

**BARRIERS TO WORK:  
THE SPATIAL DIVIDE BETWEEN JOBS AND WELFARE RECIPIENTS  
IN METROPOLITAN AREAS**

**I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The time limits and work requirements of the 1996 welfare reform law present a great challenge to large U.S. metropolitan areas, where hundreds of thousands of low-income people must find entry-level jobs. The welfare-to-work effort underway in American cities uncovers a phenomenon that many scholars already knew: there is a “spatial mismatch” between where workers live and where jobs are located, and low-income workers often have no easy way to travel between home and work.

Officials at the federal, state, and local levels already are scrambling to solve spatial mismatch through transportation solutions, yet they lack solid information about what spatial mismatch is, why it occurs, and how best to remedy it through transportation. A review of empirical literature and practical work shows that not all metropolitan areas experience the same degree of spatial mismatch, and that policy solutions may vary from city to city.

This discussion paper does three things. First, it proposes an index by which we could assess the degree of spatial mismatch and categorize metropolitan areas according to the severity of mismatch. Second, it performs a preliminary categorization of five cities to illustrate the varying degrees of mismatch found among metropolitan areas with large welfare populations. Third, it makes both short and long term recommendations for federal and state policies.

These policy prescriptions are informed by several observations:

- Low-income transportation programs are not simple to execute. They may need to be integrated with other services and flexible in order to adapt to the work schedules of entry-level workers.
- The choice between urban community empowerment and suburban job access does not have to be an either-or proposition.

Giving central city workers mobility to travel to and from suburban jobs increases family earnings and, in turn, increases the capital flowing back into urban neighborhoods.

- Suburbs are not monolithic. They may vary widely in their degree of transit accessibility and job quality. Job placement strategies need to distinguish between outer- and inner-ring suburbs; they should not be demand-driven, placing workers in jobs regardless of the distance from the city or whether the quality of the wage outweighs the opportunity cost of the commute.
- Transportation solutions should aim to enact incremental and systemic changes that create transportation equity for low-income people and improve long-term transportation systems for families of all incomes – not to create “special” programs for the inner city poor.

The short term policy recommendations argue strongly that new federal grant programs, particularly the “Access to Jobs” grants to be awarded by the U.S. Department of Transportation, must be targeted, coordinated, and sustainable in order to properly mitigate the effects of spatial mismatch. Specifically:

- Federal grants for low-income transportation programs must be targeted to those (often large) metropolitan areas which are experiencing the most severe spatial mismatch.
- These grants should reward applicants whose efforts maximize the resources of the existing metropolitan transportation system, utilize a variety of transportation modes reflecting the transportation and labor market patterns of the metropolitan area at large (e.g., public transit, private transit, vanpools, and cars), and prioritize job placement according to transportation accessibility and job quality.
- Federal leaders must lead by example and make low-income transportation programs an integrated part of federal urban transportation policy, taking steps to enforce more seamless coordination among federally-funded transit and transportation agencies within a metropolitan area.

- Federal agencies should incorporate more rigorous evaluation measures into new low-income transportation grants, and they should improve federal information infrastructure to make place-based statistical data more accessible to local program implementers.