



# Travel patterns have changed for good. Transport systems should, too

Enough with all the radii

May 19th 2022 (Updated May 26th 2022)

In Auckland, the largest city in New Zealand, public-transport fares have been cut in half. In London politicians leave passive-aggressive notes on civil servants' desks telling them to turn up for work and implore people to start going back to the office. [Eric Adams](#), the mayor of New York, has asked bank bosses to set an example by riding the subway.

None of it seems to be working. The subway is only two-thirds as busy as it was before covid-19. Auckland's bus system was half as busy in April as it was three years earlier. Despite fears of "carmageddon", people have not swapped [public transport](#) for the private kind. They are simply moving around less.

Although travel is likely to recover a little further, a return to the pre-pandemic pattern seems implausible. One clue is that not all journeys have declined. Parisians made more shopping trips last summer than they did before covid appeared. In New York Sunday travel has held up better than weekday travel. What has collapsed is rush-hour commuting, particularly among well-paid workers in the knowledge economy. That suggests the change in behaviour is caused not by fear of infection—which might be expected to diminish over time—but by a fundamental [resetting of work habits](#).

Rich countries should accept this new reality, and start building transport systems to match. Infrastructure projects that just add capacity to conventional suburb-to-city-centre routes now seem pointless, especially in the biggest cities. They are rooted in the idea that urban travel is like an asterisk, or the spokes of a wheel, with people squeezing onto radial roads and railway lines. Travel is now more like a spiderweb. People take fewer, often shorter journeys along thinner routes; they move to the side, as well as in and out. That explains why buses, which are often used for short journeys, have emptied out less drastically than commuter trains.

Now that people travel less predictably, there is a stronger case for innovations such as on-demand buses and "mobility as a service", which weaves together public transport and personal modes such as taxis and hired bikes. These make better use of the existing infrastructure, and come closer to the convenience of cars. Antwerp, Genoa and Helsinki lead in this area. British cities need to do something more basic, by integrating their public-transport networks. Outside

London, they tend to have a clutch of bus companies, some railway lines and perhaps a tram system, all doing their own thing. The result is confusion and often greater cost for the public.

Countries should not down tools on public-transport projects. Their populations are growing, and they will need to cut congestion and carbon emissions. But instead of building more radii, along the lines of London's new Elizabeth line or the tunnel being dug at huge expense under the Hudson river in New York, they should make it easier to travel around cities, or from one satellite town to another.

For the time being, governments will have to shell out to keep public-transport systems from collapsing. But another source of money will eventually have to be found to replace lost fare revenue. The best one is road pricing. Countries should stop holding referendums on congestion-charging schemes and get on with creating them. They would also be wise not to muddy the waters by exempting electric vehicles from the charge. Road pricing ought to be primarily for managing demand and raising money for public transport. Other levers—regulations, subsidies and fuel duty—can be used to get people out of the most polluting vehicles.

The transition from asterisks to spiderwebs will be difficult. Everybody from motorists to transport unions will complain. But at least a couple of things have become easier. Because so many people have learned to work from home, engineers should not fear to work on roads or railways between Monday and Friday, rather than disrupting a string of weekends. And any transport union that threatens to strike is welcome to try. The days when unions could paralyse cities by shutting down public transport are over. Along with much else.

***Correction (May 26th 2022):*** An earlier version of this article referred to tunnels being built at great expense under the East river. Those new tunnels are under the Hudson river.