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[About](#) | [Our Work](#) | [Career Opportunities](#) | [Business With Us](#) | [Information Resources](#) | [Outreach](#)

[LIBRARY](#)

► [VOLPE JOURNAL](#)

[HIGHLIGHTS](#)

[PUBLISHED AND PRESENTED](#)

[BIBLIOGRAPHIES](#)

[TRANSPORTATION STRATEGIC PLANS](#)

[LINKS](#)

Volpe Journal Spring 98

[Previous Section](#) | [Contents](#) | [Next Section](#)

The Transportation System's Role in Moving Welfare Recipients to Jobs

Most welfare recipients must rely on public transportation to travel to a place of employment. The Volpe Center has completed two projects intended to determine how well transit systems meet the mobility needs of these individuals. William Lyons is Project Manager of "Access to Jobs," a study on the use of innovative planning procedures to provide job accessibility for welfare recipients and other low-income residents in three metropolitan areas: Hartford, CT; Detroit, MI; and St. Louis, MO. Annalynn Lacombe is Project Manager of a study of the mobility problems of Boston welfare recipients and the use of geographic information systems (GIS) as a transit-planning tool for addressing these problems.

Political speeches about "moving the unemployed from welfare rolls to payrolls" create images of psychological and social transitions. But "moving" has a literal as well as a figurative meaning; that is, welfare recipients must be able to travel from where they live to locations where suitable jobs are available. ([View Photo](#): *Many Americans rely on public transportation to travel to their place of employment.*)

Today, the great majority of Americans use private automobiles to travel from their homes to their jobs. Even those who don't use their cars for the entire journey often drive them to a suburban station, then travel to a central-city workplace by commuter rail, rapid transit, express bus, or a combination of these modes. The existing transit systems serve this work force reasonably well.

The Volpe Center is now determining whether these transit systems will serve welfare recipients and other low-income citizens equally well. These individuals, who rarely own reliable automobiles, either are concentrated in certain districts within large metropolitan areas or scattered in isolated rural areas. Unfortunately for them, a large percentage of new jobs is being created in suburban areas that are not readily accessible to them by public transit. If the country is serious about moving welfare recipients to jobs, it must provide a public transit infrastructure capable of physically accomplishing that task.

WHO COLLECTS WELFARE?

The first step in determining how well a system serves a particular group is to define that group. The program commonly known as "welfare" was, until recently, known formally as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). The 1996 welfare reform law replaces AFDC with TANF, or Temporary

Assistance for Needy Families. Because TANF is a new program, most statistics concerning welfare recipients were completed when they were receiving AFDC. For simplicity, this article uses the term TANF, even for studies that were conducted while the program was titled AFDC.

Nearly 20 percent of the 5 million welfare recipients are children who live with adults other than their parents. Because the adults who receive these welfare payments on behalf of the children do not receive funds for their own needs, they are exempt from employment programs. Other adults are exempt from the welfare-to-work program because they are disabled or are parents of disabled children. This study focuses on nonexempt TANF recipients.

More than 90 percent of the families that receive TANF benefits for both adults and children are headed by females without adult males in the household; that is, recipients are primarily single mothers with one or more children at home. The typical TANF mother has the following characteristics:

- She is at least 25 years old (more than one third of these women are in their 30s).
- She had her first child when she was still a teenager, but she probably had no more than one additional child (more than 40 percent of all TANF families have only one child; 74 percent have only one or two children).
- She has, at best, a high school education.
- She has work experience but has been unable to earn enough money to get off welfare. More-over, she has been unable to establish a record of employment stability. A 1995 survey of TANF mothers found that 70 percent had worked "recently," and 43 percent had combined working with welfare in some way during the prior two years. During that 24-month period, however, the average working mother was employed for only 24 weeks, and in 1.7 different jobs.
- Her family includes at least one relatively young child, a preschooler in nearly half of the cases. The youngest child is less than 5 years old in 50 percent of TANF families are from 6 to 11 years old in 30 percent. In only 20 percent of TANF cases is the youngest child at least 12 years old.
- She does not own a car. Nationally, the household assets of only 6 percent of TANF recipients include a car; moreover, the average value of these cars is only \$620, meaning they must be presumed to be unreliable transportation.

Because most TANF recipients lack the two basic qualifications sought by employers—education and a record of employment stability—they are, with few exceptions, limited to entry-level jobs.

THE "WORK NEAR HOME" OPTION

Middle- and upper-class workers who have chosen to live at a distance from their places of employment accept the cost of commuting as part of their lifestyle choice. By contrast, low-income workers frequently cannot afford either the cost of long-distance commuting or the cost of relocating to be close to a job. Their housing options also might be limited by residential segregation based either on race or economic status. These individuals must find jobs that they can reach either by walking or by riding low-cost public transit.

Even before the 1996 welfare reform law was passed, the Volpe Center had undertaken efforts to assist the U.S. Department of Transportation and state and local transportation agencies in developing policies and programs to meet the transportation needs of welfare recipients and others whose transportation options are limited because of low incomes. One of these efforts began in March, 1997, when the Center began a project to determine whether computer-based GISs are useful in analyzing the ability of welfare recipients to travel to potential employers. A GIS generates map-based displays of numerical data entered into its database. The area selected for the study, which was sponsored by the U.S. Department of Transportation's Bureau of Transportation Statistics, was metropolitan Boston. In July, Annalynn Lacombe, the Volpe Center's manager for the project, prepared the final report.

Figures 1 through 3 show several of the Boston metropolitan-area maps generated by the GIS. As the maps suggest, Boston is a physically small city, with a metropolitan area that includes many individual cities and towns. Because of Boston Harbor, surrounding communities are limited to Boston's northern, western, and southern suburbs. The other prominent physical features shown on the map are the Massachusetts Turnpike, which extends west from downtown Boston; Route 128, the perimeter highway that partially encircles the metropolitan area; and (on some maps) Interstate 495, the area's newer, outer circumferential highway.

Figure 1 shows the zip code areas in the city, with areas shaded to show where the 7900 nonexempt TANF recipients live. As this figure indicates, most recipients are concentrated in Boston's southern neighborhoods, with smaller distributions in a few adjacent communities. (This study did not include all welfare recipients within the boundaries of Route 495; it included only those within the cities of Boston, Cambridge, and Somerville, and the town of Brookline.) ([View Figure 1](#))

Figure 2 shows the metropolitan area's public transportation network. This network includes commuter rail lines, a rapid-transit rail network, and bus routes. As the figure indicates, central Boston is the hub of a network of bus routes; a mature system of rail lines, both surface and subway; and conventional railroad lines extending to the north, west, and south. ([View Figure 2](#))

Figure 2 indicates that downtown Boston is well served by the existing transit systems. Ninety-eight percent of TANF recipients, for example, live within one quarter mile (considered a reasonable walking distance) of public transit and can easily travel from their homes to the city center. Unfortunately for these individuals, the Boston job market has radically restructured in the past 20 years. In 1970, almost 30 percent of Boston jobs were held by workers without high school diplomas; in 1990, only 7 percent of jobs were held by such workers. Nearly 45 percent of all jobs available in 1990 were held by workers with college degrees, and another 25 percent by employees with some college education. Barely one job out of four was available for someone who had a high school diploma or less.

This is not to say that Boston has no entry-level jobs; approximately 3000 are created in the city each year. Competition for these jobs, however, is

substantial. The city's unemployment rolls include 10,000 job-seekers, and each year 1100 young adults graduate from city high schools and enter the work force.

WHERE ARE THE JOBS?

Figure 3 shows the Boston-area cities and towns that have enjoyed above-average growth in entry-level jobs over the past several years. It also shows the locations of 3200 employers that are located in these towns and are in industries that offer the majority of entry-level employment opportunities. As the map shows, the highest growth areas are in the vicinity of Routes 128 and 495, a minimum of 12 and 28 miles, respectively, from the central-city area. Only 32 percent of potential employers are located within reasonable walking distance from public transportation. ([View Figure 3](#))

Of course, many factors other than the locations of the housing, potential jobs, and transit lines must also be considered. For example, as the welfare mother's profile indicates, she normally has at least one small child. To minimize commuting difficulties, child care should be available near either her home or her workplace; making an intermediate stop at a child-care facility would lengthen and complicate the commute. In addition, there are maximum practical limits to the amount of time a mother can leave her children in the care of others, making commuting time a critical consideration.

To summarize, existing transit service frequently fails to provide adequate access to entry-level jobs for a number of reasons:

- Much of the high employment growth is in suburbs, which often are not served by existing transit systems. Figure 3 illustrates this situation in the Boston area.
- Some suburbs are served only by commuter rail, which rarely provides direct access to employers.
- Where public transit does extend to suburban areas, the routes often are at substantial distances from job sites. Figure 4, which illustrates this point, shows a portion of Waltham, MA, a city on Route 128, approximately 12 miles west of Boston. As the figure indicates, no existing bus route comes within one mile of 77 Waltham businesses currently employing 3,000 workers in entry-level jobs, effectively eliminating potential workers who must use public transit. ([View Figure 4](#))
- Even when suburban jobs are accessible by transit, the trip from inner city areas often is impractical because it takes too long. The route may be indirect, the waiting time for intermediate transfers may be excessive, or the transit schedules may not be compatible with work schedules. For example, it is not uncommon for the last bus to leave a suburban shopping mall before workers are able to leave their jobs in retail shops, meaning that these entry-level jobs are denied to public-transit users.

For example, a bus trip from the heart of a Boston neighborhood housing a high concentration of TANF recipients to the area of prospective employers in Waltham as shown in Figure 4 requires the rider to catch a local bus at 6:40 A.M., transfer to a second bus, and then to a third bus. The rider reaches the end

of the bus line after a 1 hour and 40 minute trip, and still is a mile or more from the prospective employer. With no complications or time gaps, the commuter would spend nearly 11 1/2 hours at work or riding buses every day, and must also walk for another hour or find some other means of traveling the job-end segment of the route. This total time for working and commuting includes no provision for taking a child to day care (if day care can be found for this duration).

Transportation planners can use GIS-based analyses such as these to modify bus routes to make them more feasible for city residents. For example, in-town transit routes could converge on a designated departure point, from which users could connect to various express services to suburban employment areas. This need not even be a round-the-clock rerouting, but could occur only during appropriate times of the day in a system known as "flexible routing."

The commute from Boston neighborhoods to Waltham employers could be transformed from an unreasonable expectation to a practical option by providing access to the Waltham express bus from all appropriate local routes and either extending the existing route or making other transportation provisions at the Waltham end.

THE PLANNING EFFORT

The GIS project was not intended to plan actual routes from Boston-area TANF recipients' homes to prospective places of employment, but to demonstrate whether a GIS is a useful tool for such planning. The result indicates that GISs can be used to further the national objective of moving welfare recipients to places of employment. GIS provides valuable, easily visualized input for the organizations responsible for making planning and policy decisions relating to both transportation and human services.

The ability to use the urban transportation planning process to develop solutions to employment-access problems is the subject of the second Volpe Center study. This project, conducted for the Federal Transit Administration's Office of Planning and the Federal Highway Administration's Office of Environment and Planning, examines how three metropolitan areas use transportation planning to develop ways to provide welfare recipients and other low-income residents with transportation to work sites. The three metropolitan areas, selected for their innovative approaches, are Hartford, CT; Detroit, MI; and St. Louis, MO.

William Lyons is the project manager for the "Transportation Planning for Access to Jobs" study, which began in mid-March and was completed in August. The study team includes Melissa Laube and Philip van der Wilden of the Service Assessment Division. The consolidated report, which is being distributed widely to the nation's mayors, state leaders, metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs), researchers, and the general public, is available through Department of Transportation Web sites.

The "Access to Jobs" report takes a broad look at how the transportation planning process can be a vital tool to solve this urgent social problem. It discusses the following topics:

- local conditions in the three areas, including population and employment trends;

- the nature of the job access problem;
- roles of transportation and employment agencies;
- current and planned transportation initiatives, including their expected financial impact and ways of funding them;
- the use of GIS and other technical planning tools; and
- how employment access fits into the overall urban transportation planning process.

TALES OF THREE CITIES

The three studies demonstrate that successful planning for work access does not depend on any single approach. Each area approaches the problem differently, and each is in a different stage of solving it. All three, however, have recognized the importance of using broad-based coalitions to attack the problem, and all have achieved close cooperation among various organizations. In St. Louis and Hartford, strong metropolitan planning organizations lead transportation planning for access to work. Detroit, which uses a practical bottom-up approach that emphasizes grassroots development of services, benefits from the aggressive efforts of a nonprofit coalition of business, labor, and government leaders.

THE MOTOR CITY

Detroit-area transit operators have been very responsive to the transportation needs of both employers and low-income workers. Transit operators, particularly the suburban transit operator, work very closely with state employment and social service agencies to supply a great range of transit services to connect largely urban residents with suburban jobs. A partnership of the big-three automobile makers, organized labor, and government is working on a regional development and transportation plan that includes, as an important component, transportation to jobs for low-income residents. The transit operators work with this coalition, while the MPO focuses on two important tasks: assembling data on transportation and employment and providing the technical analysis necessary to determine whether proposed strategies are practical.

THE INSURANCE CITY

Hartford, with its MPO in the lead role, has developed a very successful regional transportation planning process that has been successful in dealing with a broad range of problems over the years. Because the metropolitan area is relatively small, it has been easier to assemble all the major players around the same table. This broad-based group includes not just the social service agencies and the transit providers but also the regional planning organizations and local government decision makers. The Hartford coalition began with a shared sense of responsibility for welfare reform, and has moved quickly to recognize common interests, agree on strategies, and organize political support.

Using their existing planning structure, Hartford agencies have been successful in achieving comparatively quick consensus on proposals for funding services. The planning process has two important characteristics:

- It stays very focused on each individual, specific problem.
- Using a rational procedure for deciding what would be the best use for

new money, it creates a prioritized list of investments and strategies that all participating agencies support.

Hartford provides a model for using transportation planning to rapidly organize and produce practical strategies. Over the next few years, as these strategies are translated into new or modified services, their success will be determined by whether they make the expected contributions to successful transitions from welfare to work.

THE GATEWAY CITY

St. Louis has a very strong MPO and metropolitan planning process that has been working on meeting the transportation needs of low-income communities for several years. The region has, in many ways, anticipated the nationwide changes resulting from last year's federal welfare initiative. The area has developed a comprehensive approach for jobs-access planning. Instead of attempting a "quick fix," the planning process is oriented to developing carefully constructed pilot programs that promise to yield substantial benefits, not just to low-income participants, but to entire communities. Society as a whole should benefit when the lessons learned are eventually applied on a broader scale. Although the planning process for jobs access began several years ago, transportation service improvements were initiated only recently.

In St. Louis, the MPO-led planning process has three crucial aspects:

- It emphasizes the integration of transportation services with employment and family-support services, including job placement, training, and child care.
- It is consistent with sound community development, land use, and environmental policies.
- It stresses community participation. The emphasis on community-based planning reflects a perspective shared by social service agencies working in partnership with the MPO.

The St. Louis experience indicates that although considerable time and effort are required to conduct an inclusive, participatory planning process, this effort yields a more complete understanding of problems and needs, and results in the development of innovative and promising solutions tailored to local conditions.

REGIONAL PRIORITIES, NOT JUST TRANSIT PRIORITIES

The case studies from these three areas indicate that transportation planning, preferably integrated into the overall planning process, can make major contributions toward solving employment access problems in metropolitan areas. Although each studied area is different from the others in its planning organization and approach, the report reaches several overall conclusions, which are listed in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Conclusions related to using the transportation planning process for providing low-income residents with access to jobs:

- Formal regional planning in a structure that includes all interested organizations is clearly the only cost-effective way to make transportation decisions. Future proposals for transportation services are unlikely to be funded unless they demonstrate planning coordination between the appropriate transportation, human services, and training and employment agencies.
- The metropolitan transportation planning process is an effective means for addressing "access to jobs" problems.
- Comprehensive planning for access to jobs requires an inclusive, collaborative coalition of diverse agencies and organizations to develop regional solutions.
- Planning for access to jobs goes beyond simply providing transportation to or from work.
- Individual transit agencies are successfully addressing welfare-to-work issues as part of their broader focus on service improvement and innovations.
- Fixed-route bus and rail services, with modest adjustments, are expected to meet a substantial share of employment access needs.
- Technical analysis is critical to understanding the dimensions of employment access needs and addressing those needs effectively.

More broadly, the case studies suggest that the "Access to Jobs" program demonstrates how a comprehensive planning process can be employed to deal successfully with an urgent and complex regional problem. The key aspects of the process—cooperative institutional arrangements, realistic financial planning, and appropriate technical tools—should be equally useful in confronting other broad-based regional problems.

[Return to Top](#)