

Worth the Trip? Effects of School Transportation in Boston and New York

Parag Pathak (Massachusetts Institute of Technology)

Abstract:

The question of who attends school where has long been in the public eye, nowhere more so than Boston and New York City. School assignment in these districts came to national attention in the 1960s and 70s in the wake of court-mandated busing for racial balance. In Boston and New York today, centralized assignment with district-wide choice allows students to enroll far from home, perhaps enhancing integration. Urban school transportation is extraordinarily costly, however, and the social and educational consequences of this expenditure unclear. This paper estimates school distance and travel time effects using an identification strategy that exploits the Boston and New York City school matches. Instrumental variables estimates that exploit centralized assignment show that longer travel times indeed increase student exposure to other racial groups, especially for black students. But the same empirical strategy suggests that more distant enrollment does little to boost student achievement, high school graduation rates, or college enrollment. A shift towards assignment rules favoring walkable schools therefore seems unlikely to affect educational outcomes.