

The 10 Most Congested Cities in the US (and How to Fix Them)

The next time you're stuck in traffic for 90 minutes, just remember: it doesn't have to be this way.

Jon Miltimore

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The Patriots may have won yet another Super Bowl in 2019, but not all is happy in New England.

Boston had the slowest traffic in the US in 2018, according to INRIX's newly released [Annual Congestion Report](#), with a typical Bostonian losing 164 hours in jammed traffic.

Beantown was followed by Washington, DC, Chicago, New York City, and Los Angeles to round out the top five. Below is a list of the 10 most congested cities in the US.

It might be tempting to believe (even for [economists](#)) that little can be done to alleviate traffic congestion in cities with millions of people. But is that truly the case?

Free-Market Solutions

Randal O'Toole of the Cato Institute, who has studied urban growth for decades, has pointed out that many of the most pervasive urban problems in America, including traffic congestion, can be solved by adopting free-market principles.

The problem is cities particularly and politicians generally have relied on alternative methods—from gas taxes to mass transit—to reduce traffic congestion. The results have been ugly.

Just this week, for example, California Gov. Gavin Newsom pulled the plug on the state's proposed \$77 billion [bullet train boondoggle](#). In fairness to California and Newsom, it was the right call. Mass transit has proved an [ineffective](#) yet costly way to combat traffic congestion. For [various](#) (if different) reasons, gas taxes have fared no better.

O'Toole has long (and extensively) argued that a better way to alleviate congestion would be to [refinance America's network](#) of highways and adopt [congestion pricing](#). Several studies in recent years, he [points out](#), have concluded that “pricing traffic congestion is critical to beating it.”

O'Toole himself made this point in [a 2012 paper](#):

Economists have long proposed to use pricing to relieve congestion because congestion pricing would avoid the shift-back problem. If tolls increase as the usage rate increases, and the maximum tolls are high enough that actual flows never exceed the maximum capacities, then

road capacities are nearly doubled for those hours that flows would otherwise break down into stop-and-go traffic. An additional benefit is that the revenue generated from the tolls would be used to operate, maintain, and expand the roadway where the toll was collected. This policy is usually presented as a choice: people can sit in traffic, which is a deadweight-loss to society, or they can pay a toll and avoid congestion and know that their toll fee is doing some good, such as improving roads to relieve congestion.

It Doesn't Have to Be This Way

Creating networks of private roadways would kill two birds with one stone. First, it would allow some drivers, if they so choose, to pay something to get somewhere faster. Second, it would alleviate congestion, at least to some extent, on congested public roadways.

Admittedly, there are obstacles to this idea. The unpopularity of tollways is one of them. But the perhaps bigger obstacle is the egalitarian idea, which radio host Thom Hartmann suggested in a debate with O'Toole, that rich, poor, and middle-class drivers should all suffer in traffic together, despite the environmental and economic harms.

This is a compelling argument to those who've bought into class envy. But next time you're stuck in traffic for 90 minutes, just remember: it doesn't have to be this way.

Jonathan Miltimore is the Managing Editor of FEE.org. His writing/reporting has appeared in TIME magazine, The Wall Street Journal, CNN, Forbes, Fox News, and the Washington Times.