

Feeling the pain and joys of commuting

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Dr David Bissell. Credit: Stuart Hay

Long hours commuting to and from work can generate fear, distrust and depression and can change the way people interact with their families and work colleagues, a new study from The Australian National University (ANU) has found.

However, the study also found commuting on [public transport](#) can be a positive social experience and give people valuable personal time to

dream, relax and meditate, away from the responsibilities of [work](#) and home life.

The study, titled "Commuting Life," was conducted by Dr David Bissell at the ANU School of Sociology and examined how commuting affects people and their lives rather than the types of transport used.

"For a lot of people, commuting is really constraining their freedoms to do things," Dr Bissell said.

He said over time, journeys to and from work change the way that people act towards others, their tolerance levels, what they desire from their work and home life, and can have an impact on long-term plans.

The study focussed on interviews and observations of commuters in Sydney, where people can spend up to six hours a day travelling to and from work.

"Obviously the accumulative effect on these people in a week is pretty extreme," Dr Bissell said.

"A stressful commute can change how we treat work colleagues. But it can also have negative impacts on family life, with commuters finding it difficult to relax when they return home," he said.

He said most people involved in the study had more than an hour's commute each way, even if they lived within 10 kilometres of their workplace.

In one case, a woman told Dr Bissell she's been commuting to Sydney from the Central Coast of New South Wales for 20 years, spending four hours each day in transit.

"She told me her husband is much closer to her child and she puts that down to the commute. So these are not incidental changes that are taking place here," he said.

For some people, a build-up of events experienced during the daily commute lead to significant tipping points and can force people to make significant changes in their life.

But commuting can also be enjoyable, with many people reporting the pleasure of regular social interaction or time away from work and home stresses.

"Public transport can be an especially valuable space for being with other people. It can help prevent social isolation," he said.

Dr Bissell said the study pointed to important economic productivity and public health issues.

"Hopefully it will be a bit of a wakeup call to employers in terms of managing this situation," he said.

"Yes some of these commuting problems fall on state governments. But at the same time there are many other sites of responsibility - our employers and companies for example - who could offer their staff the chance to work from home."

More information: "Commuting Life." commutinglife.com/

Provided by Australian National University

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