

1. Crossed Perspectives



Is mobility the answer to poverty ?

Between Leslie Belton Chevallier (Sociologist)
And Giulio Mattioli (Researcher in Sustainable Transport)

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Is access to employment, services and leisure merely a matter of mobility for the most disadvantaged? What are the obstacles and alternatives? These are some of the questions Leslie Belton Chevallier and Giulio Mattioli attempt to answer.

01. For the society's poorest, is mobility an essential resource to access employment, public services and leisure?



Leslie Belton Chevallier

Like everyone else, the poorest households need to travel to access employment, public services and leisure activities. But they are more distant (objectively in kilometres) or distanced (in terms of experience or perception^[^1]) from these amenities than the more advantaged households. But what sort of poor household are we referring to? Poverty has several facets and concerns an increasingly wide variety of individuals and households. Several research projects on mobility of the poor have focused their comments on the “disastrous immobility” these households face, the need to “move to get themselves out of the rut”, to access employment. In so saying, they imply a certain mobility requirement. In line with other work, qualitative interviews with low-income outer-urban households reveals, contrariwise, that their lesser (or lack of) residential, daily or professional mobility results from the fact that they place greater value on their roots and closeness to their networks than spatial mobility as resources to overcome their poverty. Many prefer to stay close to their friends and relatives, who can provide them with a range of assistance (child-minding, help with travel, etc.), rather than change municipality, and so to move closer to potential or better-paid employment, and a greater number and more diverse shops. This is in any event particularly evident for poor outer-urban households, even though their decision to stay in an outer-urban area plays a decisive role in their poverty. Being poor can also be synonymous with frequent and even complex mobility. The least skilled professional categories (and so those most exposed to the risk of poverty) face considerable insecurity which is characterised by frequent job changes and so locations (place of employment, places where workers are liable to find a job – job centre, temporary employment agency, etc. – and even place of residence). In situations of extreme poverty, the issue is less about having access to employment or services than to your own decent housing, heating, food, etc. Subsistence does not necessarily involve employment: gleaning, welfare, resorting to associations like a soup kitchen charity, emergency shelters, etc. These practices are hugely time-consuming and require considerable distances to be covered to get from one to the other, find the right contacts, etc. In conclusion, mobility is undeniably a resource for the poorest households but no more so than proximity or residential roots. ^[^1]: It is possible to be close in kilometres but still remote from amenities. The price of an activity but also the associated social image act just as much as a barrier as the fact that numerous kilometres have to be covered to access them. This is particularly so for leisure activities.



G. M

I agree with Leslie – there is definitely a need for nuance in this debate. One thing I would add to the discussion is that there are different patterns of residential location of poor households within urban areas. It is true that in many European city-regions, poor households are pushed (or confined) to outer urban areas by high housing prices. But the opposite pattern is observed as well, e.g. in many UK cities: concentrations of poverty in the inner-city, vs. wealthier, but more car-dependent, suburban areas. This creates a situation where the inner city poor have better accessibility to essential services (e.g. hospital, schools, employment centres) by public transport/walking, but are disproportionately affected by other transport-related problems like, say, air pollution.



Giulio Mattioli

I am ambivalent about this. On one level, of course it is. In contemporary societies mobility is an essential resource for *everyone* – and this includes both the haves and the have-nots. Being able to cover long distances is much more important today than it was a few decades ago. The speed at which we travel has increased, but so has the distance between residences and travel destinations. As a result, we need to travel longer distances to access employment, public services and places of leisure. On the other hand, one could even argue that mobility is even more important for the ‘haves’ than for the have-nots. Well-off people often work in more specialised jobs, which are not found everywhere, and so have to travel longer distances. They often undertake leisure activities that require more travel (say, birdwatching, skiing in the Alps). In a nutshell, they have adapted their ways of living to higher levels of mobility. By contrast, low-income people often travel shorter distances to their jobs, as these are not so specialised, and the same may apply to leisure. To some extent, their ‘mobility needs’ are already adapted to their constrained circumstances. On the other hand, certain disadvantaged groups, say the unemployed in economically depressed areas, may have to travel very long distances to reach even low-skilled jobs. On yet another level, from a *normative* perspective, it is certainly true that the have-nots experience more access problems to basic essential services such as, say, hospitals. Also, one could ask: would the have-nots need to travel more, if they were to catch up with the haves (say, in order to get better education, better jobs and achieve upward *social* mobility)? The answer to this is certainly yes. So I hate to be the typical academic who says “it’s much more complex than this” – but in this case I really think it is!



L. B

It’s true that the ability to move around is an omnipresent and distinctive value in our societies. While the poor are, on average, less mobile than more affluent households, simply segmenting people into “wealthy and mobile” or “poor and immobile” is less than satisfactory. For international executives, the power lies more in their ability to manage the travel of their subordinates than travel themselves. Conversely, many poor workers can be very mobile, for example long-distance lorry drivers, or workers in the building and public works sector. So to come back to Giulio’s conclusion, it isn’t enough for poor households to travel more, in order to reduce the social distance that separates them from more affluent social categories. Other forms of “mobility”, such as changing attitudes, linguistic registers or clothing (and there are obviously more examples than those) are necessary if not sufficient.

02. What are the material, cognitive and symbolic barriers to mobility?



Leslie Belton Chevallier

There are potentially many barriers to mobility. In terms of their defining economic situation, “poor people” first have to face material barriers insofar as it is more difficult, when on a low income, to own a car, find accommodation in the immediate vicinity of shops and services, or even to buy a bus ticket. These financial barriers can be compounded by physical barriers that surround their situation: residential (urban enclave, urban dissection, etc.) or professional. Nonetheless, these material barriers do not prevent “poor people” from being mobile, even though the distances they travel are shorter. Repair your old car yourself, use so-called “active” modes (walking, cycling, etc.) or alternatives to solo-driving (hitch-hiking, carpooling, etc.), borrowing a motorised vehicle, and using public transport without paying are all methods enabling mobility. True, these arrangements do not always correspond to the standard notion of autonomous, legal or motorised mobility, but they show that complex mobility practices are possible. While they imply short distances, they are nonetheless exhausting physically and psychologically. The cognitive and symbolic barriers are at times more significant even if they are more attributable to the social origin and position experienced by people than their objective economic situation (the two being more or less linked). The difficulty of situating yourself spatially and of reading a map are cognitive difficulties that restrict mobility or make it a particularly difficult task to confront. These difficulties are also of a symbolic nature insofar as they force the individual to confront his or her lack of ability in performing a task considered by others as normal, and his or her exclusion, as evidenced in studies on seniors, the disabled and migrants. The symbolic barriers to mobility are compounded by other symbolic limitations concerning people’s spatial entitlements. What places do they feel they have the right to frequent, where they feel their presence is legitimate and according to what means?



G. M

Leslie raises an interesting point about mobility becoming a ‘norm’ that people feel embarrassed not to be able to conform to. In practice, this may mean for example that people with fear of driving face not only negative material consequences, but also a kind of social stigma. From the point of view of these people, the enforced need to use a particular mode of transport (i.e. the car) is a barrier to their well-being. So I would argue that we should think in terms of ‘barriers to well-being/quality of life/social inclusion’, and look at the ambivalent role that mobility plays into that, rather than assuming that mobility is good per se and looking for ‘barriers to mobility’.



Giulio Mattioli

We live in car dependent societies, so the first material barrier on my list would be car ownership. On the other hand, this does not mean that all households without cars are necessarily disadvantaged! Many people without cars, especially in large cities, have high levels of accessibility and travel a lot. But it’s hard to deny that, in most circumstances, the car gives you an edge in terms of accessibility. Limited financial resources are another obvious material barrier. You need to be able to afford travel, and it can be very expensive. So, owning a car is not enough, if you don’t have the money to pay for fuel, repairs, insurance, etc. In fact, many people find themselves in what I call ‘car-related economic stress’: they spend disproportionate amounts on motoring, have to cut expenditure in other areas (say, home heating) and they still don’t get to all the places they would need to go. As for cognitive barriers, some people lack the skills necessary to travel. Some don’t have a driving licence, some can’t navigate public transport. Some may even not be aware that a travel destination exists (say, a job opportunity). Researchers and policy makers sometimes call this the problem of “low travel horizons” – certain

people *ought* to be travelling more (for instance, in order to find a job), even though they are not aware of it, or unwilling to do it. I am a bit ambivalent about this – it is a bit of paternalistic argument. I see where it comes from, but there is something odd about saying to people “I tell you that you are not travelling enough *even though you don’t agree with it*”.



L. B

I think the main barrier is not having access to a car rather than not owning one. These days, in fact, there are plenty of alternatives to car ownership (such as car-sharing, long-term leasing, access to a company car, borrowing a vehicle, etc.). They are mainly used by households who live in city centres and therefore have access to alternative transport options. Urban households also have easier access to alternatives to the car on which there may be a local policy, such as car-sharing. Apart from their relative costs, these alternatives may be directly linked to promoting a “higher” social status (the company car, for example). Overall, they are therefore mainly reserved for more affluent social categories, although there are now plenty of social and community initiatives for people in more modest circumstances. Another problem is the risk associated with vehicles owned by less affluent households, which is obviously linked to the financial barriers Giulio mentioned. A car that is less well maintained because money is short, is also more dangerous for its passengers. The paternalism referred to above relates directly to this paradoxical requirement to be mobile and the problem raised by disseminating and promoting a value that the dominant classes are disinclined to challenge. Nonetheless, today, just as with the European political crises (within the union and its member states), we need to remember that the future of mobility as a value may not be entirely rosy and that it faces plenty of dissent.

03. Are there alternatives to mobility which may facilitate the poor social inclusion?



Leslie Belton Chevallier

Mobility is needed when it effectively improves the economic situation of the poor, by encouraging access to employment, essential amenities like shops and their social network. This mobility may be daily, residential, professional, etc. Given the barriers mentioned earlier, numerous means can be implemented to encourage it and make it more inclusive: financial travel assistance, social housing near shops, services or social networks (including in the least densely populated areas), mobility training or learning (how to read a transport network map, ride a bike, drive, etc.). Mobility itself is however not enough and does not guarantee a successful return to employment or a respected place in society for the long-term unemployed. Other solutions are also used to combat poverty and exclusion. In addition to seeking economic growth leading to an ideal of full employment and a more equitable sharing of wealth, the public policy instruments are often based on the minimum wage or income-based government assistance as well as tax exemptions based on so-called “social” criteria. With regard to exclusion itself, other means focus less on aligning the mobility of the “poor excluded” members of society on that of the “rich included” than on developing a local lifestyle: implementing local neighbourhood actions, solidarity grocery shops, home visits for the elderly suffering from financial insecurity, etc. To conclude, the “poor” are neither a homogeneous category or necessarily socially

excluded. Indeed, a growing number of people in active employment (employees, workers, etc.), owning their own home, do not correspond to the archetypal image of the poor. While being mobile provides access to employment and services, it does not necessarily mean getting out of poverty or exclusion, supposing once again that the two are linked. Mobility is neither an end in itself, nor a magic bullet. Placing mobility at the centre of solutions to end the exclusion of society's poor reveals a binary vision in which mobility is synonymous with inclusion and belonging to the dominant class and in which its absence indicates exclusion and belonging to the dominated class. This leads to imposing an increasingly forceful "mobility commandment", rejected by certain authors. If mobility is a tool for the dominant classes, the wealthiest, for maintaining their social position, it is not necessarily so for the other classes, whether they are poor or not.



G. M

I agree with Leslie on the dangers of assuming an equivalence between greater mobility and greater social inclusion. This is often the case, but it should always be an empirical question, rather than a starting assumption. The policy consequences of this equivalence are problematic as well. If mobility=inclusion, how are we going to square this with the urgent need to reduce energy demand and carbon emissions in the transport sector? The solution is to focus less on mobility per se, and more on the needs that it satisfies.



Giulio Mattioli

Online services are often seen as possible substitutes for physical travel, notably for access to services, but also for commuting (home working). But there's a problem with this: the same people who are 'transport disadvantaged' are often also excluded from these services, either because they cannot afford them, or don't have the skills, etc. This is the famous problem of the 'digital divide'. As any sociologist would tell you, disadvantage in one area of life are often associated with disadvantage in another area so I am not sure how far we can go with this. Also, for instance, solutions like home working may work relatively well for jobs in the knowledge economy, but are clearly not applicable to a range of low-skilled services and manufacturing jobs. Some argue that the have-nots make up for limited mobility with strong reliance on local social networks in the area where they live (here I mean real relationships with other people, not Facebook!). But then again, there are limits to how much you can substitute one for the other. Overall, I am not so sure that we should aim to find 'alternatives to mobility'. We will always need to travel for several key things in our life. I would say the problem is more that we need to travel over shorter distances than we currently have to. This would reduce the importance attached to car ownership and fast travel, as it is already the case in some compact urban areas, where services and opportunities are available in relative close proximity. That would be good for social inclusion – or at least it would reduce the importance of mobility for the problem of social exclusion. At the same time, it would help reduce the environmental impact of transport, which is crucial for climate change. So that would be the real win-win.



L. B

“Alternatives to mobility” are not about eliminating travel but supporting other modes of transport than the car, particularly solo car use, over long distances. Looking at the issue from a more societal or environmental perspective, it’s clear that everyone gains from a system of alternatives that places value on proximity.



Leslie Belton Chevallier

Sociologist

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Giulio Mattioli

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