

# Opinion: Traffic congestion in Canada's cities a key measurement

## Costly: Gridlock can interfere with job creation and economic growth

BY WENDELL COX, VANCOUVER SUN AUGUST 28, 2015



Commuting at peak hours in Istanbul, Turkey, according to studies by GPS maker Tom Tom, means a normal 30-minute trip takes 58 minutes. The firm reports Istanbul's traffic congestion is the worst in the world among 146 cities studied. Vancouver ranks as the worst in Canada.

Traffic congestion plagues cities around the world. Roads carry virtually all of the commercial traffic in high-income cities and most personal travel.

Canada is no exception, with more than 70 per cent of work trip travel by car in the largest metropolitan areas of Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver, Calgary, Ottawa-Gatineau and Edmonton, and even more elsewhere. Transit also carries a large percentage of passenger travel, principally to urban core destinations. Much of this travel is on buses that also operate on congested roadways.

Traffic congestion imposes substantial costs. A 2006 report by Transport Canada found that congestion costs were nearly \$4.5 billion annually in the six largest metropolitan areas.

In recent years, it has become possible for public officials and consumers to compare traffic congestion levels in their cities to those in other parts of the world. For example, Tom Tom, a Dutch company that specializes in GPS systems for roadway navigation now produces an annual Traffic Congestion Index. Tom Tom rates traffic congestion in 146 metropolitan areas on six continents.

The ratings are expressed in excess travel times, expressed as the percentage of delay compared with uncongested conditions. For example, a trip that would take 30 minutes without congestion but takes 15 minutes longer would have a 50 per cent delay. Tom Tom ranks both peak period congestion, which is the most severe, and all-day congestion.

According to the latest report (2015), the worst traffic congestion is in Istanbul, with a delay of 93 per cent (calculated as the mid-point of morning and evening delay). Tom Tom estimates that the average 30 minute trip would take 58 minutes. Istanbul's all-day traffic congestion delay is 55 per cent, also the worst in the world. Mexico City has the second-worst peak period delay at 91 per cent, while Moscow rates third worst with an average delay of 90 per cent.

The shortest peak period traffic congestion delays are in Richmond, Va., at 19 per cent and an all-day delay of 11 per cent. Kansas City has the second-best peak period delay at 21.5 per cent and is followed by Abu Dhabi at 22 per cent.

Canada's metropolitan areas fall in the middle and none are nearly as bad as Istanbul. The least traffic congestion is in Alberta's largest cities.

Edmonton has Canada's best peak period congestion, ranking 34th out of the 146 world cities surveyed, with a delay of 37 per cent. The average 30-minute trip takes 41 minutes in congestion, according to the Tom Tom estimate. Edmonton's all-day delay is 23 per cent.

Calgary is second to Edmonton, with a peak period delay of 40 per cent, for a ranking of 43rd. Calgary's all-day traffic delay averages 22 per cent, slightly better than Edmonton. Montreal has the third-best traffic congestion, though ranking 90th, in the second half of 146 cities. Montreal's peak period delay averages 53 per cent, more than twice that of Edmonton or Calgary. Montreal's all-day traffic congestion delay is 27 per cent.

Ottawa has somewhat worse traffic congestion than Montreal. Ottawa's peak period delay is 58 per cent, for a ranking of 101st out of the 146 cities. Ottawa's all-day delay is 28 per cent.

Vancouver and Toronto have the worst peak period traffic congestion in Canada. Both metropolitan areas have an average peak period delay of 60 per cent, and are tied for 101st out of the 146 cities. The average 30-minute trip in uncongested conditions takes 48 minutes. This delay is nearly triple that of the Alberta cities. However, Vancouver's all-day traffic congestion delay is the worst in Canada, at 35 per cent. Vancouver is tied for 122nd ranking with Shanghai, Sydney and Paris and behind New York. Toronto's all-day delay is 30 per cent.

Traffic congestion is also important to the business competitiveness of metropolitan areas. For example, the Toronto Region Board of Trade has often cited Toronto's slower travel times as a competitive disadvantage. Traffic congestion can weigh into corporate decisions about locations for new facilities.

There is broad agreement among transportation economists that greater traffic congestion can interfere with job creation and economic growth.

Generally, better economic performance has been identified where the average employee can reach a larger number of jobs within a particular time, such as 30 minutes. Similarly, better travel times reduce commercial transportation costs.

Traffic congestion indexes can be important for evaluating transportation system performance as governments seek to foster improved metropolitan competitiveness.

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