NEW NCHRP-TCRP REPORT

COMMUTING in America III

The Third National Report on Commuting Patterns and Trends

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The average daily commute to work is taking longer now than it has in the past, according to *Commuting in America III* (CIA III), published in October by the Transportation Research Board and jointly sponsored by the National Cooperative Highway Research Program (NCHRP) and the Transit Cooperative Research Program (TCRP). The book is the latest decadal review of the nation's commuting—or journey-to-work—patterns. The findings are based on extensive, special tabulations prepared by the Bureau of the Census and funded by the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials as part of the Census Transportation Planning Package program.

CIA III reports that the average one-way travel time for a commuter in 2000 was 25.5 minutes. This represented a 3-minute increase in travel time over the average in 1990—a substantial change, considering that from 1980 to 1990 the increase was 40 seconds. The trend is even more noteworthy because from 1980 to 1990 the nation added approximately 23 million solo drivers to the commute, yet from 1990 to 2000 the number of solo drivers grew only by 13 million. This indicates that the transportation capacity inherited by this generation is being used up and that the investments in the system for future generations also are not keeping pace.

Changes and Shifts

To cope with the lengthening commute, more Americans are leaving for work during the so-called

shoulders of the peak period, between 5 a.m. and 6:30 a.m. or after 9 a.m. One result of many more workers leaving their home county to work in another county is the extension of the commute to more than 90 minutes, which the Census labels "extreme." Although the personal vehicle is still the most common mode for getting to work, transit and carpooling are increasing in many areas. More commuters are traveling from suburb to suburb instead of from suburb to central city, the CIA III data show.

During the coming decades, many baby boomers—who will start turning 65 in 2010—will leave the workplace and stop commuting. At the same time, the latest projections from the Census Bureau show that the number of younger people entering the work force will not be sufficient to replace those who will retire. Almost 20 million people ages 18 to 65 are expected to enter the work force during the years 2000 to 2010, but only about 12 million during the two succeeding decades.

These projections may underestimate the number of Americans who will be working, because it is difficult to project how many immigrants will arrive and enter the workforce and how many baby boomers will keep working after age 65. Employers will react to the challenge of finding workers by offering more flexible work schedules and other approaches to attract new workers and retain older employees.

Immigration in the past decade has increased far more than expected. Because of this influx, the nation's 30-year decline in the rate of population growth reversed sharply in the 1990s, returning to the growth rates of the 1970s. This "immigration bubble" is changing the nature of the workforce and commuting patterns.

National statistics and trends concerning commuting do not necessarily represent the experience of individual communities or of regions. This can be true for carpooling, bicycling, working at home, and—particularly—for public transportation. The differences across the nation in the availability of transit services are reflected in the uneven selection of transit modes for commuting. Transit is more prevalent in densely populated areas, and transit use grows well beyond the national average as the size of the metropolitan area increases.

Sample Findings

◆ The number of new solo drivers grew by almost 13 million in the 1990s.

◆ The number of workers with commutes of more than 60 minutes grew by almost 50 percent between 1990 and 2000. Those who had a commute of more than 60 minutes in 2005 traveled an average of 80 minutes.

◆ Men make up the majority of commuters in the early morning, from midnight to 7:30 a.m. Women tend to commute later and make up the majority of commuters after 7:30 a.m.

◆ In the 1990s the number of Americans who commute from the city to the suburbs constituted a 20 percent share of all metropolitan growth, exceeding the increase in the number of people commuting from the suburbs to the city. Travel from city to suburbs now accounts for 9 percent of commuting activity.

◆ The percentage of African-American households without vehicles dropped from 31 percent to 24 percent between 1990 and 2000 and was close to 20 percent in 2005.

◆ Although the population over age 65 grew by only 12 percent from 1990 to 2000, the number of workers over age 65 increased by 21 percent.

◆ Thirty million vehicles were added to households during 1990 to 2000, and 13 million of those were added to households that already had two or more vehicles.

◆ Approximately 4 percent of workers live in households with no vehicle.

Commuting in America III (NCHRP Report 550–TCRP Report 110) is available from the TRB bookstore for $60. Volume discounts and curriculum adoption incentives are available. For additional information and to order, call 202-334-3214 or visit the TRB bookstore online at www.TRB.org/bookstore.

Pisarski's Top 10 Commuting Tidbits

10. The proportion of workers in single-occupant vehicles is still increasing, but the rate has slowed; some areas in the West have experienced declines—a first.
9. National changes in carpooling and transit are the products of new regional shifts; typically, losses in these modes have occurred in the East and in the Midwest, with gains in the West.
8. There have been significant surges in African-American automobile ownership.
7. Immigrants' use of some modes is transitional, giving way to mainstream patterns over time.
6. There are signs of increased commuting, along with mode changes, among older workers.
5. Sharp increases have occurred in the proportion of workers traveling more than 60 and even more than 90 minutes to work.
4. The donut-shaped metropolitan area is on the rise, with big work flows into and out of the suburbs.
3. The increase in working from home is continuing, pervasive, and substantial.
2. Significant increases have occurred in the percentage of workers leaving for work before 6 a.m.
1. The number of workers leaving their home county to work has risen dramatically.

What Does the Report Reveal?

The data in CIA III indicate that work travel is an economic phenomenon and a social phenomenon, as well as a transportation issue. The report identifies a new stage in commuting patterns as the baby boom era recedes. To provide skilled workers to maintain the economy, society will need to find ways to keep aging boomers at work, to attract immigrants and rural populations, and to attract more women into the workplace.

Economic Perspective

From an economic perspective, the surge in the percentage of people working outside their county of residence has many implications. People are moving to exurban regions for desirable housing at an affordable price. Rural workers are attracted to suburban job opportunities that are locating near the periphery of metropolitan areas.

Despite congestion, workers have access to an array of jobs distributed across large metropolitan areas. Employers in turn have access to employees from an immense commuter-shed of adjacent counties, increasing productivity—one-third of the nation's population resides in 12 areas with more than 5 million people, creating massive aggregations of skilled workers. In this scenario, workers increasingly are able to live where they want and to work where they want.

Social Perspective

The substantial increase in African-American households with access to vehicles speaks volumes about rising opportunity in this country; however, it also suggests that there is a long way to go before opportunity reaches anything like parity.

As their time of residence in the United States increases, immigrant populations transition through the modes of travel to work, demonstrating the power of opportunity. Those in the United States less than five years are oriented to walking, biking, transit, and—most of all—carpooling to jobs. These modes often play an important role in immigrants' socialization. After 10 or 15 years, many of the immigrants make the transition to the automobile and adopt commuting patterns closer to the average.

Transportation Perspective

The coping options available to commuters—such as leaving for work early—may be dwindling, which could make working from home an important tool for responding to congestion. The share of commuters leaving home before 6 a.m. reveals the weaknesses in the services provided by the nation's transportation system; but this also is just one symptom of people adjusting to avoid heavy congestion in the peak periods.

The growth in working from home can be characterized as a quiet revolution. All three of the CIA reports have documented that, along with driving alone, working from home is the only mode of transportation that has grown throughout the entire period of the baby boom working years. Working from home has now surpassed walking as a way to get to work and is third behind carpooling in many metropolitan areas. Because of its importance for the older members of the workforce, working from home could be a major trend in the future.

Evolving and Emerging Patterns

In 1996, *Commuting in America II* identified 10 patterns to watch. None of the 10 has run its course yet, and it will be some time before these patterns are fully played out. Such themes as immigration, an aging workforce, and changing lifestyles are perhaps unfolding in new ways in this decade but will remain significant well into the next decade.

In addition to trends observed in the past 10 years, new patterns to watch include the following:

- Who and where will the workers be?
- Will long-distance commuting continue to expand?
- Will the role of the work trip decline, grow, or change?
- Will the value of time in an affluent society be the major force that guides commuting decisions?
- Will the value of mobility in our society be recognized?

Each of these areas of concern bears watching in the coming years, especially as the annual American Community Survey replaces the decennial census and becomes the only source of journey-to-work data from the Census Bureau.[1] Although getting to and from work every day seems mundane, the patterns will continue to change, challenging commuters and public policy makers into the future.

PHOTO: WASHINGTON METROPOLITAN AREA TRANSIT AUTHORITY

[1] This challenge to state and local planning capabilities is being addressed by NCHRP Project 8-48, Using American Community Survey Data for Transportation Planning, which will produce a guidebook in 2007 for using the new annual data in the transportation planning process.

Reflections on the *Commuting in America* Series

The work on the *Commuting in America* series began more than 20 years ago, using census data to describe the emerging patterns of commuting behavior. Frank Francois, Chair of the Steering Committee for the first report, noted in the preface that "it does not purport to reflect the policy positions of any of the sponsoring organizations and should not be interpreted in this manner." The goal was "to serve as a common resource of factual information upon which policy makers can draw in shaping transportation and development actions and policies over the coming years." The third volume continues that approach and that goal.

In the conclusion to *Commuting in America III*, I looked back at the task:

What a privilege it is to be able to work on a subject that is a source of endless interest. The need to better understand transportation behavior, and as a part of that the need to better understand commuting, is still with us and, it seems, will be for a long time. The ways in which human needs and preferences play out in a spatial context, given changes in technological possibilities, in the demography of the population, and in the larger society, generates an almost endless array of patterns to investigate and stories to tell.

When I began the first volume in April 1984 at the invitation of past TRB Executive Committee Chair Peter Koltnow, I didn't recognize that this was going to be a very big part of my career's work. I have been continually delighted that it turned into that and that it has brought me into contact with so many wonderful people in our profession. It constantly reminds me how proud I am to be a part of it all.

—Alan E. Pisarski