

Title: A Look at Bicycle Commuting by Low-Income New Yorkers using the an Alternative Poverty Measure

Authors: Todd Seidel, Mark Levitan, Christine D’Onofrio, John Krampner, Daniel Scheer

Affiliation: New York City Center for Economic Opportunity

Email: seidelt@hra.nyc.gov, toddseidel@gmail.com

Abstract:

Commuting by bicycle in New York City has increased by nearly 90 percent from 2005 to 2011 according to the Census Bureau’s American Community Survey (ACS). The common perception is that most of these bicycle commuters are white and middle to upper-class. Data suggest otherwise. According to the ACS, in 2011 over 45% of those commuting by bicycle were non-white and over 40% were considered poor or near poor (within 200 percent of poverty threshold) based on the New York City Center for Economic Opportunity (CEO) poverty measure. Adopted in 2008 by New York City¹, the CEO Poverty Measure includes the effects of taxes and the value of in-kind assistance (such as nutritional assistance and housing subsidies) on family resources. Most relevant to this topic, it also deducts from family resources non-discretionary spending for items such as commuting costs, childcare and out-of-pocket medical expenses. Widening the definition of family resources creates a realistic measure of what is available for families to purchase necessities.

This paper will explore demographic characteristics and incomes of bicycle commuters in New York City between 2005 and 2011, focusing on the working poor and near poor, using the CEO Poverty Measure. It will also contrast the locations of neighborhoods where low-income bicycle commuters live and work to those of the existing bicycle infrastructure, which the New York City Department of Transportation (DOT) has expanded by over 100% in the past five years. Use of this expanding bicycle infrastructure by the working poor and near poor promises to not only have positive health and environmental benefits but also positive impacts on household budgets by lowering commuting costs. The DOT has an ambitious goal of tripling the number of bicycle commuters by 2020; understanding more about low-income New York bicycle commuters will help them benefit.

Keywords: low-income bicycle commuters, CEO Poverty Measure

¹ New York City was the first municipality within the United States to adopt an alternative poverty measure. The CEO Poverty measure methodology follows recommendations made by the National Academy of Sciences in 1995 at the behest of Congress. The Supplemental Poverty Measure, recently adopted by the Obama Administration, uses a similar methodology to the one pioneered by New York City.