

Roads in the UK are so congested that they are making us less healthy and more lonely

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October 29, 2022

Traffic is dividing communities, research finds, as increasingly busy roads act as physical barriers, stopping millions from making short trips by foot or bike



In total, the report estimates that busy roads are costing local communities across Britain £3.2bn a year (Photo: Dominic Lipinski/PA)

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October 29, 2022 6:00 am

Britain's congested roads are blighting the lives and health of millions of people because they are acting as physical barriers that prevent local journeys by foot, new research has found.

Unable to cross roads, that are either clogged or made dangerous by speeding traffic, residents are just opting out of what should be quick trips to local shops, friends or amenities, according to a University College London study.

Or else, they are adding to the problem by getting in their cars.

Researchers have found that one billion walking and cycling trips don't take place every year because people can't face dealing with their local traffic – that means 20 “lost” journeys per person per year.

Some 135 million of those trips are replaced by car journeys, 90 million by public transport, and 775 million trips are “suppressed – trips that people want to make but end up not making because of the fear and inconvenience of road traffic”, the study has found.

“Britain has a major problem with busy roads that is taking a significant mental and physical health toll in people all over the country,” Paulo Anciaes, of University College London, the lead researcher behind the findings, told [i](#).

“It is likely that millions of people in Britain have seen their quality of life reduced, to a greater or lesser extent, by living close to a busy road – with speeding cars or high volumes of traffic – and the problem appears to be getting worse.”

The poorest in the country, who are more likely to live near a busy road, are most affected, along with children and people with mobility issues, such as the elderly and disabled, the report, published in the journal *Transportation Research*, finds.

It means that millions of Britons could be missing out on valuable exercise as well as the benefit of being outdoors and socialising, at a cost to their health and wellbeing.

Furthermore, shops and other local businesses are suffering from reduced customers as roads put up barriers to access.

In total, the report – which includes a survey of a representative sample of 3,038 British adults – estimates that busy roads are costing local communities across Britain £3.2bn a year, or £64 per person, in the form of lower revenues for nearby businesses.

Charles Musselwhite, professor at Aberystwyth University and editor-in-chief of *Journal of Transport and Health*, argues that “we have let cars, vans and lorries take over”, leading to a “spiral of decline in communities where people don't know each other”.

“The more traffic in an area, the less likely we are able to walk and to cycle in the local area, and this reduces our ability to know our neighbours; and the less we know our neighbours, the less there is to have a sense of community,” he said.

Some 35 per cent of those surveyed for the UCL report – equating to 17.7 million British adults – said they lived near a road with heavy traffic. And a quarter – equating to 12.6 million British adults – said they lived close to a road where traffic was fast.

'It's absolutely terrifying'

Allison Pepper lives right by the busy A540 Chester High Road just outside the town of Neston in Cheshire.

This makes her family's life much more difficult, with her children's journey to the local secondary school, and just walking the dog, harder than it should be.

"We live right by the main road by one junction, and to get to school, the children need to walk up by a very busy road which has a big distribution centre along it, so massive lorries go past," says Ms Pepper, who, by coincidence, is a road traffic collisions solicitor.

Allison Pepper lives by the A540 Chester High Road just outside Neston in Cheshire (Photo: Tom Bawden)

"To get to the local secondary school, you have to walk along a very narrow pavement and then try and cross a junction. I can tell you it's scary trying to cross that junction in a car, let alone as a pedestrian in the morning and after school.

"We're probably less than half a mile away from the school – but it takes much longer than it should. They either get a bus, which means going backwards to go forwards – with me driving them backwards to a local village for them to go forwards on a bus."

"Or they can walk twice the distance to get round using safer routes to avoid crossing a really busy junction and the road itself. It's all a bit crackers really. And I've stopped walking the dog up there because it's absolutely terrifying."

"Traffic volumes tend to be inversely related to speeds, because of congestion," Dr Ancaies said. "This means that the problem ends up affecting all types of areas, but in different ways.

"In cities, the problem is traffic volume – reported as high by 41 per cent of residents, rising to 45 per cent in London. And in rural areas, the problem is traffic speed – reported as fast by 33 per cent in villages and 39 per cent in hamlets."

Dr Ancaies says Finchley Road in north London, between Swiss Cottage and Finchley Road, is one of the biggest offenders when it comes to blocking off residents.

"This has been a major barrier to walking trips for several decades. We talked with the local residents – many said they felt afraid of crossing Finchley Road and avoided going to the area on the other side of the road, as a result of that fear," he said.

"One local, a woman of 60, told us 'Finchley Road is just a big pain, traffic is so heavy – buses, coaches and lorries. It's not the speed as such, sometimes there is too much congestion for anyone to speed – it's a river of traffic, constant, non-stop and you don't want to breathe in the air it's so full of exhaust fumes'.

“The probability of living near a road with a speed perceived as high decreases almost linearly with income. And the problem seems to be worsening in the UK because road traffic volumes are still increasing. This is mostly due to the increase of traffic of light goods vehicles.”

Experts have welcomed the report. Dr Stephen Watkins, a former director of public health for Stockport, and chair of the Transport and Health Science Group, said “vibrant local communities are vitally important to the health of urban residents and a busy main road through the middle of them is seriously disruptive”.

Tanya Braun, director of policy and communications, Living Streets, the UK charity for everyday walking, said: “A lack of suitable crossings is a real barrier to people getting out and about. We need to see many more measures that protect pedestrians and encourage walking.”

Adrian Davis, professor of transport and health at Edinburgh Napier University, said the study revealed “the barrier effect” of busy roads.

“Reducing private motorised travel is the only way to solve this,” he said. “Reallocate road space to high quality public transport and walking and cycling”.

Not that everyone gives in to the traffic. Dr Ancaeaes points to one extreme case that hit the headlines some years ago, of an 89-year-old woman living in Dorset, who was partially blind and walked using a frame.

For her, a visit to the post office or shop she could see from her home on the other side of a very busy road involved a 90 minute round trip – involving a bus journey to the nearest pedestrian crossing three miles away and back again.