

The Transport Rainbow at the End of the Pandemic

by Jeanne Acutanza

In this one instance, I hope we **don't** have the muscle memory to go back to our old ways of doing things, specifically our old ways of commuting and traveling. Just as the global pandemic took hold of Kirkland, WA last March, traffic-data purveyor Inrix, also located in Kirkland, was publishing their annual traffic scorecard of congestion in urban areas around the globe. Pre-pandemic, Boston ranked as the most congested city in the United States, with the average commute 149 hours, over three work weeks, to congestion. The cost to consumers of [time wasted in congestion](#) in 2019 was estimated at \$1,300 per year, a little less than the last stimulus check. No surprise that during the pandemic, hours of congestion and the resulting cost to commuters dropped dramatically. According to the [Inrix scorecard](#), during the pandemic:

- Personal vehicles were driven less (82% of the pre-pandemic), and miles down were down by 28%
- Collisions were down by 30%, but fatalities were up (as speeds increased)
- Trips into downtowns are down dramatically (66% in Portland, 48% in NYC, and 55% in Houston)
- Americans, on average, saved a week of time by not driving on congested roadways to get to work
- All tolled Americans saved \$51 B by not commuting in traditional ways

However, as we recover, we are already seeing personal driving returning to pre-pandemic levels. Miles driven has almost recovered to 2019 levels. Changing long-held habits, like regularly traveling by auto (by ourselves), is more challenging than giving up chocolate. And unexpectedly, for all of the considerable time and energy we spend solving transportation congestion, the most significant traffic disrupter has turned out to be this global pandemic. While teleworking and flexible work hours have always been in the traffic toolbox, they rarely exceeded more than 10% of all commuting trips in urban areas. The pandemic underscored that some employees could not work remotely or from home; they became forever defined as essential workers. The most significant barriers to teleworking have traditionally been a lack of trust between employers and employees and having a comfortable environment and reliable tools to foster productive work at home. The pandemic “new normal” increased home deliveries of groceries, meals, and packages, vastly improved online communication tools and cemented a vision of what telework looks like.

With this disruption, many have been asking, “What will our new normal look like, post-pandemic?” Early in the pandemic, as I worried about my kid in NY, I would assuage both our fears by painting a post-pandemic picture of the world with a modern-day Renaissance. Our new normal and post-pandemic Renaissance could be the disruption we needed to make better use of our infrastructure. In my upcoming podcast with [Dr. Anne Goodchild](#), she describes that this disruption may have helped gain broader acceptance of ideas for just-in-time use of transportation systems. These disruptions include expanded curbside delivery in urban areas, outdoor dining, and “streeteries” re-timing signals, lowering speeds in residential communities, and repurposing streets (or green streets) for active transportation. The [National Association of City Transportation Officials \(NACTO\)](#) described many of these [strategies](#) early in the pandemic. As part of my discussion with Ted Trepanier from [Inrix](#), we also talked about using what we know about the system using real-time big data to better use the system and traveling outside those peak times.

With the knowledge we have about when the transportation system is being used, and with greater flexibility from employers, we can better use the system more efficiently. A better understanding of when the system is less congested allows commuters to work from home and travel to the office more flexibly. This makes better use of the existing system, reduces the need for system expansions, and potentially reduces emissions.

Amplifying this theory, we recently sat down to chat [Dr. Laura Schewel](#) from Streetlight for an upcoming podcast episode. As another big data purveyor, she [suggests](#) that the quality and diversity of this deep data be applied to measure the impact of these investments. We can learn which investments work to improve climate and equity outcomes. More sustainable travel, accurately quantified as to how we access opportunities, might turn out to be the rainbow at the end of the pandemic if we know how to keep those good practices.