

Inactive travel: the problems of the current transport system and some possible solutions

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Over the past century, our towns and cities have been designed around making it easier to travel by car and less appealing to walk and cycle. The car is easily the dominant form of transport now, where people would have previously walked, cycled or taken public transport. Whilst motorised transport has obviously given us personal freedom to travel further and faster, this has come at a cost to our health, environment, safety and social cohesion.

The future of transport is often imagined to involve technologies which will transport us and goods at ever greater distances, in less time, in greater personal comfort and with less effort involved in doing so. Whilst these visions and efforts are welcomed for journeys over longer distances, or for those who are unable to travel off their own steam, active travel should still be encouraged for journeys over shorter distances and over the first and last miles of a journey.

The problems

There are clear trends and statistics which point to the impact that the current transport system has had on society, which can be seen in the following areas:

- ***Declining health due to inactivity*** - Around 23% of people in England are classed as physically inactive and the population is also around 20% less active than in the 1960's (PHE, 2020). Naturally, this increase in inactivity has resulted in a less fit and healthy society, which contributes to a variety of health problems, such as increased risk of heart disease, diabetes and some cancers. According to Public Health England, physical inactivity is responsible for 1 in 6 premature deaths in the UK (approximately 80,000 to 90,000 people per year). The World Health Organisation estimates that up to 5 million premature deaths per year could be averted globally, if the population was more active (WHO, 2020);
- ***Increased congestion*** - Motor vehicle traffic has increased twelve-fold (from 28.9 to 356.5 billion vehicle miles) over the last 70 years. Car traffic has increased the most and is about 20 times higher than it was in 1949 (DfT, 2019). With around 83% of the population in the UK living in urban areas (TD, 2021), clearly the vast majority of this traffic is concentrated in urban areas.

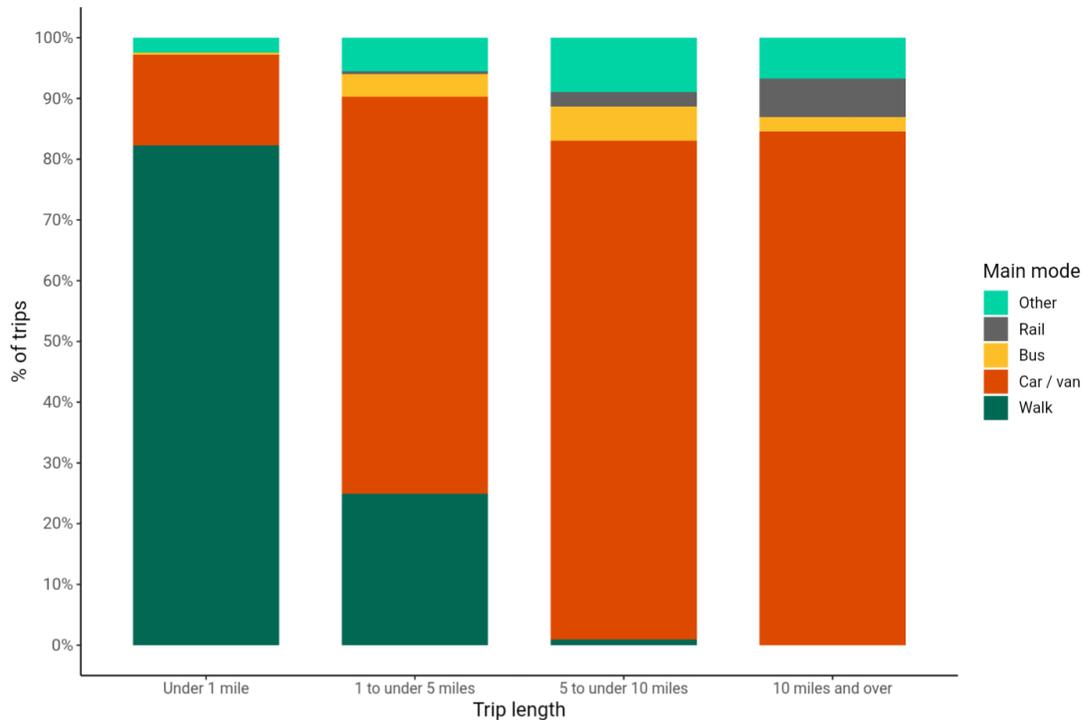
From 1949 to 2019 the population in Great Britain increased by 36.5% (from 48.96 to 66.84 million people). With an increase in motor traffic miles of 1134%, it's clear that an increase in population is not the primary factor;

- **Increased pollution** - In 2019, 27% of the UK's Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emissions were from Transport, which is the largest emitting sector. 91% of these transport emissions came from road transport vehicles (BEIS, 2021). Whilst the Energy sector has reduced its contribution, transport, as a consequence, became the biggest polluting sector in 2016 (DfT, 2021);
- **Unacceptable road traffic accidents** - Road traffic accident deaths and serious injuries have generally fallen over the past 20 to 50 years or so (DfT RRCGB, 2021). However, they are still at an unacceptable level, especially casualty rates for vulnerable road users. In 2020 (although admittedly skewed by the Covid pandemic), whilst car occupants accounted for the largest number of fatalities at 618 deaths (unsurprising, given that cars account for the vast majority trips), 346 pedestrians and 141 cyclists died in road traffic accidents in Great Britain (DfT RRCGB, 2021(2));
- **Reduced social cohesion and mental health benefits** - Although less easy to quantify, there are clear mental health benefits to increasing active travel. Aside from the physical benefits of active travel, such as the immediate impact in terms of endorphins released and the long term benefits of feeling fitter and healthier, it gives people an opportunity to interact and be closer to their environment and the people in it.

The current situation (how do people currently travel and how far)

According to the latest National Travel Survey, 25% of all trips are under 1 mile and 71% of trips are under 5 miles (NTS, 2021). As can be seen in **Figure 1** below, for journeys under 1 mile, the vast majority (82%) walk. However, around 15% take the car, despite this journey only taking around 20 minutes for the average person to walk. For journeys between 1 and 5 miles, the vast majority drive.

Figure 1: Mode share of trips by main mode for different trip lengths (NTS, 2021)



According to the NTS (2021), 59% of car trips are less than 5 miles. That's a distance which could be reached by bicycle, at a relatively slow cycling speed of 10-12mph, in 25-30 minutes. Many of these journeys will be much less than 5 miles of course.

Possible solutions

If people were encouraged to integrate active travel into their daily routine, then it would certainly help to address the issues above. For some, a journey made entirely by active modes is impractical, due to distance or the volume of things they may have to carry. However, for most people, whether they're travelling for work, school, shopping, or leisure, all or part of their journey could be undertaken by active modes.

It's the short journeys (under 5 miles) which we need to focus on, by giving people real options and encouragement to incorporate active travel into their day-to-day journeys. Some options may include:

- **Turning towns and local streets into places for people** - e.g. by implementing 20mph speed limits, reducing on-street parking, installing street trees and planters, to create natural traffic calming, and creating shared, or traffic-free spaces to give priority to more vulnerable road users;
- **Providing better facilities for active travel at all transport hubs** - e.g. by providing better accessibility for disabled users, providing e-bike and e-scooter hire at town center stations and bicycle / e-scooter only train carriageways on busy routes;

- ***Promoting the use of all new and emerging micro-mobility solutions*** - this includes e-bikes and e-scooters, which offer real potential alternatives for short to medium distance journeys, particularly for those who are not currently active, but would like to be;
- ***Providing traffic-free, or segregated routes between neighboring towns*** - most cycle routes in the UK are inconsistent, disjointed and poorly maintained. To coincide with the anticipated boom in e-bikes and other micro-mobility solutions, there should be investment in these 'inter-urban cycleways' on a scale similar to the building of the railways during the Victorian era;
- ***Suggested Car-free zones around Schools, along with demonstrating the benefits of active travel to School children*** - if active travel is going to be a major part of the future of transport, then we have to encourage children now to take it up on a daily basis;
- ***National 'Active Travel / Car-free Day'*** - this could be on a monthly basis to begin with and then weekly, on a weekend day if this is easier for people initially and gets them thinking about what's achievable;
- ***A change of culture, where walking or cycling is considered as a form of transport*** - for most people walking, running or cycling is considered a form of sport or leisure only. This is partly due to the way the exercise and sport industry has framed these activities over the past 50 to 70 years, in unison with motor vehicles (in combination with urban planning policy) replacing them as viable alternatives. In order to change this view, the benefits of integrating these active modes into people's daily routines has to be promoted.

As stated at the beginning, whilst investment in technologies to allow people to travel further and faster over longer distances is admirable, the benefits of active travel for short to medium distance journeys has to be recognised. With good investment in joined up active travel infrastructure and campaigns to encourage it, the health and environmental benefits particularly would be enormous. What's more, the investment required to install a fit for purpose foot or cycle path, for example, would be far less than the equivalent length of road or railway.

References

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