

The Burden of Commuting in Atlanta

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Despite its low commuter population relative to other major metropolitan areas, Atlanta Georgia ranks fifth in the nation for longest commute times with an average of 31.23 minutes each way (Ortiz, 2025). This does not likely come as a surprise, as Atlanta is infamous for its horrible traffic. A study published by Texas A&M's Transportation Institute estimates that Atlanta commuters spent 87 hours sitting idle in traffic during 2024, which is more than 30 hours over the national average (Raby, 2025). These additional hours cost commuters roughly \$1,043 in gas money, totaling over 3.1 billion for the city (Ponton, 2024). Comments from Atlanta residents echo these statistics, with many describing their daily commute as "awful," "the worst," and even "anxiety - inducing" (R/Georgia [flying trashcan], 2024).

Such evidence makes it clear that Atlanta's commuting problem is more than an inconvenience, but a social and economic issue with wide-reaching consequences. Driven by suburban sprawl and public transit inequities, Atlanta's excessive commute times present significant harmful impacts on its residents. Low-income citizens are disproportionately affected by these psychological, economic, and health consequences, demonstrating the need for an expansion of MARTA, as well as transit and carpool incentives to address this burden.

Causes

One of the largest contributors in Atlanta's traffic congestion is suburban sprawl. "Sprawl" describes the low density, outward expansion of a city into suburban areas. Jobs, housing, and even shopping districts are vastly spread out across the metropolitan area. The decentralization of resources and opportunities leads to increased car dependency and thus longer commute times. For example, Atlantans drive 34 miles each day on average, which is nearly 50% more than Los Angeles residents despite the fact that LA is synonymous with automobile ownership rates (Bullard, 2000). Sprawl can also be measured by the availability of jobs in a city's "urban core," which is defined by the 3km radius surrounding the downtown area. In 1980, the share of jobs within Atlanta's urban core was 19.7%; by 2000, that share had dropped to 7.7%, clearly illustrating the relocation of jobs into suburban areas (Yang, 2005).

A decrease in the utilization of public transportation and carpooling in recent years also plays a large role in the creation of traffic in Atlanta. The United States Census Bureau shows a 10% decrease in public transportation and a 5% decrease in carpooling from 1990 to 2014 (Thompson,

2016). While these percentages may not initially sound impactful, in a city of 500,000 people, even a small uptick in commuters who drive alone is enough to significantly increase congestion.

Citizens are deterred from using Atlanta's public transportation system, Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA) for a few different reasons. One resident explains that a 15-20 minute drive by car typically takes around 45 minutes on MARTA because of frequent stops on bus routes. Another resident states they don't utilize MARTA because the trains don't start early enough for their morning commute. Some residents even describe the buses and trains as "dirty" and "dangerous" (Turnbull, 2025). Unfortunately, a decrease in MARTA's demand as well as citizen's opposition to increasing taxes to fund transit expansion just reinforces the current issue: Atlanta suffers from major traffic congestion that stems from car dependency but cannot fund the expansion of its public transportation system to decrease the number of cars on the road.

Atlanta is a major commercial hub, which largely contributes to traffic congestion in the city. It houses the Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport, otherwise known as the "busiest airport in the world," as well as the home of Delta's headquarters. Additionally, two major interstates run through the city, I-75 and I-85; these roads serve as major chokepoints for commercial trucking, producing 3 of the top 10 bottlenecks in the country (Ponton, 2024).

Consequences

Heavy Atlanta traffic poses several economic challenges for its commuters. As mentioned, Atlantans pay an estimated \$1,043 in gas each year, which is roughly \$300 more than the national average. To an affluent family, \$1,043 might be just a drop in the bucket, but for a low income family that price can be devastating. Although MARTA has a relatively low fare at \$2.50 a trip, this cost can become a burden for an economically struggling family. In addition to the upfront costs, commuting also presents a cost of time. The multiple hours spent driving each day is time that could be spent working and earning money, once again disproportionately affecting low income families or those with lower wage jobs. Traffic congestion makes it much more difficult for people to work and cover the high cost of living in the city.

Each commuter in the Atlanta Metro area experiences negative psychological effects from sitting in traffic for an extended period of time each day. The inevitable isolation, frustration, and stress that stem from traffic puts a large strain on one's social and personal life. Not only does commuting take time, but it "generates out-of-pocket costs, causes stress and intervenes in the relationship between work and family" (Stutzer and Frey, 2008). Sitting in traffic takes away time that could be spent on family, friends, hobbies, or leisure. Furthermore, a study conducted by Stutzer and Frey demonstrates the

linear relationship between time spent commuting and reported satisfaction with life: participants with higher commute times consistently reported lower levels of satisfaction in their lives. These adverse effects of commuting that reach beyond financial concerns prove the need for Atlanta traffic to be reduced in order to improve the quality of life of its residents.

Commercial trucking traffic in the city produces elevated levels of diesel particle matter, which creates many health and environmental concerns. Diesel particle matter (PM) is defined as small carbon particles coated with organic compounds that are released into the air by form of exhaust from vehicles that use diesel fuel. In addition to the fact that diesel PM is a potent contributor to global warming, scientists also found that the product is linked to cardiovascular disease, respiratory illness, onset of allergies, and even contains more than 40 cancer-causing substances (California Air Resources Board, n.d.).

These health issues disproportionately impact low income residents, as demonstrated by Figures 1, 2, and 3 below. Figure 1 shows a map of traffic proximity in Atlanta, Figure 2 shows the concentration of diesel PM, and Figure 3 shows a map of the highest and lowest median household incomes in the city. The lighter areas represent the top 20% of earners, and the darker areas represent the bottom 20%. These maps clearly illustrate an overlap in the highest concentration of diesel PM and lowest income residents. Not only does this overlap mean low income households are at higher risk of health issues, but they are also responsible for paying for those issues, creating a large economic burden for those families.



Figure 1: Traffic Proximity in Atlanta

(Source: Environmental Justice Screening and Mapping Tool, Version 2.3)



Figure 2: Concentration of Diesel PM
 (Environmental Justice Screening and Mapping Tool, Version 2.3)



Figure 3: Highest & Lowest Median Household Incomes
 (Kelly, 2016)

Policy Recommendations

One of the largest avenues to improve Atlanta’s traffic congestion is to expand MARTA. Further developing the public transit system’s routes will promote more widespread use throughout the city, reducing the number of vehicles on the road. Figures 4 and 5 clearly indicate areas with the greatest opportunities and impacts for expansion. Figure 4 shows a map of Atlanta’s median commute times on a spectrum. Darker coloring indicates the metro’s longest commute times, while lighter coloring indicates the shortest. Figure 5 shows a map of the metro’s highest and lowest household incomes, with lighter areas representing the top 20% of earners and darker areas

representing the bottom 20%. Each map is overlaid with the current MARTA routes; the black route is a rail route, while all other colors are bus routes.



Figure 4: Atlanta’s Median Commute Times (Spectrum)
(Source: Simple Maps, Commute Time and MARTA)

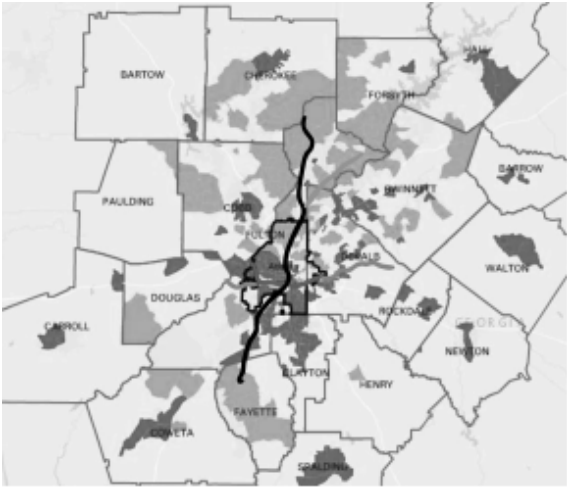


Figure 5: Metro’s Highest & Lowest Household Incomes
(Source: Kelly, 2016 and MARTA)

Each figure displays the disparities between MARTA routes, commute times, and income levels in Atlanta. Citizens located along the MARTA rail routes generally have shorter commute times, such as the northern side of the city. Coincidentally, a large portion of the highest income earners live in those areas, demonstrating the need for the expansion of MARTA rail routes into lower income areas within the metro. Although low-income families rely on public transit the most, MARTA's rail routes primarily serve higher income neighborhoods. Therefore, an expansion of rail routes further South and in East-West directions would benefit those who need it the most.

This extension can be achieved through the implementation of a few different funding techniques. First, vehicle property taxes in the Atlanta metropolitan area can be increased. Policymakers can also increase existing tolls on highways such as I-85, Northwest Corridor, or Georgia 400. These techniques disincentivize driving a car while simultaneously producing funds for the expansion of public transportation. The city can apply for an infrastructure grant from the Federal Transit Administration to construct this project.

Another method to improve Atlanta's traffic is to implement employer-provided transit incentives. The ideal policy would require employers to provide free MARTA passes to their employees, thus increasing the incentive to utilize public transit. Data from the 2011 Atlanta Regional Household Travel Survey showed that employees were 156% more likely to commute on public transit when provided free or subsidized transit passes from their employer (Ghimire and Lancelin, 2019). Employers would be able to utilize their pre-tax money for this expense, offering them a tax benefit for this incentive as well.

Lastly, implementing carpool incentives would also reduce the number of cars on the road. Atlanta has already constructed HOV and express lanes that offer faster travel for vehicles with 2 or more passengers. To take this incentive further, policymakers can give a stipend to companies in the metro area to create and monitor carpool preferred parking spots located in front of their businesses. These spots would be given to vehicles with 2 or more passengers only and be enforced with a fine, similarly to the way ADA parking is enforced. Ideally, businesses in high traffic areas would be targeted for this policy such as Downtown, Midtown, and Buckhead.

Conclusion

This case study demonstrates that commuting times in Atlanta are more than just a small disruption, but a crisis that negatively impacts all of the city's residents. The isolation, stress, and frustration connected to excessive commute times takes a toll on the personal and social lives of commuters. Traffic congestion disproportionately affects Atlanta's low-income population, creating health concerns that quickly become large financial burdens. The

city's current public transit system routes, specifically the faster rail routes, cater to primarily high-income neighborhoods, which further reinforces this disparity.

With the implementation of a few policies to expand MARTA, incentivize the use of public transit, and incentivize carpooling, the entire city of Atlanta would experience an improvement in commute times. Each of these recommended policies aim to reduce the number of cars on the road, consequently reducing traffic congestion. This reduction will improve the city's economy and overall well-being by taking the economic and social strains off of residents. The city-wide positive impact of decreasing Atlanta's traffic congestion proves that it is imperative for policymakers to take action in addressing this issue.

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