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The Committee Secretary  
Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport  
References Committee  
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Canberra ACT 2600

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## **Submission to Senate inquiry into the Role of Public Transport in Delivering Productivity Outcomes**

Dear Sir/Madam,

I am leading a three-year Australian Research Council funded project (DE120102279) called "Stressed Mobilities" that is investigating the effects of intra-city commuting in Sydney. The project is principally concerned with the relationship between commuting and wellbeing.

This project still has a year to run. However, there are already a number of published research outputs that are of relevance to the Senate inquiry into the Role of Public Transport in Delivering Productivity Outcomes

What follows is a brief overview of the aims and methods of the Stressed Mobilities project, followed by five points of relevance.

Whilst I am contributing this submission as a researcher at the Australian National University, its contents should not be attributed to the organisation.

Please do not hesitate to contact me should you require further details about the project or copies of the papers referenced.

Thank you for providing me with this opportunity to contribute to this important inquiry.

Yours faithfully,

Dr. David Bissell

## **Submission to Senate inquiry into the Role of Public Transport in Delivering Productivity Outcomes**

### **1 Project Background**

This submission is based on research undertaken during a three-year Australian Research Council funded project (DE120102279) called “Stressed Mobilities” that is investigating the effects of intra-city commuting in Sydney. The project is principally concerned with the relationship between commuting and wellbeing.

The immediate background to the *Stressed Mobilities* project is the widely documented assertion that commuters in Sydney suffer from significant stress (see for example IBM, 2011). In response, the aim of this project is to explore: (1) how this stress emerges; (2) how it affects work and home life; and (3) how it has potentially longer-term effects. As such, this project is concerned with understanding the relationship between commuting and wellbeing in terms of the transformative effects that commuting has on those involved. Since commuting to and from work is the most frequent reason for travelling by public transport, this study offers some valuable insights into the relationship between public transport and productivity.

Empirically, this project involved conducting a series of 53 in-depth, semi-structured interviews during February and March 2013 with a range of commuters most of whom reside in the Greater Metropolitan Area of Sydney.

The interviews are not intended to be used to produce a generalizable or quantifiable overview of issues affecting commuters in Sydney. Rather, in the context of this submission, they work to: (1) document how the relationship between the experience of commuting by public transport and productivity is complex; (2) demonstrate how the complexities of the relationship between commuting and productivity are well captured by qualitative approaches; and (3) therefore demonstrate how these complexities benefit from sustained conceptual analysis.

In the context of this submission, the qualitative evidence from this project shows how public transport can enhance productivity in a number of direct and indirect ways:

### **2 Points of relevance to the inquiry**

#### **2.1 Direct productivity benefit: increased economic participation**

- Public transport plays a vital role for accessing jobs, social networks, goods and services in Australia’s cities.
- Whilst public transport provides benefits to a wide cross-section of urban inhabitants, it is particularly important for young people; people who are socio-economically vulnerable; elderly people; and people who have a physical disability (see Bissell, 2009a; Preston and Rajé, 2007).
- The *Stressed Mobilities* project highlights how a well-functioning public transport network is vital for increasing economic participation. Some participants in the study who rely on public transport to get to work do not drive for financial or health related reasons, and

would not be able to participate in employment opportunities without it. Others prefer public transport over car travel

## **2.2 Direct productivity benefit: the value of public transport travel time**

- Travel time involved in commuting to and from work has often been seen as negative, understood in terms of its productive utility or value.
- However, this runs counter to the findings of the *Stressed Mobilities* project and previous research conducted by myself and other researchers that has shown that commuters use public transport travel time in ways that it is valuable and productive (Bissell, 2010; Jain and Lyons, 2008).
- This productivity can be understood economically, in terms of how people use the time of the commute as a ‘mobile office’. In this respect, public transport has a direct advantage over private car travel. Where commuting by car requires focused attention on driving itself, commuting by public transport presents opportunities to undertake a range of working practices.
- Participants in the *Stressed Mobilities* project who travel by train describe how they often save up specific work-related tasks for their commute, particularly ones that require sustained concentration such as reading documents, because they are not interrupted by workplace distractions.
- The design of train carriages and buses influences the extent to which commuters can use these spaces productively. Seat pitch has a bearing on whether laptops can be used comfortably. Seat height and alignment has a bearing on privacy which can be significant when undertaking confidential work (see also Bissell, 2008).
- For bus commuters, the benefits of limited-stop services extend beyond time savings. Participants in the *Stressed Mobilities* project describe how routes with fewer stops and starts reduces travel sickness, thereby making for a more conducive on-the-go work environment.
- Participants in the *Stressed Mobilities* project noted the importance of staying connected during commutes by public transport in order to undertake work. Since many use their mobile phones for talk and internet connectivity, ensuring that mobile ‘blackspots’ are filled in is important. The provision of free Wi-Fi on public transport is beneficial from this perspective.
- ‘Soft’ governance measures such as making some train carriages ‘quiet carriages’ can be very effective at creating environments that are more conducive to working (Bissell, 2009b).

### **2.3 *Direct productivity benefit: the value from leisure purchases for use on public transport***

- Research outcomes of the Stressed Mobilities project show that the travel time of commuting by public transport can give people the opportunity to engage in leisure activities that they would not otherwise have the chance to do owing to the pressure of professional and domestic responsibilities at work and home.
- Commuters who travel by public transport regularly undertake a range of different leisure activities including listening to music, watching TV and DVDs, reading books, magazines and websites. Some participants described how they had purchased media devices and magazine subscriptions especially for the bus or train commute (Bissell, 2014a). Most of these are activities would not be possible to do during car commutes.
- Each of these activities has economic benefits that come from the purchase of devices and electronic and print media for use during commutes.

### **2.4 *Indirect productivity benefit: the value of relaxation and rejuvenation on public transport***

- The Stressed Mobility project shows that the experiential dimension of the journey to and from work has a significant effect on commuters' wellbeing. In this respect productivity must also be understood in a broader sense, through the way that commuting impacts on people's work and home life.
- Some participants described how the stressful and agitating aspects of driving to and from work in Sydney, particularly incidents of road rage, can have a negative impact on their productivity at work. Whilst there is variation from situation to situation, it can take time to recover from particularly stressful drives. Travelling by public transport can therefore reduce the stresses associated with driving, meaning that people can arrive for work feeling more refreshed.
- Research outcomes of the *Stressed Mobilities* project show that the travel time of commuting by public transport can give people the opportunity to relax and rejuvenate in ways that are not afforded by driving to and from work (Bissell, 2014b).
- Being able to relax and rejuvenate during the commute clearly has positive implications for productivity at work and wellbeing at home.

### **2.5 *Indirect productivity benefit: the value of investing in public transport environments***

- Whilst the overall provision of services is key, both the *Stressed Mobilities* project and my previous research on the experience of public transport demonstrate the economic and social value of investment in making public transport environments feel good. This includes the travelling environments of buses and trains, but also transport interchanges, bus stops and railway stations (Bissell, 2008; Bissell 2009a).

- To ensure that public transport environments are conducive for working and relaxing requires sustained investment in maintaining the quality of the ambience and atmosphere of these spaces. Small measures such as daily litter and graffiti removal are a key part of making these spaces feel good to be in.
- Participants drew attention to how the experience of travelling on public transport can be made more pleasurable by making sure that they are safe spaces. Ensuring passenger safety on public transport is a key dimension of making these spaces feel good to be in. Participants in the *Stressed Mobilities* project cited anti-social behaviour as a significant negative aspect.

### 3 References

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**Dr David Bissell** is Senior Lecturer and an ARC DECRA award holder in the Research School of Social Sciences at the Australian National University. As a mobilities researcher, his research examines how different forms of mobility give rise to new relations between people and place. His research is published in *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*; *Environment and Planning A*; *Cultural Geographies*; *Mobilities*; *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*; *Social and Cultural Geography*; *Area*; *Theory and Event*; *Geoforum*; *Geographical Research*; *Journal of Transport Geography*; *Space and Culture*; and *M/C Journal*. He is co-editor of the *Routledge Handbook of Mobilities* (2014) and *Stillness in a Mobile World* (2011). He is on the editorial boards of *Mobilities* and *Australian Humanities Review*.