

26 Commuting rebounds after having declined during COVID-19

In May 2023, data from the Labour Force Survey (LFS)^a showed that 15.9 million workers aged 15 to 69 in Canada's 10 provinces commuted to work.^{1,2} Over the last 30 years, the number of people who commuted to work increased in every census except in 2021, partly due to public health measures and work-from-home policies in place during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Data from the 2021 Census show that, on average, commuters aged 15 and older spent 23.7 minutes per day travelling one-way to work, down from 25.4 minutes in 2011.³ Men had a longer average commute time (25.6 minutes) than women (21.6 minutes).⁴ Men (8.5%) were also more likely than women (5.4%) to report commuting 60 minutes or more each day after they left for work. This gap was partly the result of gender differences in the workforces of industries and occupations in which longer commutes are more or less common, for example, construction, mining, and fishing.³

The most common form of commuting in 2021 was with a car, truck, or van (83.9%), followed by public transit (7.7%), and

active transportation (6.2%) such as walking or biking.⁴ The remaining 2.2% of commuters travelled to work via motorcycle, scooter, moped, or with some other form of transportation. Those taking public transit had the longest average one-way commute time of 42.9 minutes.³ This was approximately double the time spent by those travelling by car, truck, or van (22.8 minutes) and bicycle (20.0 minutes).

The longest average one-way commute times in 2021 were in Canada's most populous cities. In Toronto it was 29.8 minutes, followed by 27.3 minutes in Vancouver, and 27.0 minutes in Montreal.³ That year, 7.1% of workers across the country had daily commuting times exceeding 60 minutes per day, ranging from 2.3% in the territories to 9.1% in Ontario.⁴

In 2021, employees without a fixed place of work (e.g., construction, transportation, salespersons) were nearly three times as likely as those with a usual place of work to commute for 60 minutes or more every work day by car (14.6% and 5.6%, respectively).¹ Approximately one in eight commuters (16.9%) had no fixed workplace



address in 2021, more than double the percentage in 1996 (the earliest year for which this data is available), when it stood at 7.6%.⁵

Patterns of commuting can change over time for a variety of reasons. These include population shifts (e.g., urbanization, increased mobility), evolving business practices, the availability and effectiveness of infrastructure, and economic considerations.² Historical population growth in recent years may also contribute to patterns of commuting, since most newcomers to Canada settle in cities,⁶ where long commutes are more common.

Why this matters

For most workers, commuting is an unavoidable part of earning family income. For some, it can occupy a substantial part of their day. It is worth emphasizing that the commuting data are for one-way trips, so they only reflect half of the commuting journey.⁷ Family life can be affected when

workers face difficulties integrating work and family responsibilities or other activities due to lengthy commute times.⁸ Long commutes have a well-documented negative impact on workers' health and their ability to maintain work-life balance.⁹ Time spent commuting has been linked to lower levels of life satisfaction and increased feelings of time pressure.¹⁰

Along with better health outcomes, lower commute times also contribute to lower greenhouse gas emissions and other pollutants. Between 2019 and 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions began, emissions from road transportation dropped by 14.4%.¹¹ A large and growing body of research has associated traffic-related air pollution, which is prevalent in urban centres and near many highways, with a wide range of adverse effects on population health and socioeconomic costs.¹² For example, one 2023 study estimated that one-fifth of new cases of childhood asthma in Canada are caused by traffic pollution.¹³

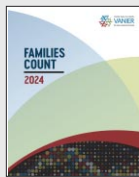
^a Data from the LFS excludes the territories, persons living on reserves, full-time members of the regular Canadian Armed Forces, and persons living in institutions.



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Families Count 2024 is a publication of the Vanier Institute of the Family that provides accurate and timely information on families and family life in Canada. Written in plain language, it features chapters on diverse topics and trends that have shaped families in Canada. Its four sections (Family Structure, Family Work, Family Identity, and Family Wellbeing) are guided by the [Family Diversities and Wellbeing Framework](#).

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How to cite this document:

Battams, N. (2024). Commuting rebounds after having declined during COVID-19. In *Families count 2024*, The Vanier Institute of the Family. <https://vanierinstitute.ca/families-count-2024/commuting-rebounds-after-having-declined-during-COVID-19>

