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An L.A. Story: Higher Housing Costs Lengthen Commuting

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Issue

Concerns about the environmental impacts of transportation have made reducing vehicle miles traveled (VMT) a policy priority. One way to decrease VMT is to decrease the length of commuting trips, and to get commuters out of their private vehicles. Unfortunately, the average one-way commute keeps getting longer in the U.S., increasing from 25.1 to 27.6 minutes between 2005 and 2019. The percentage of work trips made by private vehicle has also soared, jumping from 66.9 percent in 1960 to 84.8 percent in 2019. As commuting typically occurs during traffic peaks, it is a major contributor to congestion and air pollution.

Although many studies have investigated the determinants of commuting, few have analyzed the linkage between housing costs and commuting. This linkage is especially salient in California given the state's perennial housing shortage and the high cost of housing, which have forced many households to move inland in search of more affordable housing at the cost of longer commutes. In the short run, heavy commuting can affect a person's well-being, degrade sleep quality, and even cause depression. In the long run, unchecked commuting growth will likely cripple California's efforts to meet its greenhouse gas emission reduction goals.

To address this gap in research, we developed a model that jointly explains commuting time and distance, and accounts for residential self-selection (i.e., where someone

chooses to live), the effect of car ownership, and key land use characteristics around both residences and workplaces. We focused on Los Angeles County as our study area. With 10.08 million residents, Los Angeles is the most populous county in the U.S. and is emblematic of the transportation and housing conundrum facing many parts of the U.S. Census data shows that the average commute time for Los Angeles County residents pre-pandemic was 32.8 minutes, 18.8 percent higher than the national average.

Key Research Findings

High housing costs lengthen commuting distance. Our results show that households which can afford more expensive neighborhoods have on average a commute that is 3.1 percent shorter for every additional \$100,000 in median home value in their residence census tract. Likewise, a \$100,000 increase in the median home value of their workplace census tract raises the average commuting distance by 2.3 percent. This suggests that longer commutes are partly a consequence of California's high housing costs.

Land use around workplaces matters for commuting. In our model, job density, distance to downtown Los Angeles, and land use diversity in the commuters' workplace census tracts have a relatively greater impact on commute length than the same characteristics around the commuters' residences. Although more land use diversity around workplaces increases the likelihood of commuting by car in LA County, higher job densities are associated with lower

car use. Somewhat surprisingly, the job-housing ratio is hardly significant, possibly because the dwellings near employment centers tend to be unaffordable.

Race, Hispanic status, income, and gender matter for explaining commuting. Compared to non-Hispanics, Hispanic workers commute longer distances (+3.5%), and so do African American (+5.1%) and Asian (+2.0%) workers compared to Whites. These findings reflect differences in wealth partly stemming from past discrimination and the history of immigration in the U.S. Moreover, commuters in the top two income brackets tend to have faster commutes than lower income workers as they have more choices when selecting the location of their residence in relation to their workplace. Our results also confirm that women have commutes that are 41.2 percent faster than men, possibly because they are often balancing an outside job with childcare and household tasks (many women simply don't have time for longer commute).

Policy Considerations

High housing costs are partly a consequence of Proposition 13. California's high housing costs are partly due to Proposition 13, which since 1978 has limited the ability of municipalities to raise property taxes. This has encouraged local governments to zone land on fiscal grounds, restricting housing production and driving up the price of the existing housing stock. In addition, NIMBYism

(i.e., Not In My Backyard) by long-time residents and other exclusionary practices adopted in the wake of Proposition 13 have displaced some low- and middle-income workers to residential communities far from their jobs.

Land use and fiscal policies can reduce commuting. One possibility for reducing exclusionary zoning (i.e., the practice of using zoning to exclude certain types of land uses or some specific groups of people, here limiting affordable housing) is tax-base sharing, where job-rich cities share their tax receipts with job-poor cities that house their workers. Tax relief and cash grants, in addition to zoning for affordable housing are others way of balancing job and housing growth. For example, Palo Alto, California, rezoned land from commercial to residential uses to attract low- and moderate-income households (known as inclusionary zoning). In Los Angeles, LA Metro, the county transit agency, has a Joint Development Affordable Housing Policy, which requires 35 percent of housing units built on its properties to be affordable for households earning up to 60 percent of the area's median income.

More Information

This policy brief is drawn from the paper "An L.A. story: The impact of housing costs on commuting" available at www.ucits.org/research-project/2020-52. For more information about findings presented in this policy brief, please contact Jean-Daniel Saphores at saphores@uci.edu.

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