

Linking Transportation Inadequacies to Negative Employment Outcomes

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Abstract

Individuals in advanced industrialized countries with difficulties in labour market participation are frequently presented with life and social skills training courses, and labour market integration policies, that seek to provide skills attributable to the individuals. Scholarship, though, has not provided sufficient attention to barriers that are considered external to individuals. One such external barrier creating limits on positive labour market participation is access to adequate transportation. This article highlights the relationship between transportation accessibility and positive employment outcomes from the perceptions of people who have difficulties in securing and maintaining employment. The experiences of seventy-two interviewed participants provide strong evidence of how inadequate access to transportation can influence access to jobs, inhibit employment retention, and intersect with other dimensions of social capital that are essential to labour market participation. The article concludes that transportation is central to economic and social policies regarding labour market participation, and proposes strategies that might better equip vulnerable populations for participation in labour markets.

Keywords: labour markets, employment, skills training, social policy, transportation

Résumé

Les citoyens des principaux pays industrialisés ayant des difficultés à intégrer le marché du travail ont souvent la possibilité de suivre des formations afin d'acquérir des aptitudes sociales et pratiques, et bénéficient de politiques d'intégration au marché de l'emploi, les unes et les autres visant l'acquisition de compétences par des particuliers. La recherche,

toutefois, ne s'est pas suffisamment penchée sur les obstacles à l'emploi indépendants des personnes concernées. L'accès à un moyen de transport adéquat constitue un des obstacles externes qui limitent la participation positive au marché de l'emploi. L'article met en lumière la relation entre l'accès au transport et des résultats positifs en matière d'emploi, du point de vue des personnes qui éprouvent des difficultés à trouver et à conserver un emploi. L'expérience vécue par les 72 participants interrogés prouve de façon convaincante qu'un accès inadéquat à un moyen de transport influence l'accès à l'emploi, entrave la rétention des travailleurs concernés et recoupe d'autres facettes du capital social essentielles à la participation au marché de l'emploi. L'auteur conclut que le transport est un élément central des politiques économiques et sociales relatives à la participation au marché du travail, et propose des stratégies qui pourraient permettre aux personnes vulnérables de participer plus activement au marché de l'emploi.

Mots clés : *marchés du travail, l'emploi, les aptitudes sociales et pratiques, politique sociale, transport*

Introduction

Emerging research in Europe (Frade, Darmon, & Laparra, 2004) and North America (Vosko, 2006) addresses the concept of precarious employment, wherein one factor, or a combination of factors, is/are seen to exist: employment insecurity; low pay; poor working conditions; poor benefits; poor control over labour processes; weak or nonexistent worker rights; lack of union representation; and weak social protection. Conversely, in many advanced industrialized nations, those cycling in and out of precarious employment, and those having difficulties integrating into labour markets, are frequently represented in individualistic terms (Butterwick, 2003). As a result, social policies and programs specific to employment frequently seek to develop "internal" human capital for the unemployed and those vulnerable to labour market participation and retention (Fay, 1996). The ideologically individualistic framework of these policies may contribute to the belief that an individual's abilities are the primary influence on employment success or failure (Butterwick, 2003). This has been manifested in research by the raft of scholarship which explores standardized testing of cognitive and other individual functioning as a predictor of labour market activity (Wilson, 1996). Both the academic literature and the policy formulation process by governments pay insufficient attention to identifying or alleviating the many external barriers that contribute to people's limited level of labour market participation.

Canada is an excellent case study for examining changes in labour market forces in advanced industrialized countries. A member of the Group of Eight since its inception, the United States' largest trading partner, and geographically the world's second largest country, Canada is a stable democracy and a country with longstanding experience of industrial capitalism. It retains a welfare state, albeit,

since the mid 1970s, decreasing in scope and comprehensiveness (Graham, Swift, & Delaney, 2008). Despite the fact that the Canadian economy has performed very well for many years, pan-national fiscal advantages have not translated into real benefits for many of Canada's vulnerable workers (Stanford & Vosko, 2004).

The two sites for data collection in this study were Calgary, Alberta and Regina, Saskatchewan. Calgary is the country's fifth most populous city, with approximately one million people and, as the country's oil centre, it has been continuously growing in population, wealth, and land usage. The city has undergone exceptional urban sprawl over the last two decades. Compared to other national and international urban centers, Calgary has one of the world's largest ecological footprints (Mulkins, 2004). On a per person basis, each Calgarian occupies an average of two and a half hectares more than a person living in Toronto (Canada's largest city with five times the population) (Wilson & Anielski, 2005). Average commuting times within Canada's cities have steadily increased over the last two decades (Turcotte, 2005). Calgary's average commuting time has increased twenty-one percent since 1992 to an average of sixty-six minutes per day, making it one of the country's longer commuting cities (Turcotte, 2005).

On the other hand, Regina is a smaller Canadian city, with a population of approximately 200,000 (City of Regina, 2004) and an ecological footprint consistent with the Canadian average: approximately seven and two-fifths hectares per person (Wilson & Anielski, 2005). The average commuting time in Regina is approximately twenty minutes (Partridge & Nolan, 2005). Together, the two cities provide a good composite of experiences in larger (Calgary) and smaller (Regina) urban settings. Being located in the Prairies, Regina in particular, and Calgary to a lesser extent, experience long and severe winters. In Regina, daytime highs of negative twenty to negative forty degrees Celsius are common in January and February, often with additional wind chills making it feel colder (when exposed skin will freeze in seconds), and roads are often heavily rutted and icy. These conditions prevail in Calgary as well, but Chinooks elevate temperatures and considerably reduce the frequency and intensity of cold temperatures (Environment Canada, 2007). In both cities, the possibility of walking or cycling to work is realistically only seasonally or sporadically possible. Therefore, for those without access to a car, reliable public or private transportation is absolutely necessary if they have to travel beyond short walking distances.

Research on training programs in OECD level countries is inconclusive about the positive impact of skills training programs on individuals (see for example: Bonoli & Sarfati, 2002; Lechner, 2000; Kabalina, 2003; Koneitzka, 2003; Nivorozhkin, 2005; Rojaldalen, Gelin, & Ivergard, 2005; Steinmann, 1998; Zweimuller, 1996). Some studies have reported that participation in training programs increases employment stability but has a limited positive effect on an individual's earnings or employment, and that such programs have only short-term positive impacts on

participants. Based on the limitations within the literature, this research sought to identify what these programs are offering people and what they are lacking. This article is based on data from one-to-one as well as focus group interviews of individuals who identified as having had historic and present day difficulties in securing and maintaining paid employment. Respondents indicated that transportation was a key barrier that limits access to jobs, inhibits employment retention, and intersects with other dimensions of social capital that are essential to labour market participation, essentially causing these individuals to experience fundamental insecurity in the labour market.

Literature Review

Many labour market integration programs in advanced industrialized countries associate life skills in parallel to job skills, as if they were one and the same (Reid & Golden, 2005). Although these programs have had some success (Cohen, 2003), there are a myriad of factors beyond the level of the individual that need to be considered. The personal experiences of people having trouble integrating into labour markets provide fertile ground for the consideration of these factors (Hodgson & Turner, 2003).

Much of the secondary literature linking transportation accessibility and employment revolves around the spatial mismatch hypothesis. Spatial mismatch hypothesizes that as the physical distance between residence and employment increases, employment options become inaccessible to certain groups of people (Benfield, Raimi & Chen, 1999). Overall, the idea of spatial mismatch has been presented predominantly in an American context. It seeks to identify how the distance from residence to work impacts a person in securing and maintaining employment. The decentralization of employment opportunities to the suburbs of American cities has resulted in residential segregation of African American communities (Preston, McLafferty & Liu, 1998; Stoll, 2005; Wilson, 1996), and the creation of programs that provide recipients of social assistance with greater transportation support to reintegrate them into labour markets (Blumenberg & Manville, 2004; Coulton, 2003; Nam, 2005). The barrier to employment is identified in spatial terms and measured relative to access levels (O'Regan & Quigley, 1998; Shen, 2001). Some studies suggest that greater accessibility improves economic development, while others, focusing primarily on impoverished populations, suggest that greater access levels do not represent an adequate solution (Sanchez, Shen, & Peng, 2004).

The decentralization of employment, though, is common throughout the advanced industrialized world (Giuliano, 2004). Canada is no exception. The country's largest metropolitan area, Toronto, is characterized by greater car ownership — a result of large segments of the population moving from the city centre to

suburban zoned areas — and employment increasingly being located in areas poorly served by public transportation (Miller & Shalaby, 2003). A similar situation exists in Montreal, the country's second largest city (Senecal, Tremblay, & Teufel, 1990). Less is known about the spatial mismatch in Calgary and Regina, our sites of analysis. And still less is understood about the lived experiences of individuals impacted by spatial mismatch and having to travel great distances for employment, particularly those experiences of vulnerable and unemployed Canadian workers.

Methods

The following excerpts were drawn from a research study that consisted of twenty-seven case situations in Calgary and forty-five in Regina, 17 organizational interviews in Calgary and 14 in Regina, and 5 focus groups in Regina and 3 in Calgary. Respondents were chosen on three different axes of vulnerability: single parenthood; indigenous; and/or disability status (including visible and invisible physical and learning disabilities, mental health, and addictions problems). The sample design balanced people with each of these single characteristics against others with various combinations of these characteristics. With the help of our civil society partner organizations, we drew a stratified random sample from a list of suitable candidates. The participants all had a record of difficulties with integration, or reintegration, into current labour markets. Also, all participants self-identified as being financially poor. They all had attended some form of training program and had gone through lengthy periods of unemployment in the past. Some had participated in job training and placement programs, and some had successfully made the transition (at least temporarily) to employment. It was common that participants cycled between being in employment and receiving some form of social assistance. Our sampling technique was designed to permit comparisons of people with single and multiple characteristics, and of people who remained unemployed with those who had made the transition to employment. Following a semi-structured, open-ended interview guide, respondents were asked questions relating to barriers they experienced in securing and maintaining employment. Specifically, respondents were asked to identify barriers; the researchers did not suggest particular issues to highlight through questioning.

Interviews were recorded and later transcribed. Data were analysed using qualitative methods of inductive analysis (Glasser & Strauss, 1967; Goetz & LeCompte, 1984; Neuendorf, 2001). Specifically, the researchers read through all the interviews with the objective of identifying common themes, after which the themes were then coded and data were searched for instances of the same/similar phenomena. Finally, following this process, data were then translated into working hypotheses that were refined until all instances of contradictions, similarities, and differences were explained, thus increasing the dependability and consistency of the findings.

Another respondent pointed out

During my neighborhood, [the bus] is once an hour at night. If you miss it ... uh-oh until the next one comes (Focus Group 524).

Similarly, another respondent suggested that

Transit should definitely look into the hours and stuff like that, because ... something that the city should definitely look into is increasing the amount [of available transit] (Focus Group 516).

Public Transportation Impacts My Overall Life

Relying on public transportation had an impact on some participants' quality of life. Respondents commented on the length of time spent using public transportation and how that intersected with other areas of their lives. What, though, would be a reasonable commute time? This question is often juggled with other questions, including whether to remain unemployed, whether to seek a better job, or better hours or conditions of employment. One respondent stated that

If I wanted to expand, I would have to take transportation. My limit around my house is like: 'okay I have a mini-mall which is Safeway, a dollar store... So that's basically the only thing that I can actually apply for. But if I wanted more extended jobs, I'd have to travel... and where my location is, it's on the outskirts (Case Study 514).

Others were emphatic that long commutes on public transportation could be quite tiresome:

I tend to get tired easily, it has to, you know, be a reasonable distance. Otherwise, the journey by the bus (pause) it can drain me (Case Study 509).

The next respondent elaborated further:

I don't drive myself, so that limits me and where I can go in the city. I mean, I could figure out how to get to places, but if it takes too long, then I am not going to bother with it 'cause I'll just be exhausted ... Especially at rush hour, the LRTs, you know. So, I have to pick certain places where I'm gonna go (Focus Group 509).

Disallows More Complex Schedules

Several respondents identified that their reliance on public transportation also limits them from maintaining more complex schedules. Complexity in this instance can include picking up children from school or maintaining more than one job. Respondents identified a strong adverse relationship between rising labour market demands for flexibility, wages below the living wage, and the inadequacies of public transportation. One participant stated

During rush hour the trains are so packed ... Sometimes you can't even catch a train ... And that could be a barrier. If you have, like, somewhere to be at a certain time, and you can't catch the train (Focus Group 525).

The Need for Employee Flexibility

Respondents identified how an employer's demand of flexibility impacts people who rely on public transportation. One respondent identified that

[There is a] flexibility thing, which can tie into transportation, if they are expecting you to be flexible, yet they may ask you to work at a time when you are not able to because of transportation [unavailability] (Focus Group 525).

Another respondent highlighted how

Nowadays more businesses and companies want you to be there at 5, 6, or 7am, so it is kind of hard to catch transit at that time (Focus Group 516).

Variations in work times that are expected of employees lead to difficulties when relying on public transportation. As one respondent put it:

They do run during the morning and then when the normal workers get off work, but I did not get off at the same time as most of those people. So, the bus services during those times were not very good (Focus Group 525).

The Role of Special Transportation

Sutton (1988) argues that the increase in education, health, and social programs has developed a need to create programs for special transportation targeted for particular client groups (Sutton, 1988). Some participants in our study relied on special transportation, and of these, many described that these services were not entirely adequate.

Lack of Funding

A perception of under-resourced services was a common theme identified by respondents and associated with some of the problems presently with special transportation services. One respondent stated

Well, I know a lot of times, being an organization like Handi-Bus, with limited resources, it is hard for them to accommodate everybody. It is not an excuse, it is a reality ... I think money, from what I've heard, is a very key issue with Handi-Bus. Because of their limited budget they can only train and hire so many people (Case Study 513).

Limited Service Availability

The budgetary constraints of organizations that offer special transportation services have direct implications for the availability of service. Respondents disclosed that simply qualifying for services does not necessarily guarantee service provisions. For example, one respondent remarked

I've already gone to Handi-bus to see if I can get on with them. But now I have to wait for that after I've already had my consultation [with the service operator determining if they can receive service] (Focus Group 524).

Strict Timelines to Access Service

Special transportation services for individuals who face mobility barriers are structured around strict timelines. Individuals call to book appointments and must arrange the pick-up times for their departure and return in advance. This acts to place limitations and strain on an individual's employment situation. One respondent captured these scheduling hardships:

I myself use Handi-bus. If an employer expects me to work overtime, it would be hard for me to schedule my bus around that because it's already there. So, for me to reschedule it would mean to put it on a standby and have to wait an extra 2 hours. And even that's not guaranteed. You know, I would basically have to find my own way home, and the only other alternative would be to call up one of those taxi vans; and I mean those, I've often used those, and those cost me anywhere from 20 to even 30 bucks per trip. (Focus Group 513)

The Role of Private Transportation

The lack of private transportation is an enormously important barrier to employment. Again, the expense of purchasing and running a car was merely the tip of the

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iceberg. Here a shortfall in social capital (i.e. no family member with a car) became a barrier to obtaining a driver's licence and thereby employment. Similarly, those with medical conditions (seizure disorders for instance) are equally disadvantaged in their job search because not only do they not have private transportation, but they cannot drive as part of their work duties either. In both instances, job opportunities have been lost due to not having a driver's licence. Cases where jobs were given to job seekers with cars are discussed below.

Access to Private Transportation Opens Doors

The secondary literature highlights that low-income individuals who have access to private modes of transportation are more likely to maintain employment than low-income individuals who have to rely solely on public transportation (Garasky, Fletcher & Jensen, 2006). The literature suggests that when improvements are made to people's access to reliable automobiles they will be able to expand their search for work (Dobbs, 2005; Hess, 2005). Essentially, their increased mobility would extend their social networks (Bostock, 2001). A few respondents identified that access to private vehicles seemed to open up doors. For example one respondent reported

[While] most places are accessible by bus, but you know, depends where it is. If you have a car ..." (Focus Group 509).

Emphasis in this instance is placed on the respondent's speculation of if he or she had a car. What possibilities would that open up for him or her? What opportunities would that provide for other participants in this study?

Private Transportation is an Employment Requirement

Some people have experienced how access to a private vehicle acts as a gateway to employment. One respondent, reflecting on a recent job interview, stated that

Immediately they will ask me 'do you have a driver's licence?'. 'No', and I say, 'I am not allowed to drive due to the medical' (Focus Group 516).

Another respondent faced stigmatization by their employer due to their reliance on public transportation:

It took me three hours or something ... she eventually said to me 'you know, you cannot do this job because you do not have a car' ... She says, 'you know I chose these other girls because they had cars' (Focus Group 509).

Discussion

Unfortunately, the spatial mismatch framework can be monolithic by only looking at spatial patterns of residence and employment alone; without seeking to understand the social structures that are created by urban and suburban settlements and sprawls — where some people benefit while others falter (Hanson, 2004; Soule, 2006). The findings from the participants in this study suggest that access to transportation (public, special, or private) is a key factor impacting successful labour market attachment. The findings demonstrate that geographic distance between residence and work is insufficient for understanding the intersection between transportation and present labour market characteristics and employer demands.

Limitations of public transportation (cost, access to subsidized passes, hours of service, schedules, and routes that did not match with hours of employment and locations of both home and work), for example, all had a direct impact on labour market attachment for respondents in this study. For many respondents, this, in combination with not having private modes of transportation or the inadequacies of special transportation services, led to a fundamental labour market disequilibrium. This was the case for people trying to get to construction and industrial job sites in both Regina and Calgary. It was also a serious issue for service sector workers in both cities for places normally well serviced by public transportation for the '9–5' crowd. Based on these findings, we argue that it is necessary to analyse these limitations in relation to the demands and needs of employers in current labour markets.

Also, the availability of special transportation services is one area requiring further analysis in the present labour market environment. The original use of these special services may have been developed for reasons other than employment access. For example, utilizing "Handi-Bus" services is an inclusive transport policy program, but the intention of increasing the mobility of the people who access these services may primarily be geared toward health and recreational access. The extended time-lines and the strict scheduling framework utilized by these services are not in line with the flexible working hours employers demand in the current labour market. Similarly, these research findings provide evidence that the relationship between private and public transportation is more problematic amongst vulnerable workers. Respondents identified that their reliance on public transportation does not coalesce with the demands placed on them by employers, or with the characteristics of current labour markets. For these respondents, reliance on public transportation may be highly problematic, particularly if employers expect them to have access to a private mode of transportation, and/or highly flexible (and not always transit-friendly) working hours.

The secondary literature around employers' demands for employees has focused on the types of skills and education that are desired of potential applicants (Holzer,

1996). The analysis has thus typically focused on the individual attributes, rather than on policy areas such as transportation. The focus on skills as the primary demand of employers has led to suggestions that there has been a decline in the availability of low skilled jobs, although this trend has not been matched by a concomitant decline in low wage jobs. This change is understood as the main reason why people have difficulty in securing and maintaining employment (Wilson, 1996). Ultimately, this literature tends to overlook the crucial importance of having a driver's licence as an employment skill and of access to transit as a gateway to seeking and retaining a job, particularly in the face of demands for flexible and non-traditional working hours and the predominance of low wage service sector employment for vulnerable workers. An earlier study in Regina provides some insight: "Gambling addictions, abuse of any kind, being of aboriginal ancestry, or having difficulties with transportation all reduced the probability of employment by approximately 9 percent. On the positive side, possessing a valid driver's license increased the probability of employment by 14 percent" (McGovern & Jones, 2004, p.34). It is important to take into account employer demand when identifying possibilities for labour market participation of the unemployed (Adams, Greig, & McQuaid, 2002). But we would do well to understand the role that these demands have upon unemployed individuals.

This study was limited in scope because only people living in urban settings were interviewed; as a result of their place of residence they typically have general access to various modes of public transportation. Further research is required to identify how transportation acts as a barrier to employment in rural areas of Canada. As one of the first Canadian studies of its kind, the present study is certainly exploratory. Further research could analyse the interaction of transportation with other barriers to employment, such as: limited childcare options; the impact of time constraints on managing daily routines; and the overall health and well being of a potential employee (Roy, Tubbs & Burton, 2004).

Beyond its limitations, the findings provide evidence that a holistic approach needs to be fostered in the development and formulation of transport, economic, and social policies. Adding to the present literature that seeks a more holistic policy assessment, this study found that transportation accessibility impacts people's lives by limiting their ability to secure and maintain employment.

Conclusion

Many population groups targeted by employment programs face particular challenges that interact with successful integration and long-term attachment to the labour market. Our study found that there are a number of issues associated with both private and public transportation which generate vulnerabilities and create challenges for people struggling to acquire long-term attachment to the labour

market. Without knowing exactly which ways transportation issues negatively impact people, economic, social, and transportation policies become limited in scope. Respondents in our research state unequivocally that access to private transportation, or at least a valid driver's licence, is often a minimum necessary qualification for many employment opportunities. They also cite profound problems in public transportation as a barrier to seeking and retaining employment. If these statements were understood primarily in geographic terms, the solution would be to increase access levels, as the spatial mismatch hypothesis suggests. Unfortunately, lacking adequate social science research in this area, the social environment, which considers the relationship of people to the economic and political systems, remains largely ignored. This is an unfortunate omission within the literature given the many social, political, and economic factors that impact the lives of marginalized populations.

Transportation and social well-being are not separate entities; they are linked here by the economic and social demands of maintaining and securing employment. Transportation is important because it acts to connect people to the activities that fulfill their lives (Deka, 2004). The car-centric evolution of urban transportation has resulted in limited access, particularly for those without cars, to essential services such as employment, health, social and education (Lucas, 2004). These limitations are enhanced for lower income people, who frequently rely on public transit, walking, or cycling as primary modes of transportation (Pucher, 2004). The decline in the number of services that are within walking distance from individuals' places of residence only enhances the problem (Elkins, McLaren, & Hillman, 1991). The problem is exacerbated even further by the decreasing reliability in frequency and intensity of public transportation services (Benfield, Raimi, & Chen, 1999). Getting to and back from work is a primary concern for those who have difficulty in maintaining and securing employment.

At a policy and practice level, an important step toward employment stability would be programming that supports the obtainment of a driver's licence. Where possible, based on personal characteristics, driver's education and training should become as fundamental to employment training as GED and other forms of human capital formation or life skills. This would open up a variety of driving related employments. Further, more creative solutions to facilitate flexible transportation in sprawling cities should be considered, such as: web-mediated carpooling; the running of shuttle buses from light rapid transit and core bus routes to industrial areas and construction sites in new suburbs; and the extensive development of collective and co-operative car use to improve both the environment and to defray the large sunk cost and high operating costs associated with private vehicle ownership. An integrated system by which cars are refurbished for sale to people exiting training programs by people apprenticing in automotive trades training might also be a creative solution to this problem.

Public transportation also needs to better match the needs of today's flexible labour market. We need to see this as an important public service in support of our labour markets. If we do not, then we run the risk of being caught in the usual catch 22: the public transportation system is underutilized because it does not work well, while it is impossible to get more funding for expanded public transportation because it is underutilized. For the sake of not only the environment, but for the vulnerable and precariously employed, we need to make this leap of faith. Build a good, efficient public transportation system, and it will get used; combine it with a congestion tax as in London and significant results are possible. The final step is one of urban planning, since that discipline intersects with the emerging demands of the present labour market. As we look to reduce our carbon footprint and petroleum dependency, greater density of both housing and economic activity will become more desirable, and integrated public transportation will be central to this process. If the environmental movement could also become a movement for social inclusion and change, environmental advocates might find that public transportation is one area where these two are not competing goals.

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