



# Will the pandemic change car usage permanently?

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We have held a number of webinars, and numerous client meetings, since the coronavirus pandemic started, in order to discuss the latest developments. During these interactions, we have been asked numerous questions, many of which relate to the immediate state of the automotive industry, the likely speed of the rebound in market and production volumes, and the risks to any recovery in the near future. But other important questions address more lasting changes that the crisis may bring. Among these are two that pull in opposite directions. Firstly, will users of public transportation switch to driving their own vehicles in order to avoid exposure to infection? And, secondly, will the enforced experiment in home working lead to fewer trips as many people commute to the traditional workplace far less frequently, if at all? It is clearly too soon to answer these questions definitively, but what can be said at this point?

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On the question of whether increased flexible (home) working practices lead to reduced vehicle usage, it is important to understand the proportion of trips that are, in fact, related to work. According to national travel surveys in both the US and the UK [1, 2], work-related journeys (mostly commutes) make up around one-sixth of total journeys. In addition, many workers need to be physically present to carry out their duties. Leisure, outdoor activities, the school run and a host of other non-work trips look impossible to substitute with a Zoom meeting. Without many other transformational changes in the way we live, it seems improbable that even a large-scale switch to home working, for those who can, would do anything other than reduce the overall number of trips by a few percent. The notion of reducing travel in general could, however, remain a longer-term consideration in the context of climate change.

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What about the notion that people will want to travel more in their cars than on public transport? Tracking data from tech giants, e.g. Google and Apple, show that travel in the period(s) following the easing of lockdown(s) is favouring driving over rail, metro and bus usage. A strong rebound in car sales in China, and the surge in sales in South Korea in March and April, may also hint that commuters will choose driving over public transportation, where this is practicable. For much of the rest of the world, however, the pain of a deep recession will undoubtedly reduce vehicle demand sharply in the short term. But one recent UK survey saw non-car-owning respondents indicate that they would now be more likely to buy a car in the next year, owing to safety concerns arising from the pandemic. This suggests that, when the economic headwinds subside, there may be increased demand for cars as the transportation mix shifts, perhaps for several years, away from public and into personal transportation.

1. National Household Travel Survey, for the US (US Federal Highway Administration).
2. Transport Statistics Great Britain, for the UK (UK Department of Transport).