The Mobility of Low Income Households in the Greater Belfast Area

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ABSTRACT:
This paper explores the relationship between low-income households and their travel patterns. In Belfast, there are wide differentials in access to transport across the city for different social groups. For households without access to a car in the urban population their travel choice is restricted, which may create barriers to education, employment opportunities. Providing equitable access to services and amenities is a key policy concern. Evidence from the literature reveals that these different groups in society, which experience transport poverty, are the elderly, disabled, children, women and lone parents. This paper presents evidence from a number of focus groups undertaken in several deprived wards in the Greater Belfast Area. While car ownership is increasing amongst low–income households, the study highlights the role of the community based para-transit black taxi use. This taxibus service that operates along fixed routes, is unique to Belfast, and operates in the most deprived parts of the city. Other findings discussed in the paper include travel experiences through interface areas, public transport and car use, and walking and cycling in lower income communities. This paper finds that different dimensions to social exclusion can be found across the case study areas. Physical and geographical exclusion is a problem, which can be remedied with the careful application of policy at a local level. However fear based exclusion is a concept, which will be much harder to address.

1. Introduction

This paper investigates the role of transport in the daily life of communities with high levels of deprivation and different groups who are at risk of experiencing transport disadvantage in Belfast at time of rapid development and urban renewal. Using a series of focus groups the paper shows how different communities are meeting the challenges and adapting to a post conflict environment. The dominant mode of travel is by car, the main mode for travel to work in Belfast, accounting for almost 80% of journeys. Even though car ownership is increasing at twice the rate of that found in England, 46% of households in Belfast have no access to a car (N.I. Census, 2001). Changing demographics of the population and government policy have influenced decisions and centralised essential services such as health and education which have had an effect on transport trends and behaviour. The migration of the population, which has occurred since the 1970s from city centre locations to the outer suburbs, has resulted in a reduction of inhabitants within the Belfast City Council area. As a result of 30 years of conflict the need or desire to travel to or through different areas has shaped the public transport network, making it harder to travel using public transport across the city without changing services. One by- product of the 'Troubles' has been the emergence of paratransit or stage carriage black taxi operations along key arterial routes, first on the Falls[3] and then on the Shankill[4] roads, which started to operate when public transport was unable to operate. This community-based response to provide hackney cabs along existing bus routes is in direct competition to public transport.

2. Research Methods

This paper reports the findings from a series of eighteen focus groups and fifteen semi structured interviews undertaken as part of a wider ongoing research study. A topic guide was developed to ensure that the range of issues was covered within these focus groups and interviews. Based on supporting evidence from the literature, the sample groups reflected the types of group most at risk of social exclusion and transport disadvantage. The focus groups were assembled and asked questions following the topic guide that allowed a greater exploration and depth to the issues that arose in the discussion. The meetings were tape recorded and later transcribed. The size of the focus groups ranged from five to twenty three persons. Similarly, the in-depth interviews with individuals and stakeholders in delivering policy and services were taped and transcribed also. This approach provides a forum both for the collection of qualitative research data on opinions, beliefs and attitudes of the inhabitants from the selected in the case study areas. A wide range of groups were consulted which

[3] Falls Road Predominantly Catholic /Nationalist Area of West Belfast
[4] Shankill Road Predominantly Protestant/Loyalist Area of West Belfast

included lone parents, women's groups, the elderly and also groupings which included physically and mentally disabled young people. Poor access to employment for those on low-income was also explored through a series of meetings which took place with young and older adults undergoing training and seeking employment as well as those in further education. Locations such as community centres, neighbourhood development associations, health centres and colleges of further education as well as training and employment organisations were used to meet such groups.

3. Description of Case Study Areas.

Ward selection was based on a number of factors, including:

- Public transport and paratransit access
- Car ownership levels
- A relatively high Multiple Deprivation Index ranking

Crumlin

The most deprived area in N. I., part of west Belfast between the Shankill and Crumlin roads. According to M.D.M. ranking, with low levels of car access at less than 30%.Almost 42% of households have at least occupant with a long term limiting illness. The mortality rate is 127 based on 100 as the average for N.I. Accommodation is mostly rented; with13.9% of total households occupied by lone pensioners. Almost one third of the population are over 60 years of age most of whom live on their own. Also 14% of homes described as lone parent households with dependent children. Good public transport links exists to some parts, along the two arterial routes, as well as well as stage carriage taxi buses, which are routed from the area to the city centre.

Ballynafeigh

This is located near to a southern arterial route, in an area well served by public transport. The district contains a mixture of owner occupied and rented accommodation also houses with high multiple occupancy (HMO), which is reflected the high pop/ per/hectare figures. It is an area which has a strong, diverse community base, with a higher than N.I., average percentage of ethnic minorities residing in this area. South Belfast area has the highest percentage of children who speak English as a second language.

Ballymacarret

Ballymacarret is a good example of an area which is close to the eastern inner city, has low levels of car ownership (32%of households), and which suffers from high deprivation (ranked no.9 in Northern Ireland). Yet it has good public transport access to bus services and also a large part of the ward is close to a main rail station. Almost 32% of households have inhabitants with a long-term illness. The mortality rate is high at 133 based on 100 as the average for N.I. A quarter of the population are under 16 years of age with more than 20% over the age of 60. While it is mostly residential housing, (27.5% are owner occupied.

Whiterock

An area, which is one of the most deprived in Belfast, has a third of households with one or more persons with a long term limiting illness. The average life expectancy of the population is among the lowest in Belfast at 155 based on 100 as the N.I average. Low levels of car access are a feature, while just over 30% of households have use of a vehicle and a large young population ,almost one third of inhabitants are under 16 years of age. Public transport is limited to the arterial routes, which does not enter the large housing developments. Stage carriage taxis or para-transit system to the city centre also serves the area. The majority of accommodation is rented although more than 36% is owner occupied.

Stranmillis

Stranmillis in south Belfast is near to the inner city with close proximity to Queens University. It is a densely populated area with mixed housing but also has high levels of high multiple occupancy (HMO), lower than average age of the population and good public transport access. Car access or ownership is high. Over 80% of households have access to private transport a large proportion of which 40% are owned outright. The majority of the population is between 16 and 60 years of age and only 2.3% of households are lone parent with dependent children. Less than one quarter of homes have persons with long-term ill health. The average mortality rate is considerably better than the N.I. average at 63 compared to the average baseline of 100.

Figure 2 Belfast Area Map Case Study Wards
Source. Northern Ireland Neighbourhood Information Services, Statistics and Research Agency 2005

5. Focus group evidence--weekly travel

The focus groups and in-depth interviews were undertaken using a topic guide. The respondents were asked to describe their travel in a typical week. Where they lived and what their status was, employed, jobseeker retired etc., which shaped their travel patterns. Those who had greater needs and responsibilities displayed more routine travel behaviour compared to single persons, especially if they suffered from any form of ill health. During the course of this study the focus groups identified the needs and issues, which affected women's groups and those who were mothers of young children, were expressed. The obligations and responsibilities of such groups involve multi-tasking and mean that they combine activities on a daily basis and have to meet a schedule, for example around school hours. This necessitates frequent return journeys to and from schools if the children are young and need to be accompanied. The presence of young children was a main influence on travel patterns. When asked to describe a typical weekday a respondent replied,

> "I can walk down to the school with the older two. Sometimes I call into my mothers with the baby after. Then on a Tuesday I go to the community centre. They have a mother and toddler group from 10 to 12. It's great you can see your friends and get a cup of tea. The kids all play together and the staff are great. Then after I go to the shops before I collect the others from school at 2.pm If its raining I would get the bus but I would rather walk if the weathers good. Its not too far I can walk in twenty minutes" **((Mother of three, Ballynafeigh).**

Pensioners who are active seem to centre their lives on organised functions provided by the community. The areas which were most deprived seemed to have a better support infrastructure than other neighbourhoods which were better off.

> "Twice a week we come here for the lunch club. Some people can walk OK but the minibus takes the others. It gets you out of the house and you don't have to wash the dishes! Sometimes too they have a bus run and we go out on a shopping trip for the day. We went to Coleraine the last time but my friend couldn't go. He has arthritis and can't sit that long on a bus. There is a bus every at half eight on Friday morning to take ones down to the market". **(Female pensioner, Whiterock).**

Young persons used private taxis more often in lower income areas than more affluent areas especially for social occasions. This was common in Crumlin, Ballymacarret and Whiterock especially. In Ballynafeigh and Stranmillis it occurred too but because many places were within walking distance or by a direct public transport service it was not an issue to the same extent. Young adults in both Crumlin and Whiterock districts travelled by paratransit or taxibus frequently into the city centre along the designated routes. For many it was a first stage on a journey to work.

> "I work at Mallusk (on the northern outskirts of Belfast). I get a black taxi to Castle St go round to the City Hall and then get a bus to Mallusk .The taxis are quick they go along the bus lanes but then I have to walk a bit to the bus stop".**(Young male, Whiterock)**

Similar travel behaviour was found in the young adult focus group in the Crumlin ward most of which were trainees. The paratransit taxis were used to link into the bus network from the city centre to their onward destination. Young people relayed the view that the black taxis provided a better service than the public transport buses and they felt more comfortable using them. Some of the comments expressed the sense of loyalty and ownership of this mode of transport.

> "You don't have to wait long for a taxi on the road. Its cheaper than the buses. I would rather get a black hack (Taxibus). I know most of the drivers they are all from the district." **(Young male trainee, Crumlin).**

Good community transport provides a lifeline not only for persons who are disadvantaged because of transport but gives respite care to the families of adults and children with special needs. Adults with a physical or mental disability often have parents who are unable to manage without assistance.

> "The Gateway Project is a Godsend for us. It was started in the district 30 years ago by (name of resident) and (local priest). It gives us a bit of a breathing space. Two of my sons are badly disabled. It was easier to cope when they were young. D (name) was OK until he was nine months old and then we noticed things weren't right. Now they are 32 and 34 and are hard to manage". **(Mother of 2 disabled adults).**

6. Constraints and opportunities of travel

Just as the needs and responsibilities of vibrant households create a demand for travel, a non-car owning person who is suffering from disability, physical or mental is restrained. The limits of mobility for such groups only add to social exclusion and social interaction because of transport disadvantage. The area where this interviewee lives has no community transport and relies on relatives for support. When asked what was his weekly travel behaviour a respondent stated;

> "I don't go out much at all. I only go out once every six weeks for an assessment to Purdysburn (Psychiatric Hospital). I go by taxi .its the only time I go out. I am living here on my own. I left here a long time ago to get away and worked for Lambeth Council. But then I had an accident at work and had to come home (to Belfast). I used to have a good life now I just exist". **(Male early forties Ballymacarrett).**

Almost a third of the population of this resident's area suffer from a long-term illness. Deprived areas usually have good community support but there are always those who are invisible to social support or even do not wish to be helped. Mobility and size of an activity space is also shaped by the mode of transport used especially because of limited public transport networks. Young adults who were employed or hoping to access employment and who lived in deprived areas regularly had to travel outside the local area to do so. Travel for most young adults means public transport, which often is unavailable or does not meet their needs. Sharing lifts with others or using taxis was often an alternative. Only one out of the focus group in the most deprived area involving young adults had access to a car. While they would all aspire to owning one the cost of running a vehicle was prohibitive, particularly the cost of insurance. A car may be the only realistic option for some to access employment.

> "I would need a car to carry my tools but I can't afford the insurance. I am taking driving lessons but even if I passed I have been quoted £2800 for a Ford Fiesta".
> "(19-year-old apprentice joiner Crumlin.)

Unfortunately the most deprived areas in Belfast include many examples of social problems, lower life expectancy, higher than average levels of long-term illness and young teenage mothers. The experience of women in an area of high deprivation and a lower level of public transport service characterise the barriers these groups face. In the Whiterock district, which ranks number 3 in Northern Ireland these problems are increased when the ages of the mothers are in their teens and young adults. The incidences of young people who have the added responsibility of children face many problems with mobility a difficulty they face each day.

> "The two most important concerns we have and which affects our budget are childcare and transport" **(Director, S.A.M. School Age Mothers Project).**

Because of the need a support body was implemented to assist young mothers with childcare and continuing access to education or employment. However the funding for such schemes in Northern Ireland quite often a; clause which states that the organisation must function on a cross- community or even cross-border basis. The application of these criteria results in the main focus is inclusitivity but not necessarily at a local level. This is because the centre where the support is administered is rotated between different communities at the end of each set of funding. This has the effect in terms of transport, adding to social exclusion for those who are outside the support centre area.

This interviewee places importance on good access to facilities as a key factor and a significant part of daily life for him and his family. A community worker who has experience of assisting families and housing matters describes the neighbourhood as "high demand/ low turnover" and those low-income families that do move in want to stay. But this has consequences,

> "There are lots of people who want to come here but can't, the difficulty is broadly speaking is the price of property in the area depending on who you are if you are a homeowner that's fantastic but if you are a family on low income theres two things you can't afford to buy and secondly social housing providers are finding it increasingly difficult to actually buy properties to provide social housing in the area. And if you are renting in the private rented sector an awful lot of your income is going to pay your rent. Market rents in this area are pretty high. The knock on effect of that is that the low-income people don't have as much money to be mobile because they are spending a lot on their housing costs". **(Ballynafeigh community worker).**

Access to shops is better in areas, which are near a key arterial route with good public transport and access to shopping centres. Most of the case study areas had poor direct services to shops especially grocery provisions.

> "I can get a bus up to Forestside; the stop is only five minutes from my house. Or if I want I can go into town. I buy a day ticket and go in after 10, it's cheaper. I leave one of mine to school and I mind two others so we go on the bus. If I didn't have the wee ones I would walk" **(Mother and childminder, Ballynafeigh.)**

In the Whiterock Ballynafeigh and Crumlin wards there was good support given to older persons through regular outings and lunch clubs. Most had meetings, which took place twice a week and allowed interaction between pensioners in each ward. But there was an imbalance in community transport provision. The Crumlin and Whiterock wards had better access to community transport and subsidised taxi fares through organisations such as Disability Action and the Gateway Club but in the Ballymacarret ward no community transport existed. The level of services to those who are disadvantaged through age or ill health varies in across the study areas. Some neighbourhoods have good community support. Pensioners use mainly use private taxis and black taxis. Most are living alone no family to assist with transport and are highly dependent on taxi use Fares are not always the same and tend to vary.

> "It depends on the driver what fare he charges. From where I live I prefer to pay £4 to get here (community centre for a weekly lunch) by taxi than go on a bus .I cant walk up the hills to go to the bus stop.**(Whiterock resident).**

Residents of an area do not necessarily go to the nearest doctor. They may have a family doctor who they are more familiar with who has moved practice over the years or because they have moved to another district away from their doctors surgery. The result often causes additional pressure on the elderly and infirm.

> "It cost me £19 to visit my doctors three times in the one week. So that takes me down and brings me back home. I am a widow like I have no one else". **(Whiterock resident suffering from long term illness).**

10. Access to education

Often parents in N.I exercise their right to send their children to the school, which they perceive, will give the best possible education and opportunities for them. The schools are not necessarily the closest ones to their household. This is quite common in Northern Ireland. A significant number of participants in the focus groups in the case study areas exercised their right and wiliness to send children to Lagan College an integrated school but does not have a dedicated school bus for their location. The school is popular but not easily accessible by public transport. The school does have use of 16 buses but for the spread and shape of the catchment area the demand exceeds the supply. This has placed an added burden on those families who have children at the school and for whom the bus service was re-routed. According to one parent,

> "It is going to cost me £800 a year to send my children to Lagan College. Because there is other schools nearby we are not entitled to concessionary bus passes from the (Belfast and Education) Library Board. We (other parents) are looking to see if we could hire a bus to take them to school. It would be cheaper than that".
> **(Mother of Lagan Integrated College pupils).**

The attitude of parents wanting their children to be educated and interacting with others in a setting as diverse as possible, regarding religion and culture which are not their own, reflects the changes in a community such as Ballynafeigh. This is not to say that it does not occur in other neighbourhoods but the reasons for travelling to schools outside the neighbourhood may be slightly different especially in those wards, which are overwhelmingly either Protestant or Catholic. Changing demographics and the reduction of the school age population resulting in a centralisation of schools and generating travel.

Many parents do wish their children to attend schools which are affiliated to a religious denomination or because it is a boys or girls only school. This usually involves extra travel, as the catchment area for such schools can be problematic with no direct transport link. Often the distance is not excessive if measured in straight line but the shape of the public transport network means that a combination of buses requiring interchange is needed.

> "My youngest has to leave at 7.30 every morning to go to school. It takes two buses and an hour and a half to get there. Sometimes it is 6 o'clock before she gets home. If I could afford a car I could take her in 15 minutes". **(Mother of pupil aged 12 Ballymacarret).**

11. Access to Information

Even though bus services are good on key transport corridors, access to travel information was not easily obtainable or misunderstood. This was the case for some residents who had recently moved to the area and who were unsure about bus services. However even long term residents who lived close to a bus route spoke with uncertainty about times and frequency of buses and were unsure about how to connect to another route or interchange. Despite this resident living in the area for over two years she lacked travel information and confidence.

> "Translink have a call centre and I would ring them for journeys outside Belfast but inside Belfast I would sound silly it was you know, you should know these things. I am aware of other people I meet at bus stops who do taxi from one part of Belfast to another and spend £7 on a taxi when they shouldn't need to cause the bus service is good but there is just not enough information. It can be confusing, you are hit by numbers, and if I am going to Forestside I have to say to the bus driver.... do you go? You get buses going to the Four Winds and you say I think that might be the right one. To me it's not clear-cut even on the board thing its not clear cut it's going past Forestside (shopping centre). I spend a lot of money on taxis I should really spend it on a car about £30 a week which is disgraceful and that's just going to and from courses. I go to a course, somewhere down around Queens its not even far away but I do that on a Friday but because I am not aware of bus routes I have to taxi".
> **(Single mother of four, Ballynafeigh).**

For other women a barrier to public transport was the lack of information and the timetabling of bus services. Frequently waiting for a bus that did not turn up shaped their perceptions and affected their attitude to services in the future.

> "Used to use the Springfield road bus and had to wait an hour see when it is not coming they should put a wee sign up it should be on the big plastic screen."
> **(Female, Whiterock).**

Access to public transport information was a common theme in all the case study areas. Some had no idea how to get information on bus timetables. Others were not aware of the Translink call centre despite a large and frequent advertising campaign. Most depended on the timetables posted at the bus stop. Vandalism is an ongoing problem at bus stops as this respondent relates.

these reasons the co-operative paratransit taxibus operations in the Falls and Shankill has been very successful. The communities have confidence in them to provide a good service at a reasonable cost albeit a limited one as the routes are inflexible. If a proper subsidy for all groups not just disabled, was introduced to enable legal taxi companies to deliver mobility to persons who qualify, it may be a more cost effective measure than targeting resources at integrated transport. Access to employment for young persons is a crucial sector which an initiative funded by schemes such as Urban 2(Peace and Reconcilliation Fund) is addressed by short term leasing of powered two wheelers to those eligible. However this scheme is only a pilot and only functions in one part of North Belfast. Nonetheless it is an example of a strategy, which can work well, and one which needs to be rolled out into other areas.

From the discussions with the focus groups the complexities of the application of a transport policy which can incorporate the demands and needs of each community will require more detailed research relating to the travel behaviour of different social groups. This will be produced in a further paper based on a detailed survey of 1000 households in the same case study areas. If anything, this approach is more important to identify those at risk of social exclusion as they become more invisible because of the rate of development in these areas. Early evidence from the study reveals the profile of some areas, which although they score highly on the deprivation scale, also display some of the rapid benefits of economic growth. Areas which previously were unattractive, particularly Ballynafeigh have become much sought after by developers and young professionals because of its location and access to the city. Many of these new residents are multi car owning in older districts, which were not designed for large volumes of traffic. As progress is maintained other areas will experience the same trend where house values and car ownership increase yet who suffers from social exclusion or transport disadvantage will be harder to define. The risk is that as the balance of a community becomes more economically diverse making a successful car-less and more non –motorised transport policy less likely. The concept of integrated transport in a highly car dependent city like Belfast is an uphill struggle. Considering that a prime objective is to encourage mode shift from car to public transport, what happens if you are one of the 46% of households in Belfast that do not have access to a car?

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