



Real Estate

Best And Worst Cities For Commuters

Matt Woolsey, 04.25.08, 10:30 AM ET

The perfect commute is easy, inexpensive and reliable.

In cities boasting such factors, like [Buffalo, N.Y.](#), [Salt Lake City](#) and [Milwaukee](#), the trip to work is a breeze. But for commuters in [Atlanta](#), [Detroit](#) and [Miami](#), the daily grind is just that, thanks to bad traffic, insufficient infrastructure and drivers who resist carpools and public transportation.

Other spots that came out on top include [Oklahoma City, Okla.](#), [Pittsburgh](#), [Corpus Christi, Texas](#), and [Eugene, Ore.](#) At the bottom: [Orlando, Fla.](#), [Dallas](#), [Birmingham, Ala.](#), and [Raleigh, N.C.](#)

To find them and others, Forbes.com looked at the 75 largest metro areas in the U.S. and evaluated them based on traffic delays, travel times and how efficiently commuters use existing infrastructure, based on data from the Texas Transportation Institute and the U.S. Census Bureau's 2006 American Community Survey. The worst commutes were those that ate up the most hours and were the least reliable. The best commutes were in cities with short, dependable treks to the office, where fellow commuters efficiently use transit options to reduce congestion.

In Depth: 10 Best Cities For Commuters

In Depth: 10 Worst Cities For Commuters

In Depth: Best And Worst Commutes In Small Cities

Varying population densities and development patterns in the nation's cities make gaging efficiency difficult. In Boston, for example, jobs are mostly concentrated in and around the city center. In [Los Angeles](#), offices are more spread out. That means Boston's commuter rail and "T" systems, part of the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA), are better able to put area commuters closer to their jobs than an identical train system could do for Los Angeles commuters.

Public transit systems like the MBTA work best when they limit congestion by taking cars off the road, and thus reducing delays, travel time and increasing the predictability of a commute. Since carpooling can often accomplish the same feat, we measured a city's commuting efficiency by adding the number of people who carpool, those who take public transit and those who walk to work, and divided the sum by the city's total number of commuters, based on Census Bureau figures.

Boston scores a 23% by this measure, and Los Angeles checks in at 20%. In [San Francisco](#), an extremely efficient city, 28% of the commuters take public transit, walk or carpool, while inefficient [Kansas City, Mo.](#), scores 12% by this measure.

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A high efficiency rating also affects cost. Driving alone is more expensive than carpooling, which is typically more expensive than public transit, which is more expensive than walking. Sweet crude oil is currently selling at more than \$110 a barrel, and the less dependant commuters are on it, the cheaper the commute.

Next, we factored in delays, which are often the result of inefficient infrastructure. Los Angeles commuters may be willing to carpool or take public transit, which takes pressure off roadways, but this isn't enough to make a dent in the volume on the area's roads.

The Department of Transportation measures capacity by looking at highway miles per 10,000 people. Los Angeles ranks near the bottom, with 4.73 miles of highway per 10,000 people. [Houston](#), near the top, has 9.54 miles of highway per 10,000 people, and even a dense metro like San Francisco has 5.86 highway miles per 10,000 people.

Congestion results in places that don't have enough highway miles to handle the commuting population. To show lost time, we used Texas Transportation Institute data to rank each city by how many hours the average traveler was delayed per year as the result of traffic.

Size Matters

Population plays an important role in an area's commute. By definition, [congestion](#) is having too many commuters on the roads. The high-capacity highway system implemented in Buffalo by Robert Moses is indeed efficient, but population loss has almost as much to do with Buffalo workers' easy commute as Moses' design. In 1950, the City of Good Neighbors had quite a few more neighbors (580,000) than it does now (280,000).

What's your commute like? Weigh in. Add your thoughts in the Reader Comments section below.

Yet [Detroit](#), another city losing people, has one of America's worst commutes. Transit design in Motown is, not unexpectedly, tailored to the car--yet traffic patterns aren't smooth, since only 11% of commuters walk, carpool or take public transit. The average Detroit commuter is delayed 54 hours a year, more than residents in California's sprawling "Inland Empire" cities of San Bernardino and Riverside, who log 49 hours of delays; and more than Chicago or Boston with 46 hours each.

Even in [Houston](#), where the car is king, 17% of commuters stray from the "one worker, one car" approach, among the country's highest rates. Let alone the environmental implications of single-worker driving, it's important to consider cost. Cars are least fuel-efficient when they're idling or stuck in traffic, and households beholden to the single commuter driving are the most adversely affected by [rising gasoline costs](#).

Long Trips

Cities like Atlanta and San Bernardino, Calif., have difficult commutes as the result of sprawl. In [Atlanta](#), 12.7% of commuters spend more than an hour getting to work, and in the "Inland Empire," which includes San Bernardino and Riverside, 15% of commuters take over an hour to get to the office.

Based on commute times, we ranked each of the 75 cities we examined; they were scored positively based on the number of workers that got to work in under 20 minutes, and negatively based on those that took over an hour to get to work.

But it's important to note the trade-off: Sprawl increases driving times, but results in lower home prices. Places like Atlanta and the Inland Empire, along with many cities in Texas, have long commute times but very affordable housing. Homes in San Bernardino are \$150,000 less than in Los Angeles, at the median level, and homes in Atlanta, Houston and Dallas are all well below the national home-price average of \$206,000.

Of course, as gas prices go up, if we continue to rely on automotive transportation options, that affordable-home advantage

becomes less valuable.

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