

# CASE STUDY



## Encouraging walking and cycling

**Regional coalition uses Understanding Society  
to examine active travel**

Understanding Society worked with Transport for West Midlands, Warwickshire County Council, and Coventry City Council to understand what motivates people to walk or cycle instead of driving, and what prevents more people doing so.

Most of us still travel in private vehicles, typically cars, for short trips to work, shops, school, and social activities, and car and taxi vehicle miles went up by 29% between 1990 and 2018.

At the same time, physical inactivity and sedentary lifestyles are having serious implications for our health. Walking and cycling have been linked to the reduced incidence or severity of serious illnesses including depression, diabetes, heart disease, and cancer.

Road accidents accounted for over 1,700 deaths in 2019, and almost 26,000 serious injuries – and vehicle emissions contribute to climate change and air pollution.

The government has announced over £3 billion of investment to increase cycling and walking since 2017, so better understanding of what prompts people to undertake ‘active travel’ is vital. A research partnership between Transport for West Midlands, Warwickshire County Council, Coventry City Council and Understanding Society set out to

- identify what prompts and constrains active travel
- learn what policies have worked to encourage active travel, and which ones haven’t
- identify potential groups of people and types of short trip where travel behaviour could be influenced.

## How they used the data

The research used Understanding Society data from over 2,000 people in the West Midlands, plus two surveys by Transport for West Midlands, and qualitative telephone interviews. The Study asks questions about topics such as employment, education, ethnicity, house moves, neighbourhood, travel behaviour, and attitudes and beliefs about the environment.

Having both multi-topic representative regional data and local travel survey information allowed the researchers to build an accurate picture of travel behaviour in the region, and obtain more detailed information from residents. They took socio-economic, housing, health, and neighbourhood factors into account, and built up a picture of what determines the methods of travel people use – and what puts them off cycling or walking.

Regression analysis then allowed them to establish which factors were the most important, and to ask whether other factors could explain gender, socio-economic and ethnic differences – such as physical activity, health, people's environmental beliefs, and the type of house and neighbourhood they live in.



## Findings

Compared to the rest of the UK, people in the West Midlands are less likely to cycle to get somewhere (not for recreation), and they cycle or walk to work less, too.

Looking at the West Midlands on its own:

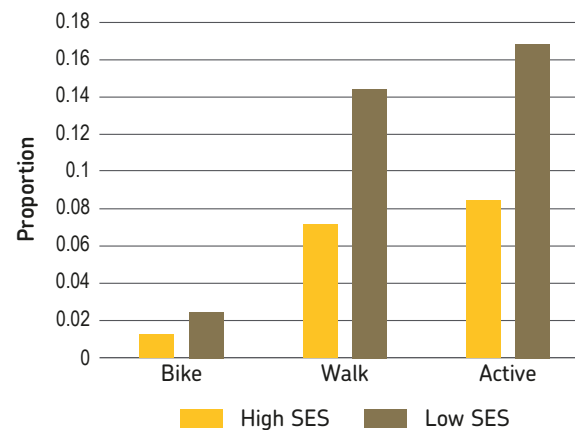
- women are less likely than men to cycle in order to get somewhere
- they are also less likely to cycle when commuting
- but they are more likely to walk to work.

People with higher socio-economic status (SES) are less likely to cycle and less likely to use active travel methods when commuting. People with low socio-economic status are more likely to walk and cycle when commuting.

People from ethnic minority groups are:

- less likely to cycle for transport and commuting
- more likely to walk to work than people not from minority groups.

Socio-economic differences in commuting behaviour



## What might explain travel behaviour?

Overall, this analysis found that gender is the most important factor influencing levels of cycling, while only socio-economic status shows a statistical difference in terms of walking to work – but the researchers also asked what other factors might be influential.

### How far people commute

People whose work is less than three miles away from their home were more likely to cycle or walk to work. In fact, distance had more effect on commuters' choice of transport than demographics.

### Family responsibilities

The report also suggested that, for gender differences, the most important factor was probably caring responsibilities. Even now, women tend to be responsible for preparing breakfast, getting children ready for school, and dropping them off. This affects their working patterns, and is very likely to affect their travel behaviour, too.

Understanding how and why these differences occur, the researchers said, should help to target particular areas or groups of people when encouraging active travel.



## Where people live

They also found that the characteristics of a neighbourhood can influence people's travel choices.

People living in an area where racial slurs are common were more likely to cycle every day. This might suggest that people want to use any vehicle to travel rather than walking, especially if they are from an ethnic minority group.

Another interesting factor was teenagers hanging around. We might assume that this is a sign of a dangerous neighbourhood, but it could be that if parents are happy for their kids to socialise outside, the neighbourhood is seen as safe. The research bore this out: people who said teenagers hung around in the streets were more likely to walk to work. Another positive factor in neighbourhoods – people feeling they can borrow things from their neighbours – was also associated with being more likely to cycle.





## Moving house or job

Behaviour theory suggests that significant events such as moving house or jobs offer an opportunity to influence a change in travel habits. People who have moved house in the last three or four years are less likely to cycle than people who stayed put, but this wasn't the case for people who had moved in the last two years. This suggests that the opportunity to influence behaviour is likely to be immediately following house moves, before people get used to particular modes of travel. There were no effects of changing jobs, but people who lost a job were less likely to cycle, and the longer they were jobless, the lower the chance of them cycling became.

## Type of housing

Housing was important, too. People with security features such as lockable gates and entry phones were more likely to cycle than those without – which may be down to the ability to store a bike safely. These security factors could also be a sign of an affluent neighbourhood, where more people walk to work.



## Further research

Interviews which the researchers carried out in the West Midlands also shed light on the issues, and showed that distance is a major factor in deciding to use a car rather than cycling or walking – especially for trips to and from school. For shopping trips, heavy loads were the most common reason for driving.

Lack of cycle routes, weather, and concerns about road safety were significant barriers when commuting – at least 20% of the respondents said these prevented them from choosing active travel.

Covid has changed people's travel behaviour, reducing the frequency of public transport use, and increasing driving. But the pandemic also triggered some to either take up or stop walking or cycling. Overall, there appeared to be a net increase in walking but not cycling – those who have stopped cycling cancel out those who have started. However, the vast majority of those who have made more trips through walking and cycling as a result of Covid intend to continue after the pandemic.





## Policy impact

The research was designed and carried out with Transport for West Midlands, Warwickshire County Council and Coventry Council, and the researchers have made presentations on it to the West Midlands Cycling Charter Group and Coventry Council staff.

They recommended:

- clear messages about active travel being good for health and wellbeing
- providing stories of people who have changed the way they travel and why
- looking at cheap cycle/e-scooter hire schemes
- looking at how hybrid or remote working can help
- safe cycle parking in commercial, transport and housing sites
- safety campaigns to protect cyclists.

In the longer term, they suggested:

- opening up town and city centres to cycling and walking on Sundays
- 'champions' to encourage more women and ethnic minority cyclists
- working with schools and workplaces to promote active travel
- improving road safety and communicate about the risks of cycling
- offering nudges and incentives to active travel.

One key finding, they said, was that a combination of measures both to encourage active travel and to provide infrastructure such as cycle lanes was the most effective approach.

Since the report was completed, the Transport Secretary has announced funding for active travel, and a new commissioning body, Active Travel England.

“Pedestrians, cyclists, and users of other transport that involve physical activity need higher priority when developing or maintaining spaces, streets and roads, and new housing or workspaces.”

Sonkurt Sen and Raj Patel, Institute of Social and Economic Research

Visit the [Understanding Society website](#) to find out more about the impact of our data.

This case study is part of a series aimed at potential users of Understanding Society data, including policy makers, researchers and people in a position to influence social policy. If you would like to discuss how we can help to support and raise awareness of the policy impact of your research, please email [ccoates@essex.ac.uk](mailto:ccoates@essex.ac.uk)

