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Transportation Research Forum

Book Review: Commuting in America, III: The Third National Report on Commuting Patterns and Trends.

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Pisarski, Alan E. Commuting in America, III: The Third National Report on Commuting Patterns and Trends. NCHRP Report 550; TCRP Report 110. Washington, DC: Transportation Research Board, 2006. ISBN 030909853X.

Commuting in America

by William Huneke

Commuting in America III is the third in a series that Pisarski has done for the Transportation Research Board. Pisarski's first two studies covered the decades 1970-1980 and 1980-1990. The series has analyzed changing commuting patterns as the Baby Boom generation entered the workforce, moved into the 21st Century and as it begins to retire.

This study reminds us how much modern America is wedded to the private automobile. It presents a blizzard of statistics, tables and graphs, and each one reinforces the primacy of the private automobile to Americans' mobility. For example, during the study's time period (1990-2000), only two "modes" grew their shares in the commuting arena across all regions of the country. Those modes were driving alone and working at home (tele-work). Clearly, Americans still love their cars.

Private automobiles continue to be what economists call a superior good, a good whose consumption increases more rapidly than income as people move into higher income brackets. Immigrants are not immune to this feature of America. A key breakpoint appears to be at an annual income of \$25,000. Below that point, vehicle-less households predominate. Households earning more than \$25,000 in annual income start to acquire private automobiles.

The American love affair with the private automobile is reflected in how much commuting depends on the private automobile. In 2000, more than 75% of commuting was done via driving alone. Even the metropolitan area that Pisarski considers an outlier (New York City) has a majority of commuters driving alone (56%). On the other hand, metro New York also has 20% of the nation's households without private vehicles.

It is not surprising that New York should be the low end outlier when it comes to driving alone. New York and Washington, D.C. have the most reliance on mass transit commuting. Surprisingly, the largest gainers in transit share turn out to be out west: Las Vegas and Portland. Overall, transit's share nationally is second to private vehicle (87.88%) but transit is less than 5% (4.57%). Working from home is third (3.26%) and walking is fourth (2.93%).

Working at home is a noteworthy phenomenon that is occurring as the population ages. Pisarski notes that older workers seem to favor working from home. As baby boomers age and more of them extend their working years, working from home may continue to grow in importance.

The study's findings should provide some caution to urban and transportation planners who seek to increase the share of mass transit in place of the private automobile. One of the private automobile's strengths is its flexibility.

Flexibility is important in what Pisarski identifies as a phenomenon that is on the rise: the work trip chain. Work trip chains mean that the worker does not always go directly to work or directly home when commuting. A work trip chain might mean the commuter does an errand or stops at child care on either the inbound or outbound trip or both. The phenomenon should not be surprising. It is increasing, concomitant with female work force participation and two income families.

Another interesting finding is the growing predominance of suburb-to-suburb commuting. Suburb-to-suburb commuting had 64% of the growth in 1990 to 2000 and accounted for 46% of all metropolitan commuting. The second biggest gainer in metropolitan commuting was reverse commuting, from inner city to suburb, which accounted for 20% of metropolitan commuting growth.

Pisarski laments the demise of the census long form and identifies data sources that will be important for transportation planners and analysts in the future. It may be that Pisarski's work will be too difficult to replicate in the future without the census long form. Pisarski also identifies trends that should be followed in the future: immigration, suburban commuting, telecommuting. He cautions that politicians have not made American mobility a priority in recent years. Maybe that will change. The greater attention the new administration is paying to climate change may bring focus to mobility.

Global warming and climate change along with the 2008 oil shock are a couple of caveats a current reader might have with *Commuting in America III*. Pisarski's work was done before the dramatic 2008 rise and fall in oil prices. This study was written after 20 years of generally declining oil prices and just as that trend was starting to reverse. If Pisarski were to do the study now or in a few years, it would be interesting to see if the oil price shock had any effect on commuting.

The greater attention to global warming is another important factor that *Commuting in America III* did not pick up because of timing. Now the United States has a new administration that is determined to address climate change. The gasoline powered, private automobile may have to adapt. How this evolution occurs during the next several years will be an interesting topic for a *Commuting in America IV*.

Those caveats aside, this is a valuable study. Pisarski's prose carries the reader easily through his wealth of graphs, statistics, and charts. His study reinforces how dependent American workers are on commuting by private automobile. This dependence is a fundamental challenge to transportation analysts and planners as they seek to tackle climate change while providing mobility to 21st century America.

Dr. William Huneke is associate director and chief economist at the Surface Transportation Board. He has more than 25 years experience in economics, management consulting, information systems, and teaching. He earned a Ph.D. at the University of Virginia. His dissertation was entitled, *The Heavy Hand: The Government and the Union Pacific, 1862-1898*. The opinions expressed in this paper are the author's and do not reflect the views or policy positions of the Surface Transportation Board or its members.