

Transportation Needs and Welfare Reform in Rural Iowa: A Case Study

Rural areas face many challenges in meeting the transportation needs of consumers who are making the transition from welfare to work. A convergent needs analysis of the transportation issues in one rural Iowa county illustrates the importance of including the consumer (welfare recipient) perspective in social welfare policy and program development.

Cynthia Needles Fletcher, Iowa State University¹

Helen H. Jensen, Iowa State University²

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996 represents a profound shift in social welfare policy in the United States. Programs designed by each state to promote work and economic self-sufficiency have replaced the Aid to Families with Dependent Children entitlement program. The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grants from the federal government to the states provide flexibility for the design of programs that are tailored to the unique needs of low-income families at the local level. The devolution of welfare program design and administration has increased the demand for systematic, scientific need analysis efforts that are designed to identify the extent and degree of need for specific services for targeted welfare populations. The purpose of this paper is to illustrate the application of a convergent needs analysis approach (Siegel, Attkisson, & Carson, 1978), using a case study of the transportation issues faced by low-income residents moving from welfare to work in one rural Iowa county.

Siegel and his colleagues describe a convergent analysis of needs as "a stepwise, multilevel, multitechnique assessment strategy" (p. 221). The result is an integrated and maximally validated description of the needs in a social area that provides input into a rational planning process. Convergent analysis gathers information from a range of need assessment methods, deployed both systematically and sequentially, in order to yield a reasonably accurate identification of need. "Convergent" in this context has several meanings. First, there is a convergence of different information coming from divergent sources (e.g., consumers, service providers, political leaders). Second, there is a convergence of different assessment strategies, each with some overlapping, yet unique bits of information. Third, convergent also describes the cumulative nature of the assessment, obtaining information at different points in time using different methods to yield an accurate depiction of human service needs of a particular social area. The paper provides background on transportation problems in rural areas and the Iowa Rural Welfare-to-Work Strategies project. We describe the process and findings from a needs analysis, which draws upon secondary and administrative data, as well as results from focus group interviews. We conclude with a discussion and summary of findings.

Transportation in Rural Areas

Rodney Slater, Secretary of the U.S. Department of Transportation, has stated, "Transportation provides the 'to' in 'welfare to work.'" Child care, job readiness, and transportation are seen as three major issues that will affect the success of welfare reform. A national survey of county welfare administrators involved in the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills (JOBS) program were asked to identify the most common reasons job-ready participants do not get jobs. One of the top barriers identified and the second most frequently cited reasons for individuals not being employed, was the lack of transportation to jobs (Hughes, 1997).

Rural areas face many unique challenges in meeting the transportation needs of low-income consumers. Unlike urban areas, rural areas have fewer jobs available, and they may have greater distances between job sites. With the influx of TANF participants that need transportation to travel to education, training, work experience, or employment locations, providing new transportation options to disadvantaged rural residents will be a critical feature of programs designed to help the poor achieve economic self-sufficiency. Transportation is necessary not only to get to and from a job, but transportation is also critical for accessing child care, health care, and other activities such as purchasing food. Transportation in rural areas is particularly critical as distances tend to be greater and public bus service is a rarity.

Travel is an inherent part of rural life. Most rural residents must travel "to town" or to another community for employment. Nationally, nearly three out of four rural counties have an average out-commuting rate from their

towns of more than 35 percent (Aldrich et al., 1998). The smaller the town, the more likely residents commute to another place for work. Both public and private transportation services exist to meet some of the needs of rural communities and their residents, however findings from the National Personal Transportation Survey suggest that nearly 80 percent of all nonmetropolitan counties have no public bus service and nearly 90 percent of all nonmetro commuters were in private vehicles (Pisarski, 1996). Clearly, most rural Americans must rely on private vehicles as their primary form of transportation.

Recent studies indicate that low-income consumers in rural areas use multiple strategies to meet their transportation needs. A Housing Assistance Council study (1997) surveyed workers who lived in households that were receiving welfare benefits and queried respondents about modes of transportation to work. Data indicate that 28 percent of workers in rural households share driving with others, compared to 17 percent of suburban workers from welfare households, and 22 percent of central city workers. Large numbers of welfare recipients carpool or ride with friends to work (Brister, Beeler, & Chambry, 1997). The cost of owning, maintaining and insuring a vehicle is a major barrier for low-income consumers. While nearly 1 in 14 rural households do not own a vehicle, it is estimated nearly 57 percent of the rural poor do not own a car (Burkhardt et al., 1997; Rucker, 1994). A recent study estimates that 96 percent of public assistance recipients have no personal automobile (Miller, 1997).

The Rural Welfare-to-Work Project

Ten states have received federal grants to address the barriers of moving rural welfare recipients off the welfare rolls and into the labor force (Administration for Children and Families, 2000). The Iowa Rural Welfare-to-Work project focuses on the design, implementation and evaluation of a project to address the transportation needs of rural participants in Iowa's TANF program (called the Family Investment Program or FIP). The Iowa Department of Human Services (DHS) has selected a nonmetropolitan county in the southeastern part of the state as the site of the pilot project. The Rural Welfare-to-Work project is designed to:

- identify rural transportation issues in Iowa and the range of transportation problems faced by low-income rural residents,
- identify strategies to overcome existing transportation challenges,
- design and implement a program to meet the needs of low-income residents in the pilot county, and
- evaluate the effectiveness of the program.

The project includes two phases. The first phase is to conduct primary and secondary research to assess the transportation needs of the rural Family Investment Program (FIP) families. The second phase is to develop, implement, and evaluate a strategy designed to address these identified transportation needs. This paper presents findings from the first phase of the project and discusses the implications of the multimethod, applied research process for other policy analysts and for consumer educators working with low-income populations.

Understanding Work and Transportation Issues: Analysis of Administrative and Secondary County-Level Data

Iowa State University (ISU) researchers have conducted the first phase of the project. This entailed analyses of administrative and secondary data to develop a profile of work and transportation issues in the pilot county. ISU also conducted focus group interviews with transportation and social service providers and low-income residents in the county. Both sources of information provide background to developing a strategy to address transportation needs in the county.

Background on the County. The project site is a nonmetropolitan county nonadjacent to a metro area, with two relatively large towns: one community with a population of 12,315 in the southern part of the county, and another with a population of 11,613 in the north. Local residents often make distinctions about programs and services that are delivered in the two regions of the county. For this reason, some analyses provide this geographic breakdown. In 1997, the county had a total population of nearly 39,000. Per capita personal income was \$20,868 – a level at 90 percent of the state average. The county's population dropped by nearly 1000 residents during the period 1987-97.

In June 1999, the county had 411 adult recipients of the Family Investment Program (FIP), based on Department of Human Services (DHS) administrative record data. Most of these recipients (89 percent) had been on FIP for at least one full year. Seven percent had received benefits for 4-11 months, and 4 percent had received benefits for 3 months or less during the last year. Although the greater share of recipients are in the southern part of the county, the two populations of FIP recipients are very similar (Table 1). About 60 percent of the recipients are under 30 years old.

Table 1
 Characteristics of Adult FIP Recipients, Active in June 1999.

Characteristics	County		
	South	North	Total
Number of Recipients	243	168	411
Age			
Mean (years)	29.33	29.44	29.37
Distribution (%)			
<=20 years	14.0%	14.4%	14.1%
21-30 years	49.0%	44.6%	47.2%
31-40 years	25.9%	29.8%	27.5%
41 and over	11.1%	11.3%	11.2%

Source: Iowa Department of Human Services.

Available transportation and access to transportation are critical parts of moving from welfare to work, and the labor supply of current FIP recipients. Although the data on private vehicle ownership need to be viewed with some caution given the difficulties of matching owners with actual users in a household, it is very useful to consider the current ability of FIP recipients to use private modes of transportation were they to be employed. Table 2 provides information from a matched data set of FIP recipients and current vehicle registrations.

Table 2
 Adult FIP Recipients and Vehicle Ownership Status in July 1999

Ownership Status	County		
	South	North	Total
Number of Adult FIP	243	168	411
Number of FIP with Vehicle	60	38	98
Percent FIP with Vehicle	24.7%	22.6%	23.8%
Year of Vehicles Owned			
Before 1991	88.3%	79.0%	84.7%
1991-1995	10.0%	15.8%	12.1%
After 1995	1.7%	5.2%	3.0%

Source: Iowa Department of Transportation vehicle registration data provided to the Iowa Department of Human Services.

Among the adult FIP recipients, about 24 percent reported current vehicle ownership (registration). The rate of ownership was slightly higher in the southern part of the county. And, as expected, most vehicles were more than 8 years old.

The availability and location of jobs in the county are important aspects of the opportunities faced by FIP recipients in the labor market. Here, we focus on jobs in the county; however, the labor market for residents may be larger than the county itself. Table 3 combines data from the Iowa Department of Workforce Development's Employment Security Reporting with the data on FIP participants and vehicle registration. As shown in the table, most firms in the county are private firms; a somewhat larger number of firms and employees are located in the northern part, compared with the southern half of the county. The location of a large government facility in the north (a state penitentiary) accounts for the smaller share of employees working in private firms. The average number of employees per firm is just under 20. The southern part of the county has a relatively higher share of the county's FIP recipients and a smaller share of the employees. FIP recipients represent about 2 percent of the total number of employees in the county.

Table 3
Firms, Employees, and Adult FIP Recipients

Characteristic	County			Non County
	South	North	Total	
Total Firms	464	532	1040	44
Percent of Total	44.6%	51.2%	95.8%	4.2%
% Private Ownership	94.0%	92.7%	93.6%	100.0%
Number of Employees	9160	9551	19145	434
Percent of Total	47.8%	49.9%	97.7%	2.3%
% Working in Private Firms	92.0%	83.7%	88.0%	100.0%
Avg. No. Employees Per Firm	19.7	18.0	18.4	9.9
Adult FIP Recipients	243	168	411	
Percent of Total	59.1%	40.9%	100.0%	
% Vehicle Owners	24.7%	22.6%	23.8%	

Sources: Iowa Department of Human Services, June 1999; Iowa Department of Transportation vehicle registration data provided to the Iowa Department of Human Services.

The largest industries in the county, by employees, are manufacturing, services and wholesale/retail trade (Iowa Labor Services data not shown). The manufacturing sector is relatively more important in the south, both in terms of firms and employees. The 1990 Census data show that the largest share of in-commuters into the county was in the manufacturing sector. Although there was a large number of out-commuters in manufacturing as well, those out-commuters (603) had a lower average salary than did the in-commuters to the county. The manufacturing sector in the county offered relatively higher mean salary (\$24,185) than that received by residents working in manufacturing out of the county (\$20,239). Manufacturing and transportation/public utilities offered the highest average salaries in the county in 1990.

In sum, the number of adult FIP recipients is about 2 percent of the total number of employees in the county, with somewhat disproportionate numbers in the southern half of the county. Nearly 24 percent of FIP recipients currently own (and register) a vehicle. The largest numbers of jobs in the county are manufacturing, services and wholesale/retail trade. The need to have mobility around the county and local labor market is suggested by the degree of commuting in and out of the county, particularly for jobs in the manufacturing sector.

Background on Rural Iowa FIP Recipients. An on-going study of Iowa FIP families provides a secondary source of qualitative data on transportation needs and obstacles faced by Iowa's low-income rural families. The Iowa State University Extension study "Family Well-Being and Welfare Reform in Iowa" is designed to inform policy makers and community leaders as they make decisions regarding welfare policy and programs (Fletcher et al., 1999). Data from semi-structured, semi-annual interviews with 30 FIP recipients in six nonmetropolitan counties were included in the analysis for this project. Themes derived from three successive interviews (fall 1997, spring and fall 1998) that comment on transportation resources and issues are summarized below.

- FIP recipients described a number of barriers to owning and operating a personal vehicle including not knowing how to drive, not having a valid driver's license, and the expense of owning, maintaining and insuring a car.
- FIP recipients who owned vehicles described them as old and invariably unreliable.
- Many FIP recipients relied on a patchwork of friends and family to meet their transportation needs. Many reciprocated, providing transportation to others when possible.
- FIP recipients in rural communities rarely mentioned the use of any form of public transportation except the school bus.

- Transportation directly influenced child care, jobs, and the daily routine. A lack of reliable transportation limited the ability of many rural recipients to seek jobs, further their education, or meet the basic needs of their families.

Findings from this on-going qualitative study of rural Iowa FIP participants suggest that a lack of reliable transportation is clearly a constraint on the options many rural FIP recipients may consider. The cost of owning and maintaining a car is identified as a barrier, but possible behavioral issues that have led to an inability to obtain or maintain a driver's license, to license a car, or to obtain low-cost insurance are also suggested as problems facing some FIP recipients.

Understanding Work and Transportation Issues in the County: Analysis of Focus Group Interviews

Primary data were collected to augment the information gleaned from administrative and secondary data on the county under study. Focus groups were conducted to obtain a better understanding of the nature of the transportation situation from the perspective of those most directly involved in efforts to move low-income families from welfare to work. The purpose of this data collection strategy was to explore the transportation needs of welfare-to-work participants and the resources to meet those needs in this rural area. Findings from the analyses of both quantitative and qualitative secondary data informed the development of the focus group moderator guides. Two focus groups were conducted, one with community professionals and the other with welfare-to-work participants. Themes in the professional group are summarized below.

- Professionals urged the development of some type of organized approach to a "mass transit" or multipurpose, passenger system.
- There was little discussion about an individual approach to transportation needs; the emphasis was on a multipurpose, passenger approach.
- Professionals saw the need for a regional view in solving the transportation problems in the local labor market that now encompasses a three-county area.
- Community business leaders should be involved in the planning and implementation process.
- There was general consensus that a more thorough resource assessment is needed, but that a "custom transportation approach" will be difficult to implement.

The group of eight professionals preferred to focus on a more holistic approach to meeting transportation needs of residents in a three-county area that included the project county. Little discussion took place on the actual needs of, conditions faced by, or transportation problems of welfare-to-work participants. The group shunned discussion of an individual approach to transportation needs (such as personal car ownership) and focused more on the ideas of a transportation brokering service and a multipurpose system for passengers. The exception to this was the brief mention of current efforts by DHS and the Work Experience Project to improve the quality of the transportation resources of program participants through car purchase or repair.

In another focus group conducted with welfare-to-work participants, eight women discussed the challenges they face in dealing with transportation issues and employment. Themes in this second focus group follow.

- Participants described working through a variety of challenges as they attempted to secure and maintain employment. Most frequently, those challenges involved transportation and child care.
- Participants' transportation needs were heavily influenced by the needs of their children.
- Participants reported facing a choice between maintaining employment and being a good parent.
- The transportation needs of these welfare-to-work participants went beyond employment.
- There was general consensus that personal vehicles are the best solution to their transportation needs.

Welfare-to-work participants had many questions about the logistics, quality and continuity of a multipurpose passenger system. This group preferred an approach that would provide low-interest loans for participants to purchase an automobile, regardless of their credit history.

In both focus groups, there was little discussion of the perceptions of the needs represented by the other group. While the moderator deliberately introduced this type of discussion in both sessions, each group had its own, unique view of solutions to the issues. Neither group discussed the challenges faced by the other group.

Discussion and Summary

Elements of a case study of the initial research phase of a program and policy development project have implications for both policy analysts and consumer educators. First, data constraints were a major influence on the

project design. As the State of Iowa devolves responsibilities for welfare programs to the local level, the need for county-level data continues to grow. Our analysis drew upon relevant administrative data from the Iowa Departments of Human Services, Transportation, and Workforce Development. These data will help local policy makers begin to describe the local labor markets and certain characteristics of the FIP population. For example, our access to a data file of the county's adult FIP recipients matched with vehicle registration data has given us new insights into welfare recipients' access to personal vehicles. Labor and Census data, analyzed by zip codes, describe job availability within the county and provide evidence of commuting patterns to jobs in the broader local labor market.

Still, secondary data fail to adequately describe the current context of transportation needs within the county or the dimensions of the transportation problems that welfare recipients are facing. By combining the analyses of secondary data and focus group interviews with targeted groups within the county, we have been able to generate a better picture of the context in which a transportation program will be developed. The study showed a need for reliable transportation as a critical element of engaging welfare recipients in stable employment. It also demonstrated the dependence on and consumer preference for private vehicles in rural areas.

The study has a number of implications for policy development. It underscores the importance of designing programs to meet needs. It illustrates the importance of including the perspectives and needs of welfare recipients in policy and program development. With regard to welfare-to-work initiatives, our study calls for the design of comprehensive programs to support transportation and child-care expenses connected with employment.

There are also lessons for consumer educators who work with welfare recipients. Transportation is a key element in the ability of welfare recipients to enter the work force in rural areas. Transportation needs are multifaceted and reflect the multiple demands of households as they meet not only the work requirements of adults, but also the child care and educational needs of children and the spectrum of basic needs of all family members. This calls for a much more flexible transportation system than is currently available to many rural residents. Finally, our findings suggest the need for consumer education about transportation choices and decisions. Transportation is one of the most costly consumer decisions. Helping welfare recipients become informed consumers can be one step toward increasing the probability that families will move from welfare dependence to employment and self-sufficiency.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Professor, Department of Human Development and Family Studies
- ² Professor, Department of Economics