

Detroit Area Study, 2001: Travel and Transportation

This policy brief summarizes findings on travel and transportation issues, as surveyed in the 2001 Detroit Area Study. More information is available in the study's full Policy Report at: <http://closup.umich.edu>

The University of Michigan's 2001 Detroit Area Study (DAS), which focused on the quality of community life, surveyed over 4,300 adults in the southeast Michigan metro Detroit area, covering Livingston, Macomb, Monroe, Oakland, St. Clair, Washtenaw and Wayne Counties. This Policy Brief summarizes findings from DAS 2001 related to travel and transportation issues. Findings in the current Brief and its associated Policy Report cover resident travel patterns, including shopping and work trips; use and ratings of public transit; travel within the region; and the extent to which people are willing to tax themselves in order to address transportation problems.

FINDINGS

Shopping Trips: Metro Detroit area residents are heavily reliant on their automobiles for shopping trips, with city of Detroit residents somewhat less so. When asked how they typically travel to their regular grocery store, 97 percent of the wider metro area respondents – compared to 89 percent of Detroiters – say they drive. And compared with the 25 percent of Detroiters who say they had walked to a grocery store “during the past week,” only 14 percent of all respondents across the region say they had done the same. Comparing community types, people in small towns (38 percent) report more walking for shopping trips than those living in other types of communities. Least likely to walk are residents in the newer suburbs (13 percent) and in rural areas of the region (4 percent).

Work Trips: For respondents traveling to work or school, the automobile is their primary mode of travel. Most (93 percent) say

they typically drive alone and only 2 percent carpool to work or school. The remainder walk, travel by bus, or use other means. Fewer Detroit respondents (83%) report driving alone.

Stress: Most metro Detroiters spend less time commuting than do residents of other major cities like Chicago and Los Angeles. Still, 57 percent of commuters say their trip is sometimes stressful, while 6 percent say it is always stressful. And there is a strong relationship between travel times and levels of stress: as travel time increases so does the amount of reported stress (although this relationship is stronger for some commuters, especially those from Wayne County and the city of Detroit).

Limited Public Transit Use: The heavy reliance on the automobile across the region corresponds with limited use of public transit. For the region as a whole, only 3 percent of respondents are regular transit users. Where public transit is most readily available, in

Washtenaw County and the city of Detroit, regular transit users comprise 7 percent and 8 percent, respectively, of the respondents surveyed.

Distance to Bus Stop: Public transit use is associated with how far people live from a transit stop. People who live within 1/16 of a mile from a bus stop are twice as likely to use buses as those living between 1/8 and 1/4 of a mile away, and four times as likely to use public transit as those living beyond 1/2 of a mile.

Declining Public Transit Use: Comparing the 2001 data to similar data gathered in 1975 and 1980 for the tri-county area of Wayne, Oakland and Macomb Counties, use of public transit has dramatically declined over the past quarter century. Whereas 43 percent of tri-county area respondents reported using public transit at least some of the time in 1975, only 12 percent reported doing so in 2001.

Key Findings

- Residents across the metro Detroit region are heavily reliant on their automobiles for travel, with very limited, and generally declining use of public transit (mainly buses).
- Among those who do use public transit, levels of use are strongly associated with distance to the nearest bus stop: the closer the bus stop, the more frequent is the use of public transit.
- Although average commute times in the region are lower than in places like Chicago and Los Angeles, significant commuter stress is still reported in southeast Michigan. Levels of stress are strongly related to both the amount of time spent commuting, and to the commuter's location: the longer the commute, the greater the stress, though this relationship is strongest for Detroit and Wayne County residents, and is weakest for those in St. Clair and Monroe Counties.
- Most people believe that safe and reliable public transit is important to the quality of life of metro area residents. However, support for public transit improvements is tempered by the questions of tax increases and paying for improvements.
- Compared to the limited support for financing public transit improvements, there is wider and stronger support to pay for improvements to roads and highways.
- Transportation patterns, values and priorities vary significantly across the region, by county, type of community (i.e., urban vs. rural), and demographic characteristics of residents.





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Views of Public Transportation: Metro area residents have mixed feelings about the transportation systems in their neighborhoods and in the region overall. Regarding their neighborhoods, nearly a third of respondents rate existing public transit favorably, a third rate it negatively, and the remaining third give neutral responses. Meanwhile 33 percent rate the overall regional system positively, but 45 percent rate it negatively.

While evaluations of the current system are very mixed, 69 percent of the respondents agree or strongly agree that the quality of life in the region could be improved with safe and reliable public transportation. And for those in the tri-county region currently without public transit options, 85 percent say they would be in favor of making public transit available in their neighborhoods. When costs are addressed, however, respondents again give mixed reactions: one third would support higher taxes for public transit improvements, one third would not, and the remaining third give neutral responses. Meanwhile, there is

evidence of a stronger commitment to pay for improvements to the road system to relieve traffic congestion and improve private transportation options.

Conclusion

The findings discussed above mask considerable differences by county, type of community (urban vs. rural, etc.), and demographic characteristics such as age, race, and income levels. More information is available in the full Policy Report. What is clear, however, is that public transit use has declined sharply over the last quarter century, even while the residents of southeast Michigan express support for the ideals of public transit. The issue of paying to provide improved transit may be a current roadblock, but as gas prices have soared in 2006, policymakers may find a public more willing to consider public transit costs and opportunities than at any time in the past.

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