

FACT SHEET 2:

TRANSPORTATION AS INFRASTRUCTURE IN RURAL & REMOTE CANADA

This is the second of four fact sheets produced by the study, *Here Today, Gone Tomorrow: Public Transportation and Vulnerabilities in Rural and Remote Canada* a scoping review of literature guided by the question: *How does the presence or absence of public transportation contribute to people's vulnerability in rural and remote locations?* The study explored how remote and rural (RR) places face complex social, political and economic obstacles in order to achieve sustainable, accessible, and appropriate transportation and exercise mobility rights. Growing vulnerability and inequality between RR places contributes to growing vulnerabilities and inequalities among RR residents and the rest of Canada. Unequal mobilities—especially affordable public transportation—shapes whether individuals and communities can achieve sustainable livelihoods, societal participation, personal and collective safety, and access to essential and non-essential services, resources, and rights.



“One of the worst fears of any community is the possible loss of transportation links. The loss of transportation services is one of the most pressing issues in rural development.”^{1(p31)}

Transportation is critical infrastructure for rural places, the absence of which results in disadvantages and vulnerability for rural places and the people who live there. Transportation has a substantial influence on how and where social and economic activities take place and on the development path of rural places. It plays a crucial role in shaping the relationship between places and determines the flow of people, goods, and services across space. It is easy to ignore the networks and systems that constitute infrastructure because the position they play in enabling activities and public and private goods and services becomes virtually invisible. Of course, governments can and do intervene in the pattern of transportation networks to shape systems that are more reflective of public objectives – e.g., to facilitate access to health care, education, or work. These government-facilitated transportation networks become part of the policy environment and broader social service provision infrastructure, which can be problematic if they suddenly disappear, as was the case for the Saskatchewan Transportation Company in 2017.²

Transportation plays a key role in defining the character of rural and remote places because of its strong influence on the possibilities of livelihood, availability of amenities, goods and services, and even food security.^{3,4} Remoteness is largely a function of transportation, based upon (the regularly accessible) time/distance to urban centres and access to goods and services. Places that are considered “remote” usually have declining population, with few employment opportunities and low incomes, although they may be important as areas of recreation, leisure, and resource extraction. With economic restructuring, remotely located natural resource-based industries, such as some oil and gas, mining, fishing, forestry, and hydroelectricity, now often rely on long-distance commuting for their mostly-rural workforces.^{5,6} Different rural and remote areas have different conditions depending on their proximity to cities. While many rural places are “in decline,” some rural areas close to cities (the “rurban” phenomenon) or in locations where retired professionals seek lifestyle and leisure amenities are experiencing a turn-around.^{1,7}

Travel in rural, remote and northern Canada can be dangerous—particularly in winter—and generally involves long distances between towns or regions where there are often areas of low population density and few or no services.³ As several Canadian provinces have few major cities but contain large rural hinterlands with many small towns, there are limited linkages between the towns of the hinterlands. Low population density in rural and remote places poses challenges for public transport, with population decline occurring along with the withdrawal of public services from these communities. At the same time, the people who remain in rural locales increasingly live their lives across large

areas and many need public transport more than ever. Buses are highly regionalized, under provincial jurisdiction, and ridership is falling with reduced services. In the case of remote—often Indigenous—communities, rail travel and seasonal (ice) roads may be the only transportation modes available, and these are being eroded by climate change.⁸ Driving can be challenging due to poor road conditions, severe weather, traffic accidents, and slow-moving vehicles. There are also gaps in cell phone coverage, leading to vulnerabilities in the case of breakdown or accidents.⁹ Transport services are few, often expensive, and may be risky.

Inequalities between urban and rural/remote areas have been increasing, while government support for rural services, including transportation, has been decreasing,¹⁰ which threatens the viability of many rural areas. Social and economic restructuring has systematically disadvantaged rural places through the concentration and rationalization of services, increased dependence of rural production on town jobs, and the contraction of the public sector without the parallel expansion of the private.¹⁰⁻¹⁵ Heightened inequality in access to transportation as a result of this restructuring has intensified more general socio-economic inequality. As the private sector and governments save money and improve their bottom lines through service reductions, these costs are transferred onto rural users who must pay more, travel farther, or forgo services.¹⁶ This more severely impacts those who already had lower levels of access to transport. These same people who are further disadvantaged are less likely to have accessible technology to compensate for the loss of transportation infrastructure and access to services – for example, the ability to find medical advice or shop online.¹⁶ Rural areas are dynamic places of change with depopulation, aging, increasing diversity and inequality, disparate circumstances, and the expansion of the non-farm population, making intersectional considerations increasingly important in understanding needs for transportation services.

Rural and remote places are often sites of concentrated poverty and racialized segregation. Place plays a role in perpetuating poverty as does the uneven development between places.¹⁷ Constraints on transport-based accessibility “tend to deepen these socio-spatial inequalities leading to multidimensional deprivations and, eventually, poverty traps.”^{18(p2)} In contrast, the indirect impact of transportation accessibility and mobility in poor regions can improve the quality and access to public goods and social services for poor people living in those areas and lead to poverty alleviation. Improving transportation can be a double-edged sword for rural regions, however; while connecting places to each other, the wrong investments can advantage richer regions at the expense of poorer areas.⁹ Without proper consultation and integration of local needs, the effects of transportation projects are likely to be inequality-enhancing rather than poverty-alleviating, benefiting already well-resourced populations and regions.¹⁹⁻²⁰

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Copies of this report are available without charge through the [University of Regina](#) or the [Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women \(CRIAW-ICREF\)](#).

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