Relationship between Vehicle Ownership and Quality of Life for Low-income Households

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Background, Research Question, and Hypothesis

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996 forced welfare recipients to work in order to receive benefits, ignoring barriers to employment inherent in the low-income population. As a result, a high proportion of former welfare recipients are working for poverty-level wages, continuing their reliance on public assistance.

Reliable transportation is consistently cited by low-income individuals (urban and rural) as a barrier to moving out of poverty. Because the poor are defined by their inability to consume in the larger market, poverty policy often ignores the work that must occur within the household economy—the mundane tasks that make up every day life. Research has shown that reliable, private transportation increases employment and improved employment outcomes, but how does it affect quality of life for the low-income population?

I hypothesized that reliable, private vehicle ownership increases the quality of life for low-income households.

Theoretical Framework

Family Ecology Theory (Rathus, 2006) assumes a family’s development is influenced by the surrounding environment. As applied to this study, this theory would predict the availability of transportation alone does not aid families in moving out of poverty as there are several influences working on the family at any one time depending upon the family’s environment. However, reliable, private vehicle ownership allows low-income families the ability to access employment opportunities and services and reach destinations they otherwise have difficulty accessing.

Literature Review

- All five studies reviewed found that the lack of transportation presented a barrier to moving out of poverty (Anderson & Van Hoy, 2006; Brabo et al., 2003; Fletcher et al., 2010; Garasky et al., 2006; Lichterwalter et al., 2006). In addition:
  - Anderson & Van Hoy (2006) found that reliable transportation was viewed by rural, low-income women as a pathway to education and training and increased employment opportunities not available to them in their smaller, rural communities.
  - Garasky et al. (2006) found a positive relationship between reliable, private vehicle ownership and employment and higher wages and that the lack of reliable transportation hindered the study participants’ ability to reach important, non-employment related destinations
  - Brabo et al. (2003) evaluated the success of a program aimed at assisting low-income individuals purchase reliable vehicles and found participants reported an overall better quality of life with increased wages, better employment, more involvement with extended family, and the ability to find better care for their children.

Methods

The research design was cross-sectional, non-random, and purposive. The participants were two male and eight female clients of JumpStart, a program that assists low-income individuals purchase reliable vehicles, between the ages of 18 and 64. Surveys were conducted via telephone. After data collection, surveys were cleaned and coded, and data analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Frequencies, means comparisons, and Cronbach’s Alpha reliability analysis performed.

Results Summary

Demographics

- The majority of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed they acquired transportation increases employment and improved employment outcomes, benefits, ignoring barriers to employment inherent in the low-income individuals vary just as the individuals themselves and the environments in which they live vary. As such, results of such research cannot be generalized nationally if solutions to poverty issues are to be successful.
- Future studies on transportation and other barriers should take into account the psychological effects of those barriers on quality of life.

- It would be useful to conduct qualitative and/or longitudinal, studies in an effort to gather information on issues that are important to the particular person being surveyed.

Implications

- Policy needs to acknowledge employment alone is not a pathway out of poverty. Reliable transportation, suitable childcare, and education are central to not only gain employment, but employment with the wages and benefits necessary to move out of poverty.
- The impact of the environment on the family cannot be ignored. Policy must address the needs of families within the context of the environment in which they live, and develop programs, like the one studied, that empower the individuals themselves to develop solutions to their problems rather than simply handing out aid that sustains them in their current situation.

Future Research

- It is recommended that future research would include a large sample in order to generalize the findings regionally. However, it is important to note research has illustrated the needs and experiences of low-income individuals vary just as the individuals themselves and the environments in which they live vary. As such, results of such research cannot be generalized nationally if solutions to poverty issues are to be successful.
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Conclusion

Research in the area of poverty generally investigates what is going wrong rather than what is going right. This study investigated how the quality of life of low-income individuals is affected through a successful program aimed at empowering its participants—creating partners in the process of moving out of poverty rather than continuing to perpetuate their role as recipients of aid.

There is a psychological aspect to poverty not addressed in the literature or this study. As a country, through policy and practice, we have moved from trying to eradicate poverty and its sources to blaming those in poverty for their lot in life. It is easy to tell another to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps, but what do we do when that person has no boots? We blame them, tell them they are not working hard enough, and tell them to do more. What we do not do is empower them. We do not give them access to the tools necessary to pull themselves out of their situation. When one has been beaten down by their circumstances, society, and policy, one loses the will to continue to fight.

This study aimed to humanize the low-income individual. Rather than deconstruct the population down to yet another list of needs and barriers, this study addressed situations and circumstances that take place regardless of socioeconomic status and provided a glimpse into how one simple thing, having a reliable vehicle, can improve quality of life. It is hoped that future research will adopt this tone, which in turn, may prompt policies that better the lives of individuals rather than reinforcing blame and causing guilt for needing assistance.