17 Towards an understanding of the social meanings of mobility

The case of Esslingen, Germany

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Abstract

This chapter focuses on a German case study, in Esslingen, southern Germany, investigating the mobility poverty of elderly people and refugees. In an economically dynamic region such as southern Germany, with a generally highly mobile population, impediments to a person's mobility can limit her or his opportunities and social participation. Although these groups have very different characteristics and mobility needs, both face similar challenges as regards mobility. Furthermore, this study region is the focus of attention here due to its high number of initiatives involving a very specific solution: "citizens' buses".

Contextualisation

The case study region is the district of Esslingen, located in south-west Germany, in the state of Baden-Württemberg.¹ The region is located east of the state capital Stuttgart and is part of the metropolitan region of Stuttgart.

Similar to the case study region of Luxembourg, the Stuttgart metropolitan region has a well-developed transport network, both in terms of road and rail transportation. Public transport is widely and frequently available even in smaller villages in the region. In addition, the Stuttgart metropolitan region is one of the economically most dynamic areas in Germany. Compared to other regions in Europe and Germany, the Stuttgart metropolitan region is wealthy. Baden-Württemberg has one of the highest GDP and disposable income per capita in Germany and the second lowest unemployment rate (Statistische Ämter des Bundes und der Länder 2019). Unemployment is low in the study region (Statistisches Landesamt Baden-Württemberg 2018e, 2017).

In order to identify the "blind spots" of the mobility system in the study region, this field study engages with two social groups whose basic needs and well-being are directly linked to their level of mobility: elderly people and refugees. Although, generally speaking, these groups have very different characteristics and mobility needs, they face similar challenges regarding mobility, as the following explanation will show.

Spatial, demographic and social characteristics of the study region

The study region is a sprawling, polycentric area characterised by scattered settlements alternating with industrial estates. The study region is classified as peri-urban with mixed urban (small- and medium-sized towns with historic cores and new suburban-style districts) and rural, low-density settlements.² Although the villages in the case study region have a rural appearance, most inhabitants are employed in the industrial and service sectors. Major employers in the car industry are located in the suburbs around Stuttgart and other major employment centres are Tübingen, Nürtingen and Reutlingen. Hence, outward commuting to Stuttgart and other industrial centres is common in the villages.

The population of the district of Esslingen grew at a rate of 3.5% between 2007 and 2017 (Statistisches Landesamt Baden-Württemberg 2018f). The study region has a slightly higher share of elderly people compared to the state average. The share of elderly people is generally lower in the city of Stuttgart and its vicinity; it increases with distance from the state capital (Statistisches Landesamt Baden-Württemberg 2018c, 2018d).

The share of population with a migrant background is higher in this region than the average for Baden-Württemberg (16.9% in 2017). Migrants mostly live in the larger cities and towns of the region, where the share of the population is between 17% and 23% (in 2017) (Statistisches Landesamt Baden-Württemberg 2018a, 2018b). A high share of refugees is accommodated in the case study region. In Germany, asylum seekers and refugees are assigned to a federal state according to a quota proportional to the total population of each state (Landratsamt Esslingen 2015). In 2015 and 2016, the district reached a peak in the number of refugees living in accommodation provided by the state.

For what is known as their “initial accommodation”, refugees are accommodated on housing estates and flats provided by the district administration. A common challenge for refugees is the search for accommodation in private or municipality-provided dwellings after initial accommodation is phased out after two years, due to the tight rental market.

The focus group sessions with elderly people were conducted in **Filderstadt**, **Aichwald** and **Frickenhausen**, all in the district of Esslingen (Figure 17.1). Filderstadt and Aichwald are both located in the vicinity of Stuttgart and the city of Esslingen, while Frickenhausen is located at a distance of roughly 30 km from Stuttgart. Due to high population growth between 1950 and 1980, when the number of residents doubled or tripled, these municipalities now have a suburban character with historical cores. Commuting to Stuttgart and Esslingen and other centres of employment is very common. Aichwald is also characterised by a high share of elderly people (Statistisches Landesamt Baden-Württemberg 2018c).

Figure 17.1 Map of the study region of Esslingen/Neckar.

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Three focus groups with refugees were conducted in the city of Esslingen. **Esslingen** is a highly urbanised area in the Neckar valley south-east of Stuttgart with a high share of migrants (21.4%) (Statistisches Landesamt Baden-Württemberg 2018a). After Munich and Frankfurt, the Stuttgart metropolitan region is the region with the highest rental prices in Germany. The city of Esslingen is among the 50 German cities with the highest rental prices for newly rented apartments and will soon be at the level of the city of Stuttgart (Neuhöfer 2017). This tense housing situation has implications for people's living and mobility situation; many people decide to move farther away from the employment centres in Stuttgart, thereby increasing their commuting distances. However this often involves commuting by car.

Focus group characteristics

The three sessions with elderly people were characterised by a mix of ages. The sessions in Aichwald and Filderstadt were conducted in late summer 2018 and the session in Frickenhausen in early summer 2019. Most participants were, however, between the ages of 60 and 75, while some participants were between 75 and 88. All of the younger participants were highly

active in local volunteering organisations, particularly in citizens' buses or other ride-sharing organisations. The older ones had previously been active members in their local communities. In all three focus group sessions, the majority of the participants were men, while only two participants in each session were women. All participants lived independently in their own households, in detached or terraced houses typical of the peri-urban region of Stuttgart.

Of the three sessions with refugees, the first session was conducted with male refugees, the second with women only and the third was a mixed group. The first two sessions were conducted in late summer 2018 and the third session in early summer 2019. The session with the male group consisted of nine participants, the female group consisted of 11 participants and the mixed session had 12 participants. All participants were relatively young, between 20 and 35 years old and three persons were more than 40 years old. The duration of stay in Esslingen differed between the participants: while many had been living in Esslingen for less than a year, some had been in Esslingen for between three and five years. The countries of origin of the refugees were Nigeria, Cameroon, Gambia, Iran, Afghanistan and Syria. Most of the participants in the sessions lived in collective accommodation in the city of Esslingen, either in the city centre or on the outskirts. However, some lived in the adjacent village in the hills with rural character.

Furthermore, eight expert interviews were conducted with representatives from the state ministry of transport, the regional transport department, community organisations and citizens' bus organisations.

Transport characteristics in the study region

Both road and public transport systems are very well developed in the region. Public transport coverage is comprehensive, especially in the Neckar/Fils valleys of the region. The city of Esslingen and several other municipalities are served by Stuttgart suburban rail services and other regional trains, with journey times of half an hour or often less. The region is also served by long-distance trains.

Despite a well-developed public transport system, mobility in the greater Stuttgart region is car-based.³ The public transportation system is concentrated on Stuttgart and the need to commute to the city. The railway routes lead radially from or to Stuttgart in the valleys surrounding the city. This also means that municipalities in the hilly areas around Stuttgart are less well connected.

Another challenge is that, outside the valleys, bus services are less frequent to major centres. In some villages, public transport is mostly oriented towards the requirements of school pupils, with low service levels in the evenings and during school holidays. Furthermore, mobility within municipalities – different districts or scattered parts of municipalities – is a challenge. Only in larger towns, such as in the city of Esslingen, there is

extensive coverage of public transportation within the limits of the municipality.

Strategies and initiatives of the state of Baden-Württemberg

The state of Baden-Württemberg outlines mobility inclusion as one of the key goals in the strategy of the transport ministry “Sustainable Mobility – for all” (Nachhaltige Mobilität – Für Alle) (Ministerium für Verkehr Baden-Württemberg 2015). It recognises that especially children in urban areas and elderly people in rural areas are limited in their mobility. Besides improving public transportation services in both urban and rural areas, better walking and cycling infrastructure is stated as a key mechanism to improve mobility and accessibility for these groups. Furthermore, innovative mobility concepts and demand-responsive transportation should be implemented to improve the situation of vulnerable groups. Another emphasis is put on accessibility in rural areas. In order to tackle the challenges in a cross-sectoral approach, an inter-ministerial working group has been formed. The current range of projects in the state of Baden-Württemberg focuses on the improvement of accessibility by running pilot projects using electric mobility, car-sharing and on-demand mobility. An important public transport service in rural areas, especially at weekends and late in the-evening, is the “Ruftaxi”, small buses that need to be booked (at least 20 minutes) in advance.

Several reforms of the ticketing system have been implemented recently. Since December 2018, the “BW-Tarif” allows travel within Baden-Württemberg at a standard rate. While this new tariff system simplifies travel and ticket purchasing for the end user, it also reduces ticket costs.

In April 2019, the tariff zone system of the Stuttgart regional transport authority was restructured. Due to a reduction in the number of fare zones, ticket prices have been reduced (Ministerium für Verkehr Baden-Württemberg 2018).

General mobility poverty in the study region

Due to the economic characteristics of the region, social disadvantage and social exclusion due to material poverty are rarely experienced. Furthermore, high motorisation rates and comprehensive public transport coverage in the region result in high accessibility across the whole study region. Hence, the risk of any individual experiencing mobility poverty is relatively low compared to other study regions presented in this volume.

Due to this low risk of experiencing mobility poverty, the consequence is that mobility poverty and the mobility needs of vulnerable groups are not a priority for most transport authorities and administrations in the region. In interviews with representatives of different authorities in the region, it became clear that they understand their responsibility in providing mass transport and not mobility solutions for vulnerable groups. The special

mobility needs of social groups are perceived as “individual transport” and hence not the responsibility of public transportation authorities. Regarding vulnerable groups with low financial means, the responsibility is considered to lie with the social departments of municipalities and districts. Such an approach is in line with the perception that public transport should be oriented towards meeting everyday basic needs, most importantly commuting for work or education. Such an approach also determines the investment and subsidy strategy of public transport in the region: once a basic service is established in all parts of the region, further investment and subsidies are only allocated when comparatively little effort can lead to a substantial increase in ridership.

The focus on basic and mass transport needs by public authorities has two major implications for vulnerable groups in the region, while the spatial dynamics add a further challenge:

- **Disadvantages due to high cost of public transport:** first, vulnerable individuals with financial constraints may face mobility poverty when trying to meet basic needs. The ticket costs in the Stuttgart metropolitan region are high compared with other areas in Germany: hence for low-income and unemployed people, the costs can be a major barrier to mobility. A common mechanism in Germany to improve the mobility of low-income individuals is a monthly “social ticket” that is available to low-income individuals at a heavily reduced price. Such offers are made by each city and district individually for registered citizens. In the district of Esslingen, such a ticket is not offered and is not planned either. Hence, due to the different costs of public transportation tickets, the level of mobility for low-income individuals may be different according to where they live.
- **Focus on mobility needs of majority population:** when the public transport offer strongly focuses on serving the needs of the majority population as it does in the region of Stuttgart, vulnerable individuals may experience mobility poverty because the transport offer does not fit their circumstances. Generally, the public transport coverage is best during commuting hours on weekdays. Hence, those who work late at night and in the early mornings or at weekends may experience mobility barriers. Another barrier exists for people with reduced mobility. Unlike in other German regions, special mobility services (door-to-door) for disabled people do not exist.
- **Increasing spatial disparities:** due to high rental prices in the main cities of the study region, lower income groups have to move further away from their places of work. For the future, this could mean that the population in rural areas is increasingly either old age or on low income. Due to limited public transportation, the mobility of low-income groups is car-based, leading to incidences of forced car ownership. Interviews revealed that these interrelations and future challenges are well understood and tackled by the transport ministry of Baden-Württemberg.

However, at local and regional levels, there is a tendency to underestimate these challenges, partially because sectoral administrations do not have the capacity to tackle complex cross-sectoral tasks.

Mobility poverty of elderly people

Transport situation of elderly people

The elderly in the region heavily rely on private motorised vehicles. All participants in the focus group sessions drove their own cars except for two participants. The car was the main mode of transport, although senior tickets are available at reduced prices. The participants expressed that losing the ability to drive one's own car is often a turning point in one's life, but most of the younger elderly do not like to think about future times when they would not be able to drive any more. Instead, they insist on driving as long as possible. One participant stated:

When you sell your car, it is perceived that one is not mobile any more. That is a huge barrier. There are many alternatives to driving a car, but there is no awareness of these alternatives among many elderly.

Due to these attitudes, other options are either not known or not seriously considered.

The distinction between mobility for basic everyday needs and mobility for social purposes is effective when analysing transport and mobility poverty in the German study region.⁴ The elderly people who participated in the study mostly had mobility needs for everyday requirements in the local area such as grocery shopping, appointments with their doctor. Furthermore, the participants travelled for social purposes such as to meet relatives and friends as well as to participate in social and cultural activities. Many focus group participants reported that they visit their grown-up children in other parts of Germany and also drive there by car.

Meeting basic mobility needs

There is a distinction between basic needs and social purposes because, as already mentioned above, for the majority of the elderly, mobility poverty in the narrow sense is not an issue in this region. However, elderly people with low financial means may face challenges due to the high cost of public transport and a mobility system that centres around the working population. The discussion in the focus groups revealed that elderly people without access to a car are vulnerable to mobility poverty and social exclusion. This vulnerability is increased when elderly people are physically impaired or have a disease that limits their mobility. In these cases, even though public transport coverage in the region is extensive, public transport stations and bus stops

are often too far away from homes. This can be observed in particular for the estates with lower density outside the historical cores of towns and villages. The use of taxis may be limited due to low financial means or because taxis do not serve villages outside the urban cores.

Furthermore, participants in the focus group session acknowledged that a low-income situation may be a social stigma in a generally wealthy region. Many people would not easily accept help but try to solve a crisis by themselves, as a community organiser highlights:

I know people in our town who are really struggling to make ends meet and they never seek help. There is a certain pride in saying ‘I want to manage without external help.’

Travel for social purposes and the social function of mobility

Participants in the focus group session considered themselves as financially independent and hence saw their basic mobility needs covered by either public or private transport.⁵ Instead, they greatly emphasised the need to travel for social purposes and the social function of mobility itself. They emphasised that social participation is key to well-being for those who are very old and mobility plays a key role in preventing social isolation.

Many of the participants still drove their own cars, but expressed that driving a car alone contributes to social isolation. Hence, they highlighted that traveling together in groups for leisure trips on public transportation has become very popular among the elderly in the region, supported by the availability of a “senior ticket” at reduced rates. Furthermore, offering rides to neighbours or friends is a way of giving support, but it is also a low-key effort to stay in touch and socialise. Mobility is hence not only the “vehicle” to get to locations in their social life, but rather mobility itself becomes the social event.

During the focus group sessions, another social implication was observed among the participants. Mobility was one crucial element of a person’s self-image. Many proudly reported long distance leisure trips or visits to family members who live far away. Several participants highlighted how much they liked driving cars over long distances. On the one hand, for those who enjoy a high standard of living in old age and have been in executive or skilled positions before retiring, this “travelness” is an expression of independence and freedom on the one hand and a means of social distinction and reputation among the elderly on the other.

Mobility poverty of refugees

Role of mobility in employment and education

The participants in the focus group sessions considered employment and education as the most important prerequisites for their well-being. Hence, mobility related to these purposes is of prime importance.

Besides walking, refugees in the study area heavily rely on public transport. None of the focus group participants owned a car. For those with direct access to trains (in the valleys of the Stuttgart region), it is easier to find opportunities for employment and education in other parts of the region. Access to jobs is more difficult if one lives in the hilly regions of the area with bus public transport. Then, cycling becomes an important means of mobility for the male refugees, as one participant explained:

I live outside of Esslingen and I work late at night, early morning or weekend shifts. During these times, there are no buses running to the next train station so I ride my bicycle to the train station. Only then can I get to work on time.

Related to the problem of accessibility is the system of assigning accommodation to refugees by the district authorities. Accommodation can be provided in both city centres and in more remote villages. The participants expressed that this system seems like a “lottery system” to them and it can limit their opportunities to find employment or suitable education.

Impact of high ticket costs and complexity of tariff system

When taking up employment, refugees usually receive low-income jobs, but then they must also pay for their accommodation on their own. This means that their financial situation does not necessarily improve substantially once in employment. Given these constraints, public transport in the region is costly for the refugees. Also, refugees with a reduced budget rely on grocery shopping at discount shops, which are not available in all villages where they live. Hence, they have to do grocery shopping at costlier supermarkets or have additional expenses to travel to a discounter. Participants in the focus group sessions also raised concerns about the costs of travelling with children above the age of six and about the latest increase in ticket prices.

Participants mentioned that for refugees who have recently arrived in Germany it is difficult to understand the complex public transport tariff and ticketing system. The participants were very aware that improving their language skills helps when using public transport. They valued the efforts made by volunteers and the municipal social services that support newcomers by explaining how the public transportation system works.

Mobility of refugee women

Specific findings on the mobility problems of women refugees were obtained through the women-only focus group. Women have to travel longer distances than men, e.g. to attend a specialist doctor. The language problem turned out to be more severe for women because some of them were illiterate

and had difficulties in using a ticket machine. Women also travel more often with young kids on public transport.

Although almost half of the women in the focus group sessions knew how to ride a bicycle, bike usage among women was not common in Esslingen. Many women expressed that they would be eager to learn how to ride a bicycle. One woman stated:

I would love to ride a bicycle, but I do not know anyone who could teach me how to ride.

However, the women expressed that there are constraints when riding bikes such as travelling with children.

Discrimination on public transport

Refugees from African countries reported that they face discrimination on public transport. They highlighted that especially when young African men travel in groups, they feel targeted by ticket inspectors. One participant stated:

The inspectors do not have much time, they cannot check everyone so that's why it is happening to us refugees.

The participants reported that they are sometimes caught without valid tickets and they are severely fined even in situations when they are travelling with a ticket, but the ticket is wrong or not valid any more. The participants raised the concern that there is not enough awareness of the difficulties they face when not acquainted with the public transport system.

Role of community-based, volunteer mobility services: citizens' buses

In more and more municipalities in Baden-Württemberg, forms of community-based transport are being implemented. The most common form is the citizens' bus (*Bürgerbus*), a public transport service which relies on unpaid volunteers for most or all tasks, in particular to drive the vehicles. The majority of the funding of a citizens' bus is raised locally, e.g. via donations from local businesses. The vehicles used are usually minibuses or large passenger cars. While citizens' buses usually run on fixed schedules and routes, there are also flexible services that have the nature of an on-demand service.

Community transport solutions were first implemented in Germany in 1985. Since then, the number of services has increased to more than 250. In Baden-Württemberg to date, 84 citizens' buses are running and an additional 12 on-demand services. In addition, there are numerous voluntary services with restricted public usage such as ride-sharing and car-pooling services for

elderly people. In the district of Esslingen, citizens' buses have been in operation since 2003. Citizens' bus initiatives are embedded in their local communities and very well connected to their local administrations and economy.

Citizens' buses are often launched and operated by local senior citizens' organisations and they are mostly frequented by elderly people. However, they are open to the general public. Refugees and other social groups with disadvantages, such as low-income groups, are not usually riders on citizens' buses and are not specifically targeted by citizens' bus initiatives. However, there are exceptions, such as the initiative in Aichwald, which specifically targets low-income persons via a special programme.

The attractiveness of citizens' buses for elderly persons can be understood when considering the social significance of citizens' buses. Many of those who volunteer as drivers for citizens' buses are younger elderly men, those who recently retired and are searching for meaningful activities for their free time as well as social interaction. The passengers on citizens' buses, on the other hand, are often elderly people who have lost their partners and /or other close friends/relatives. At this older age, one's own physical abilities may already be reduced. While using the citizens' bus for basic daily needs, the purpose of social participation is a crucial objective of these "older" elderly. Community organisers explicitly highlight the significance of these services for social inclusion. An organiser of community transport in Filderstadt stated:

The social isolation of elderly people is one of the core problems. Our mobility service contributes to reducing isolation in older age.

Here, the difference to conventional public transport becomes apparent. The participants in the focus groups with senior citizens reported that, while they rarely use conventional public transportation, they regularly use citizens' buses and other forms of community-based transport. They even decide to use citizens' buses for certain trips instead of their own cars, for the sake of the social interaction with the drivers and other passengers. For some participants, a ride on the citizens' bus has become a regularly scheduled "social event". The citizens' buses also strengthen the networks of the elderly in the villages and towns. A citizens' bus organiser from the town of Wendlingen stated:

Organisers, drivers and users of the citizens' bus have become a committed community here. People identify with the citizens' bus and a sense of cohesion has developed.

Also, volunteers enjoy the appreciation they receive for their work, as he adds:

There is a lot of gratitude from the citizens and the mayor towards the organisers and drivers. In a small town, people often need this kind of public recognition for their commitment to a social cause.

Evidence from Baden-Württemberg shows that, among transportation administrations and authorities, the motivation to collaborate with and support citizens' bus associations is limited. One of the reasons is that they do not see a need for additional transport services because conventional public transport is extensive. However, as outlined, riders of citizens' buses often – implicitly or explicitly – travel for social motivations, sometimes the social motivation is even more dominant. Citizens' bus associations, hence, often complain that local and regional public transport administrations misconceive the nature of citizens' bus services.

To close this gap between public authorities and volunteer initiatives, Baden-Württemberg is one of the few states in Germany that actively supports the development of community-based mobility solutions such as citizens' buses. In order to channel the efforts of the state of Baden-Württemberg, the "Competence Centre for New Forms of Public Transport" (Kompetenzzentrum neuer ÖPNV) at the Nahverkehrsgesellschaft (Local Public Transport Agency) Baden-Württemberg (NVBW) is exploring new approaches to mobility especially in rural areas and supports implementation with counselling and additional funding.

Conclusion: beyond basic travel needs

The results from the field study with the elderly and refugees in the region of Esslingen highlight two major observations: first, even in an economically dynamic and well-equipped region, concrete and severe mobility problems may arise for members not part of the majority working population; second, the study revealed the need to recognise the social dimension of mobility when analysing mobility poverty. This has both conceptual and practical implications. The implications are conceptual because drawing attention to the social significance of mobility offers a rich pathway to understanding the phenomenon of mobility poverty in its respective context, but also recognises that mobility disadvantage is structural and systemic. However, these implications are also practical: recognising the importance of mobility for social purposes addresses the challenges and desires of a much larger part of the population.

Transport administrations and authorities do not yet give enough consideration to these social aspects of travel and the wider benefits for the well-being of socially vulnerable persons; and they do not consider these aspects as part of their mandate. However, growing state support for citizens' buses in Germany is an indicator that there is a growing awareness of the many dimensions of mobility.

Notes

- 1 Please see the [introduction](#) to this volume regarding the contextualisation and methodology of this research.

- 2 The population density in the case study region ranges from 70/km² in rural areas to 1966/km² in the cities (Statistisches Landesamt Baden-Württemberg 2018f).
- 3 Motorisation rates range from 609 vehicles per 1000 inhabitants (in Filderstadt in the vicinity of Stuttgart) to more than 850 in rural municipalities in the region (Statistisches Landesamt Baden-Württemberg 2019).
- 4 This differentiation does not ignore the fact that the basic needs and social needs of elderly people are often connected. As Hjorthol (2013, 1203–1206) writes, meeting the more basic needs like shopping receives wider significance for an elderly person's well-being, for example due to the personal assurance of being independent and in control of one's life, the possibility to meet friends, or just the positive feeling of being out of the house, "on the road" or among people.
- 5 Those older people who are materially deprived in the case study region are largely invisible, both to the general public and this research project. On the one hand, this is an almost inevitable consequence of the research approach itself. In order to gain access to individual users, these individuals were approached via associations that network among and support elderly people. Hence, only those who are well networked, are interested in research questions or are actively engaged in voluntary community work participated in the focus group sessions. These individuals are, at the same time, the younger elderly and the ones who are stable financially and health wise. Furthermore, the overall picture of the high quality of life and comparatively few challenges is reproduced by the research participants themselves who mostly report from their own experiences.

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