

The Boston Globe

Car commuting declines slightly in Greater Boston, report finds

By Catherine Cloutier | GLOBE STAFF AUGUST 21, 2015

For decades, being stuck in traffic cursing your fate has been a fact of life in the Boston area. But a new study offers a glint of hope.

A [US Census Bureau report](#) released this month found that the number of people driving to work had inched downwards. That means fewer cars stalled in traffic on the interstate, squeezing around Boston's serpentine streets, and occupying the scarce parking real estate in the city's business districts. Automobile commuting in the Boston metro area decreased from 78.9 percent in 2006 to 75.6 percent of residents in 2013, the report found.

Those figures are for the larger metro area defined by the Census, which covers much of Eastern Massachusetts and stretches into Southern New Hampshire.

Car commuting rates for the city of Boston alone were much lower. A combined 45.3 percent of Boston commuters drove alone to work or carpoled in 2013, down a percentage point from 2010, according to the Census.

"This is good," said Larry Field, deputy director of Massachusetts Smart Growth Alliance, a non-profit that advocates for smart housing and transportation development. "It's good for reducing greenhouse gases, good for reducing traffic, and good for our infrastructure."

Boston, like many of the urban areas studied by the Census, had a lower automobile commuting rate than the national average. The car commuting rate was 86 percent nationally in 2013, a rate that has remained stable in recent years after decades of steady growth.

Boston-area residents want to walk, bike, or take public transit to their workplaces, especially the area's large contingent of millennials, said Eric Bourassa, director of the transportation division of the Metropolitan Area Planning Council.

The area has seen an increase in the number of people, jobs, and housing units in the urban cores of Boston and Cambridge or near MBTA service, he said.

Millennials' "preference is not being in auto-dependent locations. It's a lifestyle choice, but it's also a matter of finances. ... They are looking for ways to economize, and one way to do that is to get housing that allows them not to have a car," said Field.

After years of commuting from Fitchburg to the Boston area by car, Cambridge resident Dan Harrington gave up his automobile in 2012 in favor of biking or in inclement weather taking the T.

"The main reason was that driving was miserable ... the traffic, and backups, and long, slow queues at traffic lights," said Harrington, 54, in an e-mail. "I don't miss getting in a car to get to work."

Boston metro commuters' most-used alternative to the automobile was the T and other public transit systems. The Census report found that 6.2 percent of the metro area's residents traveled regularly to work on public transit in 2013. The area's rates of walking and biking to work have also increased in recent years, according to Census data.

These shifts are not just happening among millennials but also among professionals, families, and even the elderly, said Brendan Kearney, communications manager at Walk Boston, a non-profit that promotes walking.

"Boston really lends itself" to alternate modes of commuting, said Kearney. "It's a smaller, compact city that makes walking and taking transit an easy option. It's much easier to walk or take the train instead of trying to find a place to park your car when you get to your destination."

Stacy Thompson, deputy director of the LivableStreets Alliance, a non-profit that advocates for streets that are vibrant public spaces, agreed, saying, "It's not that people are giving up driving. It's a shift in people wanting more than one way to get there."

Thompson said the Boston area has some infrastructure, such as bicycle lanes and walking paths, that encourages alternate modes of commuting.

"You're seeing an uptick because this infrastructure is in place, but it's not complete," she said. "If we upped the ante on this infrastructure, you'd see an explosion of people making more choices about their own mobility."

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