



The Benevolent Society Social Issues Paper 7

Access to transport

Being able to easily get from one place to another is an essential part of daily life, opening up a wide range of social and economic opportunities for people. On the other hand, poor access to transport and inadequate transport infrastructure can compromise people's right to health and contribute to social exclusion. It can be a major barrier to people working, studying or using essential services. It can also increase their isolation by making it difficult to see friends or take part in social, cultural, or recreational activities. Affordable and accessible transport is a crucial component in building productive, inclusive and sustainable communities.

Why this is important

Over the past few decades the distances that people need to travel to get to work and go about their daily lives have risen significantly, with the result that we have grown increasingly dependent on the car.

Car ownership in Australia has grown rapidly since the 1950s, driven in large part by urban planning that encouraged sprawling population growth in the suburbs and outer metropolitan areas of our major cities¹.

In turn, the car has had a major impact on the urban landscape, with many important services, such as health facilities, shopping centres, universities and colleges, being pushed from the centre of our towns and suburbs to the edges.

As a result, walking and cycling to many destinations – forms of transport commonly used by those on low incomes – are often no longer realistic options for many people.

Today the car is a virtual necessity in the daily lives of most people, even to travel short distances². However, the costs of attaining a driver's licence, running and maintaining a car can be significant barriers to car ownership.

The dramatic rise in car use – there were more than 10.4 million registered cars in 2003 – has been accompanied by a corresponding shift in the use of urban public transport³ and a general decline in the frequency, reliability and quality of public transport services⁴.

This has a disproportionate effect on those on low incomes and people experiencing disadvantage, including older people, the unemployed and people with mental illness or a disability.

As the cost of living close to city centres increases, low-income individuals and families often choose or are forced to move to suburbs on the city fringes or other regional centres, where public transport services are limited or more expensive.

'Transport disadvantage' can have a profound impact on the lives of individuals. Inadequate, expensive or physically inaccessible transport is one of the biggest barriers that people experiencing disadvantage face in getting to essential services, such as health care. It can also compound their exclusion from employment and education and leave them socially isolated, unable to visit or be visited by friends and family or take part in social, cultural or recreational activities⁵.

Families and young children

The high cost of housing in Australia's major cities is resulting in many low and middle income families moving to 'satellite towns' and regional centres. Our own studies show that poor public transport in these areas, along with limited networks of social support, can contribute to families feeling isolated and vulnerable¹¹.

Working parents can spend up to four hours a day travelling to and from work, which severely limits the amount of time they can spend with their children. In addition, a lack of adequate transport means that children can miss out on social and recreational activities after school, and the health benefits that flow from this, as well as opportunities to spend time with friends.

Children living in rural and remote areas may frequently miss medical appointments due to barriers imposed by distance and lack of transport. This can seriously compromise their health and the early detection of medical conditions or learning difficulties.

Limited availability of public transport in low-income areas can often force people to run a car, which many can ill afford, or to use more expensive modes of transport, such as taxis, to get to work or study. For older people, the same health problems which force them to stop driving may also mean they can't use public transport safely or walk long distances.

For instance, while Western Sydney accounts for 42 per cent of the city's total population, only 19 per cent of train stations are located in the region. As a result, households in Western Sydney have higher rates of car ownership than the rest of Sydney and can spend up to twice as much on transport, including road tolls, as those located closer to the city⁶.

Growing congestion on our roads also has another major cost: increasing pollution, which can affect the health of older people, young children and other vulnerable groups. It is also a major contributor to climate change, the cost burden of which will fall most heavily on low-income and disadvantaged groups⁷.

Over the past two decades, the cost of using public transport has also risen significantly. Between 1990 and 2005 fares Australia-wide increased by more than twice the inflation rate, well above the rise in the cost of running a car and other forms of transport, in many cases without a corresponding improvement in transport infrastructure and accessibility⁸.

The cost of public transport – whether by bus, train, taxi or ferry – is a key factor that low-income people consider when it comes to deciding where and how often they can travel. Many choose to only make trips they consider to be essential, which can add to their social isolation.

Those who rely on public transport in 'transport disadvantaged' areas can also face a mismatch between where they live and where they need to go, and whether they can get there at all.

Common complaints include services not being within walking distance from where people live; circuitous bus routes and long journey times; having to make multiple connections to travel relatively short distances; poor connections between bus and train services; feeling unsafe; and infrequent or non-existent services at nights or weekends⁹.

Some buses, as well as some train stations and bus stops, are badly designed or poorly maintained. As a result, people with a disability, older people and parents with prams can find services difficult, if not impossible, to access.

Transport difficulties are profoundly magnified in country areas. Services such as taxis and trains are available in some areas, however, they can be expensive. Bus services, if they exist at all, can be infrequent or use travel routes that are out of date. Poor access to transport can be even more pronounced for some groups; for example, many Indigenous people in country areas are not located near public transport routes and may face discrimination in using some services¹⁰.

Rural communities

Transport is often cited as the biggest concern in rural areas. Some towns have no regular public transport or taxi services so those without cars are profoundly affected. Those on low incomes, with young children or people with limited mobility are particularly impacted.

The Benevolent Society has clients who are forced to travel 200 kilometres to the nearest town for medical treatment, leaving the house at 6 am and returning home at 9 pm. This places a significant burden on individuals and families, with consequences for their work and child care needs in addition to the financial burden of travelling.

Those living on the fringes of rural communities, often Indigenous people, are forced to walk to essential services and medical appointments in the absence of a car or public transport. They may need to walk on the road in the absence of footpaths. This is particularly problematic in extreme heat or rain, especially for children and older people.

As a result of these barriers, medical appointments are frequently missed, a clear example of inadequate transport affecting health and wellbeing which is a right all people hold, no matter where they live.

Older people

Good public transport can enable older people to maintain their independence by facilitating basic activities such as shopping, as well as allowing them to maintain important social contact with friends and family.

However, long walking distances to bus stops, steep steps at train stations and buses with narrow aisles can all contribute to making public transport physically inaccessible for older people.

The difficulties faced by older people when they need to attend medical appointments starkly illustrate the inadequacy of transport options for older people. While the local doctor may be able to be reached with a single trip, appointments for specialist care may require a number of connections and journeys that are lengthy, expensive and tiring.

Community transport is a solution for some older people who are living in the community. However, community transport is in high demand and short supply and is not a solution for those who need to attend hospital daily for treatment. Community transport is also not available for older people who move into residential care.

What should be done?

In making decisions about future public transport services and infrastructure, The Benevolent Society believes that equity, social inclusion and environmental sustainability must be key considerations.

Decisions about what sort of public transport services are offered, where they are provided, how often they run, how well they connect and how much they cost all have the potential to promote the health and well-being of individuals and address important economic, social and environmental issues. Transport planning should be intrinsically connected with community planning and the location of services, housing and centres of employment.

We believe that the federal and state governments need to significantly boost funding for public transport to encourage and support greater passenger use and provide a realistic alternative to car travel. Additional funding should be ear-marked to make services more accessible in transport disadvantaged areas, particularly the suburbs and towns on the fringes of our major cities.

Community demand for affordable, accessible and sustainable public transport is expected to grow sharply in the coming years, driven by significant population increases in our major cities.



Women

Women have lower levels of car ownership compared to men and, as a result, are more reliant on public transport.

A particular concern for women using public transport is the issue of safety because of inadequate staffing or poorly lit train stations or bus stops.

Some women will avoid public transport at night or not use it at all.

Women also make up the vast majority of sole parents in Australia and those who rely on public transport can face significant barriers resulting from cost and poorly connected services.

Inadequate transport can also severely limit the ability of sole parents to take up employment because of the complex travel arrangements needed to juggle childcare and getting to work.

In Sydney alone, more than a million new homes are expected to be needed within the next 30 years to accommodate the surge in population. At the same, the rising cost of petrol will put long daily commuting to work by car beyond the means of many families.

Decisions about transport infrastructure and services therefore need to be made with the long-term health and sustainability of communities in mind. This is particularly important when new land is being released for major housing developments.

State and local governments should ensure that all new developments are accompanied by a comprehensive, integrated and environmentally sustainable transport plan to meet the needs of new and growing communities. Transport planning should also be a critical element in any development of new public housing stock. International standards recommend that all residences be no more than 800 metres from a transport access point.

A key element of good public transport planning is to listen to the views and concerns of a broad range of commuters, including marginalised groups and those at risk of social isolation. Their input can help to clarify transport priorities and identify solutions to existing barriers.

We believe that the cost of travel must also be affordable to people from all socio-economic groups in the community. While concession fares do help to reduce the cost of travel for some, they are not available to all low income individuals and families.

At the local level, good urban planning can also help promote 'active transport' – such as cycling and walking – by linking homes to local facilities, such as shops, parks and schools. Designing safe and accessible travel corridors allows people to get to local destinations easily, encourages greater social interaction and can improve health outcomes by getting people to be more physically active.¹³

Government and non-profit organisations that provide important health or social services to the community may also need to consider outreach, home-based and other methods of service delivery in order to overcome the transport barriers that some of their clients face. Health outreach services are essential in rural areas. These services are costly and must be funded appropriately. Where people can be compensated for their travel costs, barriers such as retrospective refunds and lengthy application forms should be removed.

The Benevolent Society supports the development and funding of appropriate community-based transport initiatives which supplement – rather than replace – existing public transport services.

We also recognise the importance of promoting greater efficiency of public transport vehicles to reduce the impact of pollution and carbon emissions on the environment. The increased use of renewable energy sources is another strategy that could help reduce emissions and our reliance on fossil fuels.



Snapshot: Transport in Australia

- Total car passenger travel in Australia has grown almost nine-fold over the past 50 years and makes up over 90 per cent of all urban transport¹⁴.
- In 2003 there were 10.4 million registered cars in Australia, compared with 769,000 in 1950¹⁵.
- Car ownership costs account for 13 per cent of average incomes but consume 28 per cent of incomes of low-income earners¹⁶.
- Low income users account for a disproportionately high number of total trips on bus and rail services and a significant number of trips on more expensive forms of public transport, such as taxis and ferries¹⁷.
- Between 1990 and 2005, the cost of public transport fares in urban Australia increased at 2.17 times the rate of inflation; costs in country areas are higher again¹⁸.
- Limited transport options mean that almost one quarter of people living in country Australia have difficulties accessing health care when they need it¹⁹.
- For older people, the most common reasons for not using public transport are: difficulty getting into or out of the medium (53%), difficulty getting to stops and stations (30%), lack of seating / difficulty standing (12%) and pain or discomfort (12%)²⁰.

Endnotes

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6. Hurni A; *Transport and social exclusion in Western Sydney*; presentation to the 28th Australasian Transport Research Forum; September 2005; p6
7. Brotherhood of St Laurence, Catholic Social Services Australia and National Welfare Rights Network, *Joint Submission to Prime Ministerial Task Group on Emissions Trading*, 2007, see also The Benevolent Society's *Social Issues Paper 8: Environment and the impact of climate change*
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9. Hurni (2005); p14
10. Council of Social Service of New South Wales; *A Growing Divide? Submission to the NSW Ministry of Transport on Bus Fare Affordability in Rural and Regional NSW*; January 2007; p2
11. Healy, K., *Families on the Fringe: Promoting the social inclusion of young families moving to non-metropolitan areas*, 2008
12. *Sydney Morning Herald*, Sydney predicted to reach 6 million, 20 October 2008
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14. Australian Bureau of Statistics (2005); p1
15. Ibid; p1
16. Victorian Coalition for People's Transport, *The Place to be on PT: A Vision for Greater Melbourne's Transport*, 2004; p5
17. Council of Social Service of New South Wales; *Who Uses Public Transport?* (2006)
18. Ibid; p1
19. Council of Social Service of New South Wales; *A Growing Divide?* (2007); p2
20. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare; *Older Australians at a Glance* 4th edition 2007

Social Issues Papers

The Benevolent Society works with vulnerable individuals, families and communities who face a wide range of difficult issues which affect their wellbeing and their social and economic participation. Our Social Issues Agenda identifies 12 broad issues that are related to social and economic inclusion, and our series of issues papers explores these challenges and some potential solutions. To read the full series of social issues papers go to www.bensoc.org.au

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