The working poor spent a fraction of what other workers spent on commuting expenses, but those costs amounted to a significantly higher proportion of their income. The working poor who drove their own vehicle spent a higher percentage of their income on commuting than those who used public transit. The working poor used the less expensive commuting options of public transit, carpooling, biking, and walking more frequently than higher income workers.

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The working poor, those with an annual personal income less than $8,000, spent nearly 10 percent of their income on commuting expenses in 1999, more than twice the 4 percent figure for the total population. The disparity grows to five times higher when compared to the 2 percent figure for workers earning $45,000 or more per year. As income increased, workers were able to purchase more transportation services, but with a smaller percent of their income, leaving more income available for other expenses.

The working poor who drove their own vehicle spent 21 percent of their income on commuting, while those who took public transportation spent 13 percent. Both figures exceed the national medians for workers using either their own vehicle (5 percent of income) or public transit (3 percent of income). All workers spent less to commute by public transit than by driving their own vehicle. However, using either mode, lower income workers still spent less than higher income workers to commute. In fact, the working poor spent less than half of what workers earning $45,000 or more spent to commute, whether they used their own vehicle or public transit.
About 87 percent of workers earning $22,000 or more per year used their own vehicle to commute, compared to 66 percent of the working poor. A substantial number of the working poor used the less expensive options of carpooling or vanpooling (12 percent), public transit (6 percent), biking or walking (11 percent), or commuting some other way (8 percent). This pattern may indicate that commuting expenses reported by the working poor represent the minimum expense required to travel to and from work. However, the working poor, totaling more than 9 million (6.1 percent of workers) in 1999, still spent more of their income on commuting than all other income groups.

According to U.S. Government estimates, food accounts for one-third of a poverty budget, and housing that is considered affordable can cost up to 30 percent of one's annual income. In 1999, the working poor spent 10 percent of their income on commuting costs, leaving 27 percent of their income to cover expenses including: health care, child care, taxes, household supplies, personal care, nonwork-related transportation, education expenses, and saving for their future.

A full report will be published in Fall 2003, focusing on how the percent of workers' income spent on commuting varies by race, gender, age, location, household, and income definition; and will include the years 1996-1999.