

# Some urban commuters have no choice but to take their car

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An EPFL study shows that suburban commuters do not necessarily take environmental concerns into account when deciding whether to use their car. Many car commuters—especially those with hectic schedules—feel

they have no other choice. That's especially true when it comes to working mothers.

Transportation accounts for a third of greenhouse gas emissions in Switzerland, and 75% of those emissions come from car travel.

Transportation is one of the only sectors where [carbon emissions](#) have been rising since 1990. This problem is particularly acute in cities: the modal share of cars in Swiss cities is between one-third and one-fourth. A recent EPFL study examined the factors behind the popularity of cars in [urban areas](#), finding that [environmental concerns](#) play only a secondary role in commuters' modal choices. More prominent factors include convenience—how well a transportation method fits into their busy lifestyles—and comfort—how pleasurable the experience is, such as when taking public transportation or cycling.

Indeed, not everybody has the luxury of deciding whether or not to take their car. Many people feel constrained to drive, even though they view it as stressful and limiting. For commuters with particularly complex and hectic everyday lives, such as working mothers, taking their car is the most readily available solution. That's what the EPFL study conducted by two scientists at the Laboratory for Human-Environment Relations in Urban Systems (HERUS) revealed. The researchers carried out long, in-depth interviews with short-distance commuters in two Swiss cities, and their findings—which were in line with existing mobility research—have just been published in *Mobilities*.

## **Basel and Geneva**

Unlike studies that aim to quantify major trends, this one looked specifically at commuters' aspirations, values and experience. The researchers—Franziska Meinherz and Livia Fritz—interviewed ten employed individuals living in Basel and eight in Geneva, all with a relatively short commute. The sample contained an equal number of men

and women (with and without children) and included both managers and staff who use various types of transportation. The interviews were carried out in the spring of 2018.

Based on the results, the scientists identified four typologies describing people's commuting habits, as well as the dynamics that underpin changes in these habits. Their findings reveal that commuting can be functional, meaning it is determined by a tightly scheduled family life; hedonic, meaning it is related to the experience of pleasure; representative, meaning it is related to the commuter's identity and values; and habitual, in the case of people who act primarily out of habit.

The scientists then examined the factors that play into commuters' shifts from one register to another or their tendency to stay within a single register. They found that many people using active modes of transport, like cycling or walking, are driven by hedonic reasons, while the functional register is prevalent among people who use personal cars. Most significantly, the study showed that, often, it is only once a commuter has had a positive experience with an ecological mode of transportation (such as trains), or gained greater freedom in their everyday commute once their children have grown, that ecological concerns come into play. Carbon emissions therefore appear to be a secondary factor, and not the main reason for which a commuter would change their usual way of getting around.

The functional register tends to be prevalent among commuters who have moved from the city to the suburbs after having children. That's because cars are still the transportation option that provides them with the most flexibility. These findings are of interest for urban planners: "Research like ours shows that people who give up their cars are largely happy with their decision. We need to think in terms of encouraging commuters to free themselves from this burden, rather than guilt-tripping them with environmental reasons. Carbon emissions are not the

only issue involved," says Meinherz. Other issues city officials could look into are family and housing policies and urban planning.

## **Expensive, inconvenient and stressful**

In addition, the researchers observed that, while urban residents used to view cars as efficient, practical, quick and even a [status symbol](#), they now see cars as expensive, inconvenient and stressful. This sentiment was widely expressed in the interviews, albeit with some exceptions. "I let the respondents speak freely without feeling judged," says Meinherz. "Personally, I use my bicycle, and I was curious to hear one of our interviewees say that they enjoy being stuck in traffic at the end of the day because it's a time to unwind and listen to music. But most other respondents complained about rush-hour traffic—especially working mothers. They're the ones still largely responsible for driving their children to and from school and extracurricular activities, doing the shopping and running errands. All while fathers are zipping around on their electric bikes!" Providing for more [equal access](#) to enjoyable, low-carbon modes of transport could therefore be a public policy goal, according to the scientists.

**More information:** Franziska Meinherz et al, 'Ecological concerns weren't the main reason why I took the bus, that association only came afterwards': on shifts in meanings of everyday mobility, *Mobilities* (2021). [DOI: 10.1080/17450101.2021.1919491](https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2021.1919491)

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