

# Transport Policy and the Car Divide in the UK, the US and France: Beyond the Environmental Debate

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## Abstract

*Public aid programs to subsidize the automobility of poor households are at the heart of a trade-off between three different types of concern: economic (promoting access to employment for active members of these households), environmental (cutting greenhouse gas emissions from cars) and social (ensuring that policies to control car usage do not penalize poorer households disproportionately). This article analyzes comparative research into the origins and development of such programs in three countries characterized by different levels of car dependence (France, the UK and the US). It shows that these programs, which are obviously useful to the households that benefit from them and, surprisingly, have largely escaped criticism despite running counter to policies that restrict the use of cars, remain of marginal importance in all three countries. The reasons for this are twofold: firstly, auto programs are not an appropriate solution to the difficulties encountered by a significant portion of poor households and, secondly, wider development of such policies would constitute a considerable political gamble, especially as they risk destabilizing the mechanisms for funding public transit and weakening their social legitimacy. In the longer term, however, multiplying economic and fiscal methods of restricting car use that weigh disproportionately on the budgets of more modest households may necessitate a considerable increase in programs to aid automobility.*

Ordinary mobility (i.e. spatial mobility related to everyday activities) is now considered as the norm (in contrast to the negative notions of sedentariness, confinement and immobility) and a basic right (the freedom to come and go as one pleases), as well as an economic and social resource (in order to be 'employable' and to participate fully in society, mobility is essential) (Urry, 2000; Orfeuil, 2004). Implementing this norm on a concrete basis involves according an ever-increasing importance to individual modes of transport, especially the car, in line with the individualization of lifestyles and practices (Sheller and Urry, 2000).

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However, spiraling car dependence (Dupuy, 1995) raises two major issues. First, penalizing non-motorized or poorly motorized people within a context shaped by automobility generates significant social, spatial and economic inequalities at a time when the proliferation of Workfare-type policies tends to emphasize mobility as one of the conditions for getting back to work. Second, the growth in automobility generates economic, social and environmental costs (congestion, traffic accidents, consumption of non-renewable energy, and pollution).

Responses to deal with these two problems are not necessarily compatible. Economic incentives to reduce car use (urban toll roads, higher gasoline taxes, more expensive parking, etc.) may actually prove to be regressive by penalizing low-income households disproportionately and reducing their mobility almost to non-mobility. On the other hand, public auto programs for poor or fragile households may simply help to accelerate the underlying growth in car traffic, thus undermining one of the key objectives of 'sustainable mobility' policies.

Auto programs for poor households are at the heart of such contradictions between economic, social and environmental concerns. This article will focus on the development of these programs, the related debates and spatial issues in terms of both planning practices and imperatives, and on the lessons to be drawn from the trade-offs made in practice between the various objectives of 'sustainable mobility' policies.

Our analysis will be based on a comparison of three countries — France, the UK and the USA — characterized by different degrees of car dependency and different approaches to welfare reform. In this article the criterion used to measure poverty is household income by 'consumption unit', and the 'poor household' category should obviously be treated with caution. In particular, three differentiating factors need to be taken into account within this category:

- 1 The residential context: the situations of poor families living in poor neighborhoods and of those living in more affluent urban neighborhoods, peri-urban or rural areas differ considerably;
- 2 Socio-demographic characteristics: the situation of elderly people or poor students has little in common with that of single mothers;
- 3 Ethnic backgrounds: there is a more or less direct correlation between certain ethnic backgrounds on the one hand, and poverty, specific residential situations and particular socio-demographic characteristics which in turn have an impact on the relationship between poverty, insecurity, 'employability' and aptitude for spatial mobility.

Nevertheless, the 'poor' category is more effective than social class or socio-professional group in taking account of this diversity of situations (and processes) to explore the differences, as well as the similarities in the practices of these various groups. Moreover, it has already been used by a number of researchers (Wacquant, 1997; Atkinson *et al.*, 2001).

## Mobility of the poor and access to employment opportunities

Within a context of greater overall car dependency (Dupuy, 2006), the mobility of non-motorized individuals has deteriorated considerably. The 'club effect' that drives the process of car dependence has been reinforced, whereas the number and diversity of destinations accessible to non-motorized individuals have gradually declined within territories organized with regard to the supremacy of the car (Dupuy, 1995; 1999). Consequently, the steady march of the automobile has driven, and been driven by, urban sprawl and physical dispersal (Rémy, 2000; Sheller and Urry, 2000). Accessibility, which is often tantamount to auto-accessibility, represents a powerful vector for social selection

**Table 1** Car ownership and household mobility in the three countries studied

	Household Car Ownership (%) (lower quintile)	Household Car Ownership (%) (all households)	No. of Trips Made (lower quintile/upper quintile)	Distance (lower quintile/upper quintile)
France	42	77	0.69	0.50
UK	35	72	0.71	0.34
US	74	92	0.66	0.56

**Sources:** for the UK and France: DfT (2004), Foundation for the Automobile and Society (2004), Orfeuil (2004); for the US: Pucher and Renne (2003). The data taken from Orfeuil (2004) are based on the number of trips per person, per day, excluding weekends; households are divided approximately into quartiles and not quintiles. Data taken from Pucher and Renne (2003) only concern urban households; the indicator chosen is the number of miles traveled per person, per day; households are divided not into quintiles but into income bands: from less than \$20,000 per year to more than \$100,000 per year.

(Kaufman *et al.*, 2004). The ability to travel to places that can only be reached by car has become a prerequisite for normal social participation (Orfeuil, 2004).

### Inequalities in accessibility and 'employability'

Poor households are particularly badly hit by increased car dependence. They have a lower rate of car ownership and are less mobile (see Table 1). This results in specific problems in accessing essential urban resources (Church *et al.*, 2000; Hine and Mitchell, 2001; Clifton, 2004; Orfeuil, 2004). These problems are compounded for poor households living in neighborhoods with sparse facilities and bad public transit (Begag, 1995; Bullard and Johnson, 1997; SEU, 2003).

In the three countries studied, the perception of a link between low rates of accessibility to urban resources and the risk of social exclusion has given rise to specific policies. In France, since the 1990s, this consideration has formed the basis for policies to promote improved access to public transit in socially deprived areas (Harzo, 1998). The UK has also implemented policies to improve access to public transit in poorer areas and these have recently been consolidated in a broader 'accessibility planning' approach (SEU, 2003). In the US, the 1998 Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21) defines the travel requirements of poor people and ethnic minorities as a priority. Improving the mobility of these households must be based on more effective coordination of different modes of transport as well as the actions of policy makers in order to develop 'links between people and jobs, between goods and services and between different neighborhoods'.

Within the context of these policies that aim to improve accessibility in general, and due also to the 'workfare' policies implemented in the three countries studied, recent analyses have stressed the problems of poor households in accessing employment opportunities. Thus, the ability to get around is presented as an important factor in maximizing the employability of poorer people.

In the US, the Welfare Reform of 1996 breathed new life into the 'spatial mismatch' debate initiated by Kain in 1968. In the wake of his pioneering article, the research developed from the end of the 1990s on stressed the effects of racial segregation and spatial isolation on access to employment opportunities. In particular, this research shows how access to reliable transportation enhances access to employment for poor households and leads to both greater professional stability and higher income (Ong and Blumenberg, 1998; Ong, 2002). On the ground, the lack of adequate transportation for poor households, coupled with the dearth of childcare facilities and insufficient training, are the reasons most frequently presented by government agencies to account for unemployment (Lucas and Nicholson, 2003). Some authors have even asserted that during the boom at the end of the 1990s, the creation of large numbers of unskilled jobs

and the availability of funds for childcare services meant that inadequate transportation became the main obstacle to employment for poorer households (Waller and Hughes, 1999). Therefore, accessibility and transportation were of key importance in measures to get people back to work. Similarly, in both the UK and France, transportation to look for, obtain and perform a job, as it impacts on access to employment opportunities, gradually emerged as a key issue (Gobillon and Selod, 2002; Patacchini and Zenou, 2003) in line with the increasing importance of Workfare policies.

### **Mobility and access to employment: a contested relationship**

However, analyses stressing the role of spatial factors and mobility as obstacles to the employment of poor people have been challenged and contested, especially in the US where they are most numerous. Certain studies attach less importance to spatial dispersal in accounting for the employment difficulties of people on low incomes and focus instead on other factors, such as racial discrimination, access to the social networks and information required to find employment, or skills and qualifications (Ellwood, 1986; O'Regan and Quigley, 1999).

The importance of mobility in accessing employment opportunities has also been played down in other research work which bears out the local nature of the jobs market for poor households belonging to ethnic minorities (Shen, 2001). Ong and Blumenberg (1998) stress that for Welfare beneficiaries, unlike qualified workers, longer commutes do not result in higher salaries. For such households, jobs closer to home cut down on the costs inherent in having to work farther away (transport costs as well as any childcare costs) and increase income. This analysis is corroborated by research carried out in France (Vignal, 2005). The local nature of the low-income jobs market is accentuated for women. Chapple (2001) shows how poorly qualified women limit their job search to local job opportunities as they know that they lack the qualifications needed to be competitive on the regional jobs market. Hanson and Pratt (1992) show that, due to family commitments, women have to narrow down their job search area and focus on local employment opportunities, especially if they are poorly qualified. Women without access to a car are even more constrained in this respect. This research also reveals how poorly qualified women depend on informal networks for access to information concerning employment opportunities: their job searches frequently result in local jobs in areas where their social networks are densest. This local effect is reinforced by the fact that most employers prefer to recruit by word of mouth. Thus, the existence of a 'local preference' concerns both employers and job seekers and helps to create micro job markets. This reduces the significance of 'spatial mismatch' in accounting for the manner in which poor households gain access to employment opportunities.

### **Automobility as a response to barriers to mobility and access to employment opportunities for the poor?**

Barriers to mobility for poor households have been highlighted by the increasing priority accorded to the means of getting welfare recipients back to work. The debate focuses primarily on encouraging car use as means of breaking down transportation barriers and providing the poor with access to employment opportunities.

In the US, while research carried out to measure the impact of public transit on employment opportunities for the poor and ethnic minorities has produced mixed and even contradictory results (Sanchez, 1999; Holzer *et al.*, 2003; Sanchez *et al.*, 2004), research findings in respect of the impact of car ownership are far more categorical. Taylor and Ong (1995) show that barriers to employment opportunities for ethnic minorities are related less to dispersal than to the use of slow forms of transportation: individual members of ethnic minorities have longer commute times because they use public transit more frequently and not because their jobs are further away. They go on to conclude that the problem is one of 'automobile mismatch' rather than 'spatial

mismatch'. A body of related research has shown that car use tends to be positively correlated with a wider range of destinations, higher employment rates and salaries, and reduced disparities in inter-ethnic levels of unemployment (Ong, 1996; Raphael and Stoll, 2002; Blumenberg, 2002). From 1998 on, various reports published by government associations or agencies began to reflect these findings by highlighting auto access as a means of removing barriers to employment opportunities. At the same time, a series of reports were published by a whole range of government and non-government agencies recommending auto programs as one of a number of solutions for ameliorating the employability of Welfare recipients. Guidelines for setting up auto programs were also circulated. In the US context, the 'conversation between academics and policy makers and practitioners remains in its early stages but may accelerate' (Pugh, 1998: 16). It tends to give rise to standard arguments that are reflected in most reports purporting to justify the introduction of auto programs. In France and the UK, such reports are much less common although there has been an upsurge in this activity of late (Choffel and Delattre, 2002; Gobillon and Selod, 2002; Patacchini and Zenou, 2003; Dobbs, 2005). Nevertheless, the issue has not found its way onto the political agenda. This is not because auto programs are much more widely developed in the US — as we shall see, although they are more common than in Europe, they remain of marginal importance.

### A comparison of auto programs in the three countries

As we have seen, mobility has been identified as a factor that enhances social integration and especially 'employability' in all three countries, even though certain experts have stressed that it should not be considered as one of the central factors in the process of exclusion. It is within this context that auto programs have slowly begun to emerge. However, they appear to undermine the sustainable mobility policies that have been adopted in all three countries. This being the case, a number of questions arise. What is the current and potential future role of such programs within the scope of the Workfare policies currently in operation in the three countries? Is their future development being challenged in the light of their potential environmental cost and the controversy surrounding their usefulness? Are they an appropriate response to the barriers to economic and social integration faced by poor households (or at least a portion of them)? In order to answer these questions, we will focus on the implementation of auto programs in all three countries.

From a methodological perspective, this comparative study combined several inputs and levels of analysis:

- 1 Firstly, we carried out a global analysis of all auto programs at national level based on a study of official documents (legal documents, government reports). This analysis sought to place the programs studied within the relevant national political, economic and social context and to compile comparative data for the various countries concerning the development of the programs: official justification, type of action implemented, origin of the initiative (local or national); estimate of the total number of recipients and the funds committed (see Table 1).
- 2 We then conducted a local case study in each of the three countries: the San Francisco Bay Area in the US, two counties in the North East of England (Tyne and Wear, and Durham) in the UK, while in France, our case study was conducted in the Hérault *département*. Each of these local areas features diverse spatial contexts that are characteristic of the countries in question (especially in terms of land use: density, structures, etc.). We drew up an exhaustive list of the existing programs in these areas based on an analysis of official documents and interviews with institutional actors.

- 3 Finally, we studied the *modus operandi* of a small number of important programs in order to compile information for the purpose of appraising the programs, based on existing documents, statistics and interviews with those in charge of running the programs and other institutional actors.

### **Background and development: from local programs to their 'institutionalization'**

Auto programs (help with preparing or obtaining a drivers license; aid with the purchase, upkeep or use of a car) have appeared only recently and are in an early stage of development. This is true even in the US where car dependence is higher and more firmly rooted. The number of beneficiaries is very small and quite negligible if we take the population as a whole. In the US, the total number of beneficiaries of the Ways-to-Work and Wheels-to-Work programs can be estimated at 30,000 by the end of 2005. In France, it is of the order of 4,000, corresponding to about 40 local programs (DATAR, 2004). These figures remain negligible if we apply them to the number of poor households, or even to the smaller number of potential beneficiaries (the total number of beneficiaries or households entitled to apply for the programs in light of the eligibility criteria). In the UK, auto-programs *stricto sensu* are practically non-existent. The Wheels-to-Work (W2W) scheme is based almost entirely on the loaning of scooters and not cars, unlike American programs of a similar type. Its inclusion in this article is justified by the fact that the name Wheels-to-Work covers the two types of program, run by the same institutions and organized in an identical manner.

In all three countries, these programs were offshoots of initiatives which share the aim of 'getting people back to work'. With a number of exceptions,<sup>1</sup> they emerged in the wake of national welfare reform programs (1996 in the USA, 1997 in the UK and 2002 in France). They focus specifically on work-related mobility (job search, commuting, mobility in work). This is the case with the Wheels-to-Work scheme in the UK. To quote one of our contacts who runs one such program in Tyne and Wear: 'Wheels-to-Work are back-to-work schemes, not social schemes'. The scheme is based on the short-term loan (usually for six months) of a vehicle (nearly always a scooter or another two-wheeler — almost never a car) in order to find a job and travel to and from work. Beneficiaries are frequently forbidden from using the vehicle outside of work. In the UK, getting a job is deemed of more importance than mobility as a prerequisite for social integration. In France these programs also primarily concern work-related mobility. Although the national plan to provide help with obtaining a driver's license ('a Euro a day' covers a driver's license costs) has broader stated aims, and work-based social integration is mentioned only after road safety, it clearly states that a driver's license is now a basic requirement for carrying out numerous jobs and comprises a tool for social and professional integration (Bertrand, 2005). As in the UK, local programs are usually based on short-term loans of vehicles (cars, two-wheelers) to ameliorate work-related mobility. Finally, in the US, these programs have grown up in the same way (funding within the scope of Welfare-to-Work), even though the object of most programs (help with purchasing a car) endows them with much broader general aims concerning the mobility of households/individual beneficiaries.

Moreover, an analysis of auto programs shows that they are usually local 'stop-gap' solutions frequently run by associations or 'foundations' that promote humanitarian goals, social integration or family support, and involving public employment services, at least in a financing role (the ANPE in France, Jobcentres in the UK, and Welfare-to-Work funds in the US), or welfare agencies (Le Breton, 2005).

These programs have appeared in response to the concrete demands of people who are unemployed or in distressed situations. Increased car dependence in all three countries has acted as a catalyst in the emergence of such programs by forcing the actors in the

1 See, in particular, the Ways-to-Work program in the US.

field to concede the 'universal need for cars' in a relatively spontaneous manner. Auto programs have undoubtedly emerged as a response to concrete demands because it is more difficult and far more time consuming to impact the other factors that adversely affect the 'employability' of individuals. It should also be noted that, given the distressed circumstances of the applicants, the environmental argument ('we cannot provide the poor with access to cars because it is bad for the environment') was immediately knocked on the head by the actors.

In all three countries, these local initiatives were subsequently incorporated by the public authorities into national programs. In the UK, the Countryside Agency backed the development of various schemes (Wheels-to-Work, community transport, taxi vouchers, etc.). However, an analysis of documents concerning national and local transport policy (local transport plans) reveals the reluctance of public authorities to refer to strictly individual mobility assistance programs (Wheels-to-Work). In the US, the Federal Government authorized individual states to finance auto programs out of TANF funds (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families: family welfare program) and to extend the JARC program (Job Access and Reverse Commute Program that assists in developing work transportation services) on a conditional basis to include auto programs. In the case of France, we also note the tendency to group local initiatives together in a national program — *Mobilité Urbaine pour Tous* (urban mobility for all) (Foultier and Vanoni, 2003). Moreover, the recently introduced national showcase measure to help individuals pass their driver's license drew its inspiration from local initiatives that had been in place for a number of years (Esterle-Hedibel, 1998).

Finally, from a spatial perspective, we note a similar trend in all three countries: the programs first appeared in thinly populated areas (very sparsely populated rural or suburban areas in the US, peri-urban or rural areas in the UK and France). However, more recently, all three countries have begun to 'urbanize' these programs, i.e. to introduce them from the outset into more densely populated urban areas.

### Environmental justice and legitimization of auto programs

The levels of legitimization of auto programs converge to a remarkable degree in both France and the US. The car has become so indispensable to all types of travel, especially job-related travel, that, even though it has a negative impact on the environment, local actors have come to believe that they cannot fight against the generalized increase in automobility. Regarding both countries' welfare and transportation policies, the actors are unanimous in declaring that current mobility requirements can only be fully met by cars. As such, arguments to encourage access for poor households help reconcile the aim of making it easier to get welfare recipients back to work with broader concerns in respect of social equity. While the car is presented as a tool for integrating people into employment and society in general, it is also seen as *the* response to one of life's basic social necessities to which the poorest households are also entitled.

Environmental objections have only really become an issue in the United States. Some authors stress that while the car may improve accessibility for the poor, it is detrimental to the environment. Thus, auto programs cause problems in regions that already suffer from serious pollution (Sawicki and Moody, 2000). Using public funds to provide the poor with better access to cars is questionable as it increases car dependence still further, which is itself a source of congestion and pollution (Kawabata, 2003). However, other authors have refuted these arguments. For Wachs and Taylor (1998), 'we cannot expect to solve the transportation problems of the very poor by limiting their car ownership in a world that our other policies cause to be ever more dependent on automobile travel'. Thus, it is 'neither fair nor pragmatic' to condemn policies intended to encourage auto ownership among the poor (Blumenberg and Waller, 2003: 9) and giving the poor access to a crucial commodity enjoyed by the rest of society actually constitutes a 'moral imperative' (Waller, 2005). This debate is not confined to the experts and in the US the notion of environmental justice is a measure of the degree of legitimacy of auto

programs. This notion now forms part of the everyday vocabulary of transportation policy actors and it is used in debates to demonstrate that it is socially inequitable to make poor households bear the cost of the environmental constraints of such policies by depriving them of cars. In other words, environmental justice dictates that the right to pollute should be evenly distributed among the different social groups.

In France, while the notion of environmental justice has not been taken up by local transportation policy actors, certain local decision-makers have used very similar arguments to justify auto programs. They maintain that it is 'environmental injustice' that allows some affluent households to pollute without having to pay the price. In a similar vein, a number of people interviewed, in both France and the US, stress that beneficiaries' low incomes mean that their car use is kept to a strict minimum. However, it is 'the whole range of factors' bound up with sustainable development, and particularly its social dimension that are highlighted in order to justify measures to encourage auto access for the poor.

In the UK context, the environmental debate is non-existent. The few authors who have dealt with auto programs do actually raise environmental issues but always in order to cast auto programs in a poor light. Referring to the possibility of granting car loans to poor households, Lyons (2003: 342) maintained that, while this would provide poor households with greater access to employment opportunities, it would also have the following side effects:

With the financial means, the individuals now use and become dependent on their cars, foregoing their previous use of already stretched local public transit services. The quality of such services declines as a consequence, impacting upon those who remain dependent on those services for access . . . Those individuals originally unemployed are now contributing to the facilitation of urban and rural form that is founded upon an assumption of mobility and hence the exclusive society is perpetuated.

Moreover, encouraging auto access among the poor would have disastrous effects as these people frequently live in heavily populated rural areas and traffic congestion would inevitably get worse. Finally, these households would tend to drive old cars which are even less environmentally friendly (Lucas, 2004). Thus, the concept of environmental justice which has been championed in the US by Wachs and Taylor among others does not appear to have been taken up by any UK experts.

The UK thus appears to have taken a different approach from the other two countries studied. In comparison to their French and US counterparts, UK public authorities have chosen to subsidize auto-ownership and the automobility of poor households to a far lesser degree, although further research would be necessary to confirm this observation and to identify the reasons. This choice has undoubtedly been made at least partly for environmental reasons, albeit implicitly — insofar as it has neither been challenged nor even debated among UK actors or experts, any reference to environmental justice would not be warranted. Thus, neither the notion of environmental justice, nor the arguments associated with it, whether implicitly or otherwise, appear to have been wheeled out by UK actors or experts in support of auto programs. Moreover, even in a book that deals explicitly with *Transport, Social Exclusion and Environmental Justice* in the UK and the US (Lucas, 2004), the chapters dealing with the UK context never refer explicitly to this notion.

### **Preliminary assessment: auto-programs reserved for those who need them most?**

Although a number of attempts have been made to appraise auto programs (Foultier and Vanoni, 2003; DATAR, 2004), this work is complicated by the fact that they are a recent phenomenon and most are still not in steady-state operation. There is insufficient

hindsight to carry out any real evaluation, and monitoring of the results of such programs by those who run or finance them generally remains superficial. Available studies suggest that the impact of auto programs is positive. For example, based on interviews with 34 beneficiaries of the Good News Garage program in Vermont, Lucas and Nicholson (2003) show that owning a car increased their income. And according to the assessment carried out in 2006 on behalf of the Ways-to-Work program,<sup>2</sup> more than half of the beneficiaries stated that gaining access to a car allowed them to improve their employment conditions; more than 80% consider that having a car allowed them to retain their jobs; three quarters of the interviewees noted that their income increased (by 41% on average) after they obtained a loan through the program to purchase a car; and of the 150 borrowers who received cash assistance before they obtained a loan through the program, 87% were not receiving it after they paid off the loan. It should be noted, however, that these positive results concern a small number of beneficiaries and cannot be generalized.

In spite of the limitations of those studies, we have sought to carry out an initial evaluation of the impacts of these programs based on the information at our disposal and their primary objective: getting a job for the beneficiaries. This evaluation focuses particularly on the procedures used to select the program beneficiaries. In actual fact, even though the number of applicants declared for a given auto program remains small in proportion to the total number of potential beneficiaries, it still vastly exceeds the amount of available places. All programs have procedures for selecting beneficiaries which in turn raises a number of questions: What sort of applicant is ultimately chosen? What explicit and implicit criteria are used? Is the program beneficial for the successful applicants? Are the ultimate beneficiaries chosen from among the applicants (or even from among the potential applicants) those who will derive the most benefit from the program? In other words, to what extent do these programs actually benefit people whose lack of mobility is the main or ultimate obstacle to their 'employability' or, more generally, to a sufficient level of *potential* social participation (i.e. sufficient from the local authority's perspective).<sup>3</sup> Putting the question like this should make it possible to evaluate these programs more effectively in terms of their primary objective.

Analyzing the selection criteria used in three American auto loan programs shows that the program beneficiaries were neither the poorest families nor those most in difficulty. Instead, beneficiaries were chosen, first and foremost, on the basis of their ability to pay back the auto loan. These were the households who are already 'three steps up on the ladder', to quote one of the program coordinators interviewed. At first sight, this criterion does not seem compatible with Rawls' concept of social justice, whereby priority must be given to improving the lot of the worst off in society. However, surely this criterion ensures that assistance is channeled to the households or individuals for whom it will be most useful, as these people are not confronted with other more crippling social integration difficulties. In terms of effectiveness, it seems perfectly sensible to give priority to households or individuals who appear to have a high probability of being able to make future repayments precisely because the vehicle acquired has enabled them to find a sufficiently stable and well-paid job. It also follows that such 'targeting' ensures that loans are repaid quickly, which in turn replenishes the program's funds, thus making it possible to grant fresh loans to other people.

2 This is the most extensive and recent study we had access to. It is based on telephone interviews with 353 beneficiaries of the program. The results of this study are available online at [http://www.waystowork.com/pages/p\\_po\\_wtw-stds.html](http://www.waystowork.com/pages/p_po_wtw-stds.html) (accessed June 2007).

3 Regarding potential social participation, readers should refer to the key remarks of Farrington and Farrington (2005) whereby the action of public authorities should be based on potential and not effective social participation, with individuals being free to participate or not to participate as they wish.

On the other hand, other features of these programs may undermine this targeting objective. The type of vehicle (two-wheeler or car) in particular, will have a bearing on the profile of the ultimate beneficiary. This discriminatory effect is especially noticeable in the UK where beneficiaries of scooter loans are mostly young men.<sup>4</sup> Young women are more reluctant to use this form of transport, as are other categories of potential beneficiaries, such as single mothers with young children, i.e., one of the categories most at risk of social exclusion in the UK. We should note that in the US, young single mothers are the main beneficiaries of auto programs. It is strange that such an obvious discriminatory effect has not given rise to any real debate in the UK.

### Auto-dependence: auto programs v penalizing the use of automobiles?

As regards the whole issue of car dependence, it is worth noting that there are significant differences in programs to encourage automobility in the three countries studied. In the US, auto loan and auto purchase programs predominate, while in France programs focus more on providing help to obtain a driver's license and, to a lesser extent, assistance with automobility (provision of cars or two-wheelers). In the UK, as we have seen, very few Wheels-to-Work schemes offer the loan of a car.

These differences in the type of aid offered reflect different (partly inherited) social perceptions concerning the automobile. In this regard, we wish to call attention to three things:

- 1 Auto programs (auto purchase programs) which go virtually unchallenged in the US<sup>5</sup> would get a far rougher ride in France or the UK where they do not really exist.
- 2 The almost exclusive use of the loan of scooters in W2W schemes in the UK may well be related to the (social) preference for two-wheelers which has long characterized the UK, even though this mode of transport no longer has a positive image.
- 3 The remarks of the French Prime Minister indicating that 'a driver's license, just like proper housing or a job, is an essential factor in social integration, insofar as it represents the principal means of autonomous travel for our citizens' (Bertrand, 2005: 3), and, in particular, the reference to the 'collective and egalitarian dimension' (*ibid.*: 19) which should be inherent in state initiatives to help young people obtain their driver's license, would undoubtedly appear incongruous in the UK or the US.

However, it is also interesting to note that the development of auto programs does not appear to be correlated to any significant degree to the level of car dependence in the three countries studied: although these programs are debated more actively in the US, they have not been developed to any greater extent there than in the two other countries studied. We should also mention that the cumulative impact of all of these programs on the global rate of motorization (or on 'automobile density') is negligible due to their marginal nature.

If the existing programs were to be developed on a larger scale or evolve into a 'right to automobility', differences in the types of aid on offer and their potential effects on car dependence would become more of an issue. Is this scenario a plausible one?

- 4 While it is true that the majority of W2W schemes have been designed for young people (in the 16–25 age group), they are obviously not intended merely for young men. Moreover, if the program organizers wished to broaden the profile of potential beneficiaries, the mode of transport would undoubtedly become much more of an issue.
- 5 Nevertheless, we should note that in certain states, owning a car above a certain value will result in the withdrawal of welfare benefits (Blumenberg and Manville, 2004). This measure can be compared to one of the provisions introduced in Germany in the Harz Plan whereby a person's car is now treated as part of their resources which are capped in relation to the payment of unemployment benefit.

## Paradoxical programs

Our research shows that regardless of their form, auto programs are of marginal importance in all three countries. Furthermore, there is nothing in the surveys, reports or official documents consulted, nor in the interviews conducted, to suggest that any large-scale extension, development of a 'right to automobility' or public aid for automobility is imminent. Thus, there is an obvious gulf between the scientific debate and recommendations calling for motorization of the poor (persistent calls in the US, less so in France), on the one hand, and the reality of limited development and restricted access to the programs themselves. Within the scope of the research carried out, we wish to put forward two explanatory hypotheses, which both reflect the paradoxical nature of these schemes.

### The performance of auto programs rests upon their limited expansion

As already noted, assistance within the scope of auto programs tends to be allocated on a case by case basis to people for whom the lack of access to personal vehicles appears, at the time their application is examined, to constitute a significant obstacle to getting and holding down a job. In any event, the individualized application-based selection process does allow for such targeting.

Obviously, this does not mean that everybody who would have access to employment opportunities if they had a personal vehicle at their disposal actually benefits from the aid. Both the allocation processes and the actual form of the aid itself favor certain categories of beneficiaries and put off other potential applicants. Thus, as we have already shown, young men in rural or semi-rural areas tend to be over-represented among the beneficiaries of Wheels-to-Work schemes in the UK to the detriment of other potential beneficiaries, such as single mothers (for whom the loan of a scooter appears particularly unsuitable), older unemployed people (who are specifically excluded from most schemes) or unemployed people living in urban areas (where W2W schemes are less developed). In the US, programs aimed at granting car loans tend to select the most solvent individuals (i.e. those who appear to be the most able to pay back their loan). Frequently, these individuals are also in a better position to be (re)employed.

Indeed, our previous work (Coutard *et al.*, 2002; 2004) and other studies have shown that the cost of owning and using a car is prohibitive for a significant share of households confronted with barriers to mobility, in particular low-income households (STPP, 2003), which are often further penalized by the fluctuating and unpredictable nature of their income. Excluding individuals or households who can afford a car without any help and those who cannot afford one even when helped, the niche of auto programs therefore appears to be quite limited. This partly explains their limited expansion.

Besides, the advantages provided by automobiles depend to a large extent on where the poor live and work. In France and the UK, a significant portion of poor urban households now live in areas that contain not merely indispensable resources (facilities, services, stores and jobs), but also social and family networks (Coutard *et al.*, 2002; 2004). For such households, local resources compensate relatively effectively for barriers to mobility. For example, the role played by local welfare services is crucial for poor or very low-income households. The spatial proximity of family networks promotes much stronger local ties among workers and employees than among most other social categories, particularly managers and executives (Bonvalet *et al.*, 1999). Similarly, in the US, those living in poor neighborhoods frequently have much stronger ties to family and neighbors than those living in more affluent neighborhoods. For poor households, family-based networks are essential providers of services and mutual help such as childcare or accommodation (Barnes, 2003). In addition, for poor households, mobility may represent a constraint and, above all, a cost (Fol, 2005). Finally, in terms of access to employment opportunities, as we noted in an earlier section, various indicators point to the emergence of localized micro-labor markets. Thus, while lower

levels of mobility among the poor have been categorized by various actors as indicative of 'insularity' or 'confinement to a localized territory' (Le Breton, 2005: 87), 'withdrawal' (Donzelot, 2004: 19), or even 'disastrous immobility' (Lévy, 2000: 161), we see them more as evidence of strategies that make the most effective use possible of local resources than as a form of enforced confinement within a given neighbourhood, as shown by our previous work on the French and British cases (Coutard *et al.*, 2002; 2004). Bhat and Guo (2007: 524) have also underscored these proximity-based strategies: 'low income households consciously choose to (or are constrained to) locate in neighborhoods with low commute costs, long commute times, and high employment density compared to their high income counterparts. Such low income households also intrinsically choose to own fewer cars'.

In these circumstances, is increased auto-based accessibility not a delusion? For households whose resources are locally based, mobility, particularly if it is conditioned by having to find a job, may be a strain on these resources and generate costs that are not offset by the greater freedom and broader horizons that a car is supposed to provide.

Therefore, for some poor households/individuals, programs to encourage automobility (or even mobility) are not an appropriate solution. For a start, this type of aid seeks to impact a factor that probably only accounts for a part of (un)employment-related problems. In actual fact, numerous factors affect access to employment opportunities and the spatial variable does not always have a determining influence: in many cases problems with regard to skills and qualifications, discrimination, access to information networks or the very real constraints associated with an individual's time, childcare or family duties (especially for women) probably have a greater determining influence than mobility.

Hence, in order to be effective, auto programs seem to have to remain marginal. Generalization of the 'right to a car' (for example, entitlement to financial assistance for all households with income below a certain threshold), which is not beyond the realm of possibility, would undoubtedly have a low social utility value in terms of the related cost. Similarly, we consider the call in Lucas (2004: 146) to develop 'travel-training programmes [i.e.] labour intensive, micro initiatives, which need to be planned and delivered to individuals often over very long, even intergenerational, time periods if they are to have a significant effect in terms of behavioural change' to be wide of the mark. Aid that targets mobility (even if this is automobility) would frequently be ineffective in terms of the social and economic integration of the individuals/households concerned.

So, based on empirical research carried out, we are in a better position to analyze the nature of the automobile mismatch highlighted in a large body of American research literature (see above). Access to automobiles, the probability of having a job and income are undoubtedly positively correlated; however, we wish to raise three caveats. First, correlation is not the same as causality and we have shown that causality is at least partly a two-way phenomenon: households that are able to continue running vehicles (with, and subsequently without aid) are those that have sufficient income to do so. Second, average degrees of correlation undoubtedly obscure significant disparities between those households for which access to an automobile has produced an improvement in their economic situation and those for whom it has not, i.e. the average positive impact of the 'motorization' variable hides two very different pictures. Finally, the accessibility variable plays a far more important role in the US than in Europe. In other words, households without access to a vehicle are, on average, at less of a disadvantage in Europe than in the US where overall car dependence is greater.

### **Auto programs are too costly to be generalized**

Let us now deal with the second factor limiting the development of auto programs. General development of automobility for the poor in the form of a genuine policy and not merely one-off or local initiatives, would require considerable investment. In France,

such a policy would cost more than twice the amount of public funding earmarked for urban public transit (Orfeuil, 2005). In actual fact, it is not enough merely to make vehicles available. Such a policy would entail upstream coordination of, and funding for, learner drivers (a difficult and costly undertaking in the case of certain populations). A minimum budget would also have to be set aside for beneficiaries' car-operating costs (gasoline, repairs, auto insurance) without cutting back on other categories of expenditure (food, etc.) in what is, by definition, a fairly meager budget. Where are the resources to fund such a policy to come from?

In all three countries, in terms of both policies and funding, welfare programs to improve mobility are still overwhelmingly based on traditional public transit (and on community transport systems in the UK) where funding consists largely of subsidies or various types of investment (Ubbels *et al.*, 2004). The necessity of subsidizing public transit is generally linked to its social role, i.e. improving the mobility of disadvantaged people who would not be able to get around otherwise. Systematic automobility policies would necessarily lead to a reappraisal of the status quo. If the poor are provided with a significant amount of aid to travel by car, the social role of public transit is diminished and obligatory public or private subsidies appear less necessary. On the other hand, funds are needed to subsidize expensive policies to improve auto access for poor people. For politicians, switching direct or indirect public funding for public transit into individual travel modes, without any change in objectives, would be a 'natural' development. However, for public decision-makers at national level, this approach appears fraught with difficulties. Improved auto access for the poor would augment the existing level of auto use, while there would be a correlative deterioration in public transit as the offering would have to contract in proportion to the reduced amount of funding available (Lyons, 2003; Orfeuil, 2005). An increase in the general level of auto use, coupled with a downgrading of the 'public transit' alternative, can only lead to a further increase in car dependence which would in itself generate an even greater need to provide poor households with access to cars (Dupuy, 1995). The car dependence spiral would accelerate, thus leading to a huge jump in demand. As we have seen, this spiral is currently checked by the limited revenues of poor families and by the fact that such families are clustered in areas that still offer minimal levels of services, and in some cases jobs, relatively close by (Coutard *et al.*, 2002; 2004). If these checks are removed, the demand for access to cars would go through the roof, thus reinforcing car dependence still further.

It is therefore understandable that in the face of such threats (feared more than actually envisioned), policy makers prefer to maintain a guarded stance and they have not attempted to systematically expand or appropriate local initiatives. They have instead restricted themselves to more politically risk-averse alternative policies (carpooling, loans of two-wheelers, assistance with obtaining driver's licenses, etc.) for beneficiaries who are carefully selected with a view to their rapid and sustainable reintegration into the world of work.

Hence, with the exception of the UK, where they are mainly restricted to loans of two-wheelers, experts have tended to support the development of these programs, stressing the significant potential social benefits and the minimal costs involved. Nevertheless, these programs have only been applied on a partial or marginal basis. Consequently, they have only been subjected to very rare criticism, despite the fact that they are clearly contrary to the general thrust of 'sustainable' mobility policies.

This situation may change for two reasons. Firstly, the social imperatives of transportation policies appear set to assume greater importance in the coming years within the scope of energy policies that seek to curb the use of individual cars and minimize their environmental impacts (and potentially higher gasoline prices over the long-term). Therefore, using a car may quite conceivably become much more expensive in the long term. The key issue for a significant portion of the population would then be the affordability of running a car in a context of increased urban sprawl

that seems set to continue, at least in the short- to medium-term.<sup>6</sup> If this happens, this scenario would represent a reversal of the trend of lower costs associated with owning and running a car which have predominated over the past few decades. It would raise issues that go way beyond those affecting only the poorest households. Secondly, the manner in which local resources are used may conceivably change. As we have seen, they are used to promote alternatives to car use and currently act as a check on the demand for automobility. The term 'local', which in this case generally refers to the neighborhood or small town, may come to denote a much larger geographical area due to higher general levels of automobility. The use of a car would then become necessary merely to access these 'local' resources. An increase in the population concerned, coupled with an increase in the need for automobility, may then combine to make the social issue of assisting the poor with automobility a much more urgent topic.

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6 We may wonder about the accessibility planning (more effective coordination of transportation and planning policies in view of the densification and general improvement in the accessibility of essential resources) trumpeted by the British government (SEU, 2003), the exhortations in respect of density and social mix associated with policies favorable to public transit featured in French legislation (SRU and LAURE), as well as Transit Oriented Developments in the US. Not only have political decision-makers struggled to make a significant impact, but it is by no means certain that poor households will benefit from densification operations in areas that are well served by public transit. The pressure from real estate development and gentrification that have accompanied experiments in urban densification near public transit terminals in the US cast doubts on the long-term benefits of these policies to poor households.

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## Résumé

*Les dispositifs d'aide publique à l'automobilité des ménages pauvres sont au cœur d'une tension entre préoccupations économiques (favoriser l'emploi des actifs de ces ménages), environnementales (limiter la production de gaz à effet de serre par la circulation automobile) et sociale (s'assurer que les politiques de maîtrise de la mobilité automobile ne pénalisent pas les ménages pauvres de manière disproportionnée). Cet article rend compte d'une recherche comparative sur la genèse et le développement de ces dispositifs dans trois pays notamment caractérisés par des degrés différents de dépendance automobile (France, Grande-Bretagne, Etats-Unis). Il montre que ces dispositifs, manifestement utiles pour les ménages bénéficiaires et étonnamment peu contestés en dépit de leur caractère contradictoire avec les politiques de restriction de l'usage de l'automobile, demeurent néanmoins marginaux dans les trois pays. Deux raisons principales expliquent cet état de fait: d'une part, l'aide à l'automobilité ne constitue pas une réponse appropriée aux difficultés rencontrées par une fraction sans doute importante des ménages pauvres; d'autre part, son développement à plus grande échelle représenterait un risque politique non négligeable, notamment par une déstabilisation des mécanismes de financement des transports collectifs et un affaiblissement de leur légitimation sociale. A plus long terme, cependant, la multiplication d'instruments économiques et fiscaux de limitation de l'usage de l'automobile pesant proportionnellement plus lourd dans le budget des ménages plus modestes pourrait rendre nécessaire un développement important des dispositifs d'aide à l'automobilité.*