



WHY MOBILITY MATTERS TO PERSONAL LIFE

By Ted Balaker





The Galvin Project to End Congestion

America's insufficient and deteriorating transportation network is choking our cities, hurting our economy, and reducing our quality of life. But through innovative engineering, value pricing, public-private partnerships, and innovations in performance and management we can stop this dangerous downward spiral. The Galvin Project to End Congestion is a major new policy initiative that will significantly increase our urban mobility and help local officials move beyond business-as-usual transportation planning.

Reason Foundation

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The Galvin Project to End Congestion

Traffic congestion is choking our cities, strangling our economy, and reducing our quality of life. Rush-hour delays rob us of time with our families, and commute times often dictate where we live and work. The impact our inadequate transportation network has on our economy is alarming. We waste an estimated \$63 billion annually in time and fuel while sitting in traffic. Moreover, businesses and their customers bear enormous costs associated with traffic-related logistics problems, delivery delays, poor transportation reliability, and fewer potential employees within commuting distance.

This project is premised upon the conviction that the consequences of ignoring this threat will be dire. Inaccessibility leads directly to the depreciation of commercial and personal property values. This along with the gridlock will lead to the death of major cities in the United States and elsewhere in the developed world by mid-century if dramatic change is not implemented. But just as cardiac surgery can sustain our circulatory systems, we can prevent these clogged arteries that will stop the economic heart of cities from pumping.

The Galvin Project and the Reason Foundation have joined forces to develop practical, cost-effective solutions to traffic congestion, a policy initiative that will save our cities and significantly increase our urban mobility through innovative engineering, value pricing, public-private partnerships, and innovations in performance and management.

The old canard “we can’t build our way out of congestion” is not true. Adding innovative new capacity and improving the management of roads can eliminate chronic congestion.

A substantial new industry is developing as the private sector captures the opportunity in the value of our time wasted in traffic and seeks to profit from affordable, uncongested tollways. Public-private partnerships to build and operate these toll facilities have sparked innovations in engineering and design, overcoming obstacles such as limited right-of-way and noise pollution. Capital markets also provide access to much needed investment capital and ensure that new highway capacity is built where it is most needed.

In addition to adding road capacity, changing the way highways are managed can help to maximize the use of the capacity we have. The introduction of Intelligent Transportation System technologies can speed resolution to traffic delays, and electronic toll collection technologies can make extensive tolling practical. More importantly, variable pricing of lanes can keep traffic flowing all day by responding to changing demand.

Any city that ignores the threat and refuses to take up the challenge of eliminating congestion will find itself at an economic standstill by mid-century. We can solve our congestion woes. We can upgrade to an innovative, market-driven, world-class transportation infrastructure. We can change the institutions that guide our transportation decisions to create greater responsiveness, robustness, and efficiency. This project provides the ideas and tools needed to make change happen.

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Why Mobility Matters to Personal Life

By Ted Balaker

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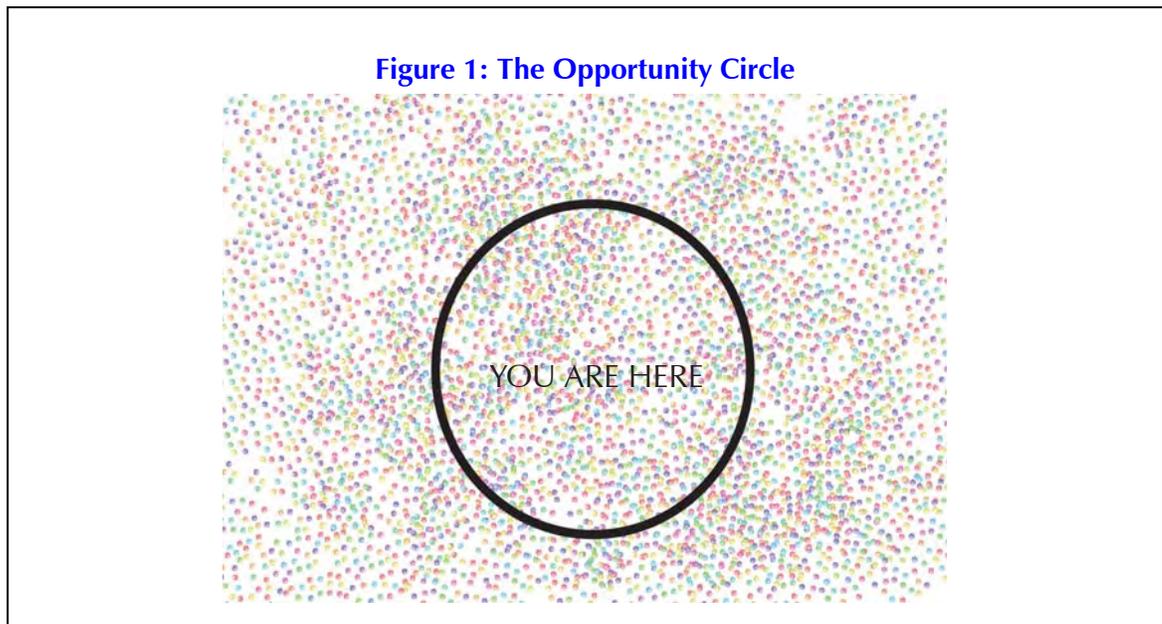
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Part I

Introduction

Americans rightly celebrate freedom of opportunity, but how far would it take us if our movement were severely restricted? How might the lack of mobility affect the kind of jobs we hold, the places we explore, or even the people we marry? The freedom of mobility helps make other freedoms more meaningful. The more mobility we enjoy, the more choices we have. Mobility gives us more of what's important in life.

Imagine that you are in the center of a circle (Figure 1). Call it your opportunity circle.



The space within the circle represents the amount of ground you can get to in a reasonable amount of time, say, one hour. The dots represent all the possible jobs you can apply for. The bigger your opportunity circle, the more jobs you can get to, and the better chance you have of landing the job that is right for you. If your mobility improves, the circle grows and you have more opportunities. If mobility degrades, the circle shrinks and you have fewer opportunities. And the dots need not represent just job opportunities. If you are an employer the dots could represent potential customers or your available labor pool. The dots could actually represent just about anything, from

dining opportunities (area restaurants) to opportunities for love (available singles). A previous policy brief (*Why Mobility Matters* available at reason.org/pb43_whymobilitymatters.pdf) takes a broad look at mobility. Here we focus on those aspects of mobility that relate to our personal lives: our relationships, family life, leisure options, state of mind, and so on.

When we enjoy efficient mobility, we can fill our personal lives with rich and varied activities thanks to what *Reason* magazine's Nick Gillespie calls a "culture boom," that is, "a massive and prolonged increase in art, music, literature, video, and other forms of creative expression."¹

Economist Tyler Cowen chronicles cultural proliferation:

*From 1965 to 1990 America grew from having 58 symphony orchestras to having nearly 300, from 27 opera companies to more than 150, and from 22 non-profit regional theaters to 500.*²

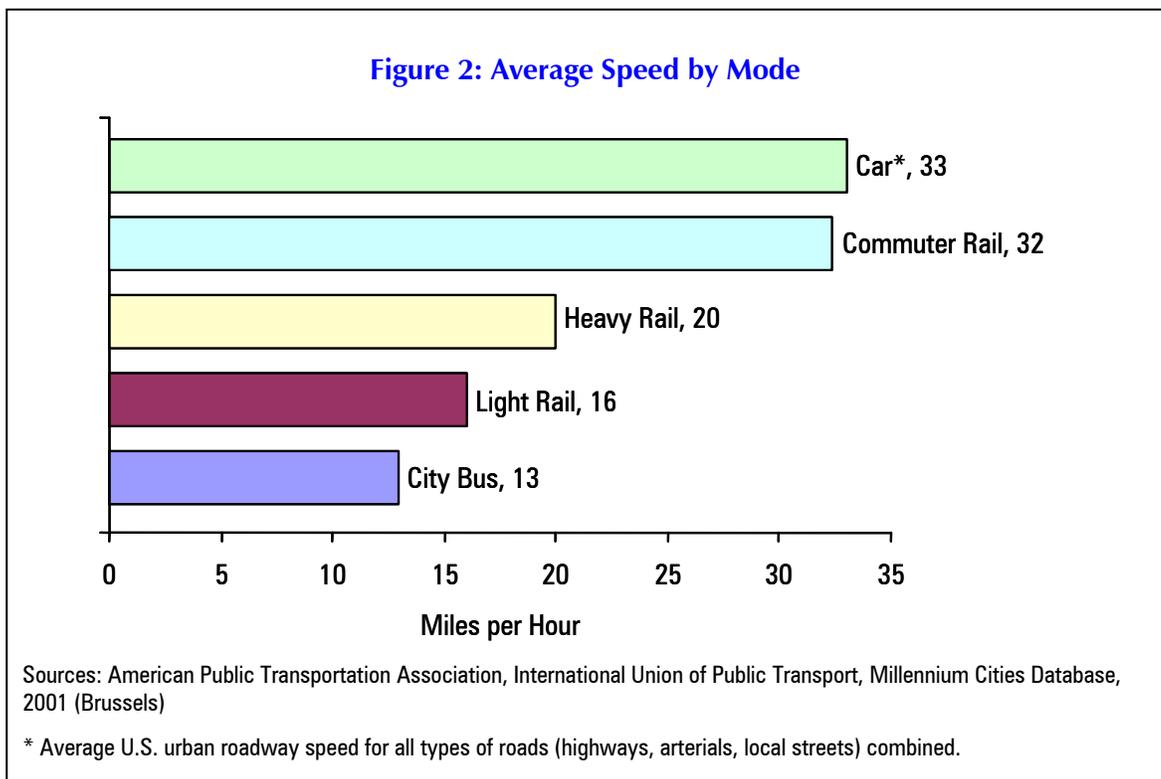
Since 1990 our culture has continued to boom. Consider, for example, that the American Symphony Orchestra League currently boasts nearly 1,000 member orchestras.³ And countless other cultural offerings—from restaurants, to health clubs, sports complexes, and art galleries—have also grown more plentiful. The more mobility we enjoy, the more we're able to take advantage of our cultural bounty.

But our ancestors had to make do with smaller opportunity circles and fewer choices. Long ago they had only their feet to rely upon. But new modes of travel—wheeled carts, animal-powered carriages, trains, cars, and planes—have allowed us to cover more ground faster.

A. What's the Best Way to Get There?

The average person can walk about four miles per hour, but cars can easily travel on arterial streets at 30 miles per hour. It's a substantial increase in speed, but the impact may be even greater than it seems. A person who walks for an hour has access to 50 square miles, but someone who drives at 30 miles per hour for 60 minutes has access to 2,827 square miles. In other words, the driver's opportunity circle is more than 56 times as large as the walker's. And when conditions permit, motorists may drive much faster on highways, thus expanding opportunity circles even more.

In many cases public transit offers greater mobility than walking and in some cases it can also beat driving. But auto travel is generally much faster than taking transit (see Figure 2).



Other factors, from transfers from one bus or train to another to time spent walking to the transit stop, make a slow transit trip even slower. Even though transit commutes typically cover shorter distances⁴, it takes the average American transit user about twice as long to get to work as the average car commuter.⁵ This holds true in some unexpected places. For many New Yorkers transit offers the fastest way to get to work, but, on average, transit commutes take much longer than auto commutes even in the New York metro area. Indeed New York's transit commuters endure the longest commutes in the nation (52 minutes each way vs. 28 minutes for solo driving). Transit commuting takes much longer than driving in many other areas with celebrated transit systems (see table).

Table 1: How Long It Takes to Get to Work		
Metro Area	Transit	Solo Driving
New York	52 minutes	28 minutes
Chicago	50 minutes	29 minutes
San Francisco	46 minutes	27 minutes
Washington, DC	47 minutes	30 minutes
Boston	44 minutes	26 minutes
Philadelphia	47 minutes	26 minutes

Source: Nancy McGuckin and Nandu Srinivasan, *Journey to Work Trends in the United States and its Major Metropolitan Areas, 1960-2000*, U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration, Publication No. FHWA-EP03058, June, 3, 2003.

Motorists enjoy additional advantages that push many people toward cars and away from transit. Travelers can reach relatively few destinations directly by transit, but motorists can go from (almost) anywhere to (almost) anywhere. Transit service frequency varies according to schedules, but motorists can travel whenever they like. Their travels are not as restrained by fatigue as are walkers and transit users who trek to and from transit stops. Simple conveniences, like trunk-space, make it easier to carry things and additional seating makes it easier to transport small children, the elderly, and handicapped. The enclosed space of a car can also spare travelers from the rain, snow, heat and humidity. And although driving brings its own risks, many people feel safer traveling at night or through unfamiliar areas within the confines of a car.

Yet, as they have always done, Americans will trade in their cars once a superior form of transportation comes along. Telecommuters already outnumber transit commuters in 27 of the top 50 metro areas, and telecommuting has already partially replaced cars for millions of American workers.⁶ And why not? Even with no traffic congestion and nothing but green lights, driving to work will never be as fast as the zero-minute commute that telecommuters enjoy. New technology has given us a new kind of mobility. Armed with cell phones, laptops and PDA's we can "be" almost anywhere without crawling into a car, train or plane. But that should not diminish the importance of "old-fashioned" mobility—moving people, parts, and products across physical space.

Although a growing number of people can work remotely, countless occupations—from hair stylist to dentist to construction worker—remain location-specific. The telecom explosion allows more business to get done over the phone or via email. The falling cost of communication has generated more communication—even across continents—and these interactions routinely result in new plans that require traditional mobility.

Recently, Austin learned that the new economy still requires efficient, old-fashioned transportation. South Korea-based Samsung considered opening a new \$3.5 billion chip plant in Austin, but company officials worried that congestion would slow the global production process—silicon wafers would be trucked from Austin to Dallas, then flown to South Korea for final processing.⁷ After local political officials committed to a congestion relief plan, Samsung decide to build the plant. Economic development benefits are soon to follow.

Business is one aspect, but in the context of personal life, physical proximity might matter even more. Even with the growing popularity of online games and shopping, many still find relaxation or stimulation by experiencing a new location. They look forward to trying a new restaurant across town, taking their kids to the park, or taking dance lessons. So when it comes to enriching our personal lives, traditional mobility does indeed matter. And, for now at least, the car usually offers the best way to stretch our circles as wide as they can be.

B. Progress Gets Stuck in Traffic

When mobility improves, our opportunity circles expand and we have access to more of what's available not only in our neighborhoods, but nearby regions. Yet how much a city offers is quite different from how much any individual denizen can access. We have come so far, but in so many places mobility is no longer improving. Mounting traffic congestion chips away at the progress we have made.

Today congestion smothers well-established areas (it's up 183 percent in Washington, D.C. since 1982) as well as upstart ones (up 475 percent in Atlanta).⁸ Not only has congestion gotten much worse in areas where we expect it to be bad, but it's also making life increasingly sluggish across the nation, from Portland to Austin to Charlotte.

The average urban American now spends 47 hours a year stuck in traffic—more than an entire work week—and it's much worse in our big cities. In Los Angeles, the average driver spends 93 hours sitting in traffic jams on the roads. In 1983, only one urbanized area, Los Angeles, had enough congestion to cause the average driver to spend more than 40 hours per year stuck in traffic. Just 20 years later, 25 areas reached this threshold (Figure 3).



The future looks bleaker still. Congestion in Los Angeles is legendary, but if officials continue to respond to the mobility crisis with a shrug, many more areas will succumb to LA-style gridlock. By 2030 11 additional urban areas (Chicago, Washington D.C., San Francisco, Atlanta, Miami, Denver, Seattle, Las Vegas, Minneapolis-St. Paul, Baltimore, Portland) will suffer through traffic

conditions as bad as or worse than present-day Los Angeles.⁹ Eighteen other areas, from Phoenix to Orlando, will endure a level of congestion only slightly less severe.

Our elected officials have been slow to address the problem, and for many years few people seemed to care. Traffic congestion was long regarded as little more than a minor annoyance. But times have changed. Former U.S. Secretary of Transportation Norman Mineta recently called gridlock “one of the single largest threats to our economic prosperity.”¹⁰ Public opinion has also changed. Silicon Valley CEOs rate traffic congestion as their second most pressing concern, as do business owners in downtown Portland, Oregon.¹¹ In its aptly titled new study *Growth or Gridlock?*, the Partnership for New York City estimates that traffic congestion saps the regional economy of as many as 52,000 jobs each year.¹² According to recent surveys, congestion is among residents’ top concerns in places as different as Denver and Washington, D.C. Residents have placed congestion atop their list of concerns in Austin, Atlanta, Houston, Portland, Los Angeles, Minneapolis-St. Paul, Sacramento, San Diego, and San Francisco. The longer public officials put off dealing with it, the more traffic congestion will transform from a minor annoyance into a force that threatens economies and quality of life, dampening our enjoyment of so many of the things that make life fun, varied, exciting, and fulfilling.

C. The Cost of Congestion

Often officials and planners tout a supposed urban renaissance in which everyone, from singles to empty-nesters, is moving to downtown centers. Although this may be true in some cases, it obscures the bigger picture and real trend: cities are losing influence.

Since 1950, suburbia accounted for more than 90 percent of the growth in our metropolitan areas.¹³ Cities like, Baltimore, Detroit, St. Louis, and Philadelphia continue to lose population and even foreign immigration cannot keep some of our most celebrated urban centers growing. In the first half of the 2000s, Chicago, San Francisco, and Boston lost population.

The situation would be less dire if demographic trends simply reflected the preference of Americans to live and work in suburban environments. Indeed the lure of suburbia has much to do with Americans’ preference for distinctly suburban features such as affordable single-family homes and backyards. And although it’s true suburbia grows more cosmopolitan all the time, cities still offer a greater concentration of cultural offerings, be they restaurants, art galleries, museums, theaters, playhouses, or most anything else.

Businesses think it wise to follow all these potential workers to the suburbs, even though a suburban environment is not inherently superior for many of them. Many businesses, families, and singles would love to stay in the city and draw on all the energy offered by agglomeration economies, but they are forced out by a variety of urban headaches, including degraded mobility.

Too many elected leaders find comfort in misleading tales of urban renaissance and too many assume that our great cities can thrive even as mobility degrades. But improving mobility is essential to ensuring our urban centers' long-term survival, and if we ignore the mobility crisis our cities will wither.

Not only are talented and energetic people increasingly choosing suburbia over city life, but sluggish urban life is also draining some of the talent and energy that remain. As travel becomes more difficult, fewer interactions take place. Vibrant competition has traditionally ensured that city dwellers enjoy the best of the best, but when mobility degrades, a city functions less like a grand urban space and more like a collection of isolated communities. Instead of traversing several neighborhoods to patronize the best establishments, denizens are more apt to resign themselves to whatever's nearby. First-rate establishments find it more difficult to attract customers and second-rate operations realize that, with less competition, they face less pressure to improve. Residents are often stuck with fewer choices, higher prices, and inferior service.

Downtown cultural institutions fret about traffic-weary would-be patrons steering clear of music, dance, and theater events.¹⁴ And often it's the offbeat establishments, the very spots that give cities their character, that are particularly vulnerable to congestion (see text box). In *Commuting in America III*, Alan Pisarski suggests that policies that suppress freewheeling travel "are destroying part of what makes a big region a great region."¹⁵

Although researchers have done their best to explain and quantify how it restrains our lives, a complete assessment of congestion's costs is hard to come by. The U.S. Department of Transportation estimates that each year traffic congestion costs the American economy about \$168 billion.¹⁶ It's a huge amount—more than the combined value of Yahoo!, Office Depot, Ford, Charles Schwab, and Walt Disney Co.—yet it still does not include all of congestion's ill effects. The figure isn't just incomplete; it's impersonal.

Others have attempted to provide a more complete and personal assessment of congestion's costs. Researchers at the Texas Transportation Institute figure that congestion costs each big-city resident \$1,000 each year.¹⁷ The figure is personal, but incomplete for it only accounts for the loss of wasted gas and time. Congestion also robs us of opportunities in more subtle ways. For example, it decreases our job opportunities. Instead of landing a more distant, but higher-paying and more fulfilling job, those living in the midst of gridlock are more likely to stick with the jobs they already have. Researchers have begun to account for how restricted mobility limits our employment opportunities and one analysis considers how cutting congestion back might enrich workers by matching them with better-paying jobs. They estimate that a 90 percent reduction in congestion in the Atlanta area would put an extra \$2,900 into the pocket of each area resident.¹⁸ An analysis of metro New York estimates that—because it limits how many trips they can make—congestion costs taxi drivers \$6,000 per year and repairmen \$7,000 per year.¹⁹

What's a Niche-Market Business to Do?

An Uzbek restaurant in LA—who knew? I didn't until I happened to drive past it one night and ever since then I've wanted to investigate. The restaurant (conveniently named Uzbekistan) sits only eight miles from my home, but a year passed before I dug into my first bowl of ogra. Why? Traffic congestion.

When I noticed the restaurant in one of the city's anonymous strip malls, my wife and I were embarrassingly late for a dinner party. We had factored in a generous amount of travel time, but the Saturday evening Hollywood traffic was downright wicked. So although I was intrigued by the mystery of central Asian cuisine, I certainly didn't want to venture into that traffic hell again.

When conversation would turn to dinner options I would think of Uzbekistan sometimes and suggest it occasionally, but only half-heartedly. For an entire year my cranky, hassle-averse self overcame my adventurous, boundary-expanding self. Whenever the spark of interest emerged, it was smothered by dreaded congestion. A clever mockumentary buoyed Uzbekistan's profile by highlighting its rivalry with Kazakhstan, but even Borat-mania couldn't propel me to Sunset and La Brea.

Then one evening my hunger coincided with the realization that it was the week after Christmas—the citywide lull when even congestion takes a break. The missus and I headed to the car, breezed all the way to Uzbekistan, and even scored a parking spot right in front.

Once inside we experienced what critics of LA miss when they fixate on the external drabness of the city's strip malls. The architectural tedium gave way to gaudy murals and a concave ceiling complete with a partly cloudy faux sky and a dangling disco ball. The synthesizer-heavy live music alternated between Uzbek tunes (or maybe they were Russian) and Sting cover songs. Most of the cocktails were vodka-based, some with simple ingredients (vodka, pickle), others a tad more elaborate like my "Asian mule" (vodka, beer and lemon juice). We enjoyed eggplant and beef salad, noodley kaurma lagman, ogra (dumpling soup), and some oh-so-juicy chicken kabobs.

No doubt congestion has thwarted the plans of other would-be diners and explorers across the city, and it's probably not those bent on experiencing something specific who get thwarted most often. Rather, it's the fence-sitters (like me) who get nudged to the "don't go" side.

Traffic congestion restrains all sorts of businesses, but the quirky ones face special challenges. We all need milk and toothpaste, so a supermarket can rely on a customer base that extends just a short distance. But businesses that cater to niche markets are especially dependent on mobility.

At any one time only a fraction of Southlanders get a hankering for Uzbek cuisine, karaoke, dance lessons, model trains, hiking trails, or any of the off-beat offerings that make cities interesting. The more ground potential customers can traverse quickly, the more actual customers establishments will attract.

A longer version of this piece appeared in the Los Angeles Business Journal.

The cost of congestion moves beyond dollars and cents when the issue turns to emergency response. A prompt response time saves a life; a sluggish one costs a life. Consider just one type of emergency—sudden cardiac arrest. Each year this emergency claims roughly 67,000 American lives.²⁰ In most of our nation's big cities only about 6 to 10 percent of those stricken are saved. These deaths are particularly tragic because this type of emergency is particularly treatable—that is, if medical care arrives quickly.

If treatment arrives within one minute, 90 percent of patients survive. At 5 minutes, survival probability drops to about 35 percent. At 10 minutes, it's zero. Even relatively modest increases in response time yield substantial benefits. An analysis of Austin emergency medical services estimates that if response times improved by just 30 seconds, 41 lives would be saved each year.²¹

Of course, quick response is not just a matter of ambulances arriving quickly. Often friends and loved ones rush patients to emergency rooms in their own cars. And speed is crucial not just for this particular medical emergency—many emergencies, medical and not medical alike, are time sensitive.

It's especially difficult to put a dollar figure on the many other ways congestion interferes with our lives. Consider the toll it takes on our personal lives—how it keeps parents away from their kids, stymies would-be love connections, and sours us on exploring our surroundings. There's also the psychological toll: how much is each gridlock-induced gray hair worth?

Part 2

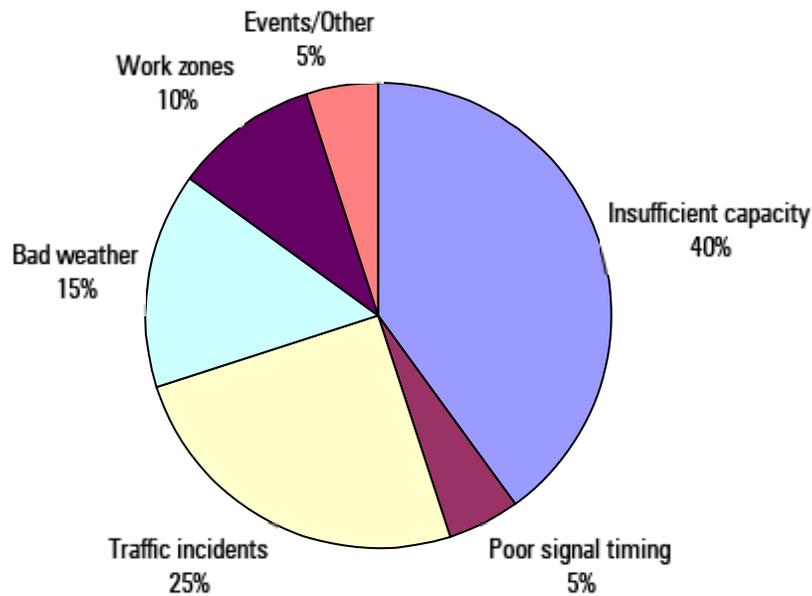
The Stress of Congestion

Everyone knows that congestion wastes time, but it does so in a way that is especially irritating. When it comes to low-grade torture, few things enrage the human animal like gridlock. Consider the very human desire to understand our surroundings. When free flowing traffic halts abruptly, our first response is “what happened!” And yet helpful information is hard to come by—it often travels only slightly faster than gridlocked speeds. Even with local radio stations announcing traffic conditions every few minutes, many motorists have learned that frequent updates aren’t necessarily helpful updates. Think of any big city. At any one time there could be dozens of traffic snarls, but traffic reporters only mention the worst of the worst. Many of us have been there. We hush our passengers, listen intently as the traffic reporter ticks through the other back ups, and then wail in agony when he doesn’t even bother to tell us why we’re trapped.

And different kinds of congestion can trigger different kinds of helplessness and stress. Many of us travel on roads that are almost always sluggish. Such trips may be frustrating, but at least we know what to expect. What’s particularly enraging is when travel becomes unpredictable.

Transportation researchers give these two kinds of congestion different names. Sometimes congestion is simply a matter of not having enough roadway space to accommodate all the cars. This is called “recurring congestion,” since it is the kind of congestion we run into on a regular basis. Then there’s the more sinister kind. New York-area commuter Dossy Shiobara notes, “It’s the exceptional or unusual situations, like the bridge jumper, or severe automobile accidents that create unusual amounts of traffic that bother me.”²²

What he’s referring to is known as “incident-related congestion.” As he explains, this type of congestion occurs when some type of incident—an accident, a stalled car, a big rig’s spilled cargo—brings traffic to a crawl. Incident-related congestion is particularly frustrating because it’s unpredictable. In fact, researchers have crunched the numbers and discovered that incident-related congestion is two and a half times as frustrating as recurrent congestion.²³ Although the breakdown varies widely by location, incident-related congestion typically accounts for half of congestion’s delay, as illustrated in Figure 4 below.

Figure 4: The Sources of Congestion (National Summary)

Source: "Traffic Congestion and Reliability: Trends and Advanced Strategies for Congestion Mitigation," Prepared for Federal Highway Administration by Cambridge Systematics, Inc. with the Texas Transportation Institute, September 1, 2005.

Travelers have a hard time planning for the unknown, and incidents by nature are unknown. One accident could double your 30-minute trip without warning. Since the element of the unknown always threatens us, travelers are forced to plan for the worst. "It will *probably* take me a half hour to get to that meeting. Then again, it *could* take twice as long." When we absolutely have to be somewhere on time—perhaps a job interview or a first date—we build in even more buffer time. Since it's so hard to predict our travel times we often overcompensate. We end up at the job interview 45 minutes early. We sit in the parking lot and our anxiety about getting there on time fades away. Boredom takes its place. We imagine all the other things we could have done with this time. Slept in more, grabbed some lunch, responded to those emails. Buffer time is wasted time, and it adds up.

Heart in San Francisco, Home in Kansas City

Although they love the San Francisco area, Wayne Brown and his wife, Teresa, decided to leave it all behind.²⁴ Steep housing costs and Wayne's treacherous commute finally proved too much to bear, and in 2005 the couple moved to suburban Kansas City. "I would find myself sitting in traffic screaming at people," Wayne recalls. When weekends came around, the two were often too worn-out from work and commuting to explore the area they loved. "During the week, it was no life," says Wayne. "And there was no way to relieve stress from work; it just continued on in my life."

During the rush-hour gauntlet we flail our arms in anger, bark at others who are competing for precious freeway space, and even lunge our cars threateningly at them. Since we're surrounded by thousands of pounds of armor and enjoy some degree of anonymity, we feel emboldened to engage in showdowns with most anyone. Dockers-clad executives and manicured soccer moms strip off the conventions of civil society, grit their teeth, and prepare for war.

In fact, some evidence suggests that the war analogy isn't just silly overstatement. Dr. David Lewis of the International Stress Management Association conducted a study of British commuters and found that—based on heart rate and blood pressure readings—they often experienced greater stress than fighter pilots going into battle.²⁵ No doubt much of the disparity has to do with personality differences. Fighter pilots are a steely bunch. They have the kind of mental toughness that allows them to stay cool in the most perilous of situations. Yet Dr. Lewis highlights another factor—control. Fighter pilots have it and stranded commuters don't.

Fighter pilots can use the whole sky to maneuver. They can bob and weave, fire at the enemy, and, if necessary, escape. Their fate is—in the most extreme sense—in their hands. But stranded commuters are at the mercy of uncontrollable forces and their inability to control their fate explains why their hearts pound with frustration.

The Stress of Transit

Long-time LA transit commuter Barbara Lott-Holland lives about 30 miles from work, yet her roundtrip commute consumes roughly four hours of each day. Bus service is often slow, spotty, and unreliable. Traffic congestion makes a bad situation worse. It's a big reason why Barbara has to add so much buffer time into her day. Will the bus arrive in five minutes or 25 minutes? Who knows?

"I have to be at work at 8 o'clock in the morning," says Barbara. "I have to be at my bus stop at 6 o'clock and the littlest variation—the bus doesn't come, it breaks down, the bus is so overcrowded that it doesn't stop for you—means that you have to wait for the next bus, and all of this is working on your nerves. It's causing you to be more tense when you get to work and makes your day longer and more exhausting."²⁶

Barbara explains that low-income people think long and hard about everything they do because it takes so long to get anywhere. They often avoid trips unless they're absolutely necessary—like picking up a child from daycare. Such trips can be particularly nerve-wracking, says Barbara "because you can't be late, because normally at child care you're docked for every five minutes that you're late. You're already in a lower-income bracket; you can't afford to pay any more for child care. Your whole day is full of stress."²⁷

Part 3

Mobility and Love Life

All across the nation, Cupid's arrow is getting stuck in traffic. Although Westchester County is geographically close to Manhattan, because travel is such a hassle, New York City singles often tag Westchesterites as “geographically undesirable.”²⁸ Thousands of Atlanta-area Match.com subscribers will not date anyone who lives more than 10 miles away. Atlanta spans nearly 2,000 square miles, but immobility limits these love seekers to a tiny corner of the metropolitan area.²⁹

Washington, D.C. might be worst of all. According to Match.com, singles there are most likely to care about how far they travel for love.³⁰ Elizabeth Reed refused to travel more than five miles for a date. “In D.C.,” she says, “five miles is the longest five miles you’ve ever traveled.”³¹

To some, particularly those in small towns and rural America, it might sound ridiculous that traffic would get between humans and what they crave most in life. Surely today's singles can deal with a longer drive, particularly since they're driving in the comfort of their leather interior, climate-controlled, satellite radio-equipped sedans. But there's little reason to launch into a “the trouble with kids today” speech. After all, some aspects of courtship are timeless, but others are quite modern.

When people lived and worked in small villages, they chose their spouses from within those small villages, local clans, and within cliques and social classes. Today mobility gives us more choices. Ever improving transportation modes—from foot to carriage to train to car—expand our dating pools. Online dating expands them still more. We don't have to settle for our acquaintances living on our block, or rely on distant relatives to arrange a date, let alone a wedding. And that's a good thing because modern love-seekers expect a lot more out of a mate.

Our spouses should not only love us, they should fulfill us, excite us, make us laugh, and make us feel better about ourselves. We want our spouses to be our best friend and our confidant. What are the chances we'll find that person living next door?

Singles can no longer assume other singles share their religious beliefs; yesterday's agrarian villages were nothing like today's vast, multicultural metropolises. Singles can no longer just assume agreement on core issues. Having kids is no longer a foregone conclusion; it's an open choice. Even if both want kids, there are still the questions of “how many?” and “when?”

And let's not forget the serendipitous side of love—the chance encounters that occur when people are allowed to churn naturally. The more they go out the better chance singles have of finding “the one.” Singles go to places—to bars, bookstores, churches, concerts, restaurants—and fall in love.

Unfortunately, many American love-seekers find that their dating pools are no longer expanding—they're shrinking. Rising congestion has begun to reverse the process that gave us more opportunities for romance. And congestion routinely compromises prime dating times. It's often at its worst on Friday and Saturday evenings. And once you do finally meet your date, the aggravation you just endured is often written all over your face. “Why would you want to show up on a first date and give that face?” asks Elizabeth.

Elizabeth did find the man of her dreams (lucky for Jay he lived 4.9 miles away from her) and they were married in 2003. But what about all those other Elizabeths and Jays who don't meet because their travel orbits never overlap? When traveling takes longer than it should, when it's more frustrating and exhausting than it should be, people do less of it. The large-scale mixing that makes cities so exhilarating becomes smaller scale. People are less inclined to experience new things, in new places, with new people. They're more inclined to mimic their ancestors and travel within the confines of their tiny, familiar orbit.

Part 4

Mobility and Married Life

Congestion can restrain singles' spontaneity, but that problem doesn't end once couples get hitched. When they go out on the town, Elizabeth and Jay usually don't stray far from their home in Arlington, Virginia. Still, one Thursday evening the couple opted to stretch their boundaries and take in a Coldplay concert. A trip that would have taken 30 minutes without congestion ended up taking two hours. Elizabeth calls the trip a "ridiculous march" and vows never to go to the Nissan Pavilion again.

That's the kind of specific experience that elicits a specific response. In this case, congestion's impact is concrete and memorable. But, as is so often the case, the victims of congestion often fail to see the extent to which they have reshaped their lives around gridlock. Elizabeth mentally "strikes out certain nights to go into the city" and when asked how it would affect her life if congestion magically vanished, she pauses. It's a surprisingly hard question because she's "gotten so used to not doing things."

Eventually Elizabeth notes that, if it were easier to get around, she and her husband would go out more often. It would really help Jay, who has a longer commute and is often exhausted and stressed out when he gets home. Jay "has to go through a decompression period," says Elizabeth.

With a decompressed and better-rested Jay, they'd do more things together, but they'd also see their friends more often too. They'd check out the nightlife in the District and they'd even venture into Baltimore.

Whether explicitly or subconsciously, many of us behave like Elizabeth and Jay. We mentally strike out more and more of our options, things we could do that would add spice, spontaneity and fun. Psychology research suggests that spontaneity—getting out of the house and doing things that break the routine—helps nurture a long-term relationship. Certainly, traffic is no excuse for living a dull life, but it's clear that congestion does have a dulling effect.

Congested Marriages

“Once you commute, you can never have dinner with your spouse again,” says Eric Larsen.³² The corporate consultant might be overstating the problem somewhat—then again, he does spend as many as four hours commuting each day. And it’s not as if he lives particularly far from his job. Eric lives in the Los Angeles suburb of El Segundo. His job is in Rosemead, 30 miles away. Without congestion, his roundtrip commute time could easily shrink to one hour. He would have three more hours each day, 15 more hours each work week.

Part 5

Mobility and Family Life

Long commutes make it more difficult for families to spend time together. The long trip home can be just a matter of distance, but as writer Brian Blum explains, congestion always looms:

The job and my home were in different cities and my travel time every morning was an hour door-to-door. Same in return. That's if I avoided traffic. Otherwise I could be in the car for three, sometimes four hours a day. It happened on one too many occasions.

To get around a totally unacceptable commuting situation, I got in the habit of beating the traffic by leaving the house at 10:00 a.m. I'd hang around the office again until sometimes as late as 9:00 p.m., long after the traffic had died down.

I'd chow down on the junk food munchies that were provided for free to other late night hangers-on, arriving back home no earlier than 10:00 p.m.

As a result, except on weekends, I was never home for my kids' bedtimes. I never got a chance to give them the tuck-in I loved as much as they did. No books before bed. No family dinners.

After three years of this crazy commute, I was frazzled and not a little bit lonely. I felt like a bad father, a rotten husband, a slave to a salary that no longer seemed worth the sacrifices.³³

Blum coped with rush-hour traffic by leaving for work after it died down. Others use the opposite strategy. They leave before rush hour. Beating traffic this way often means hitting the road while it's still dark. Alan Pisarski points out that commuters "leaving before 6 a.m., even 5 a.m., is a very rapidly growing group."³⁴ Some who work at National Airport but live in Maryland have to cross the perpetually congested Wilson Bridge. In order to avoid traffic they leave for work before 5 a.m. Once they arrive they sleep in the parking lot until their shift begins. That kind of a schedule makes it nearly impossible to see the kids off to school.

The Extended Impact of Congestion

Congestion's impact can be felt beyond the immediate family. Alan Pisarski is not just a transportation expert, he's also a grandfather. And even though his granddaughter lives in the same metro area, congestion makes it harder for him to visit her. The peak time for special events often coincides with the peak time for traffic—Friday evenings: "A half dozen times my kids have said your granddaughter is going to be in the school play, but I just don't go."³⁵ He explains that the only way he could make it on time is if he can find a way to leave at 3:30, and even then the aggravation of Friday afternoon traffic leaves him in a foul mood when the curtain rises.

A. Living Close to Work

Why don't more gridlock-weary commuters simply move closer to work? The approach certainly works for some people, but it's often more feasible in theory than in practice. It would be much easier for most of us to live closer to work if jobs and people were interchangeable. However, different jobs require different skill sets and skill levels. Different people have different talents and aspirations. If all jobs and people were identical, then more people would probably take jobs closer to home. But people don't want just any job. They want the one that offers the best combination of pay, benefits, and hours. Jobseekers consider the workplace environment, chances for advancement, and highly personal factors like how fulfilling the job is. When it comes to proximity, finding the right job is somewhat like finding the right romantic partner: chances are neither one is right around the corner.

Yet many urban planners promote the concept of "balance," in which the number of jobs roughly equals the number of workers. Some communities have actually achieved that goal, but does that mean the end of freewheeling commute patterns? Consider Fairfax County, Virginia, a rapidly growing community just outside of Washington, D.C.:

By 2000, the Fairfax job-worker ratio was effectively 1.0, that is the "perfect" situation of one job per worker. At this time, if every worker in the county worked at one of the jobs available in the county, there would have been no one entering or leaving the county to work. So, if the goal was to reduce congestion by minimizing the need for work travel, the county ostensibly would have been close to achieving it. In reality only about 53 percent of county resident workers worked in the county in 2000, a steady increase from 1990, but this still yielded a considerable need for imports and exports. The fact that large numbers of workers were moving in both directions is a measure of the differences in skills and attractions, and certainly not some kind of failure.³⁶

Even the 53 percent figure likely overstates the degree to which Fairfax workers stay close to home. After all, living and working in the same county is far different from living and working in

the same neighborhood or on the same block. One may live and work in the same county but still face a rather long journey to the office.

Moving for employment purposes makes sense if you've already been hired and you plan on staying at the job for a long time. But what if you decide to try something else? It's not clear that moving would even improve your long-term job opportunities. Say there are 1,000 jobs inside your job circle. When you move to a different part of a congested city you leave your old job circle behind. You might have *new* job opportunities, but you might not have *more* opportunities. Dual-income families (a category that represents 70 percent of workers³⁷) have even more juggling to do. Chances are both jobs won't be near each other. Moving closer to your job could mean moving farther away from your spouse's job. And if the geographic puzzle could be solved, families would still have to contend with frequent moves. A recent Bureau of Labor Statistics study found that, on average, young baby boomers held nearly 11 different jobs between the ages of 18 and 40.³⁸ Of course, if both spouses work, the goal of living near work grows even more unrealistic. Families would scarcely have time to unpack before heading off to another new home.

Even if a family were amenable to frequent uprooting, simply finding a home close to work may prove challenging. If a metro area offers a high level of mobility, house hunters can choose from among a wide assortment of properties. But traffic congestion often conspires with steep housing costs to make it even harder for people to move closer to work. In Los Angeles an artificially constrained real estate market squeezes the supply of housing and costs shoot up. The median price of a house in LA County is \$550,000.³⁹ In the ritzy parts of LA prices are even more outlandish. In Santa Monica, it's hard to buy a home for under a million dollars. The bitter mix of high housing costs and mounting congestion is something many recruits, particularly young ones, are hesitant to swallow. Yes, affordable housing does exist in LA, but it's often located in high-crime neighborhoods, the downtrodden pockets that have resisted the citywide trend of safer streets.

Schooling may further complicate matters. Many families shape their travel patterns, not around the location of their jobs, but around their children's education. After all, unlike jobs, public schools are assigned on the basis of proximity. Parents carefully shop for a house located in a good school district and when they find one this becomes the center point of their opportunity circles.

Young couples may live near a school, but once they have children they give careful consideration to whether it's the right school. Jill Cashen and Keith Ashdown love their Capitol Hill neighborhood in Washington D.C., but when the young professional couple looks at the public school their 2-year-old daughter Audrey would be assigned to they see the reason they plan to leave the city. "No child should go to school there until some serious changes are made," says Cashen. "It's certainly not an option for our child."⁴⁰

Part 6

Mobility and Fun

Mixed-use developments, and the “live, work, play” motto included in their promotional literature, have found favor among many local public officials. The idea is to put many kinds of options in the same area, so that they are easily accessible by foot or transit. Public officials hope that folks will find most of what they need nearby, so that there will be less need to drive. They often encourage and even subsidize projects that combine apartments or condominiums with employment spaces and entertainment options like restaurants and public parks.

Unfortunately, many municipalities still segregate properties by use. Retail has its designated areas, which are separate from residential, office space, and so on. Officials should liberalize land use regulations to accommodate a greater mix of uses. Even so, we must not hold to unrealistic expectations about “live, work, play” communities. We have examined some of the factors that trip up the “live, work” part of the vision, but what about “live, play”? Might people be able to satisfy their playful sides close to home?

In some cases, the answer is yes. Those who live in city centers in New York, Chicago, San Francisco and elsewhere often enjoy having a cozy restaurant a few doors down. It can be very convenient and relaxing to leave the car in the garage and take a quick stroll to dinner. The same can be said for other entertainment destinations, like parks or theaters. But whether they want to be entertained or just unwind, people don’t just care about proximity. Variety matters too.

When we head out the door, much of the fun is seeing, tasting, and experiencing something new. We seek a change in scenery. We enjoy poking around some unexplored corner of our city. Fun-seekers in the liveliest neighborhoods may be a short walk from a half-dozen quality restaurants, but after they’ve experienced each of them a few times chances are they’ll want to add new options to the mix. Efficient public transport can expand our opportunity circles somewhat, but our entertainment options explode exponentially if we enjoy speedy auto travel.

When mobility improves, we enjoy more choices, not just in restaurants, but in all aspects of the culture boom. Two decades ago who would have imagined that chefs would join the ranks of celebrities? Today Americans watch all sorts of cooking shows and buy the latest cookbooks. So many of us are eager to satisfy our inner Emeril. America’s amateur chefs enjoy hunting down ingredients—meats, cheeses, vegetables, and spices—to make their dishes just right. They head to

specialty markets. Some stores display wide organic food offerings. Others promise the freshest fish. Ethnic markets allow us to indulge in other cultures and treat our friends and family to authentic tastes. If it is difficult to get around we have to ratchet down our expectations. We have to settle for the places that are nearby. But the more mobility improves, the easier it is to get to the farmer's market, to Chinatown, or to the Italian deli.

Although America's "foodie" population has swelled, it still accounts for only a small slice of our nation. Most people's interests lie elsewhere. But whatever you do simply because you enjoy it—dance, hike, fish, hunt for antiques—improved mobility will provide you with more opportunities to do it.

Part 7

Conclusion: Toward a Mobile Society

We all endure congestion and we recognize how it pesters us on our way to and from work, so we may think we know it quite well. Few people like congestion, but few recognize the full extent of the problem. Recall Elizabeth Reed, the woman who would not travel more than five miles for a date. Although she was keenly aware of congestion's impact on her dating options, she was slow to recognize how it restrained other aspects of her life. She had "gotten so used to not doing things." Countless others of us have also gotten used to not doing things.

If we're stuck in some particularly frustrating traffic jam, we might erupt in anger. But most of the time we just surrender a little bit more because we assume that degraded mobility is the natural result of an increase in population and driving. Rarely do public officials seek to undo such feelings of surrender. Most planning agencies have decided they will not even attempt to reduce congestion—they aim only to reduce its growth. Yet if such a plan were applied to a different policy area, Americans would not stand for it. Imagine if our leaders told us that, in the future, our education system would get worse, that there's nothing we can do about it, and that all they hope to do is make test scores fall *more slowly*.

The gradual deterioration of mobility has also lulled us into making subconscious accommodations to congestion. We slowly shrink our opportunity circles. We pare back the list of things we might do if it were easier to get around. More of us mentally cross out more of our potential lives. The widespread surrender dulls individual lives, and it also dulls entire cities. As opportunity circles shrink, dynamism filters out of the city. If it were infused with the energy and talent of all its denizens, a city could grow into a grand metropolis. Sadly, urban life isn't as vibrant as it could be because too many neighborhoods function as their own little hamlets, increasingly isolated from other parts of the city.

But instead of allowing isolation and dullness to gain ground, what if we were to really ponder what we could do if our travels were speedy and predictable?

We could get to and from work, run our errands, and have more time to spend with our loved ones. We could stay home and relax or we could do just about anything—explore a new neighborhood, drop in on a friend, take in a concert, go to a new restaurant, the zoo, the park, the beach, the gym, and know that our journey would be swift.

Our culture booms with opportunity and choice, and sorting it all out is central to making the most of it. If we enjoy a high level of mobility, we can sort through many jobs and find just the right one. Likewise, mobility makes it easier to find just the right date, just the right restaurant, just the right anything. Ours is indeed a land of opportunity, but only if we can get to it.

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About the Author

Ted Balaker is a policy analyst at Reason Foundation, a nonprofit think tank advancing free mind and free markets.

Balaker is co-author, with Reason's Sam Staley, of the book *The Road More Traveled: Why the Congestion Crisis Matters More Than You Think and What We Can Do About It* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2006). U.S. Secretary of Transportation Mary Peters says, "Balaker and Staley clearly debunk the myth that there is nothing we can do about congestion." *The Washington Post* says the book offers, "a useful debunking of the myths associated with traffic," and urban scholar Joel Kotkin argues the book "should be required reading not only for planners and their students, but anyone who loves cities and wants them to thrive."

Balaker has advised legislators in several states on transportation and outsourcing policy. His recent research includes studies on urban transit and employment issues, such as offshore outsourcing and telecommuting.

Balaker's work has appeared in dozens of publications, including *Investor's Business Daily*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Orange County Register*, *Playboy*, and *The Washington Post*. He has appeared on many broadcast programs, including *The CBS Evening News* and various National Public Radio shows.

Balaker is former editor of *Privatization Watch*, a Reason publication that analyzes the latest developments in outsourcing and government reform. Prior to joining Reason, Balaker spent five years with ABC Network News producing pieces on issues such as government reform, regulation, the environment, and transportation policy.

Balaker graduated Phi Beta Kappa from the University of California, Irvine, with bachelor degrees in Political Science and English.

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