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Can we open the policy-driven ‘locks’ of life?

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One of the few things that I remember from my sociology classes is that in “modern” societies each person can depart from custom and social expectations to become something new. Yet due to today’s public policies, Americans are less free than they should be to enjoy the benefits of modernity.

To pick from just three areas, we suffer from job lock, school lock, and transportation lock. Each has repercussions for both the individual and the country as a whole.

Job Lock

When people are free to pursue the greatest possible range of employment options given their skills and interests, economic growth and personal satisfaction are maximized. But in job lock, people stay in an undesirable job for the health benefits.

In 1998, the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco estimated that job lock reduced the job mobility of women by 30 to 50 percent. Three years later, the Midwest Center for Health Services and Policy Research said that among the chronically ill, job lock reduced mobility by 40 percent.

So how did we get job lock? Much of the blame lies with the federal income tax code, which favors employer-sponsored insurance over every other kind. President Bush recently offered some proposals for putting individual plans and non-employer group plans on equal ground with employer-sponsored plans. Given the political realities in Washington, D.C., the chances of that happening are slim. Job lock will stay with us, at least until companies drop their health insurance policies altogether, as many are doing.

School Lock

To help the poor and middle class send their children to college, governments use a mixture of government-controlled and privately run colleges. They also give loans and grants to students for use at any qualifying institution, public or not.

By contrast, public funds on K-12 education can, with rare exception, be spent only on government-run schools. So rather than give money to students and families for education (as is the case for college), we fund government-owned schools, their administrators, the red tape and the union rules.

The result is school lock, in which a student's school is determined by his residence, and a family's residence is driven by the desire for a good public school. Suburbanites who might like to live in large cities may feel locked out by the poorly performing schools that usually dominate there. Low-income city residents who would like to send their children to someplace other than dysfunctional city schools are locked out of those opportunities by both the cost of private school tuition and the cost of moving to a new district.

School lock is not as strong in Minnesota as it is elsewhere, which may help explain the state's high rankings on national assessments. The state is a leader in public school choice and public charter schools. Even so, modest proposals to expand school choice through means-tested vouchers routinely die in the legislature.

Transportation Lock

Throughout history, people have met face-to-face to enjoy the benefits of commerce, social activities, medical care and other voluntary exchanges. The Internet and other communications technologies make some face-to-face meetings less necessary, but the benefits of civilization still often require getting from point A to point B. In a word, transportation mobility.

When getting from A to B is technically unfeasible, too expensive, or takes too long, the result is transportation lock, and the loss of the benefits of mutual exchange.

How can government reduce transportation lock, promote mobility, and thus enrich our lives? Sam Staley and Ted Balaker, both of the Reason Foundation (www.reason.org/road) believe that automobiles and roads are the best mobility tools. In their new book "The Road More Traveled," Staley and Balaker offer ten steps to reduce traffic problems and increase personal mobility.

Top on the list is an obvious recommendation: add more lanes to existing roads. Yet public policy, they argue, has actually encouraged gridlock through neglect. "Over the last 30 years vehicle lane miles traveled have increased by over 143 percent, but we've added just 5 percent in new capacity."

To build and maintain those roads, Staley and Balaker call for increased use of privately constructed and financed roads (to overcome political gridlock), incident management (to clear roadways of accidents that bring traffic to a crawl) and creative construction techniques such as double-decker tunnels (to build capacity in areas where land is at a premium).

Will their ideas get us out of the transportation lock, which we see every day as gridlock? I think so—if we can actually implement them.

Employment, education, and mobility all suffer from locks created in part through past policy choices. It's time to undo a few of those locks, and unleash the benefits of human creativity.