



THE TRANSPORT TRAP- How transport disadvantages poorer people

The Price of Being Poor is a series of papers being published by the General Consumer Council to raise awareness and promote discussion of the particular problems experienced by low-income families. The Transport Trap is the second in that series.

Government statistics show that people living in poorer areas of Great Britain travel less and make fewer trips, less than two-thirds of the national average¹. This demonstrates that many disadvantaged consumers are severely restricted in their ability to get about their daily lives.

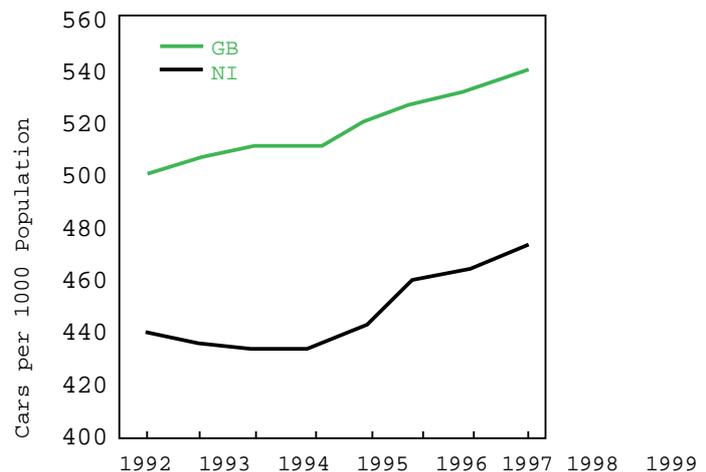
This paper looks at Northern Ireland and explains how ‘transport poverty’ makes the lives of those on low income difficult indeed.

Restricted choice of transport

There has been steady growth in car ownership since the mid 1990s. However the level of ownership in the Province lags considerably behind Great Britain, see Figure 1.

Car Ownership Levels in NI and GB (per 1000 population > 16 years of age)

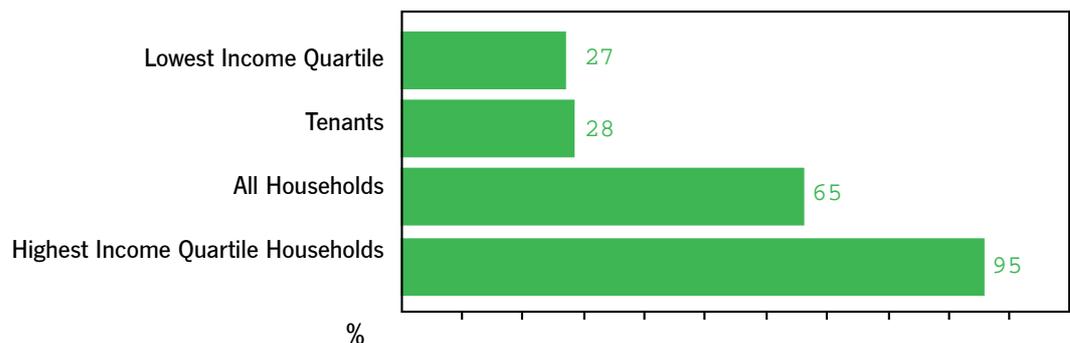
Source: Northern Ireland Transport Statistics 1999/00 (Table 1.16) and earlier Northern Ireland Transport Statistics publications



Recent figures from the Family Expenditure Survey show that 65% of local households own a car or van but this is highly dependent on income. The poorest in society, as the following chart shows, have no option but to rely heavily on public transport.

Percentage of Households with a Car or Van 1998-1999

Source NISRA, Family Expenditure Survey 1998/1999



The 1991 Census revealed that, in the poorer areas of Belfast and Londonderry, 63% of households had no access to a car.² In the better-off areas, only 31% were without a car.

To travel any distance people living in poorer areas are likely to have to go by bus or rail. Despite the desire of Government to encourage greater use of public transport, the fact remains that most people who travel on it do so because they have no choice. A 1999 survey found out how many passengers could have made their trip by car instead.³ Only 18% of rail passengers, 14% of Citybus passengers and 11% of Ulsterbus passengers indicated that they had a choice.

In other words the means of transport that is widely perceived as last resort is what most people on low income must depend on.⁴

Government neglect

Public transport is so decidedly second best because of past government policy. The Translink companies, NIR, Ulsterbus and Citybus, are publicly owned and subject to government priorities which unfortunately have tended to neglect bus and rail.⁵ This neglect means that investment to maintain and enhance services has been limited.

In addition the social dimension of public transport has not been properly accepted. Little effort has been made to identify how public transport provision could improve the situations of people on low incomes.

Translink is obliged by the Government to meet commercial, profit-oriented targets but no social service targets have ever been specified. This contrasts with the situation in Great Britain where local authorities are concerned to ensure that public transport helps the disadvantaged. While Translink tries to provide a comprehensive service by running buses in rural areas, by purchasing low floor vehicles and so on, its room for manoeuvre has been limited.

Translink is restricted due to inadequate capital investment and paltry operating subsidies. Improvements such as the purchase of new trains and the creation of a dedicated guided bus way and quality bus corridors in Belfast were stalled for many years due to lack of funds. Public financial support per head for bus and rail in Northern Ireland has been less than half the level provided to predominantly private sector operators in Great Britain.⁶

High transport cost

Travel costs are high for those reliant on public transport. Whilst it is clear that the cost of owning a car (purchase of vehicle plus annual costs of car tax, insurance, MoT and repairs) is prohibitive for anyone on a low income, the marginal costs of a car journey (i.e. the actual cost of that single trip) are much lower than for journeys made by public transport. In London, research by the Capital Transport Campaign in 1995 showed the marginal cost of a three mile journey by car was 27p but 70p by bus.⁷

If the marginal costs for one person travelling by public transport can be much higher than a similar journey made by car, it is also worth noting that, as more people make the journey (spouse, any children over the age of four,) the cost of the trip rises for those on public transport but remains exactly the same for those using a car.⁸

Unsatisfactory quality of services

It is not only hard for those on low income to afford transport but the quality of the service is often poor. Translink's passengers do not give high ratings to the quality of bus and rail services; moreover they perceive overall performance to be much worse than in the early 1990's. Passengers give good scores for the non smoking policies but on the crucial aspects of punctuality and value for money it is a different story. Even features affecting comfort, such as heating and ventilation, do not score well.⁹

The challenge of making public transport competitive with the private car, in terms of both cost and quality of service, has not been properly addressed in Northern Ireland, in contrast to the situation in many continental European countries. Yet the upgrading of the Belfast – Dublin Enterprise rail service demonstrated what can be achieved given adequate investment. Quality bus corridors where they have been introduced have also been successful.

Curtailed opportunities

Partly because of the situation they face regarding transport, many people on low income simply do not get about much. Opportunities to increase their income, as well as make it go further, are restricted as a result.

The impact of low income on travel opportunities is indicated by some results from the 1998/99 Family Expenditure Survey. The survey found that the average spend on bus and rail fares in households without a car or van was £1.96 a week while households in the lowest income quartile spent 63p.

Job openings are unlikely to be where the poor live.¹⁰ Bus routes are frequently inappropriate for people who are unemployed or seeking employment anywhere other than the town centre. Public transport is seen as unpunctual, slow and (outside of commuting peaks) infrequent, making it especially difficult for those seeking or working at part-time jobs.¹¹

Although Translink has been introducing Easibus accessible services to link up residential areas with local shopping malls, medical and leisure facilities, it remains the case that it is much easier to get a bus into a city centre than to travel a far shorter distance across town to more localised amenities.¹²

Services typically cease mid evening and few are provided on Sundays. Consequently the ability of those on low income to take advantage of evening courses, church services and recreational programmes is adversely affected. Simply visiting a relation ill in a home or a hospital can become an ordeal.

A youth worker in Belfast described the impact of restricted transport on people in his area:

"Basically, it is creating ghettos. If people cannot afford to travel they are confined to what is within walking distance. People are actually having to take taxis to the supermarket because it is the only way to get access to the better prices but this is, in itself, adding to the cost of their weekly shop. In addition, young people in particular are finding their horizons are terribly limited. Jobs that are not either within walking distance or on the main bus route into town are very difficult to get to so they are put off applying. This is a particular problem with new employment industries like call centres where shift work is often required and, quite frankly, bus services outside of peak times are just not sufficiently frequent or wholly reliable.

The costs of public transport affect people on low incomes disproportionately. It means they are often paying more for essential supplies and it restricts their social life. Obviously, the actual price of the cinema or local sports centre, etc., can be a deterrent in itself, but if you also have to add on the price of maybe two bus journeys (each way) then the additional cost and hassle makes it really hard."

Those with the greatest need to keep expenditure down find it hardest to shop at places where prices are lowest. Small local shops often charge more and offer less of a selection than supermarkets because they do not have the economies of scale that larger businesses can achieve.¹³ However access to supermarkets for people who do not have a car can be very difficult when some shopping complexes are located on the edge of towns, as is the present trend.¹⁴ A car-oriented society can too easily neglect those caught outside of the mainstream.

Negative spillovers

Ironically, research shows that while poorer people have less access to the advantages offered by the motor car, they are disproportionately affected by the disadvantages high car ownership inflicts on society as a whole.

People on lower incomes have less choice in housing and are more likely to live near busy roads than those who are better off. A study published in the British Medical Journal showed that children living in neighbourhoods with high traffic volumes had 13 times the risk of injury of children living in the least busy areas. Some of this is attributable to driving speed which tends to be lower away from main roads. The faster a car is travelling the more likely a pedestrian involved in a collision will die (45% at 30 mph versus 5% at 20mph).

Living in more congested areas also means enduring more noise and air pollution. According to Friends of the Earth road traffic is the fastest growing source of air pollution in the UK.¹⁵ The pollution gives rise to ill health and premature deaths. The Environment and Heritage Service admits that noise from traffic is probably the most widespread source of noise nuisance.¹⁶ An unpublished sample survey of residents of 12 Belfast wards revealed that more people living in 'deprived' wards were disturbed by road noise than were those in more affluent wards.¹⁷

Unmet special needs

If the poor generally are suffering because of the lack of appropriate transport options, the plight of people on low income who have disabilities is especially acute.¹⁸

The Northern Ireland Disability Council has highlighted the meagre opportunities open to people with disabilities. It reported that

- One in six adults in Northern Ireland has a disability, a significantly higher proportion than in Great Britain.
- Only one in four disabled adults of working age has a job.
- Benefits make up two-thirds of disabled people's total income, compared with just over one fifth for the total population.

- About half have difficulty using services such as going to the cinema, eating out or shopping.
- Of those, **four in ten have problems getting there.**
- 80% of disabled people who encounter difficulties are offered no help.

The Older Consumer in the Community, published in 1994 by the General Consumer Council, reported that less than half of the people (aged 60 or more) interviewed left their home every day. This suggests that social isolation may be prevalent amongst the elderly.

The study also found that only one third of older consumers owned a car. More than one third reported problems using the bus, with 17% mentioning difficulty getting on and off.

Isolated rural poor

While the underlying principles of quality provision are the same, rural transport needs are different from those in urban areas due to the scattered population.

It is important to recognise that one in five people in Northern Ireland live in the open countryside. This figure rises to more than one in three if we include those living in settlements of less than 5,000 people.

A young person from the NorthWest is now living in England partly because of the lack of **accessible, affordable and available transport.**

He had found a job in Derry, 14 miles away, at the minimum wage. This involved a two mile hike between the bus stop and home. To be in work for 9 am he had to leave home at 6.45am and did not get home until 7.30pm, due to the infrequent bus service. The cost was £5 each day in bus fares; this represented 21% of his weekly income on transport alone.

Overall more country people have cars than do city people.¹⁹ However according to the last Census 41% of households living in the poorest areas of Northern Ireland outside Belfast and Derry did not have a car compared with 22% in the better off areas. Moreover not all members of rural households with a car will be able to use it; wives and children may be isolated for much of the time.

If town and city dwellers on low incomes are becoming virtual prisoners in their immediate localities, then the situation for people where there is so much less within walking distance (perhaps only one shop, no post office, no bank, no doctor's surgery) is bound to be even more restricting.

Remedies

Making more money available is one obvious way to reduce the disadvantage of those on low income. Transport can also play a key role in alleviating the problems they encounter, by increasing access to opportunities to earn income, save money and enjoy a better quality of life. Here are just a few of the options.

Better public transport

Remedial measures must focus on this area. In particular Government must give bus and rail higher priority and, following consultation, it should set out the social responsibilities of the operators, funding them accordingly. As pointed out by the Railways Task Force in their *Overview* published in September 2000, equality and targeting social need are overarching public policies which must be reflected in the provision of transport services and facilities.

Strategic plans to encourage greater use of public transport for work, shopping and leisure trips will be successful only if they address the issue of accessibility and have regard to the rural community.

- ***An all round improvement in bus and rail transport:*** Public transport should be made more affordable, attractive and frequent with extra peak and off peak services, quality bus corridors, and real time information. The system must draw in car owners if it is to sustain adequate coverage and frequency and connect homes to jobs and other activities. Improvement entails greater capital expenditure and more operating subsidy but also some less expensive changes such as more training in customer care for bus drivers and railway staff.²⁰
- ***Greater transport accessibility:*** Translink is taking steps to make public transport more accessible for those with restricted mobility or buggies in tow, although the purchase of new low floor buses mainly affects Citybus rather than Ulsterbus services. More needs to be done in country areas. A detailed guide for passengers with disabilities, *Getting out and about*, has also been developed.²¹ More effort is needed to increase awareness of such improvements and to ensure origin to destination accessibility.
- ***Quality interfaces:*** The English study *Social Exclusion and the Provision and Availability of Public Transport* reports for example that "Antagonism between bus staff and groups of young people [in deprived neighbourhoods] seems to be common".²² To the extent that similar problems exist in Northern Ireland they need to be tackled.
- ***Effective integration of existing services and facilities:*** On-tap information to help plan a journey and 'joined up' bus and rail services (as Translink is now introducing,) make travel easier and help to include those with special needs.
- ***More 'informal' services:*** Ventures such as the Department of Regional Development's rural transport partnership initiative, volunteer/community transport and Easibus offer flexible services often suited to those on low income, and they can sometimes piggy-back on the regular network and on other statutory services.
- ***Car transport when appropriate:*** Car hire can be economical in some circumstances if the qualifications do not discriminate against low income people. A shared community taxi home from the last train or scheduled bus service or employer and/or community supported car sharing could be feasible options.²³
- ***Good taxi services:*** Consumer Council research has shown that many on low income use taxis and it is important to ensure that fares remain reasonable, by the Government encouraging competition and monitoring mergers in the industry.
- ***Fares and concessions policies reassessed:*** In February 2001 the Northern Ireland Executive made a commitment to provide free public transport for pensioners.²⁴ There are others whose lives are curtailed by the cost of transport, such as people on benefits living in rural areas, who often need to travel considerable distances. The proposed new scheme should be extended as soon as possible.

- **More demand responsive fares:** Cities and towns elsewhere have ticket transfers and other schemes for reducing the cost of travel to destinations outside the city centre and some offer more tempting off peak travel incentives. The Government has at last approved investment in a modern ticketing system for Translink so innovations are possible; they should be given high priority.
- **Responsive service routing:** Translink must act quickly following its current internal review of services in the greater Belfast area to provide routes suited to present travel needs and the emergence of new growth areas.
- **Better equipped bus and rail stops:** Too often stops lack timetable information, shelter, lighting and seating and thereby advertise a 'minimalist' service on offer as passers-by view customers waiting in the rain. Greater joint effort by the Roads Service, local councils and others are required.
- **More hail and ride bus services:** Well advertised hail and ride at off peak times would facilitate travel by the elderly and others with mobility problems. The Roads Service should work with the bus company to extend such services.

Better environment at journey origin and destination

- **Revive cycling and walking:** Foot and pedal power are a means of getting about when the budget is tight; indeed it is the poor who are most likely to make journeys on foot.²⁵ However both modes of transport have been in decline in Northern Ireland despite official Government policy to increase them. Initiatives such as Sustrans have started to improve conditions but much still needs to be done.
- **Safe neighbourhoods:** Walking and cycling are vulnerable forms of travel so effective controls of driver speed are imperative in built up areas. Also public transport depends on a people-friendly outdoor environment since most passengers have to walk at the start and end of their journey.
- **Secure neighbourhoods:** One quarter of the women in a Northern Ireland survey said they felt unsafe walking after dark. Another 15% admitted that they never went out after dark.²⁶ Women living in poor neighbourhoods, few of whom have a car alternative, are especially confined.
- **Clean, uncluttered, well lighted neighbourhoods:** The absence of litter, pavement obstructions and vandalised amenities should be as high in poor neighbourhoods as in well off ones - even if this means that those areas have to receive more maintenance on the part of local councils.
- **Safe routes to school:** Elsewhere in the UK many local projects are underway to make walking and cycling between home and school more attractive and safer. Public financial support underpins most schemes. The DRD and Roads Service should accelerate their efforts in this area.
- **Application of quiet road surfaces:** To date only one stretch of road in Belfast has been laid with a quiet road surface.²⁷

Planning

- **Provision of shopping opportunities in or near the least well off areas and along the main public transport routes:** This does not mean stopping change in retailing but rather considering the wider repercussions during the planning approval process.

- **Access to new developments:** The provision of convenient paths, well situated bus stops and the introduction of Easibus services need to be augmented by further initiatives to ensure that new facilities have excellent public transport services. Some supermarkets in England have succeeded in attracting car-free customers and their good practices should be adopted. For example supermarket courtesy buses are available in a number of places.
- **Shaping Our Future:** The Government's effort to develop a regional plan should help to focus future land use and transport policies on social inclusion. In the meantime however a weak planning framework and limited resources have resulted in developments which are difficult to reach except by car. To use two examples from Belfast, the brand new Odyssey complex and the extensive business development from the docks along the north shore have little or no access by public transport.
- **More research and follow up:** At present we do not know enough about how people get about and what their needs are, especially for accessing employment. Several studies have been published recently looking at how transport provision in deprived neighbourhoods in England and in Dublin affected the life chances of residents. There have been occasional studies in Northern Ireland, mainly focussing on the elderly and the disabled. It is important that Government put procedures in place to ensure that research findings are incorporated into policy and practice.

Involvement

- **Finding voice:** Genuine consultation with people as clients and customers and interested citizens is critical. The 'neighbourhood regeneration task forces' announced by the Minister for Social Development should take on board transport issues. Translink has set up customer panels to get feedback about services. Something similar should be created to focus on deprived areas with low car ownership levels.
- **Joined up support:** Social service, education and health providers can help to increase their clients' awareness of transport options and they can help to co-ordinate transport provision. 'Travel training' programmes are being tried in England to encourage job seekers to look further afield.
- **Recognising diversity:** People on low income are not necessarily a homogeneous group and effective support needs to take this into account. Hence the importance of supporting local initiatives and factoring them into the full transport network.

Conclusion

At present transport poverty – high cost, inferior quality, limited access in terms of times and places - exacerbates the disadvantage suffered by people on low income. However this could be changed by operators, planners, policy makers, social service providers and others taking the situations of these people more fully into account. It is in the interest of society at large to ensure that those least advantaged have access to opportunities for a richer life. Transport can help achieve this.

References

- ¹ DETR 'National Travel Survey 1996/98 Update' *Transport Statistics Bulletin*, Table 6.6. Work has begun on developing travel statistics for Northern Ireland.
- ² Wards where 70% or more of the household heads living there were in a low paid job or were not working are classed as poor areas.
- ³ Unpublished survey by PricewaterhouseCoopers presented to the Translink Passenger's Charter committee on which the General Consumer Council is represented.
- ⁴ This does not necessarily mean that a disproportionate number of the poor use public transport; people on low income tend to travel less than do the better off.
- ⁵ Private operators provide few scheduled services in Northern Ireland.
- ⁶ General Consumer Council for Northern Ireland (2000) *Submission to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee*.
- ⁷ In Belfast at present, the minimum cash fare for a bus journey within the inner city is 55p with the price rising to 95p once you go beyond. In 1995 the Citybus fares were 42 pence and 73 pence respectively. Pensioners, children under 16, job seekers and some students pay concession fares but others must contribute the full amount.
- ⁸ In the summer 2000 Translink offered a 4 person family ticket for travel by bus or rail anywhere in Northern Ireland for £12.50.
- ⁹ General Consumer Council *ibid*
- ¹⁰ The Audit Commission in England reports that 52% of job seekers said that lack of private transport inhibited them from getting a job, and 23% said that they had been prevented from getting a job due to poor public transport. See *All Aboard: a review of local transport and travel in urban areas* (1999) London: Audit Commission
- ¹¹ Low income jobs such as cleaning or security are often part time and at off peak hours. Employers may be reluctant to hire someone without a car who comes from an area with limited public transport because of concerns about employee absenteeism and lateness.
- ¹² Easibus services operate in Belfast, Londonderry and Bangor. The services are customer friendly but infrequent, being primarily designed to encourage elderly people to get out more.
- ¹³ See Spencer Henson "From High Street to Hyper Market: Food retailing in the 1990s" in *Your Food: Whose Choice* (1992) National Consumer Council, London.
- ¹⁴ More than 70% of consumers normally got to their main food shopping destination by car according to a General Consumer Council survey.
- ¹⁵ *Road Transport and Air Pollution* (March 1999) page 4.
- ¹⁶ *Bothered by Noise: There's no need to suffer* page 19.
- ¹⁷ Ivan Gregg *Factors Influencing Public Attitudes to and Annoyance by Environmental Noise* (2000) University of Ulster dissertation. One third of the people interviewed in the Ardoyne, Blackstaff, Island and Whiterock wards reported road noise disturbance compared with 22% in the other 9 wards.
- ¹⁸ A consumer survey commissioned by the General Consumer Council in 1997 asked if respondents had any physical disability or long standing health problem that made it difficult to get about. Amongst those in the best off ABC1 socio-economic category 5% answered in the affirmative, compared with 18% of those in the poorest DE category.
- ¹⁹ According to the 1997-98 Family Expenditure Survey less than two out of four households in Belfast City Council had a car or van compared with almost three out of four living elsewhere in Northern Ireland.
- ²⁰ See General Consumer Council for Northern Ireland (1999) *Improving Translink's Services for Passengers*.
- ²¹ *Removing Barriers to Bus Travel for Older People in Northern Ireland*, a University of Ulster research project sponsored by Ulsterbus, NITHC, DOE and Age Concern NI, lists numerous recommendations for improvements. Some progress has been made on many of them.
- ²² TraC (July 2000) London: DETR page 74.
- ²³ In some cases, such as for some types of disabilities, provision of a car is the best solution.
- ²⁴ Free cross border travel for pensioners is already provided courtesy of the Irish Government.
- ²⁵ The Consumer Council's 1997 survey found that 43% of those in the ABC1 category made trips on foot at least 5 days a week compared with 57% of those in the DE category.
- ²⁶ M Boyle and T Haire "Fear of Crime and Likelihood of Victimisation in Northern Ireland" Research Findings (1996) Northern Ireland Office 2/96, page 3.
- ²⁷ I Gregg *op. cit.*



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