

Lingering Effects of the Pandemic Worsen Traffic in US Cities

New Study from the Texas A&M Transportation Institute

(NEXSTAR) – A new study from the Texas A&M Transportation Institute reveals that the pandemic-era days of light traffic on the roads are long gone.

According to David Schrank, senior research scientist and primary author of the Institute's Urban Mobility Report, "Most of the country is back to its pre-COVID levels of congestion and traffic delays. In some cities, despite having fewer total commuters on the road, things have actually gotten worse when compared to 2019."

Impact of Hybrid Work Schedules

The commute has become less predictable due to the proliferation of hybrid work schedules. Schrank explains, "On any given day, everybody might be going into the office and no one is expecting it. What if next Monday everybody gets called in? Then boom – it's gridlock."

"The increased traffic has affected not only commuters but also businesses relying on timely deliveries," said transportation analyst Lisa Johnson.

Changing Commute Patterns and Traffic Delays

Flexible work schedules have stretched the commute times, with workers heading into the office later in the morning or leaving earlier in the afternoon. However, this has led to increased rush hour traffic and delays.

According to Schrank, "People have also shifted to new cities since the pandemic, heading to the suburbs and exurbs for more space, but leaving them with a longer commute now that they're back in the office."

Influence of Commercial Traffic and Warehouses

The study also highlights the role of increased commercial traffic and trucking in worsening traffic delays. Major retailers like Amazon have opened more warehouses nationwide, contributing to truck congestion on highways at all times of the day.

“Places like Columbus, Louisville, and Nashville are loaded with interstates, connecting major commercial hubs,” said Schrank. “Some of the extra traffic in these places is due to increased commercial traffic and trucking.”

Impact on Major US Cities

The study identifies the 20 metro areas with the biggest growth in traffic delays between 2019 and 2022:

- Rochester, New York (10% worse)
- Bakersfield, California (10% worse)
- Laredo, Texas (10% worse)
- Provo, Utah (9% worse)
- Louisville, Kentucky (8% worse)
- Milwaukee, Wisconsin (8% worse)
- Bridgeport-Stamford, Connecticut (8% worse)
- New Haven, Connecticut (8% worse)
- Little Rock, Arkansas (8% worse)
- Oklahoma City, Oklahoma (7% worse)
- Riverside-San Bernardino, California (7% worse)
- Salt Lake City, Utah (7% worse)
- Phoenix-Mesa, Arizona (6% worse)
- Baton Rouge, Louisiana (6% worse)
- Colorado Springs, Colorado (6% worse)
- Stockton, California (6% worse)
- Charleston-North Charleston, South Carolina (5% worse)
- Omaha, Nebraska (5% worse)
- Sacramento, California (4% worse)
- Memphis, Tennessee (4% worse)

While some larger cities like Washington, D.C., and Boston are still experiencing lower congestion than 2019, many others are seeing only slight decreases in traffic volume, making little noticeable difference to drivers.