# The Equity and Policy Implications of Long-Distance Commuting in California and the Greater Los Angeles Region

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## Project Objective

This study examined the equity implications of super-commuting in California, with a focus on the greater Los Angeles region (comprised of Imperial, Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, and Ventura counties). We analyzed equity in terms of the housing and transportation (H+T) expenditure burdens borne by super-commuters, which we define as the out-of-pocket costs of housing and transportation as a percentage of household income.

## Problem Statement

Very long commutes—or super-commutes—have long garnered outsized attention from the general public, planners, elected officials, and researchers. In the US, super-commutes are typically defined as one-way journeys to work over 50 miles in distance and/or over 90 minutes in duration. As Figure 1 shows, the percentage of California workers who super-commuted gradually increased to just under five percent (4.7%) in the years leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic. While rates of super-commuting declined during the pandemic year of 2020, they have—once again—started to climb. For some households, the expenditures associated with long commutes, particularly automobile expenses, may strain household budgets. For others, the expenditure burden of long commutes may be offset by lower housing costs in outlying areas, especially if workers are able to regularly work remotely a few days a week.

## Research Methodology

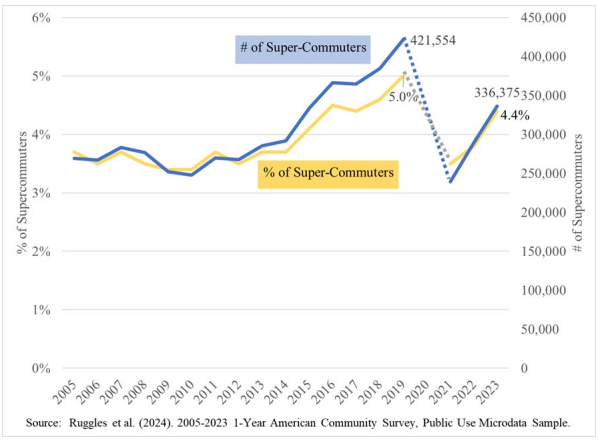
To examine these possibilities, we first analyzed the prevalence of super-commuting and the characteristics of super-commuters in the greater LA region. We then drew on neighborhood-level data to identify super-commuting hot spots in the LA region and documented the H+T expenditure burden of workers in these areas. Finally, we estimated H+T expenditures for California households with at least one worker and then developed a set of statistical models to test the relationships among the H+T expenditure burden and super-commuting, income, and other factors of interest, such as work from home, mode use, and residential location.

## Major Findings

- *Prevalence of Super-Commuting*: Despite the attention it garners, super-commuting is relatively rare; less than one in 20 (4.4%) of greater LA workers is a super-commuter (Figure 1).

- *Characteristics of Super-Commuters*: Higher-income workers are more likely to super-commute than lower-income workers. Also, super-commuters are more likely to be male,

Figure 1. # and % of Super-Commuters – LA Region

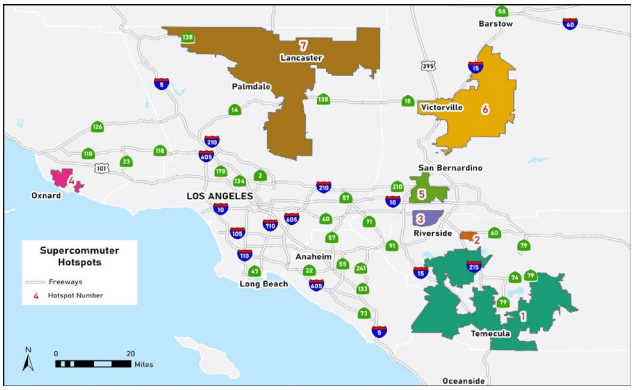



Source: Ruggles et al. (2024). 2005-2023 1-Year American Community Survey, Public Use Microdata Sample.

Black, and to commute by public transit than non-super-commuters, though most super-commuters drive to and from work.

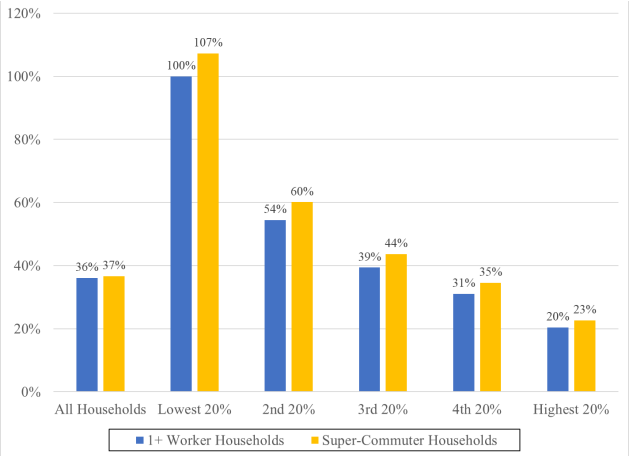
- *Super-Commuter Hot Spots*: One in four super-commuters in the Los Angeles region lives in 7 "hot spot" areas on the urban periphery of the region – Fontana-Rialto (San Bernardino County), Jurupa Valley (Riverside County), Lancaster-Palmdale (Los Angeles County), Moreno Valley (Riverside County), Oxnard (Ventura County), Perris-Elsinore-Temecula (Riverside County), and Victor Valley (San Bernardino County) (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Super-Commuter Hot Spots – LA Region




- *H+T Expenditures in Super-Commuter Hot Spots*: In almost all of the super-commuting hot spots, the average H+T expenditure burden is greater than the burden typically deemed to be affordable (45% of household income), largely due to higher-than-average transportation (rather than housing) expenditure burdens.

Figure 3. Median H+T Expenditure Burden by Household Type, CA




- *H+T Burden – California Households:* The H+T expenditure burden is highest among the lowest-income households (Figure 3). Workers in the bottom two quintiles have H+T burdens greater than 45%. Households with at least one super-commuter have higher combined housing and transportation expenditure burdens than all worker households.

- *Relationship between Super-Commuter Households and the H+T Burden*: For all worker households regardless of income, the strength of the association between super-commuting and the H+T expenditure burden is relatively modest compared to the influence of other household characteristics, such as the number of household vehicles and household size.

To summarize, outside of a few neighborhoods, super-commuters are a relatively small share of all workers and are more likely than other workers to live in higher-income households. Nevertheless, our analysis highlights two equity issues that warrant policy attention—high H+T expenditure burdens and long travel times on buses—issues that also affect low-income workers more broadly.

Broad public policy efforts to reduce commute times or to increase incomes would almost certainly reduce the number of super-commuters. Additionally, interventions to lower transportation out-of-pocket and/or housing costs would ease the household H+T burden. The findings in this regard suggest four potential points of intervention (1) expand policy efforts to offset the costs of automobile access and ownership (2) expand programs to assist low-income, first-time home buyers (3) expand state efforts to motivate local governments to zone for and entitle more housing, particularly multi-unit housing in central areas, and (4) enhance public transit in neighborhoods where transit works best.