

Running on Empty: Travel Patterns of Extremely Poor People in Los Angeles

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Although previous studies have focused on the travel needs and patterns of various social groups—including commuters, the elderly, the disabled, and women—few have specifically examined the travel patterns of public assistance recipients. The lack of information on such a large and growing segment of the population prompted a group of graduate students from the University of California at Los Angeles' Department of Urban Planning to initiate a study of the transportation needs of the very poor in Los Angeles county. Various subgroups of the population were examined, including the homeless, those living in shelters, and recipients of public assistance. Many of the latter depended on General Relief (GR), the form of public assistance obtained as a last resort, mandated by the state of California. For the very poor, accessibility to transportation is a major factor influencing the capacity to satisfy even the most rudimentary needs, such as food, shelter, employment, and medical care. The poor struggle daily to reach trip destinations that are necessary to sustain life or maintain eligibility for public assistance. This is particularly problematic in Los Angeles, where the geographic expanse of the region adds to the already formidable barriers that the poor must overcome. Moreover, the county, unlike other heavily populated counties in California, allocates few transportation subsidies to defray transportation costs to crucial destinations. Even the few transportation subsidies that are granted are allocated randomly by case workers. Dragged from one bureaucracy to another, with inadequate resources to defray the necessary transportation costs, many of the poor find themselves literally running on empty.

For the very poor, accessibility to transportation often constrains one's ability to satisfy even the most rudimentary needs, such as food, shelter, and medical care. Many must spend much of their day simply traveling to and from shelters, clinics, missions, and social service agencies that are highly decentralized. The urgency of meeting these immediate basic needs impedes the very poor from seeking and securing long-term employment.

In addition, to maintain eligibility for public assistance, employable recipients must complete assigned county work projects. Frequently, however, the very poor lack the resources to pay for the cost of transportation to their assigned job sites. Without a means of transportation to assigned job sites, the very poor often lose their eligibility for continued public assistance benefits. Many in this predicament find themselves homeless, destitute, and literally running on empty.

It is anticipated that in the current recession, this dire situation will worsen. In 1992 Los Angeles county submitted a proposed budget that fell \$2.2 billion short of that necessary to maintain the existing level of services for the poor. Since

the survey, the county has cut the General Relief (GR) monthly allowance from \$341 to \$296. At a time of record unemployment, such reductions in public assistance will only serve to push those already on the verge of homelessness out into the streets.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze and quantify the travel patterns and mobility constraints of very poor people in Los Angeles county. To this end, the research team designed a survey that was administered to more than 200 respondents. The sample consisted of homeless individuals and persons living in shelters or single-room occupancy dwellings, many of whom depend on GR benefits. Respondents were selected from nine geographic locations throughout Los Angeles county.

GENERAL RELIEF

Approximately half of the 203 survey respondents depend on monthly GR benefits. For this reason, it is necessary to provide a brief description and explanation of the state's GR program and its effect on the mobility of the very poor.

GR, the form of public assistance obtained as a last resort, is administered by the state of California but funded entirely by the counties. The purpose of the GR program is to ensure that the indigent population not receiving state or private support is provided with "minimum assistance."

To qualify for GR benefits, an applicant must

- Be a resident of Los Angeles County,
- Be a citizen of the United States or a lawful alien,
- Have a net monthly income of less than \$341,
- Own less than \$500 (excluding a motor vehicle with a market value of less than \$1,500),
- Have less than \$34,000 in real property value, and
- Apply for unemployment insurance, accept assignments to Los Angeles county workfare projects, register with the State Employment Development Department, and actively seek work.

The California Welfare and Institutions Code—under which the state's GR program falls—stipulates that "minimum assistance" include, at the very minimum, allocations for food, housing, utilities, medical care, and transportation. The state mandates the minimum requirements and oversees county actions, but the onus of administering the program, including all decisions on benefit amounts, is left to the counties.

Los Angeles county has relegated transportation to a "special need" category rather than incorporate it as a component

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of minimum subsistence. Thus, the \$341 (now \$296) monthly allowance allocated to qualified recipients in Los Angeles does not factor in the cost of transportation. Yet, for recipients to remain eligible for continued GR benefits, they must perform up to 17 days of assigned county work projects each month and complete 24 job searches within an 8-week period. It is an arduous challenge for these recipients to arrive at all their necessary destinations without funding to defray the cost of travel. Without a monthly transportation allowance, many GR recipients are forced to forego food or shelter in order to pay for transportation. Even those who make such trade-offs are sometimes unable to pay the cost of transportation. Thus, despite the provisions mandating transportation allocations, few GR recipients receive the full allotment.

The lack of mobility causes some GR recipients to miss social service appointments, employment interviews, or county workfare assignments, which results in the suspension of their benefits. It is easy to see why so many GR recipients in Los Angeles county find themselves caught in this vicious cycle.

Recent Los Angeles County Statistics

As of May 1993 more than 105,000 persons were receiving GR in Los Angeles county. This marks a dramatic increase over the 50,000 recipients in June 1990. In addition, welfare cases in Los Angeles county stand at a record 1.5 million, a 40 percent increase over the 1990 figure (1). At present 1 in 10 people in Los Angeles county depends on some form of public assistance. Of the total number of GR recipients in Los Angeles county, 65 percent are homeless and 85 percent are male.

Demographics of Homeless Population in Los Angeles County

Given that many of the survey respondents were homeless, it is important to examine the homeless as a major subset of the very poor. In 1985 a survey by the National Coalition for the Homeless placed the homeless population in the United States at close to 2.5 million, or approximately the population of metropolitan Boston.

Today, 177,000 people are homeless in Los Angeles county (2). Almost 40 percent of the homeless population lives on Skid Row, a section of downtown Los Angeles. The largest increases in the homeless population are among women, youth, and families with children (3, p. 59). Some 60 percent of these people suffer from health problems that render them unemployable.

The characteristics of homeless people have changed dramatically. The stereotypical homeless person—once a white, middle-aged, alcoholic male—has given way to a new group of homeless, who are younger than their predecessors and more likely to be single women, single-parent households, families, the unemployed, victims of domestic violence, legal and undocumented immigrants, and the mentally ill (4, p.1). For an overview of basic characteristics of survey respondents of this study, see Table 1.

METHODOLOGY

The goal of this study was to gain quantitative data on the travel patterns and transportation needs of the very poor in Los Angeles county. A survey was designed to examine the general characteristics and background of the very poor, including information about monthly income and expenditures, living arrangements, and travel patterns.

Defining, locating, and accessing the sample population for the survey proved to be one of the greatest challenges of the study. As a consequence of the inability to isolate an exclusive sample of GR recipients from the county Department of Public and Social Services (DPSS) office, the research team opted to conduct personal interviews with patrons at nine homeless shelters and residential social service agencies located in the Los Angeles metropolitan region.

The county was divided into five major regions for the purposes of analysis: San Fernando Valley (North Hollywood), Downtown, East Los Angeles, South Bay (San Pedro), and West Los Angeles (Santa Monica). This sampling procedure resulted in a survey sample that was more diverse than if the research team had been able to obtain an exclusive sample of GR recipients from the DPSS. Aside from GR recipients, the sample includes the homeless, those on other forms of public assistance such as Aid to Families with De-

TABLE 1 Basic Characteristics of Survey Respondents

CHARACTERISTIC	UCLA SURVEY, 1992	DPSS SURVEY, 1987
Average Age	38	39
Ethnicity	38% African American 30% White 24% Hispanic 8% Other	56% African American 19% White 17% Hispanic 8% Other
Birth Place	23% California 59% Other States 18% Other Countries	24.7% California 31.2% Other States 10.1% Other Countries
Years Residing in L.A.	33% Resident > 4 Yrs.	83% Resident > 4 Yrs.
Native Language	77% English 20% Spanish	No Data
Marital Status	55% Single 26% Divorced 11% Married	44% Single 28.5% Divorced 3.2% Married
Average Yrs. Schooling	11.5	No Data
Gender	83% Male 17% Female	66% Male 34% Female

pendent Children, and other very poor individuals not receiving public assistance.

The survey contained questions pertaining to travel destinations and expenses, trip frequencies, and mobility constraints as well as information on living arrangements, public assistance, work status, monthly income, and demographics.

SURVEY ANALYSIS

As noted, the sample consisted of 203 respondents. Among those surveyed, the primary form of public assistance was GR (45.6 percent), although one in four persons reported receiving some other form of welfare. Results indicated that on average, respondents made about four trips per day. Walking was the primary mode of transportation, accounting for 60 percent of all trips. The second most frequently used mode was transit, with an average monthly expenditure of \$35. On the basis of a medium monthly income of \$360, close to 10 percent of the respondent's income was spent on transit.

Although it may be more economical to buy a monthly bus pass than to pay fares trip by trip, a \$42 disbursement is a heavy burden for someone with a monthly income of \$360.

The vast majority of respondents indicated that they were unemployed (84 percent), and more than 70 percent reported that they considered finding employment to be a very important priority.

Demographic Profile of Survey Population

Respondents ranged in age from 16 to 78 years. Males constituted 83 percent of the survey sample; only 17 percent were female. The ethnic composition of the survey population is described in Figure 1 ($N = 186$).

The typical survey respondent is a single, unemployed, African-American male, 38 years old, with a high school education and an average monthly income of \$442. In general, respondents had achieved a relatively high level of education, with an average of 11.5 years of schooling. More than three-quarters of the respondents were born in the United States and speak English as their native language; 14 percent were born in Mexico. Spanish is the first language for 20 percent of the respondents. Approximately one-quarter of those surveyed were born in California; 67 percent had lived in Los Angeles for less than 4 years, and more than 33 percent, for more than 4 years.

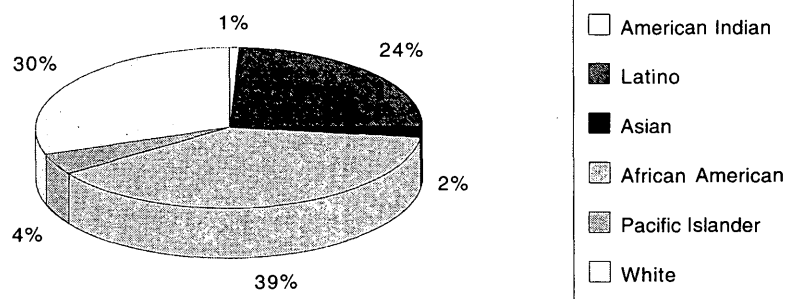


FIGURE 1 Ethnic composition of survey respondents.

Marital Status and Current Living Arrangements

Three-quarters of the respondents are single, and only 11 percent are married. Approximately 64 percent of the respondents reported that they live alone. More than half of the respondents indicated that they had lived in the same location for less than 1 month before their interview. Only 38 percent of the respondents reported regularly paying rent. Among those who pay rent regularly, nearly half indicated that they pay on either a weekly or a daily basis. The data suggest that more than three-quarters of the respondents have unstable living arrangements, a characteristic typical of the homeless population.

The median monthly rent paid by respondents is \$158. Since their average monthly income is only \$360, the average monthly income left for food, utilities, transportation, clothing, and personal items is just \$202 per month. It is difficult to imagine surviving, let alone thriving, on so little money.

Public Assistance and Income

Less than half of the respondents (43 percent) were receiving GR assistance at the time the survey was conducted.

Employment Status and Work History

By conservative estimates, more than half a million Californians are currently unemployed. These conditions have taken an unusually harsh toll on Los Angeles county residents, as evidenced by the large numbers of unemployed people in the survey sample. Over three-quarters of the sample (86 percent) are currently out of work (Figure 2).

Half of the unemployed survey respondents indicated that they stopped working as a result of layoffs or the completion of seasonal work. More than 80 percent of those sampled had participated in job searches a week before the interview date, and more than half of those job-seekers had looked for employment more than twice a week. Approximately 25 percent of those currently employed are searching for a new job. The percentage of employed males and females is evenly distributed. Figure 2 illustrates that less than 5 percent of the survey population indicated that they work every day, slightly over 5 percent work a few days a week, 2.3 percent work a few days a month, and less than 1 percent work on an irregular basis.

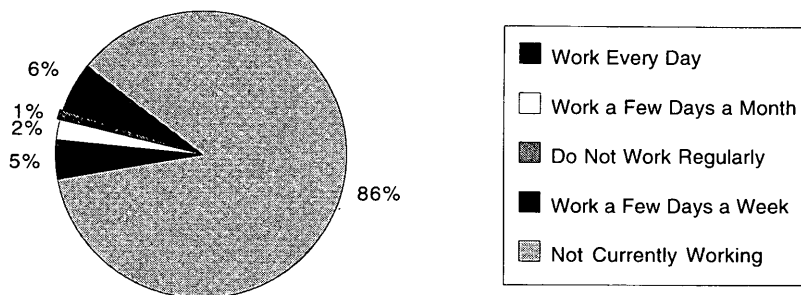


FIGURE 2 Employment characteristics of survey respondents.

Trip Diary

Transportation questions were posed to respondents in a trip diary format that attempted to assess how and where they traveled the day before the administration of the survey. The results revealed that respondents made an average of 4.1 trips during the day before the survey. Figure 3 illustrates that more than half of the respondents made between two and four trips the day before the survey. Fewer than 10 percent of the respondents reported having made between 8 and 10 trips.

Trip Destinations

Trip destinations were grouped into seven categories. The highest percentage of trips were taken for the purpose of finding shelter. The next most frequent were personal trips, followed by social and recreational, food-related, and job-related trips. Approximately 17 percent of the trips were reportedly made to specific locations such as Downtown or Santa Monica. Of these, approximately 40 percent were on the West Side and the rest were divided between Downtown, East Los Angeles, South Bay, San Pedro, the Valley, and South-Central Los Angeles (Figure 4).

Trip Modes

Figure 5 illustrates the distribution of trips by mode. Clearly, walking is the primary mode of transportation used by the poor and homeless, as nearly 60 percent of the total trips were

made on foot. Transit was the second most frequently used mode, followed by riding as a passenger in a vehicle, driving, and bicycling.

Income significantly influenced mode choice. The range of monthly income reported by respondents from all sources varied from \$0 to \$3,750, with a median of \$360. The transportation modes most affected by income were automobile use and public transit. To determine how income influenced the respondents' travel modes, car ownership was cross-tabulated with income. Given a median monthly income of only \$360, it is not surprising that just 11 percent of the respondents reported owning an operable automobile. Overall, the findings indicated that as income increases, so does car-ownership.

Given that almost 90 percent of the respondents did not own a car, it was important to examine how income affected the use of other travel modes. As stated, walking was the primary mode of transportation used by respondents. In addition, an analysis of the average number of walking trips by income categories concluded that income had an inverse relationship with walking as a mode of transportation; as income increased, the percentage of trips made on foot decreased (Figure 5). No clear patterns emerged regarding other modes of transportation.

Although walking is generally the primary mode of transportation among the poor, national policy fails to recognize it as a legitimate form of transportation. A comparison between the average daily trips in the survey sample and the findings of the 1983-1984 National Personal Transportation Study (NPTS) revealed a major difference in that the NPTS study excluded trips made on foot. The NPTS found that individuals with an income of less than \$10,000 made an av-

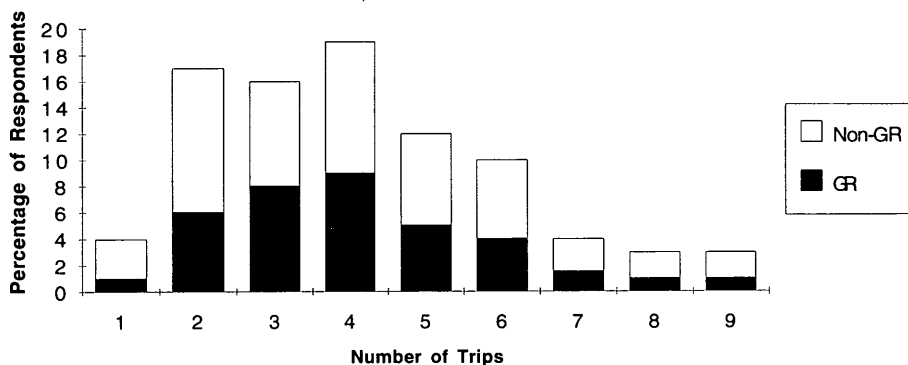


FIGURE 3 Number of trips made by respondents.

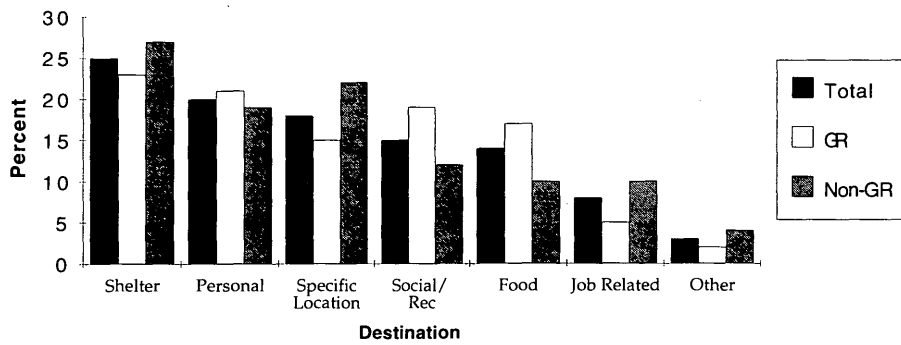


FIGURE 4 Trip diary information.

average number of 2 daily trips, whereas this survey sample revealed a higher daily average number of trips, 4.1. When walking trips were excluded from these data, the figure for the average daily trips decreased by nearly 60 percent to 2.47.

Employment and Mode Choice

Employment status was shown to correlate with mode choice. Data on transportation modes used by the employed poor to access their jobs are displayed in the following table:

Mode	Users (percent)
Bus	43.0
Walk	32.1
Car	14.1
Carpool	3.6
Other	7.2
Total	100.0

These findings indicate that more than three-quarters of the employed poor are either transit-dependent or must walk to their jobs. Another interesting finding is that the percentage of car ownership of the employed poor (11 percent) is slightly higher than that of the sample on the whole.

Expenditures on transit varied according to the individual's employment status. Half of the employed respondents spent at least \$35/month on transit, but only about 11 percent of the unemployed spent the same amount. The employed had higher transit usage than the unemployed. One interpretation is that increased transit usage and mobility are correlated to increased financial resources.

Transit Use

A number of questions about the respondents' transit use were asked to determine the transportation characteristics of very-low-income individuals and the factors that may influence these patterns. First, the number of respondents who used transit as well as the frequency of their transit trips was determined. Next, the monthly transit expenditures of the sample during the previous month was calculated. Finally, the number of transit tokens received by GR recipients from the DPSS was used to document the level of transportation support offered by the county welfare program.

Almost 77 percent of the respondents indicated that they had used public transit during the previous month, with higher usage among women than men. Most of those responding made more than 10 trips. The average monthly transit expenditure was \$35, accounting for an average of 30 bus trips made over the month. As these figures suggest, the poor are clearly transit-dependent, and many devote a large part of their monthly income to transportation.

As noted in Figure 6, more than 60 percent of the respondents spent between \$13 and \$60/month on bus travel. In some cases, the total amount paid exceeded \$42, the cost of a monthly bus pass offering unlimited rides. Although it is often more economical to buy a monthly bus pass, many respondents indicated that they could not allocate such a large portion of their monthly income to transit, all at once in a single expenditure. Senior citizens and the disabled qualify to purchase a discounted monthly bus pass for only \$4, but most of the poor surveyed in this study did not qualify for this special benefit.

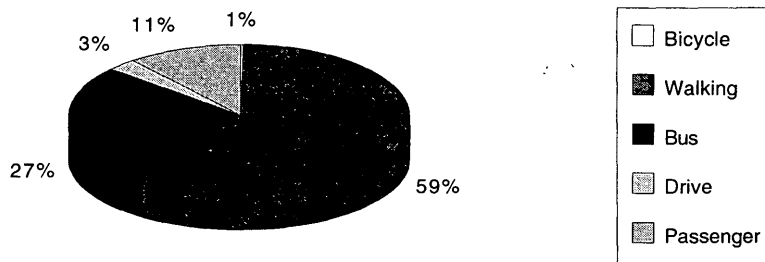


FIGURE 5 Trip destination by mode.

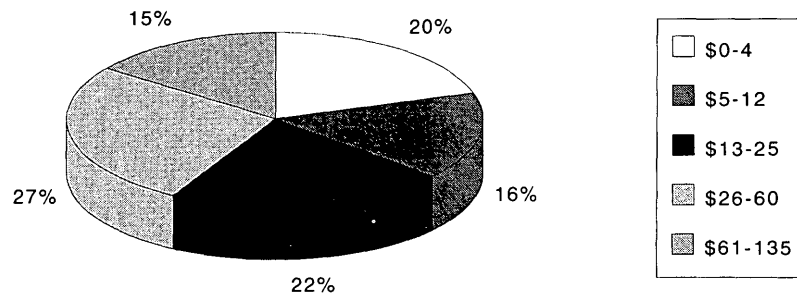


FIGURE 6 Number of transit trips last month.

Despite the stated policy of the DPSS that GR recipients receive transit subsidies when they need them, in actuality, more than 47 percent of the eligible GR recipients in the sample had not received a single bus token from the county. Moreover, of the GR recipients who had received bus tokens from the county, more than half had received only one or two tokens. For many people, lack of access to transit may contribute to patterns of failure.

There was a wide variation in transit use among the survey locations. Figure 7 demonstrates high percentages of transit use by respondents at all survey locations with the exception of East Los Angeles. The interview sites in East Los Angeles are within walking distance of services in Downtown Los Angeles. The low transit use by respondents at the East Los Angeles sites may be because these centers attracted a large number of senior citizens who had access to automobiles and to dial-a-ride taxis, shuttles, and other paratransit services for the elderly.

In contrast with the findings in East Los Angeles, the San Fernando Valley and Downtown locations had the highest percentages (greater than 78 percent) of respondents who used transit. In Santa Monica, approximately 50 percent of the respondents indicated that they had used transit at least 25 times in the last months compared with less than 10 percent of the East Los Angeles respondents. The high levels of ridership in Santa Monica and Downtown Los Angeles are consistent with the respective areas' high levels of transit service (Santa Monica) and high density (Downtown).

The influence of income on transit usage was also explored. Table 2 illustrates that the highest number of respondents who used transit were members of the income category \$351-\$500. The two most commonly cited trip purposes were related to accessing employment and social services.

Assessing Mobility Needs of the Poor

To ascertain whether the mobility needs of the sample were being met, interviewers asked respondents if there were any places they wanted to go but couldn't get to. An overwhelming 67 percent of the respondents indicated that there were such places. The results are shown in Figure 8. Interestingly, more than a quarter of the mobility problems were related to accessing employment. Survey results indicate that nearly 40 percent of the employed respondents relied on public transit to get to work.

The analysis indicated that gender did not significantly affect mobility. Men and women experience mobility problems equally.

Analysis of Frequent Destinations

Respondents were asked if there were places where they go regularly. The responses to this question were coded and grouped into six different categories: food and shopping, shelter, personal, social and recreational, job, and other. Food and shopping consisted of trips to such locations as grocery stores, restaurants, soup kitchens, and miscellaneous shopping destinations. The shelter category includes permanent and temporary shelters in addition to some outdoor locations, such as areas under bridges where one may obtain temporary shelter. The personal category includes more than 25 types of destination, the most prevalent being the DPSS office, City Hall, storage facilities, child care centers, and lawyers' offices. Regular visits to places such as libraries, movie theaters, beaches, and shopping centers were coded as social and recreational destinations. Work destinations include visits to the

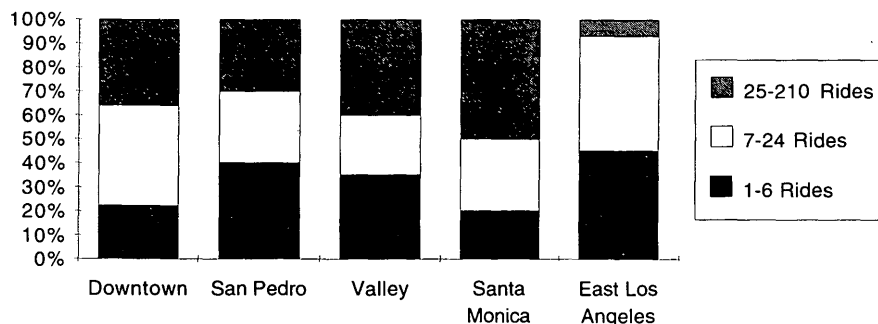


FIGURE 7 Transit trips by location.

TABLE 2 Influence of Income on Transit Use

INCOME	\$0-200	\$201-350	\$351-500	\$501-900	\$901+	TOTAL
% THAT USE TRANSIT	72	81	88	66	80	77
% THAT DIDN'T USE TRANSIT	28	19	12	34	20	23
TOTAL	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

employment offices, employment sites, or other locations associated with employment searches. Miscellaneous locations such as streets, gas stations, train stations, and boathouses were amalgamated under "other."

On the basis of their responses, 43.5 percent of respondents made regular trips to social and recreational destinations. By comparison, 10 percent of the respondents indicated that they made regular trips to shelters. The percentages of those who regularly make personal, food/shopping, and employment-related trips were 42, 32.2, and 20.1 percent, respectively.

Respondents were also asked how many trips a week they visited each destination mentioned. The largest percentage of trips were made for social and recreational purposes, followed by trips made for personal needs, including visits to social service agencies. It is interesting to note that only 5 percent of the trips were made for the purpose of seeking shelter.

Summary

The very-low-income population is heavily dependent on public assistance. The primary form of public assistance received by respondents was GR (45.6 percent), and one in four persons reported receiving some other form of public assistance. The vast majority of the respondents were unemployed (84 percent), and when queried, more than 70 percent of the respondents reported that it is very important for them to find employment.

Walking was the primary mode of transportation among the respondents. Nearly 60 percent of the daily trips of the respondents were made on foot, and on the average each

respondent made about four trips a day. The next most often used mode was transit. The average monthly transit expenditure was \$35. Close to 10 percent of the respondents' median monthly income of \$360 was spent on transit. Given that the cost of a monthly bus pass in Los Angeles county is \$42, it is often impossible for the respondents to buy monthly bus passes, even though it may be more economical to do so. Results of our analysis showed that 47 percent of the GR recipients in the sample had not received a single token from the county. Overall, only 11 percent of the survey respondents possessed bus tokens, and they indicated that the amount and frequency of this allocation was left solely to the discretion of the county worker.

From these results, it is not surprising that 67 percent of the survey respondents indicated that there were places they wanted to go to but could not get to. More than one in four respondents indicated that among such places were social service agencies, and some had become ineligible for GR because of missed appointments. It is apparent that the GR eligibility is contingent on a considerable degree of mobility, but it is impossible to attain that mobility without monetary assistance in the form of a transit allowance. Despite the DPSS's policy, the agency has failed to provide this assistance to a group of people with no other means of sustaining themselves.

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study has been to document and evaluate the travel needs of GR recipients. Survey findings indicate that there are deficiencies between the transportation that is

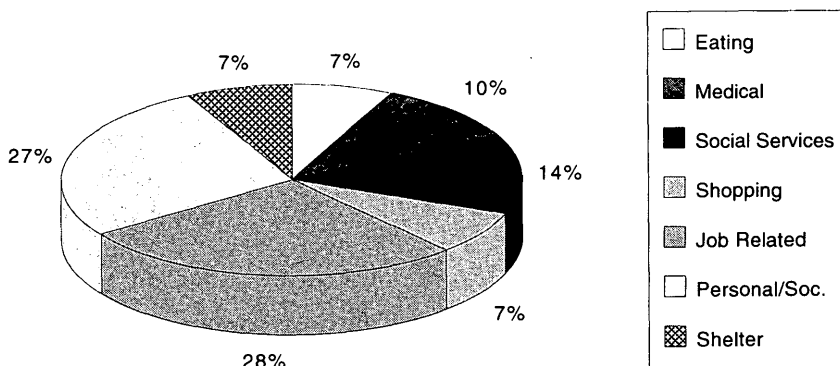


FIGURE 8 Places respondents could not get to.

needed and the transportation that is provided. Possibly the most telling statistic from the survey results is that 75 percent of the respondents who indicated using transit for the month before the survey spent an average of \$35, a figure only \$7 less than the cost of a monthly bus pass for the Southern California Rapid Transit District (RTD, which in 1993 became part of the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority). This finding is important because even without a formal transportation allowance each month, most people deemed transportation so critical to their own needs that they were willing to allocate a portion of their already extremely limited budget toward fulfilling their travel needs. Furthermore, the percentage of people spending \$35 on travel is higher than the percentage of people deemed employable by DPSS standards. Though many people have transit needs related to employment, many people make trips for other purposes. Most people made use of transit, whether for employment or other purposes. It then becomes important to recognize that transportation is considered a vital need for most individuals and that a transportation allocation for all GR recipients in the form of a cash supplement to the existing GR check is the most appropriate response.

Furthermore, enormous amounts of time and labor resources are currently being spent in determining transportation benefits. Since there is really no way for case workers to singlehandedly make equitable decisions on the benefits that individuals should receive, it seems most appropriate to streamline and standardize the entire system. In sum, providing an allowance for transportation complies with the requirements as mandated in the Health and Welfare Code and for the critical travel needs of all GR recipients; it could also save the DPSS valuable time and money at a time when it is in need of 3,000 additional staff workers.

The survey results reinforce the idea that there is a significant link between mobility and the ability to secure many of life's basic needs. The study suggests that non-employment-related transportation is a basic and legitimate need for all people, including those receiving public assistance. Recognizing this, the dollar value of the current DPSS transportation allowance should be reevaluated to better reflect the basic travel needs of those currently receiving public assistance.

The evidence also suggests that the present administration of the GR transportation allowance program should also be reevaluated. Administration of the program is time-consuming and overly bureaucratic; often many individuals do not receive their maximum entitlement. Moreover, procedural constraints often make it difficult for case workers to make equitable decisions about benefits that individuals should receive. Given these concerns, it seems appropriate to streamline the system in such a way as to maximize benefits while reducing administrative costs.

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