Analyzing the activity spaces of low-income teenagers: How do they perceive the spaces where activities are carried out?

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Abstract
In the area of social equity, much of the transportation literature has focused on the differences in travel behavior between women and men, racial groups, and income levels. Many studies agree that gender, race, income, household responsibilities, and life-cycle are significant factors that influence travel behavior. Some of these studies have used the ability to physically reach activities as a social indicator for monitoring the quality of life. However, little attention has been given to how transportation (modal use: bus, car, walking, biking) and land-use patterns affect the activity choices of urban teenagers, especially those who are low-income. When youth are the focus, the emphasis has been on the commute to and from school, and the lack of youth using active modes of transportation to combat obesity and inactivity.

Urban planning is concerned with how the built environment, including transportation, affects the social and economic well-being of municipalities and communities. The built environment is shaped by the actions of those who work, live, and recreate in the space, including youth. However, planners often overlook the value of incorporating the voice of youth in our policy decisions. Young people want to feel safe in their urban environments and have access to quality destinations for education, employment, recreation, and social purposes.

One of the most widespread themes in research on fear and safety in public spaces is that fear causes a negative impact on the social, economic, and emotional well-being of those who are affected. Researchers, across disciplines, have explored how fear limits an individual’s ability to use public space to enhance their quality of life. Design, location, and the appearance of public space contribute to both perceived fear and safety. Several studies have documented the gender differences. Women have a greater fear of crime while walking and using public transit, and are more sensitive to street lighting and the environment surrounding a bus stop. Men in public spaces tend to be the objects of fear, especially African American and Hispanic youth. Youth also perceive violence around them, and seek ways to avoid or transform it.

This study provides an opportunity to better understand the spatial constraints that low-income teenagers face, and to expand the travel behavior focus by taking into account the perceptions of safety in activity modeling. The focus of this paper goes beyond the school commute and explores the activity patterns of 122 low-income teenagers from an urban high school in Providence, RI, where sixty percent of the study population is Hispanic; twenty percent is African American; and ten percent is American Indian. A detailed exploration of the types of activities low-income teenagers engage in, after school, is discussed. Knowing where youth choose to spend their leisure time, how they choose to get there, and incorporating their perceptions of the spaces where they choose to socialize adds a new dimension to the travel behavior research.

Data were collected over a year time frame through in-school weekly workshops that sought to gather data and to educate students about the field of transportation. The analyses used in this study include both qualitative and quantitative methods. Students were surveyed addressing socio-economic factors, modal use, and perceptions toward public transportation. An activity list of at least 15 regular and
occasional activities was generated for each student. In addition, students met in gender based focus
groups to discuss how elements of the built environment contribute to feelings of security and vise
versa. Large GIS generated maps of the city (1/8th mile grid format) were used to facilitate these
discussions. A safety index was developed that shows there are clear differences in safety perceptions
based on the time of day and gender. Currently, the author is applying a regression model to identify
significant socio-economic factors that affect the dispersion of regular and occasional activities that
form activity prisms. Using GIS as a platform, perceptions of space, activity locations, gender, and time
of day will be linked to explore relationships.