Fewer car journeys and more flights: How COVID-19 has changed the way we travel

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Four years after the outbreak of COVID-19, the pandemic seems like a distant memory for many. Yet its impacts on our lifestyle today are often profound and long-lasting, with many researchers on a mission to quantify it across sectors.

As sustainability researchers, we were keen to find out how COVID-19 had affected our transport habits in Europe. Do we now move in a greener, more self-aware fashion, or did the end of the pandemic prompt a rebound effect, ushering in an era of carefree travel?

The pandemic: A great laboratory in sustainability

Beyond understanding how pandemics transform human behavior, the answer to that question matters for our ability to live on this planet sustainably. Heavily reliant on [fossil fuels](#), the transport sector currently accounts for about 37% of CO_2 [emissions globally](#), as its share continues to increase despite various climate measures. Urgent action is needed in the sector to hit global climate targets such as the EU's goal of slashing greenhouse gas emissions by 55% by 2030 from 1990 levels and net-zero by 2050.

Transitioning to a low-carbon transport sector will likely involve widespread adoption of electric vehicles and biofuels. However, the extensive effort necessary to electrify the vehicle fleet and transform the infrastructure presents greater challenges for the transport sector compared to others. This is particularly true for the aviation sector where a viable low-carbon alternative is still to be developed. Additionally, there are wider sustainability concerns associated with biofuels, including land use competition, potential adverse effects on food security, and the need to address GHG emissions and resource intensity in their production processes. Consequently, behavioral change is key to the transition in the transport sector.

The pandemic period between 2020 and 2022 provided us with a great behavioral laboratory for sustainable travel habits. Drastic, swiftly enacted measures such as lockdowns, border closures, and the shutdown of public transport saw a sharp decline in [greenhouse gas emissions](#) from commuting and leisure travel. Research also shows that many people

were subsequently open to cutting down their travels in the long term. For example, [a 2022 UK survey](link) found that British people following the pandemic were willing to reduce their flights by 20–26% and car trips by 24–30%.

However, it would be a mistake to conflate these declarations with actual emission reductions. Also worth remembering is that the stringency of COVID-19 measures varied from one country to the next. Hence, countries with the highest COVID-19 fatality rates, such as Italy, Spain, and France, implemented strict lockdowns severely curtailing people's movements. In contrast, some governments, like those in the Netherlands and Sweden, chose less strict measures or even no lockdowns at all.

Fueling the green transition—or not

To map out the exact impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on our transport habits, we took a look [at fuel consumption across Europe after restrictions were lifted](link), including gasoline and diesel, mainly used for rail and road, as well as kerosene for air travel.

Overall, Europeans have tended to hit the road less following the pandemic, but have taken a plane much more often. However, the picture differs substantially from country to country. While some countries returned to their pre-pandemic transport routines, others showed a moderate reduction in consumption as restrictions were lifted.

Some countries with less strict COVID-19 policies, such as Austria, Germany, and the UK, experienced a significant drop in the use of planes and cars that lasted after restrictions were lifted between March and December 2022. However, these changes remained small in size (typically less than 10%), possibly because people's willingness to adapt to new routines did not always match their ability to do so.

In contrast, other countries with strict COVID-19 policies, such as Greece, Portugal, Italy, and Spain, experienced a notable [rebound effect](#) in the use of planes and, to a smaller extent, railroad transport after lifting restrictions. This rebound might not only be due to an increased desire for travel among citizens in these countries but also the appeal of Mediterranean destinations for international tourists.

Hungary, Poland, Latvia, and Lithuania had less strict COVID-19 measures and showed a full return to normal levels of fuel consumption. These countries' lower incomes may partly explain why they quickly returned to "normality" for the sake of economic stability.

Positive effects in countries with limited lockdown measures

Meanwhile, despite also implementing limited measures, Sweden, Denmark, and Czechia saw people take transport less often. Nationals were able to maintain a [semi-normal lifestyle](#) (i.e. work from home, exercise, healthy lifestyle) without experiencing a strong sense of deprivation or the need to make up for lost time after restrictions were lifted. These countries offer potential policy lessons for promoting sustainable transport practices.

Sweden already had a relatively high and growing percentage of remote workers before the pandemic. This trend has continued to grow post-pandemic. Moreover, since 2010 [Sweden](#) has been looking to get its people outdoors, including by making its natural spots more accessible and promoting outdoor exercise. This is hardy a surprise coming from the birthplace of the notion of "flight shame" (*flygskam*), which describes the sense of guilt from flying's carbon footprint, pushing people toward other, less polluting alternatives.

Similarly, Denmark continues to promote and invest in cycling by investing in cycling and e-bike infrastructure in the post-pandemic era [through the National Reform Program](). Moreover, [a recent survey]() showed that residents of Copenhagen now tend to cycle to work more compared to before the pandemic.

In Czechia, affordable public transport tickets help to encourage less carbon-intensive transport options. People also appear to enjoy walking more, with a [10% increase in walking journeys]() between 2016 and 2021 in Prague.

If they want to fulfill their climate pledges, European countries need to green their [transport sector](). In the post-pandemic era, this could mean expanding cycling infrastructure, as Denmark has done, making public transport more affordable, like in the Czechia, and supporting remote work and local outdoor activities, as is in the case in Sweden. Governments need to throw their weight behind eco-friendly transport options like cycling and electric cars and lead behavioral change campaigns to make sustainable transport not just an option but the preferred choice for everyone.

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