



Getting Home: Transportation Equity and Access to Affordable Housing

*“Getting Home: Transportation Equity and Access to Affordable Housing,” is the third in a series of reports by The Leadership Conference Education Fund examining the key roles transportation and mobility play in the struggle for civil rights and equal opportunity. The reports highlight critical issues and make recommendations for policymakers as they draft a reauthorization of the nation’s surface transportation programs, which will allocate hundreds of billions of federal dollars for transportation projects that will have a profound impact on every person in our county. **To read the reports:** www.civilrights.org/transportation*

Transportation policies have a direct impact on the availability of and access to affordable housing.

Transportation decisions often contribute to economic and racial segregation. When a segment of a metro area lacks public transportation or safe walking/biking alternatives, people who cannot afford automobiles or lack the ability to drive cannot live there—even if their housing costs are within their means. But our transportation policies have contributed to sprawling metropolitan areas organized around major roads and highways.

Policies that prioritize highways and new suburban home ownership have created a landscape where truly affordable housing is difficult for many Americans to obtain.

- Families with means and access to vehicles have flocked to new suburban housing developments while low-income families—predominantly minority—lacking transportation options or locked out of certain neighborhoods by discriminatory real estate practices have remained in the under-resourced urban core.
- Homebuyers in search of affordable housing and renters often are pushed into far-flung areas with higher transportation costs, driving up the overall cost of living.
- Single-use zoning that separates housing from commerce, jobs, and services renders some housing options unavailable for people with disabilities and older Americans.

Housing and transportation costs are interrelated.

Research has shown that many people make their housing decisions based on the cost of housing alone, and that when the cost of transportation is factored in, many suburban housing choices are in fact less affordable than they initially appear. Today, most housing stock is not accessible by public transit or located in pedestrian-friendly, bike-friendly areas close to jobs, forcing families to rely heavily on their cars.

Thus, when families seek more “affordable” housing in the form of lower rents and mortgages in suburbs, their transportation costs go up. For moderate and lower-income families, the combined cost of housing and transportation can consume \$60 out of every \$100 they make in income, leaving little for food, health care, and other necessities.

In fact, in the nation’s 28 largest metropolitan areas, working families spend about 57 percent of their incomes on the combined costs of housing and transportation, with roughly 29 percent going to transportation.

Transportation policy has played a key role in segregating communities by race and income.

While segregation has multiple causes and serious effects for lower-income people and people of color, it is clear that transportation policy has played a key role in developing our segregated landscape. Investments in highways and corridors out of urban cores, along with federal housing policies and discriminatory private practices such as racial steering, helped fuel “white flight” to the suburbs and exurbs, leaving under-resourced communities behind.

Transit-oriented development provides opportunities for affordable housing.

Providing housing for a mix of incomes near transit produces better economic, social, and environmental outcomes for all residents. Transit-oriented development (TOD) has the potential to create more truly affordable housing—if adopted as part of a broad strategy of cooperation between transportation and housing agencies and metropolitan governments.

TOD projects are typically constructed around new or existing subway, light rail or other public transit stations, and incorporate a variety of uses. They are high-density developments in which housing, commerce, services, and related job opportunities are within walking distance of one another in a cluster around public transit. A well-executed TOD plan will reduce car dependence, produce attractive



housing options to those who might otherwise leave an urban core, and open job opportunities for low-income urban residents.

To ensure that TOD and other transportation investments don't simply displace low-income people to transit-deficient areas through gentrification, policy makers must build in mechanisms to preserve affordable housing near transit.

Transportation policy can make a positive impact on affordable housing.

As Congress considers a surface transportation reauthorization, which will allocate billions of dollars in federal funds to transportation development, our nation has an opportunity to increase access to truly affordable housing. To do that, our transportation investments must:

- Provide affordable alternatives to cars;
- Reduce the transportation expenses that often go hand-in-hand with communities that have lower housing and rental prices;
- Spur the development of affordable housing near jobs—and jobs near communities with affordable housing;
- Reduce segregation on a regional or metropolitan scale;
- Revitalize communities; and
- Prevent displacement of low-income people from transit rich areas.

Advocates must mobilize to educate and advocate for a shared vision of transportation equity.

Civil and human rights advocates must educate lawmakers on the link between transportation and access to affordable housing, and advocate for investments in transportation that make housing more affordable.