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What's Driving California?: The Past, Present, and Future(s) of Transportation



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Issue

Nearly every aspect of social, economic, and political life in California is linked by its transportation systems. These systems can seem seamless and transparent when they work well, but their failings can be glaring when they falter and leave behind people, goods, or places.

In March 2020, the global pandemic cast the central role of transportation in the sharpest possible relief. While millions of California workers shifted to remote work, millions more still traveled to their essential jobs. By fall 2021, the state's streets and roads were gradually refilling, bringing its many longstanding transportation problems, and some new ones, to the fore.

At this critical juncture, this study for the California 100 Initiative examined the transportation landscape in California: where we are today, how we got here, and where we might be headed.

Californians are highly reliant on personal vehicles to get around. The vast majority of personal travel in California is by car across all socioeconomic groups. Lower-income and non-white households somewhat more frequently use other travel modes, like walking and public transit. However, even though most transit users are low-income, most low-income travelers still get around in automobiles.

Californians' dependence on cars and trucks is due substantially to the state's massive investments in freeways and land use policies that have supported building out rather than up. Suburban living and widespread automobile access have been enjoyed by many but have come at the cost of increasing travel distances, chronic traffic congestion, health- and environment-threatening vehicle emissions, and a deepening housing affordability crisis. Today's transportation problems originate, in significant part, from yesterday's land use decisions.

Research Findings

- While the typical Californian drives less than the average American, better than four in five person-trips statewide are via car, truck, or motorcycle, and well over half of those trips involve driving alone (see Figure 1). Although individual Californians are taking fewer trips in recent years, their reduced vehicle travel for personal trips is more than offset by increases in commercial travel, including small package deliveries that are replacing household shopping trips.
- For the past several decades, the state has invested heavily in improving its public transit systems, especially rail transit. But transit use in the state declined 15% from 2014 through 2019, particularly bus ridership.

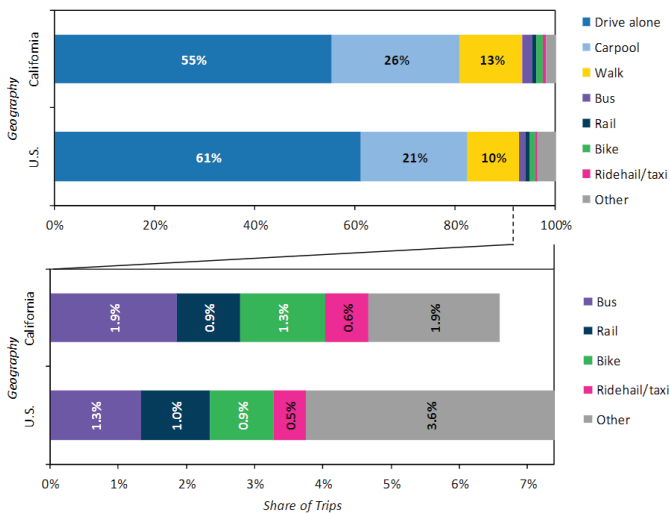


Figure 1: Travel Mode Share, 2017
 Data Source: FHWA (2017). National Household Travel Survey.
<https://nhts.ornl.gov/downloads>.

- Behind the continued high use of automobiles and the pre-pandemic drops in transit ridership is rising levels of vehicle ownership, particularly outside of the San Francisco Bay Area.
- The Ports of Long Beach and Los Angeles, combined, are the largest in the Western Hemisphere and handle about 40% of U.S. container imports. Despite California’s considerable seaport, airport, and railroad infrastructure, commercial travel in the state is mostly via truck.
- California’s transportation networks are becoming increasingly vulnerable to disruption, such as wildfires, sea-level rise, earthquakes, and pandemics.

Conclusions

- The state’s massive investments in freeways and most local land use policies over the past century have been highly complementary to driving. Low-density land uses, exemplified by dispersed single-family housing, have encouraged automobile ownership and driving for almost all trips.



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- As housing in California is increasingly undersupplied, the separation between jobs and housing has grown as many residents drive further and further in search of affordable housing. The robust growth of goods movement has led to ever larger warehousing facilities that sprawl as well.
- While funding for motor vehicle infrastructure still dwarfs that for other modes, California’s financial and political commitment to a multimodal future is a substantial countervailing force to historic auto-oriented expenditure patterns, especially at the local level.
- Three technological revolutions — vehicle electrification, shared and connected mobility services, and vehicle automation — along with likely increases in post-pandemic telework, may shape California travel in the years ahead, though their timelines and scale remain hotly debated.
- Shifting from historic patterns of low-density, single-family development to much denser multi-unit (and affordable) housing, in conjunction with shifting from encouraging driving and parking to managing them, could put California on a more affordable and environmentally sustainable path. But old habits die hard, and such shifts are often met with fierce opposition from homeowners and drivers. But the economic, social justice, and environmental costs of sticking to California’s present land use and transportation paths will only continue to grow.

More Information

This policy brief is drawn from the “What’s Driving California?: The Past, Present, and Future(s) of Transportation in the Golden State” research report by the UCLA Institute of Transportation Studies, as part of the California 100 Initiative. The full report can be found at <https://www.its.ucla.edu/project/tracks-to-californias-transportation-future/>.