

## **Those Left Behind: Immobility in the Motor City**

### **Toni Mocerri and Kelly Parker**

Detroit is a city of ironies. Metropolitan Detroit is an area infatuated with mobility whether it is social, geographic or economic. Yet, transportation and issues of mobility hinder the economic growth of metropolitan Detroit and affect the social welfare of its citizens. Just past the intersection of Detroit's most historic avenues, Woodward and Jefferson, a message in big black block letters from Detroit's Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick reads, "Detroit, we move the world." Mayor Kilpatrick is calling forth Detroit's automotive legacy as proof of the city's importance in the global economy. For the city and its residents the number one symbol of mobility is the automobile. As the birthplace of the automotive industry, Detroit's role in changing the way people and goods travel throughout the world is undeniable. Not only is the city moving the world, it, too, claims to be a city in motion. Through efforts such as Detroit's construction of new baseball and football stadiums and its successful bid to host the 2006 SuperBowl, Detroit is attempting to move up the ranks of "world-class" cities. The Detroit Metro Convention and Visitors Bureau's website proclaims, "Detroit is a city on the move – not just because of the cars we build – but also because of the changes taking place."<sup>1</sup>

Ironically, while Detroit defines itself by the mobility it creates worldwide with the automobile, the city's residents struggle with immobility. Moreover, when Detroit and its residents do achieve mobility, their means are oftentimes outside the mainstream definitions of mobility and lack legitimacy.

#### **Automobile = Mobility**

In 1916, Henry Ford declared his vision for a better America. He stated:

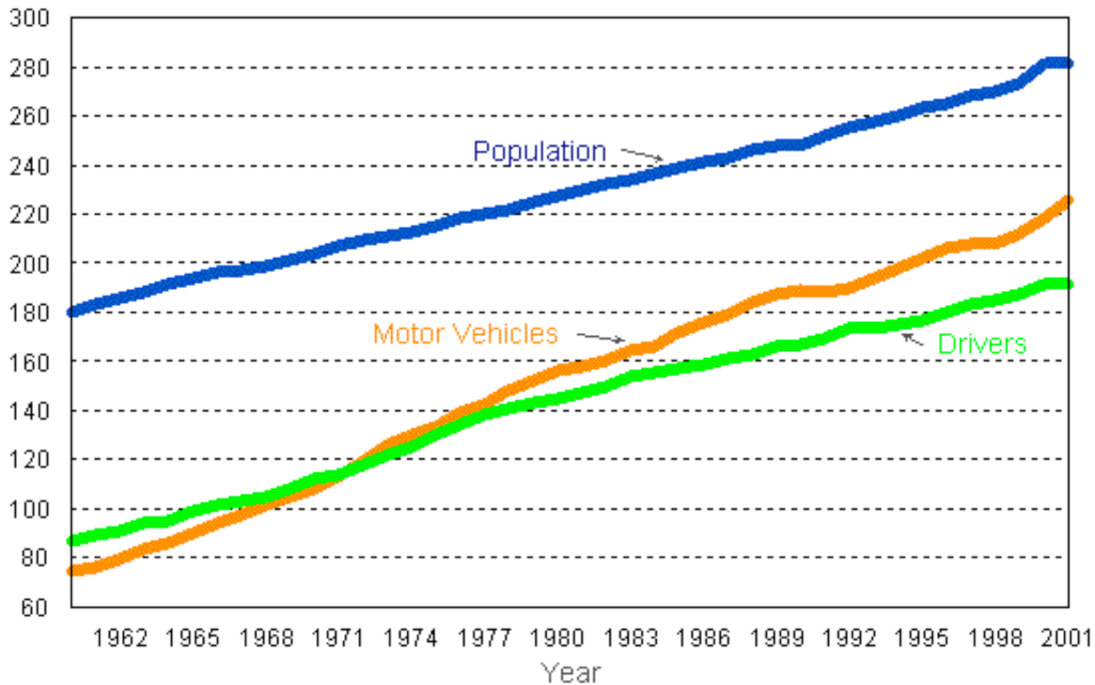
I shall build an automobile for the masses. It will be large enough for a family, but small enough to satisfy the needs of the individual. It will be built with the best materials and by the best men available on the market, following the simplest designs that modern engineering can devise. But it will be priced so low that no man with a decent salary shall be unable to possess it and enjoy together with his family the blessing of a few hours' pleasure in God's great open spaces.

In the years following Ford's statement, his dream has seemed to come to fruition. The automobile now dominates our landscape and culture. As the following graph illustrates, there are now more registered vehicles in the United States than licensed drivers. Moreover, the growth in the number of registered cars closely parallels the nation's population growth.

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### Licensed Drivers, Vehicle Registration and Resident Population

Millions



Source: Highway Statistics 2001, Federal Highway Administration, U.S. Department of Transportation, 11 July 2004 <http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/ohim/hs01/dlchrt.htm>

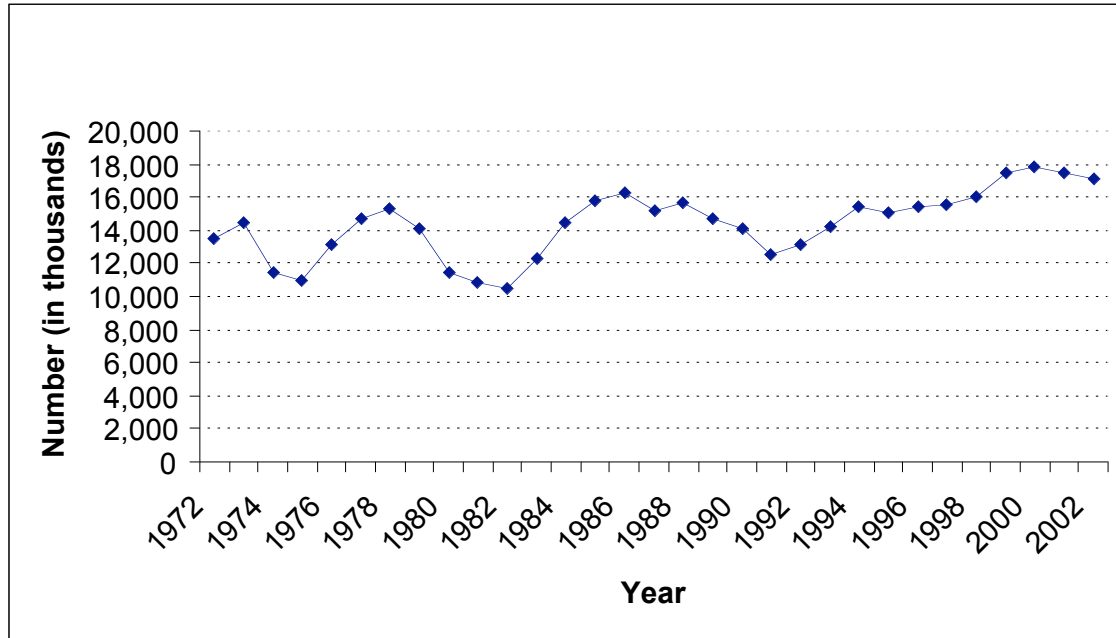
In the period between 1998 and 2001, the number of registered vehicles increased three times more rapidly than the number of licensed drivers and almost two times more than the nation's population. By 2001, there were approximately 1.2 registered vehicles for every licensed driver. These numbers do not account for the vehicles in the United States that are unregistered and/or abandoned.

Americans consume millions of vehicles a year. The following graph illustrates the number of vehicles purchased in the United States.

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### Vehicle Retail Sales



Source: Ward's Motor Vehicle Facts and Figures 2003, (Southfield: Ward's Communications, 2003) 16

In 2000, American consumption of motor vehicles reached a peak at 17,812,000 vehicles. From 1972 to 2002, Americans purchased approximately 446,198,000 vehicles. Could Ford have ever imagined that the automobile would become such a pervasive force in American society?

The automobile is not only a means for transportation. Even in 1916, Ford's vision alludes that the automobile possesses a greater symbolic importance. The automobile has become the mascot for individualism and freedom in American culture. With the automobile, Americans feel that they control their own lives and are not confined by their environment. Most importantly, they feel that the achievement of the American Dream is possible.

Similarly, James Dunn argues that automobile owners attach specific meaning to their cars. The most important of these meanings are empowerment and equality. He describes the empowering aspects of the automobile:

Ownership of an automobile empowers an individual to make a vastly wider range of choices relating to personal mobility than he or she would have without a car. Auto drivers are freed from the constraints of the fixed routes and rigid schedules of train or bus riders. They can choose many more destinations; select the companions, if any, traveling in their vehicle; carry much more luggage than they could on a bus; never have to stand because all the seats are taken; stop for a refreshment when they want to; listen to their favorite music or news; and not worry (too much) about

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being mugged while waiting at the bus stop or subway station.<sup>2</sup>

Along with empowerment, the automobile also provides a sense of equality among drivers. Dunn explains:

... it is ... true that there is a very large economic gap between the driver of a battered 1980 Chevette and one who owns a brand new Mercedes. But when they both are on the open road, or stuck in a traffic jam, or circling the block searching for a parking spot, there is a fundamental equality in their condition as automobilists that unites them across class, racial, ethnic, and religious lines as few other aspects of our society can. The opportunity, indeed the right, to own an automobile is one of the most important "down payments" on the practical material equality of living that is the most attractive promise of American democratic capitalism.<sup>3</sup>

Not only does the automobile symbolize freedom, individuality, empowerment and equality, with the "Buy American" campaign ads of organized labor, the automobile has even been a symbol of American patriotism. Overall, these symbolic characterizations of the automobile result from the automobile's ability to provide access to social and economic mobility. The automobile is essentially the vehicle by which the majority of Americans are able to access the jobs and communities they want. The United States prides itself as the "land of opportunity" and the automobile is the primary way to travel it.

### **Detroit and the Automobile**

In America, Detroit's relationship to the automobile is distinct. As the birthplace and home of the American auto industry, Detroit's identity is completely intertwined with the automobile. In the early twentieth century Detroit had over 40 auto manufacturers. In 1925, Michigan employees held 55 percent of the auto industry jobs in the country.<sup>4</sup> One hundred years after the birth of the automotive industry in Detroit, the economy in Michigan is still heavily dependent upon it. DaimlerChrysler, Ford Motor Company, and General Motors have their world headquarters and approximately thirty plants located in southeastern Michigan. A University of Michigan study found that Michigan still had the highest number of jobs associated with the automotive manufacturing industry compared to other states. Correspondingly, Michigan's automotive manufacturing employment as a share of total state employment was also the highest among states. In 1998, Michigan's 534,800 automotive jobs accounted for 11.2 percent of the state's total employment.<sup>5</sup>

Ford's original plan included paying his workers wages sufficient to purchase the very vehicles they helped to manufacture.

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Today, this legacy of the autoworker as consumer still exists. Auto dealerships and manufacturers specifically target auto-industry employees and their family-members with special deals and discount programs. These incentives not only work to ensure that autoworkers buy their employer's vehicles but they also ensure that the autoworkers' spouses, children, parents and even friends purchase their vehicles too. This phenomenon has made the relationship between the auto industry and its employees considerably codependent. The auto industry's employees are their most reliable customer base.

With generations of families employed by the auto industry, residents of metropolitan Detroit have achieved upward social and economic mobility because of the industries success. As the industry prospers so do its employees. For many metropolitan Detroiters, the automobile is their livelihood and embodies the possibility of a better future for their families. This reality is even more poignant for employees of the auto-industry who are non-drivers. Even without access to one, the automobile still remains the foremost symbol of mobility.

#### **With Success Comes Loss**

American cities were not ready for Ford's success. The increasing numbers of personal automobiles congested the country's roads. The landscape of America soon changed to accommodate the automobile. Federally funded programs provided funding for expressways and new car-friendly suburban developments. Urban residents and industries found moving out of the central cities cheaper and more desirable. The "Motor City" was not an exception. Joe T. Darden and his coauthors argue:

Detroit grew with the auto industry, and the auto industry grew according to a kind of leapfrog spatial logic. Car factories were built next to railroad lines, in open space but not too far from an available labor force. Once built, an auto plant attracted complementary metal and machinery industries, then residential subdivisions. So as the auto industry expanded, the Motor City sprawled, farther and farther out.<sup>6</sup>

The authors go on to describe the industry's move to Detroit's suburbs. They write:

World War II brought another wave of factory construction and spatial growth, but in the suburban periphery. Past location considerations – rail lines, undeveloped land, and proximity to a labor force – were now supplemented by a national defense policy urging the dispersal of war production to satellite cities as a protection against potential atomic attack. ...

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Government policy further stimulated emigration from Detroit to the suburbs in the early 1950s. The federal government financed construction of a huge freeway network. And the Federal Housing Administration insured loans for new suburban homes while often redlining older areas in the central city.<sup>7</sup>

Other industries and businesses followed the auto industry's lead. Detroit's wealth and residents now reside in the city's suburbs. Moving up socially has come to mean moving out of the city. Since this exodus, Detroit has struggled with economic decline, abandonment, and population loss. With the problems in Detroit clearly visible, the automobile allows people to drive further and further away from the problem, perpetuating the sprawl.

The city's efforts to attract people and revenue with new entertainment venues, such as the casinos, have not reversed the trend outward. Happy, a lifelong resident of Detroit, does not feel that the city has done enough. He explains:

The casino is right around the way but they haven't done much for the neighborhoods, just the business section and that's about it. They're trying to bring people back down into the city...<sup>8</sup>

For some suburban residents, the city will never be able to do enough. When asked about Detroit, a lifelong resident of Roseville, a city just to the north of Detroit, boasts that he never goes to Detroit. He claims, "The only time I'm in Detroit is when I'm driving through it at 70 miles per hour."<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, the automobile has allowed those who have left Detroit to avoid the devastation. They merely drive through, protected against the city by speed and the frame of their car.

### **Where's the public transportation?**

In 1922, Detroit purchased the city's private streetcar operations and became the largest municipally owned transit system in the United States. With 492 million rides, Detroit's ridership peaked in 1945. By the 1950s, the automobile began dominating the metropolitan Detroit transportation system. In 1956, the last streetcar ran down Woodward and buses became the primary form of public transit. Several attempts at creating a regional transit system including subways and light rail systems have started and stalled over the years. One of the most infamous occurred in 1976 when President Gerald Ford offered the region \$600 million to construct a rail system. Detroit and its suburbs were unable to successfully collaborate and the opportunity was lost. Today a disconnected unreliable public transportation system exists that includes the Detroit Department of Transportation (DDOT) and Suburban Mobility Authority for Regional Transit (SMART) bus systems.

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Most recently, government officials have created the Detroit Area Regional Transportation Authority (DARTA). DARTA is yet another attempt to coordinate city and suburban transportation services and improve the area's mass transit. However, many suburban leaders have opposed the effort. The residents of these suburbs have personal automobiles and their representatives see little benefit in using more tax dollars on mass transit. Reynolds Farley, Sheldon Danziger and Harry J. Holzer describe the reasons for the continued resistance to a regional transportation system by suburban residents. They state:

One reason why bus transportation from the central city to suburban jobs remains so difficult is that racial mistrust and tensions have prevented the coordination of Detroit's bus lines with those of the surrounding suburbs. Suburban residents express concerns that better public transportation would facilitate a "spillover" of central-city crime into their suburbs, or that their tax dollars would subsidize transportation services that few suburbanites would utilize. They would prefer that public funds be spent on road repair and maintenance in their own suburb or that their taxes be reduced.<sup>10</sup>

The lack of a coordinated transportation system leaves those without access to automobiles immobile. Tom Barwin, City Manager of Ferndale, a Detroit suburb, explains the conflict:

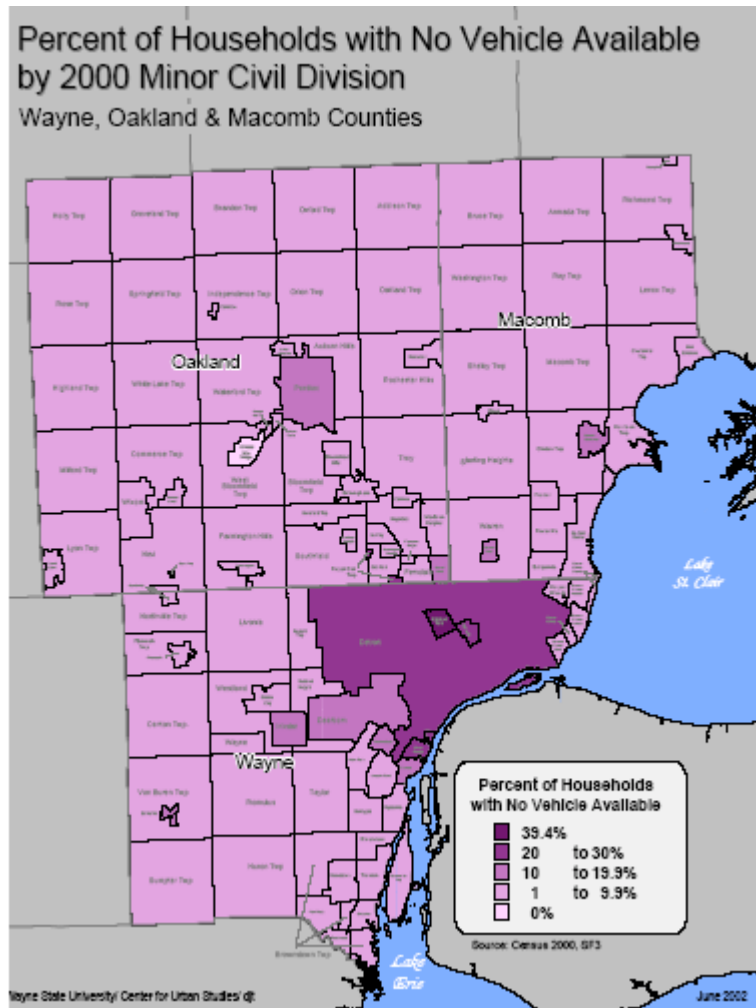
We have fully hitched our wagon to the automobile, so to speak, and while providing many people transportation freedom, we have one hundred years later eliminated transportation choice. So we here now have virtually one mode of transportation, that being the personal automobile, we do have a bus system but it's rather disjointed and under funded. And we are finding that that limits people's freedom, and some of our folks are experiencing quite a bit of stress in the inability to get around because they cannot afford an automobile and there are no other choices.<sup>11</sup>

### **Those Left Behind**

In the Motor City, no reliable alternative to the automobile exists. Those without access to their own personal automobiles – the youth, elderly, disabled and most poor of the region – are left to fend for themselves. According to the United States Census 2000, in the metropolitan Detroit tri-county area approximately 9.6 percent of households do not have vehicles.<sup>12</sup> In contrast, 21.9 percent of households in Detroit have no access to vehicles.<sup>13</sup> The following map shows the distribution of households in metropolitan Detroit without vehicles.

### **Percent of Households with No Vehicle Available**

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Source: Center for Urban Studies, Wayne State University, June 2002, 6 October 2003  
[http://www.cus.wayne.edu/research\\_tools/map\\_galleries/pdf/PctNoVehicle3CMCD00.pdf](http://www.cus.wayne.edu/research_tools/map_galleries/pdf/PctNoVehicle3CMCD00.pdf)

In metropolitan Detroit, African Americans disproportionately utilize public transportation. Even though African Americans account for only 25 percent of the Detroit tri-county population, 76.5 percent of workers 16 years and over who utilize public transportation are African American.<sup>14</sup> In Detroit, 91.1 percent of workers who use public transportation are African American even though they account for only 81.6 percent of the city's total population.<sup>15</sup> Most striking is that of all workers in the tri-county area using public transportation, African Americans living in Detroit account for 73 percent of the public transportation utilization.<sup>16</sup>

A key location in the Civil Rights Movement, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. first delivered his "I have a dream" speech in Detroit on June 23, 1963. A decade later, Detroit was the first major city to elect an African American mayor. However, just as African Americans in Detroit gained more social and political mobility, white Detroiters used the automobile to move out of the city and rejected public transportation in mass. Buses no longer

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represented equality and opportunity; instead, they represent poverty, joblessness and the incomplete battle for social justice. Ironically, as Detroit's African Americans fight against immobility, in 2002, the Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village in neighboring Dearborn announced that it had purchased the Montgomery, Ala., bus that Rosa Parks made famous on Dec. 1, 1955, by refusing to give up her seat to a white man.

#### **No Car, No Job, No Time: No One**

In Detroit the struggle of the immobile is intensified. Jobs in the inner city are sparse and they forced are to seek employment in the suburbs. Metropolitan Detroit is one the most decentralized employment areas in the country. According to a 2001 Brookings Institution report, 75.1 percent of the area's jobs are more than 10 miles away from Detroit's Central Business District.<sup>17</sup> Most of the jobs available in the city are low paying service sector jobs. Local city residents work to enhance the experience of the suburban residents as they come to the city for entertainment purposes like casinos, sporting events, strip bars and concerts.

For those Detroiters that find employment in the suburbs and rely on public transportation, the difficulties only increase. The bus systems lack comprehensive services to the locations with the most employment opportunities. Joel Kurth reported:

About 60 percent of SMART's 22,000 daily riders are from Detroit. Overall, 900 of its daily 1,500 bus runs serve downtown Detroit, even though it's home to only 70,000 of the 2.3 million jobs in Wayne, Oakland and Macomb counties.

At the same time, routes with infrequent service – every 40-60 minutes – reach major employment centers such as Troy, which has 135,000 jobs, and Auburn Hills, with 54,000.<sup>18</sup>

Riders that do use the bus system to get to jobs must make extra efforts to get to work on time. With such long waits between buses, missing a bus could add hours to a rider's travel time. At a bus stop, a woman waiting for her connection to work shares her strategies for catching the bus and the consequences of failure. She says:

I've had a job out here on 12 Mile and John R. for two months. I've been late to work four times, leaving my house two hours early, because the John R. bus has broke down, or a Seven Mile bus has been late and made me miss my connection. So in order to gain employment either in the suburbs or in the city, you cannot count on the busses, period. If you're dealing with a grace period, where you can't have any absences or you can't have any tardies for 90 days, you can't count on the Detroit public bus system

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or the SMART for those 90 days to get you to work on time.. The economy is bad, jobs are real scarce and they want to get people that can make it to work.<sup>19</sup>

Oftentimes, Detroiters that rely on public transportation do not even search for jobs in the suburbs. Farley, Danziger and Holzer in their labor market study looked at the affects of having a car when searching for jobs in metropolitan Detroit. They found access to cars during the search period raised the tendency of African Americans to seek employment in the suburbs.<sup>20</sup> Having access to an automobile means not only having access to more job opportunities, but also having the ability to retain those jobs. Because the buses are so unreliable, employers and employees alike are hindered by absenteeism, tardiness, and high turnover.

Charise, who also depends on the bus, has repeatedly lost jobs because of unreliable transportation. At first her employers are sympathetic to her transportation issues, but eventually her tardiness becomes too excessive. She recounts:

They understand when I'm late, but they say that still is not their problem, they're not affiliated with the bus system, and when I applied, the question was: Can you get to work on time? And I said I would make it the best way possible. They say Charise, these are your hours, try and make it here thirty minutes ahead of time and not thirty minutes late. We would appreciate you being here on time. Okay, I'm thirty minutes late, I'm an hour late, I walk in, my heart is pumping and I'm wondering if I still have a job! Then all of the sudden, well Charise, you've been late such amount of times, we don't want to let you go, but we need someone that's more dependable. I get my last check, I walk out the door, not knowing where I'm gonna go, where I'm gonna work, and that's it, not knowing what you're gonna do next... you're back to square zero... this has been going on since I was in high school, since I was 15 yrs old, bus systems have been poor, I'm 32 now, bus systems have not improved, at all..<sup>21</sup>

Metropolitan Detroit's public transportation users spend too much time trying to complete the most basic daily errands. They spend up to one third of their day in transit, getting to and from their low paying jobs, taking their children to daycare, and even grocery shopping. This leaves them with no time for a social life, or to work toward the achievement of their goals and dreams.

Workers are not the only ones in Detroit that rely on the public transportation system. A relic of desegregation efforts, many Detroit Public School students attend schools outside of their communities and must take public buses to school. Tardy and no-show buses affect their ability receive a quality education. Moreover, many Detroit youth also rely on buses to get them to

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work in the suburbs. These youth spend even more time traveling, time that they could use studying or participating in extracurricular activities.

The inadequate transportation system also leaves metropolitan Detroit's elderly immobile. They, too, are unable to complete basic chores. Tragically, the area's population most in need of medical services has no way of reaching those services. The elderly are forced to use alternatives such as emergency ambulance services to reach hospitals and arrive at doctor's appointments. Jane Holtz Kay found that some immobile elderly still keep their cars. She explains:

Middle-aged sons and daughters shake their heads at parents who keep their cars garaged even as old age incapacitates them. Drive or not, they cling to their automobiles and pay the insurance, excise taxes, and parking fees, since selling them symbolizes captivity and social death.<sup>22</sup>

Kay's statement is not only true for the elderly but her statement also resonates for all people affected by immobility. Some transit advocacy groups have organized Detroit area bus riders in an attempt to influence transportation-related actions. Still, the government's decision makers are not the ones riding the buses and a large gap persists between the system that exists and the one users need. The inability and unwillingness of metropolitan Detroit to collectively address the inefficiency of its public transportation system sends an unsettling message to the area's immobile: they are not of value to society. Those left waiting for metropolitan Detroit's buses are left without a means to social and economic mobility. And for some, their very survival is in question.

### **One Way or Another**

Without access to automobiles, Detroiters are essentially trapped in their neighborhoods. A poor low-density city, Detroit offers limited commercial services hindered by long distances and, oftentimes, poor quality. Even with a car finding a grocery store with good food at a decent price is nearly impossible. The city's immobile are relegated to shopping at gas stations and liquor stores, which often have a limited selection of pizza, chicken wings and hot dogs. An automobile means the right to a higher quality of life and, as a result, Detroiters have found alternative ways to attain them.

Over the decades, Detroit has had to continually cut city services to balance its budget with its dwindling tax income. As result, Detroit has cut many crucial services, including police protection, forcing departments to cover more area with less manpower. In some ways, Detroit has become an island, separated by money, race and language. Detroit has a different code of ethics than neighboring cities and it even seems to have its own

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laws, or better yet, lack thereof. This lawlessness is essential in providing Detroit's residents with unique but limited access to mobility.

Residents are able to circumvent the normal costs associated with owning a vehicle. They choose to drive vehicles without insurance, registration and even driver's licenses. However, using these illegal automobiles outside of Detroit is impractical and dangerous.

Ferndale sits on Detroit's northern border. Woodward Avenue, one of Detroit's main arterial roads, runs from Detroit, through Ferndale, and goes towards the most economically prosperous suburbs such as Birmingham. Unlicensed drivers often risk arrest attempting to access jobs in those suburbs. Barwin explains Ferndale's experience with these drivers:

Our police department pulls over about 300 people a year who do not have a valid driver's license for one reason or another. So we know that there is a considerable amount of driving that occurs with people who aren't supposed to be driving, they are just forced into having to do that and then they get themselves into trouble with the law.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, driving illegally does not provide the needed access to suburban jobs and services. An unlicensed Detroit resident uses both car and bus to reach his job at a car wash in the suburbs. He describes his strategy for being mobile and keeping his job:

In Detroit you can drive and get pulled over and you might not go to jail, but if you get pulled over in the suburbs without your license, you're going to jail, quick. So I drive my car to the border of Detroit and then catch the bus the rest of the way to my job in Royal Oak.<sup>24</sup>

Even the most minimal access to an automobile seems to provide an edge to area's immobile.

### **Car Rich**

When driving through the Motor City, one quickly sees the impact of the automobile. Automobiles retain value as object and they dominate Detroit's landscape. While Detroit's residents are immobile, the city is overflowing with vehicles and vehicle parts. Ironically, these automobiles are largely stagnant, parked or abandoned in backyards and on lawns. They retain trophy value, symbolizing the potential for mobility and the possibility of achieving the American dream.

Although storing vehicles on public streets and on private land is against Detroit's city ordinance, the city has a poor history of prosecuting violators.<sup>25</sup> Many city officials and residents often refer to these vehicles as "junk cars" and believe they are

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an example of the blight that hinders the city. During some years, Detroit's Police Department has supposedly processed over 30,000 of these "junk cars."<sup>26</sup> There are so many vehicles in Detroit's neighborhoods that even the removal of such large numbers of "junk cars" does not address the problem. In 2002, Detroit residents' named abandoned vehicles as their number one complaint for the third straight year.<sup>27</sup>

While some view the vehicles as an obstacle to moving the city forward, others understand that these vehicles are essential for the city's poor and immobile. Albert is a 78 year old Detroit resident. He spends a lot of time on his front porch, does not have a car, and depends on his family and taxis for transportation. He is sympathetic to the owners of "junk cars" and does not view the cars as nuisances. He explains:

It don't bother me if people wanna put them on their lawns. It really don't because some of them plan on having the cars fixed up later and don't, that's why. They just want to hold onto them you know? And then too, whole lots of them are running, but people, they just don't have the money to get the insurance on 'em... Expensive! It's real expensive. Especially if they have a bad driving record, then they really charge 'em high rates.<sup>28</sup>

In Detroit, a sub-economy has formed, based off of the "junk car". The residents have created alternative uses for these automobiles as a commodity. They barter and store cars, selling or saving them for spare parts. As residents move these cars from place to place, together they achieve a new form of mobility: the people achieve economic mobility by transporting the immobile automobiles.

Charles, 27 years old, makes a humble living as a tow truck driver for his family's towing business. At a young age, his father saw that the transport and storage of cars offered economic opportunities. Charles knows how to manipulate the business to ensure that each move benefits his family. He explains:

We have to move the cars from here, but most of the time when we move them it's to a better place for us, bigger or a better location. Most of the time we don't move them unless we're bettering ourselves, I guess you would say. Me, I'm personally tired of moving them. I've drug them around all my life, like a lot of these cars and trucks my father has had since before I was born.<sup>29</sup>

Although the cars offer Charles some economic capital, he realizes the limitations of his mobility. These cars represent currency, but they do not always translate into real money. Charles clarifies the dilemma:

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I'm car rich, dirt poor. I have more cars than I have money. Cars and trucks, car parts, all that stuff... I collect all that stuff. I guess it runs in my blood. My father has always done it and I've always done it... I have 185 cars in one place... I dismantle them, save parts of off them. I do it all, I do anything I can to survive.<sup>30</sup>

Curiously, Detroit's "junk car" culture is akin to those found in rural America. In an ethnographic study of poverty in rural America, Janet M. Fitchen found that the cars served several functions in the rural community:

- Standby cars can be fixed and quickly put on the road.
- Some provide replacement parts for other cars.
- Some cars serve as a "bank account" and when repaired and sold provide a small income.
- Repairing the cars allow the men an opportunity to use and exhibit their skills.
- The exchange of cars and skills provide a medium through which to build community relationships.<sup>31</sup>

Detroit's "junk cars" also offer opportunities for community building in the same way as in rural America. Fitchen argues that while residents are dealing with the cars they are also interacting and forming positive relationships with each other.<sup>32</sup> Fixing the automobiles and making them work creates the space for the neighborhood to bond.

Happy, a lifelong resident of Detroit, has repaired cars for years. While working on a car for an elderly acquaintance living near the Wayne State University campus, Happy explains how his "business" evolved. He says:

Over the years I've picked up knowledge here and there... working on my own cars, helping friends out and things like that. I just pick up on things. I'm not certified, I'm just a free-lance. I live off of 8 Mile, I have friends that live over here. I just come down and help people out, help them move, take them to the store, stuff like that. I try to help people out. It helps me out since I'm unemployed right at the moment so it kinda helps me out at the same time. Everybody's got their own little hustle down here.<sup>33</sup>

Happy's story is a common one and it helps illustrate how Detroit's immobile and poor work together to overcome their barriers to survival. In the past, the front porch was the space that connected the public and private lives of city residents and helped solidify neighborhoods.<sup>34</sup> In Detroit, the personal automobile now offers that symbolic space. The common desires of the residents for survival and mobility are shared through the automobile based sub-economy.

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**The Most American City**

In present day Detroit, having or not having an automobile completely determines the quality of each resident's life. In television commercials, the auto industry still sells the automobile of Ford's "American" dream: a vehicle for leisurely trips on the open road. Unfortunately, the reality is that the automobile is now a basic necessity for survival.

For those metropolitan Detroiters that can afford an automobile, it offers a means to the freedom that Americans value. Moreover, with that freedom, they have created lives almost completely independent of the central city. Jerry Herron, Director of American Studies at Wayne State University, argues that the resulting culture is the ultimate manifestation of the American Dream. He summarizes:

It certainly is the fulfillment of what people came here for many generations expecting that they wanted to find. That is an independent life, under their own control, with people just like me. So in that way, I think Detroit is the most American place on the planet.<sup>35</sup>

Unfortunately, the paradox of the American Dream is that not everyone benefits. And for metropolitan Detroit, being the most American place in the world means that many get left behind.

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- <sup>1</sup> “Why Choose Detroit?” VisitDetroit.com, 2003, Detroit Metro Convention & Visitors Bureau, Detroit, 11 July 2004 <<http://www.visitdetroit.com/tourprofessionals/whychoose/>>.
- <sup>2</sup> James A. Dunn, Driving forces: the automobile, its enemies, and the politics of mobility (Washington D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1998) 2.
- <sup>3</sup> Dunn 2.
- <sup>4</sup> Reynolds Farley, Sheldon Danziger, Harry J. Holzer, Detroit Divided, The Multi-City Study of Urban Equality v. 2 (NewYork: Russell Sage Foundation, 2000) 15.
- <sup>5</sup> G.A. Fulton, D. R. Grimes, L.G. Schmidt, P. S. McAlinden, B.C. Richardson, Contribution of the Automotive Industry to the U.S. Economy in 1998: the nation and its fifty states, Transportation Research Institute, University of Michigan (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan 2001) 27.
- <sup>6</sup> Joe T. Darden, Richard Child Hill, June Thomas and Richard Thomas, Detroit: Race and Uneven Development, Ed. Joe T. Darden, Comparative American Cities series (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987) 15.
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- <sup>8</sup> Happy, personal interview, 7 June 2004.
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