

The Costs of Traveling With Children: Transportation Challenges for Low-Income Families

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Issue

Low-income households face significant challenges affording transportation, which can limit their ability to reach jobs, education, health care and other opportunities. These challenges are often compounded by neighborhood disinvestment, unsafe streets, lack of shade, and elevated levels of crime and violence, which can make travel stressful and dangerous. While many policy interventions focus on reducing transit fares or building affordable housing near transit, these approaches do not account for the complexities of low-income families traveling with children.

The presence of children adds another layer of complexity. Caregivers must coordinate school drop-offs, child care, errands and commutes, often around fixed schedules. For low-income families, these pressures can make car ownership feel necessary and leave caregivers with limited time for their own transportation. Research shows that they may rely more on transit, walking or older vehicles that can be costly to maintain and operate.

To better understand how caregiving shapes transportation experiences, this brief draws on in-depth interviews with low-income adults living in South Los Angeles (Figure 1). The respondents had been selected to participate in the Los Angeles Mobility Wallet pilot program, which provided \$150 per month for a year to pay for shared transportation services, like transit fare, ride-hailing, bikeshare, and more. These interviews took place before they were using their mobility wallets. We analyzed common themes in participants' daily travel, including challenges and trade-offs, to better understand the diverse travel needs of low-income families with children.

Key Findings

Travel with children is made more complicated and difficult by the fixed nature of many trips. Households with children must navigate “fixity constraints,” as many trips — especially school and child care — occur at specific times and locations. Cars offer tremendous convenience for caregivers navigating fixed schedules by making it easier and quicker to travel between child care-related locations. Many caregivers reported prioritizing the household car for child-related travel or keeping a car specifically because of their children.

Limited budgets push caregivers into highly multimodal travel as they juggle transportation costs and convenience. Transportation costs shaped how low-income caregivers travel, often forcing them to combine multiple modes. Even participants who owned cars preferred to ride transit to save on gas, and ride-hailing services were used sparingly for trips difficult to complete otherwise.

Shared transportation options present financial and safety challenges for families with children. Caregivers described numerous obstacles to using ride-hailing and transit with children, including the need for car seats, crowded conditions and multiple fares. Safety concerns — both on transit vehicles and while waiting at stops — were the most frequently mentioned challenge. Many participants felt especially vulnerable traveling with children and sometimes altered their behavior (e.g., not riding transit in the evenings) or accompanied their children on trips, resulting in less time available for other activities.

Figure 1. South Los Angeles Project Area



Personal vehicles provide flexibility for caregivers, but also impose significant financial costs. Among respondents, access to a car was widely viewed as essential to their child care travel. Cars made it easier to juggle child care responsibilities while arriving punctually to work, responding to emergencies and making time-sensitive trips. Several respondents said that having kids prompted them to purchase or keep a vehicle. At the same time, the high costs of ownership, including fuel, insurance and maintenance, place significant strain on already limited budgets.

Conclusion

Caring for children adds unavoidable complexity to a person’s life and travel patterns, creating a “messy” travel behavior that doesn’t align well with conventional assumptions of traffic peaks and flows.¹ For low-income households who use multiple modes of transportation, the challenges of traveling with children are even greater: more trips tied

to a fixed schedule, added difficulty using shared modes with young children, and the added stress of keeping their children safe. These financial and temporal burdens hinder the caregivers’ access to opportunities and overall quality of life. Subsequently, many choose to buy a car despite constrained budgets, or limit their travel -- neither ideal solutions.

Policymakers can ease the travel-related stresses of low-income caregivers through a number of interventions, including subsidizing the cost of car ownership, changing fare prices to allow young children to travel for free, encouraging shared transportation services to better accommodate children, and conducting further research on the most appropriate ways for transportation agencies to respond to homelessness and mental health concerns.

More Information

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