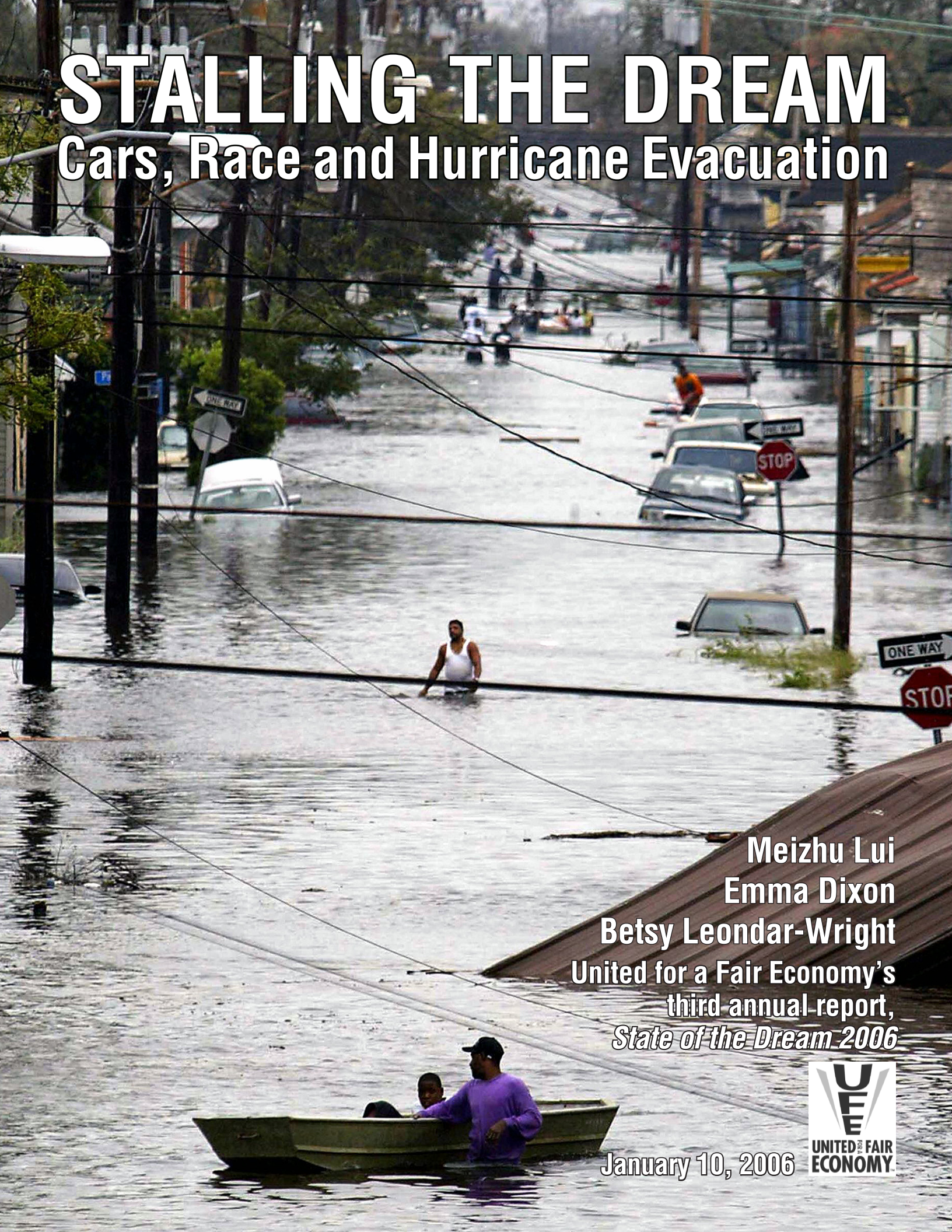


# STALLING THE DREAM

## Cars, Race and Hurricane Evacuation



Meizhu Lui  
Emma Dixon  
Betsy Leondar-Wright  
United for a Fair Economy's  
third annual report,  
*State of the Dream 2006*

January 10, 2006



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**Stalling the Dream: Cars, Race and Hurricane Evacuation**

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United for a Fair Economy's third annual report, *State of the Dream 2006*

January 10, 2006

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## Key Findings



- People of color are less likely to own cars than white people. Only 7% of white households, but 24% of black households and 17% of Latino (Hispanic) households owned no vehicle in 2000. In addition, the dollar value of white households' car ownership is more than twice as great as households of color.
- In the case of a mandatory evacuation order during a disaster, of those who say they wouldn't evacuate immediately, 33% of Latinos, 27% of African Americans, and 23% of whites say that lack of transportation would be the obstacle preventing them from evacuating.
- In all 11 major cities that have had five or more hurricanes in the last 100 years (Houston, Miami, Fort Lauderdale, Orlando, Jacksonville, St. Petersburg, Tampa, New York City, Providence, Boston, and New Orleans), people without cars are disproportionately people of color.
- Evacuation planning tends to focus on traffic management for those with cars and on institutionalized people, not on non-institutionalized people without vehicles. New Orleans had only one-quarter the number of buses that would have been needed to evacuate all carless residents.
- The median net worth of white families increased about 6% after inflation from 2001 to 2004, to \$136,000, while the black median stayed unchanged at \$20,000, according to the Federal Reserve.
- Car ownership provides access to a wider choice of jobs, entrepreneurial opportunities, affordable groceries, health care and other ingredients of prosperity.
- Eleven percent of African-American families and 21 percent of Latino families have missed out on medical care because of transportation issues, compared to only 2 percent of white families.

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*Unequal access to automobile ownership contributes to the racial economic divide for blacks and other people of color.*

## Introduction: “Left Standing There”

Every week, millions of listeners tune in to “Car Talk,” to be entertained by Tom and Ray, the PhD’s of car repair, who make us laugh at our national addiction to the automobile. We love our cars. Some people fondly remember the first hand-me-down car they souped up in high school. Others go into debt for that SUV they saw charging through desert and swamp on TV. Every year, Americans drive over 2 billion miles.<sup>1</sup> For a long time now, the American dream has come complete with a car.

But there is a dark side to our love affair with the automobile. Reliance on private vehicles divides us further into haves and have-nots, and never more obviously than during hurricanes and other disasters.

As the television cameras focused in on the rooftops of New Orleans, the nation wondered together: why were some people stuck in the city? Why were most of them African American? United for a Fair Economy’s third annual Martin Luther King Day report looks at this disturbing question.

Back in 1955, transportation was a civil rights issue across the South. If a white person wanted to ride the bus and there were no seats, blacks had to get off the bus and risk being left standing on the side of the road. Rosa Parks won the right for blacks to stay on the bus.

Rosa Parks had been evicted from buses before her 1955 refusal to give up her seat. Parks recalled the humiliation: “*I didn’t want to pay my fare and then go around the back door, because many times, even if you did that, you might not get on the bus at all. They’d probably shut the door, drive off, and leave you standing there.*”<sup>2</sup>

But fifty years later, African Americans are still left standing on the side of the road. To get out of the way of the wind and water when hurricane Katrina was approaching, some form of transportation out of New Orleans was necessary: in this case, a car was your lifeline. The post-Katrina photographs showed us a picture of racially skewed car ownership.

Besides being a critical part of the evacuation plans of the major cities that are in hurricane zones, cars are essential in other ways as well. They can make the difference between working and being unemployed. In our report, we find that unequal access to automobile ownership contributes to the racial economic divide for blacks and other people of color.

Just as the government played a major role in creating the New Orleans disaster by its failure to protect low income and low lying neighborhoods, government policies have also contributed to our national addiction to and dependence on privately owned vehicles for travel. We point to some ways in which government can jump-start new initiatives to broaden transportation equity.

Without such initiatives, too many people of color will remain stalled out on the highway to the dream.

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## I. Got a Ride? Vehicle Ownership and Race

The United States has an almost equal number of licensed drivers to the number of vehicles owned: in 1995, there were about 176 million drivers and cars owned by private individuals.<sup>3</sup> If you commute to work, you rarely see another car with more than one person in it. However, these facts don't mean that vehicle ownership is distributed equitably across the population. Many individuals own more than one car, and many families have no car at all.

Car ownership is almost universal among people with college educations and/or above-median incomes: 91% of people with a B.A. or more education, 89% of those with some college, and 93% of those between the 50th and 75th income percentile own at least one car. But only 72% of those with less than high school educations and only 67% of those below the 25th income percentile own cars.<sup>4</sup>

In the U.S., there is a racist stereotype that blacks own expensive cars, whether they can afford them or not, and flaunt them as status symbols. We all recognize the image of the welfare queen—African American, lots of kids, and with a Cadillac-driving boyfriend sharing her government check.

The data show us a far different picture. African-Americans are about three and a half times more likely to lack a car than white families; for Latino households it is about two and a half times.

Only 7% of white households in the US own no vehicle, but 24% of black households, 17% of Latino (Hispanic) households, 15% of Native American households and 13% of Asian American households own no vehicle.

In each state as well, vehicles are disproportionately owned by whites and by people with higher incomes. (See Appendix A for state data.)

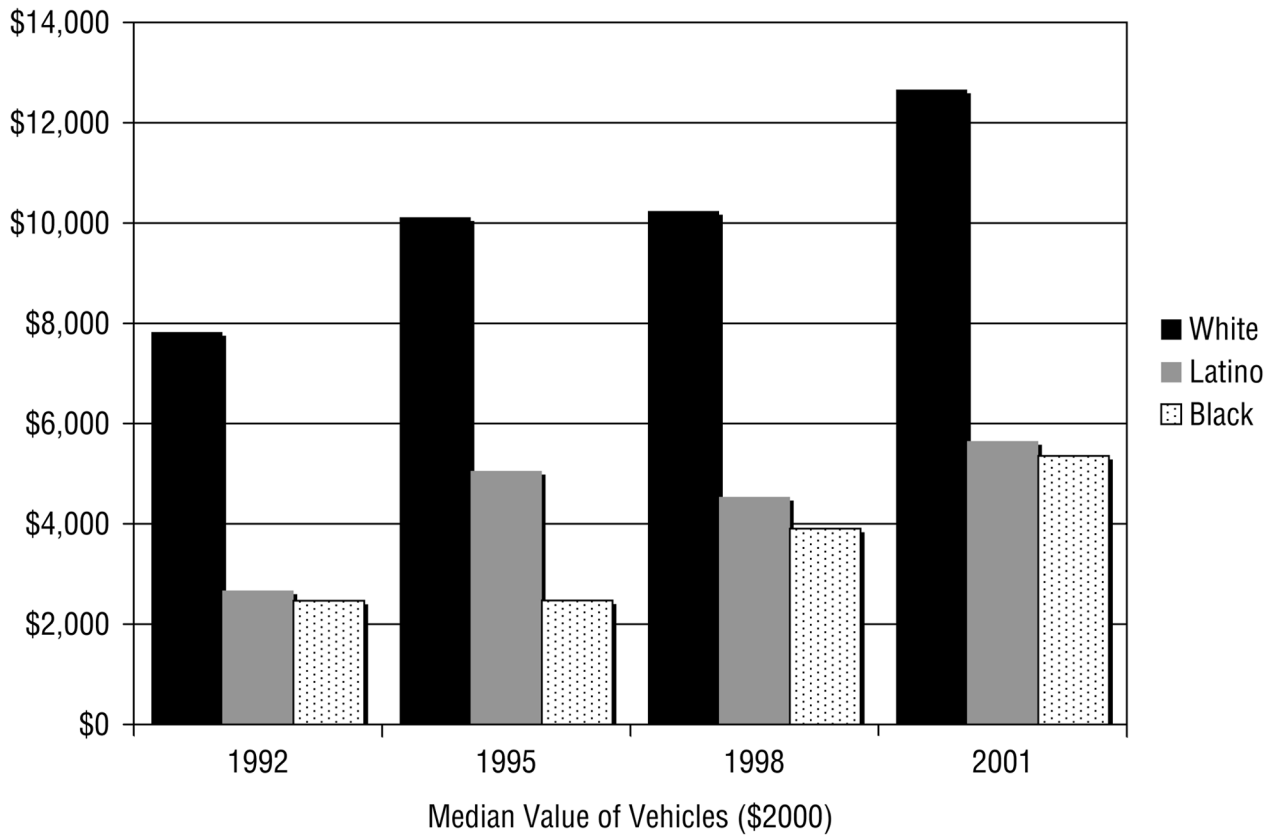
People of color also tend to own older and cheaper cars. The typical (median) white family owned a vehicle or vehicles worth \$12,658 in 2001, according to the Federal Reserve (in 2000 dollars). The vehicle(s) of the typical Latino family was worth \$5,648, and of the typical black family, \$5,355. At no time since 1992 has the median car value for people of color been as high as half the white value. (Families with no cars are included in these averages, and they pull the median values down.)

It's no mystery why people of color own fewer and cheaper cars, given the overall racial wealth divide, which continues to grow. The median net worth of white families increased about 6% after inflation from 2001 to 2004, to \$136,000, while the black median stayed unchanged at \$20,000, according to the Federal Reserve.<sup>5</sup>

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**Table 1: Median Value of Vehicles by Race of Owner (in 2000 dollars)**



Source: Barbara Robles' calculations of Federal Reserve Survey of Consumer Finances data



## II. Out of Harm's Way: Cars and Hurricane Evacuation

Hurricanes of a given strength are now less deadly than the same hurricanes would have been a century ago, and a major reason is the spread of private car ownership. The Galveston Hurricane of 1900 killed somewhere between 6,000 and 12,000 people, far worse than Katrina's 1,100.

But there's a racial disparity in who can escape by car. The most hurricane-prone large cities all have a greater percentage of carless people of color than of white people.

Eleven major U.S. cities are located in areas at risk of hurricanes, according to the United States Landfalling Hurricane Probability Project. Those high-risk cities are: Houston, Miami, Fort Lauderdale, Orlando, Jacksonville, St. Petersburg, Tampa, New York City, Providence, Boston, and New Orleans.<sup>6</sup> In each of these cities, people of color disproportionately lack vehicles. (See Table 2.)

The largest populations at risk are the 3.4 million people living in and around Houston, Texas, in a region where 43 hurricanes have made landfall in the last century, and New York City's 8 million residents, where there have been 15 hurricanes in the vicinity in the last century.

**Table 2: Vehicle Ownership in Counties at Risk of Hurricane Evacuation, by Race, 2000**

Hurricanes in Region last 100 yrs	City	County	County Population	People of Color	Households without Vehicles					
					All Races	White	Black	Native American	Asian	Latino
48	New Orleans, Louisiana	Orleans Parish	484,674	73%	27%	15%	35%	26%	18%	27%
43	Houston, Texas	Harris	3,400,578	58%	9%	5%	17%	11%	6%	11%
34	Miami, Florida	Miami-Dade	2,253,362	79%	14%	10%	21%	14%	8%	14%
34	Fort Lauderdale, Florida	Broward	1,623,018	42%	9%	9%	13%	15%	5%	7%
15	New York City, New York	5 counties	8,008,278	65%	56%	49%	61%	67%	49%	66%
15	Providence, Rhode Island	Providence	621,602	26%	14%	12%	27%	29%	17%	23%
11	Orlando, Florida	Orange	896,344	42%	7%	5%	14%	10%	6%	10%
11	Jacksonville, Florida	Duval	778,879	36%	9%	6%	19%	13%	4%	10%
8	Tampa, Florida	Hillsborough	998,948	37%	8%	6%	18%	10%	6%	11%
8	St. Petersburg, Florida	Pinellas	921,482	17%	9%	8%	20%	12%	6%	13%
5	Boston, Massachusetts	Suffolk	689,807	48%	33%	29%	38%	43%	45%	41%

Source: U.S. Census 2000, SF-3.

Ten percent of all U.S. households do not have a vehicle, but some urban areas at risk of hurricanes have much higher rates of carless households: New York City, 56%; Boston, 33%; New Orleans, 27%.

People of color are at disproportionate risk of getting stuck behind during evacuation of an urban area in two important ways. First, while people of color make up only 31% of the total population of the United States, they tend to make up a greater proportion of the populations of our cities: Miami, 79%; New Orleans, 73%; New York City, 65%; Houston, 58%. Second, in many cities, blacks and Latinos are much less likely to own a car than white households. In New York City, for example, 49% of white households have no vehicle, compared to 61% of blacks and 66% of Latinos.

The fact that cars are disproportionately owned by whites holds true for both urban and rural areas that are at particular risk of hurricanes and floods, for both Eastern and Western states, and for the counties affected by Hurricanes Katrina, Rita and Wilma in 2005. In all of these areas, Blacks, Latinos, and Native Americans (and in many cases Asian Americans as well) are much less likely to own a vehicle than whites. (See Table 3.)

This disparity makes it a racial issue when disaster planning focuses on facilitating car traffic. After Hurricanes Hugo in 1989 and Andrew in 1992, the States of South Carolina, Georgia and Florida realized they were not prepared for large-scale evacuations and so developed plans to manage evacuation traffic.

The evacuations before Hurricane Georges in 1998 and Hurricane Floyd in 1999 have been called the biggest traffic jams in US history. During Hurricane Floyd, an evacuation trip on Interstate 26 (I-26) from Charleston to Columbia, South Carolina that normally required two hours took between 16 and 18 hours.

To prevent such problems, FEMA and other agencies have developed high-tech methods of monitoring and smoothing traffic. The Oak Ridge Evacuation Modeling System (OREMS) is a computer model that simulates traffic flow

during emergency evacuations, estimates clearance times on evacuation routes, and suggests methods of managing traffic.<sup>7</sup> As a result of the Hurricane Floyd traffic jams, the Evacuation Traffic Information System (ETIS) was developed, a GIS web-based travel demand forecast model that anticipates evacuation traffic congestion and cross-state travel flows for every coastal state between Delaware and Texas.<sup>8</sup>

In contrast to this cutting-edge

**Table 3: Vehicle Ownership by Race in Regions of U.S., 2000**

Households without Vehicles	All Races	White	Black	Native American	Asian	Latino
United States (50 states, DC, Puerto Rico)	10%	7%	24%	15%	13%	17%
Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico Coastal Counties	15%	9%	29%	20%	20%	25%
Counties at Highest Hurricane Risk Historically	8%	7%	20%	9%	5%	10%
Counties Affected in 2005 by Katrina, Rita, Wilma	13%	7%	24%	12%	8%	14%
States East of the Mississippi River (and DC, PR)	12%	8%	25%	17%	17%	26%
States West of the Mississippi River	8%	6%	20%	14%	10%	12%

Source: U.S. Census 2000, SF-3.

planning for people in cars, far less thought has been given to evacuating people without cars. The planning for low-mobility groups in some states is targeted at nursing home and hospital residents and prisoners, not non-institutionalized carless people. For example, one study found that only about half of states with hurricane evacuation plans had a plan for evacuating homeless people.<sup>9</sup>

As post-Katrina evacuation plans begin to place a greater emphasis on public transportation, David Berman of the National Center for Disaster Preparedness points out that mass transit doesn't work unless transportation workers come to work in the midst of a disaster evacuation.<sup>10</sup> Is it reasonable to expect in, for example, the event of a nuclear accident that school bus drivers will make their way towards the reactors in order to drive children away? Katrina also demonstrated that public employees—police, bus drivers, and fire fighters—all have families, too, and their personal responsibilities in an evacuation may be at odds with their public responsibilities.<sup>11</sup>

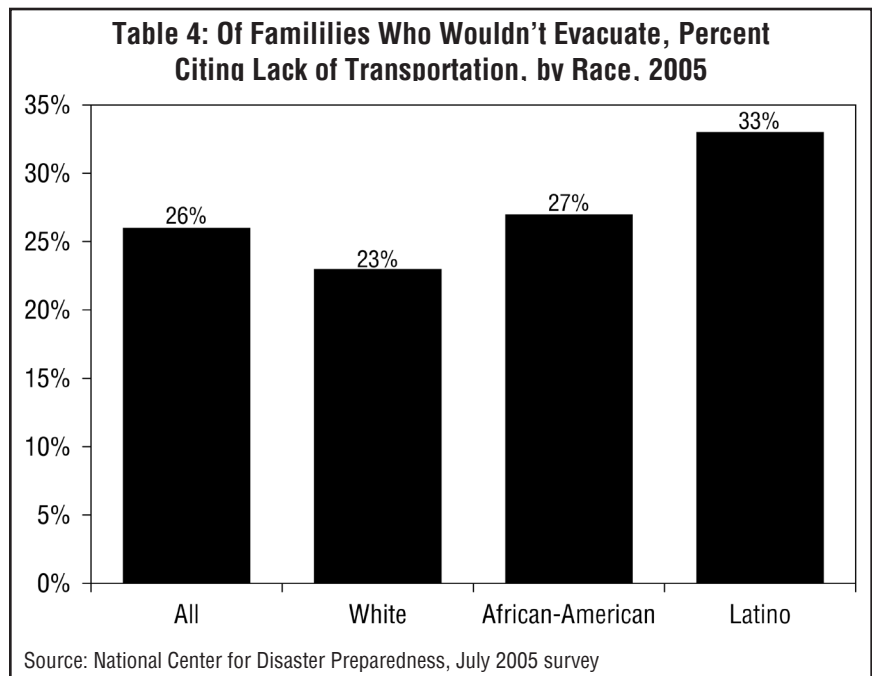
Only in a few northern states do emergency evacuation plans include trains or subways, which can expand the number of train cars to accommodate more passengers. The only form of transport besides private cars in southern evacuation plans is buses, which can't be expanded by adding more seats.<sup>12</sup>

A recent national survey by the National Center for Disaster Preparedness found that almost 30% of respondents could not leave without help in the event of an evacuation.<sup>13</sup> Over one-quarter of those stated that they would be unable to evacuate because they lacked any means of transportation. African-Americans and Latinos were less likely to have transportation than whites. Similarly, families with higher incomes were much more likely to have emergency transportation than families with lower incomes.<sup>14</sup>

Even post-Katrina, the evacuation plans of many major cities still rely heavily on transportation by private cars. Those left behind to face the floodwaters in New Orleans, and those in the daylong traffic jams experienced by Houston-area residents attempting to evacuate, experienced how dependent our public evacuations plans are on private transportation.

However, Joanne Nigg of the Disaster Research Center at the University of Delaware identified the evacuations of New Orleans and Houston as successes, in the sense that 70 to 80 percent of their populations were evacuated before the hurricanes hit: "A major reason that the evacuation

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worked in Houston is that they brought in buses, all kinds of vehicles, to get people out any way they could.”<sup>15</sup>

Another positive example of planning for at least some of the residents that lack private transportation is Miami-Dade County, which has an Emergency Evacuation Assistance Program that provides evacuation transportation for the elderly, disabled or ill.<sup>16</sup>

Boston updated its evacuation plan in December 2005 to make better use of public transportation, but according to critics, the plan still fails to make enough allowance for the density of population in its downtown area and for its “Boston-centric” approach that fails to incorporate neighboring towns like Chelsea and Cambridge, both of which have high populations and poorly developed evacuation plans.<sup>17</sup> Boston’s director of homeland security, Carlo A. Boccia, is worried: “Let’s say there was an incident today and we couldn’t get out of the city, and we had to get people out of different neighborhoods. What would we do right now? It would be problematic.... Let me tell you something—we’d be in the same shape [as New Orleans].”<sup>18</sup>

When Hurricane Rita appeared on the weather maps, the US had a second chance to try out its evacuation plans. But even those with cars could not get away. Thousands were trapped for up to 14 hours on baking hot highways leaving Houston, and some ran out of gas. “Most transportation plans in urbanized areas are developed around the daily trip to work,” said Ed Mierzejewski, director of the Florida-based Center for Urban Transport. “But you get something like Hurricane Rita, and it’s pretty impractical to think we could build enough capacity to handle the large number of people all going in the same direction at the same time.”

The events following Hurricanes Katrina and Rita have demonstrated that universal access to a privately owned vehicle is assumed by many disaster-management plans, but that, in reality, access to vehicles is highly concentrated in richer and whiter populations. Rather than protecting everyone’s life through public disaster evacuation methods, people are expected to protect themselves, by buying a car. No wonder the poor got left behind.

## The Day that Owning a Car Saved Your Life

By Emma Dixon

On that fateful Sunday in August, when the mayor of New Orleans finally ordered the mandatory evacuation, there was no plan for residents who did not own a car. And yet, according to U.S. Census data—cited urgently by disaster planners for years—this amounted to one-third of New Orleans, or 120,000 folks.

Was there no plan because these were likely to be the same one-third of New Orleans residents who lived below the poverty level, as well as below sea level? Or because they were likely to be some of the two-thirds of the city's inhabitants who are black? God only knows.

What I know is that I'm one of the lucky ones. My roof was damaged by Katrina. I do have a car, but I elected to remain at home to be near my mother. Her health conditions made it difficult for her to travel. I had to get by without electricity or phone for a week before my daughter came and drove me to her home in Indiana.

Before my power went out, I, like millions of Americans, watched residents of New Orleans and the surrounding areas fill the highways in a surprisingly smooth mass evacuation. The "haves" who had cars, or the means to rent cars, got out.

Folks without cars were told that buses would take them to the Superdome. For some, the buses never came. The city had about 500 transit and school buses, a quarter of the estimated 2,000 buses needed to evacuate all residents needing transport. Getting drivers to make repeat trips during increasingly dangerous weather was unrealistic, and some buses were flooded into uselessness.

The airspace above us was full of even greater disparities. Throughout Sunday morning, extra flights arrived as airlines tried to do what they could to aid the evacuation. By 2:30, the last of the commercial flights had departed, but the skies over New Orleans did not empty. Gulfstreams and Lear-Jets continued to land, load up and quickly depart the airport until early evening. Those who could afford the thousands of dollars to charter a flight could wait to see if the storm was truly coming, then buy their way out of the storm's path at the 11th hour. Later that evening, a Weather Channel commentator told the rest of story, "Everyone has left except those too poor or too elderly." Over 1,100 people died, and while some of them chose not to evacuate or were in nursing homes or jails, a shameful number simply had no means of escape.

One word describes the difference between those able and unable to leave: money. On August 31, Governor Kathleen Blanco issued an executive order mandating that hotels and motels shelter certain evacuees—namely current guests who were "able to pay the nightly rates," or could guarantee that costs would be covered later on. Similarly, most public transportation out of the city was only available to those able to pay.

Even on a good day, the public transit system in New Orleans is poor. Trips to and from work that take only 20 minutes by car are typically one hour in each direction because of long waits for transfers. As a result, everyone who can afford one has a car. For those residents, there's no reason to support public transit or demand that it be improved.

But for those without cars, public transportation is a necessity. Without it, getting to jobs, medical care and shopping would be even more difficult, if not

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impossible. And yet, as we saw with Katrina, dependence on the public transport system can also be a shackle, preventing those who rely on it from leaving when harm approaches.

Saving is a key factor to purchasing an automobile. Only by earning a living wage can a small amount be put aside for a rainy day. New Orleans voters made history by approving a citywide living wage in 2002, but a court blocked it, allowing poverty wages to continue. Thus, Louisiana ranks near the bottom when it comes to people putting money away for safekeeping, according to the Nest Egg Index released by the investment firm A.G. Edwards.

Before Katrina, many residents of New Orleans, even the employed, relied on the public's support for their way of life. Not just public transportation, but also unemployment insurance, food stamps, and welfare made existence possible for the poor. But Katrina proved just how fragile and tenuous life can be for the have-nots. Without cars, credit cards and substantial savings, many were left on their own to battle the full force of our nation's worst natural disaster.

En route from Louisiana to Indiana with my daughter and grandchildren in September, as we traveled through Memphis, I felt compelled to make sure that they saw the Civil Rights Museum. The museum is housed near the Marion Hotel where Martin was slain. The site evokes feelings of reverence and makes us take time for reflection on the prophetic works of Martin Luther King.

When Martin penned his "I Have a Dream Speech" in 1963, I'm sure he had no idea that in 2005, racial injustice in America would still prevail, and African Americans and other people of color would still be sinking in the quicksand of racial injustice, far from the solid rock of brotherhood. He saw that economic independence through automobile ownership, homeownership and financial security was unattainable for many African Americans, and it remains so today.

As I saw Katrina evacuees evicted by motel and hotel owners, I remembered these words from Martin's speech: "We can never be satisfied as long as our bodies, heavy with fatigue of travel, cannot gain lodging in the motels of the highways and the hotels of the cities." Katrina made Martin's words ring true today: "there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation."

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### III. Cars: Zooming Ahead Towards Prosperity

In *The Hidden Cost of Being African American*, Thomas Shapiro coins the phrase “transformative asset” to mean something that gives a boost up to higher income and more assets. For example, money for a college education or a down payment on a house pay off for a lifetime. Vehicles are another example of a transformative asset. Without a car, many jobs are unreachable, and many small business ideas are unachievable. Access to a vehicle is also often essential for meeting the basic necessities of life, like reaching medical care or buying groceries, especially in rural areas.

#### Entrepreneurship

Lack of a vehicle is a barrier to starting a small business in several ways. Gardening, catering and many other types of businesses require a car or truck and little other start-up capital.

For example, one study of undocumented immigrants in New York and New Jersey who started microenterprises found that the bulk of their net worth was in the form of vehicles, which were essential to their cleaning and other businesses.<sup>19</sup>

Car owners also tend to be able to save more money than non-car owners. People who own vehicles are about seven percentage points more likely to save money, one study found, and the amounts saved are also greater.<sup>20</sup>

Barbara Robles of Arizona State University has documented ways that public policy makes it harder for low-income Latinos to buy cars and start businesses. She finds that recently arrived Latino immigrant families tend to pool their resources in order to purchase assets as a group, while listing the asset under an individual name to meet financial requirements such as getting auto loans. For example, three brothers pool their funds together for the purchase of a truck with which to start a gardening business. The oldest brother purchases the vehicle, which can cost upwards of \$28,000. This asset makes the oldest brother ineligible for subsidized low-income housing and possibly for the Earned Income Tax Credit. Federal and state asset eligibility rules do not take into account the ‘communal’ pooling of resources that occur among many Latino working families and extended kin.

#### Jobs

The American dream includes equal employment, and Civil Rights legislation was intended to ensure equal access to jobs. But without a car, many people of color are not able to take jobs that require private transportation.

Just as job discrimination was outlawed, opening up new occupations for people of color, millions of jobs began to move away from where African Americans lived. As dramatic as the shift of jobs from the North to the South and overseas was, the shift of jobs from the city to the suburbs was equally drastic. Urban job seekers without cars were cut off from more and more employment opportunities.

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The population of white people in the suburbs increased by 22 million from 1960 to 1977, four million of them moving from central cities. Meanwhile, the inner city black population rose by six million, and the number of African Americans in the suburbs grew by only half a million.<sup>21</sup>

Corporations began to close urban manufacturing plants and relocate them in the suburbs, convenient to white job seekers.<sup>22</sup> The majority of new manufacturing jobs in the 1970s were located in the suburbs, while manufacturing employment fell almost 10 percent in center cities.<sup>23</sup> In the Los Angeles area, for example, plants were closing in the city while plants opened in the San Fernando Valley and Orange County, then a mostly white area.<sup>24</sup> Suburban white people had a greater and greater geographic edge in job hunting.

The suburbs got a boost from the federal government through highway construction. Roads built to connect suburban commuters with downtown workplaces—for example, in Los Angeles, Houston, and St. Louis—destroyed already scarce housing in neighborhoods of color, while increasing options for white families.<sup>25</sup>

In an escalating cycle, more and more investment in roadways leads to patterns of development that have spatially separated people and jobs—that’s called “sprawl.” Good Jobs First reports that, according to a 1997 U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development report, 87% of the new jobs in the lower-paying and lower-skilled service sector and the retail sector that were created in the early 1990s were located in the suburbs. Low-skill workers living in cities often cannot access those new jobs because they do not own cars and cannot access the jobs through public transportation.<sup>26</sup>

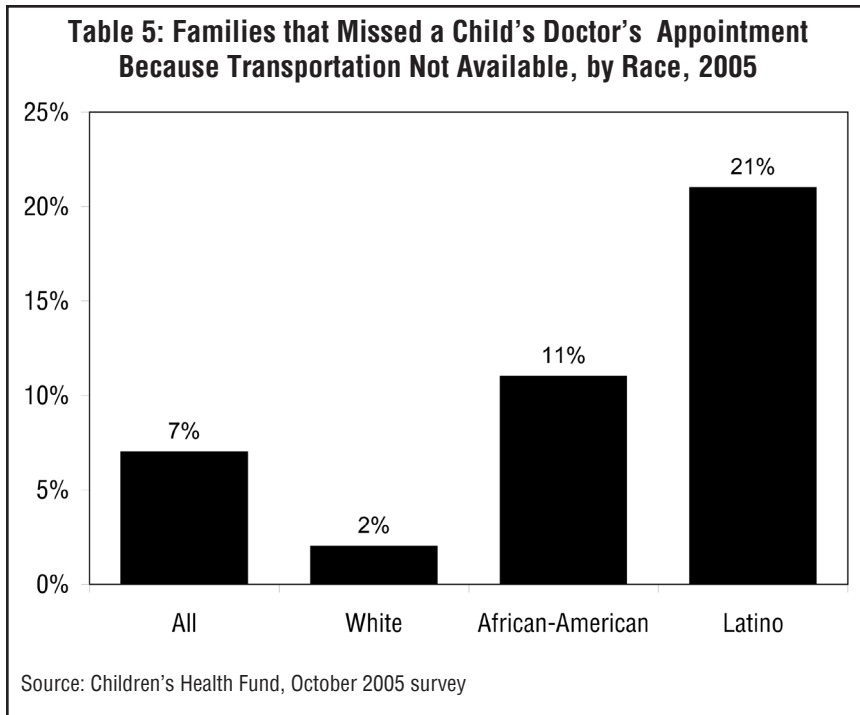
## **Food Shopping**

Access to healthy and affordable food too often depends on owning a car. Inner-city neighborhoods tend to have overpriced convenience stores and no supermarkets. Study after study has found that lower income people pay higher prices for food, as retailers take advantage of the transportation barriers that inhibit comparison shopping. In particular, neighborhoods with high concentrations of African Americans and Latinos tend to lack access to supermarkets.<sup>27</sup>

## **Health care**

A recent national survey conducted by the Children’s Health Fund found that 7 percent of all families had missed a child’s doctor’s appointment within the past year because of a lack of transportation. Eleven percent of African-American families and 21 percent of Latino families had missed out on medical care because of transportation issues, compared to only 2 percent of white families. Families with lower incomes are disproportionately faced with this concern, as are families without health insurance.<sup>28</sup>





## Voting

Forty years after the passage of the Voting Rights Act, a new discriminatory policy has been put in place in Georgia: as of 2005, would-be voters are required to bring an official photo ID issued by the Georgia Department of Motor Vehicles to their polling places.

According to the 2000 census, in Georgia, African Americans are over four times more likely to lack access to a car than are whites. While you can go get the ID even if you don't own a car, DMV offices are situated in a way that makes it harder for African Americans to get to them. As the Political Research Associates reports, "multiple offices are sprinkled in the predominantly white suburban counties surrounding the city of Atlanta but there is not one in the majority black city." Similar restrictions are being considered in at least a dozen other states.<sup>29</sup>

Martin Luther King, Jr. understood the importance of the vote and the political power that comes with it. We must not give up the vote once again, based on a criterion as tied to discriminatory economic factors as was the poll tax.

Car ownership is becoming the badge of what it means to be a real American. The original voters had to be white male property owners. Today, without a car, you might be sidelined from participating in the political process.

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*Most American families spend more on driving than on health care, education, or food. In nine major metropolitan areas, families spend more on transportation than on shelter.*

## IV. What Drove Us to This Disparity?

We take it for granted in 2005 that cars are not just wanted, but needed. However, the nation's reliance on private ownership of cars to meet transportation needs was not inevitable. Every nation must answer the question: how should we structure our cities and rural areas to facilitate the people's connection to jobs and shops—and evacuation routes? It is the choices made by the US government over the years that led to New Orleans, 2005.

Cars first became widely owned after 1908, when Henry Ford introduced his low-priced Model T. In 1916, Congress passed the Federal-Aid Road Act, making funds available to state agencies for road construction and repair. This was just the first step: the process of reliance on the highway system and on private car ownership accelerated decade by decade. In the 1930's, there was a large, well-maintained public trolley system in many US cities, but General Motors, Firestone Tires, and Standard Oil conspired to replace public transit with privately owned automobiles. In 1956, the Federal-Aid Highway Act funded the creation of the Interstate Highway System, hailed as the "greatest public works project in history."

As the government expanded road-based transportation systems, it shifted funding away from public transportation systems. Only 20% of the gas tax goes to public transit; 80% goes to building and maintaining highways.<sup>30</sup> According to the Surface Transportation Policy Project, government decisions about what kind of transportation systems it supports have a direct bearing on our individual costs to move around in our communities. Because of the emphasis on roadways, individuals now must spend five times as much of their own money on transportation each year (more than \$675 billion in 1998) as the government spends on all roads, highways, and transit systems combined (\$128 billion in 1998).

In fact, STPP reports, "for the average American, transportation is an expense second only to housing. The average American household devotes 18 cents out of every dollar it spends to getting around... 98% (of that) is for the purchase, operation, and maintenance of automobiles. Most American families spend more on driving than on health care, education, or food. In nine major metropolitan areas, families spend more on transportation than on shelter. And the poorest families spend the most—sometimes more than one-third of their income goes to transportation."<sup>31</sup>

Today, even though all of us as taxpayers, regardless of our race or income, "pay our fare," we do not benefit equally from the government's decision to concentrate transportation spending on roadways. Without a car, the road leads nowhere.

People of color bear an unfair share of the risks associated with not owning a car: not being able to evacuate from a flood, not being able to take jobs that require private transportation, not being able to get to the supermarket or to a doctor without having to hire an expensive taxi. Without a car, given the way our evacuation exits are planned, car ownership is a matter of life and death.

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## VI. Jump-starting the Dream

Given our overdependence on private vehicles, disparities in car ownership play a role in perpetuating the racial divide Martin Luther King sought to close. How can we close the gap?

### Evacuation Plans Begin at the Community Level

When Hurricane Adrian hit land in El Salvador in May of 2005, the people were ready. The most important preparation involved forming local emergency committees that designed evacuation plans and communication systems so they would be ready to help each other. Emergency committees in more than a dozen communities successfully moved people safely away from flooding areas in Adrian's path, and not a single life was lost. Neighbors knew much better than imported emergency workers who the most vulnerable people were and where they lived, and were ready to escort them to safety.<sup>32</sup>

After the massive traffic jam in Houston after Hurricane Rita, when every official and agency was trying hard to put their best foot—and vehicle—forward, it became evident that a car-based evacuation plan is not enough. Local solutions are needed here as well, not just federal ones. Easily-deployed fleets of buses within the cities are needed to get people moving as soon as the disaster alert is sounded. Otherwise a lot of people will be stuck on the road, and many others will continue to be stranded.<sup>33</sup>

### More than One Mode of Transportation to Work

The trend toward locating jobs far from the places where people live needs to be reversed. We do not have to spatially separate jobs from the people who want them. Europe and Canada, for example, made different transportation and development decisions. Most European metropolitan areas have higher population densities and more centralized land-use patterns, leading to lower levels of car use, and the increased ability of people without cars to get to work.<sup>34</sup>

Besides the use of government funds to expand transportation choices, there are other ways to bring jobs and people closer together. Federal or local governments could give location-efficient incentives in the form of subsidies to developers who serve the public interest by locating their businesses near public transportation.

Creating a better fit between transit and development does not always require subsidies. The Center for Transit-Oriented Development promotes economic development close to public transportation stops. TOD is defined as walkable development that occurs within 1/2 mile of a rail or rapid bus transit stop, is linked to a network of walkable/bikeable streets, and contains mixed-use retail, residential, and workplace activities. TOD can reduce household transportation expenses and provide alternatives to traffic congestion.<sup>35</sup>

But we have a problem right now. As long as car ownership continues to be a pre-requisite for many jobs for the poor, tax policy could be used to provide help

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*Most European metropolitan areas have higher population densities and more centralized land-use patterns, leading to lower levels of car use, and the increased ability of people without cars to get to work.*

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for workers who spend too much of their meager earnings on transportation. Margy Waller, writing for *Washington Monthly*, suggests that giving tax deductions for transportation for lower income people would be a way to close the gap. We give tax breaks to the rich that encourage them to buy more stocks to increase their earnings; why not give a little encouragement to those that have to leave their houses to earn a living?

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## Conclusion



With the rising cost of gas, not to mention what emissions do to the air we breathe, it's time to start breaking ourselves of our national car addiction habit. What was good for General Motors turned out not to be so good for the country, and certainly not so good for racial equality. Our public dollars for transportation should not be spent solely on a mode that makes all of us spend lots of our own dollars to buy and maintain cars. Let's look at investing in other travel options such as frequent bus service, safe bike lanes, and continuous sidewalks.

More options make it cheaper for individuals to get where they need to go. Because of our national fixation on automobiles, Americans now spend 38% more on transportation than Europeans. For example, Detroit spends twice as much as Toronto on its roads. Toronto spent almost eight times more than Detroit on public transit. The result? Detroit residents had to spend more than twice as much as their Toronto counterparts on transportation, including the cost of car ownership and insurance, repairs, and gas.<sup>36</sup>

Breaking an addiction is hard, and it requires the will to challenge the status quo. Rosa Parks understood that well. Achieving equality requires us to refuse to accept that Americans of color be second-class citizens. Transportation equity is needed to prevent more tragedies like Katrina, or the quiet day-to-day tragedy of unnecessary poverty.

In 2006, it is as necessary as ever to put our hands to the steering wheel and the pedal to the metal—and roll on toward justice!

## Appendix A: Vehicle Ownership by Race by State in 2000

State	People of Color in Population	Households without Vehicles					
		All Races	White	Black	Native American	Asian	Latino / Hispanic
United States	31%	10%	7%	24%	15%	13%	17%
Alabama	30%	8%	5%	18%	6%	6%	8%
Alaska	32%	11%	6%	11%	42%	13%	10%
Arizona	36%	7%	6%	14%	20%	8%	11%
Arkansas	21%	8%	6%	21%	7%	7%	10%
California	53%	9%	7%	18%	14%	10%	13%
Colorado	26%	6%	5%	15%	10%	9%	11%
Connecticut	23%	10%	7%	26%	20%	8%	26%
Delaware	27%	8%	6%	18%	7%	6%	12%
District of Columbia	72%	37%	26%	42%	47%	45%	46%
Florida	35%	8%	6%	17%	11%	6%	12%
Georgia	37%	8%	4%	18%	8%	6%	12%
Hawaii	77%	11%	9%	12%	13%	12%	11%
Idaho	12%	5%	4%	11%	8%	7%	6%
Illinois	32%	12%	8%	29%	17%	13%	16%
Indiana	14%	7%	6%	19%	11%	9%	10%
Iowa	7%	6%	6%	20%	16%	10%	10%
Kansas	17%	6%	5%	15%	8%	7%	8%
Kentucky	11%	9%	8%	23%	17%	9%	14%
Louisiana	37%	12%	6%	25%	13%	9%	12%
Maine	3%	8%	7%	14%	20%	10%	12%
Maryland	38%	11%	7%	22%	15%	8%	13%
Massachusetts	18%	13%	10%	30%	23%	20%	32%
Michigan	21%	8%	6%	20%	11%	7%	10%
Minnesota	12%	8%	7%	28%	19%	13%	15%
Mississippi	39%	9%	5%	18%	12%	8%	12%
Missouri	16%	8%	6%	23%	11%	9%	11%
Montana	10%	6%	6%	13%	13%	9%	9%
Nebraska	13%	6%	6%	19%	16%	9%	9%
Nevada	35%	9%	7%	18%	12%	9%	12%
New Hampshire	5%	6%	6%	12%	11%	6%	12%
New Jersey	34%	13%	8%	28%	20%	8%	27%
New Mexico	55%	7%	5%	10%	13%	6%	8%
New York	38%	30%	19%	52%	40%	40%	57%
North Carolina	30%	8%	5%	17%	10%	5%	9%
North Dakota	8%	7%	6%	15%	13%	11%	13%
Ohio	16%	9%	7%	23%	14%	9%	14%
Oklahoma	26%	7%	6%	16%	9%	8%	10%

State	People of Color in Population	Households without Vehicles					
		All Races	White	Black	Native American	Asian	Latino / Hispanic
Oregon	16%	7%	7%	20%	13%	11%	10%
Pennsylvania	16%	13%	10%	38%	22%	17%	30%
Puerto Rico	99%	29%	20%	36%	42%	26%	29%
Rhode Island	18%	11%	9%	26%	23%	14%	22%
South Carolina	34%	9%	5%	20%	10%	6%	11%
South Dakota	12%	6%	5%	9%	18%	9%	9%
Tennessee	21%	8%	6%	18%	8%	6%	9%
Texas	48%	7%	5%	16%	10%	6%	11%
Utah	15%	5%	5%	15%	12%	8%	9%
Vermont	4%	7%	7%	14%	13%	11%	9%
Virginia	30%	8%	5%	17%	8%	7%	10%
Washington	21%	7%	7%	17%	12%	11%	10%
West Virginia	5%	11%	10%	27%	15%	12%	14%
Wisconsin	13%	8%	6%	30%	13%	13%	14%
Wyoming	11%	5%	4%	9%	9%	5%	8%

Source: US Census Bureau, 2000, SF-3

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