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We Can Get There From Here: New Perspectives on Transportation Equity

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<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1z28n542>

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Publication Date

2018-06-01

We Can Get There From Here: New Perspectives on Transportation Equity

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POLICY BRIEF

Issue

Disparities in the distribution of transportation system benefits and burdens are significant and have persisted despite the efforts of many to reduce or eliminate them.

Although transportation plans and projects must be assessed for their distributive effects in accordance with U.S. laws and regulatory guidance, these analyses rarely uncover findings that result in changes to decisions already made or the creation of entirely new projects or policies. This outcome is due in part to limitations associated with transportation governance institutions including metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs), specifically those related to inequitable access to political power and representation. It is also due to methodological choices and limitations in the quantitative analyses that are conducted to understand (and ideally avoid or mitigate) impacts.

This white paper assesses academic research and transportation planning practice to provide a shared understanding of the definitions, challenges, and opportunities in this field, thereby enabling often-conflicting parties to collaborate in achieving a common goal: transportation equity.

An equitable transportation system would be one where participation is meaningful and effective: participants would have a reasonable expectation that their voices would be heard and decisions changed in response. The benefits and burdens created by projects, policies, and plans would also be shared equitably such that no groups would be unduly burdened by a lack of access to adequate transportation nor by negative effects from proximity to

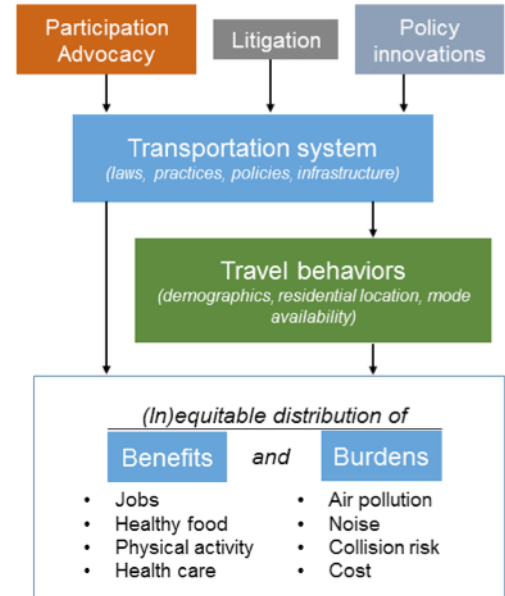


Figure 1: Key factors affecting transportation equity outcomes.

transportation infrastructure. Although an equitable transportation system remains an elusive goal, “we can get there from here” by implementing innovative and collaborative policies and practices that place increased attention on the needs of underserved communities to effect changes in the transportation system, shaping the distribution of its benefits and burdens (Figure 1).

Key Research Findings

Different types of transportation infrastructure are used at different rates by different racial and ethnic groups. These differentials will affect the ratio of benefits and burdens that are experienced by each group. Thus, any effort to understand the impacts of a project, plan, or policy has to consider the racial and ethnic demographics of existing and potential users, as well as these effects over space

and time. A traveler's race and ethnicity are likely to affect the conditions that structure his or her decisions regarding the amount of travel to undertake and mode (e.g., transit, car, bike, walk) choice even when well-known determinants of travel behavior (such as income) are taken into account.

There are significant disparities in the distribution of transportation benefits along race, ethnicity, and income lines. Transportation benefits can be measured in terms of accessibility, or the ease with which desired destinations are reached. Disparities in access to jobs, healthy food, and health care are widely observed along income, race, and ethnicity dimensions.

There are also significant disparities in the distribution of transportation burdens along race, ethnicity, and income lines. In most parts of the U.S., low-income people and people of color are more likely to live near busy roads, potentially exposing them to greater air pollution and noise impacts. Collision risks are also greater for these populations.

Impacts and disparities vary by location. They also vary depending on the particular benefit, burden, or population that is being evaluated. In any particular region or for a particular policy, project, or plan, there is a need for region-specific or policy-specific analyses of the distribution of benefits and burdens of a proposed transportation system change. In addition to considering race, ethnicity, and income-related disparities, transportation analysis must also look for disparate impacts among other groups, such as rural, transit-dependent, and elderly populations. The needs of the affected communities should determine which groups and issues to evaluate in a given situation.

Policy Implications

Regions have become critical venues for highlighting and addressing transportation-related disparities. Regions—geographic areas defined by economic connections through shared

labor and housing markets, political jurisdictions, and often shared environmental conditions in the case of air basins—have become important places for social equity advocacy and organizing. The regional transportation planning process provides a forum for addressing interrelated issues of transportation, housing, land use, and access to opportunity.

Community-directed transportation and land use analysis has the potential to improve the equity of transportation processes and outcomes. Sound analysis can inform policies aimed at mitigating or reversing disproportionate impacts on low-income communities and communities of color. Collaboration between academic researchers, residents, advocates, and policy makers can produce solutions that are informed by the best available research and the expertise and visions of the affected communities.

A range of policies will be needed to achieve a more equitable transportation system. A number of policies and programs could be implemented to increase access to economic opportunities, healthy food, health care, and opportunities for physical activity and recreation. Disparities could also be addressed systematically by proactively pursuing fair housing, reforming transportation governance, and leveraging funding to advance the goals of transportation equity.

Further Reading

This policy brief is based on “We Can Get There From Here: New Perspectives on Transportation Equity,” a white paper from the National Center for Sustainable Transportation, prepared by Alex Karner (University of Texas at Austin), Dana Rowangould (Sustainable Systems Research), and Jonathan London (University of California, Davis) with support from USDOT. To download the report, visit: <https://ncst.ucdavis.edu/white-paper/you-can-get-there-from-here-new-perspectives-on-transportation-equity/>

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