

PRECARITY IN HOUSING AND EMPLOYMENT A HIDDEN DIMENSION OF CAR DEPENDENCY

Key points

- People on short term or zero-hour contracts, or who have to move home or workplace unexpectedly, cannot always predict or plan their travel patterns.
- This precarity and ongoing uncertainty can make owning a car a necessity for many on lower incomes, even when it is hard to afford. Without a car many report diminished job opportunities.
- It can be unrealistic and unjust to expect people in such a situation to reduce fossil fuel consumption or switch to cleaner modes of travel. Some people have limited 'choice'.
- Breaking the links between precarity and car reliance could improve opportunity and welfare, and unlock possibilities for more people to reduce their car dependency.

Introduction

We investigated how people's lives are affected by the availability and affordability of fuel, vehicles, and other forms of mobility. This matters because the need to cut pollution is motivating policies aimed at reducing fossil fuel consumption and promoting a switch to cleaner vehicles. There are then implications for the costs of car ownership and travel. We held in-depth interviews with 46 adults (aged 19-70) living in a range of urban, suburban and rural locations in the north of England and with low to median incomes. These interviews explored expenditure on housing, transport and domestic energy and the trade-offs being made. Whilst sectoral analysis of affordability is routinely undertaken there is very little existing research that contributes to our understanding of how difficult decisions surrounding affordability and participation in society are experienced and managed.



Questions

- What factors influence patterns of travel amongst people on low to median incomes?
- How does the availability and affordability of public and private transport interact with uncertainties in people's lives over the short and long term?
- Do measures to reduce fossil fuel consumption risk creating hardship for certain households, and if so how can this tension be resolved?

Findings

It is common in policy analysis to assume that the costs of housing, employment and transport are traded off against each other when people move house or job, and when they figure out how to travel between these locations. In fact, few of our participants had much 'choice' about where to live or work.

For example we found accounts of:

- People having to move home unexpectedly, or at a time not of their choosing. The reasons include 'no fault' eviction from privately rented homes, changes in social housing, repossession and family issues.
- Employers moving locations or redundancy forcing job changes.
- Ongoing uncertainty about employment locations and journeys to work arising from being on short term or zero-hour contracts.

These forms of precarity and uncertainty mean that some people have very few options about when and where they move home to or how long they remain in the same place. For example, participants who had been forced to move, described how their priority was finding social rather than private rented housing, as the latter carries the risk of no-fault evictions. The lack of options at the point of having to move, meant that some people had to move in with their extended family, or, as in the case of one interviewee, become temporarily homeless.

Having to move can mean people find that they have to make long or complicated everyday journeys. One participant's journey to work had changed from a half hour walk to a 90-120 minute journey on two buses. This was after she had to move from soon to be demolished social housing, and struggled to find alternative affordable accommodation for herself and her extended family in a similar location.

When employers move location, the ability to access the workplace by public transport, even from a stable residential address, cannot be taken for granted. A participant in her 30s has experienced her employer moving location three times, most recently away from the city centre and to a location difficult for her to access without a car. As a single parent on a modest income, she had to get financial support from her father, and commented:

I am very lucky in the sense that my Dad did that, I'd have been lost without the car, just terribly lost.

Significance

The findings challenge assumptions about the 'decisions' and 'choices' people can make and future patterns of affordability. This is because:

- There is likely to be a large group of people who for reasons of precarity and uncertainty have little or no choice about the forms of transport they use. In Britain 32% of working age people not in full time education have insecure employment;¹ in England 20% of households live in private rented housing (double the number in 2002) and account for 48.6% of households who have moved in the last year.²
- Some people live and work in situations that 'demand' the use of a car and find it difficult to afford the costs involved. In theory, cleaner and more efficient vehicles should in time cascade through the fleet and reduce the cost of motoring, but some costs, including those of maintenance, are likely to go up.

Implications

Current approaches to reducing transport energy and emissions focus on the adoption of ultra-low emissions vehicles and encouraging people to switch their modes of travel. Both are compromised by common forms of housing and employment precarity:

- Those able to afford the cleanest vehicles will benefit from lower per mile costs of travel. They will be relatively more insulated against fuel price rises, leaving those dependent on older cars relatively more exposed to rising travel costs.
- Mode shift is often difficult for those facing precarity. Economic incentives, information or improvements for public transport, walking or cycling along fixed corridors may all be ineffective where people have limited ability to choose journeys, routes and therefore modes.

A first step to mitigating the transport and emissions impacts of precarity is to understand better its extent, for instance by adapting travel surveys to show how housing and employment moves affect patterns and forms of travel. This does not currently happen.

Effective measures to reduce the impacts of precarity on car use and carbon emissions need to make it easier to make complex, sometimes unpredictable journeys that do not follow peak times or routes without using a car. Measures might include:

- Taxis and car sharing that can mitigate some travel difficulties – but can have other costs as well.
- Focus on fostering door-to-door walking and cycling, even on lesser used routes.
- Using smartcard ticketing to ensure that frequent but irregular users of public transport can access low fares in the same way that daily commuters do through season tickets.

¹ <http://www.resolutionfoundation.org/app/uploads/2015/07/A-steady-job.pdf>

² https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/595785/2015-16_EHS_Headline_Report.pdf

