

To: Transport & Health Policy Makers, & Practitioners
From: Professor Adrian Davis
Date: 28th June 2021
Subject: Essential Evidence 4 Scotland No.41 Forced car ownership in deprived urban areas

Top Line: Forced car ownership is especially associated with households with children who feel the need for a vehicle despite financial difficulty, which may also be exacerbated by greater numbers of children.

Inadequate transport can exacerbate challenging circumstances, deepening physical and social isolation, particularly for people who already have lower levels of mobility, such as those with disabilities or only basic education. Place is of fundamental significance within transport policy and poorer communities have suffered the worst impacts from austerity policies such as benefits reductions and cuts to local jobs and services. When people feel impacts of unemployment or reduced income they make fewer or shorter trips, and even those with cars become more dependent on bus transport.

Despite a range of sociodemographic influences on car ownership, the positive relationship between income and car ownership remains strong, that car ownership is an established proxy for income.¹ In Scotland, the percentage of people in households without a car halved over the past 30 years. Access to a private vehicle is strongly socially and geographically patterned, with the lowest levels of car ownership in the most deprived areas, and the cost of car ownership and use is heavily implicated in this distribution. The advantages offered by a car include convenience, flexibility, comfort and the perception of being safer, compared with public transport. Yet, once an income level which makes a car affordable is achieved, it becomes very difficult to end car should income fall again.

Research in Glasgow looked at the impact of recession and car ownership in order to explore the phenomenon of forced car ownership.² Between 2008 and 2009 the UK suffered the worst period of recession since the Second World War, precipitating declining living standards, along with an extended period of austerity and welfare reform. People from disadvantaged neighbourhoods are most likely to have transport needs at times beyond the traditional 'peak travel' framework, when frequency of public transport may not be sufficient. Mobility disadvantages suffered by women and relatively low-paid, self-employed, part-time or contract workers are particularly marked in dense urban areas, where they face longer commute times. Therefore, even where public transport services exist, they are not necessarily suitable to replace car use for those with complex travel demands.

Considering factors that affect car adoption, having children in the household was a key influence. There is, they researchers argue, a growing phenomenon of 'forced' car ownership within deprived parts of Glasgow where people face particular challenges of multi-tasking and multiple responsibility. The majority of those identified as forced car owners retained a car despite ongoing or worsening financial difficulties. Fewer people adopted a car alongside financial difficulties (although some did so), suggesting that rather than being forced *into* car ownership, the majority of respondents felt unable to give up a car despite experiencing financial difficulties. Within low income groups living in disadvantaged areas, many people see car ownership as necessary for one or more reasons including: searching for jobs or the take up of employment for those out of work, perhaps increasingly so given the growth of the 'gig economy'; as a means to cope with the complexity of household mobility needs where numbers of children or numbers of adults in a household increases; and, potentially, as a perceived cheaper or more convenient alternative to the use of a mixture of public transport and taxis/cabs.

¹ Carr-Hill, R., Chalmers-Dixon, P. 2013 An introduction to the use of indices to measure deprivation, Public Health Observatory Handbook of health inequalities, Oxford: SEPHO, 87-96.

² Curl, A., Clarke, J., Kearns, A. 2018 Household car adoption and financial distress in deprived urban communities: A case of forced car ownership? *Transport Policy*, 65: 61-71.