

Automobile Dependency and the Working Poor

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David Shipler briefly mentions in *The Working Poor* that lack of access to a car is one of the factors that make finding and holding a job difficult. A person in need of a job may be unable to afford a car, since car ownership is so expensive, but they may need a car because of urban sprawl and inadequate public transit networks. But just how serious is the burden of car ownership, and how exactly does under funded public transit and urban sprawl contribute to the need to take on this burden?

The costs of car ownership concern motorists greatly, so it isn't difficult to find information. AAA releases an annual brochure and report called "Your Driving Costs." Their 2004 brochure reports a composite national average cost of 56.1 cents per mile over 15,000 miles of driving annually. This amounts to an annual cost of \$8,415. Americans spend more of their income on their cars than they do on anything else except for shelter. A reliable car that has been paid for in full may cost \$4,000 annually, but the upfront cost of a car is still great, and few Americans can afford to buy a car outright. This picture is complicated by the fact that few low-income families are able to afford a new car, which reduces the cost of financing, but these families are also likely to have poor credit which has the opposite effect. The used cars that they buy are also likely to be less reliable than the average, which increases repair costs. Clearly, owning a car is a huge financial burden. Why take it on?

The problem is an urban and suburban infrastructure designed to accommodate cars at the expense of non-automotive and a lack of well-designed, well-funded public transit services. In the years after World War II, middle-class and wealthy Americans fled the inner cities to live in suburbs. After 1970, more Americans in a metropolitan area lived outside the inner city than lived within it. Retail establishments and big-box retailers sprang up to support new residential growth, but their employee base of unskilled workers was still largely based within the inner cities, making commutes longer and more expensive. As jobs and people left the cities, many urban transit networks found themselves going out of business. Many that survived were publicly acquired and heavily subsidized. As a result, owning a car has become critical to the ability to seek, acquire and hold a job.

For example, a recent report by Washington think tank the Brookings Institution states that 32 percent of Baltimore residents do not have cars. An Abell Foundation report says this endangers the ability of these residents to get and keep a job. According to Brookings fellow Margy Waller, "people with a car are more likely to work, work more hours, and have a higher level of income." The Brookings Institution proposes lowering the barriers to car ownership in order to help more Baltimoreans become productive citizens. These barriers are high in Maryland, especially in Baltimore City, making car access more difficult to achieve than it is on average. However, it is not clear whether car ownership is a pathway to or a symptom of success. The Brookings Institution believes that it is the former, but the truth is probably more complex. There is a strong movement for better public transit in Baltimore, and the state Transportation Budget has received a high level of funding for the next six years, but even department officials admit that there is a limit to what can be done cost-effectively without a large number of customers. As I previously mentioned, lack of customers spells doom for mass transit systems. Getting people to use public transportation is difficult, however. People often prefer to drive, both because of inadequate transit networks and because of the perception of public transportation as transportation for the poor. The resulting lack of customers makes the cost-effective construction of adequate networks impossible, making this a vicious cycle where public transportation is doomed to fail. This in turn contributes to the tragic need to own a car in order to work.

This is a complicated issue, and solutions are difficult to come by. The most obvious, and least

complicated in the short-term, is to follow the Brookings Institution's advice and lower the financial barriers to car ownership. This solution has profound social and economic implications, and may well cause even more serious damage, but it is an available option. Most other solutions would require significant change in culture and in government. This is a complicated issue, tied into land use, urban sprawl, economics, culture, and other issues probably too numerous to list. Accommodation for other, less expensive modes of private transportation, such as walking and bicycling, must be made, as well as investment in better public transportation. Unfortunately, all of these issues are so tightly interlaced that it is difficult to find the best place to begin. It maybe that the barrier that car ownership poses to success is as much a symptom of the financial traps the poor find themselves in as it is a contributing factor. Fair transportation may be an issue that we are unable to resolve until we live in an America where hard work truly does guarantee success.

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