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Daily Grind

Best And Worst Cities For Commuters

Francesca Levy, 02.16.10, 6:00 AM ET

Last week a wave of bad weather buried Washington, D.C., and several Northeastern U.S. cities in snow, shutting down scores of schools, businesses and city agencies. Those unlucky enough to be summoned to work had to excavate their cars from several feet of powder or contend with stalled buses and slow trains.

While the weather was extreme, many Americans have miserable commutes year-round. In some cities, though, workers have it easy.

If you live in Salt Lake City, Utah, Buffalo, N.Y., or Rochester, N.Y., your ride to work is probably the smoothest of any big city in the country. Residents of Tampa, Fla., Detroit, Mich. and Atlanta, Ga., on the other hand, endure the most grueling slog to work.

[Full Chart: See how your city's commute ranks](#)

[In Depth: Worst Cities For Commuters](#)

[In Depth: Best Cities For Commuters](#)

There are a few elements that easy-commuting cities have in common. In those places, more workers take advantage of public transportation, walk or bike; sprawl is minimal so that workers tend to live closer to their offices; and the incidence of travel delays is low.

In Salt Lake City 20% of workers find a way to get to work besides driving alone, which leaves the roads less jammed. It's not an accident that commuters in Salt Lake have it better than elsewhere. The state of Utah has poured resources into initiatives that strengthen the city's infrastructure, including 44 miles of "hot lanes," carpool lanes that single-occupancy drivers can use for a fee, expediting their trip, and special road-construction techniques that minimize interruptions to traffic.

"This is one of the fastest-growing places in the country, and that adds to the challenge of keeping roads uncongested," says John Njord, executive director of the Utah Department of Transportation. "Keeping ahead of that curve has forced us to come up with creative solutions that impact lives as little as possible."

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Behind the Numbers

To find the cities with the best commutes, we measured travel time, road congestion and travel delays for the 60 largest Metropolitan Statistical Areas in the U.S. Using data from the U.S. Census Bureau, we calculated what percentage of commuters in each metro area took an hour or more to get to work in each of these cities in 2008, the most recent year for which these data are kept.

To find the areas with the fewest cars on the road, we next factored in the percentage of commuters who carpoled or used alternatives to driving like walking, biking or taking public transportation in 2008. We referred to this as the "green commuter" ranking. Finally, we looked at the Travel Time Index, a measure that the Texas Transportation Institute, a transportation research organization, uses to measure delays. The TTI indicates how long a commute takes during rush hour compared to the same trip in ideal conditions. A short commute is good, but a dependably short commute is even better. The most recent TTI data is from 2007, and was released in July 2009.

We ranked the metros on each of those measures, and then averaged the rankings for the final score. We gave heavier weight to travel time and congestion measures, since many of the cities have minimal differences in TTI numbers.

Size matters. Laborers zip to work more quickly in tightly packed Buffalo than anywhere else; only 3% of its commuters spend more than an hour getting to work. In Rochester, workers can count on few impediments to their trip--they're the least likely to encounter delays of any city on our list. In these two cities commuters simply traverse a smaller area; there are only 4,351 miles of road in Buffalo and 3,196 in Rochester, compared to 24,869 in sprawling Los Angeles, for example, according to the Department of Transportation.

Incidentally, residents of two cities that made our top 10, Buffalo and Cleveland, might have other things to worry about. They both appear on Forbes' list of [most miserable cities](#) (commuting time was considered for that list, among eight other metrics, including pollution, crime, weather and government corruption).

Riding the Slow Train

While a heavier reliance on public transportation can take pressure off the roads, it doesn't always translate to a better commuter experience. In New York City, a densely populated city with one of the nation's most comprehensive transit systems, 46% of commuters do something besides driving alone to get to work; that's more than anywhere else in the country. But while they might not be stranded in bumper-to-bumper traffic, commuters still contend with lengthy treks to work--20% spend an hour or more in transit. Big cities tend to have slower commutes, simply because more people are relying on the same transit system.

Tampa, Fla., comes in dead last. In fact many of the cities near the bottom of the list are in steamy Southeastern locales; the year-round swelter in these places may not be incidental to commuter unfriendliness. Pounding sun can make biking or walking to work impractical or impossible. For those opting for mass transit, high temperatures can warp rail lines, requiring commuter trains to run more slowly.

Atlanta, Ga., (no. 58 on our list) for example, has one of the worst records for green commuting: A mere 13% of commuters avoid driving alone.

Motor City Misery

Then there's Detroit. The city that comes in next to last was once at the forefront of transportation planning--the first urban freeways were built there. But its well-documented urban blight and population drain have wreaked havoc on the city's infrastructure, and the once ubiquitous presence of the auto industry decimated what was a thriving public transportation system. Now, what would normally be a 45-minute drive takes an hour at peak times, and only 12% of commuters carpool, walk, bike or use public transportation--the lowest percentage of all the cities we tracked.

Hearty state funding for infrastructure, smart policies that stem congestion and well-planned cities are the backbone of a commuter-friendly metro area. But except for telecommuters, homemakers and shut-ins, there are few who can avoid the realities of work-related travel: 86% of workers in the country brave the roads every day to get to their jobs; 60% leave the house before 8 a.m.; and the average American spends 51 minutes a day en route to and from work.

Commuting is a pain, but workers can--at least--take heart that they're not alone.

How To Cut Commuting Costs

Quick ways to save on getting to work.

1. Ask Your Boss To Help. Some employers may allow employees up to several days a week of telecommuting, while others may provide their workers with tax-free benefits for public transportation. Federal tax law also lets employees use their pretax income for public transit, and even parking.

2. Vanpooling. You might save on monthly commuting costs by joining a vanpool in which a dozen or so commuters travel together each day. Costs vary by city. Check [VPSI, Inc.](#), a vanpool service operator, for information on availability in your area.

3. Bike Sharing. The concept: Increase the number of bikes in a city, and cut down on cars and congestion. How it works: Pick up a bike in one part of the city and drop it somewhere else. Washington, D.C.'s bike-sharing initiative--[Clear Channel smartbike](#) was launched in 2008. For \$40 a year, riders get unlimited access to the system. And in the last year New York City has increased the number of new bike lanes, making it easier for those who bike to work to get there safely.

Full Chart: [See how your city's commute ranks](#)

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