

The Antiplanner

Dedicated to the Sunset of Government Planning



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Trucks, Congestion, and Class Conflict

“During the pandemic lockdowns, the email jobs caste [meaning remote workers] loved to talk about essential workers,” observes Marxist writer Malcom Kyeyune, but they now regard those workers with [“outright hatred.”](#) His fellow leftists claim to speak for the working class, charges Kyeyune, but in fact the leftist movement and the working-class movement have “divorced.”

Kyeyune was writing about the Canadian truckers who object to mandatory vaccinations, but he also mentioned European truckers who [protested high fuel taxes](#) a few years ago. In the United States, middle-class progressives have come to depend on truckers to deliver all the stuff they order from Amazon but do everything they can to make the daily lives of those truckers miserable.

Bottlenecks and the Working Class

Last week, the [American Transportation Research Institute](#)—whose web address, [truckingresearch.org](#), reveals the type of transportation it focuses on—released its 2022 list of the [top 100 truck bottlenecks](#) on America’s highway system. The good news: congestion is not as bad as it was in 2019. Average peak-hour speeds at the top 100 bottlenecks of 2021 were 39 miles per hour compared with 34 mph in 2019. The bad news: congestion is worse than it was in 2020 and getting worse.

Disturbingly, the 2022 list isn’t much different from the [2019 list](#): 78 bottlenecks listed in 2019 are also on the 2022 list and seven of the top ten 2019 bottlenecks are also in the top ten in 2022. This lack of progress is for the very good reason that the same progressives who claim to care about essential workers object to any highway improvements that would relieve congestion for truckers and other working-class people who have to get to work on time.

For example, bottleneck [number 28](#) on the 2022 trucker list, which was also [bottleneck 28](#) on the 2019 list, is the junction of Interstate 5 and Interstate 84 in Portland, which hasn’t been altered since the 1960s. The

Oregon Department of Transportation has been seeking to improve this bottleneck for years, but proposals to do so bring out [waves of opposition](#) from enlightened Portlanders who think that everything should be delivered by bicycle carrier, not Diesel trucks. Remarkably, Oregon’s Democratic Governor Kate Brown managed to [persuade local officials](#) to support the project provided part of the I-5 freeway is “capped” to reconnect a neighborhood that was split by the freeway in the 1960s, but it will probably be years before construction begins.

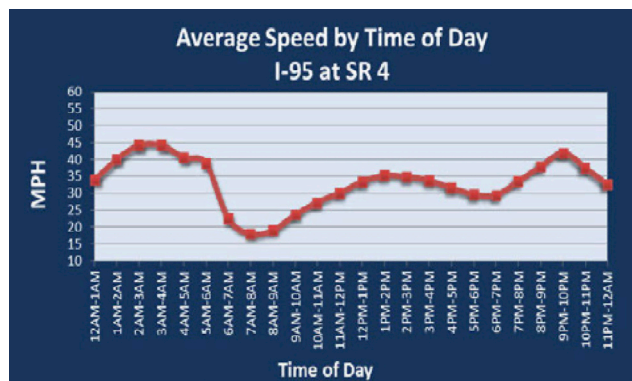
Some might think that passage of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, which included \$110 billion for highways, will help relieve congestion and bottlenecks. However, despite [objections from Republicans](#), Biden’s Department of Transportation is [discouraging the states](#) from using the funds for projects that would expand highway capacities. As “everyone knows” (even though it’s [not true](#)), building new roads only makes congestion worse, so the states are supposed to consider transit projects instead (even though many of them really do make congestion worse).

For truckers, less congestion means being able to deliver more loads per week, and since many truckers are paid by the load, congestion eats into their incomes. The American Transportation Research Institute estimates that congestion cost truckers almost [\\$75 billion](#) in 2019. That’s on top of the cost of congestion to commuters, which the Texas Transportation Institute estimates was [\\$190 billion](#) in 2019.

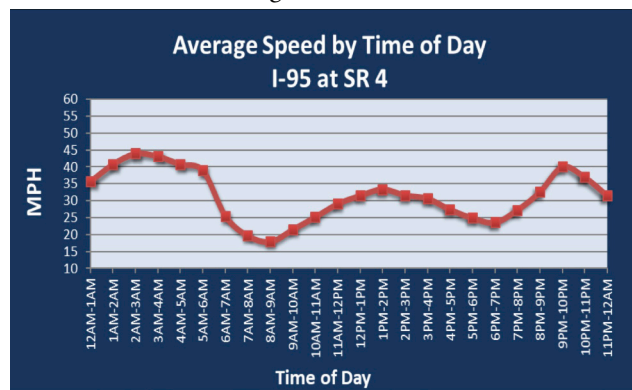
Though those costs declined in 2020, they are climbing again and are likely to come close to 2019 numbers in 2022 as driving has recovered to around 100 percent of 2019 levels. Most of these costs fall on working-class people, including both truckers and commuters, as the latter are less able to work from home, work flexible hours, or otherwise avoid driving during the most congested hours of the day as can many if not most people with middle-class jobs.

The truckers’ data is based on [readings from GPS transponders](#) now used aboard most commercial trucks,

and not surprisingly it shows that 2021 congestion often mirrored 2019 congestion, though usually at slightly higher speeds. In the worst cases, there is sometimes almost no difference between the two.

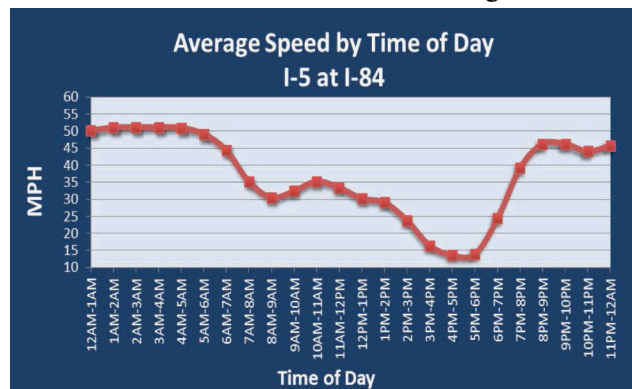


For example, bottleneck 1 in both [2019](#) and [2022](#) is the New Jersey approach to the George Washington Bridge into Manhattan. Traffic there is so heavy that it is never free flowing (which for truckers is 55 miles per hour) and instead reached a maximum of 45 mph in 2019. Speeds in 2021 were almost exactly the same, and in fact were a little worse during the afternoon rush hour.



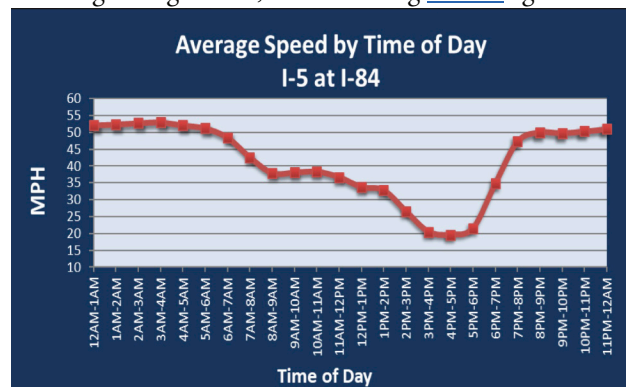
The average speed charts developed by ATRI for the New Jersey side of the George Washington Bridge are nearly indistinguishable; this one for 2022 shows slightly slower speeds at 6-7 pm.

The Effects of Telecommuting



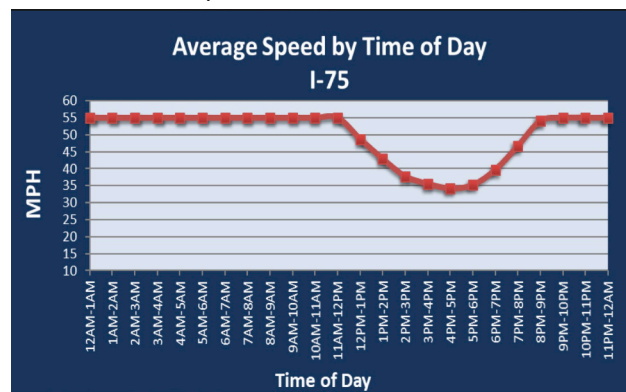
Changes are more visible lower down on the list. [Bottleneck 33](#) in 2022 was [bottleneck 29](#) in 2019: the Columbia River bridge between Portland and Vancouver. The states of Oregon and Washington spent well over

\$100 million planning a new bridge, but Oregon insisted on [significantly adding to the cost](#) by including a light-rail line into Vancouver. That plan was [killed](#) by the Washington legislature, but it is being [revived](#) again.



Compared with the previous 2019 chart, the 2021 chart shows the morning rush hour to be relatively mild.

According to the truckers' data, in 2019 speeds on the bridge slowed to 30 mph in the morning rush hour, but only 35 mph in the afternoon. Thanks to people working at home in 2021, speeds still dropped to 35 in the afternoon but only slowed to 45 mph in the morning. In fact, speeds at 8 am were only slightly slower than at 10 am. According to [Inrix](#), this congestion pattern—much less in the morning but nearly as much in the afternoon—is likely to be typical after the pandemic, as people working at home won't be on the road during the morning rush hour, but may do errands in the afternoons.



The speed chart for I-75 in this Atlanta suburb shows no morning rush hour at all but a pretty serious one in the afternoon. All four charts courtesy of the American Transportation Research Institute.

The best example of this might be I-75 in McDonough, Georgia, which was [bottleneck 12](#) on the 2022 list but wasn't even listed in 2019. According to the truckers' data, the highway enjoys free-flowing traffic all morning, but starting at noon begins to dip to as low as 35 mph, not fully recovering until after 9 pm.

The problem with congestion relief is not that it "induces" new traffic but that traffic that had been repressed by congestion returns to use the new roads. Repressed traffic includes people who drove at different

times of the day, took alternate routes, or resorted to using transit instead of autos to get to work. Transportation economist Anthony Downs called this the [triple convergence](#) as people from these other three patterns converged on the improved roads. But even if the roads appear to get more congested, the increased capacity means more people are reaching their important destinations in less time than they were taking before.

Triple convergence will apply to increased telecommuting as well as to new road capacity. The Census Bureau's [2020 American Community Survey data](#) showed that the increase in the number of people working at home took a much bigger bite out of transit commuting than it did driving to work. As the number of people working at home increased by 165 percent to 15.8 percent of workers, the number of people driving to work declined by 13 percent, but the number taking transit fell by 38 percent.

Some of that difference may be due to the fact that, nationally, people taking transit had higher incomes than people driving in 2019, and so were more likely to work at home. But this trend was also found in states such as Minnesota, where the incomes of transit commuters were lower than those of people who drove to work. In that state, telecommuting grew by 195 percent while driving fell by 17 percent and transit commuting fell by 41 percent.

It seems likely that at least some of the reason for transit's greater decline was that many transit commuters, seeing the roads were less congested, switched to driving instead. This means, as I [suggested](#) early in the pandemic, that transit will be doubly hit by increased telecommuting: first by telecommuters who were formerly transit riders and second by transit commuters who switch to driving to take advantage of the reduced congestion.

As triple convergence works its way out, afternoon congestion is likely to become as bad as it was in 2019, but mornings should be better simply because people working at home probably aren't going to do a lot of driving in the early mornings.

The American Community Survey data are for the entire 2020 year; the increase in telecommuting and consequent declines in commuting were in the last nine or ten months of the year and would have been larger during those nine months. Wendell Cox [estimates](#) that working at home grew from 6.0 percent in January and February to 18.7 percent over the rest of the year.

A [paper](#) published by the National Bureau of Economic Research calculates that, on any given workday, 20 percent of people will be working at home after the pandemic, or close to four times what it was before. This is more than Cox's estimate for 2020, but even if only 18 percent remain at home, that's still more than triple the 2019 numbers.

Cox also estimated that transit commuting declined from 5.0 percent in 2019 to 3.0 percent after the pandemic began, a 40 percent drop. Total transit ridership

in the twelve months after the pandemic began was only 30 percent of 2019, suggesting that people who used transit for purposes other than commuting to work abandoned it even more than commuters. While many of those people will return, continuing worries about infectious diseases will keep some of them away permanently.

Telecommuting and Income Inequality

Perhaps the biggest problem with increased telecommuting is not what it will do to the transit industry, which was obsolete anyway, but that it is likely to exacerbate the class divide described by Kyeyune. According to the American Community Survey, only [35 percent](#) of American workers over the age of 25 had a bachelor's degree or better in 2019.

These are the people most likely to be working at home at least parttime after the pandemic, and as such they will be less concerned about congestion than the 65 percent of working-class employees who mostly have to commute during fixed hours. Yet the 35 percent, even though in the minority, have a lot more political power and will be most likely to object to projects that could relieve congestion, whether that means fixing bottlenecks or even just coordinating traffic signals.



Most middle-class people don't shop at Walmart and, if they had anything to say about it, working-class people wouldn't be able to shop there either. Portland, for example, has created barriers to prevent Walmart from building stores in the city limits. [Photo](#) by Walmart.

With higher incomes and more job flexibility, the 35 percent will also have more choices about where they live, which will reduce their concerns about housing affordability. When members of the working class complain about traffic congestion, high housing prices, poor public schools, or other issues that affect them more than the middle class, they will be even more likely to be dismissed as racists or other "deplorables."

In the 1960s, housing was affordable everywhere in the country, congestion was trivial compared with today, and public schools taught reading, writing, and math rather than critical race theory and climate change. In that

decade, America's income inequality was the lowest in its history and the working class and middle class together seemed to merge into a category called middle income.



"[Congestion is your friend](#)," some urban planners say, meaning it is a friend to those who want to force other people to stop driving. But it isn't a friend to truckers or to working-class people who have to get to work or pick up their kids at daycare on time. [Photo](#) by DaModernDaVinci.

In the 1960s, working-class and middle-class families

lived in the same neighborhoods; drove similar cars; ate similar foods; and got their information from the same newspapers, magazines, and television networks. Today, they live in different neighborhoods if not entirely different cities; working-class people are more likely to drive pickups while middle-class people are more likely to drive Priuses or Teslas; eat in entirely different restaurants; and, of course, get their information from wildly conflicting news sources.

Everything the middle class has supported since the 1960s, from urban-growth boundaries to light rail, has been aimed at making life better for the middle class while making it worse for the working class. The result has been a huge increase in income inequality. Those who want to blame income inequality on capitalism are ignoring this important lesson in history, and the problem won't be fixed until we undo the government actions that made inequality worse.

Randal O'Toole, the Antiplanner, is a land-use and transportation policy analyst and author of [The Vanishing Automobile](#) and Other Urban Myths. [Masthead photo](#) by SCS Software.