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U.S. NEWS

# More Commuters Go It Alone

*Americans Increasingly Go Solo or Work From Home; Carpooling Now Below 10%*

By NEIL SHAH

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American commuters prefer to go it alone—mostly by driving to the office, but increasingly by working from home.

Last year, about 76% of workers 16 years and older drove to work alone—just shy of the all-time peak of 77% in 2005, according to data from the Census Bureau's American Community Survey. Driving alone dipped slightly during the recession, but it has been ticking back up as the economy revives.



Tim Anson, an architect in Birmingham, Ala., says he has no viable options for commuting, other than driving alone 25 minutes each way to an office park south of the city. *Wes Frazer for The Wall Street Journal*

Meanwhile, just about every other way of getting to work has either languished or declined. Carpooling has tanked—falling from about 20% in 1980, when gasoline prices were soaring from the oil shock of the late 1970s, to under 10% in 2012. Public transportation accounted for just over 6% of daily commutes in 1980 and is now 5%. A category the Census calls "other means"—which includes biking—stands at 2%, largely unchanged over the past decade.

These commuting trends come despite efforts to get people to use public transportation or other alternatives. And a variety of forces are coming together to ensure that Americans continue to seek out lonely commutes—and the numbers could grow.

Tim Anson, 35 years old, an architect in Birmingham, Ala., is one of America's solo commuters. He drives about 25 minutes to work—roughly the national average—from his home near downtown to an office park in a suburb south of the city.

He says he has no viable or appealing alternative. "Biking would be practically impossible," he said. While he recently helped a colleague with car trouble get to work, he generally thinks carpooling means less freedom. "If you're carpooling with someone, you find yourself on someone else's schedule," he said.

### Related Video



What makes for a perfect commute? Researchers are finding it's as much about what you do while traveling as it

is how long you travel. Sue Shellenbarger and transportation consultant Alan Pisarski join Lunch Break with details. Photo: Getty.

## Audio

WSJ This Morning's Gordon Deal speaks with Neil Shah about commuting by car.

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The only area of commuting that has seen clear growth is working from home—which has doubled to 4%, up from 2% in 1980. Technological advances are making it easier to work from home, sparking a debate among business executives, especially in tech centers, over the benefits of telecommuting. Yahoo Inc. Chief Executive [Marissa Mayer](#) created a stir earlier this year when she ended the firm's work-from-home arrangements.

"It used to be, 30 years ago, to work from home, you had to take something like a 20% wage cut, all else equal. Now that

wage cut has vanished," said Nicholas Bloom, an economics professor at Stanford University.

James DeMichele, 33, a software developer in Austin, Texas, has worked from home for four years, and stays in touch with the office via Skype. He misses the "social aspect" of being in an office and says it's useful to be face to face with colleagues when planning projects. But at other times, "being at home is really useful in terms of being productive," he said.

And there's another advantage: Mr. DeMichele and his wife had a daughter earlier this year. "Having the flexibility of being able to watch after her is really good, too," Mr. DeMichele said.

The share of Americans driving to work has always been high—climbing steadily from roughly 64% in 1960, when the Census began tracking commuting—and various demographic forces could ensure that it stays high or even rises further.

More older Americans are working past retirement, which can mean more car commutes or work-from-home arrangements. And car use among lower-income Americans and minorities has generally been rising, according to Mark Mather of the Population Reference Bureau, a nonprofit demographic research group. For instance, the share of black U.S. workers driving to jobs hit 71% in 2010, up from 66% in 2000, census data show.



'Biking would be practically impossible,' Anson says. *Wes Frazer for The Wall Street Journal*

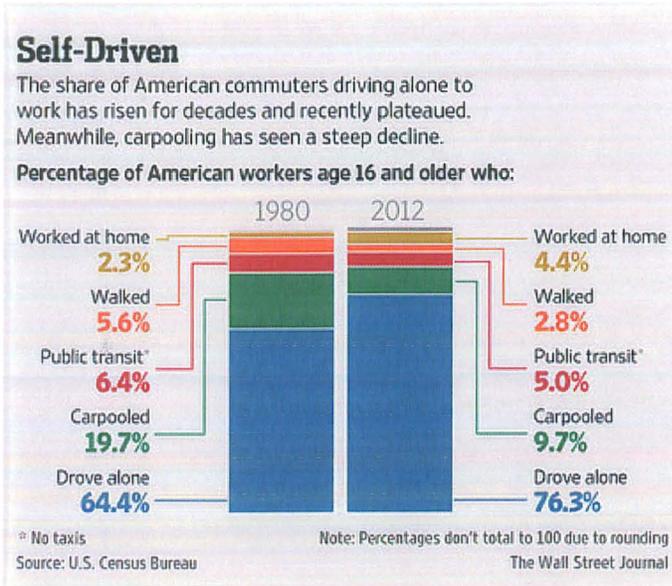
At the same time, work and home are, for many people, getting farther apart geographically. That trend makes cars, which offer more flexibility, more attractive to commuters. Plus, around 45% of American households have no access to public transportation.

To be sure, national and even state trends can mask changes in cities. Alabama's share of solo drivers has risen from 83% in 2008 to over 85% in 2012—the highest in the country. Meanwhile, New York, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C., have seen decreases in their shares of workers driving alone, and increases in the use of mass transit, biking and working from home, census data show.

America's commuting patterns are a politically sensitive issue due to rising concerns about the nation's obesity rates and the environment. Mass transit, carpooling, biking and walking have been touted by advocates as ways to build civic camaraderie, make Americans healthier and preserve the environment.

But others say the nation's love affair with cars—and the growing trend of home workers—simply reflects the changing way Americans work and live, from the rise of two-worker households in recent decades to

the fact that attractive jobs, homes and schools are often farther away from each other rather than clustered together in old-style urban neighborhoods.



Many people "relish the time to be alone," said Alan Pisarski, a transportation consultant and author of "Commuting in America," a series of commuting studies for the Transportation Research Board, part of the National Research Council.

Workers, especially younger ones, increasingly mix their commuting modes—driving alone one day, but then taking the bus or biking the next, said Peter Varga, chairman of the American Public Transportation Association.

Tracy Sunderland, a professor in Boise, Idaho, recently got a bicycle and uses it to get to work sometimes. "I ride it to work when I can—not as much as I should," she said. "Sometimes I'm prepping for class

right until I have to be there." More often, the 48-year-old relies on her 1997 Nissan Pathfinder, since the city's buses run infrequently. Driving, she said, is generally more convenient. "Like a lot of Western cities, Boise sprawls."

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