Transport Policy 30 (2013) 336–344

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Transport Policy

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/tranpol

Why do immigrants drive less? Confirmations, complications, and new hypotheses from a qualitative study in New Jersey, USA

Daniel G. Chatman [a,*], Nicholas J. Klein [b]

[a] Department of City and Regional Planning, College of Environmental Design University of California, 410A Wurster Hall, Berkeley, CA 94720-1850, USA
[b] Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, 33 Livingston Avenue, New Brunswick, NJ 08901, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Available online 12 November 2013

Keywords:
Immigration
Travel behavior
Sustainability
Residential choice
Public transit

ABSTRACT

Recent immigrants to the United States drive autos less than the US-born, with rapid increases in their ownership and use of autos over time, and a persistently lower level of auto use even when controlling for socioeconomic characteristics and time in the US. Quantitative studies have not yet explained these phenomena. Given that population growth in the US is largely dependent on immigration, understanding auto ownership and use among immigrants is important for transportation sustainability.

We conducted six focus groups with US residents born in India, the Philippines, and Latin America. Our findings confirm, complicate and contradict the existing literature explaining differences in auto use among immigrants and the US-born, and we identify some new hypotheses with implications for policy-relevant research. More difficult driving conditions in the US and remittances back home may contribute to the initially lower auto ownership and use among immigrants. The rapid transition to auto use may be a function of household changes having more dramatic effects among immigrants given their initially high-density residential locations. The growth of non-English speaking transit riders, an increase in private transit services, and different residential location priorities may all contribute to the persistently lower auto use by immigrants even after many years in the US.

1. Introduction

Immigrants account for a substantial share of all transit ridership, walking and carpooling in the United States and are much less likely than the US-born population to own and drive personal automobiles. Immigrants commute by transit at more than twice the rate of US-born persons when they arrive, and they continue to use transit at higher rates for up to 15 years (Blumenberg and Shiki, 2007). When they arrive in the US, immigrants are one and a half to two times as likely as US-born persons to carpool to work, and remain more likely to carpool to work even after living in the US for 15 years (Blumenberg and Smart, 2010). A similar pattern is found in the case of cycling (Smart, 2010). While those who have been in the country longer than 20 years use autos only slightly less than the US-born population, studies typically still find a small persistent difference (Blumenberg, 2009; Blumenberg and Shiki, 2007; Chatman, in press; Chatman and Klein, 2009; Myers, 1997; Purvis, 2003; Rosenbloom, 1998; Smart, 2010; Tal and Handy, 2010). But travel behavior among immigrants is far from uniform. For example, immigrants from Latin America use autos at lower rates than US-born residents, and these differences can only be partly explained by demographics, built environment characteristics (at home and at work) and residential preferences. But after controlling for these same factors, the auto use of US-born residents and immigrants from India are about the same (Chatman, in press).

Previous research has identified a number of hypotheses to explain lower auto use among immigrants, their transition to greater reliance on autos, and the persistence of an "immigrant effect" even after controlling for socioeconomic characteristics and time in the US. Immigrants may have little experience driving in their home countries, may arrive with a culture of transit ridership, or may have used alternative modes extensively in their home countries, and changes in culture or habit may explain changes in travel as immigrants stay longer in the US (e.g., Blumenberg, 2009; Blumenberg and Shiki, 2008; Blumenberg and Smart, 2010, 2011; Tal and Handy, 2010). Immigrants often initially settle in neighborhoods with a high concentration of other immigrants from the same region of origin, which may enable carpooling (Blumenberg and Smart, 2009, 2010; Cline et al., 2009), with later moves to suburban neighborhoods making driving alone the easiest option (Blumenberg and Shiki, 2007). Such residential choices could be influenced by a decreasing supply of affordable housing in some cities (Thomas, 2010), or changes in how immigrants choose neighborhoods as they become more

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 510 642 2454.
E-mail addresses: dgc@berkeley.edu (D.G. Chatman), nick.klein@rutgers.edu (N.J. Klein).

0967-070X/$ - see front matter © 2013 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.
http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.tranpol.2013.10.002

settled in the US, focusing on additional factors like school quality and not prioritizing proximity to work so much (Parks, 2005). The "contexts of reception" (Portes and Rumbaut, 2006) that immigrants experience could also shape travel patterns and residential locations: driving is an illegal or fearful proposition for undocumented residents (Garni and Miller, 2008), and there is discrimination against immigrants in the market for auto loans (Cohen, 2006) and credit (Blumenberg and Smart, 2011).

Many of these hypotheses to explain the pattern of auto use among immigrants are essentially speculative because they are post-hoc explanations of quantitative patterns–they have not been corroborated via qualitative research. Quantitative analyses can provide only a limited understanding of what motivates decision making. There has been some related qualitative research using focus groups, but this has primarily addressed the personal travel challenges that immigrants face. For example, an article using focus groups with Latino immigrants in Georgia suggested that relying on carpooling with coworkers limited immigrants' ability to find better housing in other neighborhoods and made it difficult to travel for non-work purposes (Bohon et al., 2008). Research drawn from focus groups with Latino immigrants in California, many living in agricultural areas, highlighted the need to use cars for a variety of trips and the challenges of owning and borrowing cars (Lovejoy and Handy, 2008, 2011).

This paper is based on focus groups conducted with immigrants born in the Philippines, Latin America and India, three regions that together account for more than half of all immigrants who had arrived in the previous 5 years living in New Jersey, according to the ACS 2006–2008 3-year sample (Ruggles et al., 2010), as well as the top three sending regions for naturalizations in the US between 2008 and 2011 (United States. Department of Homeland Security, 2012a, b). By recruiting participants from three areas of origin, our study differs from previous qualitative studies of these topics, which have focused on Latin American immigrants. While a slight majority of immigrants living in the US were born in Latin America, the countries of origin for all US immigrants are quite diverse (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d., 2010). Whether this diverse immigration pattern will continue depends on workforce openings, economic trends in the US and elsewhere in the world, and immigration policy. New Jersey provides a useful context to conduct research on this topic because it has a large number and great diversity of recent and established immigrants, with 21% of its population born abroad, third highest among US states (Camarota, 2012), as well a wide range of accessibility and built environments, and a high rate of alternative mode use compared to the rest of the US.

2. Data collection

We conducted six focus groups, two each with participants born in the Philippines, India, and Latin America, each including 8–12 participants and lasting about 2 h. We secured the cooperation of immigrant support services groups to recruit participants and to host the groups. Each focus group participant was paid an incentive of $75 and we also provided funds to defray expenses for each of the host organizations. While focus groups are not "representative" in a statistical sense, we sought participants with a range of experiences and backgrounds. In addition to immigrant status, the primary criteria for inclusion in a focus group were having significant out-of-home responsibilities and being between the ages of 20 and 64. We varied the groups geographically and by professional background, and within each group we sought a roughly equal share of habitual transit users and drivers as well as variance in the time participants had lived in the US.

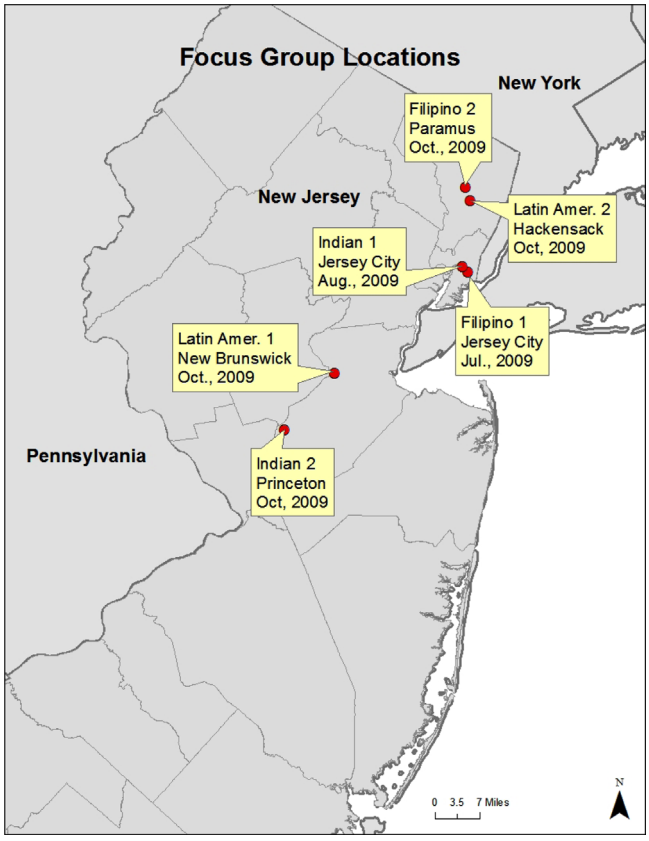

Fig. 1. Map of focus group locations.

We conducted the focus groups from July through October, 2009 in different parts of the state (see Fig. 1). We moderated the Philippine- and Indian-born groups in English, and the Latin-American-born groups in Spanish.[1] The first author moderated or co-moderated all of the groups; the second author attended all of the English-speaking groups. The lead moderator for the Spanish-speaking groups was Lou Kimmel of New Labor, a community based organization serving immigrant workers in New Brunswick.

We asked the focus group participants to describe their travel patterns currently and when they first arrived; to discuss the reasons for their changes in travel habits over time; and to explain how they decided where to live, both when they first arrived in the US and in subsequent moves. We used a topic guide as an outline script (see Appendix:A), from which we diverged frequently to follow the natural course of conversation. In order to allow for and elicit free-flowing conversation on topics and issues that we did not anticipate, we used open-ended questions and statements as much as possible (Marshall and Rossman, 2010).

We also administered a short pre-focus group questionnaire that provides a basic socioeconomic and travel profile of the study participants (Table 1). More than 80% of participants reported using transit at least once per month, and 56% commuted by transit. Participants had a higher average educational attainment but lower average household incomes than the state averages

[1] This decision was based on the English proficiency of these groups in recent Census data, as well as the advice of our partner organizations. According to the 2009 American Community Survey, 97% of Philippines-born and 90% of Indian-born New Jersey residents speak English well, very well, or exclusively, while only 67% of New Jersey residents born in Latin American countries speak English at the same level.