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Authors

Espeland, Sierra

LanzDuret-Hernandez, Julia

Rowangould, Dana

et al.

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Who Experiences Rural Travel Burdens?

Evidence from Car-Limited and Latin American Migrant Households

Sierra Espeland, *National Institute of Standards and Technology*

Julia LanzDuret-Hernandez and Dana Rowangould, *University of Vermont*

Sarah Grajdura, *Utah State University*

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Issue

Transportation systems provide vital connections to essential destinations including jobs, healthcare services, education, and recreational opportunities. However, people living in rural communities face unique transportation challenges, including greater distances to destinations and few high quality transportation options. Barriers to mobility can lead to transportation burdens, such as high transportation costs or unmet transportation needs—whereby trips cannot be made. These transportation burdens can adversely affect well-being. Differences between rural and nonrural areas in the built environment and population characteristics are well documented and studied. However, little is known about the differences in who experiences transportation burdens in rural versus nonrural areas, the factors that drive these differences, and how to improve mobility and access in rural populations.

Researchers from the University of Vermont analyzed national survey data on transportation

burdens. Then, guided by a community advisory board, the researchers interviewed two groups of Vermont residents with limited or no access to a vehicle: 42 people living in small and rural communities and 14 Latin American migrant workers. The interviews focused on transportation experiences and barriers to mobility.

Key Research Findings

Rural populations in the US experience heightened transportation burdens and disparate outcomes. People living in rural areas across the US are about twice as likely as those in nonrural areas to report unmet transportation needs (Figure 1). Car access is the most important predictor of unmet needs in rural US communities. Those with limited car access and people of color are disproportionately transportation-burdened in rural areas. Additionally, the nationwide analysis indicates a variation across different types of rural areas: people living in small towns face fewer transportation burdens than people living in more dispersed rural areas.

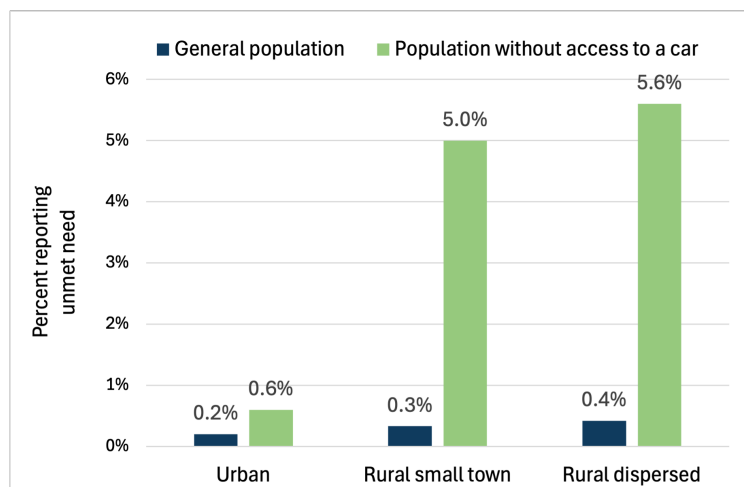


Figure 1: Share of the general population and of people without access to a car who reported an unmet transportation need—namely, they did not travel on a given day because they did not have a transportation option.

Need for low-cost vehicle maintenance programs to support rural mobility. Interviews with rural, car-limited Vermonters indicate that many with low incomes owned vehicles that they could not afford to maintain or fix, which greatly reduced their mobility and quality of life. The community advisory board expressed interest in the potential for investing in programs that would help lower-income households repair vehicles to regain transportation independence.

Potential to build on community networks through rural shared mobility programs. People without car access rely on friends and family for rides and some rely on rural transit services. Investing in shared mobility programs has the potential to provide greater mobility and access. The community advisory board and people interviewed expressed interest in creating and expanding carshare, rideshare, and innovative rural transit services.

Driver's privilege cards increase independence for Latin American migrant workers. Driver privilege cards, which are state-issued licenses for people who are not able to provide proof of legal status in the US, greatly increased independence and mobility for many Latin American migrant workers interviewed.

Legal landscape, resource access, native language information, and community networks are tied to mobility for rural Latin American migrant workers. According to interviews with workers, the legal landscape and resource access—including access to drivers' licenses, personal vehicles, and personal networks—significantly affect their mobility and quality of life. Difficulty accessing transportation did not stem from a lack of financial resources but from a lack of knowledge of transportation resources, a lack of native language options for information about transportation resources, and legal and social contexts that prevent participants from feeling safe when leaving

their homes. Some respondents reported feeling less safe when closer to the US-Canada border, where border enforcement is more active. All participants without a car and license reported paying for rides to get from one place to another, which requires connections with community networks.

Policy Implications

- Expanding housing options (including affordable housing) and transportation resources in rural town centers could increase people's mobility and access to important destinations and amenities.
- Expanding programs to improve vehicle access, through shared mobility (carshare, rideshare, innovative rural transit services) or discounted maintenance and repair of privately owned vehicles is critical to mobility and quality of life among rural populations.
- Expanding access to permissive driver's licensing laws and investing in organizations and programs that strengthen community ties and improve information dissemination (including native language options) are crucial to making mobility and community resources accessible to Latin American migrant workers.

More Information

This policy brief is drawn from "Evaluation of Rural Travel Constraints and Travel Burdens in the U.S. and in Rural Zero-Car Households," a report from the National Center for Sustainable Transportation, authored by Sierra Espeland, Julia LanzDuret-Hernandez, Sarah Grajdura, and Dana Rowangould of the University of Vermont. The full report can be found on the NCST website at <https://ncst.ucdavis.edu/project/evaluation-travel-constraints-and-travel-burdens-us-and-rural-zero-car-households>. For more information about the findings in this brief, contact Dana Rowangould at dana.rowangould@uvm.edu.

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