

SUSTAINABLE TRAVEL

COMMUTING (NOT) TO A HEALTHIER AND HAPPIER FUTURE



Re→set

lessons from
lockdown

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The global pandemic not only transformed *how* we work, but also *where and how we get to work*. For many people that were instructed to work from home, and others who were told not to work at all, the daily commute became a rapidly fading memory overnight. The impact was instant: **sharp falls in both road traffic and road deaths¹, cleaner air², empty commuter trains³, and inner-city eateries issuing profit warnings as people saved money by making their own lunches at home.⁴**

While some have returned to the office, many are still working from home and 'blended working' is becoming the new norm with

benefits to both employers and employees, as office-based workers travel into work at most only a few days a week. Commuting numbers paint a dramatic picture. The Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) system that moves commuters around the San Francisco Bay Area **hovering at between 25 and 30 per cent of its pre-pandemic daily ridership⁵** in late 2021. The Parisian public transport authority is **never expecting to see pre-pandemic levels of daily travellers ever again.⁶** As of September 2021, **half of British workers were still working from home at least some of the time, with 60%⁷** of all respondents wanting to see remote working as a permanent feature going forward.



The rise of remote working has made expensive, unhealthy and polluting long commutes fall out of fashion, and could permanently shift behaviour for the better

"Turning a regular commute into a more occasional commute has been life changing in many ways – I am healthier, less stressed and more productive than ever. I walk the dog before work, pop into the garden between meetings, or just do my conference calls with an eye on the bird feeder instead of staring at another concrete wall. I now realise the stress generated by train delays and cancellations, queues in grubby tunnels, packed tubes full of viruses and angry fellow passengers was ridiculous. That's not to say there is no value in going to an office – every time I do, I get a real lift from the incidental conversations and laughs that you just don't get on conference calls. But it's definitely not necessary every day for anyone who is an office worker, ever again. And so much better for the planet that my car stays parked outside the house and I make my own coffee. In a reusable mug."

Judy Mackenzie Stuart, Chief Knowledge Officer, Bryan Cave Leighton Paisner

The rise of remote working has sounded the death knell for the daily commute – but this came at a time when the average commute – often driven by lack of access to affordable housing – was actually getting longer in many places. In 2019, the average one-way commute in America increased to a **new high of 27.6 minutes**.⁸ But roughly **25 million American workers spend more than 90 minutes**⁹ getting to and from work every single day. In the UK in 2018, **the average roundtrip commute reached new highs of 59 minutes**.¹⁰ For **10% of American workers in 2018, a 60 minute commute was a daily reality**.¹¹ In **both Milan and Manila**¹², the average commute is well over an hour.

Affordable housing shortfalls and the concentration of jobs and industries gave rise to pre-pandemic trends that are unfathomable now: **the super commuter and the mega commuter**.¹³ The **super commuter**¹⁴ is someone that travels more than 60 minutes per leg of the journey, while a **mega commuter**¹⁵ is someone who travels 90 minutes plus or more than 50 miles on just one leg of the journey. According to the U.S Census, **there were roughly 600,000 mega commuters**¹⁶ in 2017.



The internet was briefly full of **hellish tales of 2:15am alarm clocks and six hour commutes**¹⁷, but COVID-19 soon saw an end to that. And given the benefits of canning the commute, perhaps it would be wise not to let it return. Why? Commuting makes us unhappy. **A 2020 study found that longer commuting times**¹⁸ were associated with lower job and leisure time satisfaction, increased strain, and poorer mental health. Those people with a commute of more than 90 minutes are far less likely to have an active social life or exercise frequently, **often leading to reports of loneliness and depression**.¹⁹ One study from Sweden even found that **those with longer commuting times, perhaps unsurprisingly, were at a higher risk of divorce and separation**.²⁰

Commuting makes us unhealthy too. Having a longer commute means people are less active and more sedentary, putting them at **higher risk of obesity and high blood pressure**.²¹ One study found that **people with a daily commute of 30 miles plus**²² were more likely to suffer from obesity. Alongside these health issues are the well-documented increases in **sleep deprivation**²³ and **stress**²⁴ that long commutes can contribute towards, opening up a pandora's box of physical and mental health problems.

The long commute will not be missed; and people and planet are set to be happier and healthier without it.



A long daily commute can also undermine the health of the planet. Globally speaking, **roughly a quarter of energy related carbon emissions come from travel**.²⁵ In countries like the **UK**²⁶ and the **USA**²⁷, the transport sector is the largest source of emissions – far more polluting than the energy or agricultural sectors – and **emissions from transport are, in some contexts, accelerating**.²⁸ Road vehicles are the greatest villain for emissions, making up **nearly three-quarters of transport emissions**.²⁹ Beyond the emissions is the air pollution that commuting contributes to, which is responsible for around **40,000 deaths a year in the UK**³⁰ and costs the British economy, through health issues and lost productivity, roughly **£20 billion every year**.³¹

But just as the global pandemic made long commutes seem like something alien, it also brought the opportunities and benefits of encouraging alternative modes of commuting into sharp focus. Active commuting, where people set out to their place of work on foot or bike, has increased alongside requirements to socially distance and in response to pop-up active travel infrastructure. Active commuting brings a wealth of benefits: **lower risk of heart disease, cancer, and diabetes**³², as well as **boosts to mental health**.³³ Employers that sought to cash in on this shift in mobility patterns by encouraging active travel or the use of e-bikes and scooters have shown that such initiatives can deliver **substantial emission cuts**³⁴ and **boosts in employee wellbeing**.³⁵

“The pandemic enabled millions of people to experiment by working from home or commuting on foot or by bike. Although there was pain involved, many found they quite liked the changes – and employee pressure is now forcing businesses to adopt to greener practices that might otherwise have been put off for years. This will be good for both human wellbeing and the health of our planet.”

Roger Higman, Network of Wellbeing (NOW)

Locking in these changes is essential if we are to banish the long, tiring and stressful commute to the pre-pandemic past. The long commute will not be missed; and people and planet are set to be happier and healthier without it.



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