



# The Road to Health Care Parity: Transportation Policy and Access to Health Care

*“The Road to Health Care Parity: Transportation and Access to Health Care,” is the second in a series of reports by The Leadership Conference Education Fund examining the key roles transportation and mobility play in the struggle for civil rights and equal opportunity. The reports highlight critical issues and make recommendations for policymakers as they draft a reauthorization of the nation’s surface transportation programs, which will allocate hundreds of billions of federal dollars for transportation projects that will have a profound impact on every person in our country. To read the reports: [www.civilrights.org/transportation](http://www.civilrights.org/transportation).*

**Access to health care is a civil right and a foundation for other rights.** Today, low-income populations, people of color, households in rural areas, and people with disabilities disproportionately lack access to affordable, quality health care. This disparity has contributed to high rates of preventable conditions, which affect individuals’ ability to participate fully in education and the workforce.

**Lack of affordable and accessible transportation options is a major contributor to health disparities.**

- It isolates low-income people from health care facilities and forces families to spend a large percentage of their budgets on cars and other expensive options at the expense of other needs, including health care.
- Our current transportation policy generates public health problems that disproportionately affect low-income communities and communities of color.

***How does transportation policy contribute to health disparities?***

For decades, we have invested the overwhelming majority of federal transportation funds in new highway construction. These decisions were made by institutions without significant representation of people from urban areas and people of color. As a result, we have a landscape of metropolitan sprawl and a predominately car-based transportation system.

By underinvesting in walkable communities, rapid bus transit, rail, and bicycle-friendly roads, our policies contribute to high concentrations of poor air quality, pedestrian fatalities, obesity, and asthma. All of these public health risks have disproportionately affected low-income people and people of color. For instance:

**Lack of access to health care facilities** – Without affordable and accessible transportation, many Americans are physically isolated from health care providers. People of color, households in rural areas, and people with disabilities face significant hurdles because many cannot

drive and public transportation is often unavailable, inaccessible, or unreliable.

**Pedestrian fatalities** – Children, seniors, and people of color are disproportionately represented among the 76,000 Americans killed in pedestrian accidents in the last 15 years. Streets that are safe for all road users—including pedestrians and bicyclists—are critical to ensuring livable neighborhoods.

**Obesity** – Streets and highways without sidewalks discourage walking and contribute to rising obesity rates. Obesity costs account for approximately 9 percent of all U.S. health care spending.

**Fewer resources for health care and nutritious food** – The poorest fifth of American families spend 42 percent of their incomes on transportation. This massive expenditure can wipe out already limited budgets for out-of-pocket medical expenses, nutritious food, and health recreational activities.

**Pollution-related public health risks** – Transportation-related air quality is causing serious public health problems in cities, most notably asthma. Studies also show that people living within 300 meters of major highways are more likely to have leukemia and cardiovascular disease.

***How can transportation policy make a positive impact on health conditions?***

To promote greater parity in health care, our transportation policy must shift a portion of transportation investments away from highway construction and toward other transportation modes. Expanding public transportation, walkable communities, and bicycle-friendly roads will bridge the gap between many Americans and health care services, as well as decrease health hazards such as pollution and pedestrian fatalities. **Given what’s at stake, advocates must mobilize to educate and advocate for a shared vision of transportation to provide health care access for all.**