

The Meaning of Commuting in America III

By Alan E. Pisarski

What does *Commuting in America III* tell us, aside from a deluge of statistics on commuting behavior? It helps us recognize that work travel is an economic phenomenon and a social phenomenon of the first order, as well as simply a transportation topic. It introduces a new stage in commuting patterns as the explosive baby boom era recedes and questions arise of who and where will our new workers be.

FROM AN ECONOMIC PERSPECTIVE:

The surge in the percentage of people working outside their county of residence is tremendously important from the economic perspective. It has several facets and many implications.

- #1. People are moving to exurban regions to obtain desirable housing at an affordable price tag.
- #2. Rural workers are attracted to suburban job opportunities as those jobs move toward the periphery of the metropolitan areas.
- #3. Despite congestion, workers have access to a vast array of jobs distributed across increasingly large metropolitan areas.. Inversely, employers have access to employees from an immense commuter-shed of adjacent counties increasing their productivity. (One-third of the national population resides in 12 areas over 5 million, creating massive aggregations of skilled workers.) This adds up to workers increasingly able to live where they want and work where they want.

FROM A SOCIAL PERSPECTIVE:

- #1. The substantial increases in African-American households with access to vehicles says multitudes among rising opportunity in this country. But it also tells us that there is a long way to go before anything like parity arrives between minorities and the general population.
- #2. As their time in the U.S. increases, immigrant populations transition through the ways to travel to work – demonstrating the power of opportunity. Those here less than five years are heavily oriented to walking, biking, transit and most of all carpooling as their form of access to jobs. These often play the role of socialization engines. After ten or fifteen years, one sees the transition to the automobile and something like mainstream patterns.
- #3 Will aging boomers stay in the work force longer helping solve our worker shortages. This may be a key to our future.

FROM A TRANSPORTATION PERSPECTIVE:

- #1. The shares of commuters leaving home before 6 a.m. tells us a great deal about the weaknesses in our transportation system's services. It is just one symptom of people being forced to adjust behavior to avoid heavy congestion in the peak periods.
- #2. The growth in people working at home can be characterized as the quiet revolution. Over the years, the decline in farm workers masked the rising number of metropolitan workers who worked at home. The *Commuting in America* series has documented that it is the only "mode" of transportation, along with driving alone, that has grown throughout the entire period of the baby boom working years. It has now surpassed walking as a way to get to work and is third behind carpooling in most metropolitan areas. Given the importance of working at home to the older work force, it can be a major force in the future.

This report reflects a society that is both dynamic and productive. The genus *Commuter Americanus* is a very resilient creature; one that is coping with inadequate transportation systems and services as best it can. We are a challenged affluent society.

This brief was produced by Alan E. Pisarski, Author, Commuting in America III. It is not a product of the Transportation Research Board or the National Research Council.