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Commute Distance and Jobs-Housing Fit in Los Angeles

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Issue

Across the country, many large metropolitan areas face an acute shortage of housing, which is driving up housing prices. Anecdotal evidence suggests that households priced out of expensive urban neighborhoods are moving to the outer reaches of metropolitan areas, where they find cheaper housing but have longer-distance commutes. Growing commute distances may negatively affect the health and economic mobility of workers and, if cars are involved, have deleterious effects on the environment.

In this study, UCLA researchers investigated the merits of this anecdotal evidence. The study examined the relationship between housing availability near workplaces and commute distance for lower-, medium-, and higher-wage workers in the Los Angeles metropolitan area, including Los Angeles and Orange counties. Lower-wage workers have monthly wages less than \$1,250; middle-wage workers have monthly wages between \$1,251–\$3,333; and higher-wage workers have monthly wages greater than \$3,333.

To do so, they drew on the work of Benner and Karner (2016) and analyzed “jobs-housing fit,” a measure of the adequacy of housing units of different prices matched to the wages of local workers. They set the household income threshold for lower-wage workers as \$30,000 a year, two times the \$1,250/month threshold of the lower-wage job category. According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), affordable housing is defined as housing in which residents pay no more than 30% of their gross income for rent. Based on this criteria, lower-wage workers could afford rentals of \$750/month ($30\% \times \$30,000/12$).

Key Findings

Higher-wage workers commute further than lower-wage workers. The mean commute distance for a higher-wage worker is 14.2 miles, which is 32% longer than the commute distance of lower-wage workers.

Lower-wage workers have few options when it comes to affordable housing near their jobs. Only 4% of lower-wage workers worked in neighborhoods with more affordable units than lower-wage jobs, while 77% of higher-wage workers worked in neighborhoods with more cost-appropriate housing options than jobs. The takeaway here is that it is difficult for lower-wage workers to afford to live in neighborhoods in close proximity to where they work.

Central Los Angeles performs well by job-housing fit measurements. For both lower- and medium-wage workers, the ratio of affordable housing to jobs is highest in the central part of the Los Angeles metropolitan area (Figure 1). For lower-wage workers, the cities of Lancaster and Palmdale in the far northern reaches of Los Angeles County rank high in jobs-housing fit. Medium-wage workers can more easily locate housing in neighborhoods in the San Fernando Valley (immediately north of the LA basin) and near Anaheim in Orange County.

Some neighborhoods — regardless of worker wages — have fewer housing units than jobs. This trend is a product of historical zoning regulations aimed at separating conflicting land use and neighborhood anti-development efforts often motivated by preservation and environmental interests.

Jobs-housing fit helps to explain commute distance. The researchers used statistical models to test the relationship between commute distance and jobs-housing fit, independent of other factors that explain commute distance. For all wage groups, commute distances grow longer as the number of jobs exceeds the number of affordable housing units. The jobs-housing metrics are more strongly associated with the commute distance of lower- and medium-wage workers than that of higher-wage workers.

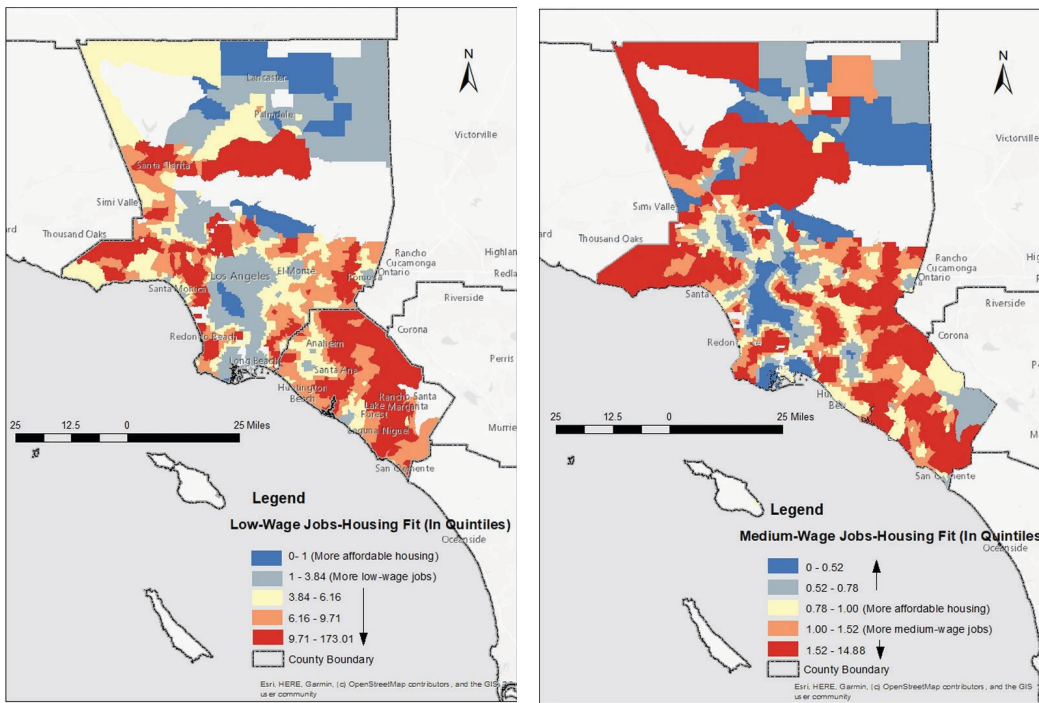


Figure 1.
Lower- and Medium-Wage Jobs-Housing Fit, Los Angeles MSA

Conclusion

Many factors help to explain commute distance (e.g., sociodemographic characteristics, household composition, occupation type, urban structure, neighborhood preferences). The findings from this study, however, support the conclusion that the lack of affordable housing near employment locations contributes to longer-distance commutes. This finding underscores the necessity of protecting and expanding the supply of affordable housing in job-rich neighborhoods, particularly those in expensive coastal cities like Los Angeles.

About the Authors

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Further Sources:

Benner, C., & Karner, A. (2016). Low-wage jobs-housing fit: identifying locations of affordable housing shortages. *Urban Geography*, 37(6), 883-903

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More Information

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