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Universal Basic Mobility Pilot Programs in Oakland and Bakersfield Are Combatting Transportation Poverty

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Issue

The concept of Universal Basic Mobility (UBM) calls upon policymakers to ensure all people have access to transportation services for basic needs like work, food, and healthcare. Pilot programs in California and beyond are testing UBM as a means to address the problem of transport poverty, often defined as a household spending more than 10% of their income on transportation (the average American household spends 16%). Transport poverty also encompasses issues of mobility access (e.g., how far a person can travel and what types of destinations they can reach in a defined amount of time) and transportation experience (e.g., safety). Those particularly vulnerable to transport poverty include low-income households, communities of color, undocumented immigrants, persons with disabilities, and youth who are neither working nor in school.

Researchers from the University of California, Davis evaluated the economic, social, and environmental impacts of UBM-inspired pilot programs in two major California cities–Bakersfield and Oakland. The pilot programs targeted two different populations, both vulnerable to transport poverty— young adults with a history of foster care or other social service needs (either meeting the definition of disconnected youth or at-risk) in Bakersfield, and a low-income, minority-majority community with many undocumented immigrants in East Oakland. The central component of both pilot programs was free fare transportation service, though each program offered

Transportation poverty afflicts many low-income households, and can include spending large amounts of time and/or income to travel. Transportation poverty can also mean facing dangerous travel conditions, or sacrificing taking trips due to lack of available mobility options or lack of funds.

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different services. Since Bakersfield has limited public transit service, this UBM program included up to five free 30-minute rides on shared, dockless e-scooters or e-bikes (owned by the company Spin) for 100 youth for one year. Oakland's program distributed prepaid cards ($300 for 500 selected participants) that could be used on a variety of public transportation and shared mobility services.

Key Research Findings

Participants in both city programs replaced car trips and/or walking with shared mobility and/or public transportation trips. In the Oakland pilot program, participants most often used their funds on Alameda Contra-Costa (AC) Transit, benefitting from the new, fast BRT line in their neighborhood, and Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART), which many participants could not afford previously. Program participants also tried out new modes of transportation, sometimes for recreation or leisure, but more often for utilitarian purposes (particularly in Bakersfield).

Both programs were successful at alleviating many aspects of transportation poverty. Participants reported improved access to jobs, food, health care, and social and recreational opportunities. They were able to travel to more places and choose travel modes to get to their destinations more quickly and have better travel experiences. The pilot programs also helped participants carry out their activities with more comfort and dignity (e.g., not showing up to work sweaty) and yielded social and cultural benefits.

The transportation services offered in the programs occasionally fell short in terms of providing adequate access or safety. The primary barrier to access and safety was car-centric urban design (e.g., lack of appropriate bike infrastructure). Oakland participants cited lack of safe bike lanes and poor road conditions as well as lack of e-scooter and/or e-bike availability as deterrents to shared micromobility use. In addition, unprecedented levels of vandalism in Bakersfield to the Spin e-bikes toward the

end of the program led to poor e-bike availability as well as unreliable performance, causing disappointment and inconvenience for participants. Occasional equipment failures (likely often related to the vandalism) as well as some user behavior (e.g., not wearing a helmet) made for unsafe conditions for micromobility use. Some participants who did not feel safe or comfortable using either shared micromobility (due to age, ability, or lack of familiarity) or public transit (due to fear of crime or harassment) limited their use of services to the most basic of needs (e.g., food, health care) and did not get to experience the social and recreational benefits that some participants found with the programs.

Conclusion

Feedback from pilot program participants in both cities indicated that the service offerings were widely appreciated and beneficial. While some issues were raised related to access and safety, these can likely be addressed with enhanced program design. For example, improved education and communication strategies (e.g., promotion at community fairs or ride-and-drive events) may help participants feel comfortable using micromobility. Public safety trainings could provide instruction on how to respond to crime and harassment on public transit. For micromobility to be a viable travel option for more people, real and perceived dangers need to be addressed to prioritize safety on city streets. Improved ridership on public transit will also require improved safety, including addressing crime.

More Information

This policy brief is drawn from the report " Evaluating Universal Basic Mobility Pilot Programs in Oakland and Bakersfield, California" available at https://www.ucits.org/research-project/2022-20. For more information about the findings presented in this brief, please contact Angela Sanguinetti at asanguinetti@ucdavis.edu.