Evaluating Transportation Equity: Principles and Practices

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# Abstract

Equity refers to the fairness with which impacts (benefits and costs) are distributed, and the degree that those impacts are considered appropriate. Transportation planning decisions often have significant equity impacts, and there is growing recognition of the importance of considering these impacts. Transportation equity analysis is therefore important and unavoidable. Most practitioners and decision-makers want to incorporate equity analysis into transportation planning.

However, transportation equity can be difficult to evaluate because there are various types of equity, impacts, ways to measure impacts, and categories of people to consider. As a result, there is no single method for evaluating transportation equity. It is generally best to consider a variety of equity issues, perspectives and goals. A planning process should reflect a particular community’s equity concerns and priorities, so public involvement is important for transport equity planning.

Horizontal equity requires that people with comparable needs and abilities be treated equally, for example, receiving similar benefits and bearing similar costs. It implies that people should “get what they pay for and pay for what they get,” unless a subsidy is specifically justified. It can also justify compensation for external costs.

Vertical equity requires that the allocation of benefits and costs favors disadvantaged people. This tends to justify universal design that accommodates people with diverse needs and abilities, multimodal planning that provides transportation options for non-drivers, planning for affordability, special discounts and exemptions for lower-income travelers, and special protections or benefits for vulnerable or disadvantaged groups.

A useful way to incorporate equity into planning is to define various equity goals. Specific transportation policies and projects can then be evaluated based on the degree that they support or contradict these goals, and their design can be adjusted to better achieve these goals.

More comprehensive equity analysis allows practitioners to better incorporate equity objectives into planning decisions, and identify policies and projects that maximize equity objectives. New analysis tools and information resources are available to better evaluate equity and incorporate equity objectives into transport planning. Improved equity analysis in transport planning can reduce conflicts and delays, and better reflect a community’s needs and values.

# Some examples of my related publications:

Todd Litman (2020), Evaluating Transportation Equity: Guidance for Incorporating Distributional Impacts in Transportation Planning,” Victoria Transport Policy Institute (www.vtpi.org); at www.vtpi.org/equity.pdf.

Todd Litman (2019), "Transportation Affordability: Evaluation and Improvement Strategies," Victoria Transport Policy Institute (www.vtpi.org); at www.vtpi.org/affordability.pdf.

Todd Litman and Marc Brenman (2012), "A New Social Equity Agenda For Sustainable Transportation," Paper 12-3916, Transportation Research Board Annual Meeting (www.trb.org); at www.vtpi.org/equityagenda.pdf.

Todd Litman (2006), You CAN Get There From Here: Evaluating Transportation Diversity, Victoria Transport Policy Institute (www.vtpi.org); at www.vtpi.org/choice.pdf; originally published as, “You Can Get There From Here: Evaluating Transportation Choice,” Transportation Research Record 1756, TRB (www.trb.org), 20401, pp. 32-41.

Todd Litman (1996), “Using Road Pricing Revenue: Economic Efficiency and Equity Considerations,” Transportation Research Record 1558, Transportation Research Board (www.trb.org), pp. 24-28; at www.vtpi.org/revenue.pdf.