Replacing trains with coaches: implications for social inclusion in rural New South Wales

Ian Gray

Charles Sturt University

Merrilyn Crichton

Charles Sturt University

Abstract

With the future of New South Wales (NSW) regional train services under question, concern has been expressed that replacement of trains with coaches will diminish levels of mobility and raise social exclusion for some people. Provision has been made on coaches for people considered to be disabled, but without recognition of the needs of people who do not fit either able or disabled categorisation. All train services offer better accessibility and therefore mobility to all people. The issue of regional train service cessation and replacement raises questions regarding the reliability of existing Australian studies about train service replacement, the degree to which health and illness are affected, as well as the potential for the exacerbation of existing social exclusion. An examination of the literature and some historical investigation undertaken by the authors highlights these limitations amid the ableism/disablism dualism in existing research and rural transport policy. The paper further suggests that the absence of Australian evidence of mobility loss should not be taken to indicate the reality of regional mobility and social inclusion. Instead the paper argues that further independent mobility loss and social exclusion may occur if coaches are further substituted for regional train services.

Keywords: Public transport, disability, rural Australia, regional Australia, social

inclusion, social policy, transport history

Introduction

The modes of transport available to people for personal travel influence their capacity to travel, and thereby affect their capacity to retain important aspects of their social interaction. The most obvious effect is by way of cost when travel is expensive, physically demanding or involves the purchase of an expensive vehicle. In these circumstances, people may not be able to travel the long distances to specialist medical services available in Australia's major cities or to their families. Rural Australia has a relatively sparse pattern of settlement and there is a well-documented long-term trend toward migration to metropolitan cities as a result of drought and other financial and lifestyle. Research shows that some people choose not to travel or just not think of doing so as it is outside their experience (Ahern & Hine, 2012; Stanley, Hensher, Stanley, Currie, Greene, & Vella-Brodrick, 2011). The modes of transport provided by governments in Australia are generally in the form of either buses/coaches or trains, or a combination of them. Buses, coaches and trains present different levels of accessibility and cost. Public transport provided by governments, by way of subsidy to private operators or direct government operation in Australia in the 21st Century, generally offers higher levels of accessibility and lower cost with concession fares, than commercial services. However, the modes of travel offered by public transport services have changed extensively in rural areas, and have significant implications for social inclusion.

Before explaining the changes in transport provision for rural Australia, it is useful to explain the context of rural New South Wales. The State's population is concentrated in the Sydney metropolitan area and the coastal cities, all of which are growing. Apart from Wagga Wagga, which has a population of 62 000, the towns west of the major population growth area on the cost and 100km inland are relatively small and many suffer population decline. Those in the far west are very small. Moreover, the distances between towns can be very long, representing a full day's travel.

The population of regional NSW is ageing rapidly and experiencing higher rates of illness, putting strain on medical services (Alston & Kent, 2004). It has been

argued that rural Australia has, as a result of these changes, developed a "rural peasantry" and has "among the most disadvantaged groups in Australian society" (Higgins, 1998, p.10). Further, it has been established that people with disabilities have greater levels of disadvantage in rural Australia than those without disabilities (McPhedran, 2010). It is in this contemporary context that examining the historical trends of managing public transport across such a vast geographical expanse and in terms of such a diversity of difficulties that this paper seeks to highlight and unpack what is known about the effects of policy change; in this case train substitution.

Beginning in the early 1970s, and accelerating in the early 1980s, many of the passenger trains which served the smaller towns of rural New South Wales were discontinued. These services had been operated by the New South Wales Government. Most of the trains were replaced by coach services over time. Public concern was expressed about the changes through this period, and some case study research on the social impacts was published. More extensive social research on change from train to bus services had been conducted earlier in the United Kingdom, where public reaction had been vocal and negative. All of the Australian research focused on the effects which the changes had on people's ongoing travel choices and, by implication, social inclusion. However, it is also important to examine how people consider options which might appear to others as open, when for some travellers, the change effectively makes a decision for them. That may be a decision not to travel.

The most extensive Australian work found positive effects following the commencement of coach services. From survey evidence, it concluded that rural people had responded well to the introduction of modern coaches and had benefited from their introduction. Comparable international evidence of service level deterioration and people not using replacement bus services is available. To the extent that train services make a distinctive contribution to rural mobility and social inclusion, the value of trains may have been underestimated and significant social impacts ignored. It would be unfortunate if any future debate about modes of rural public transport were to be informed by the existing Australian research without an eye to its limitations.

The New South Wales Government has been developing a 'Transport Master Plan' and in the process, has hinted at further questioning of the future of many of the remaining rural train services due to the age of the trains. At the same time, a

State Parliamentary committee is investigating New South Wales TrainLink (formerly CountryLink), the State's rural train and coach service. Infrastructure New South Wales, a statutory authority advising the New South Wales Government, has stated that the 'XPT' trains used in New South Wales will have to be replaced and consideration should be given to replacing them with coaches (Infrastructure NSW, 2012, p.136). In Canada, the Government of Ontario has ceased operation of a train service, the Ontario Northlander, which is broadly comparable to some train services in New South Wales. At the same time, the Community Rail Partnerships in the United Kingdom are reviving some local rural train services. The future of rural trains appears to be in flux locally and globally.

Our approach includes a review of the literature on rural social inclusion/exclusion and mobility from the range of perspectives available, early research on change from train to bus/coach services as it occurred in Australia and overseas, and some relatively recent research findings. We summarise the process of change as it occurred over about 40 years in New South Wales. We then apply additional information about former train services to earlier research in order to help explain why its findings are not what might be expected in the light of overseas research and some of the implications of research done in Australia.

Conceptualising social inclusion/exclusion in the rural transport context

Research has established a relationship between mobility and social inclusion/exclusion (Cass, Shove, & Urry, 2005; Delbosc and Currie, 2011b, c; Kenyon, Lyons, & Rafferty, 2002; Lucas, 2012; Rose, Witten, & McCreanor, 2009). International research shows the effect of social exclusion from public transport on people with disabilities and the elderly. For people with learning disabilities and mental illnesses, public transport can be almost as complicated. In one project, people with disabilities self-excluded after a young woman with a learning disability had stones thrown at her while she walked home from her day service. Not surprisingly, people with learning disabilities no longer walk or use public transport in this town, and more dramatically only go to cafes known to be welcoming and inclusive, severely limiting their contact with the general public but making them feel safe and valued in their own circle (Hall, 2005, p. 109). In another study, timetabling of buses meant that older men and women could not depend on public transport to get to doctors' appointments. Instead, these people used expensive taxis and relied

on friends, family and neighbours (Ahern & Hine, 2012, p. 31). In regional Australia, taxi services are rarely available or available in limited numbers and cost prohibits their use. Despite government subsidies for people who are in their senior years or people with disabilities, the distances between towns make taxi and bus subsidies highly costly enterprises. While many people can access neighbours', friends' and families' cars, many (as we note below) find the cost of running and maintaining cars expensive. Again the high cost of fuel (much higher in regional areas) is another limiting factor for regional people living on low wages or disability pensions. What might appear to be subtle and possibly unrelated issues become problematic and cumulative.

Transport is critical to anyone who wishes to access health or social services (Iezzoni, Killeen & O'Day, 2006; Sheppard, 2005), and elderly and disabled people are likely to have greater need for health services than others. These issues are raised as significant concerns for policy in Engels and Liu (2013). All rural longer-distance travel is more likely to be for social and medical purposes than travel to work. Travel is more directly related to the maintenance of social capital, lack of which can be related to social exclusion (Stanley et al., 2011). Long journeys are increasingly required for visits to family who have left rural towns and farming areas, and to specialist medical services in the larger and growing towns. It is not surprising then that older people and people with disability experience social exclusion and lowered social capital. With respect to what may be shorter journeys, where social outings were concerned, older people simply did not attend if public transport was not available. This was especially found amongst men who experience community buses as overly feminised (trips are full of women going shopping or to service clubs for example). Men were much more interested in going to pubs and football matches, but preferred to stay home if the transport options did not suit (Ahern & Hine, 2012, p. 32). Health trips and social outings are not, however, the greatest transport burden for older people, as most trips are for grocery shopping. Where these journeys are concerned, if a bus is unavailable, people are more likely to accept help from family, friends and neighbours (Ahern & Hine 2012, p. 30). If a long distance is involved, this may not be possible.

Due to the complexity of attributing causation to any particular variables, the literature on mobility tends to be shy of claiming that immobility is a direct cause of social exclusion. However, clear association has been found, such as in Banister

and Bowling (2004). Studies have linked socio-economic poverty with transport poverty (Kenyon et al., 2002, p. 217). Stanley et al. (2011) use Australian data to confirm an association between mobility and social exclusion. Walker's (2007) study of urban and rural-dwelling persons with epilepsy found that the issue of transport was of greater concern to people in rural areas. This was directly linked to the loss of jobs, inability to undertake higher education, and the sense of identity attached to being independent. Gray, Shaw and Farrington (2006) linked community transport to social capital and social exclusion. Recent Australian research, including Rosier and McDonald (2011), and Delbosc and Currie (2011c), indicates the significance of transport and access to services for the well-being of rural people. The issues differ between urban and rural situations in that the range of services available locally may be smaller in rural towns, and as mentioned above, rural out-migration can separate family members. Delbosc and Currie (2011c) find a stronger association between transport disadvantage and well-being in regional than in urban situations. People who suffer transport disadvantage in regional areas are likely to suffer a greater impact on their well-being than transport-disadvantaged people in urban areas. The greater impact of transport disadvantage in regional locations has not been explained in the literature, but it is reasonable to propose that it is related to a combination of local service decline, demographic change, particularly population ageing, and a need for longer trips. Harbutt (2007) points out that trips become shorter post-retirement. However this is based on use of local services, which are likely to be diminishing in smaller settlements, and does not account for the need to travel to visit family and friends who are likely to have moved away.

Research has been conducted in Australia relating rural transport problems to social exclusion broadly (such as Rosier and McDonald, 2011; Delbosc and Currie, 2011b) and in relation to specific issues. Currie and Allen (2007), focusing on disability, warn against assuming that if disabled people do not travel, there is no demand among them for travel. To illustrate one important element in relation to the change from train to coach: it is not hard to imagine how difficult it would be for a disabled or mobility-impaired person to climb unassisted aboard a coach of the type used for rural services (these have high steps and a winding stair way), in comparison with the accessibility of a train from a raised platform or an urban low-floor bus[i]. People who might find coach travel difficult would not necessarily be seen as either disabled or even mobility-impaired. For many people, change in public

transport can present a serious problem. Transport Related Social Exclusion (TRSE) (Cass et al., 2005; Rose et al., 2009), where the inability to engage in 'normal' activities is the result of ineffective and/or inaccessible transport options, further isolates already vulnerable people (Mandershcheid, 2009).

Children can be affected as well as adults. With respect to train services, evidence collected at the Riverina Archives in Wagga Wagga indicates that children with disabilities were largely dependent on the train system around the New South Wales Riverina to get to school in the 1960s and 1970s. The Kurrajong School for the Retarded (the only school for these children in the area; now known as Kurrajong-Waratah Industries) ran a small bus service, and often also used teachers' own cars to meet children at the Wagga Wagga railway station in the mornings and to take them back to the train station after classes. In the 1960s, a letter to the school from a mother thanked the teachers for their work with her daughter, but apologised that she would only be able to attend the school one day per week because of the insufficient availability of trains from their small town to and from Wagga Wagga[ii]. As is evident in Walker's (2007) study, some of these issues have not been resolved. For children with disabilities, taxi services are subsidised in order for them to attend schools (as they are also for adults attending day services), but for adults who have no intellectual disability, but are physically impaired, there is a dependence on public transport and/or the kindness of friends and neighbours, or people pay high rates for taxi services. Any loss of accessibility to public transport in rural areas can effectively re-disable people, making them dependent on other people, as well as making training, schooling, higher education and jobs difficult to negotiate or inaccessible entirely.

All of these factors prompt consideration of the modes of travel and the types of vehicle available. Church et al. (as cited in Delbosc & Curry 2011a, p. 556) propose a seven point framework to describe how transport excludes. Of those seven, the first two are particularly relevant to regional situations and call for special consideration with respect to longer distance journeys:

- Physical exclusion: the physical nature of the transport system may create physical and psychological barriers to access by people with impaired mobility, hearing or sight.

- Geographical isolation: dispersed locations may limit the ability to carry out activities in the immediate area.

The literature on transport and social inclusion/exclusion acknowledges that different modes suit different purposes, but generally does not differentiate between modes in terms of relevance to social inclusion/exclusion. For example, Delbosc and Currie (2011a) conclude that regional public transport services should be carefully targeted, mentioning local and long-distance buses, but they do not consider implications of vehicle types in any more depth. The literature generally does not differentiate between long distance coaches and buses.

The terms social inclusion and exclusion form a dualism which can hide the complexity and subtlety of conditions which affect travellers. Social inclusion in the literature around mobility has been largely ignored in favour of the notion of social exclusion. This becomes apparent in the application of policy. Clapton (2009) argues that the social inclusion/exclusion dualism is both helpful and problematic. On the one hand, social exclusion is a discourse which allows for an activism that breaks down boundaries between 'able' and 'disabled' people, on the other, it promotes an unreasonable suggestion that people with intellectual disabilities in particular and other disabilities more generally, are different from one another and other people. Social inclusion however, promotes the idea that people with disabilities can be "contained, embraced or placed in an aggregate... planned intentionally, politically and strategically" (Clapton, 2009, p. 1). The concept of inclusion illuminates the negativity in the inclusion/exclusion dualism. Policy has aimed at reducing exclusion, but to do so it has identified a group of people who are seen as different and need to be accommodated differently. The elements of difference become very important as they are reified and become objects of policy. Transport which is inherently inclusive, offers mobility to everybody equally, does not confront the dualism.

The Ableist discourse (Kumari Campbell, 2009) also presents this dualism. It is worth a note here, as its application to rural public transport may have led to the development of services for 'the disabled' while neglecting those deemed to be 'able' yet suffering exclusion. Ableism is another dualist philosophy in which Disablism ('a set of assumptions (conscious or unconscious) and practices that promote the differential or unequal treatment of people because of actual or presumed disabilities') and Ableism ("...the existence of a hitherto unacknowledged imagined

shared community of able-bodied/minded people held together by a common ableist homosocial world view that asserts the preferability and compulsoriness of the norms of ableism... [resulting] in compulsive passing, wherein there is a failure to ask about difference, to imagine human be-ingness differently" (Kumari-Campell, 2009, p.4)) are two parts of the same equation. The upshot of both social inclusion/exclusion and ableism/disableism is the same: people with disabilities are identified and treated as 'other' and any attempt to replace exclusiveness with inclusiveness is likely to focus attention on whichever elements of disability are obvious and seen as amenable to change. This may distract attention from people who are not as mobile or otherwise 'able' as others. While contentious, it seems to the authors that the underlying ableist discourse is framing transport policy and inadvertently excluding rural and regional people in NSW from necessary medical services and what many of us consider ordinary life.

Social inclusion occurs when people with any kind of mobility impairment are embraced by the community in a way that leaves people with a sense of belonging and value. Social exclusion will be used to describe events and feelings where people with disabilities are not valued, and whose needs are not met. The latter can occur when disability is identified and specified in a form which is amenable to relatively simple and specific forms of accommodation. Pursuit of specific accommodation can result in missing more subtle forms of disability which are not so apparent. By limiting the availability of train services, transport services thus exclude people who have impairment of their physical mobility as well as those who are impaired by differences in their brain function (for example people with autism or spacial awareness difficulties).

Any change which reduces the accessibility of public transport is likely to increase exclusion, especially with respect to relatively long journeys. One such change is the replacement of inherently more accessible trains, which have no stairs to climb, with coaches which are only accessible by the use of stairs, or in the case of modified coaches, lifts for people who use wheelchairs. This is an instance of the ableism/disableism dualism in practice: people who use wheelchairs are deemed disabled and provided for while those who may be discouraged by stairs are not. Trains also provide more easily accessible toilets and many have a food and beverage service on board. Loss of these can also discourage travel. Highlighting the significance of train services, the Physical Disability Council of New South

Wales, in its submission to the New South Wales parliamentary Inquiry into Inter-Regional Public Transport services (CountryLink, now NSW Trains) made after conducting a survey of CountryLink users, stated as its first recommendation that there should be 'no further replacement of CountryLink trains with coaches' (Physical Disability Council of New South Wales, 2012, p. 2).

The significance of the availability of modes can be illuminated by research on the effects of the replacement of a more inclusive mode, trains with another, less inclusive, mode: coaches. Arguably, to the extent that their travel opportunities have been limited, the shift toward coaches has led to the isolation of some of Australia's most vulnerable groups. The affected people may be relatively few in number but the effects on their lifestyles and well-being can be profound.

The issue of regional train service cessation and replacement raises several questions for research.

- In the light of international research, how reliable do the existing Australian studies appear to be and what potential do they have for predicting the effects of future train substitution on social inclusion?

- How might any unreliability in existing studies be explained?

The process of change in public transportation from trains to coaches in rural New South Wales

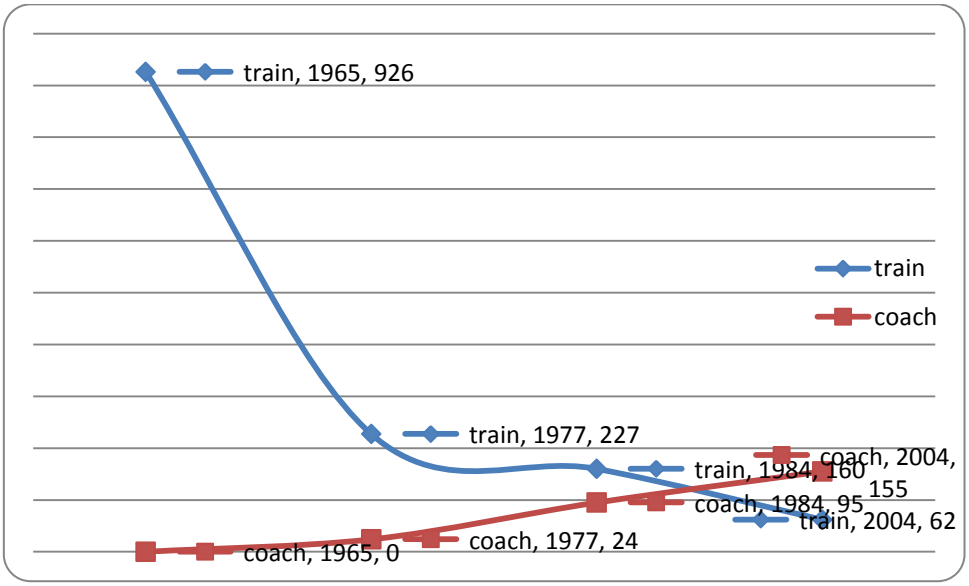
With the number of stations close to its peak, the 1965 public Country Timetable lists 926 stations outside the Sydney-Newcastle-Wollongong area. By 1977, 699 stations had been closed. Some train services had been replaced by coaches, but only in the north-west of the state where 26 coach stops were available. 227 places were still served by train but 673 stopping places had lost their service altogether.

Withdrawal of branch line trains and replacement with coaches continued in the early 1980s. The process was associated with the introduction of modern, faster, express passenger trains ('XPTs') from 1982 and consequent timetable changes. The total number of places served grew by two during this period, to 255 in 1984, including a small number of places not previously served at all. However the number of train stopping places continued its decline, to 160. The present pattern of decline was largely established by 1984 (Figure 1).

By 2004, such was the proliferation of coach services that the number of places served by a government coach service was more than twice the number served by train.

- Sixty-two places were served by train and 155 served by coach only.
- Forty of those served by coach only had not previously been served by train.
- There were 115 places where the train service had been replaced by government coaches.
- Nearly twice as many places had seen their train service replaced by coaches as had retained a train service.

The 2004 pattern remains largely unchanged in 2013.



Source: public timetables

Figure 1. Numbers of train and coach stops, 1965 to 2004.

Although only not related to train replacement with buses, it is worth noting that the frequency of train services has also declined by, generally, one service per day. Places currently served by one train each day typically had one train by day and one by night. Some places on interstate lines had three or four services but now

have two (day and night) and closer to Sydney, where there were four services, there are now three. Change in branch line services has been more complex, with some towns losing all service for a period after the trains ceased, but most now have a similar frequency of coach service to the trains, connecting with a main line train[iii].

This analysis suffers the limitation that it refers only to places, not populations. Many of the stopping places eliminated would, by 2004, have had diminished populations. However, some areas with relatively large and growing populations had continued to lose train services, though the North Coast gained coach services in many places where no railway had been built (Gray, 2004). Other than on the South Coast, where a railway had not been built beyond Bomaderry (Nowra), the far North Coast where train services were replaced by coaches in 2004, and Cessnock in the Hunter Valley, all the regional local government areas with populations over 20 000 people still have train services in 2013. Among the 21 local government areas with populations between 10 000 and 20 000 people, 10 have lost local or nearby train services and 11 still have them in 2013. All have gained and retained coach services.

The rationale behind train service closure has overwhelmingly been economic: an apparent necessity to reduce costs of public transport provision. The Public Transport Commission formed a 'rationalisation committee', which, by the end of 1973, had decided to recommend that all 'hopelessly unprofitable' branch line train services be discontinued 'without provision of alternatives', at least in the first instance, with improved main line trains to connect with coaches to 'acceptable locations' at a later stage (Gunn, 1989, p. 481). Stiles (1979) and Parolin (1996) report that consideration had only been given to the financial state of railway operations. There had certainly been no assessment of social impacts at any stage of the change process. The process of change has often been controversial but overall there appears to have been remarkably little action taken against the replacement of train services with coaches or even against the absence of replacement services when trains ceased to run. Overall, the change appears to have been an administrative and political success; reversals have been rare.

Research on the effects of change from train to coach and bus services

The effect on people where replacement coaches were offered is not so clear. The earliest research on train service withdrawal was conducted by Stiles (1979). Stiles

identifies and discusses negative effects on local business and employment. The very small communities along railway lines suffer where no road services are provided. Stiles concludes that the coach services which commenced in the 1970s were “regarded as a vast improvement by the majority of people...” (Stiles, 1979, p. 10). However, she also acknowledges that there are equity issues which are not being addressed including the need for relocation by young people in particular where public transport and private transport are not available.

The replacement of train services by coaches in rural New South Wales was examined in more detail during the 1990s, about ten years after most of the changes to be made had been made. The work of Raimond and Parolin (1992) supports Stiles’ (1979) conclusions in a case study conducted in northern New South Wales, focusing on the approximately 100 kilometre branch line connecting the small towns of Barraba and Manilla to the regional city of Tamworth. Surveys were conducted among public transport users, households and businesses after the changes had been implemented. Survey analysis shows that the substitution of coach services for trains is seen as positive, despite lower frequencies of service.

Parolin (1996) reports findings from the same data, but focuses on levels of acceptance of the coach services and consequent change in travel patterns. The data are drawn from a random household sample used to “identify respondents who either had previously used rail services and have since used CountryLink or have used CountryLink in some capacity” (Parolin, 1996, p. 51). This specification of the data collection procedure is a little ambiguous, but the sample appears to be restricted to people who use the coach services and so would not encompass people who might have previously used train services but did not use the replacement CountryLink coaches at all. In the light of overseas studies to be discussed below, this may be a significant omission. Respondents were interviewed in depth about previous and current travel activity. These data are supplemented with information collected in an on-board survey of coach passengers. Parolin finds that the new services “have been overwhelmingly accepted” (1996, p. 57) even to the extent that they have attracted significant numbers of motor car users. He argues for the continuing importance of the services and suggests that there may be latent demand for them. However, the survey sample used for Parolin’s (1996) findings also suggests that many people who used trains were not using the replacement coaches, at least not as often as they used the trains, even though his case study

coach route followed the previous train route closely. Parolin (1996, p. 57) states: “Further detailed analysis has indicated that only 50 percent of previous train travel is now undertaken on the new services; the remainder has been transferred to the car (used primarily as passengers)”. There is also an implication that it were people who, for whatever reason, could not or did not drive a car themselves who did not change from train to coach travel. As they could or did not drive and did not use the coach service, this suggests that some people may have lost a degree of independence in their mobility.

Parolin (1996, p. 57) does not find evidence to support “the more adverse findings reported in some overseas studies”. He does, however, mention two British studies (Moseley et al. 1976 and Oxley 1982) reporting the effects of public transport (including bus service) withdrawal. These studies confirm loss of mobility for some people. One of those studies, Oxley (1982), is said by Parolin to have found evidence that as many as 26 percent of trips were no longer being made. Most of the travel which had ceased was for social or shopping purposes. Parolin (1996, p. 50) finds these studies to have revealed “a minority ... not able to cope and experiencing difficulties in maintaining travel activity requirements”. His research does not confirm the absence of such a minority in his case study area.

Among the other overseas research referred to by Parolin (1996) is a study by Hillman and Whalley (1980). It is the most relevant overseas study to our work, as it focuses on the replacement of train services with buses in rural areas of the United Kingdom and is also the most comprehensive work on the topic. The Hillman and Whalley (1980) research investigated the social impacts of the very significant number of train service closures in the United Kingdom from 1963. Hillman and Whalley (1980, p. 28) find that fewer than three in ten former train users made no change in their travel activity after train services ceased, while “one in twelve reported total curtailment of their previous rail-based activity”. Further, the range of destinations visited had frequently been reduced. Car travel, it seems, was a more popular substitute than the replacement bus services. Hillman and Whalley (1980) report that just under half of the former train users chose to travel by the replacement bus services. This is a remarkably similar figure to that of Parolin (1996), but 13 percent of the Hillman and Whalley (1980) train users had also used buses before train service closures. They report that “the transfer to bus use is much lower than would be expected had the bus service been a truly adequate alternative to the rail

service" (Hillman & Whalley, 1980, p. 67). More than half of the survey respondents said that they had problems with bus travel which they had not suffered with trains. The problems indicated include timetabling issues but also discomfort. Ten percent or more, depending on destination, gave "dislike of bus travel" as a reason for not using the replacement buses (Hillman & Whalley, 1980, p. 83). Since the closures, Hillman and Whalley find use of the replacement buses to be declining. It is interesting to note that many rural train services in the United Kingdom have been maintained and one is currently being reinstated after closure in the 1960s (see http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-south-scotland-29505220).

Taylor (2006) conducted a survey of people in rural areas of Poland where passenger train services have been withdrawn. Where buses are provided, the service offered is poor. A substantial proportion of Taylor's (2006) survey respondents (28 percent) report difficulty travelling to work after train services ceased, the rate of car ownership being relatively low in rural Poland, with a consequent rise in unemployment. Thirty percent of respondents report some difficulty with shopping after train service closures. Access to health services is said to have become difficult most frequently, by 55 percent of respondents (this is consistent with studies reported earlier of the choice by people with disabilities and older people not to attend appointments due to transport exclusion). In tune with Parolin's (1996) finding of increased dependency, Taylor (2006) notes that people increasingly use transport assistance provided by friends, family and neighbours.

The literature contains further support for scepticism about the general application of existing Australian research on train substitution. There are indications that urban bus travel is generally less popular than train travel. Currie (2005, p. 17) refers to "mode specific factors" arising from "intangible soft" issues such as ride quality, ease of understanding of how to use the system and quality of stations versus bus stops. These factors may also apply in a regional context, further suggesting a discrepancy between Parolin's (1996) conclusions and some people's experience of the change. With respect to New South Wales, Gray (2004) reports that, among 303 respondents to a telephone survey conducted in and around two regional cities, 51.8 percent agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: 'I usually enjoy long train trips'. Fewer than half that proportion, 23.1 percent, agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: 'I usually enjoy long coach trips' (Gray, 2004, Appendices p. 32). From more recent European research, Scherer, Dziekan and

Ahrend (2011) report that 65 percent of their regional survey respondents indicate a preference for a train over an equivalent bus service.

More seriously, the possibility that many people have lost independent mobility has not been effectively rejected in the Australian context. Parolin's (1996) sample is limited by reliance on respondents who used the replacement coaches, at least to some degree. The sample does not appear to contain respondents who may have ceased using public transport, or ceased travelling altogether, as were revealed in the Hillman and Whalley (1980) study. There remains a possibility that a significant but hidden loss of travel opportunity occurred among some elderly people and people with disabilities.

The parallels between the findings of Parolin (1996) and Hillman and Whalley (1980) suggest that attention should be given to the train travellers who stop travelling. In New South Wales, Gray (2004) used focus group data to explore the situation of people, mostly elderly or disabled, who would be likely to cease travel with the termination of a train service. The replacement of train services with coaches may have invisibly increased isolation due to the inaccessibility of coaches to people who have difficulty climbing steps, use wheelchairs or have other spatial awareness problems. Accessibility is known to be a problem for elderly people using buses (Economic Research Centre, 2000). There are also issues about accessibility of toilets and access to food which may affect mobility. Gray (2004) also points out that once they have stopped travelling, such people become invisible to transport policy makers. This resonates with the work of Hillman and Whalley (1982, p. 35) whose discussions with officials revealed that they were unaware of the extent of effects on travel patterns. There is no indication of the total loss of mobility due to lack of access to motor car transport in Parolin's (1996) research. However, as Nutley (2003) shows, it should not be assumed that car ownership is high in rural areas and that consequently car travel can readily replace public transport. Parolin's (1996) study did not investigate these problems.

For some people, loss of train travel may mean loss of mobility and loss of independence, as well as increased isolation from medical services and family. Australian research shows clearly that there is outward migration from rural and regional areas due to economic decline, drought and cultural lifestyle change which is increasing isolation from friends, family and indirectly, services. (Andrews, 1999; Dufty-Jones & Connell, 2014). There are clear indications that these are real

situations; some people lost opportunities for travel when train services were closed, and they did not regain those opportunities when trains were replaced by coaches. They may have found other means of travel; most likely it seems as passengers in private cars, thereby losing some independence. Community Transport services, including local bus and taxi services to help people travel to, for example, medical appointments, were praised in Gray's (2004) focus groups, but were not seen as a substitutes due to eligibility rules, costs, having 'closed books' (not accepting more clients), reliance on volunteers and being a 'band aid'. With a reasonable likelihood that regional coach travel is less popular than train travel, and that some people may have lost some of their independent mobility as a result of the replacement of trains with coaches, Parolin's (1996) conclusion that the changes were accepted appears narrowly-based.

Explaining the acceptance of the replacement coaches in New South Wales

We should still account for the popularity of the coach services as indicated by Parolin (1996) and Stiles (1979) in the light of the relative unpopularity of coaches indicated in the literature and the likely problems which the change caused for some people. In order to do so, let us consider the timetables and service standards with regard to Parolin's (1996) Barraba line case. In 1974 the train from the end of the branch line to the junction with main line services in a regional city and service centre (Tamworth) took two hours and 55 minutes. In 1987 the replacement coach took one hour and 12 minutes. The present coach service takes one hour and 18 minutes[iv]. The train service in the 1970s was regularly provided by a 'rail motor', number CHP 38. This vehicle was built in 1934 (Dorrigo Railway Museum, 2011). The last passenger train service on the Barraba line was provided by rail motor HPC 403 (Pickard, n.d.) built in 1938 (Dorrigo Railway Museum, 2011). Neither of these vehicles was air conditioned. Their seating was of the padded, though relatively uncomfortable, bench type[v]. The train service which the coaches replaced was slow and uncomfortable.

Blackwell (2000) describes a journey from Tamworth to Barraba in rail motor CHP 38 during 1976.He reports a journey with unexplained stops, and delays due to a faulty train motor. This may have been relatively normal in the late 1970s. An internal State Rail Authority report from 1978 says that the majority of carriages used on country express trains were 30 years old and others were up to 90 years old.

Only one train service had carriages younger than 10 years (State Rail Authority, 1978). Gunn (1989) says that in 1973, the Minister for Transport reported to parliament that the oldest passenger carriages had been built in 1888. The modern XPT trains which replaced the old vehicles offered much more comfortable and predictable journeys. This would no doubt have contributed to the popularity of the combined XPT and coach services for people using them to reach former branch line train stops.

It appears that, for people on the Barraba line studied by Parolin (1996) who used the coaches, the change from the rail motor service to a modern coach service would have offered a greatly improved standard of reliability and comfort, and shorter journey times. Hillman and Whalley (1980) briefly discuss the relative comfort of branch line trains and replacement buses. In the United Kingdom where journey times are generally shorter, rural buses are more accessible having lower floors than the long-distance coaches used in New South Wales. The latter have luggage bays under the passenger seating. Hillman and Whalley (1980) note that the buses were generally younger than the trains they replaced, and indicate their own prior expectation that the modernity of buses would make them more popular than their research shows buses to be. However, there is no indication in Hillman and Whalley (1980) of problems like those suffered by the Barraba rail motor – very slow services in very old trains suffering recurring breakdowns. Hillman and Whalley (1980, p. 112) refer only to “minimal standards of decoration” and reduced levels of maintenance. Where Parolin (1996) finds a relatively popular coach service, Hillman and Whalley (1980) find relatively unpopular bus services. But while the Hillman and Whalley (1980) buses, and those described by Taylor (2006) in Poland, replaced an apparently relatively popular train service, it is hard to imagine that the Barraba line train service could be said to have been popular even if it were well patronised. This may help to explain the difference in findings between Stiles (1979) and Parolin (1996) and the earlier research Parolin cites.

Conclusion

The Australian research has not confirmed that the more negative findings of overseas studies are inapplicable to the changes made in New South Wales. This is primarily because we have no information on the extent to which the cessation of

travel, which we know to be a problem, has occurred. We can confirm that any generalised conclusion that the process of change in New South Wales was benign should not be drawn. We have overseas evidence that many people may stop travelling even where replacement bus services are provided. Parolin's (1996) finding that people who used train services but did not use the replacement coaches, as many as half of the former train travellers, travelled by car as passengers only, affirms this point in the Australian context. Further research is needed to analyse the process of change which people encounter when a train service ceases in order to obtain a comprehensive view of the effects of change on people in a range of circumstances. Such research should collect data from people whose journeys and modes of travel have changed, but importantly also from people who may have ceased to, or curtailed their travel.

This questioning of previous research prompts further consideration of the more structural factors behind the process of change and its relation to social inclusion/exclusion. These conditions cannot be made apparent by analysis of data collected from people who travel. Doings so risks excluding people who stop travelling, either because no replacement coach service is offered, or because coach travel is either problematic for them or simply breaks a habitual practice with which they were familiar and comfortable. This point returns to the ableism/disableism discourse in its relation to social inclusion/exclusion. Policy driven by this dualism, and in the absence of a clearly reliable source of evidence about impacts of train substitution, risks ignoring the effects which change can have. While the changes like wheelchair accessibility made to coach services since their introduction have, when considered in terms of simple practicality, potentially enabled some people with disabilities to use coaches, the reality may be that many people have been effectively and subsequently discouraged by the initial change. Moreover, many people may remain discouraged because the coaches do not offer easy access or suitable services for people who need easy access to vehicles, plus suitable catering and toilet facilities. In this way the focus on specific disability has led to a potentially significant point of social exclusion. Developments like Information and Communcation Technology (ICT) may increase the useability of both coaches and trains, but such change is unrelated to the basic physical structures of the vehicles involved.

Returning to the specific research questions above:

- In the light of international research, how reliable do the existing Australian studies appear to be and what potential do they have for predicting the effects of future train substitution on social inclusion?

It would appear unwise to base any prediction on the social impacts of the replacement of the present train services with coaches solely on the basis of the 1990s research. The possibility than many people simply stop travelling when train services cease, has not been addressed directly.

- How might any potential unreliability be explained?

The failure of previous studies to acknowledge the extent of the change in reliability and comfort levels, when modern coaches replaced outdated trains, remains a shortcoming. It should not be concluded that modern coaches will be accepted by everyone when compared to the standard of amenity offered by modern trains.

These findings are particularly important for assessment of policy for rural public transport provision, particularly for decision-making regarding any future replacement of train services. We have evidence of a hidden population which does suffer from train substitution, including ceasing to travel altogether or at least becoming dependent on others to drive them in private vehicles. The danger in assuming that because people do not travel there is no demand among them to travel, as suggested by Currie and Allen (2007), is particularly pertinent. It should also be recognised that those people would disappear from the policy gaze once they cease to use public transport, or public transport is no longer available to them. Future research should seek to document the experiences of people who do not travel as well as those who use available services.

Analysis which places the same value on trips for people with different needs is at least potentially flawed. A train travel opportunity would surely be of greater value to a person who has no other practical means of travel other than the train. If the travel is important to the person's health and well-being, it may have even more value attached. The historical analysis and the qualitative research discussed above at least points towards a situation in which a relatively small number of people might have lost something very valuable to them. The value of the old train services may

have been much greater than the numbers of people using them would have indicated.

There would seem to be a case for a broader perspective to be taken on use of rural public transport services so that the functions they serve and the needs they fulfil are taken into account. That is, the total benefit accruing from a public transport service may be not only greater than the patronage numbers suggest, but could extend beyond the range of benefits normally attributed to public transport: benefits to people's health and other experience related to social inclusion. In policy terms, this suggests a much broader perspective than the revenue and expenditure associated with the provision of the service would provide. Such situations sometimes prompt consideration of public transport in terms of other policy objectives, like social and health priorities, such that budgetary judgements could be made with broader issues in mind.

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Footnotes

[i.] As the New South Wales government-operated coach service has grown, measures have been taken to improve accessibility. New South Wales TrainLink, which contracts coach companies to provide the services, says that, other than on one route, all its coaches are wheelchair accessible, subject to the dimensions and manoeuvrability of the wheelchair, but assistance is needed to board and bookings have to be made in advance (See http://www.nswtrainlink.info/your_journey/special_needs and websites of various contracted coach operators). However, while the needs of wheelchair-dependent people are important, the issue of accessibility and public transport use is much broader.

[ii.] This information comes from data collected from letters to the School from parents, as well as ledgers and other documents. These are available in the Riverina Archives, Wagga Wagga NSW.

[iii.] The train service between Canberra, the national capital, and Sydney is effectively also a regional service as it stops at rural towns. Its frequency has not diminished.

[iv.] Source: public timetables.

[v.] The train used on the line to Tumbarumba in the 1970s was an older rail motor than those used on the Barraba line. It was of a type which entered service in 1920s. A rail motor provided the last service, on 3 August, 1974 (Scrymgeour 1989).

Biographical notes

Ian Gray is Adjunct Associate Professor in the Institute for Land, Water and Society at Charles Sturt University in Wagga Wagga. He was previously Associate Professor in the Sociology Discipline at Charles Sturt. His research has focused on rural social and environmental issues, including transport. He is the author of Politics in Place: Social Power Relations in an Australian Country Town (CUP 1991) and A Future for

Regional Australia: Escaping Global Misfortune, (CUP 2001) the latter with Professor Geoffrey Lawrence.

Merrilyn Crichton is a lecturer in sociology at Charles Sturt University in Wagga Wagga. Her research has been about volunteering conducted by professional men and women, but more recently has focused on the experience of social and policy changes (especially water, social services and infrastructure) by marginalised groups living in rural and regional Australia.