

# Talking the impact of stressful commutes with UMN

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Credit: University of Minnesota

On average, commuters in the U.S. spend more than 25 minutes commuting to work. Add in construction season or missing their bus, and the commute can become particularly unpleasant.

Betty Zhou, an assistant professor in the Carlson School of Management who conducted research on the impact of stressful commutes, answers questions about how it can impact workers and employers.

## **Q. What are some of the common stressors commuters face on a daily basis?**

Prof. Zhou: According to U.S. Census Bureau data, some commuters in the U.S. face the reality of an extremely long [commute](#). Similar concerns were raised in other countries like China.

Along with the length of commuting time, some of the common stressors faced by our research participants—who took the bus to work on a regular basis in China—included overcrowded buses; traffic jams and construction on the way to work; missing their bus; and other commuters riding bicycles or driving cars in the bus lane.

These stressors may vary across different groups of commuters depending on their transportation means (e.g., bus vs. metro) and the larger context (e.g., infrastructure).

## **Q. How does a stressful commute impact workers?**

Prof. Zhou: Research suggests that when going through two consecutive activities—such as commuting and then working—people's experiences in the first activity, particularly stress reactions, can carry over to affect their performance in the next activity. Therefore, workers can be negatively affected by a stressful commute because their mental resources were spent on regulating the [negative emotions](#) and thoughts triggered by the bad commute. They are then left with fewer resources to devote to their work in the hours immediately following their commute to work.

In this way, a stressful commute can make it more difficult for workers to regulate proper workplace behaviors (e.g., proper interactions with customers), focus their energy on work tasks and accomplish work goals. Beyond our research, other studies have shown that commute quality is correlated with workers' affective and behavioral states, such as [work-family conflict](#), aggressive behaviors and negative mood.

## **Q. What can workers do to alleviate the impact of commuting on their workday?**

Prof. Zhou: Workers should try to find a reliable and safe way to get to work from home. If they cannot change the transportation means (e.g., they cannot afford a car or driving their own vehicles is too expensive in terms of parking cost), they can proactively manage their commute by collecting information about the schedule or current status of their usual rides, be aware of the weather and road conditions, and so on. Technologies can help commuters better manage this type of information. For example, if available, commuters can use smartphone apps to check the status of the buses or light-rail trains.

Employees should also try to minimize the interference on work from family-related matters during [work hours](#), such as scheduling home repairs during work hours, which could exacerbate the negative impact of stressful commute on work.

In spite of a stressful commute, a significant task at work—such as one with a large impact on colleagues—can also help focus workers' attention on their job despite a stressful commute.

## **Q. How can employers and other organizations help reduce commuting stress and improve job performance?**

Prof. Zhou: Employers should be aware of the impact commuting has on employees. There is ample evidence that commuting can affect workers' job performance and well-being. It is an integral part of the work experience.

Employers should keep in mind that employees may not have the ability to freely choose where they live and change their commute. Their employees have limited resources and are often responsible for the needs of their family members.

By raising employers' awareness of the negative impact of commuting on employees' performance, which directly affects the company's bottom line, they may be more willing to support flexible work schedules, telecommuting or other alternative arrangements.

Public transportation services can provide more timely updates on their vehicles via texts, emails or mobile apps. This way, commuters have better control over their schedule.

## **Q. What is next for your scholarship and research in this space?**

Prof. Zhou: My collaborators and I feel it is important to develop and evaluate interventions that can help commuters improve their commuting experiences and cope with commuting stress so commuting has smaller negative impact on work and family.

Since we conducted the studies, commuting conditions have not seemed to improve in certain regions in the U.S. and in major cities in China. Therefore, the need to understand how to cope with commuting—especially when the workers do not have alternatives regarding commuting means, commuting time and commuting

routes—is as strong as ever.

A few potential areas for devising and implementing interventions include activities workers can do immediately after arriving at work and during work days which are low-cost to employers. These can include mini-recovery exercises that allow temporal detachment from [work](#), as well as free services crowdsourced among commuters sharing similar commutes (e.g., chat groups for ride sharing, informational support and emotional support).

Provided by University of Minnesota

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