

**CommuterLINK Revisited: Policy Change and Transportation Access of Low
Income Workers**

Summary of 2007-08 data analysis

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Policy Changes and Job Access

In 2002, stricter eligibility standards for CommuterLINK were established, under which it became an interim transportation service to prevent job loss or assist newly employed clients. Only clients with a minor child, who were receiving Ohio Works First benefits in Lucas County and were referred by an LCDJFS case manager could receive services; clients were limited to 90 days of service, after which they were expected to have their own transportation. Service was limited to those whose residences or places or times of employment were not served by TARTA. In 2008, a limit was set of 64 unduplicated clients per year. Eligibility standards for the Car Buy program were also tightened. Most significant was the addition of a requirement that applicants be currently working 30 hours per week and have worked 30 hours per week for at least six months (although college enrollment was counted toward this requirement); the monthly payment by clients increased from \$100 to \$150 in 2008. The Car Buy program expected to serve approximately 60 new clients in 2008. As a result of these changes, both programs serve fewer clients. CommuterLINK now offers only temporary transportation assistance, and the Car Buy program is available only to those who are already employed.

To investigate the impact of these changes, we obtained information from TMACOG on current and recent participants in the Car Buy and CommuterLINK programs. For CommuterLINK, this included places of residence, employment, and childcare locations, as well as days and hours of work; for Car Buy, we have information on places of residence and employment. TMACOG also provided us with cost information for both programs. These data enabled us to compare geographical and temporal accessibility, mobility of past and present clients, as well as current and past costs of the two programs.

We mapped residence and employment locations of CommuterLINK participants in relation to TARTA routes, in order to estimate their ability to access their jobs by public transit. The patterns that emerged were similar to those we discovered in our earlier research. Residences were concentrated in the central city area of Toledo, and employment locations were more dispersed, many beyond the limits of bus routes (as shown on Map 8)Employment locations of CommuterLINK participants, however, did not appear to be more distant from central city neighborhoods than in 2001. [copies of all maps may be obtained by e-mailing the authors]

We also calculated two measures of job access, employment density and jobs within three miles, and mapped the results of this analysis. Both are based on jobs in employment classifications most likely to afford opportunities to low income populations, such as retail, food service, and personal service and measure the concentration of potential employment opportunities relative to distance from each block group in the study region. (An explanation of how each measure was calculated. can be found in appendix 1.) These maps show that job density was greatest for central city residents, as was number of jobs within three miles. When transit routes are compared with employment density, it is apparent that public transit provides access to areas with

higher job density.(maps 9 and 10) What is even more evident is the location of high job density areas in proximity to major highway routes (maps 11 and 12) Yet, despite the concentration of jobs in the central city, many CommuterLINK participants are employed in locations distant from their homes, but accessible by highway and public transit (maps 13, 14, 15). It is noteworthy as well that the distribution of employment locations of CommuterLINK participants closely resembles the overall distribution of jobs (shown in map 4).

Transit access is essential to the ability of these clients to maintain employment after their CommuterLINK eligibility expires under the 90 day limit, because they must be employed for 6 months to qualify for the car buy program. Our previous analysis indicated that utilization of public transit imposed a severe time burden on these workers, particularly those who required child care: total travel times more than five times longer than by automobile, and travel times per mile at least twice longer than by car. Furthermore, the limited hours of TARTA service make it impossible for those with late night or weekend hours to use public transit: our data indicate that nearly half of clients' job experiences (47.5 %) involved weekend hours, and almost one-quarter (24.2%) involved late night hours. Without taxi service or a car, workers may be forced to quit these jobs.

Examination of CommuterLINK and CarBuy participation from 2003 through 2008 showed a steady decline in the number of CommuterLINK clients.from 198 in 2003 to 72 in 2007 and 44 for the first six months of 2008, reflecting the impact of eligibility restrictions. The 90-day limit on CommuterLINK eligibility also significantly reduced annual costs and total number of rides provided: more than 11,000 rides were provided in 2004; less than half that number, 5,273, were provided in 2007. Not surprisingly, the annual per client cost in 2007 of \$1,805.24 was less than half the annual cost per client in 2000. As of November 2008, active Car Buy participation had also declined, to 28, from a high of 70 in the initial year of the program. (Table 3) Because of the limited number of days of CommuterLINK service, per client annual costs for the Car Buy program were higher than those for CommuterLINK in 2007.

CommuterLINK transportation assistance is now provided to fewer low income workers in Lucas County for a shorter period of time than in 2000. Neither CommuterLINK nor the Car Buy program makes provisions for clients whose CommuterLINK eligibility expires after 90 days: they are only eligible for the Car Buy program if they have been employed for 30 hours a week for 6 months. Those ineligible for Car Buy must either borrow a car, share transportation with a friend or neighbor, or resort to public transportation. Recall, however, that they would not have received CommuterLINK services had they been able to reach their jobs by bus. Policy changes, while saving money in the short run, have added to the already significant obstacles confronted by low income Lucas County residents seeking employment.