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Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/86f650pb>

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Publication Date

2024-06-20

DOI

10.17610/T6X31V

JUNE 2024

Improving Economic, Social, Health, and Environmental Outcomes for Extreme Commuters



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Issue

Extreme commuting — spending 180 minutes or more traveling to and from work — is increasing worldwide, especially in urban areas. This growth has been driven by limited affordable housing and job opportunities. Los Angeles residents, particularly those with lower-income jobs, face long commutes due to housing constraints and distance from job centers. This research study widens the concept of extreme commuting to extreme travel, which encompasses travel to all destinations.

This research examines how extreme travel affects economic, social, environmental, and health outcomes for lower-income people living, working, or studying in the San Fernando Valley. This work was conducted in collaboration with Pacoima Beautiful, an environmental justice community-based organization primarily serving Latinx communities in the Northeast San Fernando Valley. The findings can inform policy and planning efforts, particularly in anticipation of the East San Fernando Valley Light Rail Transit Project, and contribute to the broader discourse of environmental justice and transportation equity.

Study Approach

This project involved a community-engaged research process. The researcher developed each step of the process alongside Pacoima Beautiful, using a qualitative approach to investigate the effects of extreme travel. The researcher conducted 14 interviews with people who experience

extreme travel and have connections to the San Fernando Valley, which allowed for in-depth conversations about first-hand experiences. The researcher also surveyed 93 people to compare outcomes and travel experiences between people who experience extreme travel and those who do not.

Key Findings

- **Transportation Challenges:** Participants highlighted significant transportation barriers, especially for those who depend on public transit. Long travel times and car-centric infrastructure impact residents' access to essential services like employment, health care, and amenities, with many expressing frustration over limited mobility options.
- **Health and Social Impacts:** Extreme travel negatively affects both physical and mental health, with concerns ranging from air pollution exposure to exhaustion and stress. Participants reported missing out on social activities and personal care, which can exacerbate feelings of isolation and impact relationships with family and friends.
- **Economic Impacts:** Extreme travel imposes financial burdens, with participants citing high vehicle-related expenses and limited access to affordable transportation alternatives. These contribute to financial strain and hinder opportunities for socioeconomic advancement.

Social Impacts	
missing out on activities	
socializing	50%
exercising	43%
other personal care (grooming, resting, etc.)	57%
leisure activities	43%
time spent traveling affects relationships	
limited time for quality time with family	57%
fractured relationships with friends	29%
inability to contribute to household chores	50%

Environmental Impacts	
air quality	
worried about pollution	93%
response to air quality concerns	
avoidance / escapism	21%
exposure mitigation	50%

Economic Impacts	
transportation costs	
transportation expenses are a burden	57%
car expenses are high	57%

Health Impacts	
physical	
exhaustion / fatigue	93%
waking up very early	50%
pain	57%
lack of movement / sitting too long	86%
unfavorable eating habits	21%
exacerbating pre-existing conditions	36%
mental	
anxiety	36%
boredom	21%
frustration/irritability	43%
loneliness/isolation	43%
stress	57%
other	
lack of green spaces	14%
limited access to healthcare services	36%

Figure 1. The percentages of interviewees who reported experiencing negative impacts to social, economic, environmental, and health outcomes

- Causes of Extreme Travel:** The primary drivers of extreme travel emerge from housing affordability constraints and current land use patterns. Participants emphasized the need for systemic solutions beyond improvements in transportation infrastructure to address these underlying issues and alleviate travel burdens.

Recommendations

- Transportation Cost Reduction:** Offer financial assistance for vehicle-related expenses and expand mobility programs to alleviate transit costs for low-income individuals.
- Transit Service Improvements:** Advocate for enhanced bus service reliability and accessibility, particularly in underserved areas like the San Fernando Valley.

- Access to Social and Recreational Spaces:** Promote transit routes connecting residents to public parks and social gathering spaces, strengthening community ties and well-being.
- Air Quality Improvements:** Advocate for policies to reduce air pollution and emissions, and educate the public on risk mitigation strategies to minimize health impacts.
- Housing and High-Quality Job Access:** Address the root causes of extreme travel by increasing access to affordable housing near essential destinations and supporting the creation of high-quality jobs where people live.



Rios Gutierrez, A. (2024). Lost Hours, Lost Opportunities: The Toll of Extreme Travel on Lower Income Communities in the San Fernando Valley (Master’s capstone, UCLA). Retrieved from: <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5f48f7tg>

Project ID: UCLA ITS-LAS2405 | DOI:10.17610/T6X31V

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This capstone project was also supported by

UCLA Lewis Center
for Regional Policy Studies