

UC Office of the President

Policy Briefs

Title

Investigating Unmet and Difficult Travel in Underserved Communities in California

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/05m98123>

Authors

Wang, Weijing

Barajas, Jesus M., PhD

Hardman, Scott J., PhD

Publication Date

2026-05-01

DOI

10.7922/G22F7KSD

Investigating Unmet and Difficult Travel in Underserved Communities in California

Weijing Wang¹

Jesus M. Barajas, Ph.D.²

Scott J. Hardman, Ph.D.¹

¹Institute of Transportation Studies

²Department of Environmental Science and Policy

University of California, Davis

May 2026

Issue

Residents of disadvantaged, low-income, rural, and tribal communities—collectively referred to as underserved communities—often face transportation barriers resulting from decades of car-oriented planning. This has left lower-cost modes such as public transit, walking, and cycling unsafe or unavailable¹, resulting in widespread travel difficulties and unmet mobility needs that are challenging to measure. To understand how people are navigating these challenges, we surveyed 2,892 residents from underserved communities in California. Centering the experiences of people often underrepresented in travel behavior surveys, this study provides insights into the main factors linked to difficult or unmet travel, how people adapt to these challenges, and the barriers they face. Our findings provide evidence to inform the design of equitable transportation solutions that can improve mobility and access for California's Priority Populations—groups that are State priorities for investments in improving health, air quality, and access to economic opportunities.

Key Research Findings

Unmet and difficult travel disproportionately affects underserved communities. Over one-third (36%) of residents from underserved communities experience trip difficulties, and 13% forgo trips—far higher than the 5% rate among the general U.S. population². Women face twice the odds of travel difficulties compared to men, and individuals without cars have three times the odds of travel difficulties compared to car-owners.

Car access is a key factor shaping unmet travel needs. When trips are difficult, 23% of people without cars forgo travel compared to 14% of car owners. Half of carless respondents cited the inability to drive or lack of car access as a barrier to travel.

Alternative modes can ease travel difficulties—but only if they are affordable and reliable. Seventy-seven percent (77%) of carless individuals rely on public transit, shared rides, or active travel to complete difficult trips. They use

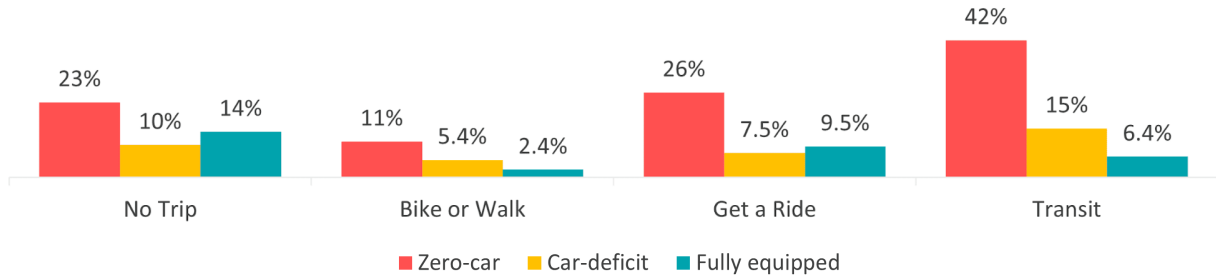


Figure 1: Percent of household with Zero-car, that are Car-deficit (fewer than one car per adult), or Fully equipped (one or more cars per adult) that forgo trips (No Trip) and the modes used for difficult trips for those that have difficult trips but did not forgo the trip.).

public transit at three times the rate of car-owners and they use shared rides and active modes (biking or walking) at twice the rate. Despite the benefits of alternative modes, people without cars are two to three times more likely than car owners to cite poor transit service and affordability as travel barriers. Policies that improve service quality and reduce costs are essential to making alternative modes equitable solutions

Further Reading and More Information

This policy brief is drawn from the report “Investigating Unmet and Difficult Travel in Underserved Communities in California” prepared by Weijing Wang, Jesus M. Barajas, Ph.D., Scott J. Hardman, Ph.D. with the University of California, Davis. A pre-print of the journal article can be found here: <https://ucits.org/projects/18121/>. For more information about findings presented in this brief, please contact Weijing Wang at weijingw@ucdavis.edu.

¹Barajas, J. M. (2021). Chapter One—The roots of racialized travel behavior. In R. H. M. Pereira & G. Boisjoly (Eds.), *Advances in Transport Policy and Planning* (Vol. 8, pp. 1–31). Academic Press. <https://doi.org/10.1016/bs.atpp.2021.06.007>

²Gould-Werth, A., Griffin, J., & Murphy, A. K. (2018). Developing a New Measure of Transportation Insecurity: An Exploratory Factor Analysis. *Survey Practice*, 11(2), 1–34. <https://doi.org/10.29115/SP-2018-0024>

Research presented in this policy brief was made possible through funding received by the University of California Institute of Transportation Studies (UC ITS) from the State of California through the Public Transportation Account and the Road Repair and Accountability Act of 2017 (Senate Bill 1). The UC ITS is a network of faculty, research and administrative staff, and students dedicated to advancing the state of the art in transportation engineering, planning, and policy for the people of California. Established by the Legislature in 1947, the UC ITS has branches at UC Berkeley, UC Davis, UC Irvine, and UCLA.

Project ID UC-ITS-2025-39 | DOI: 10.7922/G22F7KSD