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INICIO >

## La movilidad de los pobres en dos metrópolis europeas

La dependencia del coche versus la dependencia por localización (\*) | Por Olivier Coutard, Gabriel Dupuy y Sylvie Fol

(\*) *Extraído en su versión original en inglés,  
Mobility of the Poor in Two European Metropolises:  
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Guest editor: Gabriel Dupuy*

### Resumen en español

Basado en un estudio comparativo sobre la movilidad de los pobres de los alrededores de París y Londres, con soporte en estadísticas y encuestas de tipo cualitativo, este artículo expone como la dependencia del coche es mayor para los pobres en del Reino Unido que para los de Francia. Aparte de factores de orden sociológico (las redes de relación y soporte familiar), explica como el planeamiento urbano y las políticas de transporte son parte de la respuesta al porqué de ésta situación.



## Mobility of the Poor in Two European Metropolises: Car Dependence versus Locality Dependence

*Based on a comparative study of the mobility of the poor in and around Paris and London, and backed by statistics and qualitative surveys, this paper exposes the greater car dependency of the poor in the UK than in France. Aside from the sociological factors (family mutual support networks), differing urban planning and transport policies are part of the reason why.*

In highly motorized societies, the urban mobility of poor households - fewer of whom tend to own a car than better-off households - is an issue that raises questions in regard to the need for and/or nature of specific public policy-making. Thinking on the matter suffers from an enormous lack of insight into how poor households use and move around their urban space. Do they all seek to acquire a car for the same reasons, irrespective of local contexts? What role does commuting play in structuring their travel patterns? Does this constitute an area that calls for particular kinds of public policies?

We have sought to shed light on these questions through a comparative survey based on in-depth interviews with around a hundred low-income households in the urban areas of Paris and London. To facilitate comparison between two countries – France and Great Britain - we selected households inhabiting similar districts: a city-centre neighbourhood dominated by social housing estates; and a community on the outer suburban fringe, largely populated by poor households (see figure 1). The interviews enabled us to fine-tune our analysis of the sample households' travel habits and the constraints hindering their mobility.

The analysis is rounded off with a wider-ranging statistical study aimed first at pinpointing the general social and demographic characteristics of poor households in France and Britain, together with their economic status and residential location; and second at identifying the factors underlying the various patterns of mobility: the urban history of the two regions under consideration; the housing, transport and social security policies implemented.

These two areas are clearly interdependent: a country's social security guidelines, for instance, have a major effect on the sociodemographic characteristics of poverty. [\(1\)](#)

### France and Great Britain: Differing Contexts

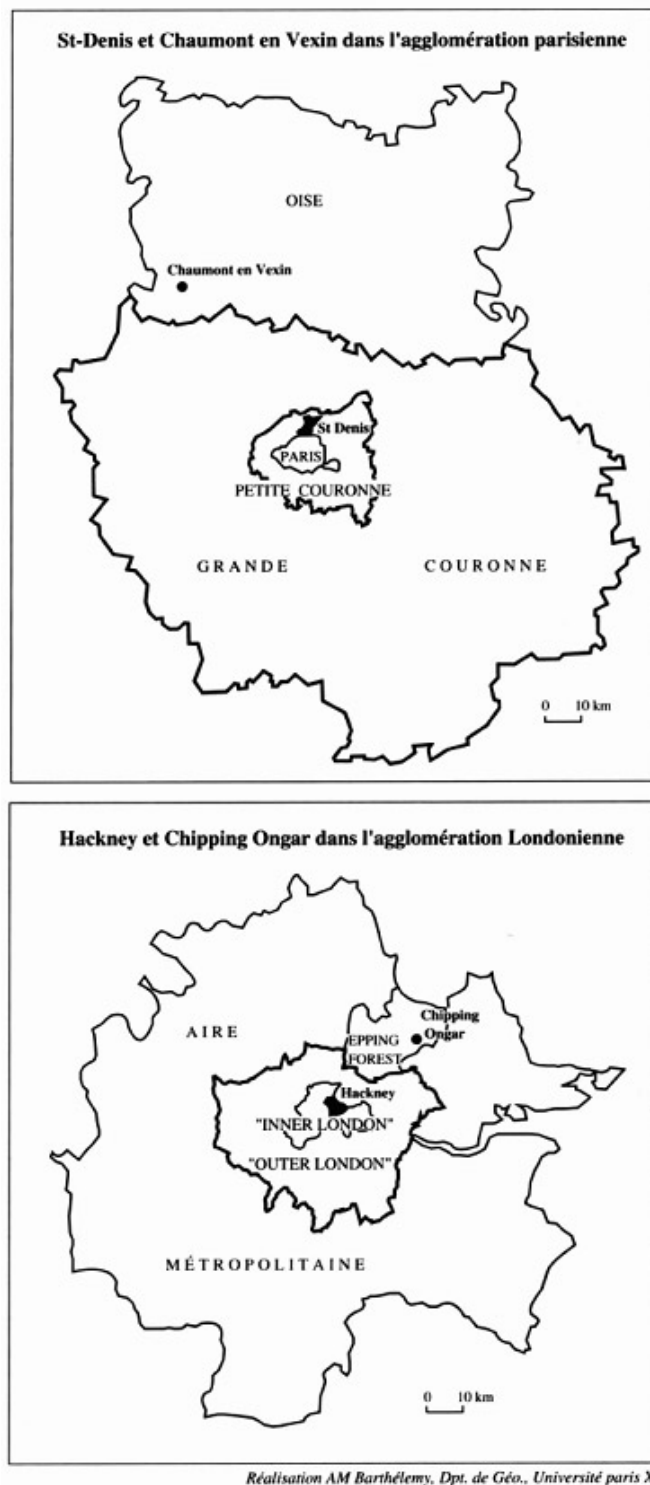
Starting at country level, while the past 20 years have seen the British government withdrawing from the fields of housing, transport and urban planning (with the emergence of quangos, the sale of social housing, the deregulation and/or privatization of public transport, etc.), the state is still the key actor in France. In social policy terms, the British have placed a far greater emphasis on the introduction of powerful incentives designed to encourage the unemployed to return to work.

Table 1. The four districts where surveys were carried out.

	<i>Central area neighbourhood</i>	<i>Outer area locality</i>
<i>Paris</i>	Salvador Allende estate in Saint Denis	Chaumont-en-Vexin
<i>London</i>	De Beauvoir estate in Hackney	Shelley estate in Chipping Ongar

Meanwhile, more poor households in Britain than in France tend to own their own homes, largely in inner-city areas. Also, more of them consist of families than in France, featuring higher levels of child poverty and lower levels of unemployment. With regard to mobility, the British poor appear to be under greater pressure to acquire a motor car, while the working poor account for a comparable and growing share of the population in both France and Great Britain.

At urban area level, the spatial functioning and layout of London is more metropolitan (polycentric) in nature than Paris, and of a larger spatial scale in terms of planning policy as well as the travel patterns that the policies in question are partly responsible for producing. While their transport systems may differ in structure, broadly similar patterns have been noted (e.g. in line with the modal split pertaining to each urban area as a whole). There are significant differences in the spatial distribution of poor households in London and Paris, with those in the former concentrated in areas closer to the urban core and those in the latter more scattered – which does not, as we shall see later on, mean to say that poor households in the Paris area are spatially isolated.



(Figure 1)

Noting how the poor in Britain appeared under greater pressure to acquire a car than those in France led to our wondering whether poor British households were not more car-dependent than their French counterparts. If so, what are the reasons for the differences in their respective situations and how likely is it to last?

### France: Locality Dependence-based Practices

In terms of mobility, most members of the Île-de-France (Paris region) households interviewed do not tend to travel very far from home. Virtually none of those residing in Chaumont spend any time in Paris, and some have never even been there. A significant proportion of the residents of the Salvador Allende estate rarely go to Paris either. In both cases, this has less to do with their not having a car - since Paris is within easy reach by public transport - than the fact that they are

simply becoming less and less inclined to leave the familiarity of their immediate surroundings. This situation is often ascribed to a lack of money or transport.

But locality-centred practices also tie in with the presence in the home neighbourhood of resources that help alleviate poverty-related constraints. Indeed, both sites feature shops and key public services and facilities.

Chaumont - probably on account of its county town status - offers a wide range of shops and services: food shops, banks, a post office, a taxation centre, a family welfare centre, the offices of the national electricity company and an especially large number of public facilities for a town of its size: several schools, two colleges, a social centre, a centre run by the regional organization providing for the welfare of mothers-to-be and infants, and even a hospital. Similarly, residents of Salvador Allende have a mere fifteen-minute walk to access the very wide range of shops and services on offer between the pedestrian precinct and shopping centre of Saint-Denis town centre. The concentration of services, in both Chaumont and Saint-Denis, represents a further advantage for non-car-owning residents: a relative abundance of local job opportunities. Indeed, a sizeable proportion of the working population among interviewees in Chaumont (a third) and Salvador Allende (close to 40 per cent) were employed locally. A good deal of local jobs are linked to public facilities: posts at the town hall, caretakers on the social housing estates, hospital workers, ancillary staff of local schools, nursery assistants, and so on. This pool of public sector employment opportunities represents another reason why poor households can survive without a car.

When travelling is unavoidable, public transport can offset the disadvantages of not having a car. Residents of Chaumont, for instance, can reach the neighbouring town of Gisors thanks to the state-run railway line from Paris, which is also used by high school pupils and people looking for more specialized shops and services. Salvador Allende residents enjoy access to a clearly far more extensive transport system: with the extension of a metro line to central Paris, the upgrading of the bus services - a new bus station now being located quite close to the estate - they have a number of different lines to choose from in order to travel to neighbourhoods throughout Saint-Denis and other towns in the region. Local people approve of the new metro station, which some see as a *bonafide* opening to the outside world. And even though few of our interviewees are actually using it to travel to Paris on a regular basis, they appreciate having it there should they wish to do so.

That said, public transport is not the answer to all of the local population's travel needs. Weekly shopping trips, for instance, are not always practicable by bus or by metro.

When non-motorized households find themselves in need of a car, they have to call on outside resources. Relatives and, to a lesser extent, friends constitute a crucial source of such resources for many of the low-income households interviewed. Their importance hinges first and foremost on spatial proximity. More than half of our Salvador Allende estate sample households have relatives living in Saint-Denis (half on the estate itself) and a further 25 per cent have family in other neighbouring towns.

The family plays a major part in the residents' activities, and they devote much of their spare time to it. What is more, it is a major source of mutual aid. Relatives can help avoid trips through such services as child minding. Or they can help increase the mobility potential of non-car-owning households by offering a lift to those that have trouble carrying heavy loads of food shopping home on foot or on public transport. The family provides clearly the most easily - or, at least, most frequently - mobilized support.

Poor households without cars have a limited range of resources available to them and these must be used in a measured way. Recourse to each type of service is carefully managed in accordance with constraints specific to each individual set of circumstances and travel needs. The balance struck in the use of the various resources is manifestly complex and delicate.

Residential location is a key component of that balance. Indeed, inhabiting places equipped with a wealth of 'convenientes' lessens the need to resort to other resources, especially public transport and relatives or friends. Our survey has revealed a clustering of poor households around these convenience-rich areas, stemming, in Saint-Denis and Chaumont alike, from local policies geared to building social housing for low-income earners.

The clustering was also found to tie in with two complementary forms of residential strategy implemented by the poor households themselves: a 'static' form, where those living in the heart of their 'resource base' seek to stay put; and a 'mobile' form, where households make a conscious effort to gravitate towards places capable of satisfying their resource needs. The 'static' form is common in Saint-Denis - with a good many households having been there for years on end - as well as in Chaumont, albeit to a somewhat lesser degree. These are the households with the local family connections and the least trouble in mobilizing solidarity-related resources. The proximity of their relatives (or friends) has combined with the familiarity with the places and their inhabitants that has gradually built up over the years to create a reassuring environment and to produce relational ties.

Working-class relationships hinge on spatial proximity. This is conducive to the growth of far stronger local roots than may be found among households belonging to other social classes. Alongside the 'well-rooted' residents are other households adhering to the second, 'mobile' form of residential strategy, i.e. those who have arrived more recently in a conscious endeavour to be closer to the resources on offer locally. For some families, Chaumont represents one of a limited range of

possible residential locations featuring a sufficient supply of services. A significant number of recent arrivals happen to be former residents who already have relational ties in the town. These include several divorced women returning to be close to their families after having moved away with former husbands.

So the concentration of a minimum resource base is crucial to poor households with limited if any access to a car. The towns studied feature adequate public services - including public transport - while the proximity of family and friends and familiarity with the places create conditions conducive to residents establishing local roots and, at the same time, developing certain forms of **locality dependence**. It is hardly unusual to find such features in Saint-Denis, a 'typical' suburban (innercity) neighbourhood. It comes as more of a surprise in Chaumont, whose peri-urban environment might lead one to expect more spatially scattered practices and, hence, a greater degree of **car dependence**. Analysis of the British study areas will, as we shall see, reveal a quite different picture.

### Great Britain: Car Dependence-based. Practices

The surveys carried out in the London area pinpointed a number of especially influential constraints shaping the urban mobility patterns of low-income households. Poor public services, not least insofar as transport is concerned, significantly undermine the self-sufficiency of such households when they do not own a car, thus putting them in a position where they have little choice but to acquire one.

Few of the De Beauvoir households interviewed use the limited number of shops available on the estate because they find them too costly. The Shelley estate is relatively better served, with shops located on the estate itself or at the nearby Chipping Ongar centre. But these are small and medium-sized businesses whose prices are known to be higher than the outlying hypermarkets, and which tend to be used only by residents without cars. They usually take the bus and unanimously complain about the slowness, unreliability and extremely poor quality of services. De Beauvoir estate residents are especially unhappy about the lack of an underground station and the endless waits at bus stops.

But their situation is nowhere near as bad as it is for residents of Shelley, where buses are even fewer and farther between and where the Chipping Ongar underground station is sorely missed following its closure some years ago, depriving locals of a really useful link to central London and sparking a chain reaction that has had a highly damaging effect on urban life: closure of local shops and businesses, closure of schools, and people leaving in droves. Non-car owning households, however, scarcely ever seek to alleviate their local travel problems by appealing to their relatives or friends. Indeed, even though some interviewees have some family living nearby, their relationships appear far less close-knit than is the case among French households. They hardly mentioned their family networks. Relatives rarely visit one another, and not a single noncar owning household admits to asking the family for help with its transport problems.

What is more, not that many are inclined to ask their friends. Given the accumulation of problems and the apparent risk of social isolation, even the poorest non-motorized households find themselves unavoidably pushed into acquiring a car.

Motorized households regard car ownership as a matter not of choice but of compulsion. This is primarily because of where the jobs are located. The De Beauvoir estate is the neighbourhood with the largest number of long-distance commuters. The fact that most of the Shelley residents working locally (over a third) are unskilled women doing insecure, part-time jobs shifts a greater share of the burden as far as the household's sources of income are concerned onto the male wage-earner. And, as almost every working member of a motorized household interviewed points out, the best paying jobs are those located farthest from home, thus making it essential to own a car. Without one, many would have had to settle for lower-paying jobs in the neighbourhood (e.g. at the local supermarket). Owning a car is also very often said to be a must by working women with children and others having to cope with complex, demanding, 'trip-chains'.

Car ownership, however, accounts for an enormous share of the household budget among our interviewees, especially the residents of Shelley, who clearly have no other alternative. Virtually every motorized household there finds it hard to run a car without making sacrifices in other areas of the family housekeeping. They are often heard to worry about their cars breaking down, given that they cannot afford to buy a new one or to have them repaired as regularly as they might like. That said, not every car owner uses his or her vehicle with the same degree of intensity. Indeed, poor people tend to limit the use of their cars to essential purposes (mostly, trips to work). Several interviewees - especially Shelley residents - point out that they hardly ever go out in them because they are too old and because petrol is far too expensive.

The seemingly inevitable motorization of the peri-urban poor of Britain appears to have produced a form of **car dependence** that is quite unlike the situation found to exist among their counterparts in France, for whom alternative solutions still appear to remain possible.

### The Role of Public Policies

Our surveys, then, have highlighted two distinct and at times conflicting models in regard to the spatial practices of the poor in Great Britain and France.

We now need to take a more detailed look at the specific role that employment policy plays, via its effects in terms of home-to-work mobility, in structuring poor people's spatial practices and in sustaining those two national models.

The poor of both Britain and France face employment difficulties of a nature that can be manifest (unemployment) or latent (remote workplaces, job insecurity, etc.).

Endeavours to tackle poverty can aim at promoting jobs for people facing either of those kinds of employment difficulties. Or else they can seek to provide the people in question with sustainable welfare support for as long as it takes them to return to the employment market. Policy-makers waver between these two approaches (when they are not seeking to combine them). Over the past two decades, British policy-makers have favoured an incentives-based welfare-to-work policy aimed at encouraging poor people of working age to return quickly to (or even make a first appearance in) what has become a more flexible and fast-changing jobs market. Meanwhile, their French counterparts have established a socially-sensitive approach providing out-of-work poor people with specially designed, long-term assistance.

Opting for either one of these policy approaches is bound to affect poor people's mobility. To find jobs that match their skills and abilities quickly, they are driven to widen their job-hunting horizons and to be ready either to move home or to agree to long-distance commuting. Alternatively, they can stay put. The metropolitan areas of Paris and London feature far more extensive employment markets than smaller cities. What is more, their transport systems render the workplace far more accessible.

Three-quarters of jobs in the Paris area, and almost as many in and around London, can be reached in under an hour on public transport. Overall figures such as these, however, mask the fact that the jobs for which the poor are most eligible are not necessarily located within easy reach of home. This is the European version of America's 'spatial mismatch'. In the United States, the problem is relatively simple. Largely suburbanized jobs are relatively inaccessible to the deprived population groups that remain confined to inner-city areas. Although the situation in large European metropolises such as Paris and London may differ, the spatial mismatch is just as real. In London, the better-off classes first of all moved out of areas in and around the city centre and the less well-off moved in (cf. the example of Hackney).

More recently, a number of centrally located neighbourhoods have undergone an intense degree of gentrification, forcing the poor into other neighbouring areas or even, more rarely, to outlying areas such as Shelley (Atkinson, 2000). In Paris, most of the poor have remained in or around the capital.

The large-scale construction of public social housing estates in the suburbs with a view to accommodating struggling population groups has led to a situation where social housing accounts for some 30 per cent of the stock in the inner suburbs. So much so that the poverty rate recorded in 1999 by the French family allowance office (2) came to close to 17 per cent in Seine-Saint-Denis (an inner suburban borough) as opposed to less than 10 per cent in Val d'Oise (which still happens to be the outer suburban district where that rate is at its highest). Only more recently has there been a marginal increase in the number of poor people moving into more remote outlying areas (cf. Chaumont-en-Vexin).

In London, all but the highly skilled service sector jobs have relocated away from the city centre, and now cover a vast area encroaching on the green belt in the regions of the Outer Metropolitan Area. In Paris, the workplace for manual labourers and low-level office workers is located further from the city centre than it is for more highly skilled workers (see Wenglenski and Orfeuill in this issue). So 'the banlieue rouge (3) model, with its social housing located close to the workshops, has collapsed' (Massot et al., 1995). Furthermore, while the metropolization of the London and Paris urban areas has gone hand-in-hand with a growth in employment opportunities, few of those opportunities actually concern the sorts of low-skilled jobs that are chiefly of interest to the poor.

Nowadays, the poor of Paris and London alike are increasingly having to live in areas located some distance away from the centre, while the jobs for which they can consider themselves eligible have become both few and far between. Under such circumstances, the French policy advocating density and mixing boils down to the reproduction in outlying towns of the locality-dependence model initiated in and prevailing over the social housing estates of Paris' inner suburbs.

In Great Britain, the promotion of welfare-to-work incentives has resulted in a growth in mobility that, in such a highly motorized country, was always bound to amount to a growth in 'automobility'.

Recent employment policy (or measures to tackle unemployment) in the two countries has therefore tended to confirm our observations vis-à-vis the two national models. One is struck, for example, by the consistency of each country's public policy affecting the mobility of the poor. In France, the reliance on local resources goes hand-in-hand with efforts to provide the people concerned with community-level facilities, services and transport. In Britain, on the other hand, policy-makers bank on people's mobility; and they have not chosen to provide them with efficient public transport networks.

A growing confidence in the market's ability to supply transport services has put neighbourhoods with few car owners at a disadvantage. And when those neighbourhoods are located on the outskirts, it further bolsters the obstacles to their participation in an extended urban society and economy (MacGregor, 1997).

Public transport in France, especially in and around Paris, has been maintained at a good level of efficiency in spite of the difficulties (underfunding, security problems, etc.). The same cannot generally be said to be true in and around London.

Assessing the Policies in Terms of Sustainability Comparison between France and Great Britain has therefore brought out two national models of spatial practices among poor households. These models undoubtedly stem from - and have in any event been bolstered by - the gradual implementation of a body of public policies concerning not just travel, but also welfare benefits, housing, infrastructure and services. How can one conduct a comparative assessment of the two models and their underlying policies? Does France have good grounds for maintaining an approach that leaves the poor somewhat immobile? Has Britain made a greater success of it by compelling its poor to adhere to a state of 'automobility'? In other words, should another country facing the task of tackling the issue of poverty within a context of general motorization seek inspiration from the British rather than the French approach? Is car dependence ultimately preferable to the locality dependence model or vice versa?

Our survey has led us to assess the two models (and their underlying policies) in terms of sustainability, in the light of three sets of criteria: economic, environmental and social. From the economic point of view, car dependence burdens the poor with heavy costs that undoubtedly undermine their ability to cope with other basic expenses

**Table 2. Assessment of sustainability criteria by national model.**

<i>Model</i>	<i>Sustainability criteria</i>		
	<i>Environmental</i>	<i>Economic</i>	<i>Social</i>
Car dependence (G.B.)	X	X	✓
Locality dependence (Fr.)	✓	✓	X

(e.g. food), which hardly looks very sustainable. From the environmental point of view, locality dependence is clearly more sustainable insofar as it tempers overall car dependence. From the social point of view, however, our studies have shown that young people do not appear overly keen, to say the least, on the locality dependence model, thus threatening to undermine the sustainability of that approach.

It is not the researcher's job to weigh up these three criteria with a view to ruling in favour of one particular approach or another. That said, we do need to underscore one key factor to emerge from our research. In countries featuring widespread motorization (to a degree that exceeds the European average), the poor can only cope with a reliance on local resources (locality dependence) if they have constant access to help from third parties - relatives, friends and neighbours who generally tend to be car owners. Keeping up such forms of solidarity is a sine qua non for any policy geared to curbing car dependence. At the same time, it generally involves a high level of car ownership within society. This leads to the conclusion that it is doubtful whether a radical choice of either policy can lead to sustainable development. If poverty cannot be eradicated, one sustainable solution would clearly involve a balance being struck between car dependence and locality dependence.

**OC, GD, SF**

## NOTES

(1) The definition of poverty used in this survey hinges on the following criterion: that the household's 'equivalized' income (a measure incorporating the size of the household into income comparisons) places it among the poorest 20%.

[\(volver al texto\)](#)

(2) The family allowance office (Caisse d'Allocations Familiales) defines the poverty rate as the share of a town's residents living in a welfare beneficiary household whose income is below the poverty line. [\(volver al texto\)](#)

(3) Literally 'red suburb', which refers to the dominance of the communist party in local government in many municipalities around Paris in the post-1945 period. [\(volver al texto\)](#)

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