

NEWS > TRANSPORTATION

Work from home forever? After COVID, Californians want to ditch daily commutes, survey says

More remote work could mean less Bay Area traffic



Traffic backs up on the Bay Bridge on Sunday, Oct. 28, 2018, in San Francisco, Calif. Traffic is one of the reasons that increasing numbers of Bay Area residents are looking to leave. (Karl Mondon/Bay Area News Group Archives)

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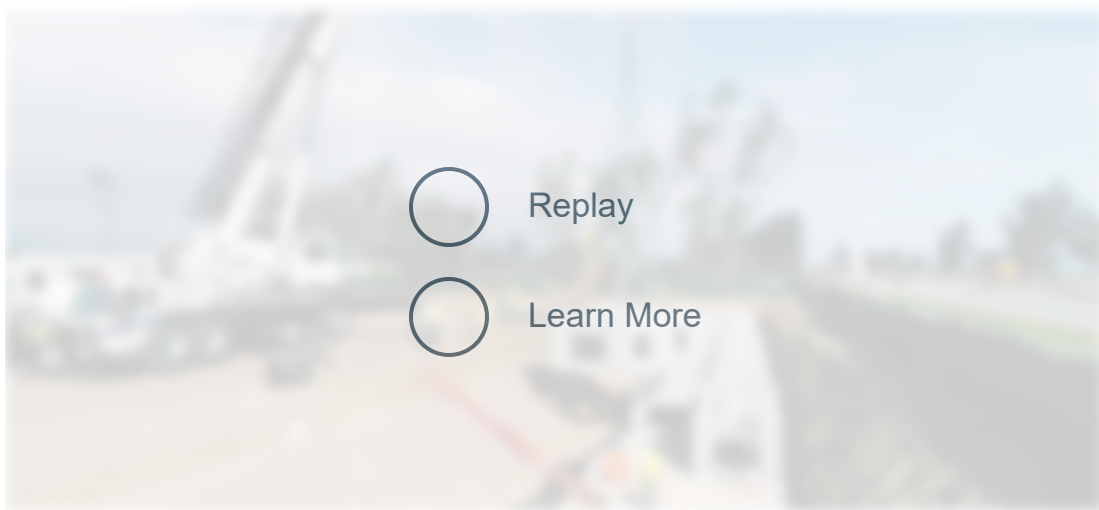
Californians who swapped mind-numbing traffic and packed trains for “commutes” to a home office or living room don’t want to go back to their old daily grind.

That’s according to [a University of Southern California survey](#) released Monday, which found more than half of those surveyed who are now telecommuting want to keep working from home at least three days a week after the pandemic ends. Just 18% are hoping they’ll go back to in-person work every day.

In the Bay Area, where [many workers before COVID spent hours](#) each weekday enduring some of the nation’s worst traffic, those attitudes could keep congestion from [roaring back at pre-pandemic levels](#) when more offices reopen.

USC professor Hernan Galperin, the study’s lead researcher, said the results show remote work has “great potential to reduce traffic congestion and carbon emissions.”

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Then again, the shift might also pose a threat to public transportation agencies such as BART and Caltrain that once relied on streams of daily commuters headed to jobs in San Francisco and Silicon Valley for much of their revenue.

The survey, from USC’s Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism and the California Emerging Technology Fund, looked at the impact access to broadband Internet has had on people’s ability to work, learn and conduct doctor’s visits remotely.

Like other research on remote working during the pandemic, the survey found wealthier workers are more likely to telecommute — those who were considered “low-income,” meaning they earned less than 200% of the federal poverty level, were twice as likely to report they are working in-person five days per week compared to higher earners. Just over half of people with access to broadband Internet were working at least some of the time from home.



As vaccinations become more widespread and businesses that abruptly shifted to telecommuting 13 months ago start making plans to welcome employees back in greater numbers, there is no consensus on how often workers want to return to the office.

Almost one-third of current telecommuters, 31%, say they would be happy working from home five days a week if they had that option.

Lots of others want something in between their Zoom-based present — which has tested work-life boundaries and [left many feeling isolated from their colleagues](#) — and a full return to daily commuting that drained our time, energy and wallets.

Just over 20% said they would like to work from home three to four days per week, and another 29% said one to two days of telecommuting was the right balance.

When it comes to the future of Bay Area traffic there are three key questions, said Metropolitan Transportation Commission spokesman John Goodwin: How often are people commuting to in-person work? Do they drive alone or use more efficient means to get there? And do they travel at rush hour, or during off-peak hours?

“The idea that a third of workers might continue to stay home five days a week would take pressure off the freeway system in the Bay Area,” Goodwin said — so long as people continued carpooling and riding public transportation at the same levels they did before the pandemic.

The USC survey was based on phone interviews with 1,650 California residents, conducted in English, Spanish, Mandarin and Vietnamese in February and March. It has a margin of error of 2 percentage points.

One lingering question Galperin acknowledged his survey didn’t address: Whether workers get what they want as employers create remote work policies for the post-COVID era.

A [separate survey released last week](#) from the Bay Area Council, which asked how often today’s telecommuters “anticipate” they will work in-person next year, as opposed to their preference, found 38% expect they’ll be back in the office five days a week — [more than double the 16%](#) that said they think they will work from home every day.

Tags: [Coronavirus](#)



Nico Savidge | Reporter

Nico Savidge is a reporter covering courts, crime and law enforcement for The Mercury News. He grew up in Berkeley, then lived in Wisconsin for nine years before returning to the Bay Area, making him both a local and a transplant. A graduate of the University of Wisconsin, he previously wrote for EdSource, the Wisconsin State Journal and The Janesville Gazette. He spends his time outside of work re-learning the Bay Area and losing his tolerance for cold weather.





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