



Communication and Marketing Department  
Isebe loThungelwano neNtengiso  
Kommunikasie en Bemakingsdepartement

Private Bag X3, Rondebosch 7701, South Africa  
Welgelegen House, Chapel Road Extension, Rosebank, Cape Town  
Tel: +27 (0) 21 650 5427/5428/5674 Fax: +27 (0) 21 650 5628  
[www.uct.ac.za](http://www.uct.ac.za)

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## **UCT study finds SA's transport system deepens inequality**

A comprehensive new study by researchers at the University of Cape Town (UCT) has revealed that despite significant investments in public transport, South Africa's transport system remains unjust – and its burdens fall heaviest on black communities, especially black women. The findings are published in the journal *African Transport Studies*.

Conducted by Professor Marianne Vanderschuren and Dr Tanya Lane-Visser of UCT's Centre for Transport Studies, the study is titled "Transport equity in South Africa – How much progress was made over the last two decades?"

South Africa is already the most unequal country in the world, according to the World Bank. The study was set out to assess whether the same inequality permeates the country's transport systems. Drawing on data from the South African Household Travel Surveys from 2003, 2013 and 2020, the study explored how factors like income, race and gender affect mobility, access and safety. The findings are troubling: over the past two decades, more metrics have deteriorated than improved.

The researchers found that economic inequality strongly influences transport outcomes. Those with lower incomes – predominantly black South Africans – face longer commute times, greater reliance on walking or informal public transport, and higher exposure to road dangers and crime.

Although South Africa has invested in infrastructure like bus rapid transit (BRT) systems, average commute times have increased from 37 to nearly 46 minutes since 2003. Moreover, walking now accounts for over 55% of all trips, up from 40% in 2003 – not because of environmental consciousness, but because one-third of respondents reported being unable to afford any other mode of transport.

Walking is particularly common among black communities, reflecting their economic challenges. According to the World Health Organization (2023), black South Africans earn on average 23% less than their white counterparts. This income disparity, deeply rooted in the country's history, plays out visibly in the transport sector, where black commuters not only walk more but also travel longer distances.

"The study also highlights that gender differences in travel patterns in South Africa are less pronounced than in many other countries, despite a persistent 14% gender pay gap. However, a deeper intersectional analysis shows that black women experience the worst of

both worlds: they endure the longest commute times and face heightened risks of personal insecurity during travel. Crime and gender-based violence disproportionately affect them, particularly when commuting on foot or using public transport,” said Professor Vanderschuren.

In terms of travel purposes, education and work remain the most common reasons for travel. Interestingly, black South Africans make more trips for education than work – a pattern not observed among other racial groups. “This trend likely reflects the country’s staggering unemployment rate, especially among young black adults, who represent 84% of the unemployed population. Among women, 37% of all trips in 2020 were for education, which may partly be attributed to accompanying children, although many children in South Africa walk to school alone from an early age,” said Vanderschuren.

Despite the progress made during the first Decade of Action for Road Safety, South Africa still experiences a high road fatality rate – over 20 deaths per 100 000 people, far above global averages. Pedestrians, who now account for 40% of these fatalities, are especially vulnerable. This, said Vanderschuren, underscores the urgent need for safer infrastructure and a more inclusive transport policy.

The study also points to persistent concerns over safety in public transport, particularly in minibus taxis and standard buses. While perceptions of driver behaviour have improved slightly since 2013, safety remains a key concern for many. Women, in particular, continue to report high levels of discomfort and fear due to personal security threats. Between one-quarter and one-third of South Africans still express concern about personal safety while using public transport.

“The collapse of the country’s once-affordable rail system has further limited options for the poor, pushing more people toward unsafe and inefficient modes of transport. Combined with worsening economic conditions, these setbacks have undermined the few gains that have been made in public mobility,” said Vanderschuren.

Despite visible investment in transport infrastructure, she said that transport justice in South Africa has not significantly improved since 2003. “Racial and economic disparities in travel patterns, costs and safety persist – and in many cases have worsened. The transport system still reflects the broader structural inequalities of the country, failing to deliver equitable access to mobility for all citizens,” she added.

“Of particular concern is the experience of black women, who face compounding disadvantages due to both race and gender. They are more exposed to danger, endure longer travel times, and are more likely to be walking in unsafe conditions due to financial constraints. These conditions call for urgent policy interventions that centre the needs of the most marginalised – not only to improve transport equity but also to address broader issues of social justice.”

**ENDS**

**Issued by: UCT Communication and Marketing Department**

**Ridovhona Mbulaheni**

Media Liaison and Monitoring Officer  
Communication and Marketing Department  
University of Cape Town  
Rondebosch

Tel: (021) 650 2333  
Cell: (064) 905 3807  
Email: [ridovhona.mbulaheni@uct.ac.za](mailto:ridovhona.mbulaheni@uct.ac.za)  
Website: [www.uct.ac.za](http://www.uct.ac.za)