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TRAVEL PATTERNS AND WELFARE TO WORK

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The nation is about to enter into the second stage of welfare reform with its federal reauthorization within the upcoming year. The first stage of welfare reform started with the enactment of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), which transformed welfare from an income entitlement program to a transition-to-work program. As the federal and state governments reauthorize welfare reform with the goal of refining existing policies and programs to enhance the ability of welfare recipients to find and hold employment, it is worthwhile to examine what we have learned about the travel patterns of welfare-to-work participants during the initial phase of welfare to work. The shift to a jobs-first approach has made transportation barriers a top priority (Blumenberg and Ong, 2001). Our recent research demonstrates that employment and earnings are tied to access to private and public transportation (Ong, 2001; Ong et al., 2001; Ong and Houston, forthcoming). Here, we examine another dimension of the nexus between welfare reform and transportation: the impact on travel patterns.

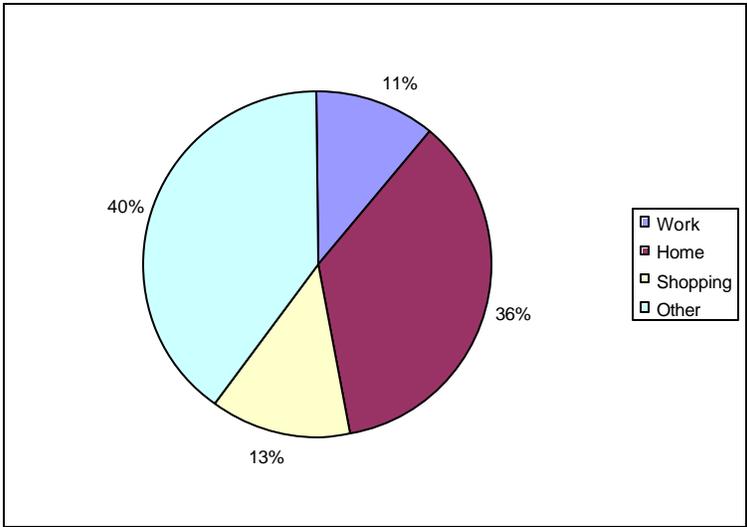
One of the consequences of moving people off welfare and into work is a dramatic change in their transportation needs and travel behavior as observed in among participants in welfare-to-work programs in Los Angeles County in 1999 and 2000 (Ong et al., 2001). Welfare recipients constitute a very disadvantaged population. Four in five

lived in a single-parent household and two in five had less than a high school degree, half did not own a car, and half were employed. Of those without a job half were actively engaged in job-search.¹

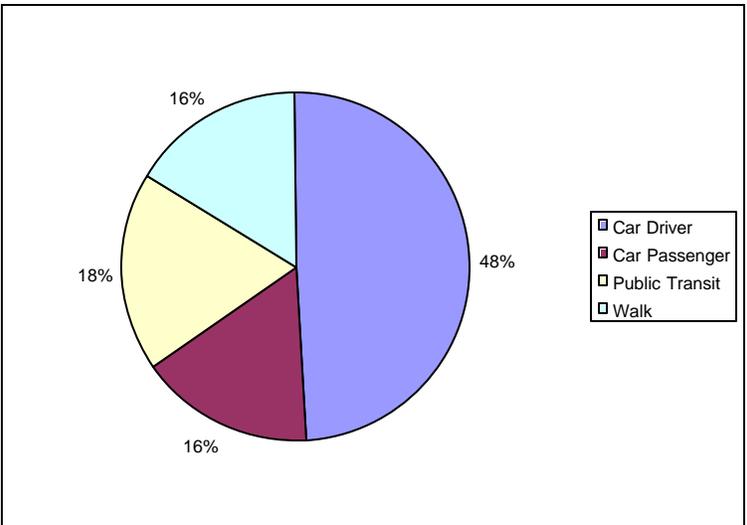
The travel patterns of recipients were complex. They made on the average slightly more than three trips a day.² In addition to work trips, a typical recipient makes multiple daily trips to fulfill family and household obligations. Work trips account for only about 11 percent of all trips (Graph 1). Nearly two-thirds (64 percent) of the trips were taken in private vehicles (Graph 2). Modal choice was highly correlated with whether or not a household possesses a car. Among car owners, a large majority of their trips (83 percent) was by car, compared to only a third (35 percent) of the trips among those without a car.

1 The statistics are based on a random survey of about 1,500 participants in welfare-to-work programs. The survey was sponsored by the Department of Public Social Services of Los Angeles County, designed by the Lewis Center for Regional Policy Studies at UCLA, and conducted by the Survey Research Center at the California State University, Fullerton. The sample was drawn from administrative files for those in the welfare-to-work program in September, October or November of 1999. The survey was conducted between November 1999 and February 2000, automated in a CATI (Computer Assisted Telephone Interview) system, and administered over the telephone in English, Spanish, Vietnamese, and Armenian.

2 Trip information is based on an abbreviated trip diary.



Graph 1. Purpose of Trips Made by Welfare-to-Work Participants



Graph 2. Mode of Trips Made by Welfare-to-Work Participants

Welfare-to-work requirements impose substantial changes to recipient travel patterns, trip characteristics, and travel mode. Table 1 describes the trips by welfare-to-work activity: (1) a baseline group comprised of those not working and not engaged in

job search, (2) a second group comprised of those unemployed and undertaking job search and/or job preparation activities, and (3) a final group comprised of those working.

Employed recipients made more daily trips compared to the baseline group. Recipients in job-search activities experienced the greatest travel burden. They made almost twice as many trips daily compared to the baseline group. This can partially be explained by the job-search requirements of welfare-to-work programs, which mandates that participants complete several job applications per day.

Job-searchers not only had the heaviest travel demand, but they also relied on the least reliable and least flexible forms of transportation. They were more likely than others to take public transit and were less likely to take trips by private vehicle. Many recipients in the job-search activities attempted to offset the heavy burden of travel by “chaining” their trips. That is, these recipients often combined travel to many destinations (e.g., childcare and attendance in Job Club) into one “trip.” This, however, often proved to be very difficult, particularly for those relying on public transit.

In addition to increasing the number of trips, working and job-search activities often generally shifted the time of day that recipients travel. Only a third of the baseline group initially left home during the morning peak hours, but three-quarters of those engaged in job-search left home at this time. Although this proportion drops after finding a job, approximately two-thirds continue to leave home for work early in the morning.

Table 1. Trips Characteristics by Welfare-to-Work Activity

	Unemployed, Not In Labor Force	Unemployed, Job-Search Day	Employed Working day
Avg. # of Trips per Day	2.5	4.3	3.4
More than 5 trips per day	19 %	38 %	27 %
Travel AM Peak hours	33 %	74 %	65 %
By Car	56 %	53 %	68 %
By Public Transit	16 %	28 %	20 %
By Walking	25 %	18 %	10 %
Involved in Trip Chain	12 %	26 %	22 %

A key finding is that as welfare recipients moved into the world of work, their travel patterns start to converge to those of other low-income parents in many ways. This can be seen by comparing some of the above statistics on recipients to comparable statistics on low-income, single-parent respondents in the 1995 Nationwide Personal Transportation Survey (NPTS). The average number of trips per day for recipients is only slightly lower than that of other low-income, single parents. For both populations, work trips comprise only one-tenth of all trips, while shopping and other purposes dominate. For both groups, less than one-fifth use public transportation. Moreover, the average commute distance for employment is about seven miles for recipients and about nine miles for NPTS low-income single parents. It is difficult to determine the exact degree of convergence between the travel patterns of these two populations since the survey of welfare-to-work participants was conducted in Los Angeles County in 1999-2000 and the NPTS was conducted nationwide in 1995, but the available evidence of convergence is compelling. This is not surprising since the goal of welfare reform has been, and will continue to be, to transform the welfare population into a working poor

population. This means that the welfare population will encounter many of the same transportation problems faced by all low-income people. This suggests that there should be a convergence of transportation policies and programs that currently treat those on welfare and other working poor as disparate populations.

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