

Commuting



Large numbers of people commute to work. Despite the claims made over the past few years that technological innovations such as the internet will result in increasing numbers of people working from home it does not appear that commuter numbers are falling. The biggest alteration in British commuting habits came in the 1950s and 1960s with the rise in car ownership and the concomitant increase in the numbers of people able to drive to work. There have been only minor changes over the past decade. Comparisons between the data for 1992 and 2001 show that a slightly greater percentage of people are driving to work, fewer are walking, cycling or taking the bus and the proportion using rail services has remained approximately the same (see table). Over the same period, the average time spent travelling to work has increased slightly from 23.4 minutes in 1992 to 25.3 minutes in 2001.

Try This...

Carry out a small-scale survey of commuting amongst people you know. At the same time, ask your participants how they think commuting affects their quality of life. How do the data from your survey compare with the research findings in this section? If they are markedly different, try to explain why.

Effects of Commuting

The nation's commuting habits have an impact on the environment. The fact that the vast majority of people use private motorised transport to get to work has

UK commuting data for 1992 and 2001

Mode of transport	Car, van, minibus, motorcycle	Bus, coach	Bicycle	Rail	Walk
Autumn 1992	69%	9%	4%	6%	13%
Spring 2001	71%	8%	3%	6%	11%

Source: Labour Force Survey, Office for National Statistics (2001)

consequences for levels of air pollution. Although it is true that a bus or coach emits more in the way of particulates than the average private car, a bus or coach may be transporting 50 or 60 people whereas a car is frequently used by only one. As such, the pollution output per commuter of private cars far exceeds that of public motorised transport. As was discussed in chapter 2, pollution from vehicles has a negative impact on physical and mental functioning. In addition, it appears to be the case that commuting itself can have psychological and health effects.

The average commuting times given above mask large differences in the amount of time spent travelling to and from work. Whilst for some people the journey to work is a short one, many people spend far in excess of the average 25 minutes or so. For some people, commuting adds as many as four hours to their working day. This is bound to have an impact on their own quality of life and that of those around them. Cassidy (1997) identifies a range of potential effects including:

- Stress associated with commuting
- Reduced opportunities for leisure and relaxation
- Less time spent with partners, children etc.

Commuting and Stress

Costa et al (1988) investigated the effects of using public transport on commuters. Apart from the general deterioration in quality of life that results from reduced leisure and family time, they found that commuting itself is a stressful experience. Commuters

showed higher rates of psychological and health problems and increased rates of absenteeism from work. Novaco et al (1991) found that commuting had a negative impact on satisfaction and mood and Kolowsky et al (1993) report that stress and dissatisfaction rise as a function of commuting time for users of both public and private transport.

Much recent research has focused on drivers and the specific stressors associated with driving. This focus has partly been motivated by concern over 'road rage'. Cassidy (1997) describes road rage as 'displays of aggressive behaviour by drivers towards other road users, often involving very dangerous driving or threats of physical violence' (p.165). Anecdotal evidence suggests that road rage incidents are fairly frequent, with many drivers having a story to tell about a situation they have seen or in which they have been involved. In addition, there have been several high profile criminal cases. For example, in April 2000 Kenneth Noye was gaoled for life for the murder of Stephen Cameron following an incident in which it was alleged that Cameron had 'cut up' Noye on the M25 motorway. It appears that road rage is related to driver stress. Matthews et al (1991) report correlations between driver aggression, dislike of driving and driver stress. Novaco (1991) points out that driving itself increases physiological arousal (a component of stress), which can be further heightened by the frustration of congested traffic and the actions of other road users which, whilst they may not actually be aimed at 'thwarting' the driver, may be **attributed** as being so. In addition to the stress of driving, other factors may also contribute to road rage

incidents. These include the anonymity associated with driving, which could lead to feelings of **deindividuation**, and feelings of **territoriality** associated with car use (see chapter 4 for a discussion of both deindividuation and territoriality).

One of the factors that appears to mediate driver stress is **impedance**, a term that refers to anything that holds a driver up from reaching his or her destination (e.g. traffic jams, road works and diversions) Novaco et al (1991) report that higher levels of impedance are associated with poorer job performance and health and higher absenteeism. Some researchers have suggested that the effect of impedance is mediated by personality. As is the case with noise, it appears that Type A personalities are less affected by high impedance levels (as measured in terms of blood pressure and frustration levels; Stokols et al, 1978).

The Impact of Commuting on the Community

The impact of commuting extends beyond the detrimental effects it has on commuters themselves. Because the majority of commuters in the UK rely on their cars, an increase in commuting means an increase in road traffic. This has an impact on society at large. Concern has recently been expressed over the lack of physical exercise taken by children in the UK. Between 1958 and 1995 the proportion of boys who are clinically overweight almost doubled to 9 percent, whilst the proportion of overweight girls rose to 13 per cent (Chinn and Rhona, 2001). It has been suggested that this will eventually contribute to a number of problems such as obesity and heart disease when the current generation of children grows to adulthood. Although part of the decline in physical activity amongst British children may be due to the erosion of the sporting aspects of the school curriculum, another factor that may be important is the extent to which children, rather than walking or cycling to school, are now driven by their parents or guardians.

Over the ten years to 1995, the number of children walking to school fell by nearly 400,000 and the number cycling fell from 300,000 to 100,000 (Department for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, 2001)

Most important in explaining why fewer children are walking or cycling to school appears to be parental fear about the dangers of heavy traffic. Because parents are concerned about the danger that road traffic poses to children, they are less inclined to let them travel unsupervised to school, preferring instead to drive them. However, as a result of more children being driven to school, the amount of traffic on the road increases. The increase in traffic, in turn, leads to the perception that the road are becoming more dangerous and, as such, parents become less willing to let their children walk or cycle to school. In short, a vicious cycle develops, the result of which is more children getting less physical exercise (SUSTRANS, 1996).

Increased parental supervision due to fears about traffic, however, do not just threaten the long-term physical health of children. Appleyard and Lintell (1972) found that traffic density had an impact on children's and adults' sociability. Three streets in San Francisco were compared, all similar except with respect to traffic density. 'Light Street' had a traffic density of about 2000 vehicles per day, 'Moderate Street' about 8000 and 'Heavy Street' about 16 000. Appleyard and Lintell found that residents in 'Light Street' had roughly three times as many friends in the same street as residents of 'Heavy Street' (3.0 compared to 0.9) and about twice as many acquaintances (6.3 compared to 3.1). Residents of 'Light Street' perceived their neighbourhood as friendly and relatively free from traffic danger. By contrast, residents of 'Heavy Street' tended to be rather withdrawn and there was little sense of community. Similarly, Huttenmoser (1995) found that children living in areas with heavy traffic had about half the amount of social contact with other children than children living in light traffic areas. Huttenmoser

concludes that heavy traffic areas are detrimental to children's social and motor development as well as putting considerable strain upon parents who feel they have to spend more time directly supervising their children.

