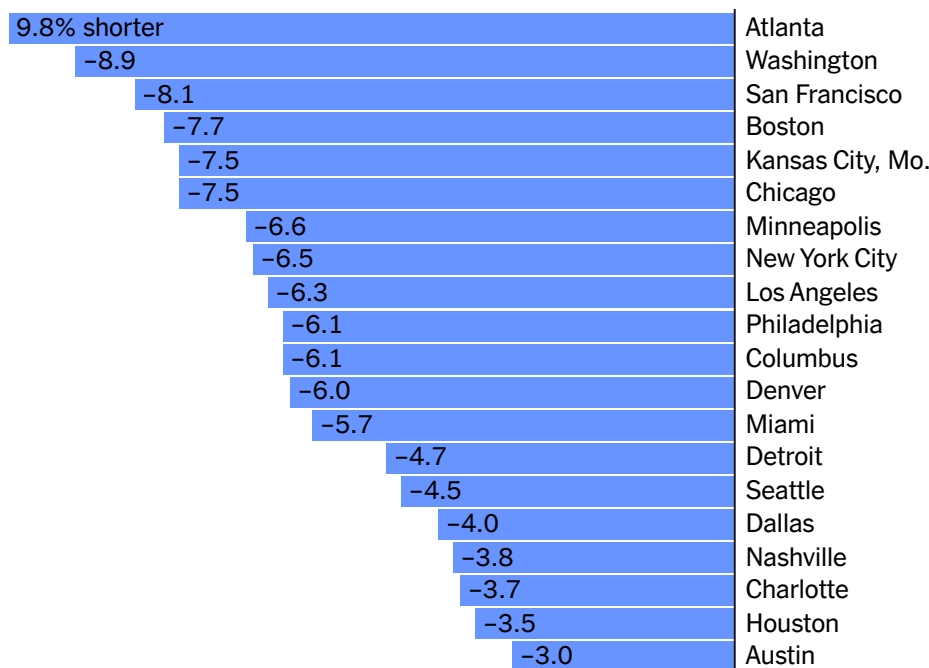


Percentage change in duration of one-way commutes from 2019 to 2022

Source: Replica | Note: Change is from autumn of 2019 to autumn of 2022.

Most Americans still have to commute every day. Here's how that experience has changed.

By Lydia DePillis, Emma Goldberg and Ella Koeze Nov. 6, 2023

The average American commute is about 27 minutes. While people in many industries were able to start working from home during the pandemic, recouping their travel time, nearly half of U.S. workers kept devoting a good chunk of their day — sometimes an hour or more — to being in transit.

Pandemic-era commuting has widened several divides: between those who can work remotely and those who can't, and between those who drive and those who use public transportation. The decrease in travel by those able to work remotely has changed the nature of commutes for everyone else — streamlining rush-hour traffic, for example, but making trains run less often.

For some, it has been a mixed blessing. Take Torie Hargreaves, whose commute used to be brutal, often double the 27-minute average. As a nurse at a hospital in Minneapolis, she would leave home shortly after noon, and it could take up to an hour to wind her way up Hiawatha Avenue to the sprawling campus, past construction sites and other bottlenecks.



Before the pandemic, it could sometimes take Torie Hargreaves, a nurse in Minneapolis, nearly an hour to get to work. Now it's about 35 minutes. Jenn Ackerman for The New York Times

Like a majority of Americans, Ms. Hargreaves was unable to do her work at home. She kept driving to the hospital five days a week — in the eerie stillness of the pandemic lockdowns, then the slow resurgence of traffic as life returned to something like normal.

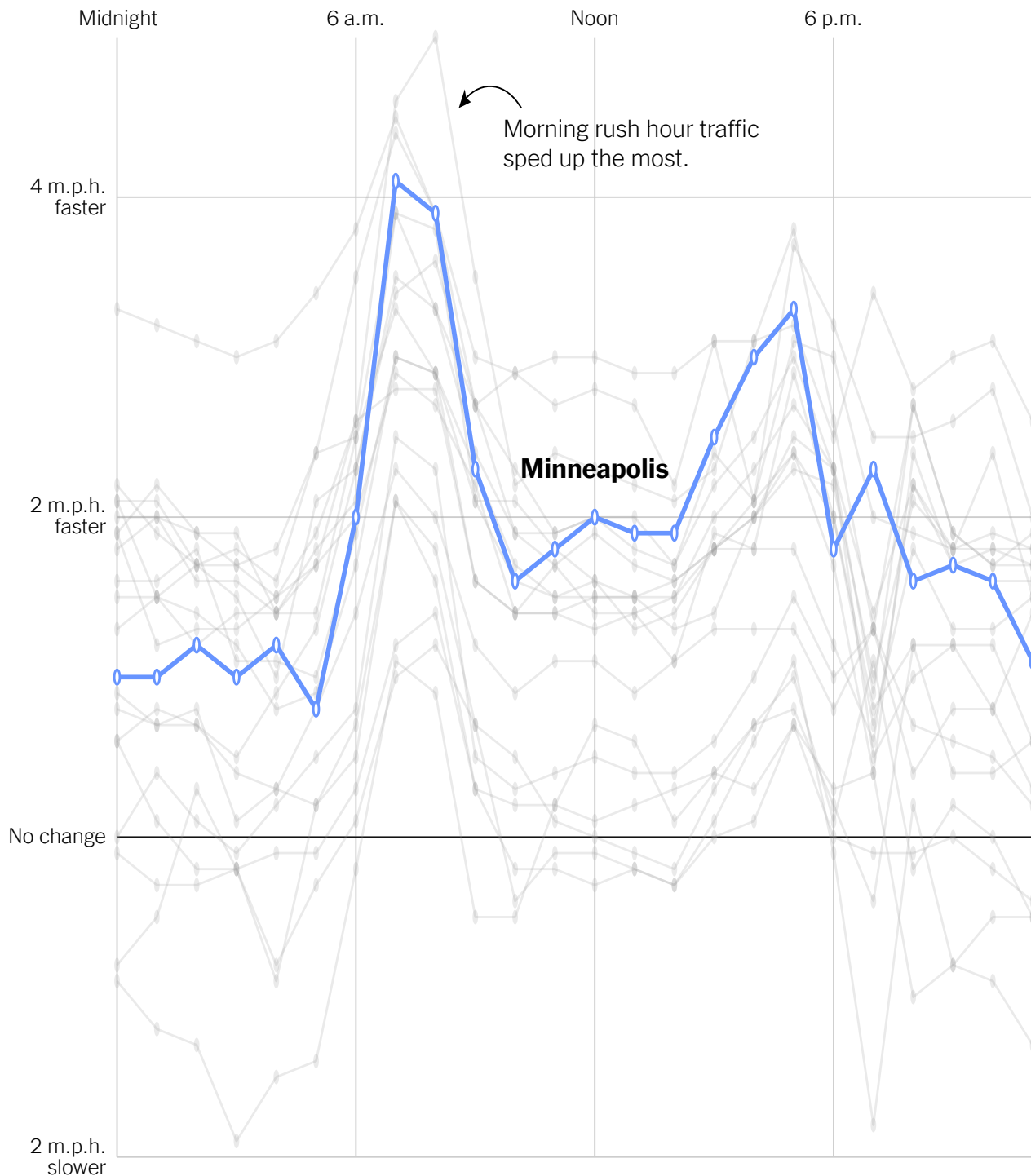
Her journey now takes only about 35 minutes, slightly less than in 2019. That doesn't mean it's easier: Emptier roads have meant faster speeds — according to GPS signals collected and analyzed by the data firm Replica — and less-considerate drivers.

“I notice it a lot when merging or taking turns at lights,” Ms. Hargreaves said. “People have gotten to be so much more isolated about their mindset that they aren’t aware of their neighbors.”

In many cities, postpandemic commutes are faster

Difference in the average driving speeds at each hour of the day in 20 metro areas in autumn 2022 from autumn 2019

Select a metro area: Minneapolis ▼



Source: Replica

But Ms. Hargreaves has at least been able to reclaim some of her home time. That's not the case for Andrea Villanueva, 45, who lives in South Minneapolis and takes the bus to North Minneapolis for her job as a contractor cleaning a grocery store.

For Ms. Villanueva, who leaves for work at 8 p.m. and usually comes home around 7:30 a.m., the 45-minute trips each way became far more challenging during the pandemic, particularly because of rising crime, Covid-19 risks and emptier public transit vehicles that have made her uneasy.



Andrea Villanueva takes the bus to North Minneapolis for her job as a contractor cleaning a grocery store. Jenn Ackerman for The New York Times

“I felt unsafe to travel any more on the bus, but I have to because I don’t know how to drive,” Ms. Villanueva said in Spanish, describing moments when other passengers have grabbed her inappropriately or coughed on her, making her sick.

Ms. Villanueva has sometimes had to change her commuting routines to feel safe, by traveling at different times or asking her brother to accompany her on the bus. “Before, I came home at 5 in the morning,” she added. “But now I don’t come home at 5. I come home when someone can come to take me home.”

Christopher Wiese, an assistant professor of industrial organizational psychology at the Georgia Institute of Technology who studies commuting, says the “quality” of commutes depends less on the time they require, and more on how peaceful and predictable they are. The experiences of white-collar friends and family members whose working lives had suddenly become much more fluid can also make in-person workers feel relatively worse off.

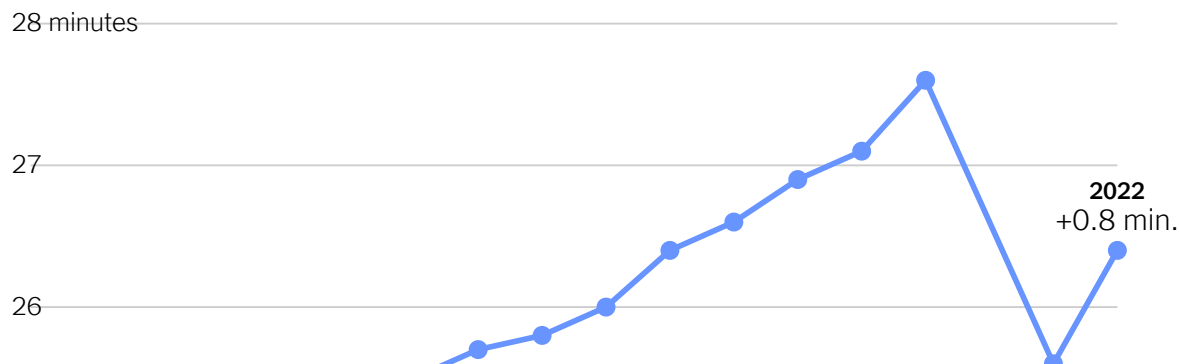
“I think it’s become worse from a psychological sense, and that’s likely because they’re not provided an option to not commute,” Dr. Wiese said. “These essential workers may be viewing the same experience through a more negative lens.”

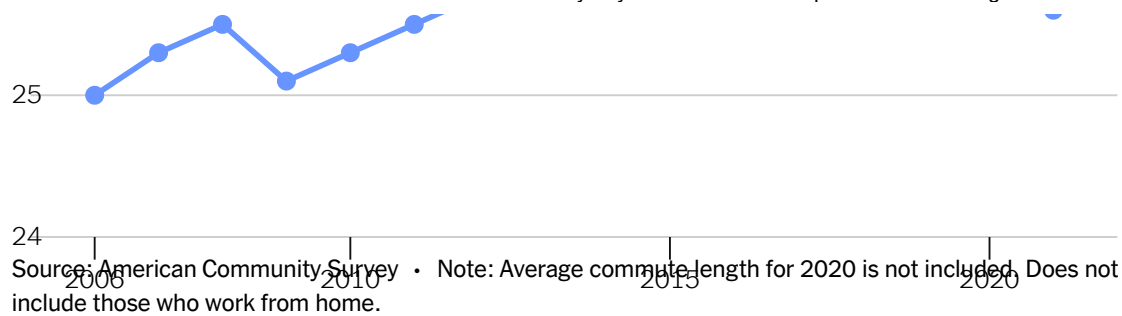
Ms. Hargreaves thinks about that disparity sometimes. A friend works for Target’s corporate headquarters in Minneapolis, and usually gets to work at home, a lifestyle that allows for things like joining book clubs and hiking on the weekends. It was enough to make Ms. Hargreaves think about switching careers.

“There’s always that temptation and pull,” she said. “But ultimately the cause of working at the bedside in a hospital is worth my time.”

The American commute got longer, again

Average one-way commute duration





In 2006, according to the Census Bureau, the average one-way commute took 25 minutes. By 2019, it was up to 27.6 minutes.

That gradual elongation happened because workers were moving farther from their workplaces, often forced to the margins by the rising cost of housing in job centers. “Super-commuters,” who travel hours to get to work, became more common.

Of course, commuting is riven with inequality: Although the gap has been narrowing, Black workers generally still have longer commutes than white people, resulting in part from housing segregation. Workers of color are also disproportionately likely to hold jobs that can’t be done from home.

The march of longer commutes shifted into reverse during the pandemic. Although the Census Bureau wasn’t able to collect solid results for 2020, by 2021 the average one-way commute had dropped by more than two minutes from 2019.

Why did that happen? In part, those who had longer distances to travel were more likely to stop making the journey, while people who lived closer to their workplaces kept going, bringing down the average.

A more important reason: With fewer employers demanding rigid 9-to-5 schedules, the morning and evening rush hours thinned out. People still drove a lot — running errands in the middle of the day between Zoom meetings — but those who had to commute at traditional times had less traffic to contend with. The resulting higher speeds also resulted in a spike in the per-capita rate of fatalities involving motor vehicle accidents.



With fewer employers demanding rigid 9-to-5 schedules, the morning and evening rush hours thinned out. Jenn Ackerman for The New York Times

In 2022, as employers started requiring that workers return to the office and highways filled up — especially with freight, as logistics companies rushed to meet the new demands of online shopping — the average one-way commute increased to 26.4 minutes, from 25.6 minutes in 2021. The difference doesn't seem like a lot, but it adds up to millions of hours across the approximately 136 million people who commuted last year.

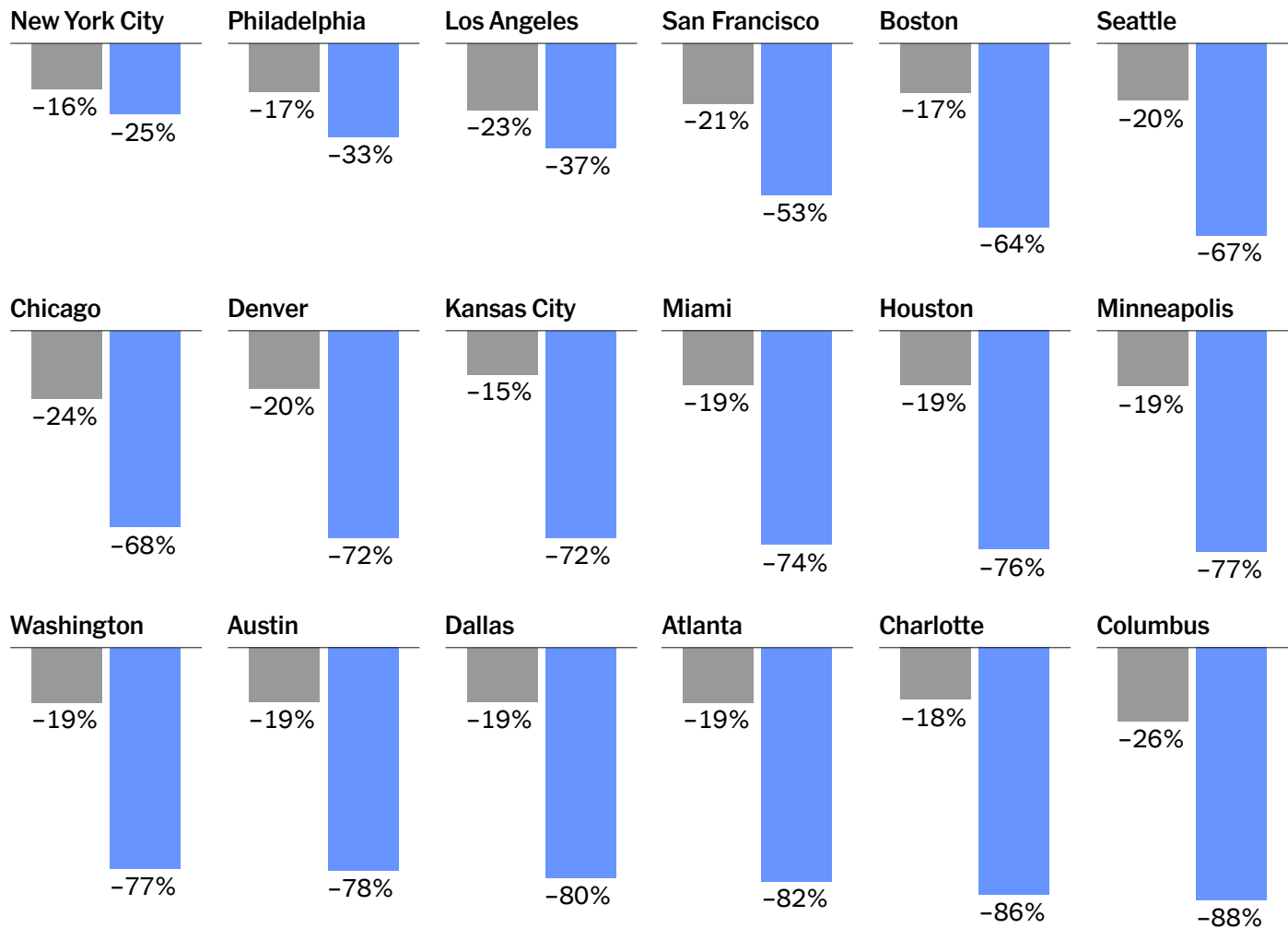
More granular data from Replica shows where commutes in late 2022 were still the shortest relative to the same quarter in fall of 2019. Commute times in the metropolitan areas surrounding Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Kansas City, San Francisco and Washington were 7.5 percent to 10 percent lower.

The average commute distance changed much less, an indication that commuters are driving faster — but also, more people are driving. Some of those who could afford to abandon their bus and

train commutes did so, first out of fear of infection. Then, having invested in cars and not needing a monthly transit pass because they might need to travel only a couple of days a week instead of five, they stuck to it. The share of people using transit in 2022 was 3.1 percent, according to the Census Bureau, down from 5 percent in 2019.

Many commuters have abandoned public transit since the pandemic

Percent change in 2022 from 2019 in the number of commutes taken on a typical autumn Thursday by either car or on public transit.





Source: Replica • Note: Car commutes only include rides in privately owned cars, excludes taxis or rideshares.

“Once you taste the freedom and flexibility of a personal automobile, how are you going to put them back on the farm, so to speak?” said Patricia Mokhtarian, a professor of engineering at the Georgia Institute of Technology who also studies commuting. “It’s almost an imperative to justify that decision by using it.”

As the years went on, service disruptions — caused at first by the difficulty of maintaining a full complement of drivers, conductors and maintenance workers as Covid waves swept through the work force — have started to morph into more permanent changes forced by declining ridership on traditional morning and evening rush routes.

Ridership on San Francisco’s BART system, for example, is down 40 percent from pre-Covid expectations on weekdays. The transit agency, which had already curtailed capacity by retiring older train cars, recently revamped its schedule to redistribute trips across the week — which makes life more difficult for those who still have to get to work every day.

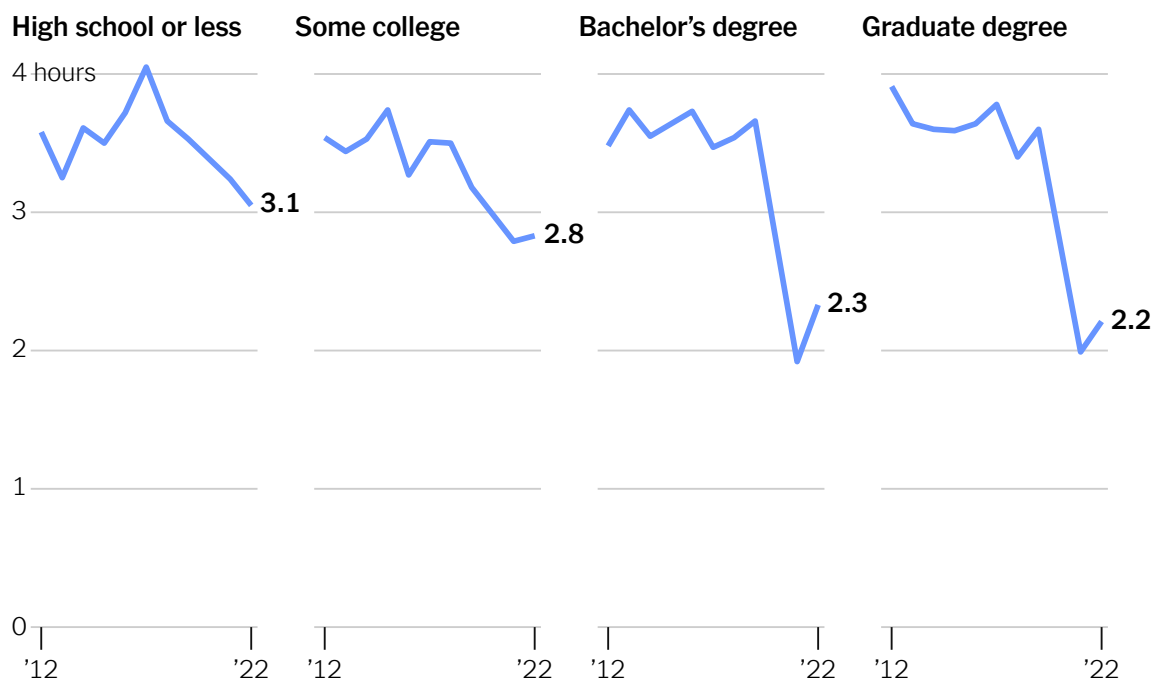
“There are actually fewer trains in what you would think of as peak commute hours, so they can provide more service at other times of the day and on weekends, because weekend ridership has rebounded to a greater degree,” said John Goodwin, assistant

director of communications for the area's Metropolitan Transportation Commission. "So for a lot of riders, that changes the frequency from every 15 minutes to every 20 minutes."

According to a Labor Department source, the American Time Use Survey, those who commute by public transit spend roughly twice as much time traveling to and from work as people who drive. That relationship remained fairly stable through the pandemic years.

Highly educated workers are spending less time per week commuting

Average hours spent commuting per week by education level for all workers



Source: American Time Use Survey • Note: Data for 2020 is not included. Weekly average is imputed from daily averages.

Those who depend on transit tend to have less education and lower incomes than those who drive. The reduction in commutes for those with college degrees has meant that they now spend less total time per week commuting than workers with only high school educations. Before the pandemic, that relationship was reversed.

Rosalind Tucker, managing director of mobility services at the Atlanta Regional Commission, calls the white-collar transit commuters "choice riders," in that they typically have the freedom

to commute via private automobile or not at all. Blue-collar workers are “lifeline riders,” because transit is all that connects them to their source of income.

Lifeline riders depend on choice riders to keep the system robust, but in the postpandemic era, that relationship has broken down. “A lot of our choice riders, we’re still working to influence them to re-choose transit,” Ms. Tucker said. For example, regional transit operators are working with employers to offer more flexible passes beyond the typical monthly unlimited version, which had been an important revenue source. “We need transit to remain a reliable option for lifeline riders.”

That mission has become more complicated for a couple of reasons. The geography of in-person jobs has shifted slightly, with e-commerce warehouses now employing thousands of people outside city centers, off highway exits without much else around them. And federal Covid-era funding for transit systems is running out, raising the specter of an urban death spiral of fewer riders, higher fares, less revenue and worse service.

Aimee Lee is the deputy executive director of transportation at the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, which coordinates the area’s many transportation services, including roads. The agency projects an annual shortfall of \$730 million for the Regional Transportation Authority, starting in 2026, unless it finds a way to plug the hole. Ms. Lee said that would be terrible for people who depend on transit — and also for the employers who depend on them.

“What I fear is if our government agencies bail on transit, and we choose to disinvest from operations there, riders don’t view transit as being a reliable option anymore,” Ms. Lee said. “People can’t afford to work in the region anymore. Businesses don’t have access to their work force.”

Data notes

Replica models commute patterns and overall travel behavior using a variety of sources, including de-identified mobile location data from cell phones, personal vehicles and commercial freight vehicles, as well as anonymized count data from roadway sensors and transit agencies. Throughout this article, Replica's data is used to compare changes in the autumn of 2022 from the autumn of 2019. The autumn season includes the months of September, October and November in each year.

American Time Use Survey calculations define commutes as trips between work and home; commutes can include brief stops of 30 minutes or less. Methodology is based on "Measuring Commuting in the American Time Use Survey" by Gray Kimbrough (2019). Averages are for all survey respondents who reported doing any work, regardless of whether they had a commute. Weekends and holidays are excluded; weekly totals are extrapolated from daily averages based on a five-day workweek.

Additional contributions from Ben Casselman and Jonathan Wolfe.

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