

Getting there

Katherine Marshall

A workday is more than just the hours on the job. For most workers, it also consists of time spent travelling to and from their place of employment. Home-based work and telework may be appealing options, but so far, these arrangements are relatively rare. For the majority of the workforce, "getting there" is still part of the daily routine.

More than 9 million

According to the General Social Survey, [\(1\)](#) on a typical weekday (Monday through Friday) in 1992, 9.1 million workers, [\(2\)](#) representing 92% of the employed population, travelled to and from work (see [Non-commuters](#)). As might be expected, the number of commuters dropped sharply on weekends (see [Weekend commuters](#)).

Total weekday commuting time to work and back averaged 48 minutes in 1992. However, 23% of commuters spent over an hour in transit, and 10% averaged more than 90 minutes ([Chart A](#)). By contrast, for 15% of commuters, the journey to and from work took no more than a quarter of an hour.



Chart A Almost one quarter of commuters spend more than an hour travelling to and from work.

Source: *General Social Survey, 1992*

Rush hours

On weekday mornings, the period from 7:00 to 7:59 a.m. sees the greatest number of commuters setting out for work. (3) In 1992, more than 3 million commuters began their trip during this interval ([Chart B](#)). The hours immediately before and after this peak were also popular for leaving home, with 1.7 million workers heading out between 6:00 and 6:59 a.m. and another 2 million, between 8:00 and 8:59 a.m. Earlier and later commuters were less numerous: just under 500,000 left for work before 6:00 a.m. and 592,000 set out after 9:00 a.m.



Chart B The morning rush occurs between 7:00 and 8:00 a.m. while the evening rush lasts from 4:00 to 6:00 p.m.

Source: *General Social Survey, 1992*

The rush hour peak is less pronounced in the evening than in the morning. In 1992, the most common time to leave work, involving 1.9 million commuters, was from 5:00 to 5:59 p.m. However, the 4:00 to 4:59 p.m. interval was almost as popular, with over 1.8 million workers heading home during that period.

Off-hour commutes sometimes longest

In 1992, the average morning commute was 22 minutes and in the evening, 24 minutes. However, trips that took place before the rush hour peaks tended to be somewhat longer. For example, commuters who set out between 5:00 and 5:59 a.m. were on the road for an average of 32 minutes; those starting their journey from 4:00 to 4:59 a.m. averaged 29 minutes. Similarly, at the end of the workday, commuters who left before the evening peak had slightly longer-than-average trips home.

These longer travel times may reflect the commuting patterns of the people who live farthest from their place of work. They may have to leave early in the morning to arrive at work on time. They may also choose to arrange their working schedules to beat the morning and afternoon rush hours.

The car dominates

The automobile is by far the most common means of commuting and has been for some time. (4) In 1992, 88% of all weekday trips (an average of 7.9 million commuters a day) involved automobiles: 69% of commuters used only a car, and another 18% used a car in combination with some other mode of travel

([Chart C](#)). Walking figured in 22% of commutes, while 10% involved public transportation (bus or subway). Just 2% of commuters used bicycles. [\(5\)](#)



Chart C **The car is the dominant mode of transportation for commuters.**

Source: *General Social Survey, 1992*

The automobile's dominance varied somewhat with the age of commuters. Those aged 35 to 54 were the most likely to use a car as their only means of getting to work (73%), while commuters aged 15 to 24 were the least likely to do so (60%). Relatively large proportions of commuters under 25 walked (26%) or used public transportation (17%) all or part of the way. These figures reflect the comparatively low rates of car ownership among people younger than 25.

Affluent more likely to drive

The automobile is not only the most common means of commuting, but it also seems to be the mode that workers select when their income allows them the flexibility of choice. For instance, 74% of commuters from households with annual incomes of \$60,000 or more used automobiles only. By contrast, just 58% of those with incomes less than \$20,000 relied solely on the car.

Walking was involved in 20% of the commutes of workers from higher-income households, compared with 27% for those from households with lower incomes. Similarly, only 6% of commuters with household incomes of \$60,000 or more used public transportation, whereas such facilities figured in the journeys of 15% of commuters from households receiving less than \$20,000.

Short walks ... long rides

The mode of transportation that commuters use reflects the time it takes them to get to work. In 1992, those who walked all the way spent the least time commuting (an average of 29 minutes a day) ([Chart D](#)). On the other hand, commuters who took public transportation only, or in combination with a car, had the longest trips, averaging over 90 minutes a day.



Chart D Commuting time varies with the mode of travel.

Source: *General Social Survey, 1992*

Car-only commuters spent, on average, a total of 45 minutes travelling to and from work.

Women less likely to commute by car

In many respects, the weekday commuting patterns of men and women are similar. For example, there is comparatively little difference in the proportions of male and female workers who were weekday commuters. In 1992, from Monday to Friday, on average, 91% of employed men and 94% of employed women travelled to and from work. Nor did their average time on the road vary substantially: 51 minutes a day for men versus 45 minutes for women.

The major difference in men's and women's commuting patterns was the means of transportation they used. Men were more likely than women to travel by car only: 74% versus 64%. Walking was involved in 27% of women's commutes, compared with 18% of men's. Similarly, 13% of female commuters used public transportation, whereas the comparable figure for men was 8%.

An hour a day for Toronto and Vancouver

Commuting times vary in different metropolitan areas. [\(6\)](#) In 1992, Toronto and Vancouver residents had the longest daily commutes, averaging 60 minutes. In fact, 16% of Vancouver commuters spent more than 90 minutes a day travelling to and from work ([Table](#)). On the other hand, Halifax commuters spent an average of just 38 minutes a day on the road, and only a negligible proportion of them averaged more than 90 minutes.



Table Commuting in selected census metropolitan areas, 1992

Source: *General Social Survey, 1992*

Daily commuting time was also relatively long in Montreal (54 minutes), and Ottawa-Hull and Winnipeg (both 51 minutes). By contrast, travel to and from work consumed 45 minutes or less, on average, for commuters in Quebec City, Calgary, Hamilton and Edmonton.

Modes of transportation also differ in various metropolitan areas. Exclusive use of automobiles was most

common in Edmonton, where this mode was chosen by 75% of commuters. As well, 70% or more of commuters in Halifax, Quebec City, Winnipeg, Calgary, and Vancouver relied solely on the car. By comparison, just 60% of Ottawa-Hull commuters, and 61% of those in Toronto, depended only on automobile transportation.

More than 30% of commuters in Ottawa-Hull and Hamilton walked for all or part of their journey. In Edmonton and Winnipeg, walking factored in only 14% and 16% of commutes, respectively. Use of public transit was relatively high in Toronto (20%) and Montreal (18%).

Rural differences

Almost one in six workers living in rural areas did not commute in 1992. This reflects the relatively large percentage of rural residents who are self-employed and work at home, notably in agriculture ([Crompton, 1993](#)). However, rural workers who did commute were more likely than urban dwellers to use a car as their only means of getting to work (78% compared with 67%). Not surprisingly, the proportion of rural commuters taking public transportation was very small (less than 2%), although such facilities were used by 12% of urban commuters.

Summary

Employment and commuting go hand in hand. On weekdays, nine out of ten workers travel to their job, and most of them get there by car. Commuting time averages three-quarters of an hour, but varies with the means of transportation. While flexitime and staggered hours supposedly ease congestion, this is probably not evident to the millions of commuters who venture into rush-hour traffic on a daily basis.

Non-commuters

A minority of the employed population (770,000 or 8%) did not commute in 1992. There are several reasons for this: they may have worked at home; lived very close to their workplace; lived temporarily at their workplace (e.g., construction site, logging camp); or have had an occupation such as truck driving, that kept them on the road throughout their workday. In 1992, the majority of non-commuters were self-employed (67%). Primary occupations, which include farming, fishing, forestry and mining, had both the highest rates of self-employment (57%) and the highest percentage of non-commuters (40%).

Weekend commuters

The number of commuters drops sharply on weekends. In 1992, the average number of commuters was 2.6 million on Saturdays and 1.7 million on Sundays, compared with the weekday average of more than 9 million. And while 92% of those employed on weekdays commuted, just 75% of weekend workers did so. Female workers were considerably more likely than their male counterparts to commute on weekends: 82% versus 71%.

Getting to and from work is faster on weekends than on weekdays. In 1992, total travel time averaged 42 minutes on Saturday and 37 minutes on Sunday, compared with 48 minutes during the week. Only 15% of Saturday commutes and 9% of those on Sunday lasted over an hour.

Notes

Note 1

The 1992 General Social Survey (GSS) collected time use data over 12 months from a random sample of about 9,000 respondents aged 15 and older. Each respondent completed a diary of activities over a 24-hour day, recording for each primary activity the start and end times, the place where the activity occurred, and the person(s) the respondent was with during that activity. (Survey respondents were not expected to report activities that took only a few minutes). Commuting data were derived from reports of travel to and from work .

Full-time residents of institutions and residents of the Yukon and the Northwest Territories were excluded from the survey. For further information, contact Ghislaine Villeneuve at (613) 951-4995.

Note 2

For this article, the employed population consists of all persons who were employed on the diary day, that is, the day for which they recorded their activities. Unless otherwise stated, the data refer to weekday commuting.

Note 3

To determine "rush hours," start times for morning and evening commutes had to be chosen arbitrarily. Morning start times for the trip to work could range from 4:00 to 11:59 a.m.; evening commutes for the trip home could start as early as 2:00 p.m. or as late as 9:59 p.m.

About 1.2 million workers in the morning and 3.0 million in the evening travelled outside the typical start-time intervals. These workers were excluded from calculations of morning and evening commutes. Some of them may be shift workers whose commuting does not fall into the standard morning and evening travel times. As well, the large number not reporting a start time for their evening commute reflects the fact that many people do not go directly home after work. Thus, their evening travel time would have been reported not as commuting, but as travel to and from shopping, entertainment, socializing, etc.

Note 4

From 1976 to 1984, Statistics Canada conducted the Travel to Work Survey as a supplement to the November Labour Force Survey. The 1984 picture of commuting was similar to that in 1992. For more information about this survey, contact Mike Sivy, Special Surveys Group (613) 951-4598.

Note 5

Just over three-quarters (76%) of the commuting population used a single method of travel. However, a substantial minority of commuters (one in four) used multiple methods. Therefore, the proportions using individual methods add to more than 100%.

Note 6

These commuting times and modes refer only to people who lived within metropolitan areas in 1992; that is, the many workers who lived outside metropolitan boundaries and travelled downtown to their job are excluded. From the General Social Survey, it is not possible to determine how many people had such commuting patterns. Estimates, however, can be derived from census data. For more information, call Richard Nadwodny (613) 951-3950.

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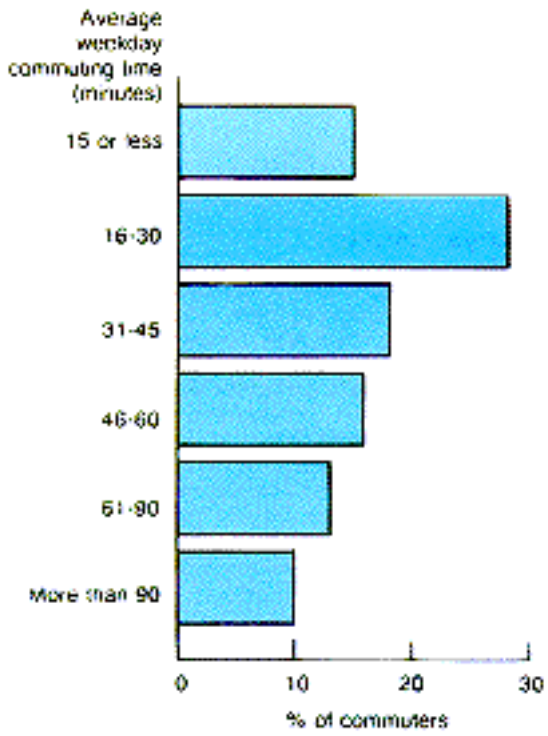
Source

Perspectives on Labour and Income, Summer 1994, Vol. 6, No. 2 (Statistics Canada, Catalogue 75-001E). This is the second of seven articles in the issue.



Chart A

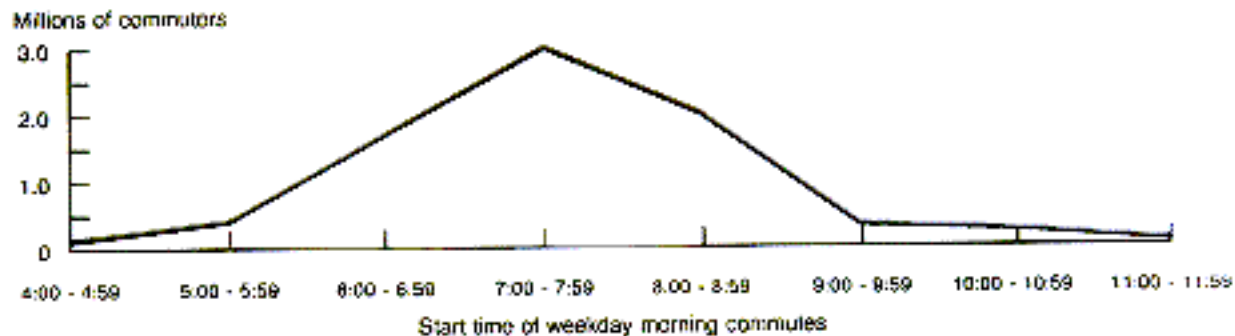
Almost one-quarter of commuters spend more than an hour travelling to and from work.



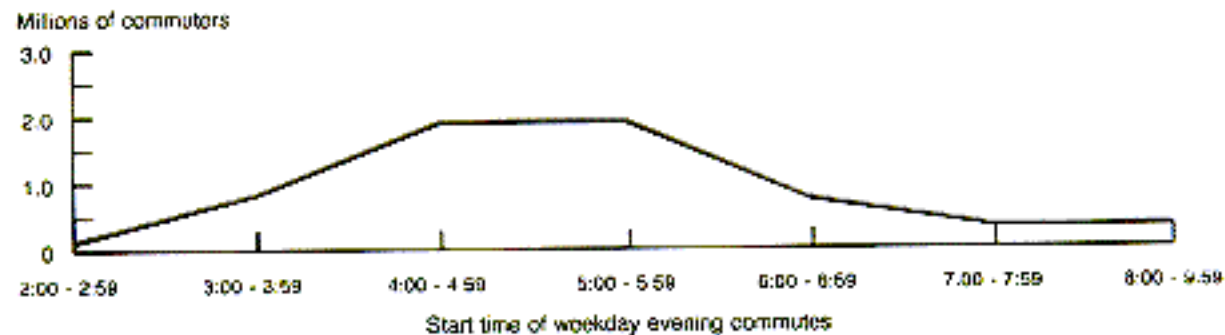
Source: *General Social Survey, 1992*

Chart B

The morning rush occurs between 7:00 and 8:00 a.m. ...



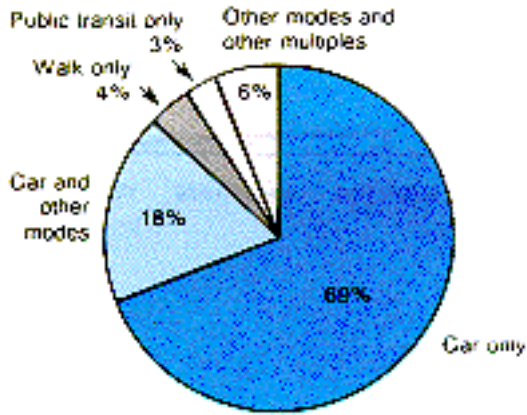
... while the evening rush lasts from 4:00 to 6:00 p.m.



Source: General Social Survey, 1992

Chart C

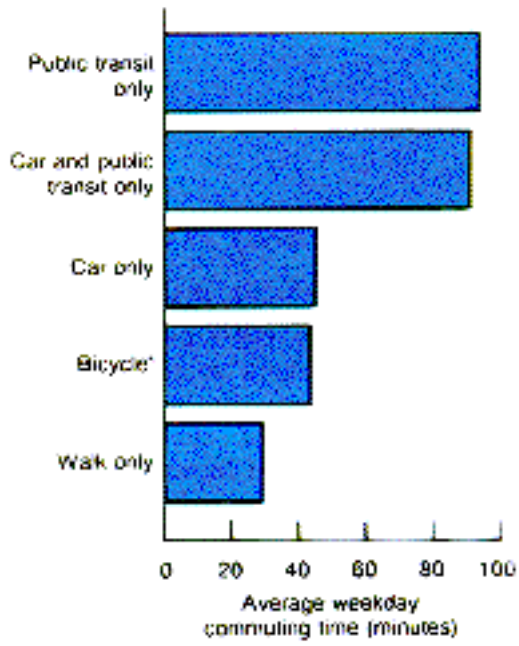
The car is the dominant mode of transportation for commuters.



Source: General Social Survey, 1992

Chart D

Commuting time varies with the mode of travel.



Source: General Social Survey, 1992
* Includes "bicycle and other."

Commuting in selected census metropolitan areas, 1992

	Average number of weekday commuters	Average duration of weekday commute	Proportion* of commuters reporting:		
			Car only	Walking all or part way	Public transit, all or part way
			%		
	'000	minutes			
Halifax	109	38	71	25	--
Quebec City	219	45	72	22	--
Montreal	1,056	54	63	25	18
Ottawa-Hull	469	51	60	33	16
Toronto	1,638	59	61	24	20
Hamilton	185	44	62	35	--
Winnipeg	222	51	73	16	15
Calgary	298	45	72	21	12
Edmonton	326	43	75	14	--
Vancouver	585	60	72	20	12

Source: General Social Survey

** Because many commuters use multiple modes of transportation, percentages add to more than 100 (see note 5).*