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# Better Parking Policy Can Make California Transportation More Sustainable

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## Issue

California emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic with a renewed commitment to sustainable, functional transportation. In some ways, the pandemic itself offered a glimpse of what a system built on those goals might offer. Driving plunged during the COVID lockdowns, and congestion and pollution fell alongside it. Parking spaces were repurposed for dining, revealing the vast amount of space cities had used to store empty vehicles. Traffic was lighter, the air was cleaner, and in at least some regards the streets were livelier. Can the state keep or recapture some of these benefits going forward? If so, how?

These aren't easy questions to answer. For one, the decline in driving was accompanied by a great deal of economic pain. Much of the pandemic's reduced travel occurred because people lost earnings. That's not the policy path we want to follow. Even among people who kept their jobs, moreover, driving rates were low because destinations were few: much work was remote, and many shops, restaurants and other destinations were closed or restricted. Additionally, while driving fell, transit did too. And transit, unlike driving, has struggled to recover.

The challenge, then, lies in getting some of reduced driving's benefits while avoiding its potential costs. An ideal policy might encourage people who can do so to work from home, nudge people to make fewer vehicle trips and more transit trips, and hold down driving and its associated externalities even when the economy has roared back to life.

No single policy will accomplish these goals. California could, however, make progress toward these goals by changing the way it regulates parking. Until very recently, parking in almost every California city was not just highly regulated but regulated in a way that kept its prices low. Cities keep most curb spaces free for drivers and (despite some recent legislation) require almost all new developments to provide ample off-street parking. This combination makes parking artificially inexpensive. Because parking is a complement to driving, and because it is also antithetical to density, policies that make parking abundant and inexpensive make driving more appealing and transit less so. A more laissez-faire approach to parking--one that allows prices to be set by supply and demand, and lets developers rather than cities determine the supply-- could nudge more people to drive less and take transit more.

We examined these ideas using the California Household Travel Survey (CHTS), which is unique in its detailed data on personal travel and the price and availability of parking. In particular, we investigated how the availability of free parking related to people's decisions to drive, use transit, and work from home.

## Key Research Findings

**The typical California vehicle spends most of its life parked, and most of that parking is free.** In our data, the median household vehicle in California is parked 23 hours a day. Eighty-nine percent of California households have free

parking at home, and 80% have free parking at work. The vast majority of trips end in a free parking space, usually an off-street space.

**Californians with free parking at home own more cars, drive more miles, and take fewer transit trips than households without free parking at home.** Even after controlling for a wide array of neighborhood and socioeconomic characteristics, our analysis suggests that “bundled” residential parking — parking included in the rent or purchase price of a home — is associated, at the person and household level, with more vehicle ownership, more vehicle travel, and less transit use. Importantly, households with bundled parking drive more even when we control for the number of vehicles and licensed drivers they have.

**Californians with free parking at work are more likely to commute by driving.** In raw terms, 95% of people with free parking at work drive to work, and less than 1% take transit. In comparison, only 37% of people without free parking at work drive to work, while 28% take transit. These simple averages do not account for other factors influencing travel decisions, such as income or vehicle availability, but when we control for such factors the differences remain striking. California workers with free parking at work are 12 to 22 times more likely to drive for their commute.

**Parking doesn’t appear to be strongly correlated with teleworking.** In our analysis, working from home was

associated with neither free parking at home nor at work. A potential reason for this null result is that the CHTS does not distinguish between teleworking (i.e., working remotely for a job that has an external office) and home-based work (e.g., giving piano lessons from one’s house). These two forms of work could have quite different associations with the built environment. People might be more likely to telework if parking near the home is scarce (they don’t want the hassle of finding parking when they come home) but more likely to work from home if parking is abundant (piano students can easily park when they come over for lessons).

**It isn’t clear that teleworkers actually drive less.** In our data, households with people who work from home report slightly lower levels of driving than otherwise similar households who do not have a home-based worker. It’s important to emphasize, however, that the overall research literature does not reach a conclusion about whether teleworking reduces overall driving. It also does not reach a definitive conclusion about what it does to overall productivity. These remain important areas for further research.

## More Information

This policy brief is drawn from the report “Parking, Working from Home, and Travel Behavior” by Hao Ding and Michael Manville, both of UCLA. The report can be found at <https://www.ucits.org/research-project/rimi-4l-01>.

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