



Part 3

Read the text below and answer questions 27–40.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF COMMUTING

For decades, mainstream accounts in urban economics have treated commuting as a largely rational transaction. The classical story is built around the idea of a compensating wage differential: individuals accept the disutility of travelling further in exchange for extrinsic incentives such as higher salaries, larger dwellings, better schools, or neighbourhood amenities. In this equilibrium view, the labour market and housing market jointly “price” distance, so that time spent travelling is offset by the benefits purchased with the resulting income or space. Commuting, therefore, is framed not as a psychological experience but as an impedance cost that households knowingly incur to reach a preferred bundle of wages and housing. From this perspective, longer commutes should not systematically reduce well-being, because they are voluntarily chosen and compensated through tangible gains.

Yet the empirical literature has repeatedly challenged this tidy equilibrium. A prominent line of research associated with Stutzer and Frey has popularised what is often called the commuting paradox: even when commuters report higher incomes or better housing, they also report lower life satisfaction than comparable individuals with shorter journeys. The paradox is not simply that commuting “feels unpleasant”—that is trivial—but that the unpleasantness appears to persist despite the presumed compensation. One explanation is that people overestimate the enduring value of the benefits they are purchasing. Another is that they underweight the day-to-day cognitive and emotional costs of travel because those costs are distributed in small doses across time, making them easy to ignore at the moment of choosing a job or home. In other words, the market may compensate in money, but subjective well-being does not convert cash into emotional equivalence as neatly as the theory assumes.

To understand why, psychologists point to hedonic adaptation: the tendency for people to become accustomed to improved circumstances, so that the pleasure of a new benefit gradually diminishes. A larger house, a quieter street, or an upgraded kitchen can generate an initial spike in satisfaction, yet its emotional impact often declines as it becomes the new baseline. The trouble is that adaptation is asymmetric. Individuals may adapt quickly to the amenities gained by moving further away, but they do not adapt in the same way to the commute that finances those amenities. The disutility of travel can remain salient precisely because it is repetitive, time-sensitive, and often experienced as wasted time. Moreover, each commute can be appraised as an interruption rather than a possession:



one cannot “own” a smoother journey in the same way one owns extra space. Thus, the benefit attenuates, while the cost remains psychologically vivid, producing a long-run imbalance that the compensating wage story struggles to capture.

A further reason commuting resists adaptation lies in the role of control and unpredictability in cognitive appraisal. Transport researchers describe impedance not merely as distance or duration, but as the friction created by unreliability: the gap between expected and actual travel, the anxiety of missed connections, and the perceived helplessness of waiting. Commuting time is not uniform time. Ten minutes spent moving predictably can feel less burdensome than ten minutes spent stationary in a traffic jam or on a platform without clear information. When delays are frequent or opaque, commuters experience a form of cognitive loading: sustained vigilance, constant recalculation of arrival times, and rumination about downstream consequences such as childcare pick-ups or workplace penalties. This explains why the same nominal duration can produce very different psychological outcomes. The stress arises not only from time “lost” but from uncontrollability and the need to manage uncertainty under constraint.

Mode choice also mediates these processes by shaping autonomy and bodily experience. Active commuting—walking or cycling—often confers a sense of agency: individuals can adjust pace, select alternative routes, and translate travel into exercise rather than sedentary waiting. Even when physically effortful, active modes can reduce cognitive loading because they offer immediate feedback and a clearer link between action and progress. Passive commuting, by contrast, can induce learned helplessness when travellers become dependent on systems they cannot influence. Driving in congested traffic can be physically sedentary while cognitively demanding, because it requires constant attention without guaranteeing movement. Public transport can be restorative when reliable, but it can become stressful under overcrowding, cancellations, or ambiguous delays. In such conditions, commuters may experience a spillover effect: irritation and fatigue do not remain confined to the journey but bleed into workplace performance and family interaction.

Digital technology complicates the picture further by altering the boundary function of commuting. Boundary theory suggests that transitions between roles—home to work, work to home—help individuals regulate identity and recovery. For some, the commute historically served as a psychological buffer, a period of decompression that reduced emotional carryover. Smartphones and connectivity allow commuting time to be “utilised,” but they also invite boundary crossing: emails, messages, and meetings can convert travel into an extension of the workday. Researchers often distinguish segmentors, who prefer clear separation between roles, from integrators, who are comfortable blending



domains. Technology can benefit integrators by enabling flexibility, but it can harm segmentors by eroding the commute's protective function. The result is that commuting may become less a transition and more a contested space in which work demands intrude on recovery, intensifying cognitive load rather than reducing it.

Finally, commuting is not merely an individual inconvenience; it has social consequences that intersect with inequality. The spatial mismatch hypothesis argues that employment opportunities and affordable housing are often geographically separated, forcing lower-income workers to travel further or accept less stable routes. Because these commuters frequently rely on slower, less reliable systems, their impedance is higher even when their wages are lower, producing an unequal distribution of disutility. Over time, this can reinforce labour-market stratification: those with resources purchase proximity or flexibility, while those without resources pay in time, stress, and reduced access to opportunities. In this sense, commuting is a mechanism through which urban form and labour markets jointly reproduce inequality, not simply a neutral bridge between home and work.

Taken together, the research suggests that commuting cannot be treated as a simple bargain that markets automatically balance. The commuting paradox emerges because the gains that motivate long journeys are subject to hedonic adaptation, whereas the daily costs are amplified by unpredictability, cognitive loading, boundary erosion, and unequal access to reliable transport. Policies that reduce impedance—through reliability, flexible scheduling, safer active networks, and better job–housing alignment—may therefore yield outsized benefits, not because they save minutes in the abstract, but because they reduce recurring psychological strain that accumulates across years.

Questions 27–31

Choose **YES** if the statement agrees with the claims of the writer, choose **NO** if the statement contradicts the claims of the writer, or choose **NOT GIVEN** if it is impossible to say what the writer thinks about this.

27 The writer suggests that the compensating wage differential model may not fully account for how subjective well-being responds to commuting costs.

28 The writer claims that higher income always fully cancels out the psychological burden of longer commutes.

29 The writer argues that unpredictability and perceived lack of control can increase the mental strain of a commute even when travel time is not extreme.



30 The writer implies that digital connectivity can weaken commuting's role as a psychological transition for some workers.

31 The writer states that the spatial mismatch hypothesis proves that all low-income workers have longer commutes than high-income workers.

Questions 32–35

Complete the summary below. Choose **NO MORE THAN TWO WORDS** from the text for each answer.

Adaptation and control

Classical models assume that commuters accept longer journeys in return for extrinsic

32 such as higher pay or better housing. However, satisfaction from these benefits may fade through hedonic **33** Travel stress can persist when unreliable journeys create cognitive **34** and a sense of reduced control. Workers who prefer clear separation between home and work are described as **35**

Questions 36–40

Select the correct answer.

36 According to the passage, what is a key flaw in the classical economic view of commuting?

A It assumes commuters never choose housing for reasons unrelated to wages, such as schools or neighbourhood amenities

B It treats monetary compensation as if it translates predictably into psychological equivalence, ignoring adaptation and recurring mental costs

C It argues that commuting time is entirely determined by personal preference rather than by transport infrastructure and housing supply

D It suggests that commuting disutility is irrelevant once public transport becomes more widely available

37 Why does the passage suggest people adapt more to housing gains than to commuting costs?

A The emotional impact of improved amenities often fades as they become normal, while commuting remains repetitive and appraised as wasted, time-sensitive disruption

B Housing benefits are objectively measurable, whereas commuting costs are purely imaginary and therefore disappear with experience

C Commuting becomes easier over time because travellers learn faster routes, while housing conditions become worse through physical decay



D People adapt to commuting quickly when they have access to digital entertainment, but they rarely adapt to improvements in living space

38 What does the passage imply about digital technology and “boundary crossing”?

A It protects recovery by preventing work communication during commuting and strengthening separation between roles

B It affects commuters uniformly by turning travel into productive time without psychological drawbacks

C It reduces cognitive load by eliminating uncertainty and providing accurate predictions of delays in real time

D It can benefit workers who tolerate role integration, but it may harm those needing separation by extending work demands into the commute

39 What is the social significance of the spatial mismatch hypothesis in the passage?

A It shows that commuting patterns are driven mainly by personal lifestyle preferences rather than by labour markets

B It implies that long commutes are a sign of higher social status because they indicate willingness to trade comfort for income

C It suggests that unequal access to affordable housing and reliable transport concentrates commuting disutility among disadvantaged workers

D It argues that commuting inequality will disappear automatically once cities expand rail networks

40 Which conclusion best reflects the writer’s overall argument?

A Commuting is best understood as a fixed inconvenience that individuals should manage privately through distraction and time management

B Commuting is not a neutral trade-off, because adaptation diminishes the benefits while unpredictability, boundary erosion, and inequality amplify recurring psychological costs

C The main solution is to eliminate commuting entirely through permanent remote work, since transport reforms cannot change cognitive appraisal

D The key determinant of commuting stress is the total number of minutes travelled, so policies should focus primarily on increasing average travel speed

Answer Key

27. YES

28. NO

29. YES



30. YES

31. NO

32. incentives

33. adaptation

34. loading

35. segmentors

36. B

37. A

38. D

39. C

40. B