

9-21-2000

The Longest Commute: The Geography of Poverty, Employment, and Services

Matthew F. Reidy

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp>



Part of the [Transportation Commons](#), and the [Urban Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Reidy, Matthew F. (2000) "The Longest Commute: The Geography of Poverty, Employment, and Services," *New England Journal of Public Policy*. Vol. 16: Iss. 1, Article 5.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp/vol16/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. It has been accepted for inclusion in *New England Journal of Public Policy* by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. For more information, please contact scholarworks@umb.edu.

The Longest Commute

The Geography of Poverty, Employment, and Services

Matthew F. Reidy, M.P.A.

The average American commuter, alone in an automobile, has a twenty-five-minute ride to work, a not unpleasant, usually overlooked part of the workday. But for millions of low-income people trying to establish themselves in the workforce, getting to work can be a major hurdle because their jobless neighborhoods are not well connected to areas where jobs are plentiful. Theirs is the longest commute. This is not a new problem. The decades-long decline of inner cities and the public transportation system are fairly well-documented phenomena. The time limits instituted as part of the 1996 welfare reform legislation bring a new immediacy to the problem, forcing more low-income people to look for employment, a difficulty that could become worse. Most of the solutions proposed by welfare officials, however, are geared toward trying to improve transportation services, expressed by federal and state officials as “Transportation is the ‘to’ in welfare to work.” Instead, the author suggests, policymakers should recognize that the most effective means of addressing the isolation of low-income communities is to invest in them by bringing jobs to the people rather than people to the jobs.

The decline of inner cities can be traced to the end of World War II, for postwar prosperity brought many changes to the United States. Prior to that conflict, the sites of most manufacturing and other industrial sectors were cities that contained the markets and labor pools, but the following years saw the suburbanization of jobs and the middle class. Owning a home became affordable for more people; tax rates for homeowners and business owners were lower outside cities; access to highways for businesses and a new class of commuters was easier; the open space of suburbs was appealing to home and business owners alike. The only problem was that low-income workers remained in the cities, largely because builders did not create low-income housing developments in the suburbs.

Thus was born the phrase “spatial mismatch,” meaning that low-skill workers tend to reside in central city areas while low-skill jobs are usually found in separate zones. The concentration of poor people in urban areas has worsened over the past three decades. William Julius Wilson describes the experience of these poor communities in *When Jobs*

Matthew Reidy, a former employee of state and federal government, is a consultant in health care and human services.

Disappear, and Paul Jargowsky does the same in *Poverty and Place: Ghettos, Barrios, and the American City*.¹ As they and other scholars have noted, these pockets of poverty include few jobs and services, but many poor people. The implications of this phenomenon are numerous and significant.

Paralleling the growth of the spatial mismatch phenomenon was the slow demise of public transportation, which peaked in the 1920s when ridership was nearly 16 billion. Until the end of World War II, a large percentage of Americans still used public transportation because most lived in urban areas and could not afford to own automobiles. Following the war, more people could purchase cars and homes in the suburbs. As a result, the number of public transit users dropped, as did public support for financing it. This loss was accelerated by the automobile and highway lobbies, which pushed the federal government to invest in highways rather than subways. After decades of the “spiral unto death” — decreased revenue in the fare boxes and government subsidies leads to decreased service, which leads to decreased numbers of riders, which leads to decreased revenue — the United States is reputed to have the worst public transportation system in the industrialized world.²

While the isolation of poor urban communities and the collapse of public transit have been somewhat slow, even insidious, welfare reform is a front-page issue. The War on Poverty was a major feature of the postwar era, as was the backlash against it. From its very beginning, some politicians criticized particular antipoverty programs as well as the entire initiative. By 1980, less than fifteen years after the start of that program, Ronald Reagan was successful in his campaign for president, thanks in part to his images of “welfare queens” and his promise to eliminate them. For the next twenty years, Republicans found it worthwhile to place welfare, along with crime and taxes, in their triad of core issues. Finally, President Bill Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996, which made fundamental changes to the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program. Its main theme was that welfare recipients must work while receiving benefits, allowable for only a limited time. The transitory nature of the assistance program is clear in its new name, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), presuming that once their eligibility for welfare benefits ends, recipients will find work and become self-supporting. In any event, the government will no longer offer cash support to them or their children.

In some states the TANF time limits have already begun to eliminate some people from eligibility for cash assistance. As more states’ time limits are implemented, and as the federal five-year limit approaches, it will be easier to determine just how difficult people in certain communities will find getting to work. This is particularly true for the growing majority of TANF recipients who live in inner cities.³ Since most job growth occurs in the suburbs, which are seldom connected to inner-city neighborhoods by public transportation, and few urban TANF recipients own cars, the proverbial writing is on the wall. Without work and public assistance, many of the people terminated from welfare programs will find themselves in a most difficult situation. This pending dilemma brings new immediacy to the geography of poverty, employment, and services.

Isolated Communities

Poor urban communities have at least one thing in common with poor rural communities: both are cut off from the mainstream of our economy and suffer all the ramifications of isolation. A big difference between the two is that urban neighborhoods were not

always so isolated, but over the past fifty years the American economy has changed dramatically; in fact it has literally moved. This situation has various names: spatial mismatch, concentration of poverty, suburbanization of jobs, pockets of poverty, ghettoization. The bottom line is the same: all sorts of employers leave, service industries such as supermarkets, banks, and retailers dry up, middle-class families move out, leaving a community with an excess of problems and a shortage of resources. This is not to say that these are defective neighborhoods. On the contrary, they are often filled with resilient, resourceful individuals who work hard to keep their families and communities together. But neighborhoods with high unemployment are ripe for all kinds of problems associated with family and community disintegration.

Research in this area is extensive. In the late 1960s, investigators first identified spatial mismatch as an explanation for high unemployment or low wages in neighborhoods cut off from job-rich localities.⁴ Several studies on the same topic appeared in the late 1980s and early 1990s.⁵ Another spurt of research was published in the mid-1990s, when Wilson and Jargowsky illustrated the problem and found that it had become worse in the intervening decades. Concentrations of poverty in urban areas have become more numerous and thicker over time.

When researchers first examined this phenomenon in the 1960s, they viewed the problem largely in the context of race, examining the development and consequences of spatial mismatch in African-American neighborhoods. Clearly, race has been an important factor in spatial mismatch, partly because of ethnic discrimination in housing and employment. The research on this topic suggests that not all low-income neighborhoods suffer from lack of access to jobs, but low-income neighborhoods in general suffer from spatial mismatch, and predominantly African-American neighborhoods have a disproportionately greater problem of access to the employment market.⁶

There can be no doubt that race and racism are major factors in the isolation of low-income communities, but race is not the only factor. The predominant force is poverty. In recent years researchers have analyzed census tracts with low levels of personal income, finding that poor communities in general are subject to spatial mismatch. Investigators have also examined communities with high densities of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families recipients, as distinct from low-wage workers, and compared them with job-rich areas. These TANF-specific analyses also supported spatial mismatch. For example, Boston researchers found, for residents of communities with a disproportionately higher rate of TANF recipients, that many entry-level jobs in the metropolitan area are simply inaccessible owing to inadequate public transportation. They also discovered that 48 percent of the employment locations in their study could not be reached by public transit in less than two hours.⁷ Poverty is largely an urban issue — nationwide, three-fourths of TANF recipients live in inner cities.⁸ Meanwhile, two-thirds of job growth occurs in the suburbs.⁹

Only a small percentage of TANF recipients own cars; estimates vary between 6 percent and 25 percent.¹⁰ Ownership is important. America is a car-centered society, and the vast majority of workers drive to work each day, but most poor people cannot afford automobiles. The Automobile Association of America estimates that the average annual cost of owning a car is in excess of \$6,500.¹¹ Even low-income individuals who buy less expensive used cars and do basic maintenance and repairs themselves incur such costs as insurance and registration, gas, and, in some localities, property taxes. Many city residents' auto insurance premiums are higher than those in suburban or rural areas, and as city residents of all classes acknowledge, car ownership is often out of the question

simply because only limited parking space is available. Lacking cars, the vast majority of TANF recipients depend on public transportation. Unfortunately for many people trying to get to work, the problem with public transit is summed up by “You can’t get there from here.”

The Fall of Public Transportation

The sad state of U.S. public transportation is common knowledge, perhaps even taken for granted. But at the beginning of this century, it was a significant part of life; indeed, trolleys and streetcars were a liberating force for low-income city people.¹² With the advent of public transit, urban workers were no longer limited to employment in factories within walking distance of their homes — they could cross town to new job opportunities. During World War II, fuel shortages led the American public to rely heavily on the public system.

After World War II, the United States, unlike most industrialized nations, downplayed public transportation for a number of reasons: more people could afford to own cars; equally important, car ownership became an integral part of American culture. After all, the automobile represents key features of American society, namely, mobility and independence — at least according to automobile advertisements. In any case, there was also a real shift in population as more people moved to the suburbs and commuted to work in their own vehicles.

Naturally, public transit ridership was bound to decrease and with it support for mass transit, but the collapse of its infrastructure was not merely the natural consequence of a moving population. We now know that the automobile and highway industries worked actively to decrease support for public transportation.¹³ The special interests lobbied local, state, and federal governments to abandon the old program and invest in highways; as a massive interstate system was being developed, urban public transportation declined.

The statistics clearly show the change in transportation patterns. In 1960, 20 percent of workers traveled to work in an automobile; by 1980 the figure had risen to 80 percent.¹⁴ The latest figure exceeds 90 percent.¹⁵ During the postwar decades public transportation became a shell of its past glory. The latest figure for public transit users nationally is about 10 million, or 8 percent of the total working population. Low-income earners represent almost half the ridership.¹⁶

The streetcars and trolleys that made up public transportation in the early part of the twentieth century are virtually extinct. In most U.S. cities, certainly most mid-sized ones, such transportation translates to buses, yet old streetcar rails still poke through some city streets. Bus routes often cover old trolley routes. One criticism of modern public transit is that bus routes are far more limited than the rather expansive trolley systems of long ago. This makes sense, given that a much smaller portion of the population now relies on it. To make matters worse, the bus routes that exist have not always been designed to move people efficiently for, in many cities, they operate like the spokes of a bicycle, going to a central point in the middle of the city. While this design has some built-in efficiencies, the typical rider who wants to cross town or go from an easterly to a southern point in a city must first go downtown, wait for a transfer, and go out again. As a result, travel time becomes significant.¹⁷ The delay contributes to the unpopularity of the system; in a fast-paced society no one enjoys a slow bus ride.

Buses with dozens of empty seats moving down streets with no businesses provide a clue that something has to change. Indeed, all across the country, local transit authorities are operating on deficit budgets and struggling to find a way to survive in the twenty-first century. Unfortunately for them, federal and state subsidies for public transit are drying up, and its authorities are desperately seeking new sources of revenue. They avoid shifting costs to paying passengers, aware that increased fares will drive more people away. Often the only alternative is to continue cutting back on services, which only continues the downward spiral.

Difficulties of Rejuvenating Public Transit

Just as many reasons contribute to the decline of public transportation, many more exist for its failure to return to its former vitality. The fact that relatively few people, as a percentage of the working population, patronize the system helps explain why there is relatively little political support for mass transit. Also, a large percentage of the riders are low-income workers, further explaining the lack of political support.

Political ideology also plays a role in the public transit issue. Some conservative corners criticize it as a wasteful anachronism. Such transit, they argue, is a public monopoly just as inefficient and insensitive to customer service as any private monopoly. There have been calls for private-sector providers to compete with the public service. Some critics argue that using vans rather than buses, small business rather than state bureaucracy, and market forces rather than central planning will create flexible and affordable transportation that encourages people to leave their cars at home.¹⁸

There is some validity to the argument that mass transit does not make the economic sense of five decades ago. The key to a profitable system is attracting a critical body of riders who share origins and destinations.¹⁹ That may have been the case at the turn of the century when all the residents of a given neighborhood might have worked at the same factory or cluster of factories.²⁰ But by end of the century the American environment was quite different.

For one thing, women's roles changed dramatically, and gender is an important issue in transportation, particularly in the context of welfare; more than 90 percent of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families are headed by women. Several studies have shown that household responsibilities can play a major role in determining commuting patterns.²¹ For example, in a household with children, a parent — usually the mother — is responsible for such activities as taking a child to and from child care, to school, extracurricular activities, medical visits, shopping for food and clothing, and so on. For the average middle-class married mother, the so-called soccer mom, this can be a time-consuming role, as evidenced by the lighthearted bumper sticker Mom's Taxi. On a more serious note, research shows that mothers' job opportunities can be limited to certain geographic areas precisely because competing demands dictate a relatively short commute to work.²² The pressures are equal, if not greater, for single mothers on TANF, owing to the shortcomings of public transportation.

Regarding transportation for modern mothers, two of the most salient aspects of the commuting problem are travel time and flexibility. Travel time is a critical variable. An average U.S. worker's commute takes approximately twenty-five minutes.²³ However, spatial mismatch and the deficiencies in transit systems force many low-income people to spend an hour or two completing a one-way journey.

As commuting time increases, corresponding problems increase.

- With respect to employment, chances of a person's quitting a job increase, particularly for low-wage earners.
- With respect to net income, the longer one's commute time, the longer one's child is in day care, which necessitates more money being spent for child care.
- Longer commutes can also lead to increased transportation costs.²⁴

All these problems reduce workers' net income, an important issue for low earners, who have precious little disposable income.

Concerning quality of life, the more time consumed in commuting to work, the less is available to spend with one's children. For single mothers, as for all parents, family time is invaluable.

Single mothers in all income brackets tend to have involved commutes. Their mode of transportation must be flexible to accommodate the numerous stops they have to make, for example, shopping and picking up children. Clearly, most mothers prefer the flexibility of an automobile to perform these tasks. But how does a woman without a car handle her responsibilities? Public transit cannot be all things to all people. Buses do not wait while a parent takes a child into a day care center. Nor can buses be as flexible as taxicabs, for instance, in reaching various destinations. However much public transit authorities might want to improve or expand these routes, their limited budgets allow service to only a limited number of areas. In short, the current systems cannot meet the needs of many low-income working mothers.

In addition to gender, economics, politics, and shifting demographics, race also plays a role in the problem of modern mass transit. In Alabama, a journalist noted,

The crisis in urban transit has affected the state where the bus boycott began. In Mobile . . . where most bus riders are low income African Americans, service was cut by 22% while fares increased from \$1 to \$1.25. Riders sometimes wait an hour or two between buses . . . [and] may spend three or more hours a day commuting across town to minimum wage jobs. As Mobile City Council president Rev. John Clinton put it, "Now, the question is not can you ride in the front of the bus. The question is whether you can have a bus to ride on."²⁵

The proprietors of a Buffalo, New York, shopping mall told its individual store owners that inner-city buses would not be allowed on mall property. Several civic leaders complained that bus routes were determined by racism. One community leader reportedly said, "It is a kind of racism that is often played out in battles between cities and suburbs. It doesn't directly say no blacks allowed, but the effect is the same."²⁶

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., drew the connections between race, isolated communities, and public transportation in 1967.

When you go beyond a relatively simple though serious problem such as police racism, however, you begin to get into all the complexities of the modern American economy. Urban transit systems in most American cities, for example, have become a genuine civil rights issue — and a valid one — because the layout of rapid-transit systems determines the accessibility of jobs to the black community. If transportation systems in American cities could be laid out so as to provide an opportunity for poor people to get meaningful employment, then they could begin to move into the mainstream of American life. A good example of this problem is my home city of Atlanta, where the rapid-transit system has been laid out for the convenience of the white upper-middle-class suburbanites who commute to their jobs downtown. The system has virtually no consideration for con-

necting the poor people with their jobs. There is only one possible explanation for this situation, and that is the racist blindness of the city planners.²⁷

In some respects, there have been many changes in the past three decades, but in others little is different. A 1991 article on the politics of mass transit described an Atlanta situation. A state representative from a suburban area is quoted as defending a vote against an increase of half a penny in the sales tax, which would have extended Atlanta's transit system into his county, saying, "Crime rides the rails . . . We don't want criminals particularly from downtown or poorer neighborhoods to have access to [our county]."²⁸ In 1997, researchers examining the spatial mismatch hypothesis surveyed access to jobs in Atlanta. Finding the mismatch phenomenon, they discovered that only three in every hundred full-time jobs in newspaper advertisements met the following three criteria: entry level; pay more than \$15,000 annually; and located within a quarter mile of a bus route.²⁹

To the casual observer, transportation might have little to do with race and gender issues, problems deeply rooted in this country. But the literature on this topic shows that to improve the U.S. system requires addressing these related problems, at least to some degree.

The difficulties associated with revitalizing or expanding public transportation are long-standing and profound. While it may make perfect sense to build major improvements into its infrastructure, the government is unlikely to be willing or able to develop a system to meet the needs of the large numbers of women on TANF who are preparing to enter the workforce. That also explains why it is so strange for the federal government to consider transportation-based solutions as the primary means of addressing isolated communities in the context of welfare reform.

Welfare Reform and Public Transportation

In 1992, presidential candidate Bill Clinton pledged to "end welfare as we know it." In 1996, federal welfare reform legislation, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act (PRWORA) of 1996, was signed into law. Arguably, its single most important aspect is time limits. States have the authority to limit eligibility for assistance to a certain number of months in a row; one may roll on and off welfare, but not stay on indefinitely. This is emphasized in the federal provision that says no one may receive federal cash benefits for more than five years during their lifetime, unless they meet certain criteria for an exemption such as a disability. It is the "temporary" of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families.

While some critics consider time limits heartless, supporters view them as necessary sticks to motivate people to become independent and to motivate state agencies to help them reach that goal. TANF supporters claim that the legislation provides states with sufficient funding and flexibility to help welfare recipients become employable and self-sufficient. The thinking is that states will take full advantage of the new TANF block grant to create effective job training and placement programs, health insurance coverage, child care subsidies, and other supportive services, including transportation, to enable those on welfare to transition to a life of work.

Amid the excitement of the legislation and the first few months of the new program, little, if anything, was said about the geography of poverty. Perhaps politicians and policy wonks gave it little thought. The intricacies of health insurance and the significance of child care might well be more intriguing study topics. Besides, when making

historic legislation bound to change welfare as we know it, there is little time to worry about such quotidian aspects of workaday life as bus routes.

About a year after the enactment of PWRORA, the federal government began to acknowledge the problem of spatial mismatch. Remarkably, though, federal officials decided to frame the problem primarily in terms of transportation rather than community. The secretary of Transportation was fond of saying, "Transportation is the 'to' in welfare to work." This was followed by explicit encouragement from federal officials to the states to address transportation issues. In a joint letter from the secretaries of Transportation, Health and Human Services, and Labor to state welfare officials, the secretaries encouraged them to overcome "one of the biggest challenges facing those transitioning from welfare to work: finding reliable, affordable, and efficient transportation." They urged states to use "existing funds for transportation services wherever possible." The key, they suggested, is taking "full advantage of current resources."³⁰

That was a remarkable position in light of the rather dismal state of public transportation systems. While it was laudable for the government to recognize the serious problem of spatial mismatch, the secretaries' focus on transportation-based solutions is a bit puzzling. If spatial mismatch is such a tough problem, one might ask, why address it with public transit, the weakest link in the chain of government services?

The one new financial investment by the federal government for the transit system is geared specifically toward low-income people. Congress allocated new funds precisely for such services for welfare recipients in the form of the Department of Transportation's Access to Jobs program. Unfortunately, the allocated amount of money is relatively small — \$600 million over five years — and will be scattered across the country for demonstration projects. That many dollars certainly sounds like a lot of money, but viewed over five years for a population of some 12 million individuals, it amounts to an investment of about \$10.00 per person per year. Granted, these moneys are meant to finance demonstration projects, to test innovative methods. Still, it seems a paltry sum compared with the \$27 billion in combined state and federal dollars allocated in 1997 alone for the TANF block grant.³¹

The Federal Transit Administration (FTA) is slated to administer the Access to Jobs program and offer the grants through competition. The purpose of the grants is to help states, local government, and nonprofit organizations develop effective approaches to meet the transportation needs of welfare recipients and others of low income. The grants cannot exceed 50 percent of project costs, so grantees must cover the remaining costs with state, local, or private funding.³² The program is too new to evaluate, but members of the Government Accounting Office (GAO) opined that several issues must be addressed so that the program can truly meet the needs of the poor. For one, they suggested, the FTA should require grant beneficiaries to coordinate transportation strategies with local job placement and other social service agencies. Further, the FTA should include many transportation strategies, not just existing mass transit systems, in implementing welfare reform. The GAO believes that this may require FTA and local transit agencies to undergo a "cultural change whereby they are willing to accept nontraditional approaches for addressing welfare to work barriers."³³

In addition to Access to Jobs grants, the federal government is allowing, even encouraging, states to use portions of the TANF block grant and the Welfare to Work grant funds for transit services. There's not much new about that. Assistance with transportation was available under the old AFDC program in the form of bus passes and vouchers for gas or vehicle repair. Virtually every state will continue to make this kind of help available under TANF.

Unfortunately, only a few states have used their welfare block grants to create new investments in transportation-related projects.³⁴ Most TANF state plans are focused on helping recipients with auto repairs and gas money or free transit passes. Without question, these supports are quite important for TANF recipients who own cars or whose homes and places of employment and day care are located on convenient bus routes. But for the large number of those who are not car owners and do not find public transit useful, these supports have little value. On an encouraging note, a few states have developed innovative programs to help TANF recipients acquire used cars, and at least two states have designed small pilot programs whereby TANF beneficiaries become van-based transportation entrepreneurs and help other recipients commute to work. These programs combine the job development aspect of entrepreneurship with a flexible transportation design that meets the needs of working mothers. These states, however, are exceptions to the rule.

In their defense, federal and state governments have made sincere efforts to improve transportation services in order to overcome spatial mismatch. The federal government has sponsored many conferences for state welfare and transportation officials, there have been numerous reports by federal agencies, and a few states have developed new ideas and made advances. But at least at this point, four years after enactment of PRWORA, relatively little progress has been made to improve services for most U.S. low-income individuals. Given the enormous hurdles to be overcome, this is not surprising.

Therefore, it is time to give lower priority to transportation-based tactics since they offer limited benefit. The better alternative is to focus on community-based strategies. In other words, it will be more effective for welfare officials to focus on bringing jobs to the people rather than people to the jobs.

Bringing Jobs and Services to People

Perhaps the most striking aspect of welfare officials' focus on transportation-oriented solutions is not the underwhelming financial investment or the apparent lack of recognition of the challenge in developing effective transportation-based tactics; it is the failure to give top priority to community-based strategies. That is, welfare policymakers have tried to figure out the complex problem of moving folks back and forth from their communities twice a day rather than attempting to create jobs in inner-city neighborhoods where three-fourths of their clients live.

Bringing jobs to the community serves two purposes: providing employment opportunities while delivering services. In addition, it also conveys stability, vitality, and hope to neighborhoods in need of all three. Moreover, a community-based approach resolves the problem of long commutes — and its negative ramifications — because it creates jobs close to where the people live; that alone is a major benefit.

As the welfare reform time clocks continue to tick, it is important for officials to recognize that community-based strategies are inherently superior to those which are transportation-based because the former have fewer obstacles and offer greater promise of large-scale results.

An applicable criticism to proposals for community-based strategies might be, in 1990s vernacular, “Been there, done that.” Critics might say, “We tried that in the 1960s and it’s not worth trying again.” This, however, is a specious comment. It is important to remember that policymakers and program managers have learned many valuable lessons in the past three decades. Many developments of that period have provided new tools for strengthening communities.

- The Community Reinvestment Act provides capital through requiring banks to make loans in poor and minority neighborhoods. This legislation passed in 1977 in response to findings that many banks engaged in red-lining, the practice of refusing to provide loans to individuals in certain areas deemed by the banks to be too risky. Under the CRA, banks have been required to improve their lending practices and the successes have been demonstrable.³⁵
- The Enterprise Community/Enterprise Zone (EC/EZ) Initiative, which provides federal moneys and regulatory relief in designated low-income areas is a promising opportunity that can be expanded. The EC/EZ initiative was started in the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1993 when \$1 billion was made available over several years via the Social Services Block Grant. In addition, it provided for \$2.5 billion in federal tax incentives. Beginning in 1995, 105 areas in 42 states were selected to participate. There are four key principles: economic opportunity, sustainable community development, community-based partnerships; and strategic vision for change.³⁶
- The Brownfields Redevelopment movement is helping to turn abandoned urban industrial locations back into job centers. About 450,000 former U.S. commercial and industrial sites are a barrier to local economic development. The Environmental Protection Agency is the lead federal entity in this effort, and many state governments are taking active roles in cleaning up these sites.³⁷
- In the private sector, a number of economists — Michael Porter, for one — are promoting the notion of revitalizing inner-city economies by enticing businesses into urban areas and using the European practice of clustering as economic building blocks. These new tools, plus the lessons learned from a generation ago, can lead to a powerful strategy for revitalizing isolated urban communities.³⁸

One might argue that the existence of these various approaches suggests that community-based strategies are already in place. Each of these particular strategies, however, was in existence prior to the enactment of federal welfare reform, and none have been explicitly tied to efforts to help people become independent from welfare. More to the point, these methods have not received the kind of attention from welfare officials that transportation-oriented systems have received.

One also might argue that the economic development systems have their respective flaws. That may be true. The Community Reinvestment Act has encountered criticism in Congress, where some conservative politicians believe that the government should not meddle in lending practices of private institutions.³⁹ The Enterprise Zone experience has been rather limited in scope, and there is evidence that the process has not always been free of problems.⁴⁰ The Brownfields initiative has been criticized for being led in the Environmental Protection Agency rather than shared with agencies more accustomed to promoting businesses and jobs so the process could be faster and more user friendly.⁴¹

The notion of government-provided incentives, usually in the form of tax breaks or land or utility development, to the private sector for investment in low-income urban areas has also received criticism.⁴² *Time* magazine ran a cover story on corporate welfare, with a picture of a porcine businessman being fed by Uncle Sam, and reported that pub-

lic assistance to corporations does not always serve the public good.⁴³ In July 1999, when President Clinton called for more private-sector investment in poor communities during a week-long tour of low-income areas, some critics were dismissive. Why, they asked, if this was a serious effort, did Clinton wait until the penultimate year of his presidency to draw attention to it? Why wait seven years after first campaigning to end welfare as we know it and a full three years after signing the PWRORA into law? Be that as it may, the important point is that presidential leadership has been brought to this issue. The bully pulpit is a strong force in our society and now that it has been focused on revitalizing low-income communities, there is a great potential for success.

Each of these criticisms may have validity. The reality is that the job development initiatives are not entirely flawless. Still, there have been some remarkable successes and strategies that hold out great promise for helping to restore communities, especially if they are coordinated in cohesive development strategies.

Likewise, coordinating economic development strategies with poverty-related programs would produce enormous strength for communities. In fact, true community-based strategies must involve the economic as well as the health and human services dimension. Cross coordination would make it possible to achieve tremendous efficiencies across the board while addressing fundamental issues in low-income communities.

It is eminently sensible to approach the problems of poor neighborhoods holistically. The federal and state governments spend a massive amount of money on individuals in these isolated locales through a variety of programs such as Medicaid, Food Stamps, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, and housing programs. The concentration of poor people in certain areas, while problematic in many respects, has at least one benefit in terms of the administration of poverty-related programs: at least in theory, it allows these programs to be coordinated and centralized to maximize efficiency.⁴⁴

Consider the largest poverty-related programs as measured in terms of government expenditures and numbers of people served: Medicaid, TANF, and the Food Stamp program.

- The Medicaid program expended \$160 billion (federal plus state dollars) in 1996 on 37.5 million individuals. It covers the medical expenses of low-income persons.
- The welfare program, TANF, allocated \$27.3 billion (federal allocation plus state Maintenance of Effort) in 1977, the first year of the TANF block grant. The program served 11.9 million individuals, providing families with cash assistance, child care, and employment training.
- The Food Stamp program, in 1997, served 21.4 million people in 8.8 million households. Total cost of the actual Food Stamp benefits was \$22.4 billion.

It may be surprising that after thirty years of research and analysis on the isolation of poor communities, the largest of the contemporary poverty-related programs have no significant location-oriented strategies. Of course, these programs were not explicitly intended to help whole neighborhoods; they were designed to help individuals and families. Indeed, while the programs are not panaceas for poverty, they do provide significant assistance in helping persons and groups to alleviate some of the aspects of poverty and become healthier. But the performance of these programs is definitely affected by the isolation of poor communities.

In welfare, we know that someone who cannot get to a job, owing to spatial mismatch, is at risk of long-term public assistance.

In Medicaid, the single largest budget item oriented toward low-income people, numerous studies have shown that a top reason for recipients not receiving adequate health care is their difficulty in getting to practitioners' offices.⁴⁵ For example, pregnant women find it onerous to travel to obstetricians' offices. Another top reason, for children who miss dental appointments and immunizations, is trouble in reaching dentists' and pediatricians' offices. Prenatal care, dental care, and well-child visits are cost-saving preventive services; absences serve only to increase the ultimate costs of the Medicaid program.

In Food Stamps, we know that people who cannot patronize a supermarket are forced to spend their limited dollars at higher-priced convenience stores or pay expensive taxi fares to reach markets in other neighborhoods.⁴⁶ These extra costs limit poor families' already meager purchasing power.

Access problems point to communities that do not have adequate entrance to health care practitioners, supermarkets, or services, for example, banking and retail outlets. Clearly, inaccessibility to services results in decreased program efficiency and, ultimately, higher government expenditures for poverty-related programs. Such situations cry out for community-based interventions, but, with very few exceptions, most government programs do not address these problems or promote answers. If real coordination between these programs could be achieved, the results could be quite significant in terms of improving recipients' quality of life and decreasing aggregate costs.

The work involved in developing the coordination necessary for community-based strategies is extensive. The logistics of coordinating a multitude of programs, government agencies, funding sources, and regulatory issues can be almost as overwhelming as the problems of poor locations. Yet without a balanced effort, the result will be a series of relatively inefficient individual tactics.

Coordination Is the Key

The key to any strategy for invigorating isolated communities is thoughtful coordination. It may seem blatantly obvious, but the United States spends more than a quarter of a trillion dollars a year in tax dollars on poverty-related programs. Despite the fact that poor people are concentrated in certain areas, the largest poverty-related programs pay little attention to community-based interventions. Moreover, there is virtually no connection between poverty-related programs and economic development initiatives. Coordination between government agencies and the private sector is even rarer.

Although antipoverty and economic programs overlap in urban and poverty issues and even in specific geographic areas, there is little coordination between them. This is not entirely surprising because different government organizations administer the various programs and have little, if any, communication with one another, let alone joint planning. In general, government bureaucracies are not famous for cooperating with other branches or the private sector.

The irony is that the various entities deal with the very same low-income neighborhoods. The shame is that they do not capitalize on their respective knowledge and resources nor do they make the most productive use of their funding. Under the EZ/EC initiative, federal agencies are supposed to make special efforts to coordinate their activities in the designated areas. It may be too soon to tell whether interagency coordina-

tion works as well as it should, but clearly there is a precedent for focusing the massive government resources. There have also been good experiences in public/private ventures through which local and state governments have succeeded in growing new businesses in low-income areas.

This is a classic win-win situation. The private sector could benefit from new market opportunities and new workers. The government could benefit from improving the efficiency of poverty-related programs. For example, the TANF program stands to benefit when new job opportunities are created in recipients' neighborhoods. When a supermarket is built in a low-income community, the Food Stamp dollars spent there help to create jobs for residents of that location. When a Medicaid health care practice opens in a poor neighborhood, government payments to that facility help to employ neighborhood residents. Most important, the communities themselves benefit from lower unemployment and greater access to services.

The idea of strengthening inner-city communities is not new. There is, however, a new urgency to connect economic development and poverty-related programs because the TANF time limits mean that the safety net is no longer available; the economy must be able to absorb people who previously relied on it. Community-based strategies are essential to accomplishing this goal. Connecting economic development and antipoverty programs is easier said than done. But to imagine the results of a fully coordinated public and private effort to resuscitate isolated neighborhoods is to visualize an America that no longer has poor, isolated communities. ❁

Notes

1. W. J. Wilson, *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996) and P. A. Jargowsky, *Poverty and Place: Ghettos, Barrios, and the American City* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1997).
2. K. T. Jackson, "Public Transportation," in *The Reader's Companion to American History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991), 882–886.
3. R. Pear, "As Welfare Rolls Shrink, Cities Shoulder Bigger Load," *New York Times*, June 6, 1999, 22.
4. See J. F. Kain, "Housing Segregation, Negro Unemployment, and Metropolitan Segregation," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 82 (1968): 175–197.
5. J. D. Kasarda, "Urban Industrial Transition and the Underclass," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 501 (1989): 26–47; T. J. Cooke and J. M. Shumway, "Developing the Spatial Mismatch Hypothesis: Problems of Accessibility to Employment for Low-Wage Central City Labor," *Urban Geography* 12 (1991): 310–332; K. Ihlanfeldt and D. L. Sjoquist, "The Impact of Job Decentralization on the Economic Welfare of Central City Blacks," *Journal of Urban Economics* 26 (1989): 110–130.
6. J. D. Kasarda, "Entry-Level Jobs, Mobility, and Urban Minority Unemployment," *Urban Affairs Quarterly* 19 (1983): 21–40; D. T. Lichter, "Racial Differences in Underemployment in American Cities," *American Journal of Sociology* 93 (1988): 771–792; Cooke and Shumway, "Developing the Spatial Mismatch Hypothesis"; V. L. Carlson and N. Theodore, "Employment Availability for Entry-Level Workers: An Examination of the Spatial-Mismatch Hypothesis in Chicago," *Urban Geography* 18, no. 3 (1997) : 228–242.
7. "Welfare Reform and Access to Jobs in Boston," U.S. Department of Transportation, Bureau of Transportation Statistics, BTS98-A-02, prepared by Annalynn Lacombe, Washington, D.C., 1998.
8. Pear, "As Welfare Rolls Shrink."

9. See addendum to letter to state welfare officials from the U.S. secretaries of Transportation, Health and Human Services, and Labor, May 4, 1998, Washington, D.C.
10. U.S. Government Accounting Office, "Welfare Reform: Transportation's Role in Moving from Welfare to Work," GAO/RCED-98-161, May 1998; see also K. Edin and L. Lein, *Making Ends Meet: How Single Mothers Survive Welfare and Low-Wage Work* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1997).
11. American Automobile Association, "Your Driving Costs," Heathrow, Florida, Summer 1996.
12. See Scott Molloy, *Trolley Wars: Streetcar Workers on the Line* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996).
13. J. Klein and M. Olson, "Taken for a Ride," Newday Films documentary, Hohokus, N.J., 1996.
14. ENO Foundation, *Commuting in America: A National Report on Commuting Patterns and Trends* (Westport, Conn.: ENO Foundation, 1987).
15. Office of Highway Information Management, Federal Highway Administration, *1995 Nationwide Personal Transportation Survey*, Washington, D.C., 1997.
16. Community Transportation Association of America, "Access to Jobs: A Guide to Innovative Practices in Welfare to Work Transportation," 1998; available on the Internet at www.ctaa.org/welfare/innovative.
17. See, for example, S. Davies and M. Albaum, "Mobility Problems of the Poor in Indianapolis," *Antipode Monographs in Social Geography*, no. 1 (1972): 67–86.
18. See J. A. Dunn, Jr., *Driving Forces: The Automobile, Its Enemies, and the Politics of Mobility* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1998); N. Achs, "Roadblocks to Public Transit: For Reasons Ranging from Prejudice to Pragmatism, Many Suburbanites Are Fighting Tooth and Nail to Keep Mass Transit Out of Their Neighborhoods," *American City and Country* 106, no. 1 (January 1991): 28–32; and J. Love, "It's Time to Get the Government Out of Mass Transit," *USA Today*, November 12, 1993, 122, N2582, 12.
19. See J. W. Mason, "The Buses Don't Stop Here Anymore: Sick Transit and How to Fix It," *American Prospect* 37 (March–April 1998): 57–63.
20. See S. Hanson, *Gender, Work, and Space* (New York: Routledge, 1995).
21. See S. McLafferty and V. Preston, "Gender, Race, and the Determinants of Commuting: New York, 1990," *Urban Geography* 18, no. 3 (1997): 192–212; J. Madden, "Why Women Work Closer to Home," *Urban Studies* 18 (1981): 181–194; B. Rutherford and G. Wekerle, "Captive Rider, Captive Labor; Spatial Constraints on Women's Employment," *Urban Geography* 9 (1988): 173–193; J. Madden and L. C. Chiu, "The Wage Effects of Residential Location and Commuting Constraints on Employed Married Women," *Urban Studies* 27 (1990): 353–369; P. Gordon, A. Kumar, and H. Richardson, "Gender Differences in Metropolitan Travel Behavior," *Regional Studies* 23 (1989): 499–510; and V. Preston, S. McLafferty, and E. Hamilton, "The Impact of Family Status on Black, White, and Hispanic Women's Commuting," *Urban Geography* 14 (1993): 228–250.
22. Hanson, *Gender, Work, and Space*.
23. U.S. Census Bureau, "Journey to Work," based on 1990 census data; available on the Internet at www.census.gov/population/socdemo/journey/ustime90.txt.
24. See McLafferty and Preston, "Gender, Race, and the Determinants of Commuting."
25. R.D.G. Kelley, "Freedom Riders (The Sequel)," *The Nation* 262, no. 5 (February 5, 1996): 18–22.
26. Warren Galloway, quoted in E. Barnes, "Can't Get There from Here: A Tragic Death Exposes a Hidden Agenda in Public Transportation Bus Route Discrimination," *Time* 147, no. 8 (February 19, 1996): 33.
27. M. L. King, Jr., "A Testament of Hope," in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James Melvin Washington (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 325–326.
28. See Achs, "Roadblocks to Public Transit."
29. M. Rich and J. Coughlin, "The Spatial Distribution of Economic Opportunities: Access and Accessibility Issues for Welfare in Metropolitan Atlanta," paper prepared

for presentation at the 94th annual meeting of the Association of American Geographers, panel on Urban Health, Welfare, and Education Problems, Boston, March 1998.

30. Joint letter to state welfare officials from the U.S. secretaries of Transportation, Health and Human Services, and Labor.
31. U.S. Government Accounting Office, "Welfare Reform: Early Fiscal Effects of the TANF Block Grant," GAO/AIMD-98-137, August 1998.
32. National Governors' Association Summary of H.R. 2400, "Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century; Section 3037, Job Access and Reverse Commute Grants," July 14, 1998, National Governors' Association, Washington, D.C.
33. U.S. Government Accounting Office, "Welfare Reform: Transportation's Role in Moving from Welfare to Work," GAO/RCED-98-161, May 1998.
34. See the National Transportation Resource Center's 1998 Resource Guide, "State Welfare to Work Transportation Analysis: State by State Analysis of TANF State Plans," July 1998.
35. R. Kuttner, "Lessons of the Community Reinvestment Act," *American Prospect*, November 1997.
36. See U.S. Department of Agriculture and Department of Housing and Urban Development, "Home of the EZ and EC Program"; available on the Internet at www.ezec.gov.
37. National Governors' Association, Center for Best Practices, "Brownfield Redevelopment"; available on the Internet at www.nga.org/cbp/activities/brownfielddredev.asp.
38. M. Porter, "The Competitive Advantage of the Inner City," *Harvard Business Review*, May-June, 1995.
39. J. M. Schlesinger, "Gramm Crusades to Overturn Community Lending Act," *Wall Street Journal*, April 19, 1999, 24.
40. See, for example, M. L. Owens, "Citizen Participation and Strategic Planning for an Urban Enterprise Community," *New England Journal of Public Policy* 13, no. 2 (1998): 143-162
41. Z. Kotval, "Industrial Policy: Federal, State, and Local Response," *New England Journal of Public Policy* 13, no. 2 (1998): 7-18.
42. M. Gozner, "The Porter Prescription," *American Prospect*, no. 38 (May-June 1998): 56-64.
43. D. Barlett and J. Steele, "Corporate Welfare," *Time*, November 9, 1998, 36-50.
44. R. Peet, "Some Issues in the Social Geography of American Poverty," in *Antipode Monographs in Social Geography*, no. 1 (Worcester, Mass.: Antipode, 1972).
45. S. Thaddeus and D. Maine, "Too Far to Walk: Maternal Mortality in Context," *Social Science Medicine* 38, no. 8 (April 1994): 1091-1110; R. Riportella-Muller and M. Selby-Harrington, "Barriers to the Use of Preventive Health Care Services for Children," *Public Health Reports* 111, no. 1 (January 1996): 71-78; M. Reidy, "Assessment of Rhode Island's Medicaid Dental Services and Model for Increasing Access to Dental Care," Rhode Island Department of Human Services, 1997; J. Johnson and P. Primas, "Factors That Prevent Women of Low Socioeconomic Status from Seeking Prenatal Care," *Journal of the American Academy of Nurse Practitioners* 6, no. 3 (March 1994): 105-111; K. Rask, M. Williams, and R. Parker, "Obstacles Predicting Lack of a Regular Provider and Delays in Seeking Care for Patients at an Urban Public Hospital," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 271, no. 24 (June 22, 1994): 1931-1933; I. Hanson, W. Spears, and D. Stoner, "Immunization Prevalence Rates for Infants in a Large Urban Center: Houston/Harris County, 1993," *Texas Medicine* 92, no. 3 (March 1996): 66-71; A. Billittier, R. Moscati, and D. Janicke, "A Multi-site Survey of Factors Contributing to Medically Unnecessary Ambulance Transports," *Academy of Emergency Medicine* 3, no. 11 (November 1996): 1046-1052; C. Hickey, S. Cliver, and R. Goldenberg, "Low Prenatal Weight Gain among Low-income Women: What Are the Risk Factors?" *Birth* 24, no. 2 (June 1997): 102-108; C. Ciamb Bruno and C. Cowell, "The Extent of Barriers and Linkages to Health Care for Head Start Children," *Journal of Community Health* 22, no. 2 (April 1997): 101-114; W. Siganga

- and T. Huynh, "Barriers to the Use of Pharmacy Services: The Case of Ethnic Populations," *Journal of the American Pharmacy Association* 37, no. 3 (May 1997): 335–340.
46. R. Koralek, "Conference on Access to Food, September 1995: Report of the Proceedings"; available on the Internet at www.usda.gov/cgi-bin/waisgate.