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Environmental Justice and Transportation Equity: A Review of MPOs

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Surface transportation policies at the local, regional, state, and national levels have a direct impact on urban land use and development patterns. The types of transportation facilities and services in which public funds are invested provide varying levels of access to meet basic social and economic needs. The way regions develop land dictates the need for certain types of transportation, and on the other hand, the transportation options in which regions invest influence patterns of urban development.

While many lament the trend toward suburban sprawl as damaging to the environment or unaesthetic, those who support social equity should also be concerned about the associated impacts. Substantial investment in highway development and other transportation programs that encourage private automobile use has supported low-density developments that extend increasingly farther and farther from the central city, and to residential and commercial areas that are increasingly spread out, producing “edgeless cities” (Lang 2003). In addition to being costly to state and local governments, transportation policies that encourage these growth patterns play a substantial role in producing some indirect, negative social and economic effects, including perpetuating residential segregation and exacerbating the inability of minorities to access entry-level employment, which is increasingly found in suburban areas. MPOs are well suited to provide leadership in the areas of metropolitan development and civil rights.

The federal role in transportation expanded substantially during the second half of the twentieth century. The interstate highway program of the 1950s was followed by an ambitious mass transit initiative during the 1960s and 1970s. As federally supported large central city projects,

federal programs included requirements for project review at the metropolitan level. MPOs were established to perform a key role in regional transportation planning, and federal transportation laws created and heavily funded these regional planning bodies to coordinate federal transportation programs. During the final decade of the twentieth century, MPOs assumed responsibilities beyond transportation planning with one of the new planning requirements being social equity, also known as environmental justice, to be included as provisions of regional plans.

Two ways to evaluate the importance that MPOs place on social or environmental equity is to examine the products of their planning activities and also the representativeness of their policymakers. This chapter discusses the extent to which large MPOs incorporate environmental justice concerns into their planning processes. Three dimensions of this issue are reviewed: efforts targeted at assessing the fairness of planning outcomes and the promotion of social equity; public participation in MPO processes; and analysis of the extent to which MPO boards underrepresent social, economic, and ethnic/racial groups. The discussion relies on existing research for background on the MPO structure and its responsibilities, and then presents the results of a survey to examine the types of equity planning conducted by MPOs, the forms of public participation efforts, and the representation of voting board members.

There is considerable potential for MPOs to efficiently and effectively confront questions of equity within metropolitan areas. The structure of MPOs is such that political and geographic fragmentation can be reduced, eroding the potential for continued housing market segregation, economic and social segregation in schools, and increasing suburban affluence at the expense of central city infrastructure and other public services (powell and Graham 2002). One challenge for MPOs is coordinating local government competition while at the same time maintaining standards of fairness and equity relative to transportation investments.

Along with acknowledging the significant impacts their decisions have on the built environment, many MPOs have attempted to evaluate their actions in light of Executive Order 12898. Now, ten years after this order was issued by President Clinton, the question is whether MPOs have undertaken actions consistent with the mandate. Environmental

justice and transportation equity planning analyses are examples of such actions. While scores of equity analyses were conducted during the 1970s, the practice was relatively absent until it reemerged in the late 1990s.

Overview of MPO Structure and Responsibilities

ISTEA made MPOs primarily responsible for planning and allocating transportation funding in metropolitan areas by providing funds directly to them. Although MPOs have been in existence since the 1950s, generally operating as either a subdivision of state DOTs or a function of a regional COG, ISTEA and the USDOT's implementing regulations made them more influential, and gave them uniform functions and responsibilities. ISTEA also broadened the membership of the policy-setting boards of MPOs governing large areas, requiring that they include representatives from local governments in the region, agencies operating major transportation systems, and state officials.

ISTEA and its implementing regulations required MPOs and state planning agencies to develop twenty-year regional plans outlining in detail the priorities, policies, and strategies for the region's transportation system. MPOs were also required to prepare, with community involvement, a TIP listing the transportation projects that would be undertaken within three years.

While state DOTs control the majority of overall transportation planning decisions, MPOs play an important role in shaping urban transportation policies that affect the major concentrations of population within states that also include significant numbers of minorities and low-income individuals. Both of these organizations can play an increasingly crucial part in promoting social equity through the broad view of social inclusion.¹ Some argue that transportation service provision, the consequences of interaction between land use and transportation decisions, and issues of spatial equity are effectively addressed on a regional basis and at appropriate stages in the planning process. To be effective, this requires balancing the roles of state, regional, and local planning agencies through a coordination mechanism that does not currently exist.

ISTEA and TEA-21 established planning criteria for MPOs to consider as they review their transportation programs. These criteria went beyond specific transportation elements to include a wide range of issues where transportation projects affect other aspects of metropolitan development. The Constrained Long-Range Plan (CLRP) is expected to show compliance with EPA air quality standards, consider implications of transportation projects on air quality and land use, foster economic and community development, and be sensitive to equity issues. Except for the air quality requirement, the guidance for meeting the criteria for the remaining list of policy concerns is less defined.

Addressing Equity: Environmental Justice and Transportation Planning

The issue of equity within metropolitan transportation planning processes is primarily being addressed through the environmental justice component of MPO programs. Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Executive Order 12898 established environmental justice as a federal policy, with Clinton's order stating that "each Federal agency shall make achieving environmental justice part of its mission by identifying and addressing, as appropriate, disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects of its programs, policies, and activities on minority populations and low-income populations."

Both the USDOT and the FHWA issued Environmental Justice Orders (USDOT Order 5610.2 and FHWA Order 6640.23) in 1997 and 1998, respectively. These orders described how environmental justice elements can be incorporated into existing federal programs. The USDOT (2000, ii) cited three core principles of environmental justice that can be used for analysis and decision making, including both procedural and substantive elements.

1. To avoid, minimize, or mitigate disproportionately high and adverse human health and environmental effects, including social and economic effects, on minority populations and low-income populations;
2. To ensure the full and fair participation by all potentially affected communities in the transportation decision-making process;
3. To prevent the denial of, reduction in, or significant delay in the receipt of benefits by minority and low-income populations.

Three issues constitute the core of equity and environmental justice concerns for MPOs. The first relates to the more formal political processes used by MPOs—specifically, the formal membership and voting processes. The second concerns the ISTEA/TEA-21 requirement for public participation in the MPO planning processes. Finally, the third equity issue concerns how the specific groups are served or underserved by transportation programs. The remainder of this chapter addresses these issues.

Fostering Public Involvement

ISTEA required greater public involvement in the MPO process, and MPOs were expected to ensure increased and formal opportunities for timely and effective public involvement in the development of the CLRP, TIP, and other planning activities. In 1995, an Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations (ACIR) study reported that more MPOs were making efforts to meet this requirement, with 78 percent of MPOs reporting various efforts to encourage public involvement. The report concluded that there were more opportunities for involvement available to the public, more staff available to support these processes, the development of new involvement techniques, a sense that MPOs were listening, and a feeling that this involvement would make a difference in planning processes (U.S. ACIR 1995). A follow-on study noted improvements, but “that much work apparently remains to be done” (U.S. ACIR 1997).

In a 2000 study, Andrew Goetz and his colleagues at the University of Denver again confirmed the observation that MPOs were making progress in this area. The review of four MPOs in large metropolitan areas reported that the MPOs felt most successful about their public involvement activities. Each had extensive public involvement programs and felt that this contributed to their planning efforts. Involvement early in the process seemed particularly valuable because it surfaced potentially difficult conflicts, and provided time to head off litigation and delay (U.S. General Accounting Office 2002; McDowell 1999; Goldman and Deakin 2000). MPOs supported the public processes, but did want greater flexibility in the FHWA requirements (U.S. General Accounting Office 2002).

At the same time, it is not entirely clear that public involvement represents a deeply or enthusiastically held MPO value. On balance, Robert W. Gage and Bruce D. McDowell (1995) found that at best, the MPOs' directors rated their efforts as "slightly ineffective." The American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO) and their member states have been critical of participation procedures because they seem to serve more as a "lightning rod" for controversial projects. Such procedures bring out those with strong opposition on a one-issue basis, but do not provide a more continually engaged public (Goldman and Deakin 2000).

Creating public participation places heavy demands on the capabilities of MPOs. Traditionally, they have not invested a great deal of energy in this area. They had to find new ways to engage the public when they did not have the resources or techniques to do so. MPOs needed to quickly learn how to involve diverse and hard-to-reach persons. They confronted the problem every public outreach effort faces of involving people in issues beyond the single one that they usually oppose or support intensely (U.S. Government Accounting Office 2002).

While McDowell (1999, 15) saw continuing challenges, he also found evidence of progress: "memberships of policy boards and committees have been expanded, consensus-building processes have been enhanced, non-traditional participants have been recruited, special workgroups and task forces have been established to explore new issue areas, new advisory councils have been set up, and weighted voting has been introduced." MPOs, particularly in large metropolitan areas with substantial technical capability, have taken advantage of Internet technologies to enhance contact with persons outside of normal political processes. These MPOs regularly post reports, schedules of meetings, committee membership, and other materials related to their planning activities.

MPOs are increasingly performing distributional analyses to assess the incidence of costs and benefits by location as well as demographic group. In addition to identifying and measuring direct impacts from policy interventions, these analyses are concerned with direct effects such as how individuals or groups adapt to interventions—such as transportation improvements. These adaptations can take the form of physical or psychological responses (such as health) as well as economic responses

(such as residential relocation), and do not occur randomly within metropolitan regions. Distributional analyses generally identify the outcomes of decision-making processes, but unfortunately like a broader range of social impact analyses, they do not identify weaknesses or biases in the system that produced such outcomes.

MPO Political Participation and Voting Bias

Several equity issues arise from the structural arrangements of membership and voting. First, since most MPOs follow the structural format of a COG, each political jurisdiction normally receives one vote. Citing the one-person, one-vote principle, larger jurisdictions may consider themselves unfairly represented. At the same time, the smaller jurisdictions prefer the one-jurisdiction, one-vote procedure as a way to prevent larger jurisdictions, often in the urban center, from dominating planning recommendations and decisions.

Federal transportation laws do not require an organizational or vote structure that prevents bias in allocating transportation investments. Paul G. Lewis and Mary Sprague (1997) identified four major types of MPOs, each with unique voting arrangements. The most prevalent type is the COG. A COG is constituted as a cooperative organization of the local governments in a region. Typically, each participating local government in the region appoints a representative to the COG board, on which they serve as a fully voting member, regardless of the size of the local government they represent.

As most MPO boards are either COG boards or adjuncts to a COG, MPO voting is usually nonproportional or unweighted based on population. This is because many MPO governing boards, especially COG-based ones, are apportioned on a one-government, one-vote basis. This gives each jurisdiction, including small suburban municipalities, as much say in MPO policymaking and allocation as central cities. Given the new challenges facing MPOs, and especially their charge for addressing regional needs explicitly, this creates tension among competing jurisdictions (Francois 1995). As Lewis observed, however, in few cases is the MPO voting structure apportioned directly on the basis of population (Lewis and Sprague 1997; Lewis 1998). Lewis (1998, 813) argued that

metropolitan bodies such as a COG and an MPO have been structured “toward consensus, with more concern toward representing all local governments on regional boards than on establishing equitable criteria for the representation of the region’s population. This has led to serious problems of mal-apportionment in many regional organizations, including MPOs.”

As MPOs took on more regional decision-making authority (particularly in the area of allocating funds), issues of representation emerged. Lewis and Sprague reviewed the problematic nature of various voting mechanisms in MPOs and the potential for legal challenges resulting from unequal representation embedded in these voting procedures (Lewis and Sprague 1997; Lewis 1998). They reported that MPOs employed a range of voting approaches: some used one vote per member, while others relied on variations of weighted voting. Their study of California MPOs concluded that “the average California MPO deviates from proportionate representation of its population by about one-third” (Lewis and Sprague 1997, 9).

In an approach used to lessen the impact of the disproportional representation of smaller jurisdiction, some MPOs allow for weighted voting at the request of any of the member jurisdictions. Weights for board member votes can be set in proportion to the population being represented by the board member. For example, if a metropolitan region has four member jurisdictions with one hundred thousand persons each, equally weighted votes would account for 25 percent of the overall board vote (assuming full participation). If three of the four jurisdictions had a hundred thousand persons and the fourth had two hundred thousand, however, then the voting weights would instead be 20 percent for the first three and 40 percent for the fourth. Another method gives jurisdictions additional votes in proportion to population size. In the case of the four-jurisdiction example above, the first three would have one vote each and the fourth would have two. This method is weaker in terms of producing proportionality when population sizes vary by irregular and uneven amounts. Following the practices used by many COGs, split votes are avoided whenever possible. Controversial issues are often delayed, and resorting to weighted voting is likewise avoided in order to maintain a collaborative atmosphere among COG members.

The representational issue gets even more complicated because of the hybrid character of MPOs. They are first a group of local government officials—hence the concern for the equitable representation for each jurisdiction. At the same time, they are also expected to include other transportation partners, often nonvoting, such as the state DOTs and transit providers. Structural problems abound for MPOs trying to address both the equity issue of representation implied by one-person, one-vote assumptions and the need to involve important partners in the MPO planning process. A U.S. ACIR (1997) report that examined the certification documents completed by MPOs as required by ISTEA found recurring problems associated with certain structural dimensions.

About one-third of the certification reviews identified needed improvements for MPO structural arrangements with reference to board and committee processes. The report pointed out the need for MPO boards and committees to broaden their participation on boards, and policy and technical committees, particularly with state DOTs and other providers of transportation. The ACIR report urged that MPOs allow state district offices to vote a proxy for state DOT headquarters staff and that MPOs move to weighted voting. In addition, the ACIR study identified a continuing need to define the roles and responsibilities of different partners in the MPO processes, especially in relation to the CLRPs and TIPs. Another structural recommendation of this review recognized the significance of using meetings as one of the key MPO administrative processes, and the need to move toward more regular and open meeting processes (U.S. ACIR 1997).

The ISTEA/TEA-21 emphasis on multimodalities, partnerships with nontraditional partners, and extensive public involvement has given rise to a constitutional concern over the one-person, one-vote standard for political processes. Lewis identified representation issues that would eventually involve constitutional questions of one-person, one-vote. The issue became still murkier when new partners were given varying degrees of formal status and voting power on decision-making boards. The inclusion of state DOTs, transit agencies, and other transportation providers into the voting mix only exacerbated the problem of identifying representation plans that would meet legal requirements (Lewis 1998). The problem is with both formal voting inequalities among jurisdictions as

well as the more informal decision-making processes. Since most votes are unanimous, the more substantive deliberations occur in the technical committees and among members of the MPO rather than among elected political leaders (Lewis 1998).

Addressing Civil Rights and the Needs of Underserved Populations

The issues of political representation and public participation are direct examples of equity issues in the MPO process. ISTEA/TEA-21 also required MPOs to examine how traditionally underrepresented groups were engaged in MPO processes as well in the substantive issues. These policies were incorporated into ISTEA/TEA-21 and therefore MPO planning processes. Other, more specific provisions followed from these general principles. For example, transportation projects were expected to improve the mobility of the economically disadvantaged through “intermodal connections between people and jobs, goods and markets, and neighborhoods” (Bullard 1996). The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996, the welfare-to-work initiative, and the job-access/reverse-commuting program supported low-income populations to transition into the workplace (Lacombe 1998; Willis 1997). These initiatives were part of the welfare reform legislation that created job-access programs, which were designed to aid low-income populations in finding and maintaining gainful employment. Many MPOs have produced reports of various forms on reverse-commuting projects that help individuals in the welfare reform program find transportation to and from their place of employment (Blumenberg and Waller 2003; Wolf and Farquhar 2003). Most reports lack rigorous statistical analysis, but rather rely on anecdotal or descriptive summaries of service performance.

MPO Survey

A survey of fifty large MPOs assessed the level of effort put forth toward environmental justice and transportation equity issues. This included a content analysis of MPOs’ “plan of work,” three-year plans (TIPs), twenty-year plans, and state plans—many of which were available electronically. The objective was to determine whether transportation equity

principles were integrated into transportation plans at the metropolitan scale, and whether adequate consideration was given to public participation and accountability. The review specifically looked for language codifying the enforcement or monitoring of civil rights, environmental justice, social justice, transportation equity, and public participation activities. Having addressed one or more of these issues through public reporting (that is, required plans) indicates a seriousness of intent and the degree of accountability.

Along with these planning efforts, the survey looked specifically at the racial or ethnic balance of MPO boards relative to the jurisdictions that they represent. This section addresses that issue as well as exploring trends in equity planning and concern about civil rights. In particular, we used the following general criteria to guide our data collection:

- Does the agency include specific language about civil rights issues in its long-range planning document?
- Does the agency have a separate policy document that deals specifically with civil rights issues?
- Does the agency devote staff time or positions (full-time equivalents) to civil rights affairs?
- Does the agency budget specifically allocate resources to civil rights staff, projects, or other activities?
- How has the agency involved the public in civil rights matters? This may include advisory committees, public meetings dedicated to civil rights issues, and other modes of public input.

Approach

To collect information on fifty large MPOs, we began with a search and review of individual MPO Web sites. Nearly all of the selected MPOs had Web sites, most of which included board member rosters as well as plans and other documents related to their planning activities. Follow-up telephone contacts were made in cases where certain data were not available on Web sites. Individual Web sites were examined because there were no comprehensive sources of information about MPO board members, plans, or activities other than listings of organizations and basic demographics of their constituencies. The data were collected

between May and August 2004. The following is a descriptive analysis of the data collected.

Transportation Equity Planning Activities

This study examines the extent to which large MPOs incorporate transportation equity, environmental justice, and civil rights concerns into their planning processes. Most MPOs address civil rights issues in their long-range plan, and environmental justice was most commonly discussed as part of regional goals and objectives, public participation and outreach, and regional demographic trends. Several MPOs incorporated geographic analyses showing the spatial distribution of low-income households and racial minorities.² In addition, nearly one in four MPOs had produced a planning document specific to environmental justice or civil rights issues (a list of the eleven is shown in table 10.1). This is compared to only eight out of fifty U.S. states that reported having adopted environmental justice programs in 2000 (American Chemical Council 2000). Of the states with adopted policies, most were focused on complying with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits dis-

Table 10.1
Transportation equity planning documents

MPO	Plan/document
CATS (Chicago area)	Unified Work Plan
MTC (San Francisco area)	2001 RTP Equity Analysis and EJ Report
DVRPC (Philadelphia area)	“And Justice for All” Report
SEMCOG	Regional Transportation Plan
North Central Texas COG	Mobility 2025
Metropolitan Washington COG	Access for All and CLRP
Puget Sound Regional Council	Title VI Plan; Environmental Justice Demographics Profile
Boston MPO	Regional Transportation Plan
Northeast Ohio Areawide Coordinating Agency	Title VI Plan
Rhode Island Statewide Planning Program	Community Participation–Title VI
Oahu MPO (HI)	Environmental Justice in the OMPO Planning Process

crimination in any program receiving federal funds. NEPA and 23 USC 109(h) also require consideration of social impacts that may result from projects with federal support (USDOT 2003).

There were some common elements among these documents, with most being guided by either Title VI of the Civil Rights Act or Executive Order 12898. The underlying concern expressed was whether proposed transportation investments were biased toward particular demographic groups. To this end, most MPO efforts defined and quantified the proportion of metropolitan population within “targeted” or “protected” populations. In addition, the locations and concentrations of these populations were mapped along with the location of transportation improvements. The objective of such mapping efforts is to illustrate the distributional equity of MPO plans. Distributional analyses represent a subset of social impact analyses, and along with identifying and measuring direct impacts from policy interventions, social impact analysis is also concerned with direct effects such as how individuals or groups adapt to interventions. These adaptations can take the form of physical or psychological responses (such as health) as well as economic responses (such as residential relocation), and do not occur randomly within urban areas. Distributional analyses generally identify the outcomes of decision-making processes, and like a broader range of social impact analyses, do not identify weaknesses or biases in the system that produced such outcomes.

• In many cases, environmental justice plans outlined specific strategies for public participation as key elements to guide and implement equity planning. Most of the efforts documented by MPOs appeared to be relatively recent, so there were few longitudinal assessments of program effectiveness. Such evaluations will be possible in the future given the types and range of indicators that were included in the plans. Indicators within planning reports include measures of regional employment accessibility, transit accessibility, traffic congestion levels, environmental impact, and transportation mobility. Few, however, concentrate on measures of outcomes such as labor participation rates, wage levels, school attendance, or overall regional accessibility.

In the United Kingdom, policymakers and social justice advocates often take a broader view of social inequity. British efforts to eradicate

“social exclusion” address communities that are isolated from or marginalized by the general society. In the United States, attempts to counter spatial inequity are usually limited to improving housing and employment access—represented in some respects by residential segregation—whereas social exclusion is a much broader concept. It encompasses concerns about physical (personal) exclusion, geographic exclusion, exclusion from facilities, economic exclusion, temporal exclusion, fear-based exclusion, and space exclusion. Addressing social exclusion includes addressing problems such as the lack of access to jobs, education, and training; low levels of access to public transportation at particular times of the day, which has an impact on persons without cars who work late and early-morning shifts; and limited access to public and private spaces because of unsafe conditions and design.

Overall, it was unclear in nearly all cases how the results of MPO equity analyses could be used as feedback in the transportation planning and decision-making process. Emphasis was often placed on public involvement, where information from the analyses could be discussed and used to identify areas of potential concern. In other cases, the information generated through data analysis processes focused on social equity became inputs to regional transportation modeling (see, for example, Metropolitan Transportation Commission 2001).

In addition to planning documents, we looked at whether MPOs allocated staff or budget resources to transportation equity, public participation, and other outreach activities. Only 15 percent of the MPOs responded that they have staff specifically involved with civil rights oversight and planning. On the other hand, it is interesting to note that while the selected MPOs acknowledged that they provide little support in terms of staff positions or budget resources for civil rights, close to three-quarters reported that they conduct activities that had a civil rights focus. The selected MPOs reported that on average, they conducted three of the types of activities shown in figure 10.1—the most frequent of these being public meetings (68 percent) that were specifically for environmental justice or transportation equity purposes.

In general, it appeared that the motivation for many of these agencies to prepare plans or analyses (shown in table 10.1), or conduct planning activities (shown in figure 10.1), was a reaction to legal threats, condi-

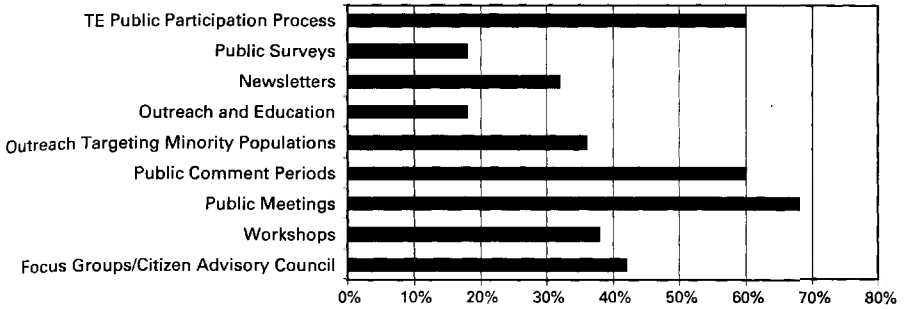


Figure 10.1
 Transportation equity-related planning activities

tions of recertification, or compliance with Title VI reporting requirements. Others either directly or indirectly referred to threats of lawsuits as a rationale for performing or preparing equity plans and policies. It was not apparent whether any of the organizations had proactively carried out an equity plan, analysis, or other activity as a result of regional problems identified by MPO representatives or planning staff. This is also true when documents refer to “agency policies” as being the reason for social equity-related planning activities. The policy could have been generated from within the organization, or could be the result of the enforcement actions mentioned above. Further research is needed to more closely examine the quality and motivation of these studies.

Board Composition

Our survey assembled the MPO board member rosters for fifty large MPOs based on population size. Voting members of these boards are instrumental in programming federal and state transportation funds, and should ideally reflect the racial and ethnic diversity of their constituents. A culturally representative board suggests that every person has an equal chance of providing input (Nelson, Robbins, and Simonsen 1998). The selected MPO boards averaged twenty-six voting members each, with some having as few as seven (Greater Buffalo and Portland metro) and others with as many as seventy-six (SCAG in Los Angeles). Board size was not clearly correlated with the population size of the jurisdiction. This is an artifact of the one-jurisdiction, one-vote system, where a jurisdiction’s

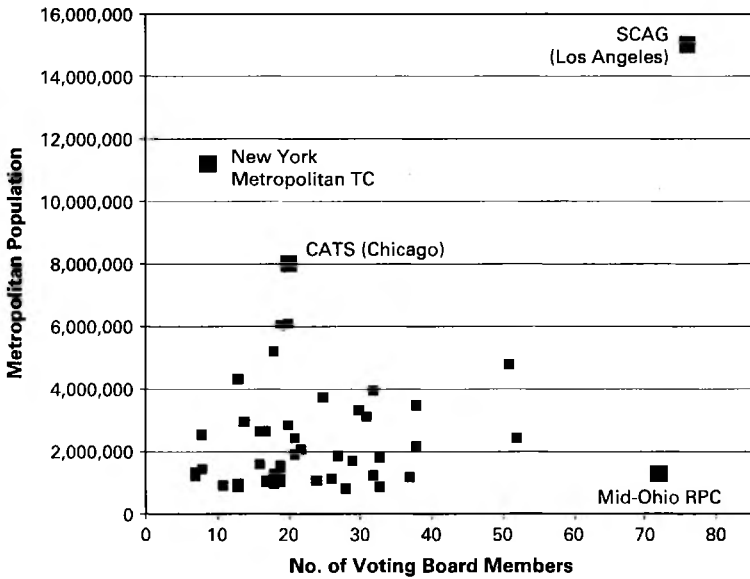


Figure 10.2
Board size and metropolitan population size

number of residents does not directly determine the number of voting board representatives per jurisdiction. In addition, participation by non-local representatives (regional, state, and federal) on each board also increased the number of voting board members. The outliers among the MPOs were the Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles ones, which had low per capita levels of board representation due to their population sizes of eight million, eleven million, and fifteen million, respectively (see figure 10.2).

Gender

Little attention has been paid to the role of gender in local or regional government decision making. While the travel patterns of women have distinct differences from those of men, decision making about transportation investments and policies ought to be informed equally by female and male perspectives (see Root and Schintler 1999). Overall, females represent about 25 percent of voting board members in the selected MPOs. No MPO boards were without female members, with an average

of over six females per board. The San Diego AOG, the Denver Regional COG (DRCOG), SEMCOG, the Hillsborough County MPO, and the Metropolitan Council of Twin Cities had the highest proportion of females (each with over 40 percent). Additional research could examine whether policy emphases are affected by higher levels of female leadership, especially as they relate to the identified travel needs of women and children.

Race and Ethnicity

As expected, the voting members of the selected MPO boards were predominantly white (approximately 88 percent). African Americans represented about 7 percent of all board members, followed by Hispanics (3 percent) and Asian/Pacific Islanders (1 percent). Native Americans and "other" (combined) represented less than 1 percent of all voting board members. This compares to these MPOs' overall racial/ethnic composition, which was 61 percent non-Hispanic white, 15 percent non-Hispanic black, 6 percent Asian, and 17 percent Hispanic as of 2000.

Furthermore, thirteen of the fifty boards included in the study had all white board members. Ten of the boards surveyed had greater than 20 percent nonwhite board representatives. The most racially/ethnically diverse among these were the Oahu MPO (31 percent white) and the Miami (Florida) Urbanized Area MPO (46 percent white). The boards with the largest percentage of African American members were the MPOs in Miami (32 percent), Washington, DC (22 percent), and Philadelphia (17 percent). Overall, there was only a slight correlation between the racial/ethnic composition of MPO boards and the racial/ethnic characteristics of their jurisdictions.

Board Representation

One challenge facing MPOs is that many of their boards are overrepresented by suburban interests by virtue of a one-area, one-vote system. When district boundaries for MPO board representatives and planning units are drawn that result in approximately equal-size geographic areas, urban-core areas that have denser populations end up being underrepresented compared with suburban zones that have lower population densities. This system influences the level of public involvement and

participation of persons based on residential location—and negatively so in the case of low-income neighborhoods of color in urban-core areas.

For the selected MPOs in this analysis, there was not a correlation between racially diverse MPO boards and the number of environmental justice planning activities. This suggests that board representation as previously discussed may not lead to particular planning actions—in this case, the performance of environmental justice-oriented planning analyses. Other research indicates that MPO board and voting structures have a significant effect on the outcomes of transportation investment decisions—especially those related to public transit (see Nelson et al. 2004). Arthur C. Nelson and colleagues found that the ratio of urban to suburban votes was correlated with the allocation of transportation funds between road and transit modes. In particular, they discovered that for each additional suburban voter on an MPO board, between 1 and 7 percent fewer funds were allocated to transit in MPO budgets.

Although specific information about the racial and ethnic composition of MPO boards had not previously been collected, we expected that minorities were underrepresented on MPO boards relative to the demographic characteristics of their constituents. For example, this was the situation facing SEMCOG as constituents recently challenged the representativeness of voting board members (Brooks 2004). In particular, the constituents were dissatisfied with expenditure levels for transit compared to highways in the Detroit metropolitan region, which they saw as skewing investments toward sprawl and consumption of rural land. The case has increased the visibility of board structure and procedure regarding MPO decision making.

Summary

It is difficult to gauge the level of commitment to transportation equity principles by MPOs simply by describing the types of planning activities that they undertake. In addition, while the racial and ethnic composition of voting members is an indirect measure of adequate public participation and representation, it may serve as an indicator of the degree to which minorities have a stake in regional policymaking.

While planning analyses directed at equity concerns and adequate representation are two visible factors affecting MPO planning outcomes, they certainly have both practical and symbolic importance. Data collection, analysis, and system evaluation regarding fairness at least signals an awareness of potential weaknesses and corrections. Follow-through and implementation, however, is the ultimate sign of organizational commitment. Moreover, a diverse set of representative policymakers would ideally reflect the range of constituent preferences.

An interesting question is whether planning analysis and representative boards are either substitutes or complements within an MPO structure. Is it sufficient to have thorough data collection, analysis, and monitoring of equity outcomes at the metropolitan scale despite unrepresentative board members, or do representative boards (and their consequent voting) more directly influence policy and decision making that affect distributional equity? And finally, does the combination of planning analyses and representative boards have synergistic effects that provide a greater potential for addressing the needs of traditionally underserved populations?

The Challenges Ahead

Specific challenges remain in regard to greater public participation and involvement in transportation decision making by state DOTs and MPOs (Sanchez, Stolz, and Ma 2003). Community-based groups that assist transportation agencies should be encouraged to improve outreach processes and strategies to identify culturally diverse groups and facilitate their involvement. These efforts are also greatly needed to support the information dissemination about transportation and related land use impacts. Mechanisms are needed that allow the formal recognition of coalitions of community representatives on MPO advisory committees and decision-making boards. In addition, MPOs, local governments, researchers, and CBOs need resources for more data collection and analysis about transportation access to basic needs such as health care, jobs, affordable housing, and public education (Surface Transportation Policy Project 2003).

Along with improved information, the certification of MPO compliance with the ISTEA/TEA-21 planning process is a critical area where the federal partner can play a significant role. Certification is one way that the federal agencies try to hold MPOs accountable for meeting federal requirements. MPOs and state DOTs must conduct self-certification reviews annually. They must examine major issues they face, how they undertake planning regulations and consider the seven planning criteria—involving disadvantaged business enterprises, the CCA, civil rights, and ADA provisions—and particularly how those MPOs in designated areas not meeting air conformity standards meet special requirements (McDowell 1999). The FHWA can determine that MPOs fall into one of four categories: full certification, certification subject to specific corrective actions being taken, limited certification, and withheld certification (McDowell 1999). In the first round of certification reviews in 1996, no MPO had its certification withheld.

It is in the best interest of MPOs to proactively address issues of fairness in decision making, planning, and representation, especially as it relates to allocating transportation funds. Many MPOs already have policies guided by either Title VI of the Civil Rights Act or Executive Order 12898, with several of them outlining specific strategies for public participation as key elements to guide planning. MPOs can also protect themselves against legal challenges such as those faced by SEMCOG, where as noted above, constituents recently challenged the representativeness of voting board members and were dissatisfied with expenditure levels for transit compared to highways in the Detroit metro region. Successful challenges may either be the impetus to improve MPO processes or, if ignored, could undermine MPO effectiveness.

Notes

1. The British government defines social exclusion as “a shorthand term for what can happen when people or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime, bad health and family breakdown” (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, Social Exclusion Unit, United Kingdom, n.d.).
2. See, for example, Maricopa Association of Governments 2003 and Mid-America Regional Council 2001.

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