

Second Annual Index Ranks Climate Impact of Transportation for 100 Largest U.S. Metro Areas, Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic

StreetLight Data Analysis Reveals New York, NY Sarasota, FL and Portland, OR Take the Lead in Reduced-Impact of Transportation

SAN FRANCISCO ([PRWEB](#)) January 21, 2021 -- COVID-19 has had an unprecedented impact on greenhouse gas emissions, including those from transportation. To reveal some of those effects, [StreetLight Data](#), Inc., the leader in Big Data analytics for mobility, today unveiled its second annual U.S. Transportation Climate Impact Index, which ranks the country's 100 most populous metro areas based on several carbon-related transportation factors, including Vehicle Miles Traveled (VMT), bicycle and pedestrian metrics, transit, population density, and circuitry.

In 2020, unemployment increased, as did working-from-home, along with ecommerce and restaurant delivery. Transit and airplane travel plummeted, while more people rode bikes and walked outdoors. Some city dwellers fled to more spacious locations and college students left campus and adopted remote learning. The pandemic continues to wreak financial, medical and social havoc on the world.

However, travel shutdowns in the U.S. gave us a peek at what might be possible: A healthy economy and population, but with less driving and more bicycle and pedestrian travel.

StreetLight Data's 2020 U.S. Transportation Climate Impact Index Best Performing Top 10 U.S. Metro Areas:

The top metro areas generally have low VMT, significant bike and pedestrian activity, high per-capita transit use (mainly in the pre-COVID months of 2020), high population density, and low circuitry (people drive directly to their destination, instead of burning extra miles using ring roads and other indirect routes).

1. New York-Newark-Jersey City, NY-NJ
2. North Port-Sarasota-Bradenton, FL
3. Portland-Vancouver-Hillsboro, OR-WA
4. Cape Coral-Ft Myers, FL
5. San Francisco-Oakland-Hayward, CA
6. Miami-Fort Lauderdale-West Palm Beach, FL
7. Colorado Springs, CO
8. San Diego-Carlsbad, CA
9. Minneapolis-St. Paul-Bloomington, MN-WI
10. Seattle-Tacoma-Bellevue, WA

StreetLight Data Analysis Uncovered Three Key Takeaways from 2020:

- Driving and Economic Growth Aren't Connected

StreetLight saw 2020 VMT drop to unprecedented lows. However, Gross Domestic Product (GDP) didn't follow suit. This suggests that decoupling VMT and GDP is possible. Encouragingly, the United Nations also noted that emissions have already peaked in GDP growth countries, indicating that VMT can drop while economic growth continues.

- “Active Transportation” Plays a Larger Role

Many metro areas across the U.S. saw bicycle riders and pedestrians become more active in 2020. Although bicycling activity increased in many areas, it dropped in many major cities – most notably in cities with a history of very active bike commuting. This isn’t surprising for a year with widespread work-from-home mandates. The analysis found that even in those cities, bicycling did not drop as much as driving. This indicates that bike riding took up a larger share of total miles traveled in 2020.

- Work-From-Home Isn’t a Silver Bullet

Although widespread work-from-home policies were still in place at the end of 2020, the fall in commuting did not translate to permanent or drastically lower amounts of driving. In fact, by August, VMT had begun to climb back to pre-pandemic levels, albeit with peak traffic spread over more hours during the day.

The analysis of hourly vehicle volume for major metros captured the reduction of peak morning rush hour. StreetLight saw similar travel patterns from Chicago, Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., and San Francisco: Less driving from 6:00 a.m. to 9:00 a.m. compared to 2019, with more comparative volume midday, building to a longer afternoon rush hour.

Potential for Change

“Given the potential for decoupling economic growth from VMT, now is the time to create more financial and other incentives for reducing climate impact. If we don’t build that into our economic recovery, we risk obliterating any short-term gains made during COVID-19 travel shutdowns,” said Laura Schewel, CEO and co-founder of StreetLight Data.

One of the most encouraging 2020 takeaways: Many cities this year moved quickly to adjust transportation infrastructure to help citizens and businesses. This included closing streets to vehicles, opening sidewalks for restaurant seating, and adjusting parking options for delivery services. Cities should incorporate this “rapid planning” stance long-term, as transportation technology, behaviors, and economics will continue to evolve rapidly.

While working from home for white-collar workers didn’t eliminate huge amounts of VMT, it did open up the possibility of reduced commute driving. For example, if companies permanently adopt a one-day-a-week work-from-home, it could reduce commute VMT by up to 20%.

In addition, while StreetLight doesn’t explicitly measure air travel in this report, the reduction in business travel was massive. Fewer conferences and meetings, and a few more virtual conferences, can also lead to significant transportation emission reductions from business travel while, perhaps, improving productivity.

StreetLight Data Analysis of the 2020 U.S. Transportation Climate Impact Index Top 10 U.S. Metros:

1. New York-Newark-Jersey City, NY-NJ

For a second year, the New York metro area tops the list, however, for very different reasons. In 2019, New York ranked #1 or #2 in bike, pedestrian, and transit miles traveled. Those scores vaulted it into our top slot despite an abysmal VMT ranking of #80, compared to the other metro areas.

In 2020, New York's driving ground to a halt during the pandemic, placing it near the top of our VMT rankings. Transit activity per capita remained high, however, bike and pedestrian activity slid farther down in the rankings, as compared to other cities in 2020.

2. North Port-Sarasota-Bradenton, FL

Florida has several cities on this year's list and Sarasota's debut in the Top 10 illustrates how quickly a few tweaks can affect an area's rank in our Index. Last year, Sarasota ranked #19 overall, with middle-of-the-road scores for all factors.

In 2020, Sarasota-area residents took advantage of the beautiful climate to engage in a lot of biking and walking. Sarasota tops the list for cycling activity, and places #4 for pedestrian travel. Those high scores combined with a top-third VMT rank boost Sarasota on the list.

3. Portland-Vancouver-Hillsboro, OR-WA

Last year Portland's indexed VMT ranking was in the bottom quarter of the list, however, rose to #15 this year. At the same time, relative cycling activity in Portland rose in the 2020 rankings. The overall combination is enough to rate this city highly transportation climate-impact friendly.

4. Cape Coral-Ft Myers, FL

Cape Coral just missed making the Top 10 last year, however, small adjustments in 2020 popped it up in the overall rankings. The city's bicycle and pedestrian activity ranks higher this year compared to its peers.

5. San Francisco-Oakland-Hayward, CA

Last year's #2 city drops in the overall rankings, largely because other cities caught up on bike and pedestrian scores. As in New York, San Francisco area's VMT ranking improved markedly in 2020 because people drove less. However, relative to other cities, Bay Area residents didn't ride bikes or walk quite as much in 2020. This is perhaps related to residents leaving to stay in other metro areas during the crisis.

6. Miami-Fort Lauderdale-West Palm Beach, FL

Miami made a remarkable jump compared to last year, largely on the strength of an impressive improvement in VMT ranking. In the worst 20 of last year's VMT ranking, Miami places third-best this year, probably related to a drop in tourism. Although the metro area's bike and pedestrian rankings were worse this year compared to 2019, that giant drop in driving makes up for it.

7. Colorado Springs, CO

Last year, Colorado Springs was in or near the bottom half of the rankings for every single factor. However, in 2020 it vaulted into the best 10 cities for both bike and pedestrian activity. Those scores and a slightly better VMT ranking helped this metro area move from an overall bottom third ranking to Top 10.

8. San Diego-Carlsbad, CA

San Diego made the largest jump of any city on the entire list. Last year, it was the fifth-worst metro area compared to its peers. This year, San Diego stands out with the second-lowest VMT/capita on our list. Residents reduced driving in 2020, however, they kept using public transportation, preserving San Diego's already-healthy transit ranking.

9. Minneapolis-St. Paul-Bloomington, MN-WI

Another city where residents did an impressive job to reduce driving during the pandemic, the Minneapolis metro area rose from #95 for VMT/capita last year to #19 in 2020. The rest of its rankings remained almost unchanged from 2019, however, Minneapolis stands out for dropping VMT/capita so markedly compared to its 2020 peers.

10. Seattle-Tacoma-Bellevue, WA

Seattle's densely populated metro area with high transit use had the potential to place higher than #63 last year, but drivers relegated it to #85 on the VMT/capita ranking. This year, curtailed driving made a big difference, with Seattle jumping to #14 on VMT/capita ranking. Moderate bike and pedestrian scores helped Seattle break into the Top 10.

[Click here](#) to explore StreetLight Data's 2020 U.S. Transportation Climate Impact Index interactive website, and the full 100 U.S. metro areas, as well as more context for the top 10.

Methodology:

StreetLight Data analyzed the 100 most populous metro areas from the U.S. Census list of core-based statistical areas (CBSAs). The company scored the cities individually, per capita, by six core transportation factors: Vehicle Miles Traveled (VMT), bike commuting, pedestrian commuting, circuitry, population density, and transit ridership.

StreetLight Data analyzes trips derived from location-based services (LBS) data, processed by our proprietary algorithm. Results were indexed values, not actual measurements, because StreetLight does not capture 100% of a city's movements. Overall rankings were derived using each individual factor's value scaled from 0 to a factor's weight. A higher ranking indicates a better score, with a lower ranking indicating a worse score, relative to other cities.

About StreetLight Data

StreetLight pioneered the use of Big Data analytics to help transportation professionals solve their biggest problems. Applying proprietary machine-learning algorithms to over four trillion spatial data points over time, StreetLight measures diverse travel patterns and makes them available on-demand via the world's first SaaS platform for mobility, StreetLight InSight®. From identifying sources of congestion to optimizing new infrastructure to planning for autonomous vehicles, StreetLight powers more than 6,000 global projects every month. For more information, please visit: www.streetlightdata.com.



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