Americans' commutes keep getting longer, according to survey data

Washington-area residents spent an average of nearly 35 minutes commuting each way in 2017, the Census Bureau reports. By **Faiz Siddiqui**

September 17, 2018

U.S. commuters spent an extra 2½ hours in transit last year, even though the average daily commute increased only about 18 seconds per trip, according to data from the Census Bureau's newly released 2017 American Community Survey.

The survey data shows that the average commute crept up to 26.9 minutes from 26.6 minutes the year before. Major cities across the country saw commute times increase, and the Washington region retained its spot as home of the second-longest travel times in the nation.

Among major metropolitan areas, the nation's capital trailed only New York, where the average one-way trip to work reached 37 minutes, a full two minutes longer than a decade prior. Washington's commute times ticked up to 34.9 minutes from 34.8 in 2016, but notably, the latest figures came in 1½ minutes longer than in 2007.

[*The American commute is worse today than it's ever been*]

That means the Washington region's commuters spent 12.5 hours more commuting last year than they did a decade ago.

Commute times have been on the rise nationwide since 2010. A March 2015 report from the Brookings Institution's Metropolitan Policy Program shed light on a key factor driving the trend: As the country has become increasingly suburban, jobs have moved farther from population centers.

"Between 2000 and 2012, the number of jobs within the typical commute distance for residents in a major metro area fell by 7 percent," the report said. Though the trend affected residents both inside and outside city limits, the trend was more pronounced for those commuting from the suburbs.

The Washington Post's Wonkblog wrote in 2016 about the larger societal implications of increasing commute times.

There's a massive body of social science and public health research on the negative effects of commuting on personal and societal well-being. Longer commutes are linked with increased rates of obesity, high cholesterol, high blood pressure, back and neck pain, divorce, depression and death.

At the societal level, people who commute more are less likely to vote. They're more likely to be absent from work. They're less likely to escape poverty. They have kids who are more likely to have emotional problems.

Rounding out the top 10 in 2017 were San Francisco (34.4 minutes); San Bernardino, Calif. (32.7 minutes); Atlanta (32.3 minutes); Chicago (31.8 minutes); Baltimore (31.5

minutes); Boston (31.4 minutes); Seattle (31 minutes); and Los Angeles (30.8 minutes), with each logging average commutes of more than 30 minutes.

Robert Puentes, president of the Eno Center for Transportation, said multiple factors could be at play, including outward migration due to the steep cost of living in and near Washington, general increases in car ownership and vehicle miles traveled, and the the continued shift of jobs out of urban cores. The post-recession workforce could mean more people are commuting to jobs, resulting in more traffic.

"The region is continuing to grow outward," Puentes said. "Jobs are continuing to decentralize. Sprawl is still kind of alive and well in many metros with the economy booming again."

Still, Puentes said, there is no single explanation for the increase in travel times -- at least not one that is readily apparent.

"If the commute itself is more stressful, that obviously has large implications for people's quality of life, satisfaction, and all these different health effects," he said. "But ... if you're walking 15 minutes it's a much different commute than if you're driving."