

Traffic vs Kids:

How Puget Sound Gridlock Hurts Families

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Introduction

Nearly everyone is familiar with the discouraging experience of sitting motionless in traffic on a four-lane expressway, gazing placidly at the rear bumper of the next car, while a large metal sign on the roadside informs drivers, “Speed Limit 60 mph.” For many Washington drivers this is a twice-daily event.

We often hear that traffic congestion contributes to a “diminished quality of life,” but what does that well-worn phrase really mean? Beyond the dry numbers and sterile statistics that make up much of the public debate over transportation lie the real challenges facing millions of Washington citizens, ordinary people who are simply trying to get on with their lives.

Increasing highway congestion means more than flaring tempers and a drain on the economy. It is about how time spent on the road detracts from life at home, in the workplace and in our communities. The focus of the transportation debate tends to be directed at the frustration of dealing with heavy traffic, while the real concern should be what is lost elsewhere.

Sitting in traffic means absent mothers and fathers, missed soccer games, canceled family dinners, foregone visits to grandparents and relatives, all because it is just getting too difficult to get around. These are only some of the elusive and indirect ways clogged roads erode the strength of family life in our communities. The daily round of traveling to school, work, daycare, sports, on needed errands, and back home again makes many family members feel they spend more time in the car than they do with each other.

In the transportation debate the views of organized interests in government and business are well represented. The construction industry, government unions, public officeholders, highway planners and transportation companies all have a strong voice in the process. Most of the discussion of how to solve our transportation problem centers on the impact on the economy and on how to identify funding sources. The average mom or dad, however, is generally too busy meeting everyday necessities to attend hearings in Olympia or go to public meetings of the local planning commission. An essential element is starkly missing from the policy discussion: how a poorly operating road network is severely impacting families.

To fill this need the Washington Family Council and the Washington Institute set out to identify and measure the many subtle ways traffic affects families. We surveyed 402 Washington adults to find out what they think about traffic and the part it plays in their personal and family lives. The survey centered on the area with the worst traffic congestion in the state, Pierce, King, and Snohomish counties.

The purpose of our report is to put a human face on the mind-numbing statistics that tend to dominate discussion of our region’s traffic problems. Decisions under consideration now will directly impact the lives of our families today and into the future, just as we must all live today with the road-building decisions made twenty and thirty years ago. This study provides new information which will guide policymakers, the media, business leaders, and ordinary citizens in finding real, workable solutions that take into account the needs of families.

Background

There is broad agreement among policymakers and the general public that Washington's transportation system is in desperate need of upgrade and expansion. The current road network has not kept pace with population growth and the building patterns of development. An interstate highway system designed in the 1950s and built in the 1960s continues to form the core of the overall road network. These concrete arteries remain essentially unchanged since the day the ribbon was cut at the opening ceremony.

The present interstate system was originally designed to meet traffic needs for twenty years and it is now operating far beyond its original capacity.¹ It is being pressed into service to handle the daily traffic load of one of the fastest-growing metropolitan areas in the country. The population of the three-county region covered by our survey is 60% larger today than it was when Interstate 5 opened. Not surprisingly, lack of capacity is the primary cause of the chronic overcrowding we see on our roadways today.

The people of the Puget Sound region are not alone in feeling the stress of overburdened roads. Nationwide, Americans spend an estimated 100 million hours a year in stalled traffic, a statistic to which Washington drivers certainly contribute their full share.² In addition to millions of hours of lost time, the incessant gridlock costs Washington state an estimated \$2 billion a year in wasted resources.³ Perennial gridlock forces unwanted changes in both businesses and the daily lives of families. To cite just one business example, the Seattle Times, after 103 years as an afternoon paper, recently shifted to morning delivery in part because its drivers could not get the daily paper distributed on time.

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**“It irritates me and I
become impatient ...
I don't like to plan my
life around traffic.”**
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The region's transportation stresses will only grow in the future. In today's dynamic economy most new jobs are located in the suburbs. There are now as many daily commutes from one suburb to another as there are from the suburbs into a central urban core, and the old “spokes of the wheel” planning model no longer applies. The number of vehicle miles traveled in Washington each year has been growing faster than population since the mid-1980s, a figure that currently stands at around 9,000 miles per person per year.⁴

The problem is severe enough when, as today, about 11%, or 794 miles of the state highway system experiences acute congestion on any given weekday. Experts predict that over the next 20 years fully 37%, or 2,600 miles, of the highway system will be regularly blocked up and unable to function smoothly.⁵ Drivers in the Seattle-Everett metro area already each endure an average of 70 hours of delay per year, compared to the national average of about 40 hours. Estimates show that the break between morning and evening rush hours will steadily diminish, until residents of the Puget Sound region will experience severe traffic congestion throughout much of the day. Before long the only people who can expect an easy commute will be those working the night shift.

These are the broad trends in transportation and growing traffic congestion, but what is most important is how these trends are felt in the lives of everyday people and their families. That is what our survey set out to discover. The results are presented in the following sections.

Impact of Traffic on Family Life

The impact of traffic reaches beyond the individual and enters the homes to impact the family. Men and women who spend time on the road commuting in traffic aren't the only victims of traffic congestion; their spouses, children, and families are also affected. Traffic is robbing some families of valuable time together. Many respondents recognize this and 62 percent would like to spend more time with their families if they spent less time in traffic.

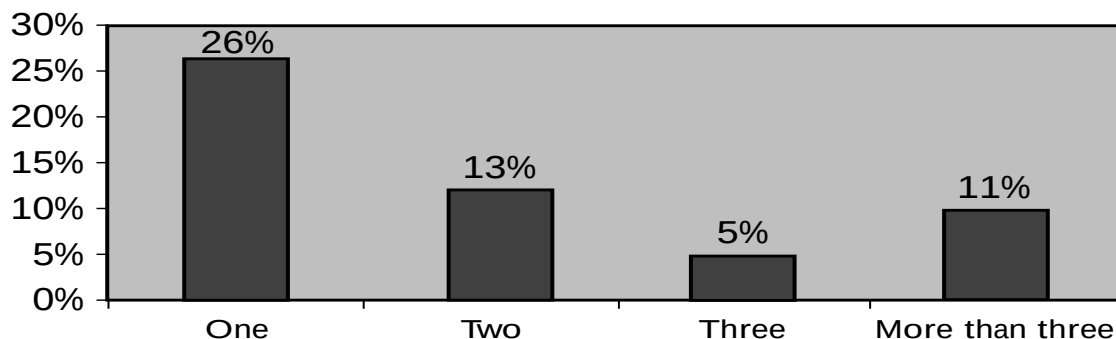
- People more likely to say they would spend more time with their family are those who say family time/activities are very central to their lifestyle, those who say traffic has a large impact on their decision making, those who have dependent children under 18, those who are married, or those between the ages of 18-54. People who say family time/activities are not central to lifestyle, those who say traffic has no/very little impact on their decision making, those who have no children under 18, those who are single, or those over age 55 are less likely to say they would spend more time with their families.⁶

Traffic impact falls heaviest on families. Respondents were asked “due to traffic congestion, on average, how many family-related functions are you late for or do you miss entirely per week.” While 44 percent of the overall sample said they miss one or more events per week, that number jumps to 55 percent of families with children at home; 13 percent of whom said they miss two events per week, 5 percent said three events, and 11 percent said more than tree events per week. Of the remainder, some work at home, have a short commute to work, are retired, or unemployed.

One missed event per week translates to more than 50 per year, while more than three a week exceeds 200 events over one year. Translated into personal terms, that means mothers and fathers are missing between 50 and 200 soccer games, family dinners, teacher conferences, and other family-related functions. And, if Washington parents with children could spend less time in traffic, 85% of them say they would spend more time with their family.

- Those more likely to say they don't miss any family-related functions are those who have an ideal commute, those who say traffic has no impact on their decision making, those who have no children under 18, those who are married, or those over age 55.⁷

**Family-Related Functions Missed or Late For
Per Week by Families with Children**

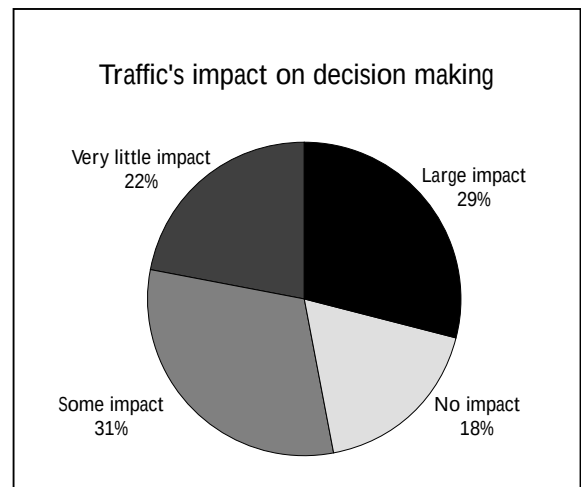


- Those more likely to say they miss one or more family-related functions per week feel that traffic has an impact on their decision making. The more impact that traffic has on decision making, the more functions individuals seem to miss. Those between the ages of 18 and 54 are also more likely to miss family-related functions each week.⁸

Children spell love “t-i-m-e.” Disrupted family lives lower the quality of life for parents and children alike, and deprive children of the nurturing that helps them grow to productive citizens and successful parents themselves. This impact is intensified for families headed by a single parent. Respondents were asked to “rate traffic’s impact on the decisions (they) make with respect to family functions and activities that require (them) to commute.” Traffic has no impact on 18 percent of respondents, but 82 percent are impacted by traffic (18% said no impact, 22% said very little impact, 31% said some impact, and 29% said a large impact). Interestingly, but not too surprising, the amount of impact traffic has on individuals seems to be directly related to their age. Those over the age of 55 are more likely than younger people to say that traffic doesn’t affect them. Traffic is impacting the decision making of those in the midst of forming and raising their families. Those between the ages of 18 and 54 indicate that traffic has very little or some impact on their decision making.⁹

Impact of Traffic on Personal and Community Life

Spend a little time in traffic and you’ll quickly realize you could be doing other things with your time. In order to determine what people would do if they weren’t spending so much time in traffic, respondents were asked what they would spend time on. Only 9 percent of respondents said they would spend more time at work, 15 percent of respondents would spend more time on volunteer work or community activities, 49 percent said they would spend more time on fun, leisure activities, hobbies, or recreation, but the majority of people would spend more time with their family (62 percent). In essence, traffic is not taking time away from work, but from private life, family, and community. Family time is the activity most displaced by traffic problems.



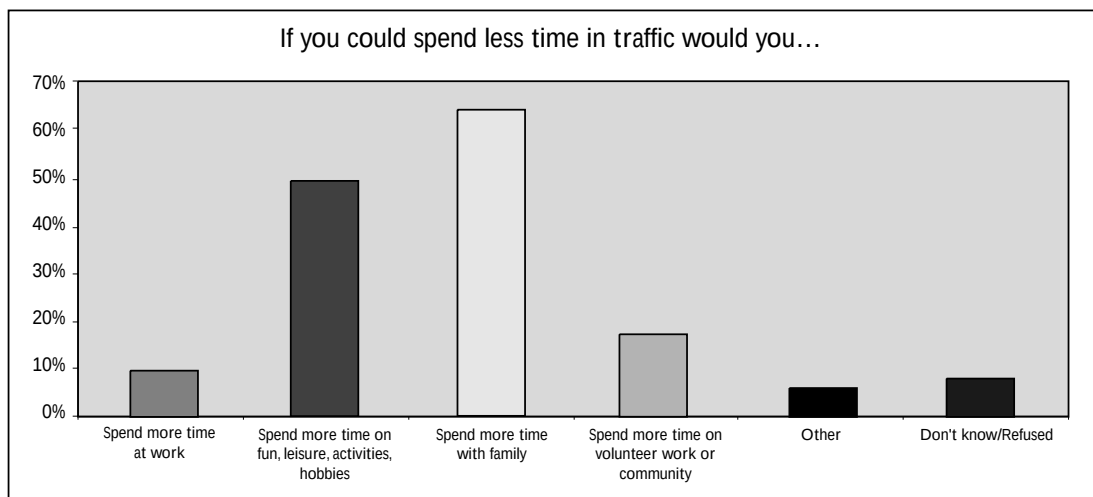
“It takes time from me that I could spend with my family.”

- Gender, income, and age relate to who is more likely to say they’d spend more time at work. Men are more likely than women, those with a higher income are more likely than those with a lower income, and young people are more likely than older people to say they’d spend more time at work.¹⁰

- One of the ways that the needs in a community are met is through volunteers. Volunteers animate a community, they meet the needs of people and impact the beauty and livability of communities.

Every volunteer makes a difference. So imagine the impact 15 percent more people volunteering could make in each community. Those who don’t have an ideal commute were more likely than those who do to say they would volunteer.¹¹

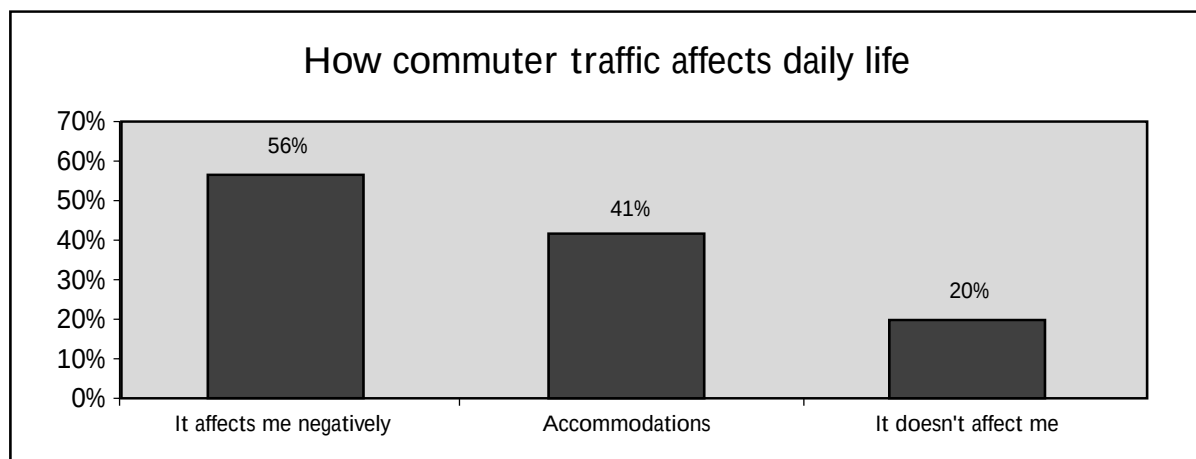
- Almost 50 percent of respondents said they would spend more time on fun, leisure activities, hobbies, or recreation if they spent less time in traffic. Those who aren't married or don't have children are more likely to say they'd spend more time on fun. Recreation is another way we interact as a community, as we play alongside each other. And recreation can be a good thing that makes people less stressed in the long run. For those without families, this may be their source of rejuvenation.¹²



The Widespread Impact of Traffic

Traffic is a problem that reaches beyond our roads, communities, and economics entering our homes and affecting our families and personal life. Respondents were asked to comment on traffic and their answers were divided into three categories: make accommodations, traffic has a negative affect, and traffic has no affect (comments could fall into more than one category). Fifty-six percent of people communicated that traffic affects them negatively, forty-one percent stated that they make accommodations to avoid the affects of traffic, and twenty percent feel that their lives are not affected by traffic.

- Those more likely to comment that traffic impacts them negatively have children under 18 at home and are between the ages of 18-54. People who make accommodations are more likely to have an ideal commute or say traffic has no impact or very little impact on decision making. People who say they are not affected by traffic are more likely those without children under 18, those who are married, or those over age 55.¹³



In other words, it is people in their family forming and raising years who experience the impact of traffic the most. Taking into consideration that making accommodations implies traffic has, at some point in time, had a negative affect, between 80-90 percent of people have been or are affected negatively by traffic. This means that traffic is an issue that the majority of people have to address in their daily life. Some individuals find ways around traffic, but others either don't or can't.

Conclusion

What impact is traffic having beyond what we've discovered here? Is traffic affecting people's decision to interact with one another? Do they decide not to visit family because they would have to spend too much time in traffic? Are employees more stressed when they arrive at work because of traffic problems, and does that then affect the rest of their day? Are mothers and fathers returning home stressed because of traffic? Are they spending less time at home with their children and more time on the road?

These are questions that must be asked when talking about the issue of traffic. The long term consequences of traffic reaches far beyond simple economics; it seeps into the foundation of society — people and their families. Solutions must not ignore the individual and the family. The commitment level to creating solutions to traffic problems should be commensurate with the degree to which traffic is proving detrimental to society's first and most valuable natural resource — families.

Appendix

County

King	63%
Snohomish	17%
Pierce	20%

Age

18-24	10%
25-34	17%
35-44	25%
45-54	21%
55-64	12%
65 and over	16%

Gender

Male	48%
Female	52%

Rent or own

Own	64%
Rent	34%
Refused	2%
Other	2%

Marital Status

Single	26%
Married	57%
Separated	1%
Divorced	7%
Cohabiting	3%
Widowed	6%
Refused	2.4%

Registered Voter

Yes	89%
No	11%

Education Completed

Some high school or less	4%
High school graduate/GED	19%
Vocational/technical school	3%
Some college/associate degree	31%
Four year college graduate	23%
Post graduate work	20%

Income

Under \$25,000	15%
\$25,000 to \$34,999	16%
\$35,000 to \$49,999	24%
\$50,000 to \$74,999	21%
\$75,000 to \$99,999	13%
\$100,000 or more	12%
Refused	17.6%

Methodology

This paper is the result of a joint research project commissioned by Washington Family Council and Washington Institute Foundation and conducted by Market Trends, Inc. in Seattle, WA. The data in this report originated from a telephone survey of 402 Washington adults. The survey was conducted between April 7th and April 19th, 2000. The results of the research are accurate to within ± 4.9 percentage points at the 95% confidence level (which means that if the study were repeated 100 times, in 95 of those cases the results would fall within ± 4.9 percentage points of the results we obtained with this study). Answers of “don’t know” or “refused” were not used to calculate percentages.

All questions about this research should be directed to Dawn Wilson at Washington Family Council.

Endnotes

- ¹ “The Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956: Creating the Interstate System,” by Richard F. Weingroff, Federal Highway Administration, Washington, D.C., p. 12.
- ² “Free the Roads,” Wall Street Journal, April 21, 2000.
- ³ “Draft Accords and Options for Public Comment,” Blue Ribbon Commission on Transportation, May 18, 2000, p. 5.
- ⁴ Ibid, p. 6..
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Overall, 62% of respondents said that if they spent less time in traffic, they would choose to “spend more time with their family.” The sub-groups more likely to say this are: family time/activities are very central to lifestyle (73%), traffic has a large impact on decision making (70%), have dependent children under 18 (85%), married (74%), attended some college/vocational school (70%), Snohomish county (74%) or Pierce county (73%), earn more than \$75,000 (69%), or between the ages of 18-34 (64%) or 35-54 (69%). The sub-groups less likely to say they would spend more time with family are: family time/activities are not central to lifestyle (48%), traffic has no/very little impact on decision making (54%), no children under 18 (49%), single (36%), college degree (55%), King county (55%), earn less than \$35,000 (52%), or over age 55 (46%).
- ⁷ Overall, 56% of respondents aren’t late for and don’t miss any family-related functions per week. The sub-groups more likely to say they don’t miss any family-related functions are: ideal commute (65%), traffic has no impact on their decision making (77%), no children under 18 (61%), married (59%), registered voters (58%), completed high school or less (64%), Pierce county (66%), earn more than \$75,000 (63%), or over age 55 (73%). The sub-groups less likely to say zero are: commute not ideal (53%), traffic has some (44%) or a large impact (39%) on decision making, children under 18 (45%), single (43%), not registered voters (38%), some college (49%), King county (53%), earn between \$35,000-74.9K (43%), or between ages 18-34 (42%) or 35-54 (54%).
- ⁸ Overall, 21% of respondents indicated that they miss one family-related function per week. The sub-groups who were more likely to miss one are: family time/activities not at all central to lifestyle (27%), traffic has some impact on decision making (31%), earn between \$35,000-\$74,999 (29%), or between ages 18-34 (30%). The sub-groups less likely to say one are: family time/activities very central to lifestyle (18%), traffic has no/very little impact on their decision making (15%), earn less than \$35,000 (14%), or over 55 (14%). Overall, 11% of adults say they miss two family-related functions per week. The sub-group more likely to report this is: traffic has some impact (16%) or a large impact (17%) on decision making. The sub-group less likely is: traffic has no impact on decision making (3%). Overall, 4% say they miss three functions and 8% say they miss more than three family-related functions per week. The sub-groups more likely to say they miss more than three family-related functions per week are: traffic has a large impact on decision making (18%), single (13%), or between the ages of 18-34 (11%). The sub-groups less likely to say they miss more than three are: traffic has no (4%) or some (4%) impact on decision making, married (5%), or over age 55 (3%).
- ⁹ Overall, 18% of respondents said that traffic has no impact on their decision making. The sub-groups more likely to answer this way are: completed high school or less (26%) or over age 55 (29%). Those less likely are: college degree (14%), or between the ages of 18-34 (11%) or 35-54 (15%). Overall, 22% indicate that traffic has very little impact on their decision making. The individuals more likely to say this are between 18 and 34 (30%) and those less likely to say this are those between the ages of 35 and 54 (19%). Overall, 31% of respondents say that traffic has some impact on their decision making. The people more likely to say some impact are between the ages of 35 and 54 (37%) and those less likely to say some impact are over the age of 55 (22%).
- ¹⁰ Overall, 9% of adults stated that they would spend more time at work if they spent less time in traffic. The sub-groups more likely to state this are: men (13%), between the ages of 35-54 (12%), or earn between \$35,000-\$74,999 (12%) or more than \$75 (18%). The sub-groups less likely to indicate they would work more are: females (6%), over age 55 (4%), earn less than \$35,000 (2%).
- ¹¹ Overall, 15% of respondents indicated they would spend more time on volunteer work or community activities if they spent less time in traffic. The sub-groups more likely to volunteer are: commute not ideal (18%), Snohomish county

(21%), or earn between \$35,000-\$74,999 (20%). The sub-groups less likely to say they would volunteer are: ideal commute (7%), Pierce county (8%), or earn more than \$75,000 (69%).

¹² Overall, 49% say that if they spent less time in traffic, they would “spend more time on fun, leisure activities, hobbies or recreation.” The sub-groups more likely to say they would spend time on fun are: family time/activities is not very central to lifestyle (58%), traffic has some impact on decision making (53%), no children under 18 (57%), single (63%), or King county (53%). The sub-groups less likely to spend more time on fun are: family time/activities are very central to lifestyle (41%), traffic has a large impact on decision making (40%), have children under 18 (32%), married (43%), or Pierce county (37%).

¹³ Overall, 56% of adults surveyed indicated that traffic affects them negatively. The sub-groups more likely to say traffic affects them negatively are: commute not ideal (62%), traffic has some impact (63%) or large impact (70%) on decision making, children under 18 (65%), college degree (63%), earn between \$35,000-\$74,999 (63%), or between the ages of 18-34 (63%) or 35-54 (62%). The sub-groups less likely to say traffic affects them are: ideal commute (38%), traffic has no/very little impact on decision making (41%), no children under 18 (51%), completed HS or less (44%), earn less than \$35,000 (48%), or over age 55 (39%). Overall, 41% of respondents make accommodations in regards to traffic. The sub-groups more likely to make accommodations are: ideal commute (52%) or traffic has no impact or very little impact on decision making (46%). The sub-groups less likely to make accommodations are: commute not ideal (37%) or traffic has a large impact on decision making (32%). Overall, 20% of adults said that traffic doesn’t affect them. The sub-groups more likely to state this are: traffic has no impact/very little impact on decision making (25%), no children under 18 (23%), married (22%), registered voters (21%), or over 55 (41%). The sub-groups less likely to say traffic doesn’t affect them are: traffic has some impact (14%), have children under 18 (14%), single (10%), not registered voters (11%), or between the ages of 18-34 (10%) or 35-54 (14%).

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Verbatims from the Traffic vs Kids Study

“It complicates my life because I have to carefully plan our activities so that I don’t get caught in traffic or spend too much time in it or be late for activities or miss them.”

“I don’t get to see my family as much because of the traffic.”

“I spend a lot of *time on the road*. Any time spent in traffic is wasted and spent inefficiently.”

“It wastes my personal time and time for work.”

“I pollute the air more because I use more gas and it takes a long time to get where I want to go.”

“A lot of road rage . . . *I don’t want to drive anymore.*”

“It affects time, emotional well-being, on a social level it affects family lives and personal relationships.”

“I can’t get home or to work on time. Sometimes we have to *miss activities* because my husband can’t get home on time.”

“The traffic is busy... I’m forced to plan ahead for any social engagement or cancel the engagement altogether... I don’t like to *plan my life around traffic.*”

“Horrible, awful, and abominable, I was commuting from Snohomish to Lynnwood and *I quit the job that I love* because of the commute.”

“It’s a good reason for leaving Seattle, it’s so bad I plan on moving.”