

# TRANSPORTATION APARTHEID

## LEFT BEHIND BY TRANSPORTATION APARTHEID BEFORE AND AFTER DISASTERS STRIKE

By Robert D. Bullard

Transportation serves as a key component in addressing poverty, unemployment, and equal opportunity goals by ensuring access to education, health care, and other public services. Transportation equity is consistent with the goals of the larger civil rights movement and the emerging regional equity movement.

American society is largely divided between individuals with cars and those without cars. The private automobile is still the most dominant travel mode of every segment of the American population, including the poor and people of color. Clearly, private automobiles provide enormous employment access advantages to their owners. Having a car can also mean the difference between being trapped and escaping natural and man-made disasters.

According to the 2001 National Household Travel Survey (NHTS), which was released in 2003, 87.6 percent of whites, 83.1 percent of Asians and Hispanics, and 78.9 percent of blacks rely on private cars to get around. Nationally, only seven percent of white households do not own a car, compared to 24 percent of African American households, 17 percent of Latino households, and 13 percent of Asian American households.

### Dismantling Transportation Apartheid

For more than a century, African Americans have struggled to end apartheid on buses, trains, and highways. This form of

racial discrimination was codified in 1896 by *Plessy v. Ferguson*, a U.S. Supreme Court decision that upheld Louisiana's segregated "white" and "colored" seating on railroad cars, ushering in the infamous doctrine of "separate but equal."

The modern civil rights movement has its roots in transportation. In 1955, more than a half a century after *Plessy vs. Ferguson* relegated blacks to the back of the bus, Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat at the front of a Montgomery city bus to a white man. In so doing, Parks ignited the modern civil rights movement. Parks, who passed away in 2005, would have had a difficult time sitting on the front or back of a Montgomery bus in 2000, since the city dismantled its public bus system—which served mostly blacks and poor people. The transit cuts were made at the same time that federal tax dollars boosted the construction of the region's extensive suburban highways.

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Many of the nation's regional transportation systems are "regional" in name only—with a good number of "separate and unequal" urban and suburban transit systems built along race and class lines. The ten-county Atlanta metropolitan area typifies a region struggling to get its roadway and transit balancing act together. The Metropolitan Atlanta Regional Transit Authority (MARTA) serves just two counties, Fulton and DeKalb Counties, and the city of Atlanta.

Race has literally stopped regional transit in its tracks. The outlying suburban counties of Cobb, Gwinnett, and Clayton opted out of MARTA and created their own "separate" bus systems. For many white suburbanites, MARTA is jokingly referred to as "Moving Africans Rapidly Through Atlanta" and they want no part of it. (Indeed, a recent rider survey revealed that 78 percent of MARTA's rail and bus riders are African American and other people of color.) MARTA is the nation's eighth-largest transit system and the only one in the country that does not receive any state earmarked funds. In contrast, the Massachusetts Bay Transit Authority (MBTA), the nation's oldest and sixth-largest transit system, gets 20 percent of the state's five cent sales tax, or about \$680 million a year.

In Louisiana, New Orleans and Jefferson Parish also run separate bus systems. Passengers on the New Orleans Rapid Transit Authority (NORTA) and Jefferson Transit are forced to switch buses at the parish line. Even Hurricane Katrina floodwaters did not wash away the stubborn cultural divide that separates New Orleans from its suburbs.

In November 2006, New Orleans and Jefferson Parish councils met to try to end the longtime regional transportation roadblock and bring the fractured city and suburban bus system in sync. The two jurisdictions had a chance to combine forces a year after Katrina, when Jefferson Parish awarded a three-year contract for management of its bus system. NORTA made a bid for the job, but Jefferson Parish chose a private Illinois company that offered a better deal.

### Left Behind by Suburban Sprawl

As jobs and opportunity flee to the distant suburbs, where public transit is inadequate or nonexistent, persons without cars are literally left by the side of the road. Suburban sprawl is widening the economic gap between the "haves" and "have-nots." Over time, sprawl-driven development has aided and abetted many black neighborhoods in becoming "opportunity-poor" disaster areas. In 2000, no other group in the U.S.

was more physically isolated from jobs than blacks. More than 50 percent of blacks would have to relocate to achieve an even distribution of blacks relative to jobs; the comparable figures for whites are 20 to 24 percentage points lower.

Suburbs now contain the majority of office space in many of the country's top metropolitan office markets. In 1979, 74 percent of office space was found in central cities and only 26 percent was found in suburbs. By 1999, the central city share of office space decreased to 58 percent, while the suburban share grew to 42 percent.

Detroit leads the nation in suburban "office sprawl." In 2000, the suburban share of the metropolitan office space stood at 69.5 percent in Detroit, 65.8 percent in Atlanta, 57.7 percent in Washington, D.C., 57.4 percent in Miami, and 55.2 percent in Philadelphia. Getting to many job-rich suburbs without a car is next to impossible.

### Stranded by Natural and Man-Made Disasters

Cars are also an essential part of emergency evacuation plans. Disaster evacuation plans across the nation assume that people own cars. Nearly 11 million households in the U.S. lack vehicles, or more than 28 million Americans who would have difficulty evacuating their area in the event of an emergency.

In 1997, to encourage better disaster planning, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) launched Project Impact, a pilot program that provided funding for communities to, among other things, assess their vulnerable populations and make arrangements to get people without transportation to safety. The program reached 250 communities and proved quite effective. However, the Bush administration ended the program in 2001, and funds once earmarked for disaster preparation were shifted away.

Hurricane Katrina demonstrated to the world the race and class disparities of who can escape a disaster by car. On August 28, 2005, Mayor Ray Nagin ordered New Orleans' first-ever mandatory evacuation since the city was founded in 1718. Emergency plans were particularly

insufficient with regard to evacuation for the car-less and "special needs" populations—individuals who cannot simply jump into their cars and drive away. At least 100,000 New Orleans residents—and more than one-third of New Orleans' African American residents—did not have cars to evacuate in case of a major storm. Over 15 percent of the city's residents relied on public transportation as their primary mode of travel.

According to a report published by United for a Fair Economy, *Stalling the Dream: Cars, Race and Hurricane Evacuation*, New Orleans

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had only one-quarter the number of buses that would have been needed to evacuate all car-less residents. The evacuation plan for Katrina worked relatively well for people with cars, but failed to serve people who depend on public transit. This problem is not unique to New Orleans.

Having regional transportation plans and emergency evacuation compacts in place before disasters strike makes good sense. Regional compacts are agreements negotiated among public, private, and civic interests to address tough challenges that cut across regions and cannot be addressed by any single jurisdiction *successfully*. Regional compacts have been negotiated in some

places to address transportation and related air and water quality challenges, as well as growth and related environmental and equity challenges. Such compacts should also be used to address flaws in evacuation planning. Unfortunately, instead of cooperating, many suburbs actually compete with their central cities for transportation, housing, and development dollars—thereby increasing regional fragmentation.

After more than eighty percent of New Orleans flooded after the levee breach, most of the city's 500 transit and school buses were without drivers. About 190 NORTA buses were lost to flooding, and most of the NORTA employees were dispersed across the country and many were made homeless. Sixteen months after the storm, less than half of all New Orleans bus and streetcar routes were back up and running and only 17 percent of the buses were in use.

### Conclusion

Clearly, private car ownership increases mobility (and, in turn, employment opportunities) in normal times as well as in times of disaster. Boosting African American car ownership rates would thus narrow inter-racial employment gaps, as well as enhance their ability to evacuate during natural and man-made disasters.

Katrina exposed a major weakness in mass evacuation plans, shining the national spotlight on the heightened vulnerability of people without cars—a population that faces transportation challenges in everyday life—and the need for comprehensive regional compacts to address mobility needs of all residents before and after disasters. Such regional decision making on critical transportation issues can help give all communities the resources to assure vulnerable residents equal access to jobs, education, health care, and other public services during normal times, as well as equal opportunity to evacuate with the rest of the population when disaster strikes. □

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