

Focus article

Tackling transport-related barriers to employment in low-income neighbourhoods

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Background

A study for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation carried out by a joint team from Sheffield Hallam University and the University of Sheffield has found that residents in low-income neighbourhoods are willing to travel to work but find the 90 minute maximum imposed by Jobcentre Plus to be quite unrealistic. Not only are commuting options constrained by unaffordable or unreliable public transport, but when combined with the prospect of low-paid or insecure employment long journeys to work are simply uneconomic.

"I'd be willing to travel any distance, it's more time.... [The Jobcentre Plus expectation is] just silly, you've got three hours travel time on top of a job, so you do a 12 hour shift, that's a 15 hour day, where are you supposed to sleep in that?" (Female, north Manchester, aged 35).

This voice was just one of the 79 job-seeking residents we interviewed in six contrasting urban neighbourhoods across England and Scotland. Using maps to show how far public transport timetables suggest you can travel in different timeframes (between 5 and 90 minutes) at different times of the day, we explored the places to which residents were willing and able to travel for work. We also considered the extent to which local transport systems were available, reliable and affordable links to potential places of work.

Our interviews revealed some key findings:

- Transport is a significant barrier to employment for many residents living in low-income neighbourhoods. Public transport is often seen as something which constrains rather than enables a return to work.
- Transport issues are intimately related to the nature and location of employment. The prospect of poorly paid and insecure work limits the range of areas where individuals look for work. Moreover, local public transport systems have not adapted to the increasingly dispersed geography of lower-skilled employment.
- There is little evidence that residents have limited 'spatial horizons' – this is where localised, cultural outlooks might constrain people's perceptions of viable commutes.

- Proximity to employment in city centres does not necessarily increase employment opportunities if the work does not match aspirations, skills or experience, and transport links to job opportunities available elsewhere are poor.
- The lower cost difference between bus and train fares in the Glasgow city region encourages use of both modes, unlike our case study areas in England where more expensive train fares mean residents tend to use bus only.

The Evidence

Most of our respondents had past experience of low-paid, low-skilled or 'atypical' work that involved irregular shifts or hours. This background and their skill levels meant that they were mostly looking for similar types of job. Concerns about the quality and quantity of work inevitably shaped residents' perceptions of viable commutes to work.

Many people identified issues with the location of appropriate work relative to where they live, but the degree of 'spatial mismatch' was not simply a reflection of distance from areas where suitable jobs exist. For example, Seacroft is close to Leeds city centre but, for residents seeking manual work in sectors such as manufacturing and warehousing/distribution, it remains difficult to access the more peripheral commercial or industrial parks:

"There's a place called Sherburn-in-Elmet and they have tons of work, big industrial estate but there's no bus service, it's about 13 miles away. I do not understand why they build a big estate where there's no transport, that's like tough, if you haven't got a car you can't have a job." (Male, east Leeds, aged 49).

We also found little evidence that residents' spatial horizons were limited in terms of a reluctance to travel far for work. Most expressed a willingness to commute an hour or more, although caring commitments or a preference to work in familiar areas led some individuals to consider only those areas that are closer to home. Past commuting experiences also confirmed the stated willingness to travel. The average commute across all modes in Britain is around 30 minutes (Department for Transport, 2017), so what most of our respondents suggested was feasible were significantly in excess of typical commuting times.

A major issue for some residents without access to personal transport concerned the lack of public transport services to enable them to undertake very early or late shifts. The reliability of buses serving our case study areas was also often reported to be poor, being variously described as "shocking" (Female, Strathclyde, aged 20) and even "murder" (Male, south Glasgow, aged in his 50s). This impacted upon perceived commuting and employment options, with residents dismissing some journeys altogether because of the risk of delays and poor punctuality being penalised by employers. It was also a disincentive to consider jobs in locations requiring an interchange with another bus service or a different mode of transport.

"There used to be places I was going you would have never got to by public transport. [But now] for me to go to a particular job that was outside the city ... you're talking possibly two or three buses minimum and as far as security work, seven o'clock start [it's not possible]." (Male, Strathclyde, aged 62).

Transport barriers were closely related to the levels of pay on offer for the type of work sought, with commuting sometimes deemed unaffordable for those facing the prospect of relatively low-wage rates. Viable commutes were often assessed in terms of the trade-off between transport costs relative to potential earnings:

“I’ve been offered loads of jobs online [but] by the time I’ve paid for travel expenses to get there, work in a part-time job on a part-time wage, it wouldn’t be worth my while.” (Female, Kirklees, aged 59).

Rail fares were noticeably higher than bus fares in the English case study areas, leading some to discount taking the train to commute entirely, even where a direct service from a local station was available:

“It doesn’t cross my mind, it’s that far outside my price range.” (Male, Tameside, aged 61).

In contrast, we found a higher level of willingness to travel by rail among interviewees in Scotland, where cost differentials are less marked. This highlights the importance of parity of fares across different modes - and the benefits of common ticketing systems - to increase travel choices.

These transport-related barriers were sometimes intensified by individual and household circumstances. For example, caring commitments for dependent children or adults impacted on the hours individuals could work, the distance and time they could commute, and the childcare costs they could afford relative to wages.

There were also concerns among some about the support provided through Jobcentre Plus. This included reports of being pressured to apply for work regardless of the suitability of the job or the feasibility of long commutes expected under the ‘90-minute rule’. Some also noted the lack of travel planning advice:

“They do not offer any advice or support with transport issues. Every now and again, an adviser will look up the nearest bus route for you, but don’t look at the practicalities of it.” (Male, Kirklees, aged 30).

Conclusion

The research clearly shows that transport is a significant barrier to employment for many residents living in low-income neighbourhoods. There were multiple accounts of how employment was inaccessible because of unreliable buses, excessive fares or potentially lengthy journey times. It also highlights how transport and commuting are related to the nature and location of employment. Low wages limit commuting choices because of the trade-off with high transport costs. Jobs with early or late shifts are virtually impossible to reach when public transport is not running. Peripheral sites such as retail, commercial and industrial parks are hard to access using a public transport system which has often failed to adapt to the changing geography of employment.

The broad nature of these challenges means that transport-related barriers to work cannot be solved through transport policy alone. Improving access to employment demands coordinated action across a range of policy areas, including transport but also economic development, regeneration, housing and planning, and employment and skills. It also requires action across spatial scales involving stakeholders at national, city, regional and local levels.

In England, the new institutions, powers and funding being acquired by city regions through devolution may provide more tools to improve the connectivity of low-income areas. Combined authorities and new ‘metro’ mayors are particularly well-placed to drive this agenda forward given their central role in the devolution process, their growing focus on issues of poverty and inequality, the expertise of constituent local authorities, and their ability to co-ordinate policy across multiple policy areas.

Recommendations

Based on our findings we have distilled a starting list of policy recommendations in order to address the transport-related challenges facing low-income households in their everyday lives:

- ‘Stronger’ models of partnership or bus franchising (through the Bus Services Act 2017) improve the availability, reliability and affordability of public transport to make it easier to access employment.
- Planning tools and approaches ensure that new housing and employment developments are well served by public transport that reduces the travel costs, times or distances between places of residence and work.
- Transport and employment policy are better integrated to enable employment support providers to help clients understand travel choices as part of their return to work.

Above all, coordinated action by the UK Government, combined and local authorities, transport bodies and partner agencies is needed to ensure that these proposals are taken forward so that transport provision can enable rather than constrain the ability of residents in low-income neighbourhoods to find and sustain work.

About the project

The study is based on an evidence review, interviews with 79 residents and 51 stakeholders, analysis of ‘travel time’ maps, and policy development workshops. It was undertaken between January 2017 and February 2018. The full report of the study (*Tackling transport related barriers to employment in low-income neighbourhoods*) was published in 2018 by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. It is available along with summary versions at <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/tackling-transport-related-barriers-employment-low-income-neighbourhoods>

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References

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