

1. Research notes



What does it mean to be less mobile? Insights from the COVID-19 lockdown

Research notes
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What does daily mobility mean to us? What would we miss if we had to reduce or significantly change our everyday movements? What would we gain? Most importantly, what opportunities and challenges would this create for designing and implementing low-carbon transition policies? The COVID-19 lockdowns offered a unique opportunity to address these questions. Our research shows that daily mobility plays a complex and ambivalent role in people's lives. While some aspects of mobility are seen as a burden, other meanings of mobility are so important that people seek "compensatory mobilities" to make up for missed experiences. This has implications for low-carbon mobility transitions.

Research participants

- Anna Nikolaeva
- Ying-Tzu Lin
- Samuel Nello-Deakin
- Ori Rubin
- Kim Carlotta von Schönfeld

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Introduction

If we aspire to transition to a less (or differently) mobile world for higher environmental and social sustainability, it is crucial to explore how this transition can maintain positive aspects of mobility, such as sociability, health and exercise. Likewise, it is key to understand possible motivations of people to be less (or differently) mobile in their daily lives.

Global restrictions on daily mobility during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020-2021 offered us, mobility scholars, a unique opportunity to explore how individuals experienced not being able to commute. In this context, the meaning of once completely normal and taken-for-granted daily mobility practices becomes clearer. What do people miss, and what do they appreciate about no longer commuting to work? How does this experience of immobility (or greatly reduced mobility) change the meanings attributed to mobility, and (how) does this impact other daily practices? Do people adopt new mobility practices to compensate for experiences they are missing? What does this mean for understanding the opportunities and challenges for low-carbon transition policies?

How we did our research

In order to address these questions, we interviewed 50 people (22 women and 28 men) from 12 countries using a written narrative interview method, aiming to elicit stories about individual experiences¹. At the time of participation, all respondents worked exclusively from home or, in some cases, most of the time (after a period of having worked only from home).

The narrative interview consisted of a single question: 'How has COVID-19 changed your daily mobility, and how do you feel about these changes?' It was followed, after a large blank space, by an elaboration and some optional questions that could be used as writing prompts.

We analysed the gathered data in two stages searching for key categories and themes. The first stage of analysis resulted in the categories indicated in

	Positive impact of the change	Negative impact of the change
Reflection on previous experience	Immobility as relief (18)	Immobility as loss (41)
Discovery of new experiences	Immobility as boon (36)	Immobility as burden (17)

Table 1. The numbers in brackets indicate the number of people who shared experiences that we coded under a particular category.

During the second stage, eleven main themes emerged within each category (Table 2). Furthermore, a new category was identified, which is related to the eleven themes, yet also stands apart: 'compensatory mobilities'.

Immobility as a relief	Immobility as loss	Immobility as burden	Immobility
Not having to spend time and energy on commuting	Loss of previous work-life balance and separation between different spheres of life	Monotony, boredom and loneliness	A more leisurely use of time
Relief from the stress of commuting	Loss of time for oneself	Poor concentration	Deeper connection with the community
	Missing physical movement		
	Missing the commute itself associated with freedom, spontaneity and encounter		
	Missing social contact as a result of not 'going to work'		

Table 2. Overview of the main themes, compiled by the authors.

The complex and ambivalent meanings of daily mobility

Most interviewees missed various aspects of going to work, yet also discovered new experiences, routines and meanings that held their daily life together and made it pleasant (Table 2).

Our first key finding is the complexity and ambivalence within many individual stories. Most interviewees described both positive and negative experiences, and for many there was no clear bottom line or simple conclusion. Not commuting meant losing important daily experiences and gaining new ones, and the prominence of these (imposed) trade-offs is reflected in the fact that the two corresponding categories 'Immobility as a loss' and 'Immobility as a boon' were identified in the data most frequently. The following quote illustrates how they manifest within a single interview:

I do not like commuting and I welcome the increased time for sleep and relaxation. (...) Part of the reason for this is also that my train commute takes place on a very crowded route and I often have to stand for part of the journey. I do notice that I do not read as much anymore, as I usually do

this during my train ride. I also have to put in more effort to stay active and go for a walk during the day now that I do not have my regular routine of biking 2x15 minutes and walking 2x20 minutes a day.

One part of work commuting that I do miss are the trips to other locations – for example for interviews (a significant part of my work). I enjoy visiting other parts of the country and being ‘on the road’, and these trips usually take place during off-peak hours to have more opportunity to work in the train or to relax. (Female respondent, 30 years old, the Netherlands)

Compensatory mobilities

Our second key finding is a recurrent theme in our data which we have labelled as ‘compensatory mobilities’. Thirty-four respondents mentioned attempting to reproduce what they missed about their commute, while simultaneously making use of perceived advantages of not commuting, such as flexibility or extra time. The relationship between the ambivalent and complex meanings of commuting, extra time and flexibility gained by not commuting, and ‘compensatory mobilities’ manifests itself in the experience of this interviewee:

Even though my commute before the COVID-19 lockdown by bicycle was less than 10 minutes each way, I feel that I have much more time in the day without it. However, I also feel that my daily routine has become very inactive, and I have had to specifically plan taking walks or bike rides since the COVID-19 lockdown ... On the other hand, taking undirected walks and bike rides allowed me to explore new places in the city, learn new streets, and notice aspects that I had not previously seen. ... I have been quite happy with the change and would like to see it remain going forward. (F, 29, Belgium)

Thus, the emergence of compensatory mobilities is a result of the complex and ambivalent role that daily mobility often plays in daily life. These practices emerged as a partial replacement for certain positive experiences associated with mobility, as well as a response to certain negative feelings related to working from home, including a feeling of monotony, boredom and isolation. In particular, some interviewees attempted to compensate for the lack of physical movement and kinaesthetic pleasure, for missed experiences of exploration, freedom and encounter, for the absence of a transition activity before and after work, and for the lack of time alone. While some respondents found a way to more or less reproduce the experiences they missed through other forms of mobility, mainly using active modes, others pointed out that the mere act of movement did not add up to the complexity of the commuting experience. For the latter, the practice of commuting is made up of multiple elements that are all meaningful – for instance, the sense of destination, seeing different people and places on the way to work, the feeling of getting energised for the day and so forth. For them, compensating for one or two aspects was not an adequate replacement for the original practice:

I miss riding my bike on a regular basis very much. Riding to work helped me to wake up and feel more energised at the beginning of the day. Unfortunately I didn’t manage to make up for it. There is something unique about commuting that is difficult to replace. I kept using the bike for daily leisure trips at the weekend, but, since the goal is different, the whole ride takes on a whole new meaning. (F, 30, Germany)²

Interestingly, many respondents associated compensatory bike rides and walks with social encounters and interactions as well as a deeper engagement with the built and natural environment, and assessed these experiences very positively. Such positive accounts also often featured discussions of the local environment as walking or cycling-friendly, providing easy access to facilities and natural areas.

What do our findings mean for research on low-carbon transitions and policy?

Compensatory mobility is key

Compensatory mobilities appear to be key for understanding the meaning of mobility in daily life and the intrinsic enjoyment associated with being on the move, but they are also important for unravelling the potential impacts of car dependency and car-centric planning on the carbon footprint of working from home. If people engage in commuting compensation mainly by driving rather than by cycling or walking, then this may essentially negate the expected effects of working from home on CO₂ emissions (Su et al. 2021). **Low carbon policy plans which focus on working from home cannot assume favorable outcomes by default. More research is needed on these ‘compensatory mobilities’ and how they are shaped by various factors, including the built environment.** We thus support the call by Meinherz and Fritz (2021: 838) to explore ‘structural constraints inhibiting the spread of pleasurable low carbon everyday mobilities’ by extending it to the current situation of more widespread teleworking practices in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our findings on compensatory mobilities resonate with the existing work on the meaning of mobilities grounded in practice theory. For example, Spurling et al. (2013) talk about ‘substituting practices’ as ‘more sustainable practices (new or old) [that] can fulfil the same needs’ (51). **Compensatory mobilities, especially if performed by foot or by bike and compensating for high-carbon travel, perhaps can be seen as ‘substituting practices’ that allow people to keep the most appreciated experiences associated with mobility while reducing their carbon footprint.** While it is difficult to provide more definitive conclusions on whether such substitution occurs on the basis of our study alone, the findings from a large survey in Belgium by Hook et al. (2021) found an increase in undirected walking and cycling trips during the lockdown among people who used to drive to work in 2020. The possible importance of this shift is underscored by the insight on the strong impact of mobility behaviour on attitudes to specific modes (Kroesen, Handy, and Chorus 2017). This means **that it is worth examining whether compensatory walking and cycling may eventually lead some drivers to embrace active modes for other purposes**.

Mobility policy needs to embrace sociality

Our study also contributes to the discussion on **the important role mobility plays in supporting and shaping everyday sociality**. Many interviewees commented on how walking and cycling—as opposed to commuting by car or public transport—has facilitated developing or renewing their interest in their own neighborhood and local community. Our study thus supports the idea that active modes—for instance, those walks and bike rides that we labeled ‘compensatory mobilities’—encourage spontaneous interaction in the neighborhood, sense of connectedness and the formation of social capital (Lund 2003; Te Brömmelstroet et al. 2017). **This calls for more attention to be paid to urban design and facilitating sociality through accommodating low-carbon mobility as part of policies aiming at stimulating working from home and reducing high-carbon travel.** Lower speed-limits in cities, introducing areas only accessible for those who walk or cycle, attractive public spaces where people with different needs can dwell – from children to elderly – all of these provide examples of enhancing conditions of everyday sociality on the move and encouraging walking and cycling.

However, our results also point to a peculiar trade-off: **not commuting also meant feeling isolated from other important social circles and missing fleeting encounters with strangers**. This resonates with the findings on public transportation and daily sociability during the period of lockdown in Amsterdam (Kokkola et al., 2022). This loss of social engagement due to reduced mobility indirectly suggests that mobility infrastructures are not only physical structures, but also should be viewed as social infrastructures (Tonnelat and Kornblum 2017; Klinenberg 2018). Thus, planning for (reduced) mobility also means intervening in the urban social fabric, facilitating some connections and cutting others. These findings generate questions for further research: does this mean that people who commute regularly were very disconnected from their neighborhoods in their ‘normal’ pre-corona life? Is this new sense of connection the result of the total impact of the pandemic (diminished options not just to travel but also to socialize and go out), or does the lack of commuting play a decisive role in it?

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Notes

1 This research is a follow-up of a non-representative survey with 1009 respondents globally that aimed to explore people's experiences of working from home and not commuting in April 2020 (Rubin et al. 2020). The target audience of this survey consisted of people who had not (or had hardly) worked from home before the global pandemic started and began working from home all or most of the time following the introduction of restrictions related to COVID-19. In June 2020, written narrative interview requests were sent to 300 people from the pool of survey respondents, as they had expressed interest in participating in a potential follow-up study. As a result, 50 people completed the written interview. Most respondents were knowledge workers (consultants, teachers, university lecturers, civil servants etc.) residing in Europe, the US and Australia). At the time of participation, all respondents worked exclusively from home or, in some cases, most of the time (after a period of having worked only from home). For more details on the sample and the discussion of the methodology please see Nikolaeva, A., Lin, Y.-T., Nello-Deakin, S., Rubin, O., & von Schönfeld, K. C. (2022). Living without commuting: Experiences of a less mobile life under COVID-19. *Mobilities*, 0(0), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2022.2072231>

2 This quote has been slightly edited in order to make the intended meaning clearer.

Mobility

For the Mobile Lives Forum, mobility is understood as the process of how individuals travel across distances in order to deploy through time and space the activities that make up their lifestyles. These travel practices are embedded in socio-technical systems, produced by transport and communication industries and techniques, and by normative discourses on these practices, with considerable social, environmental and spatial impacts.

En savoir plus x

Lockdown

The lockdown measures implemented throughout 2020 in the context of the Covid-19 crisis, while varying from one country to the next, implied a major restriction on people's freedom of movement for a given period. Presented as a solution to the spread of the virus, the lockdown impacted local, interregional and international travel. By transforming the spatial and temporal dimensions of people's lifestyles, the lockdown accelerated a whole series of pre-existing trends, such as the rise of teleworking and teleshopping and the increase in walking and cycling, while also interrupting of long-distance mobility. The ambivalent experiences of the lockdown pave the way for a possible transformation of lifestyles in the future.

En savoir plus x

Movement

Movement is the crossing of space by people, objects, capital, ideas and other information. It is either oriented, and therefore occurs between an origin and one or more destinations, or it is more akin to the idea of simply wandering, with no real origin or destination.

En savoir plus x

Teleworking

The remote performance of a salaried activity outside of the company's premises, at home or in a third place during normal working hours and requiring access to telecommunication tools.

En savoir plus x

Associated Thematics :

Lifestyles

- Alternative mobilities
- Aspirations
- Proximity
- Representations
- Rhythms of everyday life
- Crises
- Work

Theories

- Concepts
-

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