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Discussion of Driving Mobility: The Role of Automobiles and Public Transit

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Welcome, you are listening to a UC Davis Center for Poverty Research Conference Podcast. I'm Lisa Pruit, a center faculty affiliate and the organizer of our November 2014 Poverty in Place Conference. This conference brought together scholars from across the social sciences to present and discuss new work on how space and place inflect various dimensions of poverty.

In this presentation, Deb Niemeier discusses Evelyn Bloomenberg research on the role of transportation in connecting tenants in subsidized housing with job opportunities. Niemeier is a professor of Civil and Environmental Engineering at UC Davis.

>> First of all, I am very pleased to be here. I don't often get invited to poverty workshops or even to workshops that are largely filled with non-engineers.

In fact, I have to tell you that I wasn't actually sure. It's the first time I've ever been asked to be a discussant even. We don't have discussants in engineering conferences. And so, I asked my partner last night who's from the Humanities, I said, what exactly does a discussant do, or a few nights ago.

And my middle daughter took over and patiently explained to me what I should be doing as a discussion. But the best part is as she finished, she sorta shook her head and she said, engineers, and walked out. Which left me very insecure for this conference. Evie's paper basically confirms a lot of what has been anecdotely referred to and discussed in the literature with respect to transportation and the MTO program.

I would characterize it in a big picture comment of basically transportation plays a key role in job gain and job stability. I would break her paper down in my very succinct engineering way into two findings. I would say the possession of an auto, the availability of an auto increase the likelihood for job gain.

And the transit increase the likelihood of continuous employment, which Evie didn't really hit on so much in her talk, but it's in her paper. And you could also call this the Southern California perspective and the Northern California perspective. And our findings also make sense in terms of the context we know about low income households and affordable housing Immobility, social services immobility, health immobility, education immobility.

We see this mobility question roll out over and over in a lot of different contexts. And, what I'd say is mobility matters to everyone, but it, probably, particularly matters to low income households. What I'm not as confident about is the applicability of the policy findings about vehicles in specifically In today's urban/suburban settings.

And I worry that improved auto access, even through programs like ride-share and leasing arrangements, whatever form it takes, for low-income households as a key policy intervention is, one, a non-starter, politically. And also, at cross purposes with larger social goals about the externalities produced by automobiles. So, I take a more new view of some of these findings.

I say this for several reasons. First, even under lease and sharing arrangements, vehicle access is quite a bit more expensive than transit access. And it's a whole lot more expensive if you start to take into

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consideration the externalities. Many of which low income households already face a disproportionate share of.

So you've got this going on in the back. And of course, the response to this is, well, you know, we can address the cost differential through subsidies. And through foundation support, some sort of social net support could address some of these cost differentials. But when I think through this, I think about this article that Malcolm Gladwell wrote in the early 2000s, so nearly ten years ago.

And basically, the article said that, that there were only about 10% of the population that were chronically homeless. And most of them had mental illnesses. They had alcohol, drug abuse issues. And this 10% had healthcare and social service system costs that were way above what anybody had imagined.

And some of the research at the time said that they follow 2500 indigents are homeless in New York City. And the cost for those 25 chronically homeless New York City over the 18 months they studied them was about 62 million dollars. And at the same time, UC San Diego followed 15 chronically homeless inebriates, and they followed them for 18 months, and I have this data.

And they found that the average hospital emergency room costs average \$100,000 a piece. So very strong social reason to do something about this 10%. Anyway, this guy, I don't know how many of you remember him, his name was Philip Mangano, and he was appointed by Bush as the Director of the US Interagency Council on Homelessness.

And it convinced about 200 cities to develop new policies for dealing with the homeless. And I'm getting to my main point here. But, essentially, they provided subsidized efficiency apartments for homeless people with clear rules. And they hired case workers, and they actually did these interventions. They were very successful with this chronically homeless day.

A lot reduced when they worked out the numbers it was about 10,000 dollars including the apartment and the social service of the case workers. When it went to the public, if you can imagine, the left said, why can't we do this for everyone? The right said, none of these people have earned this.

And the policy went down the tube in Denver. And I fear that talking about buying autos or providing auto access for low income households gets us down a rabbit hole of discussion that leverages that hinges on politics rather than it's sense. And so, I also feel like there's one more really important reason to carefully consider the car as a solution, the externalities of driving.

As Evie notes in her paper, there are well-documented externalities with very high negative externalities with vehicle use. But her point is that poor people should drive because everyone else does and it's regardless of externalities. And I feel like that's a little bit of a red herring. The fact is that poor people experience many of the negative externalities associated with automobiles in the first place in the form of terrible air quality, poor housing locations, lack of safe quality green space, to mention just a few.

And it's really hard for me as an air quality person to think about asking them to trade access for more pollution. Because at the end of the day, that is the trade-off that's being asked. It also doesn't solve the real problem. And the real problem is, I'm going to suggest in the remainder of these slides, is the lack of

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affordable housing and lack of good transit service that essentially serves the spatial configuration it needs to serve.

So right now, most cities just as a way of background, most cities if you're relying on transit. Even in transit-rich locations, it's very problematic. If you look at the funding for transit right now, 19% of all federal funding goes to transit. The bulk goes to roads. And this is true across federal, state, and local.

Now, what's important about the local and the federal distinction and the state distinction in California doesn't even matter because we don't put money out. But in the federal distinctions is the federal money that can only be used for capital improvement. In other words, you can only buy buses.

You can only make big, large scale capital investments. And so, what that means is most of the operating cost gets picked up by the local transit agencies. And so, where that gets you is more competition. Then, cooperation dominates. You get schedules that don't mesh well together. You get headways that don't stack against each other, and you get limited spatial coverage on your bus system routes.

And then, if you look at providing enough transit when all you have is the local budget, it's really even hard to find the money. And especially, federal funding is on a steep downward trend. This is only since October of last year. So, the money is going fast. And then, if you look at one more thing, which is that even in large cities, transit-rich cities.

If you use some of the national transit data, what you see is that expenditures. There's some evidence that expenditures are lower where poverty is higher. And that transit-rich areas are probably under-funded relative to their suburban counterparts. So you see these two trends in the transit data. And if that is the case, there's a couple of things that play out.

One is scale issues, you could have scale issues. You could provide transit more cheaply per capita than you could provide in the suburbs. But, the other thing is that we don't have the coverage, we're under-funded on an urban basis, which would mean that transit isn't actually at a loss for accessing loss for accessing jobs, anyway.

So that's one big thing. And then, I also think the sum of this number might be reflecting that the increase in poverty growth in suburban areas that's Scott mentioned this morning could drive up the local costs that are associated with suddenly providing transit in the suburban areas, and just providing them in general is going to be more expensive.

So, you can kind of get a sense this picture is a little complicated. And then, even in an area like San Francisco, which is generally considered transit-rich, a year and a half ago the mayor assigned a task force to come up with a the backlog of transit repair and transit, sort of renovation, rehabilitation that needed to be done.

And what we've found was that the backlog was enormous. 10.1 billion in transportation infrastructure needs, and bulk of those were going towards maintaining the core existing transit system. So, we have definitely walked away from maintaining the system. And we are certainly not expanding the system in any way.

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My favorite quote from the study, by the way, there was a quote that said, average speed of mini buses, eight miles per hour. Top speed, Usain Bolt exceeded in the 100-meter dash, 27 miles per hour. So, there's all these issues about how well transit is able to serve.

This is from some work of my PhD student who did it as part of a post-doc, and what they've done is gone in and looked at location of low wage jobs to affordable rental units in the Bay area. And what this shows is that the ability to get used to transit, to get people where to they go just as Evie noted is a huge issue.

And if you look at this map, you can see that where there are jobs, there is also not affordable housing, which brings up the whole dimension to this problem. And in fact, if you look real closely and you have a sense of the transit system in the area, it's constrained between these high low wage jobs area.

So, not only do you have housing, but you also don't have transit. Or not only do you have transit, you don't have housing. This means that the notion that you need to get more affordable housing in some of these locations where there are jobs is really important. Although, I will argue, it's no less politically palatable than providing cars would be, probably.

And in fact, this is not a novel thought. In California, we have the RHNA process, and basically, we look for a jobs and housing balance as part of the regional planning process. It's been there for a long time. Each jurisdiction, each region is given a housing determination number based on future growth.

And then, an allocation is done to different income levels to ensure that we get dispersion of affordable housing over the region. So in theory, we should be in pretty good shape if everybody's been doing this allocation properly in providing the affordable housing. Which brings me to some research which I've been conducting with a PhD students who's standing in the back slowly slinking down.

And, what we've been doing is actually taking one of the housing cycles. They operate on six and seven year-housing cycles. And we've been taking the data from the housing cycle. And actually looking at what cities stated they were gonna plan, they were gonna build, plan for, and then what was actually built.

So, and here's some preliminary findings which is, my phrase is planned is not built. Essentially, you can see that at the very low income, we built 77% of what we've planned during this 1999 to 2006 period. Low income, 66%, and moderately, 32%. If you look at affordable housing over the entire Bay area region, we're at 57%.

So, I think this idea about providing cars, providing transit, providing housing. Housing is really mixed up with actually not providing any of it very well. So, sorry, I'll leave it there. So, if I want to leave aside the housing issue for a little bit, which I feel quite passionate about this point, and reflect a bit back on the transportation issue that Evie brought up.

I do agree with her. There are some commonalities between the two perspectives. Just to prove that I'm not totally anti-car, I think one approach would be to require hybrids or electric car vehicle sharing as part of the affordable housing complexes. Right now, we've privatized the development of most of our affordable housing complexes that go on right now.

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It would be a short and small step to put car sharing as part of the complex itself. And then, the second approach is regional pay in system. What we're seeing in the Bay Area right now was a lot of pushback at providing affordable housing from some of the suburban communities.

And yet, at the same time, you could argue they're paying big costs in providing transit. And, I think this notion of dispersing housing, affordable housing, has to come alongside with dispersing transit in a regional sense. So that you don't get 20 local operators, you get a regional system that functions for these households.

And one way you can do it is to have a regional pay-in system if a locality doesn't have a decent jobs housing balance, they pay into a regional transit system that is able to operate. But, whether this could work or not is sort of a whole another issue certainly in need of research.

So in summary, I guess what I've thought about is we need to move beyond the traditional ways that we've sort of thought about transportation. I mean this both in the sense of auto access and transit availability as they exist today. And we need to take advantage of sort of a vanguard of the state's emphasis on climate change and think about the ways we could leverage some of the things that are happening on the climate change front for a better future for low income households.

And I think about things like can we create better options for densification without gentrification? Can we leverage the needs of the young wealthy populations riding Google's buses in San Francisco to improve the housing transportation options of the poor in San Francisco? And I'm just using the Bay Area because that's where we're working.

And can we leverage regional planning to better account for the needs of the poor? The regional planning organizations all say, oh, we take equity in the situation, but the fact is they don't. And so, not in any real substantial way. So I think, for a transportation person, putting a small tow into the poverty area, these are the things, the connections that I could see that would happen, so.

>> I'm Ann Stevens, the director of the Center for Poverty Research at UC Davis, and I want to thank you for listening. The center is one of three federally designated Poverty Research Centers in the United States. Our mission is to facilitate nonpartisan academic research on domestic poverty to disseminate this research and to train the next generation of poverty scholars.

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