



Overview

When people in Chicagoland seek employment, one of the most important considerations is how they will get there. The trip to work – including the travel mode, length, and quality – has an outsized impact on an individual’s ability to gain and keep a job. A person’s commute can also influence their daily mood, overall mental and physical health, relationship with coworkers and family, and, of course, their wallet. When our transportation system overwhelmingly favors driving to work over public transportation, walking, or biking, the resulting travel environment forces an overreliance on private car ownership and the associated inequities for historically disadvantaged workers.

How jobs intersect with transportation

Transportation is the #1 barrier to employment

According to a survey conducted by the Chicago Jobs Council, transportation is identified as the top barrier to people finding and keeping a job. Over 80 percent of Illinoisans drive to work – some by choice, but many others by necessity. But the cost of owning and operating a personal vehicle – an average of \$9,000 annually – can be prohibitive for many low- to moderate-income people.

Proximity to jobs and spatial mismatch

Beginning in the 1950’s, Americans started moving to the suburbs. As millions of families abandoned American cities for suburban living, jobs and employment centers followed. But through explicitly racist public policy, this suburban exodus was almost exclusively reserved for White people.

Thus, began decades of “job sprawl,” or the movement of employment opportunities to distant, low-density, drive-only locations that remain inaccessible to anyone without a car. The resulting phenomenon is known as spatial mismatch – the misalignment in proximity between where low-income, low-skilled workers and people of color live and where suitable jobs are located. According to a report by the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, commuting from the South and West Sides and adjacent suburbs takes considerably longer than the trip to and from work elsewhere in the Chicago metropolitan area.¹

While the Chicago metropolitan region has become more diverse over the last few decades, the legacy of racial segregation and spatial mismatch continue to



disproportionately deny access to good jobs for people most in need of employment.

Help wanted: license required

The ability to drive is not just a prerequisite for physical access to job locations. It also impacts the ability to qualify for employment at all. Driving is not a right, but a privilege – a privilege that is often unavailable to the poor, people with disabilities, non-English speakers, immigrants, older adults, and others. In the United States in 2015, only 6.51 percent of White households did not have access to a car, while 19.71 percent of Black households did not have access to one.²

In an environment where many employers require possession of a valid driver’s license and/or access to a vehicle as a condition of employment, loss of a license can spell disaster for workers. A February 2018 investigation by ProPublica Illinois revealed how Chicago’s ticketing and debt collection disproportionately impact Black motorists. In January 2020, Governor JB Pritzker signed the License to Work Act, which ends the practice of suspending licenses over unpaid parking tickets. After the law goes into effect in July 2020, it’s estimated that 55,000 motorists will regain the right to drive this year. While we know we need fewer cars on the road, taking away the licenses of low-income drivers is not the answer to a sustainable future.

¹ <https://www.chicagobusiness.com/article/20180124/BLOGS02/180129950/chicago-area-commute-times-worst-on-south-west-sides>

² https://nationalequityatlas.org/indicators/Car_access

Quick facts

- Residents in Chicago's poorest communities of color spend two hours one-way via transit to get to work in the largest suburban employment hubs (CULTivate report).
- Four out of five of the region's job centers lack access to reliable public transit (CNT).
- Commuting time is the single strongest factor in the odds of escaping poverty (Harvard study).
- One-third of poor people of color lack access to a car (Transportation Equity Caucus/Leadership Conference).
- Low-income people spend upwards of 40 percent of annual household income on transportation (Leadership Conference/Transportation Equity Caucus).

Active Trans position

Active Transportation Alliance believes that transportation systems should improve, not inhibit, peoples' access to good-paying jobs – especially for historically underemployed groups. We promote a jobs environment that expands public transportation options to existing job centers; creation of new jobs closer to where people live; the promotion of compact, mixed development that makes walking and biking to work easy, safe and convenient; and the reduction of license suspensions as a penalty for non-driving violations.

Policy solutions

- Expand investment in transit improvements to job centers
- Transportation Demand Management and workplace travel planning
- Equitable Transit Oriented Development
- Reduced transit fares for low-income riders

Local opportunities for action

- Elevated Chicago Work Plans
- Chicago Jobs Council's Transit Table Coalition
- Pace Express bus-on-shoulder program
- Coalition for a Modern Metra Electric
- CTA Red Line Extension
- Employer-supported housing
- License 2 Work campaign

Endnotes/citations/source material

Chicago Jobs Council

Job Sprawl and the Spatial Mismatch between Blacks and Jobs, The Brookings Institution

The Impact of Chicago's Racial Residential Segregation on Residence, Housing and Transportation, Chicago Urban League,

Complete Streets Mean Equitable Streets, Smart Growth America,

The Impacts of Neighborhoods on Intergenerational Mobility Childhood Exposure Effects and County-Level Estimates