Environment and equity concerns about transport

The last twenty years have seen a dramatic growth in both vehicle numbers and the distances driven in all industrialised societies. Car-ownership is now the norm for most households. Ever-rising car-ownership has led to increasing concerns about the harmful effects of transport on the natural environment and quality of life for groups without regular access to a car. Nevertheless, policies which aim to mitigate the environmental impacts of traffic may sometimes come into conflict with the social inclusion of low-income and other disadvantaged groups and communities. A study by the Transport Studies Group at the University of Westminster has found that:

- Although poor transport provision is not always a primary preoccupation of many low-income groups, it often acts as a barrier to their economic and social inclusion.

- People living in areas of low income would be happy to carry out more of their activities locally but are constrained by the poor availability of local services and the cost and quality of goods.

- In some instances, policies are needed to raise the mobility of some excluded groups, in order to widen the horizon of their employment, social and leisure activities.

- Public transport is generally viewed as inadequate to the everyday travel needs of most people in all but the innermost areas of larger cities in the UK. The high cost of fares acts a further barrier to its use. Those who do not have access to a car often rely on lifts and/or taxis because of the inadequacy of public transport services.

- People on low incomes who own cars usually do so because they would not be able to meet their basic lifestyle commitments without them, but tend to use them frugally to keep motoring costs to a minimum.

- Those on the lowest incomes who drive cars tend to commit a greater proportion of their incomes to motoring than higher income groups; as such pricing policies to reduce car use impact on them more heavily.

Introduction

Traffic congestion is an everyday fact of life in many towns and cities in the UK, resulting in increased noise and air pollution and streets that are less safe for pedestrians and cyclists. At the same time, more and more people are relying on the car as their primary means of transport. People are travelling far greater distances than they did even ten years ago in order to meet their basic lifestyle commitments. This is associated with ever more dispersed land-use patterns, which in turn demand greater and greater car dependency. As more people look outside of their local area to work, shop and play, there has been an accompanying decline in local facilities. Public transport services have also deteriorated as people abandon them in favour of the car.

In recognition of both the environmental and social impact of over-reliance on the car, successive UK governments since the early 1990s have introduced policies to reduce this dependency. The study finds that these policies may, at times, come into conflict with the social inclusion of some disadvantaged groups and communities. One of the main aims of the study is to locate the role of transport in the lives of these people and to evaluate the extent to which the present system of transport and transport policies meet their basic needs.

The role of transport

The study demonstrated that transport is not a primary preoccupation of many low-income groups and that the role of transport in enhancing or eroding their quality of life is often unrecognised by them. Nevertheless, poor transport provision was identified as having an implicit or knock-on effect in terms of the disadvantages and exclusion they experienced. In particular, it can act as a barrier to:

- access to high quality education;
- crime and order, particularly in relation to youth disaffection;
- the social integration of older people;
- access to adequate health care facilities;
- the take-up of employment.

Poor air quality and road accidents emerged as a particular area of concern for the schoolchildren participating in the study, as many of them suffered from asthma, but high accident risk and poor air quality were often accepted as a 'fact of life'.

Local services

A lack of local facilities and activities for young people ran as a common theme across the groups and was seen to be a significant factor in the rise in youth disaffection in many areas. There was a strong sense from the focus groups that each local area should have a minimum level of service provision (although it was not clear what this should be) and in many instances constituted the thing considered to be most lacking in that area. Participants pointed out on several occasions that if activities are not provided locally, then the additional cost of travelling to places outside the local area effectively puts them out of the price range of low-income groups, particularly young people. In some cases, however, the stated need for more local services was linked to an unwillingness to travel because of a fear of the unknown. This was often accompanied by a lack of knowledge about the transport system or the availability of facilities in other areas, and sometimes resulted in reduced social and economic horizons and lower aspirations.

Public transport services

All the groups were very damning of public transport services in their areas, although these ranged from virtually non-existent in the rural areas to quite frequent and comprehensive in the more urban areas. The respondents identified a number of barriers to their use or greater use of public transport, most importantly:

- The high cost of fares relative to their incomes and/or the higher costs of fares in the morning peak;
- The inadequacy of routes accessing essential services such as hospitals, colleges and shops;
- Poor vehicular access and supporting infrastructure;
- Poor staff training and inadequate staffing (in particular, the absence of conductors);

- The problem of personal safety and security for vulnerable groups.

The focus group evidence suggested that, unless these issues are addressed, even people on very constrained incomes will seek to own cars in order to meet their transport needs.

Car-ownership

The study has also served to identify that public transport is never likely to be a viable option for some people, however low their income, and in these instances they will forgo other basic amenities in order to maintain their car ownership and use. This was particularly the case for:

- people living in isolated rural communities;
- those working late night shifts and/or at isolated locations on the edge of town;
- many women undertaking multi-purpose trips under time constraints.

More fundamentally, all those participating in the study who already owned a car said that they would not be able to meet their basic accessibility needs without it. Those with cars found them cheaper to purchase, maintain and run than if they were to carry out the equivalent travel by public transport. Working participants and those looking for employment felt that they needed a car and, apart from the older people, most of those living in households without a car aspired to own one.

There was a great deal of animosity towards pricing policies to restrict car use and even those participants without cars appeared to be strongly against policies that would make their use more expensive should they ever have the opportunity to own one. People in the more car-dependent case study areas where cars were seen as a necessity said that if driving became more expensive than it already is, their quality of life would be seriously compromised.

Transport policies

The Government's new agenda for transport notes differential access to cars in a car-dominant society as potentially contributing to the social exclusion of certain groups and communities. It recommends that local authorities evaluate the social equity implications of their transport policies and design local programmes to address shortfalls in provision. This study suggests that many of the problems associated with poor transport and accessibility for low-income and other disadvantaged groups are beyond the capacity of local authorities to resolve for the following reasons, namely:

- Limited resources and the funding constraints of existing policies;
- Insufficient powers to affect the delivery of affordable and appropriate public transport services;
- The problems of retaining and/or providing basic local services in low-income areas in the wider economic climate of competition;
- Conflicting intentions and competing priorities of central government policies within and between Departments;
- Insufficient guidance, poor transference of best practice examples and insufficient robust analysis of problems, concerns and solutions at the local level in instances where the local authorities are able to influence policy through the local transport planning process.

Conclusions

The researchers conclude that until social equity evaluation becomes a feature of central and local government transport policy and provision, it is unlikely that the problems of disadvantaged individuals, groups and communities will be understood or addressed. They also recommend that, as determinants of travel are dependent on so many other factors, evaluations will also need to include analysis of the impacts of transport and accessibility on other areas of policy decision-making, such as health, education, employment, regeneration and social inclusion.

About the study

The study involved an initial review of the findings of previous and ongoing studies of transport in relation

to disadvantaged groups. It also drew on data from
the National Travel Survey and the Family
Expenditure Survey to explore the unique travel and
expenditure patterns of low-income groups. Five case
studies were selected for more detailed research. The
case studies, which took place between April and
June 2000, comprised a series of interviews with local
policy officers and 10 focus groups with residents
living on low incomes in these areas. In recognition
that travel behaviour and experiences differ with age,
gender and lifestyle circumstances, separate focus
groups were held with:

- Children
- Young people
- Unemployed people
- People in low-paid work
- People from minority ethnic communities
- Disabled and mobility impaired people
- Older people

It was also felt important to ensure that adequate
consideration was given to people living in different
types of area who may have different transport needs.
The main area types were identified as:

- Rural settlements
- Small towns (20 - 50,000 population)
- Post-industrial communities (e.g. ex-mining, steel
  manufacturing)
- Suburbs
- Inner city metropolitan areas

It was not the intention of the case studies to
describe the specific transport and accessibility
problems of the areas that were selected, but rather to
explore the more generalised experiences of such
groups in relation to transport and transport-related
issues. As such, specific locations were chosen on the
basis that they could act as a proxy for the lifestyle
conditions of deprived groups living in different
types of settlements.