

# Slate

## Your Commute Is Killing You

Long commutes cause obesity, neck pain, loneliness, divorce, stress, and insomnia.

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This week, researchers at Umea University in Sweden released a startling finding: Couples in which one partner commutes for longer than 45 minutes are 40 percent likelier to divorce. The Swedes could not say why. Perhaps long-distance commuters tend to be poorer or less educated, both conditions that make divorce more common. Perhaps long transit times exacerbate corrosive marital inequalities, with one partner overburdened by child care and the other

overburdened by work. But perhaps the Swedes are just telling us something we all already know, which is that commuting is bad for you. Awful, in fact.

Commuting is a migraine-inducing life-suck—a mundane task about as pleasurable as assembling flat-pack furniture or getting your license renewed, and you have to do it every day. If you are commuting, you are not spending quality time with your loved ones. You are not exercising, doing challenging work, having sex, petting your dog, or playing with your kids (or your Wii). You are not doing any of the things that make human beings happy. Instead, you are getting nauseous on a bus, jostled on a train, or cut off in traffic.

In the past decade or so, researchers have

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produced a significant body of research measuring the dreadfulness of a long commute. People with long transit times suffer from disproportionate pain, stress, obesity, and dissatisfaction. The joy of living in a big, exurban house, or that extra income leftover from your cheap rent? It is almost certainly not worth it.

First, the research proves the most obvious point: We dislike commuting itself, finding it unpleasant and stressful. In 2006, Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman and Princeton economist Alan Krueger surveyed 900 Texan women, asking them how much they enjoyed a number of common activities. Having sex came in first. Socializing after work came second. Commuting came in dead last. “Commuting in the morning appears particularly unpleasant,” the researchers noted.

That unpleasantness seems to have a spillover effect: making us less happy in general. A survey conducted last year for the Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index, for instance, found that 40 percent of employees who spend more than 90 minutes getting home from work “experienced worry for much of the previous day.” That number falls to 28 percent for those with “negligible” commutes of 10 minutes or less. Workers with very long commutes feel less rested and experience less “enjoyment,” as well.

Long commutes also make us feel lonely. Robert Putnam, the famed Harvard political scientist and author of *Bowling Alone*, names long commuting times as one of the most robust predictors of social isolation. He posits that every 10 minutes spent commuting results in 10

percent fewer “social connections.” Those social connections tend to make us feel happy and fulfilled.

Those stressful hours spent listening to drive-time radio do not merely make us less happy. They also make us less healthy. The Gallup survey, for instance, found that one in three workers with a 90-minute daily commute has recurrent neck or back problems. Our behaviors change as well, conspiring to make us less fit: When we spend more time commuting, we spend less time exercising and fixing ourselves meals at home.

According to research from Thomas James Christian of Brown University, each minute you commute is associated with “a 0.0257 minute exercise time reduction, a 0.0387 minute food preparation time reduction, and a 0.2205 minute sleep time reduction.” It does not sound like much, but it adds up. Long commutes also tend to increase the chance that a worker will make “non-grocery food purchases”—buying things like fast food—and will shift into “lower-intensity” exercise.

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It is commuting, not the total length of the workday, that matters, he found. Take a worker with a negligible commute and a 12-hour workday and a worker with an hourlong commute and a 10-hour workday. The former will have healthier habits than the latter, even though total time spent on the relatively stressful, unpleasant tasks is equal.

Plus, overall, people with long commutes are fatter, and national increases in commuting time are posited as one contributor to the obesity epidemic. Researchers at the University of California–Los Angeles, and Cal State–Long Beach, for instance, looked at the relationship between obesity and a number of lifestyle factors, such as physical activity. Vehicle-miles traveled had a stronger correlation with obesity than any other factor.

So, in summary: We hate commuting. It correlates with an increased risk of obesity, divorce, neck pain, stress, worry, and sleeplessness. It makes us eat worse and exercise less. Yet, we keep on doing it.

Indeed, average one-way commuting time has steadily crept up over the course of the past five decades, and now sits at 24 minutes (although we routinely under-report the time it really takes us to get to work). About one in six workers commutes for more than 45 minutes, each way. And about 3.5 million Americans commute a whopping 90 minutes each way—the so-called “extreme commuters,” whose number has doubled since 1990, according to the Census Bureau. They collectively spend 164 billion minutes per year shuttling to

and from work.

Why do people suffer through it? The answer mostly lies in a phrase forced on us by real-estate agents: “Drive until you qualify.” Many of us work in towns or cities where houses are expensive. The further we move from work, the more house we can afford. Given the choice between a cramped two-bedroom apartment 10 minutes from work and a spacious four-bedroom house 45 minutes from it, we often elect the latter.

For decades, economists have been warning us that when we buy at a distance, we do not tend to take the cost of our own time into account. All the way back in 1965, for instance, the economist John Kain wrote, it is “crucial that, in making longer journeys to work, households incur larger costs in both time and money. Since time is a scarce commodity, workers should demand some compensation for the time they spend in commuting.” But we tend not to, only taking the tradeoff between housing costs and transportation costs into question.

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How much would we need to be compensated to make up for the hellish experience of a long commute? Two economists at the University of Zurich, Bruno Frey and Alois Stutzer, actually went about quantifying it, in a now famous 2004 paper entitled “Stress That Doesn’t Pay: The Commuting Paradox.” They found that for an extra hour of commuting time, you would need to be compensated with a massive 40 percent increase in salary to make it worthwhile.

But wait: Isn’t the big house and the time to listen to the whole Dylan catalog worth something as well? Sure, researchers say, but not enough when it comes to the elusive metric of happiness. Given the choice between that cramped apartment and the big house, we focus on the tangible gains offered by the latter. We can see that extra bedroom. We want that extra bathtub. But we do not often use them. And we forget that additional time in the car is a constant, persistent, daily burden—if a relatively invisible one.

Do not take it lightly. People who say, “My commute is killing me!” are not exaggerators. They are realists.

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