Are Urbanites Willing to Ditch Cars for More Sustainable Commutes?

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With public transit ridership down sharply during the COVID-19 pandemic, cities are looking to sustainable mobility to forestall a potential long-term shift to solo driving.

Sustainable mobility options such as public transit, cycling, and e-scooters can offer safe, affordable travel to residents. They can make transportation networks more resilient. Significantly, they can also reduce emissions from transportation, the source of about one third of total carbon emissions in C40 member cities. Because many urban trips are short – in Chicago, half are less than three miles – advocates have long noted the potential for some solo car trips to be replaced with cycling, walking, e-scooters, or the bus.

But how willing are urban residents to replace car trips with more sustainable modes? A recent poll conducted by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs and The Harris Poll surveyed urban and suburban residents in six large US metropolitan regions: New York City, Chicago, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Houston, and Phoenix.1

Key Findings

- Nearly two thirds (63%) of urban residents (those within the central city) would consider traveling to work via public transit, far higher than pre-pandemic ridership rates in any of the cities surveyed.
- Among metropolitan respondents (inclusive of urban, inner suburb, outer suburb/exurb, and rural), top reasons for declining to consider transit were COVID-19 (50%), trip time (43%), and personal safety (32%).
- More than half of urban residents (54%) would consider traveling to work via bicycle or electric bicycle, and 48% of these residents would consider commuting via electric scooter.

1 See Methodology section
• Among metropolitan residents, distance to work (43%), traffic safety (32%) and personal safety (27%) are the top reasons given for declining to consider cycling to work.
• A large majority of urban residents (77%) support the construction of bike lanes and other infrastructure for bicycles and very small vehicles (e-scooters or e-bikes, e.g.).
• A large majority of urban residents also support building new highways (75%) and widening roads (80%).
• Additional polling can provide quantitative data about transportation attitudes by subgroup, including race, gender, age, income, and family status, augmenting existing qualitative research.

Public Transit Can Lure Riders with Service and Safety

In the metropolitan regions surveyed, residents’ professed willingness to commute via public transit far outpaced actual ridership rates.

Overall, 47% of metropolitan residents and 63% of urban residents said they would consider traveling to work via transit. Yet among the cities surveyed, the actual rate of commuting was far less. According to 2018 ACS data, the actual rate of commuting via transit in 2018 was 3% in Phoenix, 4% in Houston, 9% in Los Angeles, 26% in Philadelphia, 28% in Chicago, and 56% in New York City.²

### Public Transit: Willingness to Ride vs. Actual Ridership

Respondents’ answers of “Would you consider traveling to work via public transit?” compared to actual proportion of commute trips made via transit in cities surveyed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>Willingness to Ride (2020 Harris Poll)</th>
<th>Actual Ridership (2018 ACS Data)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Urban/Central City</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York City</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>56%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chicago</td>
<td>28%</td>
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<td>Philadelphia</td>
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<td>Los Angeles</td>
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<td>Phoenix</td>
<td>3%</td>
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² American Community Survey Data
Half of metropolitan respondents unwilling to consider riding public transit named COVID-19 as a reason. Nearly as many (43%) blamed too much time in transit, and one third of respondents (32%) had personal safety concerns. Additionally, more than one quarter (27%) complained about the current level of service in terms of timeliness, frequency, and cleanliness.

Large American transit agencies – and those across the world– are developing strategies to improve safety and service during the pandemic to regain riders. But the survey results may also suggest that agencies can do more than simply recover lost ridership. Even as questions remain about the future extent of remote work, agencies have a large pool of potential new riders who might be lured to transit with improvements to safety, trip times, and service.

Furthermore, by prioritizing racial equity, cities and transit agencies can also offer the riders who rely most on public transit high-quality mobility options without the expenses associated with car use.

**Cycling (and Scooting) has Unrealized Ridership**

Among the cities surveyed, actual bike commuting rates in 2019 ranged from a low of 0.4% in Houston to a high of 2.1% in Philadelphia. Yet 54% of urban residents said they would consider cycling to work, as did 42% of metropolitan respondents overall. Additionally, 48% of urban residents said they would consider commuting via e-scooter.

![Bicycles: Willingness to Ride to Work by Geography](image)

*Metropolitan area includes all four geographies: central city (urban), inner suburb, outer suburb/exurb, and rural.
Across metropolitan regions, respondents who declined to consider cycling to work listed the following reasons: Distance to work (43%), traffic safety (32%), personal safety (27%), and time (23%). Additionally, one in five (19%) stated they would simply never cycle to work.

During the pandemic, many cities bet on infrastructure to encourage cycling, most notably in Paris, where Mayor Anne Hidalgo committed to building 650 kilometers of bike lanes, coupled with a €300 million investment to upgrade the city’s bike network. In the United States, cities such as Minneapolis, Oakland, and Philadelphia followed suit with “open streets” and pop-up bike lanes of their own, albeit on a smaller scale.

Notably, male metropolitan residents were more likely to consider cycling to work (51%) than female respondents (30%). Unfortunately, the sample size for this question was too small to draw significant conclusions about how attitudes differ by race, income level, age, and family status among urban residents.

While physical infrastructure such as bike lanes can play an important role in improving safety and luring riders onto bikes, research has shown the limits of prioritizing bicycle infrastructure over meaningful engagement with communities.

Many Black and Brown neighborhoods, often ignored and exploited by the city planning establishment, have specific transportation needs—for example, greater reliance on buses to access jobs or healthcare. Therefore, residents’ genuine engagement and involvement in the planning process is essential, and new infrastructure must grow out of a considered, inclusive, democratic process.3

Residents Support Big Transportation Changes

The survey also found residents across metropolitan regions highly supportive of changes to street infrastructure, with urban residents especially supportive. Notably, this support remained consistent regardless of whether the intent of these changes was to facilitate cycling or driving.

77% of urban respondents—and 77% of metro respondents overall—expressed support for building additional infrastructure for bicycles, e-scooters, and other very small vehicles, such as bike lanes.

3 On transportation attitudes, see, for example, Chelsie Coren and Kate Lowe, *Commuting in Context: A Qualitative Study of Transportation Challenges for Disadvantaged Job Seekers in Chicago*, Metropolitan Planning Council (May 2020); *Where Do We Go From Here? Breaking Down Barriers to Cycling in the U.S.*, People for Bikes, 2019; Melody Hoffman, *Bike Lanes are White Lanes: Bicycle Advocacy and Urban Planning* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016); Amy Lubitow, Kyla Tompkins, Madeleine Feldman, “Sustainable Cycling for All? Race and Gender-Based Bicycle Inequalities in Portland, Oregon,” *City and Community* 18.4 (December 2019): 1181-1202.
Surprisingly, urban residents also expressed strong support for very different transportation interventions: construction of additional highways (75%) and widened roads (80%). Urbanites actually supported new highway construction at a higher rate than metropolitan residents overall (75% percent of urbanites, compared to 64% overall in the metropolitan region).
Why would urban residents support bike lanes, new highways, and road widening at similar rates? The former is a hallmark of sustainable mobility, small scale and inexpensive. The latter are the opposite: expensive, profoundly disruptive, car-oriented, and generative of carbon emissions.

One possible explanation is that many city residents are frustrated with urban travel, and simply want the transportation network to work better, whatever the method.

Perhaps, this indicates support of any new project with the potential to speed up travel. Notably, the question did not ask respondents to consider trade-offs, such as the public cost and environmental impact of various types of new infrastructure.

On one hand, this interpretation suggests enduring support for the program of large-scale highway building that emerged in the postwar era and radically altered US metropolitan development. On the other, it also suggests enthusiasm for sustainable transportation that policymakers can capitalize on. For example, although bike infrastructure projects frequently incite controversy - so-called “bikelash” - the survey data shows a large majority of urban and metropolitan residents supportive of such projects.

**Conclusion**

The survey results present an image of metropolitan residents – and urbanites specifically – as willing to embrace new transportation behaviors. Urbanites also express support for new transportation infrastructure, whether to support cars or
more sustainable modes. The results suggest policymakers have strong public support for ambitious projects to promote sustainable mobility.

Policymakers can also address residents’ reluctance to travel on sustainable modes with initiatives to improve personal safety, traffic safety, and level of service. In many cases, even trip time and distance to work can be lessened by integrating mobility services, allowing for seamless transfers from bus to shared bikes, for example. Moreover, creating healthier, safer, and more convenient public transit service will likely attract riders lost during the pandemic while also benefitting existing riders.

For urban cycling in particular, policymakers have often focused on bike-friendly infrastructure as the key element to encourage ridership. But research also shows the insufficiency of infrastructure alone to effect large shifts in ridership, particularly in marginalized communities. Indeed, the survey results suggest that although some of riders’ concerns can be solved with infrastructure, some cannot. Infrastructure paired with other strategies – such as community outreach, participatory planning, subsidies, or other approaches – may be more fruitful in changing transportation behaviors.

**Methodology**

This analysis is based on data from an internet survey developed by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs and the Harris Poll and conducted by The Harris Poll November 5 to November 19, 2020. The survey was conducted online within the United States among 1,200 U.S. adults ages 18 and older, evenly divided among six metropolitan regions: New York City, Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston, Philadelphia, and Phoenix. Respondents self-identified the community type in which they lived: central city/downtown (also referred to here as “urbanites”), inner suburb, outer suburb/exurb, and rural.

This online survey is not based on a probability sample and therefore no estimate of theoretical sampling error can be calculated. Figures for age, sex, race/ethnicity, education, region and household income were weighted where necessary to bring them into line with their actual proportions in the population. Propensity score weighting was used to adjust for respondents’ propensity to be online.