Good transportation is critical for everyone, but is particularly vital for low-income and working families struggling to manage and improve their daily lives. Getting around — to jobs and to classes, to buy groceries or to see a doctor — has been shown to be a challenge for low-income households and people of color. Yet, surprisingly little is known about how these families navigate transportation challenges on a daily basis. Large national datasets, state surveys, and transportation models frequently fail to provide enough information on localized transportation issues or on the travel needs and behaviors of smaller demographic groups within the general population.

To better understand this important issue, Neighbor to Neighbor Massachusetts (N2N-MA) and the Kitty and Michael Dukakis Center for Urban and Regional Policy at Northeastern University collaborated on a mixed-methods data collection project with the intent of developing policy solutions to address the transportation needs of low-income and working Latino families in Massachusetts. The project focused on four Massachusetts cities with large Latino populations that represent a range of transportation environments: East Boston, Lynn, Springfield, and Worcester. We conducted door-to-door surveys with more than 350 residents in targeted neighborhoods and held focus groups in each city to collect information on how residents get around, where they go using different transportation modes, what obstacles and issues they contend with, and solutions for overcoming transit-related problems. This Executive Summary briefly reviews what we have learned and offers policy recommendations to increase equitable access to affordable and high-quality transportation. This analysis will guide and support N2N-MA’s advocacy on behalf of low-income communities of color, and educate policymakers and transportation planners about the real impacts of transportation on people’s daily lives.

Key Findings and Conclusions
Transportation takes a heavy toll on the time, budget, and stress level of low-income Latino Massachusetts residents as they manage getting to work or class and meeting their basic needs. We found that:

- Low-income Latino residents lack good transportation options and must often choose between expensive dependence on automobiles and inadequate, time-consuming public transit;
- Transportation challenges adversely affect people’s access to basic needs, broader opportunities, and overall quality of life;
- Low-income Latino residents of Massachusetts cities need better and more affordable transportation options, including more frequent public transit service that gets them to jobs and other important destinations in a reasonable amount of time and every day of the week.

“When I came here 18 years ago, I spent three years taking the bus and walking. I had to buy a car because transportation here is so poor. Out of all the places I’ve gone, I think Massachusetts is the place with the most transportation problems.”
— Springfield Focus Group Participant
**WHO DID WE SURVEY?**

We surveyed 362 mostly low-income and Latino residents in East Boston, Lynn, Worcester, and Springfield, Massachusetts between October 2012 and January 2013. The sample consisted primarily of people of Hispanic origin (80%) and women (70%). We targeted low-income neighborhoods and as a result the survey respondents tended to be very low income, with 75% reporting total household incomes below $20,000 and less than 6% reporting household incomes greater than $40,000.

**No Good Choices**

For many low-income Latino residents of Massachusetts, high-quality and reliable transportation options simply do not exist. Public transportation options leave much to be desired, yet the cost of vehicle ownership and upkeep is financially burdensome.

While not necessarily a preferred option, travel by car is the primary means of transportation for the majority of survey respondents. *While only 46% of the sample owned a car, 57% identified automobiles as their “primary” mode of transportation – a finding explained by the high but often invisible practice of regular reliance on someone else’s car.*

As shown in Figure 1, nearly one in six respondents in Lynn and Worcester, and nearly one in four in Springfield identified “someone else’s car” as their primary means of transportation. Many respondents relied on cars, particularly for access to grocery shopping and visiting family and friends, even though they did not own a car or even in many cases (42% of respondents) have a driver’s license. These figures reflect a high level of automobile dependence by a population that is neither enthusiastic about nor financially equipped for car ownership. Those who primarily travel by car cite the cost of car ownership and maintenance as a greater burden than traffic congestion or parking. Automobile ownership is seen as a solution to the inadequacies of the local public transit service, but one that is imperfect, with 83% of respondents reporting that gasoline prices are too high.

Overall, four in ten residents sampled lacked any access to a car and over one third of respondents (35%) relied on public transportation as their primary mode of transportation. Only 3% identified walking as their primary transportation mode and none identified bicycling as their primary transportation mode (only 9% of respondents even reported that they own a bicycle). In East Boston, however, with its more extensive Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) Blue Line and bus service, 70% of respondents used public transportation as their primary mode, compared to less than one third of respondents in Lynn, Worcester, and Springfield.

While automobile reliance is both expensive and problematic for those who do not own a car or have a driver’s license, cars were chosen as the primary means of transportation by a majority of respondents because of concerns about the quality and convenience of public transportation. Three out of four of survey respondents agreed with the statement, “If public transportation was better, I would drive and/or be driven less.” While low-income Latino residents in the Greater Boston region report less dissatisfaction with public transportation service, residents living outside of the MBTA service area face significant disadvantages. Especially in Worcester, Lynn, and Springfield, public transportation frequently fails

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FIGURE 1: What is your primary means of transportation?
to meet the needs of low-income Latino families. Although car ownership is financially burdensome, many low-income Latino families in Massachusetts are automobile-dependent out of necessity.

The Toll of Transportation
These transportation challenges and disadvantages seriously and adversely affect the quality of life and access to opportunity for low-income Latino families in Massachusetts cities. Transportation takes a heavy toll on the lives of low-income Latino Massachusetts residents in many different ways including high costs, limited access to employment and other opportunities, wasted time, and added stress.

One major toll imposed by the current transportation system on low-income families is its cost. Inadequate access to reliable and convenient transportation in daily life is a drain on the limited amount of disposable or discretionary income available to low-income Latino families. While taking public transportation can sometimes be seen as a cost-saving measure, 42% of transit users reported that the cost of transit was a financial problem for them. In Massachusetts, the costs of transportation are high and potentially burdensome — regardless of mode: nearly 40% of survey respondents said that, at some point, they were forced to sacrifice a basic necessity in order to afford transportation.

The current transportation system also limits access to good jobs. We found that the varying levels of transit access in the four communities surveyed paralleled trends in employment. East Boston respondents reported the best level of transit access, followed by Lynn, Worcester, and Springfield. Similarly, East Boston residents were the most likely to report being employed (82%), followed by Lynn (55%), Worcester (38%), and Springfield (28%), respectively. Focus group participants described how poor access to transit and poor frequency of service resulted in difficulties finding or keeping a job, particularly second-shift jobs and jobs located in nearby locations not served by public transportation. Several focus group respondents recalled job openings they were unable to apply to because their local regional transit authority (RTA) does not offer weekend or late-night bus service.

Limited access to transportation often limits access to opportunities other than employment. Although our survey respondents primarily live in neighborhoods with the highest proportions of zero-vehicle households within each city, 63% of survey respondents reported that they cannot access 'everyday' destinations like the grocery store, pharmacy, or post office on foot and are forced to travel outside of their neighborhoods to complete routine activities. When accounting for time waiting for the original and return-trip buses, time spent on buses, and time traveling to and from bus stops is factored in, accessing routine destinations via public transit service (especially in Worcester and Springfield) can take hours or even all day. One focus group participant reported that a family member was forced to withdraw from the local college because of conflicts with the transit schedule.

Finally, inadequate transportation options cost low-income Latino residents not only money and opportunity but also valuable time. Survey and focus group participants tend to spend a great deal of time traveling between destinations, only to arrive late at medical appointments, work, or school.
because of transportation-related issues. Roughly one-quarter of survey respondents reported that transportation-related issues caused repeated lateness to work; 30% were repeatedly late to health care appointments; and 32% said they were repeatedly late to school. These figures may well underestimate the problem of time lost to transportation because residents have learned to respond to the system’s unreliability by allowing more time to get to their destinations: Some focus group participants described their strategy of arriving at the bus stop one full hour in advance of the bus’s scheduled arrival time in order to combat “no-shows.”

**Creating Better Options**

Based on these findings, we conclude that low-income Latino residents of Massachusetts cities need better and more affordable transportation options in order to ensure access to basic needs and greater opportunity. While the survey and focus groups only included four sites across the state, we are confident that our conclusions are applicable to communities across the Commonwealth; the issues and concerns raised are likely to be similar in places from Lowell and Lawrence to New Bedford and Fall River, and from Fitchburg to Pittsfield and North Adams. The Commonwealth’s low-income residents and working families need better transportation choices, including reliable transit that allows them to get to jobs, school, and all the other places they need and want to go.

Although some transportation improvements and policy changes may require a long time to implement, others could be made in a year or less and would have immediate positive effects on the daily lives of low-income Latino residents of Massachusetts cities. Neighbor to Neighbor and The Dukakis Center therefore call on the Commonwealth, transportation, transit and regional planners, and municipal officials to work with community groups and affected residents of cities throughout Massachusetts to:

- Improve and expand transit options: Funding for the regional transit authorities must be increased in order to allow transit providers to increase service frequency, extend hours of service, expand weekend service and establish new routes to better connect low-income residents and neighborhoods with low automobile ownership to employment and other frequent destinations such as grocery stores and medical centers. At the same time, the MBTA needs to reassess its bus routes outside core Boston neighborhoods to achieve the same access goals.
- Improve the affordability of transportation: Public transportation must remain affordable even as its reach is expanded. Planned increases in gasoline taxes, tolls and transit fares under the pending transportation finance legislation need to be accompanied by measures to mitigate the impact of higher costs on low-income residents.
- Increase walking and biking: Economic development and land-use planning should focus on bringing more necessities within walking distance of low-income households with limited automobile and transit access and on improving walkability in their neighborhoods. Bike sharing might be an important addition to these neighborhoods and consideration should be given to expanding the current Hubway system and creating bike sharing or other biking options outside of the Hubway geography, in order to reach more low-income Latino neighborhoods.
- Connect policy and planning: Transit shapes access to job training, school and health care, and so transit planning must focus on improving access to these destinations. As regional transit authorities create the comprehensive regional transit plans required by the pending transportation finance legislation, the agencies need to better understand the social, demographic, and geographic realities of their customers and the key destinations for transit passengers and to involve those customers and community-based organizations in the planning process. At the same time, state and municipal officials need to consider transit linkages in all relevant programs and policy decisions on issues ranging from workforce training to housing affordability to access to healthy food.
- Plan and invest for the long term: While the first priority must be improving and expanding existing services within cities, new bus and possibly rail service should be evaluated and implemented to improve connections between those cities and both the Boston core and nearby employment centers in order to better serve the many low-income Latino communities across the state that lack accessible and affordable transportation to jobs and other opportunities.

These changes in transportation policy and investments need to be implemented as quickly as possible in order to reduce the tolls of transportation and increase the prosperity not only of low-income Latinos but of low-income and working families throughout the Commonwealth.