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Who has the longest auto commutes?

Comparing commute duration by race/ethnicity in Los Angeles and the Inland Empire

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High housing prices have become a defining aspect of many coastal regions in the United States. For some families, these rising costs may motivate them to move further away in search of more affordable housing options. Specifically, prior studies identify housing costs as the prime reason for the exodus of Black families from Los Angeles (Los Angeles and Orange counties) to the less densely populated Inland Empire (Riverside and San Bernardino counties) — the 2022 average monthly rent in the Inland Empire was more than \$300 dollars lower than in Los Angeles. Meanwhile, the median commute distance for workers in Riverside and San Bernardino counties is nearly twice as long as that of workers in Los Angeles and Orange counties.¹ Thus, as economists have long predicted, many Southern California residents may have to trade lower housing costs for substantially longer commutes. In this analysis, researchers assess recent changes in the workforce and compare auto commute durations by race/ethnicity across these two geographic regions to determine the existence and magnitude of disparities in commute durations.

Study Approach

Data from the American Community Survey's one-year public use microdata sample was used within this study to compare commute duration in the Los Angeles Metropolitan Area (Los Angeles and Orange counties) to that of the Inland Empire (Riverside and San Bernardino counties) by race/ethnicity, from 2005 to 2022.² Due to the limited sample size, researchers focused specifically on the four largest racial and ethnic groups (Latino, Asian, Black, and white workers) and auto commuters, who in 2022 comprised nearly 91% of commuters in the Los Angeles Metropolitan Area (MSA) and 96% of commuters in the Inland Empire. Transit commute mode share was not studied further because it was relatively low across both geographic regions, peaking at 1.9% in the Inland Empire in 2008 and 6.7% in the Los Angeles MSA in 2011. By focusing on a single commute mode, researchers were able to more clearly determine differences in commute duration across racial/ethnic groups

within a region (commute duration gaps) and within racial/ethnic groups across the two regions (within-group differences).

Key Findings

Workforce demographics noticeably shifted in Los Angeles and the Inland Empire over the 18-year study period, driven by the growth in the Latino workforce. The percentage of the workforce that was Latino rose from 41% to 45% in Los Angeles and from 41% to 55% in the Inland Empire. In contrast, the percentage of the white workforce declined sharply in both regions, from 36% to 29% in Los Angeles and from 44% to 27% in the Inland Empire. There were modest gains in the Asian workforce in both regions, whereas the percentage of the workforce that was Black declined slightly in Los Angeles and remained steady in the Inland Empire.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the duration of commutes by car rose for all racial/ethnic groups. Latino workers in Los Angeles experienced the largest increase in commute durations, which jumped 14% from 2005 to 2019 (Figure 1). More generally, auto commute durations were longer in the Inland Empire than in Los Angeles for all racial/ethnic groups.

The auto commute duration gap relative to white workers was typically widest for Black workers. The gap was most pronounced in the Inland Empire, where Black workers had the longest commutes relative to white workers in all but two years of the study period (Figure 1). In the Los Angeles MSA, the Black-white commute duration gap was narrower but increased leading up to the pandemic. Differences in auto commute times echo the findings of other studies, reflecting the persistent role of race in both residential and labor market segregation.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Latino and white workers in Los Angeles had approximately the same auto commute duration. This finding stands in stark contrast to the racialized difference in commute times between Black and white workers



Figure 1.

Car commute duration by race/ethnicity in Los Angeles and Orange counties (left) and Riverside and San Bernardino counties (right). *Dotted lines reflect the U.S. Census Bureau’s statement that the pandemic’s disruption resulted in data quality issues with the 2020 ACS 1-year data.

mentioned above. Meanwhile in the Inland Empire, not only did Latino workers consistently have the narrowest gap relative to white workers, but Latino workers also had the shortest auto commute durations of the four major racial/ethnic groups in all but one year (2008).

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, within-group differences in auto commute time between Los Angeles and the Inland Empire were often narrowest for Latino workers. For example, in 2019, the commutes of Latino workers in Los Angeles were 2.6 minutes shorter than those of Latino workers in the Inland Empire. Conversely, the difference in commute times between Los Angeles and the Inland Empire was often widest for Black workers prior to COVID, though the difference had narrowed leading up to the pandemic.

Most workers had shorter auto commutes in 2022 compared to 2019, although the magnitude of the decline varied across racial/ethnic groups. The commute durations for Black workers in both Los Angeles and the Inland Empire have nearly returned to pre-pandemic levels. Meanwhile, there were larger decreases in commute times for Latino workers in both regions.

Conclusion

As anticipated, this study finds that workers in the Inland Empire had longer auto commute durations than workers in Los Angeles. Still, across both geographic regions, Black workers consistently had the longest commute durations amongst the four racial/ethnic groups. In contrast, Latino workers had the shortest auto commute durations in the Inland Empire. Prior to the pandemic, Latino workers in Los Angeles also had among the shortest

commute times, comparable to those of white workers. These larger trends suggest underlying differences in the housing and labor market opportunities available to Black and Latino workers. Moving forward, it is not yet clear if these differences will persist, as the dust has not fully settled with respect to pandemic-related behavioral changes, such as the rise in remote work and shifts in mode choice and residential location. Further data and analysis is ultimately needed to better understand existing and future racial/ethnic variation in commute duration in Southern California.

About the Authors

Annie Chan is a graduate student researcher at the UCLA Lewis Center for Regional Policy Studies.

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