2003).

Finally, Individual Development Accounts (IDAs) can help low-income families accumulate savings and purchase vehicles. IDAs are savings accounts for low-income workers that provide an incentive to save by matching participants' deposits with public and private funds. While welfare funds can be used to match IDAs for the purchase of automobiles, this is rarely done since auto-related IDAs may be considered assets for the purposes of eligibility determination for some other federal benefits. Federal and state programs must be altered to ensure that they are an allowable expense and will not jeopardize program eligibility.

An IDA program has been administered as part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR). The program provides matched savings accounts and financial education to low-income refugees for a number of purposes including automobile purchases. Federal funds are available—on a competitive basis—to public and non-profit organizations to provide matched savings up to \$2,000 per individual refugee and \$4,000 per refugee household. From the onset of the program through 2002, 57 percent of participant asset goals were for vehicle purchases (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2002). However, while the ORR has been the second largest funder of IDAs in the country, in recent years due to budget cuts, the program has been reduced substantially. In 2002, ORR awarded 49 IDA grants totaling \$18.4 million. In contrast, the 2005 program letter reports that \$1.5 million will be allocated to the program, funding only 7 to 8 recipients (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2005). Further, the announcement requires that accounts for automobile purchases represent less than 10 percent of all IDAs established through the program. These figures suggest that funds for

this program should be increased and greater flexibility given in the use of these funds for automobiles purchases.

Programs to facilitate auto ownership among welfare recipients also may have the added benefit of enabling low-income families to purchase newer vehicles that have fewer mechanical difficulties. In California, for example, the vehicle asset limitation is currently set at \$4,650, well below what is needed to purchase a reliable automobile. Many auto ownership programs have also addressed the auto “reliability” issue. Some programs have established funds to help participants with auto maintenance such as incorporating regular maintenance costs as part of loans or establishing agreements with city and county mechanics to provide free or low-cost maintenance to individuals who receive cars (Reichert, 1998). Other programs help participants transition from short-term, perhaps older vehicles, to newer, better-quality vehicles particularly as their incomes rise (Brenna, 2005).

There is also a role for public transit improvements. In some dense urban neighborhoods, such as neighborhoods located in close proximity to employment centers, public transit may enable riders to travel to their destinations in a reasonable amount of time. In these neighborhoods, where transit ridership tends to be quite high, transit agencies must provide adequate levels of service. They must also ensure that services are accessible to foreign-born neighborhood residents and, in particular, address the language barriers facing immigrants and refugees. Many transit agencies already provide services to improve transit information for those with limited English proficiency (LEP). They were mandated to do so following President Clinton’s signing of Executive Order 13166 on August 11, 2000 and the subsequent release by the Department of Justice of the policy

guidance document, “Enforcement of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964--National Origin Discrimination against Persons with Limited English Proficiency.” Executive Order 13166, entitled “Improving Access to Services for Persons with Limited English Proficiency,” requires that:

...each Federal agency shall examine the services it provides and develop and implement a system by which LEP persons can meaningfully access those services consistent with, and without unduly burdening, the fundamental mission of the agency. Each Federal agency shall also work to ensure that recipients of Federal financial assistance (recipients) provide meaningful access to their LEP applicants and beneficiaries (The White House, 2000).

The Department of Transportation (DOT) responded to these regulations by releasing “DOT Guidance to Recipients on Special Language Services to Limited English Proficient (LEP) Beneficiaries,” a document that specifies how the DOT can provide meaningful access to LEP persons by ensuring that they are “given adequate information, are able to understand that information, and are able to participate effectively in recipient programs or activities, where appropriate (U.S. Department of Transportation, 2001:6736).” The document further specifies the components of providing “meaningful access” to services. Transit agencies that receive federal funds must conduct a thorough assessment of the language needs of the affected population and communities served, develop a written language assistance plan, provide staff training to support this plan, provide necessary language services, and monitor the effectiveness of the program.

There are three primary methods by which agencies can provide language assistance services—oral interpretation, written translation, and alternative, non-verbal communication. Oral interpretation includes providing skilled interpreters such as employing bilingual staff, hiring permanent or part-time interpreters, or establishing telephone interpreter lines. Agencies must also ensure that written materials routinely

available in English are translated into other languages. This includes “applications, consent forms, letters containing important information regarding participation in a program...notices pertaining to the reduction, denial or termination of services or benefits or that require a response from beneficiaries, notices advising LEP persons of the availability of free language assistance, and other outreach materials be translated into the non-English language of each regularly encountered LEP group eligible to be served or likely to be directly affected by the recipient’s program (U.S. Department of Transportation, 2001:6740).” Finally, the DOT also encourages agencies to use methods and devices that do not use language such as pictograms, symbols, diagrams, color-coded warnings, illustrations, graphics, and pictures.

There is evidence that transportation agencies are attempting to comply with these requirements under threat of potential litigation based on Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 barring discrimination based on national origin, among other factors, by any program or activity receiving federal assistance. See, for example, the report produced by the National Capital Region Transportation Planning Board (<http://www.mwcog.org/uploads/committee-documents/9ltfWg20030626164928.pdf>) or the Residential Transit Coordinator (RTC) program established in King County, Washington (<http://www.metrokc.gov/kcdot/aboutus/intrans/2004/6multilingual.htm>). However, neither the extent of programs to provide special language services for those with limited English language proficiency programs nor the effectiveness of existing programs have been examined.

Finally, the study suggests a need for additional research to more fully explore the transportation needs of Southeast Asians. This study is a start; however, larger sample

sizes are needed to examine ethnic as well as geographic differences among Southeast Asian refugees. A larger sample size might help to better explain why Southeast Asian welfare recipients are more auto-dependent than other low-income households and their specific auto- and transit-related barriers. Further, any programs to address these transportation barriers must be evaluated to ensure that they are being used utilized and that they effectively meet the needs of this population group.

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