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Cars, Buses, and Jobs: Welfare Participants and Employment Access in Los Angeles**ABSTRACT**

Some studies suggest that, among other obstacles to employment, welfare participants face a spatial separation from jobs and other employment-related services. Using data on welfare participants, low-wage jobs, and public transit in Los Angeles County, this study examines the relative access that welfare participants have to employment opportunities. Our analysis shows that welfare participants' access to employment varies dramatically depending on their residential location and commute mode. Many welfare participants live in job-rich neighborhoods and are able to reach many jobs without difficulty by either car or public transit. However, other welfare participants live in job-poor neighborhoods where a reliance on public transit significantly reduces their access to employment. In these neighborhoods, long and unreliable commutes on public transit often severely limit their ability to find and reliably travel to and from work. Therefore, given the distinctly uneven patterns of employment opportunities in metropolitan areas, policies to address the transportation needs of welfare participants should be targeted to reflect the characteristics of the neighborhoods in which welfare participants live.

INTRODUCTION

The passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 fundamentally transformed the provision of social assistance in the United States. Gone is Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), a program that entitled needy families with children to an array of benefits and public services. In its place is Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), a program that abolishes federal entitlements, provides flexible block grants to the states, mandates tough new work requirements, and imposes a five-year lifetime limit on the receipt of public assistance. No longer can low-income families rely on long-term government support to remain at home and raise their families. Current welfare programs mandate employment for most recipients and offer temporary financial aid and short-term employment assistance to help recipients transition into the labor market.

To meet the employment targets established by the federal government, agencies must implement programs and services that enable welfare participants to make rapid transitions into local labor markets. Some studies suggest that, among other obstacles to employment, welfare participants face a spatial separation from jobs and other employment-related services that inhibit finding and keeping jobs. Evidence from metropolitan areas such as Atlanta, Boston, and Cleveland show that welfare participants disproportionately live in inner-city neighborhoods, far from entry-level employment opportunities located in the suburbs (1,2,3,4,5). This spatial mismatch between welfare participants and jobs can cause costly commutes; a mismatch can also limit recipients' access to informal job networks, make it difficult for recipients who work far from home to respond to household crises, and lead to unpredictable work arrival times. Thus,

limited geographic access to employment may hinder recipients' ability to both find and keep jobs.

Using data on welfare participants, jobs, and public transit in Los Angeles, this study examines the relative access that welfare participants have to employment opportunities. The analysis shows that most participants do not face the typical "spatial mismatch" between residential locations in the central city and job opportunities in the outer suburbs. Despite job *growth* in suburban neighborhoods, the highest concentration of jobs in Los Angeles remains in the central part of the city, and the average commute distance for welfare participants is relatively short, approximately 7 miles. However, depending on their residential location and commute mode, welfare participants' access to employment varies dramatically. Many welfare participants live in job-rich neighborhoods and are able to reach many jobs by either car or public transit. However, other welfare participants live in job-poor neighborhoods where a reliance on public transit significantly reduces their access to employment. In these neighborhoods, long and unreliable commutes on public transit often severely limit their ability to find and reliably travel to and from work.

Given the distinctly uneven patterns of employment opportunities in metropolitan areas, policies to address the transportation needs of welfare participants should reflect the characteristics of the neighborhoods in which welfare participants live. If welfare participants live in job-rich neighborhoods, the evidence suggests that public transit can effectively transport them to jobs. In these neighborhoods, policymakers may wish to invest in public transit improvements. In job-poor neighborhoods improved fixed-route public transportation service is unlikely to substantially increase employment access. In

these neighborhoods, welfare participants would clearly benefit far more from policies to increase auto ownership and to improve alternative forms of non-fixed-route transportation.

TRANSPORATION AND ACCESS TO JOBS

Most welfare participants commute outside of their neighborhoods to find employment. For these recipients, transportation provides a vital link to the labor market. However, in many cities commuting even short distances is made difficult by limited access to fast and reliable forms of transportation whether that be on public transit or in cars. As a result, many welfare participants identify transportation as a major obstacle to their employment. Moreover, a growing number of studies show an empirical relationship between welfare participants' access to transportation and their employment outcomes.

Many welfare participants face a spatial separation from jobs makes it difficult for them to find and keep employment (6). Typically, this spatial separation is characterized as a mismatch between welfare participants living in inner-city neighborhoods, distant from job vacancies disproportionately located in suburban communities. The relevance of the spatial mismatch literature to welfare participants, a predominantly female population, is uncertain. Most of the literature on the spatial mismatch hypothesis focuses on the economic opportunities of men, particularly African American men; and the literature with respect to women has been both scanty and inconclusive (7,8,9,10,11). Additionally, the spatial mismatch may not be as relevant in Los Angeles as in other cities such as Atlanta, Chicago, Milwaukee, and Philadelphia (2,5). However, even if

welfare participants are not commuting long distances from central cities to suburbs, they often face more localized spatial mismatches that require them to commute to destinations outside of their immediate neighborhoods.

For many participants, commuting even short distances is made difficult by limited access to fast and reliable forms of transportation. Not surprisingly, the survey data show that welfare participants have fewer reliable transportation options than do higher income commuters. First, most welfare participants do not own automobiles. Estimates of the percentage of welfare recipients in California who own cars vary widely, from 7 percent to approximately 25 percent (12,13,14). According to data from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (12), automobile ownership among welfare recipients is 6.7 percent nationally and 19 percent in California. Other California surveys place auto ownership among recipients at approximately 25 percent (13,14). Data from a quality control survey administered by the California Department of Social Services shows that 18 percent of welfare participants in Los Angeles own automobiles compared to 35 percent of recipients statewide.

Auto *ownership* data, however, are a surprisingly weak proxy for travel by autos among welfare recipients. Relatively high percentages of recipients commute to work by either borrowing cars or carpooling with others. The results of a five-day transportation survey of recipients traveling to the offices of the county's employment program show that one-half of the recipients arrived to the offices by car (15). Of the 50 percent that arrived by car, 44 percent used their own car; 34 percent asked for a ride, and 22 percent borrowed a car (15). In contrast, only 4.5 percent of all Los Angeles commuters traveled to work on public transit (16).

Those participants who do not travel by car are largely transit dependent, relying on the existing public transportation system for their travels around the region. For the transit-dependent recipient, the existing network of buses and trains may not adequately accommodate their complicated travel patterns. Some studies find that public transit does not adequately serve job-rich destinations (1,5). For example, limited night and weekend service may make it difficult for welfare recipients to commute to jobs that require off-peak travel. Welfare participants often complain of the difficulty of using public transit to transport not only themselves but also their children. Public transit does not easily accommodate trip chaining, for example multiple stops on the way to and from work. Additionally, public transit – stations and vehicles -- do not typically incorporate design elements that allow women to physically travel with strollers, shopping carts, parcels, and small children (17). Finally, issues of public safety can be a concern; despite declining crime rates, women often express safety concerns related to dark and deserted transit stations, bus stops, and parking lots (18).

Given the many transportation obstacles facing welfare participants, it is not surprising that they, themselves, identify transportation as one of the key employment barriers that they face. In a 1996 job readiness survey conducted by the California Department of Social Services, 24 percent of participants who had problems finding jobs stated that transportation was a barrier to their employment success. Other studies also find widespread transportation problems among welfare participants (19). Additionally, a growing number of studies show the relationship between transportation barriers and employment outcomes. Spatial access to jobs increases the employment and earnings of welfare participants (20,21,22,23) and reduces welfare usage rates (24). Studies also find

a positive relationship between the employment rates of welfare participants and access to cars (14,19).

WELFARE RECIPIENTS, JOBS AND TRANSPORTATION IN LOS ANGELES

Like most other parts of the country, the number of people on welfare in Los Angeles has declined, falling by approximately 27 percent from its peak in March of 1995 to April of 1999 (25). Many welfare participants have found employment, albeit in low-wage occupations. However, as recipients with the fewest barriers find employment leave welfare, those remaining are the ones most likely to face multiple and often intractable obstacles to succeeding in the labor market. As this study shows, transportation remains a significant obstacle to their employment success.

This study examines the relative access that welfare participants have to jobs in Los Angeles. To examine this issue we assembled data on the geographic location of welfare recipients and low-wage jobs and combined this information with transportation data. The study includes the central part of Los Angeles County, an area that accounts for 87 percent of all welfare recipients in the entire county. This area is primarily served by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), the largest transit operator in California. Seventy-six percent of all welfare recipients in the County live within the MTA service area.

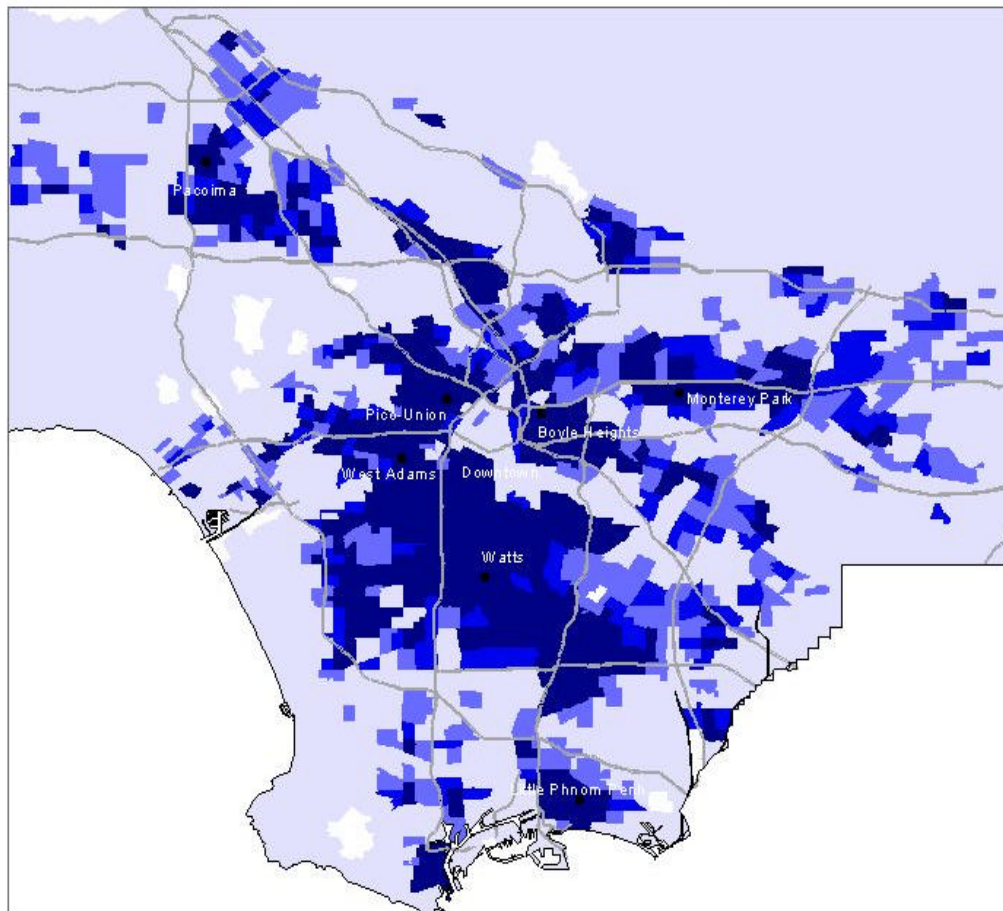
The residential location of welfare participants is based on Los Angeles County administrative data for the 3rd quarter of 1998. The data include addresses of welfare participants that were then geocoded by census tract. The employment data are from the American Business Directory produced by American Business Information, Inc. Welfare

participants – 80 percent of who are women – are disproportionately concentrated in low-wage, feminized occupations (5,26,27). Therefore, we estimated the number of low-wage, feminized occupations by census tract by identifying feminized occupations using data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. We then apply an industrial-occupational matrix developed by the California Employment Development Department to estimate the number of low-wage, feminized occupations in each census tract. Finally, we add to our analysis transportation data from the local Metropolitan Planning Organization, the Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG). These data include the spatial location of transit lines and bus stops and estimated peak-hour commute times by mode between each Traffic Analysis Zone.

Residential Location of Welfare Recipients

Figure 1 shows the geographic location of welfare recipients in our study. As the map illustrates, high concentrations of welfare recipients can be found in a few neighborhoods that are scattered around the County. These neighborhoods are identified on the map by name and include Boyle Heights, Little Phnom Penh (City of Long Beach), Monterey Park, Pacoima, Pico-Union, Watts, and West Adams. These neighborhoods are diverse. Some of them are located in the suburbs and others in the central city. Additionally, the racial and ethnic composition of welfare recipients in these neighborhoods varies significantly. Hispanic welfare recipients (52 percent of the entire caseload) are located in each of the neighborhoods; however, they are particularly concentrated in Boyle Heights, Pacoima, and Pico-Union. African American recipients (29 percent of the caseload) are concentrated in neighborhoods directly south of downtown in West Adams and Watts. Asian recipients (6 percent of the caseload) are

Figure 1: TANF Recipient Density



Adult Recipients/Sqm
0 - 100
100 - 200
200 - 300
300 and above

Source: IBPS (July 1998)

0 8 16 24 Miles

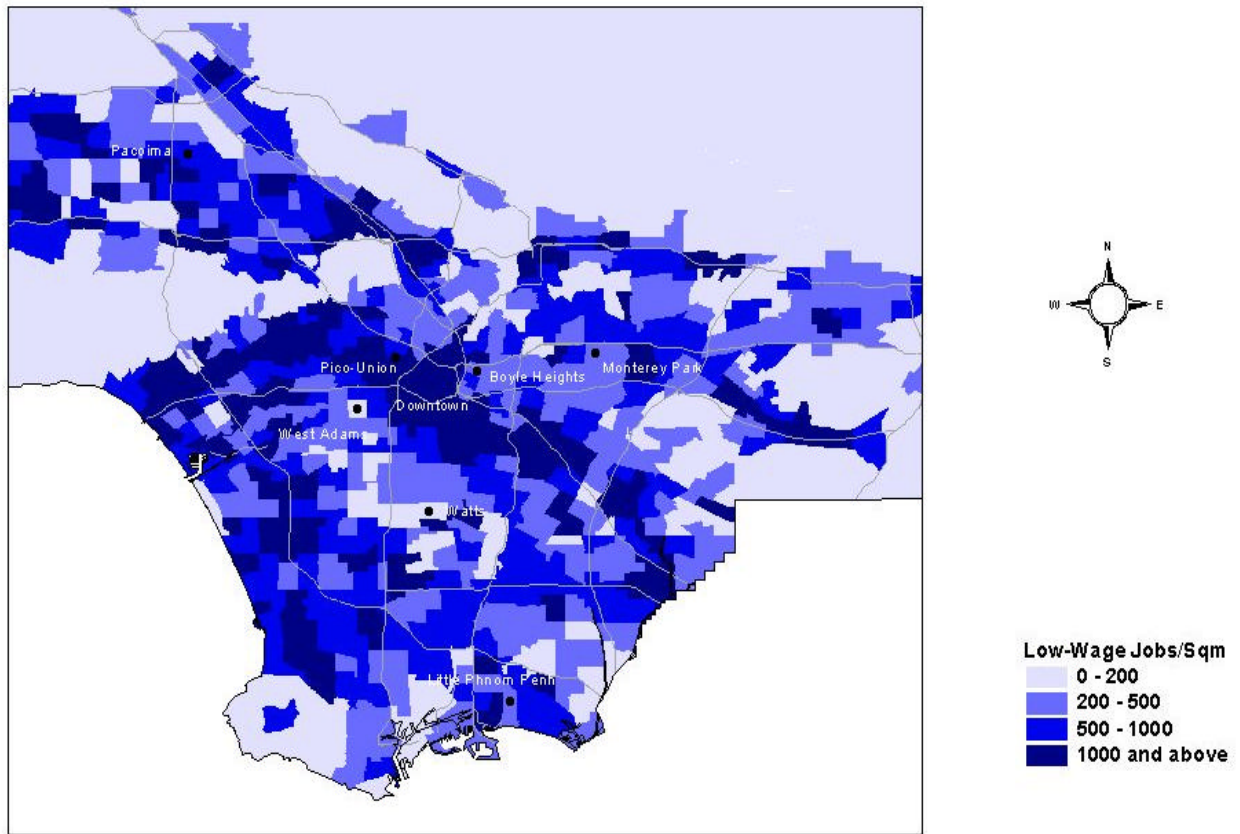
concentrated in Little Phnom Penh and Monterey Park, communities with large concentrations of Southeast Asians many of whom qualified for welfare as part of refugee assistance programs (28). Finally, non-Hispanic white welfare recipients (13 percent of the caseload) are dispersed throughout the county.

Low-Wage, Feminized Occupations

Figure 2 depicts the relative job richness of census tracts throughout Los Angeles and shows the distribution of low-waged, feminized occupations. The data show, not surprisingly, that employment in Los Angeles is not characterized by a simple monocentric pattern. The darkest areas on the map represent the job richest census tracts for the kinds of lower wage jobs typically held by welfare recipients. The highest concentration of jobs is in downtown (the approximate center of the map) and along what is known as the Wilshire Corridor, the major boulevard that extends from downtown, through Beverly Hills, West Los Angeles, Santa Monica, and terminates at the coast. Other job-rich Los Angeles neighborhoods include areas to south of downtown such as the Ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach. The light shaded areas indicate districts where job access is relatively poor. These include many higher-income suburban neighborhoods as well as census tracts in South Central Los Angeles, the predominantly African American and Hispanic areas south and east of downtown.

A comparison of the spatial distribution of TANF recipients and low-wage, feminized occupations (Figures 1 and 2) shows two types of neighborhoods. The first is where there are high concentrations of welfare recipients living in close proximity to areas with ample employment. These areas include neighborhoods just east and southwest of the downtown area (Boyle Heights and Pico Union). The second type of

Figure 2: Low-Wage Feminized Occupations



Source: ABI (1998)

0 8 16 24 Miles

neighborhood is one with high concentrations of welfare recipients and relatively few jobs. Neighborhoods that fit into this category include neighborhoods such as Watts, south of downtown, and some low-income suburban neighborhoods such as Pacoima in the northeast San Fernando Valley.

Public Transportation

An analysis of the current public transportation system shows that welfare recipients in Los Angeles have uneven access to public transportation. Welfare recipients living in job-rich neighborhoods can reach a fair number of jobs using public transit. However, recipients who live in job-poor neighborhoods – whether those neighborhoods are located in the suburbs or the central city – have extremely limited access to employment. Although welfare recipients may be able to easily walk to a bus stop, long and unreliable transit commutes can severely limit their ability to find and reliably travel to and from work.

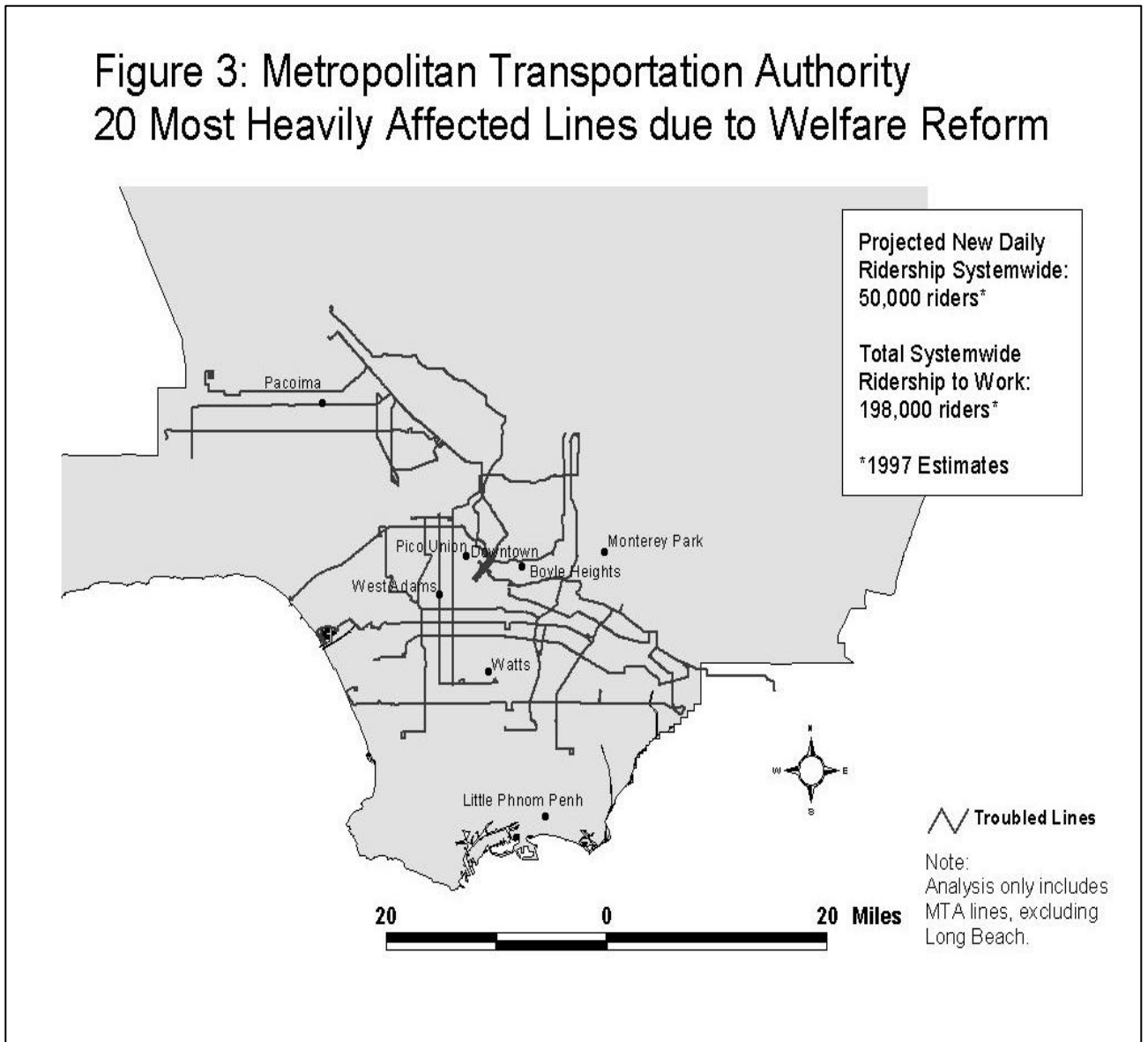
Data on welfare recipients' proximity to bus stops show that most are within walking distance of a stop; eighty-seven percent of all Los Angeles county recipients live within a quarter-mile of a transit stop. But while stops are generally accessible, the array of timely destinations served by these stops can vary significantly from neighborhood to neighborhood. In addition, many central city bus lines in Los Angeles are oversubscribed and most occasionally pass by waiting passengers (29). The issue of overcrowding on MTA buses was the focus of a lawsuit filed against the MTA in 1994. The NAACP Legal Defense Fund represented the plaintiffs and argued that the MTA intentionally discriminated against minority bus riders and, therefore, violated the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution and Title VI of the Civil Rights

Act of 1964 (30). The plaintiffs argued further that the MTA's expenditures on subway and light rail construction and regional commuter rail were taking place at the expense of the MTA's central city bus operations which service primarily low-income, minority riders (30). In October of 1996, the parties signed a consent decree that legally bound the MTA to expand existing bus services. Compliance with the consent decree has reduced but not eliminated overcrowding (31).

Therefore, the primary issues facing recipients are twofold. It is important to determine, first, whether recipients can board the bus once they arrive at their stops and, second, once they board the bus, whether they can travel to anywhere meaningful – a job, a day care center, the welfare office – in a reasonable amount of time. To examine how welfare reform might affect ridership on existing transit lines, we estimated the base capacity of MTA lines. We then adjusted these figures to account for current ridership and to develop a measure of the adjusted (or available) capacity on these lines. In other words, given current patterns of usage, we estimated the number of additional seated and standing passengers who can be accommodated on MTA buses and trains. Finally, we assumed that half of all current welfare recipients will enter the labor market and that two-thirds of these new workers would rely on public transit. Based on these estimates, we identified the 20 bus lines in Los Angeles that would experience significant capacity problems should a relatively high proportion of newly employed welfare recipients commute to work via public transit.¹ Figure 3 identifies these lines and shows that, while they are primarily located in the central part of the county, they also include some heavily

¹ These results present a best-case scenario since the analysis does not specifically examine MTA capacity during the peak period. Additionally, transit service during nights and weekends can be extremely limited.

Figure 3: Metropolitan Transportation Authority 20 Most Heavily Affected Lines due to Welfare Reform

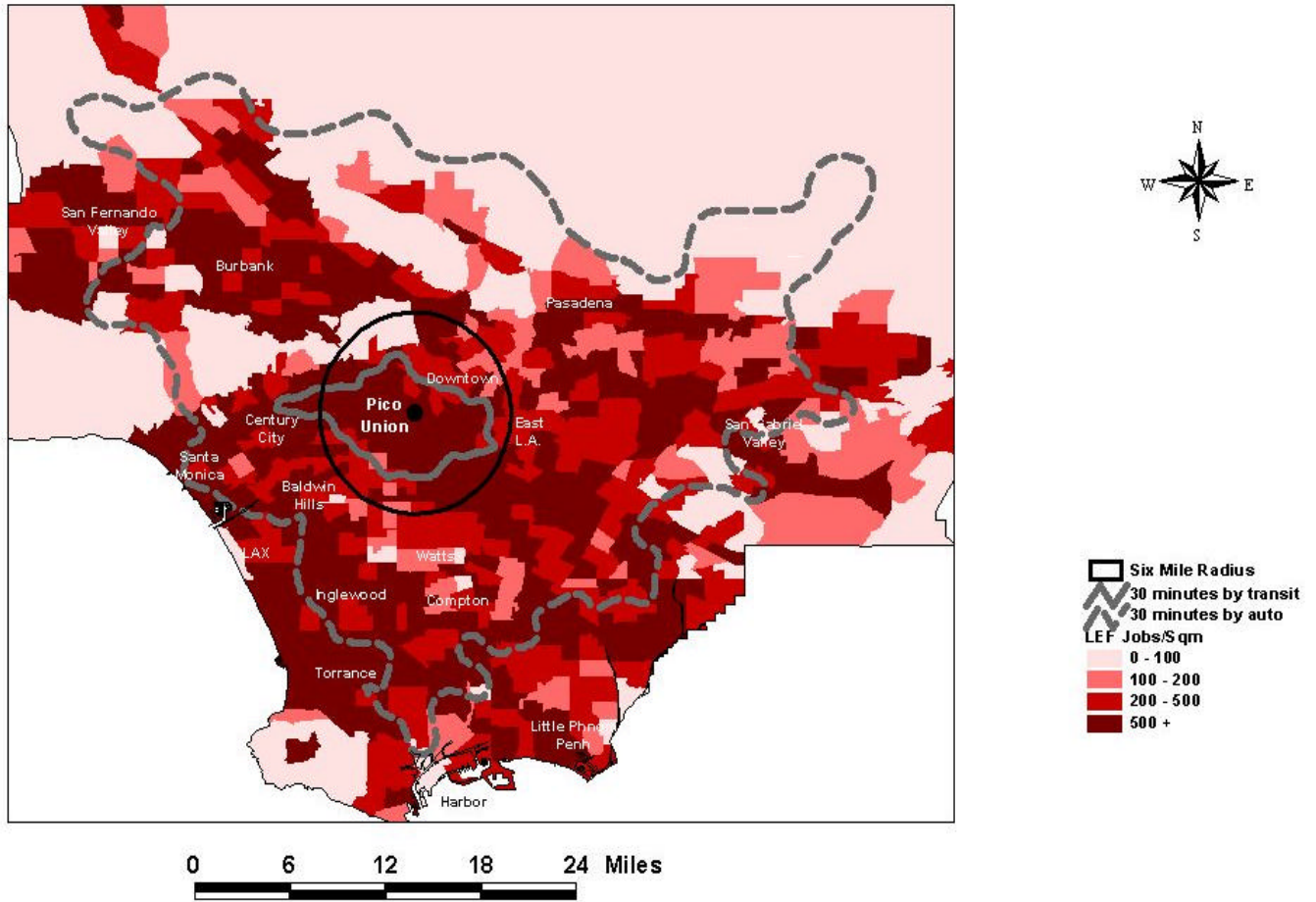


frequented lines in the San Fernando Valley, the suburban area located in the northern part of the map.

Even if welfare participants are able to board a bus or train, they still may not have good access to employment. Using data from the Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG), we calculated how far welfare recipients could travel by automobile and public transportation within 30 minutes on a congested road network simulating actual levels of vehicle delay.² We then estimated the number of low-wage, feminized jobs located within these 30-minute commute time buffers. The analysis shows that, in general, welfare recipients who travel using a car have fairly good access to jobs regardless of the neighborhood in which they live. Transit-dependent recipients, however, face uneven access to employment depending on whether they live in job-rich or job-poor neighborhoods. The following two figures illustrate this point by drawing on data for two different types of neighborhoods. The first neighborhood is Pico-Union located in close proximity to the job-rich downtown area. The second neighborhood, is Watts, a job-poor area located approximately 8 miles south of downtown.

Figure 4 shows the 30-minute time contours around the Pico-Union area. Within a 30-minute commute by bus, recipients who live in Pico Union have access to a substantial number of low-wage jobs (118,990). However, compared to recipients that rely on the bus, welfare recipients who travel by car have access to five times as many low-wage jobs (615,700) within a 30-minute commute. In Watts (Figure 5), the disparity between the job access of transit-dependent recipients and auto-dependent recipients is much, much greater. Recipients who travel by bus have access to 8,001 jobs; those that

**Figure 4: Low-Wage Job Access from Pico Union
30 Minutes by Transit and Auto**

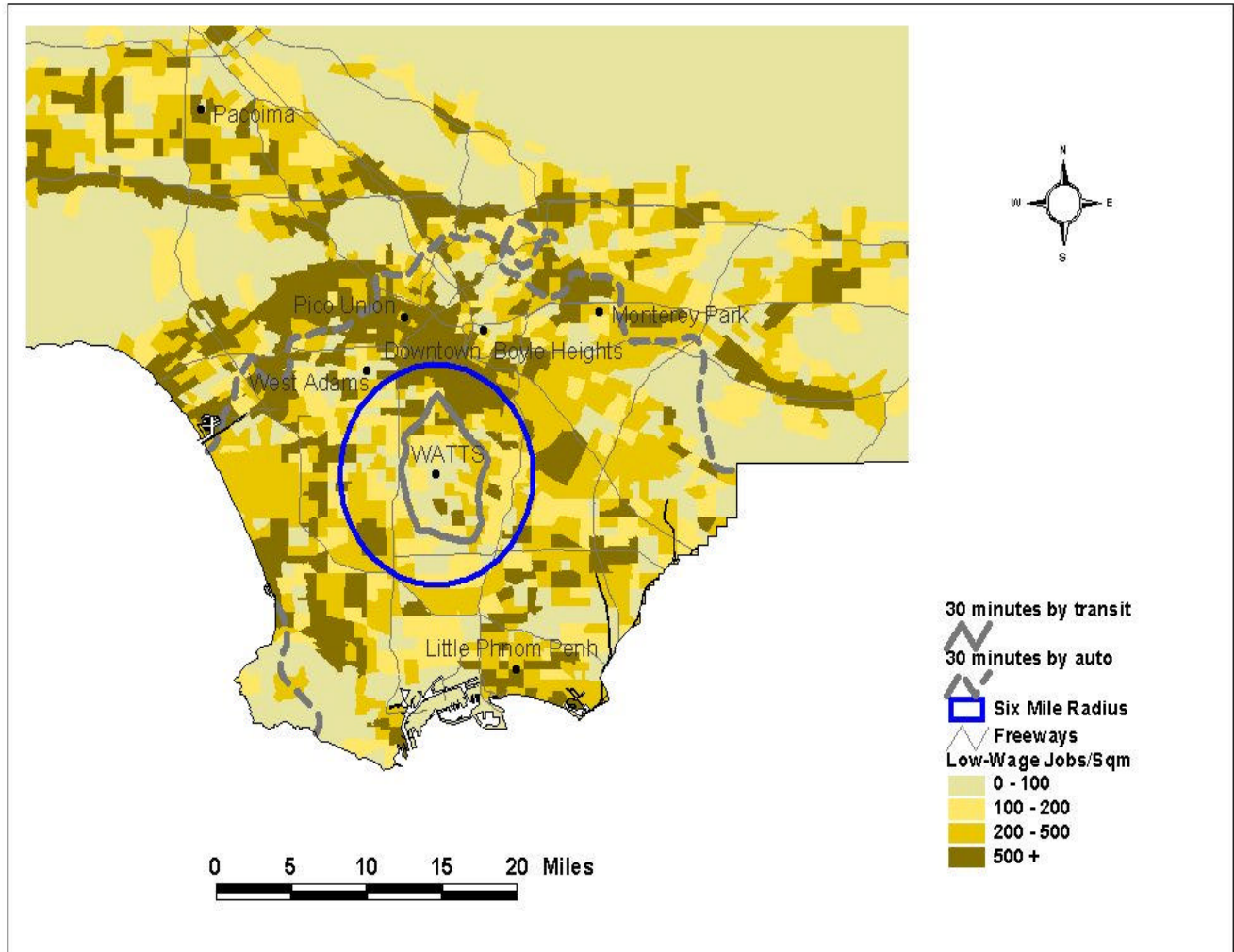


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rely on a car have access to more than 59 times as many jobs (468,561). In each of the identified neighborhoods, commuting by car allows recipients to access many more jobs

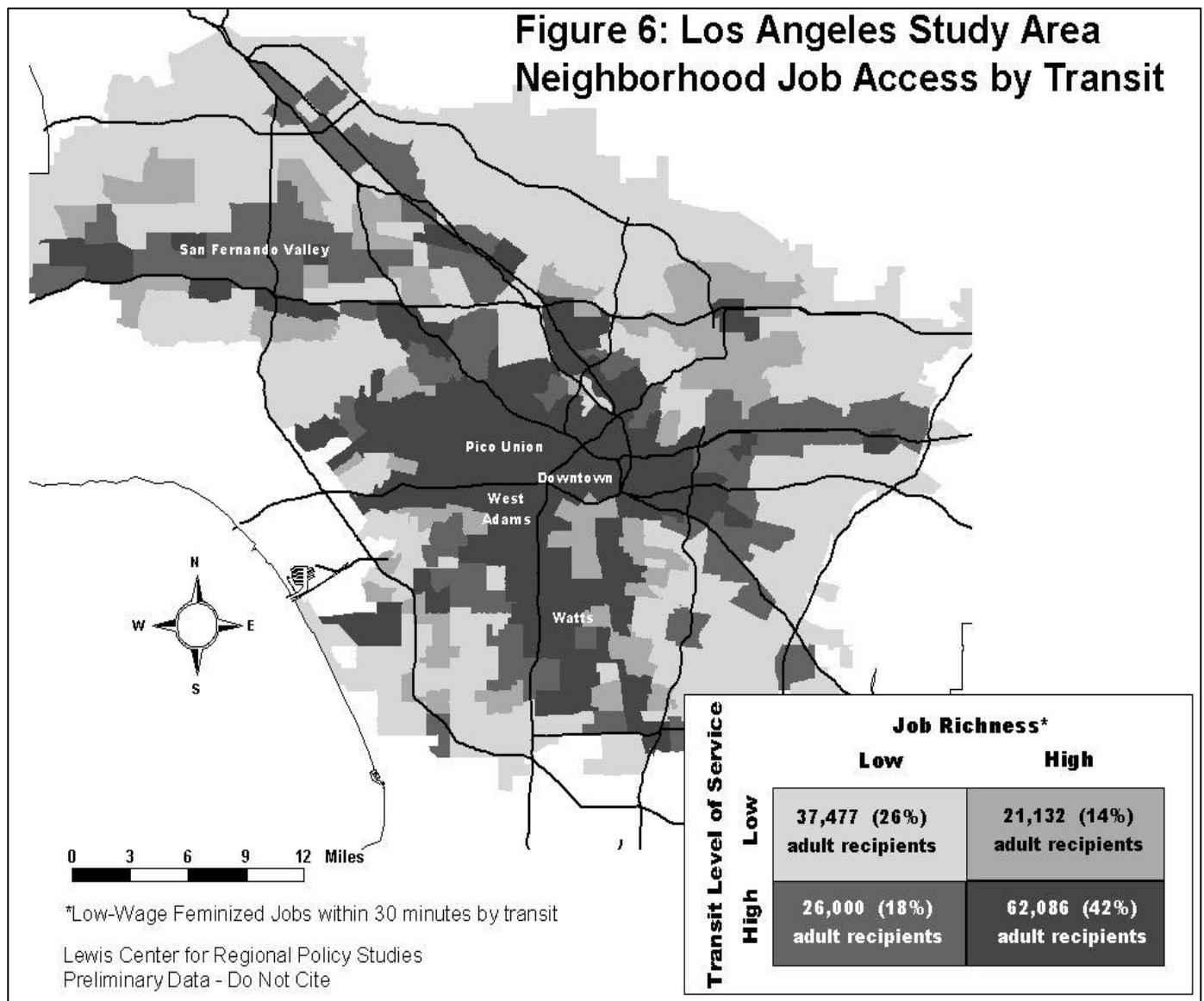
²While instructive, these travel time data almost certainly underestimate total transit travel times relative to driving, since they do not account the time involved in walking to the bus stop, waiting for the bus, stopping at any other destinations along the way, or traveling from the bus stop to a final destination.

**Figure 5: Low-Wage Job Access from Watts
30 Minutes By Transit and Auto**



than traveling by bus. However, in job-rich neighborhoods such as Pico-Union and others, transit-dependent recipients still have access to a reasonable number of jobs.

Finally, in Figure 6 we divide the Los Angeles study area into four quartiles by the job richness of the neighborhood as well as by the existing level of public transit service. The level of transit service is based on the maximum level of transit service



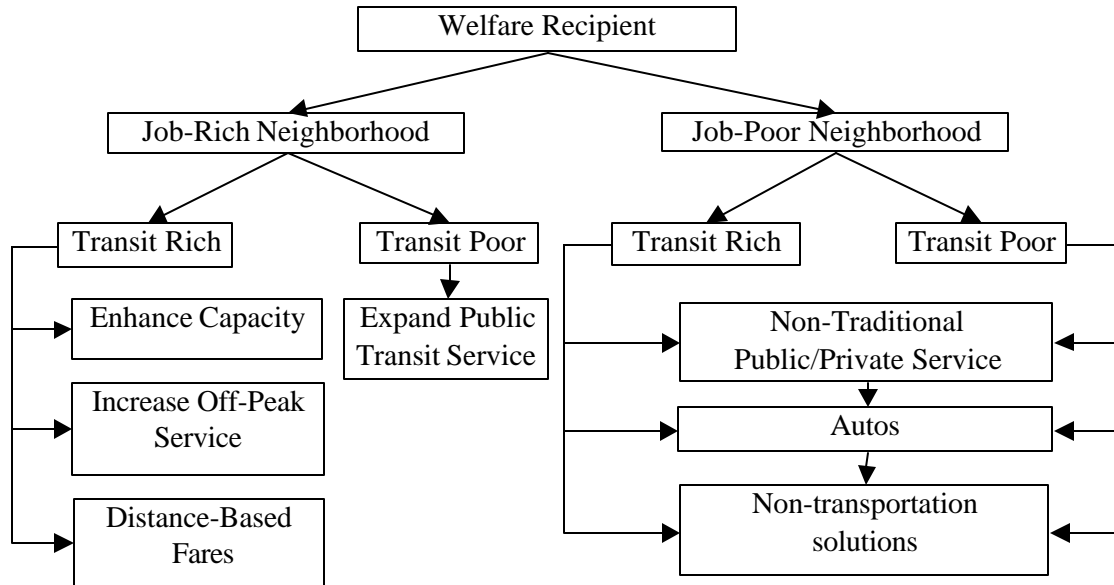
available during the am peak for each traffic analysis zone (TAZ). The map shows that approximately 14 percent of recipients live in job-rich neighborhoods with low levels of transit service. Forty-two percent of recipients live in job-rich neighborhoods with high levels of transit service; these neighborhoods are largely located in the central part of the county. The remaining 44 percent of recipients live in job-poor neighborhood. Some of

these welfare recipients have access to high levels of public transit; however, they would have to sustain long commutes in order to reach their destinations.

CONCLUSIONS: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Thus far, the implementation of targeted transportation services for welfare participants in Los Angeles has been quite limited pending the results of a transportation needs assessment mandated by the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors in 1998. In the interim, the County has addressed recipients' transportation needs by offering free bus passes and reimbursing recipients for their auto travel and by establishing programs to provide welfare recipients with information on bus routes and schedules. The results of this study show that, in addition to targeting services to individual welfare recipients, transportation services should be targeted, in part, based on the type of neighborhoods in which recipients live.

The schematic presented in Figure 7 shows the particular types of policies that are appropriate depending on relative job richness of the neighborhood. If policymakers choose to improve transit service, they should do so in job-rich neighborhoods where welfare recipients can travel to jobs and other destinations within a reasonable length of time. Enhancements might include adding bus lines in areas with limited service; increasing capacity by adding vehicles and shortening headways; increasing off-peak service to better accommodate night and weekend work schedules as well as non-work travel; and instituting distance-based fares to reduce the travel costs for recipients who, on average, make shorter trips than higher-income travelers.

Figure 7: Geographically-Targeted Transportation Policies

Over time, transit planning and policy has increasingly emphasized services such as commuter services and rail development, aimed at attracting so-called “choice” riders (32). Programs to increase the transportation options of the poor have largely emphasized reverse commute services, designed to transport low-income residents from their homes in the inner city to suburban employment opportunities. For example, in 1996, Public/Private Ventures with the support of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the U.S. Department of Transportation, and a number of major foundations, established the “Bridges to Work” program. Bridges to Work is a series of demonstration projects intended to make private-sector jobs in the suburbs accessible to inner-city residents by providing residents with, among other things, transportation to and from suburban jobs in which employers report difficulty in filling. Based on this

demonstration project, the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21), the principal federal surface transportation legislation, authorized funds to support reverse commute services. The “Access to Jobs” program provides competitive grants to local governments and non-profit organizations to develop transportation services to connect welfare recipients and low-income persons to employment and employment-related support services. With the promise of federal funds, many counties are planning to implement reverse commute programs. However, in an era of limited funds, enhancing transit services for low-income riders in central city neighborhoods will require public transit agencies to shift their funding priorities away from attracting suburban riders or from transporting welfare recipients from homes in the central city to suburban job sites. In Los Angeles, this approach would mean investing additional resources on buses that serve central city neighborhoods.

However, in job-poor neighborhoods, even in job-poor neighborhoods where welfare recipients currently have adequate access to public transportation, the evidence presented here suggests that regular fixed-route transportation will not transport welfare recipients to jobs as effectively as cars and other non-fixed route transportation services. Therefore, in recipients residing in job-poor neighborhoods, policymakers might consider the following three types of policies:

(1) *Establish auto programs and non-fixed route transportation services in job-poor neighborhoods.*

In many job-poor neighborhoods, even if welfare recipients could easily walk to a bus stop and board a bus, they would not get to their destinations within a reasonable amount of time. In these neighborhoods, welfare recipients would benefit from programs to increase their access to an automobile and programs that provide non-fixed route

transportation services. Counties around the country are experimenting with a variety of car programs including providing low-cost auto loans, car-sharing and carpooling programs, reduced-rate auto insurance, and auto maintenance services (33,34,35). In these neighborhoods, other non-fixed route transportation services might also work such as employer-sponsored vanpools, shuttles, or paratransit.

Unfortunately, auto programs have been politically controversial and have raised concerns with public transit advocates and environmentalists who believe that these programs will result in increased traffic congestion and pose a threat to public transit and air quality. In Los Angeles, the task force responsible for developing a transportation plan for welfare recipients initially included an auto component in the plan; the County Board of Supervisors later eliminated the auto component.

(2) Provide services that ease the burden of long-distance commutes

Although most welfare recipients commute relatively short distances, some will inevitably find jobs far from where they live. For those recipients, it is important to establish services that ease the burden of long-distance commutes. Guaranteed ride home programs would enable recipients to travel home whenever they needed in case of emergencies.

(3) Adopt non-transportation solutions to transportation problems

New public policies that are not directly transportation related may also improve employment access among welfare recipients. For example, local economic development is intended to increase economic opportunities in areas of concentrated poverty. These programs have included financial incentives, regulatory relief, and social services targeted toward preserving, attracting, and/or creating jobs to revitalize poor

neighborhoods. The evidence on the effects of local economic development programs varies depending on the type of program as well as the measures used to evaluate these programs. Additionally, similar to transportation services, many existing local economic development strategies are tailored around creating job opportunities for low-income men (36). This approach has played limited role in the overall policy response to welfare reform in Los Angeles, most likely because it is a long-term solution in a policy environment in which welfare recipients must find jobs immediately.

Policies that contribute to greater housing mobility can also offer improved access to housing in job-rich neighborhoods. The most prominent example of this strategy is the Gautreaux Assisted Housing Program in Chicago in which African-American families receive assistance to move from public, central-city housing to housing in suburban, predominantly white neighborhoods (21,22). Counties may not be able to afford ongoing housing assistance for welfare recipients; this type of a subsidy has typically fallen to the federal government in the form of the Section 8 housing voucher program. However, in Los Angeles, TANF funds will be used to subsidize the one-time relocation of welfare recipients who want assistance in moving to new neighborhoods.

Non-transportation policies to increase women's access to employment may improve economic opportunities for some welfare recipients but, by themselves, will not solve recipients' job access problem. Local economic development programs, if effective, are slow and may not meet the immediate needs of welfare recipients. Housing mobility programs do not address racial and ethnic discrimination in housing markets and the shortage of affordable housing units in many job-rich neighborhoods. Since a perfect

balance between jobs and housing is unlikely, transportation services are essential components to effective welfare-to-work programs.

Planning for the transportation needs of welfare recipients must move beyond simple, dichotomous debates over the merits of public transit versus automobiles. Welfare recipients face many transportation-related obstacles to finding and maintaining employment. Therefore, a cookie-cutter approach to meeting their transportation needs will be ineffective. As this analysis has shown, no single program or service will be successful. Counties must strive to implement a variety of programs that, in part, are targeted based on the characteristics of the neighborhoods in which recipients live.

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