

CATCH THAT BUS:

REVERSE-COMMUTE CHALLENGES FACING LOW INCOME
INNER-CITY RESIDENTS OF ONONDAGA COUNTY

2008 Report

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Executive Summary

Employer concerns about labor shortages for entry-level positions in the suburbs and outlying city neighborhoods prompted county planners to ask Cornell ILR to conduct this study. We organized a series of focus groups with low-income inner-city residents who commute to the suburbs or outlying city neighborhoods and work in health services, hospitality, or warehousing; we also spoke with several supervisors and a transportation planner. We found four major transportation challenges: limited service at non-standard times; out-of-synch schedules; off-schedule and off-route buses; and poorly located bus stops. We highlight several transportation initiatives that have been tried in other communities and propose a series of recommendations that transit planners, the transit company, and employers might consider in order to mitigate the reverse-commute challenges in ways that would benefit all stakeholders.

Acknowledgments

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Background

Job sprawl, or the movement of jobs from the center city to surrounding suburbs, is a post-World War II phenomenon that afflicts most metropolitan areas in the United States. Decentralization of employment tends to accompany the spread of residential housing into the suburbs and reflects a similar preference for avoiding the economic, environmental, and social costs that attach to inner-city living. But as employment opportunities in the urban periphery have expanded, the ability of low-income, inner-city residents to access these jobs has not kept pace. Lack of adequate transportation, both public and private, to support commutes from the city to the suburbs, i.e., “reverse commuting,” is a challenge that bedevils workers, job seekers, employers, and policymakers, alike.

Just 40 years ago, a slight majority of workers lived five miles or less from their place of employment. But by 2001, the National Household Travel Survey (NHTS) was no longer reporting trips from home to work of less than five miles. Over a 20 year period, from 1980 to 2000, the proportion of jobs located in the central city of the 10 largest metropolitan statistical areas fell 10 points, to 47% from 57% (Gobillon et al, 2005). Another study using data from 2000 found that among metropolitan areas with populations greater than 500,000, on average 71% of the region’s jobs were located at least five miles from the central business district (Stoll, 2005). An earlier study found that 82% of the central cities in 92 metropolitan areas lost jobs to the

suburbs during the mid-1990s (Brennan and Hill, 1999). Given the continuing progression of job sprawl and suburban development, it is not surprising that the average distance traveled by workers today has increased by 42%, from 8.54 miles in 1983 to 12.11 in 2001 (Hu and Reuscher, 2004).

Regardless where the jobs are, the journey to work is most often made by car. Data from the American Community Survey (2006)¹ indicate that 76% of commuters drive alone in a car and an additional 11% participate in carpools. Although the spike in gasoline prices this year has significantly increased the cost of driving, private vehicles continue to remain the most prevalent means of transportation for the simple reason that cars ensure a relatively quick and convenient commute. The average commute for both private and public forms of transportation is about 12 miles, but time spent in the car is approximately half that of public transit—23 minutes compared to 48 minutes (Hu and Reuscher, 2004).² Moreover, cars facilitate chained trip making; that is, multiple stops between home and work to daycare, school, doctors, supermarket, and the like.

The car’s popularity aside, many people travel to and from work via public transit. In 2006, approximately six million people (4.3% of the workforce) reported using buses or trains in their daily commutes (Bureau of Transportation Statistics, 2006). Indeed, public

¹ http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/DatasetMainPageServlet?_program=ACS&_submenuId=&_lang=en&_ts=

² Average travel times remained the same according to the 2006 American Community Survey.



transportation is a popular and efficient option in older, densely populated metropolitan areas, such as the urban Northeast, where complex transit systems are geared to intra-city travel and the smooth movement of suburbanites into and out of the central city. Buses, trains, and subways generally meet the needs of these passengers, but a variety of other transit needs, such as city to suburb and suburb to suburb, draw far fewer resources. Transportation policy in the post-World War II years paid scant attention to the effects of job sprawl and few service adjustments were made to facilitate reverse commuting. The situation has taken on some urgency now given the reach of residential and employment decentralization, increasing concern about the environment, and anxiety over surging energy prices. (The media recently reported that many of the nation's transit systems have been experiencing increased ridership in the wake of rising fuel costs.)

Low-income households face the most daunting transportation challenges. For one thing, many low-income individuals do not own cars. According to one report, 27% of urban households with incomes less than \$20,000 were without any form of personal transportation (Waller, 2005). Public transit, then, is often the only alternative for people who fill the entry-level service, hospitality, retail, and warehousing jobs that sustain the suburban economy and salt many city neighborhoods. But inadequate public transit from city to suburb, and sometimes from one city neighborhood to another, means many of these workers struggle to get to and from work. Making matters worse, many of these jobs mandate attendance during

off-peak and weekend hours, exactly the times when public transit options are even more limited or nonexistent.

Difficult city-suburb commutes impose a variety of tangible and intangible costs on workers and employers alike. Would-be workers may be deterred from seeking jobs in outlying areas, thus limiting their own employment prospects as well as, from the employer's perspective, the potential hiring pool. Currently employed workers may experience excessive tardiness or absences, which could lead directly to termination and indirectly to a falloff in productivity and profitability that could in turn cause layoffs. As for the actual logistics of the commute, consider the nonpecuniary costs paid by low-income urban residents with jobs in the suburbs: travel duration that dwarfs travel distance, split-second timing to catch multiple buses or excruciating waits for the next bus, long walks to and from the bus stop, urgent requests for rides from family and friends, and expensive cab rides when all else fails.

Methodology

Research for this study involved a review of the literature on reverse commuting and focus group interviews with Syracuse residents who work in the suburbs of Onondaga County or in outlying city neighborhoods. Given the policy and planning interests of the Onondaga County Office of Economic Development, we narrowed our research plan to include occupations within three industries that employ low-wage workers: food service and



housekeeping in the health services and hospitality industries, health aides in the health services industry, and stocking and packing workers in the warehousing industry. Through the efforts of the Greater Syracuse Chamber of Commerce, three employers (one from each industry, each with facilities in different geographic areas) allowed us to convene on-site focus groups to talk with workers about their daily commutes. We held group interviews in two of the three cases; in the third, we caught workers individually for a few minutes during shift change. In all, we spoke with 30 workers and obtained background information from three supervisors and one transportation planner. To ensure confidentiality for workers and employers, no names or other identifying information is included in this report.

The findings presented here are preliminary and reflect the perspective of people who talked with us. This project is the first phase of a larger study that will address the transportation-related employment challenges of low-income individuals. Future research will gather data from job seekers, employers, service providers, transportation planners, and economic development officials. Those findings, in turn, will seed pilot programs to address some of the commuters' challenges as well as a longer-term research agenda on the linkages among transportation, economic development, and job mobility.

This study follows on a report compiled in 2001 for the Syracuse Metropolitan Transportation Council by Bergmann Associates, which worked in conjunction with a multi-agency advisory committee.

The Bergmann study focused on the transit needs of individuals moving from welfare to work and other low-income workers and relied on a survey of 1,000 employers to inform the findings. This research, by contrast, is based on face-to-face discussions with workers who depend on public transportation for their daily commutes.

We heard similar comments from nearly all interviewees, regardless of work location or industry. Although key themes emerged, we caution against generalizing the results from this small sample of workers and worksites.

Findings

Ondaga County, like other urban areas in the United States, is characterized by suburban sprawl and the employment decentralization that goes with it. A report released in 2002 by Smart Growth America (co-authored by Cornell faculty member Rolf Pendall) looked at urban sprawl in the context of transportation-related measures. The researchers found that twice the proportion of residents in relatively non-sprawling areas use public transportation in their workday commutes than do residents in areas with greater degrees of sprawl. Interestingly, Syracuse falls just outside the top quintile for sprawl. Based on a four-factor index that includes street connectivity, mixed use, centeredness, and density, Syracuse garnered an overall "sprawl score" of 80.3, which placed it 16th out of 83 metropolitan areas (Ewing et al, 2002).



The county has long been aware of weak links in its public transit system. A comprehensive strategic plan to restructure the county's transit services, completed by the Central New York Regional Transportation Authority in 1999, focused on the mobility needs of commuters, seniors, persons with disabilities, welfare recipients, and human service agency clients, and noted service gaps for workers needing rides at the end of second shift hours and for all parts of the third shift. That report was followed two years later by a more narrowly tailored study compiled by Bergmann Associates for the Syracuse Metropolitan Transportation Council. The Bergmann study, required by the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) Job Access and Reverse Commute (JARC) grant program, identified the unmet transportation needs of welfare recipients and other low-income residents while also recommending specific service improvements.

The welfare-to-work mandate that dominated policy and planning discussions among Onondaga County economic development officials and employers a decade ago has given way to generalized concern about labor shortfalls. Companies that hire skilled professionals as well as those that employ unskilled workers report that jobs are going unfilled for want of appropriate candidates. There are surely many reasons why upstate New York communities may be experiencing a demand for labor that is not matched by supply (see, for example, Edid, *Bridging the Gap: Training Needs Assessment of the Immigrant Workforce in Onondaga County, NY*, June 2007). But it is employers' expressed concern

about labor shortages for entry-level positions in the suburbs and outlying city neighborhoods that prompted county planners to ask Cornell ILR to conduct this study.

At a very basic level, the job sprawl that characterizes Onondaga County hinders the ability of low-income city residents to find jobs located beyond the urban core or outside the neighborhoods in which they live. Academic and policy researchers suggest a variety of reasons why this is so, including limited information about distant job openings, lack of familiarity with suburban surroundings, complex family obligations (mostly pertaining to school, daycare, and elder care arrangements) that discourage long travel times, and the logistical challenges associated with reverse commuting.

Local employers who pay wages at or near the minimum affirm that transportation is, indeed, a constraint. "We had difficulty hiring this past year," commented one health services manager. "Evening jobs are the hardest to fill. The pool of potential employees is narrowed by the transportation issue." A recruiter for a temporary employment agency that places workers in suburban warehouse jobs agreed that recruiting would be far easier but for the matter of transportation. "It comes up in interviews," she said. "The first shift starts at 5:30 a.m. and the earliest bus gets here at 6 a.m. The second shift ends at 11 p.m. and there are no buses at that hour." Needless to say, few workers at this facility rely on public transit.

But people need work and an unspecified number of Syracuse



residents surmount the transportation obstacles and take jobs in far-flung neighborhoods or in the suburbs. Not surprisingly, the matter of how to get to and from work is a frequent topic of conversation among employees and one that elicited strong and boisterous responses from interviewees during the focus group meetings.

The public transit system in Syracuse is organized and managed by Centro (a subsidiary operating company of Central New York Transit Authority). It operates through a hub-and-spoke structure that requires most riders to catch a bus to downtown and then transfer to another bus that gets them to their destination. A one-way ride within the county costs \$1 (including a transfer) and \$40 buys an unlimited one-month pass. None of the workers interviewed voiced a complaint about the cost, although several said some kind of discount would be appreciated. A few workers said they depend on friends or relatives for their daily commutes and pay up to \$25/week for this service. An occasional taxi ride is also a solution, although the cost is prohibitive.

Some workers live on or near a main bus line and can transit directly to and from their jobs, but most need two buses in each direction. Many of the interviewees live within five miles of work (researchers' estimate based on conversations with management representatives; few interviewees were able to specify the exact distance) and leave home well before the workday begins. Travel duration—including the time needed to get to the bus stop, transfer at the "lineup" downtown, walk to the worksite and punch in—mounts up quickly. Many workers indicated their

commute easily takes 1.5 hours in each direction. The timeline obviously stretches when a worker misses the bus, which may run just once an hour, or if a bus on the last leg of the journey is running late.

Transportation Obstacles

Following is a summary of the most critical commuting challenges as reported by our interviewees.

Limited service at non-standard times. Whereas workers seem resigned to the length of time spent traveling, other aspects of the commute cause them no end of aggravation. Chief among the complaints is limited or no service on the weekend and at night. Workers claim that Saturday buses run less frequently than during the week and Sunday service is even more limited despite the expansion of the Sunday schedule several years ago. This is a sore point for most workers in the focus groups because for them, weekend shifts are the norm. "The weekends stink," said one health aide, a comment that neatly summarizes other workers' evaluation of the situation. This particular employee works the 7am-3pm shift on Sundays; the first bus through her neighborhood is 7:12am, so she walks downtown to catch the 6:33am bus; to return home after the shift ends, she must wait for the 4:15pm bus to take her back downtown. Other health and hospitality workers have no choice but to arrive at work up to an hour early or to lean on family members for a ride.

Those working evening shifts fare no better. On some routes bus service dwindles from hourly during the traditional workday to every two hours in the evening. The last lineup downtown



is at 11:30pm and all buses are off the road an hour later. But coverage is required 24/7 in many health services positions, meaning workers come and go at various points throughout the night. Hotels with banquet services must staff events that sometimes run past midnight and then need workers to set up for the next morning; demands of the job mean employers cannot guarantee workers a definite quit time. “Some night girls take cabs,” said one health services worker, an option most workers interviewed spurn because of the cost. (Getting downtown from one of the outlying hotels can run \$25, which translates to about three hours of pay). Workers on the second shift in the three industries we focused on sometimes prevail on friends or relatives for late-night pick-ups, an awkward situation that prompted one banquet services worker to begin riding his bike to work. Second shift hotel workers occasionally ask the reception desk if the guest shuttle will take them to the nearest bus stop, a request that this hospitality employer usually grants if the shuttle is available. Several health services and hospitality workers say they sometimes get a ride home from their supervisors. But these options are not always available: one banquet services worker finished up one night at 2 a.m. and embarked on a two-hour walk home, part of which entailed a stretch along a dark highway.

Out-of-synch schedules. Bus schedules that do not mesh with shift times, even during traditional work hours, is another source of irritation. The shift at one health services facility ends at 3pm, but the bus one worker needs comes by at 2:59; a sympathetic shift supervisor allows the worker to clock out

five minutes early. But ending times are not quite so flexible for other workers who miss their bus because the shift ends moments before the bus is due to arrive. “You’re kind of beat when you get out so you can’t run for the bus,” said one food services worker. “You just hope the driver waits.” (A wish not often fulfilled, according to many workers.) Missing the bus typically entails a long wait for the next one.

Off-schedule and off-route buses.

The erratic appearance of buses is a topic that prompted much commentary during focus group meetings. According to the workers, sometimes buses arrive early and they are not at the appointed spot. Sometimes buses never show up at all, the workers continued, and sometimes bus drivers decide, seemingly on a whim, to diverge from the planned route. One worker said she and several co-workers waited fruitlessly for a bus late one night last winter before finally giving up and walking down a busy street where they tried to flag down a passing bus. Another worker wrote to Centro about a bus that never arrived and received a reply explaining the regular driver had been absent and no substitute had been scheduled. Several workers complained that new bus drivers are often confused and veer off course.

Poorly located bus stops. Adding to the hassle factor are inconveniently located bus stops. Pick up and drop off points may be remote from the intended destination, be it home or work. Workers report routes to or from the bus stop that take them through woods, up or down steep hills, along busy roadways that lack sidewalks, or across busy roadways that lack stoplights. Evening



shift workers express anxiety about waiting alone at isolated bus stops for the bus back to downtown and having to walk from the bus stop to home: “It’s scary,” commented one hotel worker.

Centro Initiatives

Centro has tried responding to the needs of low-income reverse commuters. Following up on the service needs identified by the 1999 Regional Mobility Action Plan, Centro launched “Rides for Work” in 2001. A combination of federal and state funds associated with the national Job Access and Reverse Commute (JARC) program and the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, along with backing from local groups and employers, enabled Centro to provide free transportation to and from work for low-income county residents who worked odd hours or did not live near a bus line. The program was intended as short-term support (early on, the time limit was six months) until workers could arrange a permanent alternative; service was provided by private contractors who operated small buses for other purposes. But the funding streams soon dried up and Centro kept reducing the amount of time workers could use the service while raising the income-eligibility bar. Certain legal requirements and bureaucratic hassles further undermined the viability of the program. Although Centro provided 54,108 rides to work for 362 people in 2007, by mid-2008 the program was basically defunct.

Two linked and ongoing Centro initiatives try to ease the transportation burden but do not address the challenges of job sprawl, nontraditional hours, or other issues identified in the focus groups. Under the “Fare Deal”

program, employers get a (federal) tax break by subsidizing the use of public transit—up to \$115/month for each worker. Although the program does not cost employers anything and completely covers the cost of transportation for workers residing in the city who commute to city or suburban jobs, only about 50 employers currently participate (Syracuse University just signed on), a number that may reflect employers’ opinion that how people get to and from work is not their responsibility. The program does have another important benefit, though: Workers on the day shift at participating employers can get a free taxi ride from work when an emergency strikes.

Existing Initiatives and Best Practices

Communities throughout the United States are struggling to identify, implement, and fund mass transit solutions to job sprawl. Below is an overview of several federal, state, and local programs that address the job sprawl/transportation dilemma.

Job Access and Reverse Commute program (JARC)³

JARC falls under the aegis of the Federal Transit Administration (FTA). It is primarily intended to improve access to transportation services that facilitate employment and employment-related activities for welfare recipients and

³ Text below adapted from United State Department of Transportation and Federal Transit Administration. *Job Access and Reverse Commute Program (5316)*. 2008. http://www.fta.dot.gov/funding/grants/grants_financing_3550.html



eligible low-income individuals. JARC is also concerned with enabling residents of urbanized and nonurbanized areas to transit to suburban employment locations.

JARC was established as part of the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA–21). Section 3037 of TEA–21 requires that projects selected for JARC funding compete nationally based on specified criteria. Beginning in 2000, however, Congress began designating particular projects and recipients for JARC funding. In each succeeding year more projects were designated until finally all JARC project funding was allocated according to the dictates of Congress.

In 2005, the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU) repealed Section 3037 of TEA–21. JARC funding is now allocated by formula to states for use in areas with populations of less than 200,000 persons and to designated recipients (e.g., nonprofit organizations, state or local government authorities, public and private providers of public transit services) in areas whose populations exceed 200,000; the formula is based on the number of eligible low-income residents and welfare recipients. SAFETEA-LU authorized a total of \$727 million for JARC grants from 2006 to 2009. Communities have flexibility in designing plans and projects to meet the transportation needs of low-income people and welfare recipients.⁴

⁴ Adapted from United State Department of Transportation and Federal Transit Administration *Job Access and Reverse Commute Program – Overview*. 2008. http://www.fta.dot.gov/funding/grants/grants_financing_3624.html

Under the Government Performance Results Act (GPRA), FTA is required to review program goals and performance. The two measures established for JARC are:

1. Actual or estimated number of jobs that can be accessed as a result of geographic or temporal coverage of JARC projects.
2. Actual or estimated number of rides (as measured by one-way trips) provided as a result of the JARC projects implemented in the current reporting year.

The New Jersey Transit "WorkPass"⁵

This service and educational program is an example of a successful cross-agency coordination effort. It provides assistance to more than 50 public and nonprofit organizations, including county welfare agencies, Medicare agencies, and other social service organizations that offer public assistance for transportation to jobs, medical assistance, and childcare. New Jersey Transit (NJT) brought together the New Jersey Department of Transportation and the state's human services agency, and within a month implemented the WorkPass program. More than 5,000 monthly passes and one-way tickets are purchased each month by WorkPass members (i.e., individuals). The transit agency attributes the program's success to the partnerships formed among various agencies and its adaptability to the agencies' needs.

⁵ Adapted from APTA Testimony on the 2001 Labor, Health and Human Services, Education and Related Agencies Appropriations Bill. http://www.apta.com/government_affairs/aptatest/2000hhs.cfm



As part of the WorkPass program, NJT trains caseworkers to help clients determine the best NJT routes to travel. A 1999 review by the American Public Transportation Association (APTA) concluded that county welfare agencies were saving 50%-60% on each WorkPass participant. Counties participating in the WorkPass program were also eligible to apply to the New Jersey Department of Human Services for a transportation block grant based on the dollars saved through the WorkPass program. These grants are used for vans and shuttles and to provide other services that fixed transit routes cannot support. Estimates are that WorkPass has saved more than \$2 million in transportation costs for its members.⁶

Nashville, Tennessee Metropolitan Transit Authority – Midtown Program⁷

The Nashville Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) Midtown service was intended to help welfare-to-work participants get to their jobs and spend less time traveling. Midtown service was funded through a contract with the Nashville Career Advancement Center, which used welfare-to-work transportation funds from the U.S. Department of Labor. The financial supports allowed the MTA to create a new midtown connector bus route that transported riders to their destinations through more direct routes. Prior to implementation of the new service most buses arriving in the city center from the outskirts stopped in downtown Nashville (at a transportation center) before continuing on to other destinations.

One-third of the new Midtown service routes, however, connected outside downtown. The Midtown routes were designed to serve major Nashville hospitals that offer entry-level jobs to people participating in the welfare-to-work program. The buses ran every 30 minutes during peak travel times and about every hour during midday and evening hours. Service hours covered the period from 5:40am until 11:15pm, weekdays and weekends to accommodate early and late shifts. The MTA reported that average travel times were cut in half, to 20 minutes from 40.⁸

The MTA established a second service for riders within a circumscribed geographic area. Called “The Zone,” this program gave people with jobs in the central city access to short segments of existing routes within a large portion of the downtown at a reduced rate. Travel within the zone costs 25 cents per trip compared to the regular \$1.40 fare; monthly unlimited zone passes cost \$5.

Vanpools⁹

Vanpools serve riders whose travel needs are not met by fixed-route transit services for a variety of reasons, including geography or schedule (i.e., suburb-to-suburb or suburb-to-city commutes, or early or late shifts), demographic characteristics (e.g., elderly, disabled), or to meet occasional needs (e.g., doctor visit). In addition, some communities replace underused fixed-route service with vanpools, which enables the transit system to continue serving riders while avoiding the higher costs of large fixed-route buses. In Fort

⁶ Adapted from APTA 1999 Access-to-work Best Practices Survey Summary Report, Part 3. 1999. http://www.apta.com/government_affairs/wtw/99wtw_net3.cfm

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ Indications are the program is no longer operating.
⁹ Adapted from Higgins and Rabinowitz. 2002.



Worth, TX the transportation authority replaced one route with three vanpools for an annual saving of \$11,500 during the 1985-1997 period. Some programs have a welfare-to-work component that provides transportation to welfare-to-work participants. And finally, some transit systems test the potential for fixed-route ridership in previously unserved areas by first introducing vanpools.

Recommendations

This study did not set out to delineate specific route improvements based on needs and preferences expressed by workers. Instead, we offer several general recommendations that could advance the shared interests of transit planners, economic development officials, employers, and employees.

For transit planners

1. Coordination among transportation service providers (public, private, and nonprofit) to establish a cost-effective system that would offer more frequent bus service during shift changes, on weekends, and at night.
2. Creation of alternate transit arrangements, such as vanpools, that would be jointly supported by employers, employees, and Centro.
3. Fresh evaluation of service recommendations offered by Bergmann Associates and consideration of new routes that would efficiently connect areas

of concentrated employment with residential enclaves.

4. Follow-up evaluation of individuals who participated in Rides-to-Work Program: e.g., Are they still working? How do they get to work and back?

For transit company

1. Pick-up and drop-off points that are safe and more proximate to work sites, especially in areas with concentrated employment.
2. Buses that stick to their assigned schedules and routes.
3. Outreach to employers about transportation issues and initiatives that would benefit their operations and their employees (including, but not limited to, the Fare Deal program and helping employees arrange carpools).

For employers

1. Coordination of shift times in areas of concentrated employment to ensure more bus riders and make it financially feasible for Centro to add service.



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