



Mobility Justice: What It Is and Why It Matters More Than Ever Right Now



A few years ago in a Connecticut suburb, a low-income mom's car broke down. On paper, it probably looked like it wouldn't impact her children's ability to get to school because they participated in a choice program that—unlike many of its counterparts in other areas—offered transportation. But the path forward was not smooth.

As is generally the case with public schools, the school district's transportation budget was limited. To accommodate the complex web of students crisscrossing the metro area, the program's buses picked up and dropped off students at a limited set of stops. The typical suburban participant had to walk roughly half an hour to reach a stop. Further, these walks often required crossing busy roads, traversing areas without sidewalks, or passing isolated or high-crime spots.

So this mom drove her children to and from the bus stop daily—until she couldn't. The car was in the shop, and the school bus company told her

to take an Uber (that she couldn't afford).

As a result, her children missed a week of school.

“Even though they say every kid should have the choice of what school they want to attend, it's not really a choice if you don't have a car,” she told researchers at the University of Connecticut.

In an [article](#) published earlier this year in the peer-reviewed journal *AERA Open*, the UConn researchers (NEPC Fellow [Casey Cobb](#), along with [Charles Wentzell](#) and [Kelly Farrell](#)) drew upon interviews with this parent and 43 others, plus geospatial analyses of transportation data, to conclude that this was not an isolated event:

[O]ur analysis revealed transportation-related barriers that disproportionately affect historically marginalized families. Through a transportation equity lens, it became evident that families of color tended to bear the heaviest burdens in navigating school choice logistics. Common challenges included long bus rides, multiple transfers, a lack of late busing for extracurricular activities, and the need for families to arrange their own drop-offs and pick-ups at distant or inconveniently located bus stops.

In other words, they possessed insufficient mobility justice.

What is mobility justice?

“At its core, mobility justice emphasizes that the ability to move—or to stay in place—is shaped by intersecting systems of power and inequality, making mobility a fundamentally political and justice-centered concern,” the researchers write. “Mobility justice emphasizes that disparities in commute

time, access to safe and reliable transit, and the burden of transportation decisions are unequally distributed across social groups—particularly impacting low-income communities and communities of color.”

Taking into account both the school bus ride and journey between the bus stop and home, the researchers estimate that median student commute times each morning ranged from a low of 40 minutes for urban

residents choicing into urban magnet schools to a high of an hour and 10 minutes for suburban residents choicing into urban magnet schools. These times may be underestimates because they did not entirely account for school bus delays or traffic.

As noted above, the researchers found that the commutes disproportionately impacted historically marginalized students. For example, median one-way commute times for Black and Latino children choicing into urban magnet schools were nearly 80 minutes as compared to just over 60 minutes for their White counterparts. Like the parent described above, marginalized families navigate these challenges with limited resources.

Despite the challenges faced by many of its participants from historically marginalized groups, the program Cobb and his colleagues studied actually provides more transportation benefits than many forms of choice such as charter schools or private school vouchers, which typically rely on parents to drive their children to school. As these programs expand, parents who lack access to reliable cars or flexible work schedules will continue to face additional barriers to participation.

The dearth of attention to issues of mobility justice also helps explain why universal private school voucher programs tend to be primarily used by affluent families. Cobb and his co-authors assert, “Ensuring safe, accessible, and inclusive transportation systems is essential to making school choice truly available to all families—not just those with the resources to overcome its hidden costs.”

Those costs are inherent in the policy decision to divert taxpayer funding into multiple, parallel systems and to facilitate choicing into schools outside a child’s neighborhood. Lawmakers are thus faced with their own choice: Divert even more taxpayer funding into those systems or tolerate mobility injustice.

NEPC Resources on School Choice

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