

Citizen Opinions on Public Transportation Roles, Service, and Financing

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This report summarizes the results of a recent statewide public opinion survey conducted in 1000 households across New York State. Topics addressed include opinions on public transit performance, transit needs, public participation, transit users, automobile-oriented policies, and funding sources and financing. Results of the survey indicated that (a) New York State residents think that regular dependable local bus service is the most important transit need, (b) transit is used most frequently by middle-income (rather than low-income) groups, and (c) there is strong support for special services or lower fares for the elderly and handicapped.

During the summer of 1974, a series of public hearings was held by the New York State Department of Transportation to air public views on transit. The information gathered at these meetings was useful in obtaining information quickly for studies on transit operating assistance being done at this time. Those conducting the hearings, however, recognized that the full spectrum of public opinion was not represented. Accordingly, the department contracted Market Facts, Inc., to conduct a statewide public survey on a wide range of transit problems and related issues, such as community transportation problems, operator performance, importance of different factors influencing travel mode choice, and public preferences for different transportation-assistance programs. This paper summarizes the findings of the survey. Complete findings are available elsewhere (1).

DATA

The survey consisted of a sample of 1000 households selected randomly throughout New York State. The sample was divided equally among four geographic areas: New York City, other major metropolitan areas with over 50 000 population, small urban areas with between 5000 and 50 000 population, and rural areas.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of interviews. Respondents were chosen to represent the demographics of the state. Samples of certain groups were weighted, since the process of selection, because of time or budgetary constraints, could not exactly match the state's demographic profile. The survey was conducted by personal interview, and the refusal rate was negligible.

The replies were broken down into the following categories of the state's population: geographical residence, family size, family income, age, sex, race, automobile ownership, and mode to work. From these breakdowns, it was possible to analyze reasons for responses and obtain profiles of users of various modes.

CHARACTERISTICS OF TRANSIT USERS

An understanding of public feeling toward transit depends on a perception of the demography of transit users and nonusers. The survey revealed some surprising facts on this subject. Transit is not used most by those families with the lowest incomes but by those earning from \$3000 to \$9000 and above \$25 000 per year:

| Family Income (\$) | Avg Days per Week Used | Family Income (\$) | Avg Days per Week Used |
|--------------------|------------------------|--------------------|------------------------|
| <3000 | 1.55 | 12 000 to 14 999 | 1.05 |
| 3000 to 5999 | 2.07 | 15 000 to 24 999 | 1.28 |
| 6000 to 8999 | 2.08 | >25 000 | 1.78 |
| 9000 to 11 999 | 1.54 | | |

Those families with incomes between \$6000 and \$9000 are the most frequent transit users because their incomes do not permit the daily operation or necessary maintenance of an automobile; yet their employment and higher disposable income (as compared with those earning less) generate a number of trips.

Those who annually earn below \$3000 are mostly retired persons, among whom physical disability, the absence of employment, and a small disposable income lower trip-making potential. Among them, however, automobile ownership is surprisingly high; 46 percent

reported having at least one car, only 5 percent less than those in the \$6000 to \$90000 income bracket. It is likely that the retirees, having bought their cars when they were working, retain them until maintenance and operational costs or physical disability force them to give their cars up. The high degree of transit use among those earning \$25 000 or more is less explainable. A large percentage of this group may live in the New York City area, where they use the rail commuter network. Any conclusions, however, about the behavior of this group must be regarded as tentative because the sample taken of them was small.

Transit use in New York State is a function of city size, and, therefore, the service available in the urban area: The larger the area is, the more transit will be used. The largest group of everyday riders (42 percent) live in New York City, and, among the city's total population, transit is used an average of 3 days/week. By contrast, the largest group of persons who never use transit (84.2 percent) live in rural areas. More than half the population from other parts of the state say they never use transit (54.3 percent in major metropolitan areas and 65.6 percent in small urban areas).

MODE FOR WORK AND NONWORK TRIPS

The mode to work is the automobile (Table 1), except in New York City, where three-fourths of all work trips are made by transit.

Most nonwork trips in New York State are by automobile. The smaller the population is of the area in which a person lives, the greater the chance is that he or she will use the automobile as passenger or driver for nonwork trips. Even in New York City, almost half of the nonwork trips are by automobile (Table 1). Twice as many New York City residents use bus as use rail probably because of the nature of the city's transit system. The rail system radiating from the central business district serves Manhattan with its concentration of unexcelled cultural activities. However, use of these facilities by the city resident is expensive and relatively infrequent, and the opportunity for taking advantage of them by transit is decreased at night when infrequent rail and subway scheduling, fear of crime, and less traffic congestion encourage automobile use.

The bus system, on the other hand, functions as a connector to the rail lines, providing services to areas where leisure activities are concentrated. Except for a few rush-hour express services, almost no buses connect Manhattan with the outer boroughs, but they do provide services to outlying shopping districts.

Generally, however, the higher a person's income is the more frequently automobiles will be used for nonwork trips. Even among the lowest income group automobile use is high, primarily because of the high rate of ownership among the elderly, who constitute the majority of this group. The only exception to the correlation between income and automobile use is among those in the \$6000 to \$9000 group, which is transit oriented.

REASONS FOR HAVING TRANSIT

New Yorkers view transit as a supplemental rather than a primary means of transportation. Of the reasons given for having transit in New York State, 6.1 percent of the respondents indicated keeping downtown strong; 15.1 percent, reducing air pollution and saving energy; 18.7 percent, reducing traffic congestion; and 59.9 percent, providing transportation to people without cars.

The view of transit as supplemental is more prevalent where transit service is less comprehensive. The smaller the area is and the less extensive transit service is, the more passive its role will seem to people.

PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF TRANSIT PROBLEMS

Twelve percent of all New Yorkers rank transportation as the most serious societal problem; in contrast, 40 percent rank crime as the most serious, and 15 percent rank drug use as most serious. Bus services are considered to be the major problem in all parts of New York State, even in New York City, where bus services are the most extensive and frequent (Table 1). In New York City, severe traffic congestion, which slows operations; the necessity, until now, of paying a full fare for transfers; and the need to use buses to reach rapid transit are being influenced by these considerations. Interestingly, the need for door-to-door bus service seems to be one of the major needs in the city.

Elsewhere in the state, the infrequency and the lack of cross-town service and the sparse coverage of many systems are considered to be the reasons for the feelings about the need for improvement of bus service. Rural residents feel this need more than others. Many New York City residents think that rapid transit service requires improvement (Table 2). Although extensive, the system requires major rehabilitation as well as significant additions to its physical plant. Overcrowding, lack of direct service to major activity centers, and long, slow rides are commonplace.

SUBSIDIES FOR THE DISADVANTAGED

Generally, there is strong sentiment among all New Yorkers to provide some special transportation service or lower fares for disadvantaged groups. Support for such aid is strongest for the handicapped and the elderly; school-age children and low-income groups, in that order, have the least support (Table 2). However, in all cases, two-thirds of all New Yorkers support the subsidy. Even among the highest income groups, normally the most conservative, sentiment for such aid is strong. Analysis of replies on basis of respondents' modes to work shows automobile users least inclined for any reduced-fare program. Transit users have the same strong opinion favoring aid to all groups; however, aid for the poor is supported less strongly among this group.

AUTOMOBILE-ORIENTED POLICIES

When given a choice, 34 percent of all New Yorkers would rather not penalize the automobile for the benefit of transit (Table 1). If the automobile were to be restricted, however, the prevalent choice is to ban them from downtown areas. New York City residents more strongly favor downtown automobile restrictions than any other limitation. Their next choice is not to make the automobile more costly, but more respondents in other areas favored this policy, most likely because New York City is least dependent on the automobile. In contrast, only 15.5 percent of the rural residents are in favor of restricting areas that automobiles may enter. The feelings about not restricting automobiles are stronger in other parts of the state than in New York City, but not so strong as the feelings in the rural areas.

Figure 1. Location of sampling point and number of interviews.



Table 1. Percentage of survey respondents according to their trip modes, transit needs, and attitudes toward automobile-restrictive policies.

| Item | New York City | Other Metropolitan Areas | Small Urban Areas | Rural Areas | New York State |
|--|---------------|--------------------------|-------------------|-------------|----------------|
| Work-trip mode | | | | | |
| Automobile driver/passenger | 21.3 | 82.8 | 77.1 | 80.1 | |
| Bus | 23.9 | 15.6 | 6.0 | 0 | |
| Subway/railroad | 52.1 | 1.8 | 0 | 0 | |
| Walk/other | 11.6 | 7.8 | 21.0 | 21.5 | |
| Non-work-trip mode | | | | | |
| Automobile driver/passenger | 44.6 | 75.6 | 95.6 | 96.1 | |
| Bus | 33.5 | 17.3 | 5.0 | 0.9 | |
| Subway/railroad | 15.9 | 0 | 0 | 0 | |
| Walk/other | 6.9 | 12.0 | 7.8 | 7.0 | |
| Transit need | | | | | |
| Regular bus service | 31.1 | 61.1 | 64.1 | 67.5 | |
| Door-to-door transit | 20.2 | 10.1 | 9.6 | 4.1 | |
| Rail rapid transit | 30.0 | 7.9 | 8.1 | 5.1 | |
| Intercity train service | 5.5 | 12.4 | 14.2 | 13.9 | |
| Not known | 13.3 | 8.4 | 4.1 | 9.4 | |
| Automobile-restrictive policy | | | | | |
| Increase all tolls | 11.0 | 20.6 | 10.3 | 11.5 | 11.9 |
| Increase parking fees | 15.7 | 17.4 | 15.8 | 10.2 | 15.2 |
| Increase tolls for automobiles with one or two persons | 16.6 | 13.0 | 12.3 | 9.9 | 14.1 |
| Increase automobile registration tax for big automobiles | 17.2 | 20.5 | 21.5 | 14.9 | 18.5 |
| Restrict areas automobiles may enter | 35.5 | 22.7 | 31.0 | 15.5 | 30.1 |
| Give transit priority | 18.7 | 19.7 | 21.7 | 14.4 | 19.1 |
| Do not make cars more costly | 27.3 | 36.4 | 37.3 | 50.6 | 34.4 |

Note: Multiple answers were allowed.

Table 2. Percentage of survey respondents according to their attitude toward lower fares or special transportation services for the disadvantaged.

| Attitude | Group | | | |
|-------------------|------------|---------|-------------|------------|
| | School-Age | Elderly | Handicapped | Low-Income |
| Strongly opposed | 2.3 | 1.5 | 1.4 | 4.2 |
| Somewhat opposed | 4.1 | 2.2 | 2.4 | 7.4 |
| Neutral | 7.4 | 2.9 | 2.8 | 15.2 |
| Somewhat in favor | 23.4 | 14.1 | 12.4 | 20.8 |
| Strongly in favor | 62.7 | 79.3 | 81.0 | 52.5 |
| Mean ^a | 1.40 | 1.67 | 1.69 | 1.10 |

^a0 = neutral; -2 = strongly opposed; +2 = strongly in favor.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

1. Transit is used most frequently, not by the low-income but by the middle-income groups. Low-income groups do not have disposable income to participate in activities that would entail transit use.

2. Transportation is considered to be the most serious problem by 12 percent of the state population. That feeling is more prevalent in rural areas than in New York City. In fact, most rural residents (21 percent) consider transportation to be the most serious problem. Most people, particularly rural residents, see transit as filling a transportation gap—providing transportation to those without cars.

3. Approximately one-third of the population considers some aspect of local bus service to be the most serious transportation problem. Frequency, lack of dependability, and lack of service (particularly in rural areas) are the most frequent complaints.

4. Most people feel that regular bus service is the greatest transportation need in New York State. This opinion is especially prevalent in the urban areas, except in New York City where door-to-door bus and additional rapid transit are considered to be the greatest needs.

5. There is strong support for special services or lower fares for the elderly and handicapped. Support for subsidies for school-age children or low-income groups, although still constituting a majority, is somewhat weaker.

6. About one-third of the population would rather not see the automobile penalized for the benefit of transit.

The survey has reviewed feelings of New York State residents on a number of transit issues. The results are instructive, and the data are invaluable in drafting legislation and opening several possibilities to further citizen participation programs. Public feelings have been given more consideration and, as a result, the transportation planning process has been sensitized to public need.

REFERENCE

1. E. P. Donnelly and others. Statewide Public Opinion Survey on Transit Operating Assistance, Technical Report. Preliminary Research Rept. 80, Planning Division, New York State Department of Transportation, Albany, Aug. 1975.