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How do people get to work and how long does it take? Analyzing commutes and income in Greater Los Angeles

Annie Chan and Evelyn Blumenberg • 2024

Issue

Across Los Angeles, gentrification and housing affordability persist as key issues. Connected to this challenge is the concern that commutes have worsened over time as families searching for lower-cost housing have been pushed out of denser, more expensive urban areas. Prior studies suggest that lower-wage workers commute shorter distances than higher-wage workers.¹ In this analysis, UCLA researchers focus on commute durations. They examine income differences in commute duration and commute mode over the last 18 years. Despite rising housing prices, commute durations declined in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic — likely due to an increase in the number of remote workers and a shift toward driving.

Study Approach

Using data from the American Community Survey's one-year public use microdata sample, researchers analyze commute duration in the Los Angeles Metropolitan Area (including Los Angeles and Orange counties) by household income and travel mode, from 2005 through 2022.² Workers are then divided into two income categories: those living in households above the poverty line and those living below it.

Key Findings

For lower- and higher-income workers, the average commute duration was fairly similar over the study period, ranging from 28 to 32.3 minutes. Differences in commute times were miniscule over the entire 18-year study period. Lower-income workers averaged a commute time of 29.5 minutes and higher-income workers averaged 29.3 minutes.

The difference in commute times has to do with modality.

Controlling for mode, commute duration between the two income groups is very similar — but commute trips by public

transit, regardless of income, are about twice as long as those by automobile (Figure 1). In 2022, lower-income workers were more than twice as likely to commute by public transit compared to higher-income workers. In short, lower-income workers are more likely to take slower modes of transportation — like public transit — but travel shorter distances. Meanwhile, higher-income workers are more likely to commute by car but travel longer distances.

Across the Los Angeles region, the car is still king. From 2005 to 2022, the percentage of lower-income workers commuting by car increased by 7.2 percentage points. In comparison, auto commuting among higher-income workers, which was already high in 2005 (90.8%), increased slightly to 91.3% by 2022.

Prior to the pandemic, public transit use was already declining. In 2019, 11% of lower-income workers commuted by public transit, down from a peak of nearly 19% in 2007 (Figure 2). The recent data suggest that a greater share of lower-income workers is giving up public transit in favor of cars. In contrast, the decline in transit commuting among higher-wage workers was more modest, falling from a peak of 5.8% in 2011 to 4.8% in 2019.

Transit commuting has decreased such that by 2022, a greater share of lower-income workers walked to work (8.8%) than traveled via public transit (8.2%). Notably, this shift was not due to the increased popularity of walking. Over the 18-year study period, the walking mode share never exceeded 10%.

Commute times fell in the aftermath of the pandemic. Lower-income workers commuted 4 fewer minutes in 2022 than they did in 2019, whereas higher-income workers had a 2.4-minute shorter commute time in 2022 compared to 2019. For lower-income workers, this overall trend may be due, in part, to their increased reliance on automobiles. Additionally, the upsurge in the number of workers who now work from home likely played

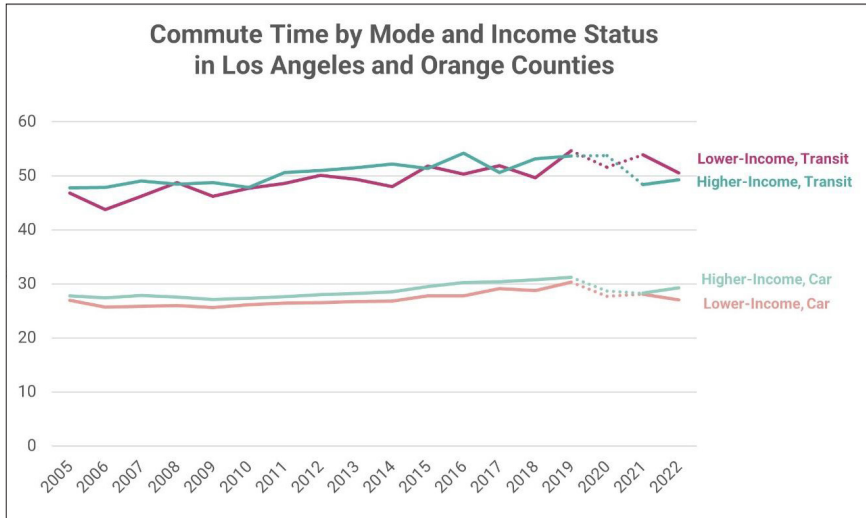


Figure 1.

Mean commute duration by year and mode, according to household income*

*The dotted lines reflect data quality issues with the 2020 ACS 1-year data, due to the disruption of Census data collection efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic.



Figure 2.

Percentage of transit and walk commuters by year and household income*

*The dotted lines reflect data quality issues with the 2020 ACS 1-year data due to the disruption of Census data collection efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic.

a role. From 2019 to 2022, the percentage of remote workers doubled among lower-income workers and nearly tripled among higher-income workers. Such significant changes in work location likely contribute to less traffic congestion during peak commuting times. Further, research shows that the workers who commuted the longest distances prior to the pandemic, disproportionately higher-income workers, were the group most likely to shift to remote work.

Conclusion

Overall, lower- and higher-income workers have similar average commute durations — but their modes of transportation differ significantly. Lower-income workers are more likely to have long commutes on public transit, whereas higher-wage workers are more likely to travel longer distances by car. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, many workers — disproportionately higher-income workers — shifted to remote work. Many lower-income workers did not have the same luxury. Instead, they experienced a considerable increase in automobile use during this time. The combination of these trends contributed to a significant decline

in commute durations across both income groups. It is too early to tell whether the temporary, pandemic-induced respite from increasing commute durations will persist and, if they do, the consequences for securing a more equitable and sustainable future in Los Angeles.

About the Authors

Annie Chan is a graduate student researcher at the UCLA Lewis Center for Regional Policy Studies.

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