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Issue 10: Perceptions of Congestion Not Universal

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<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9zn89853>

**Authors**

Ong, Paul M.  
Haselhoff, Kim

**Publication Date**

2005-06-01

# SCS FACT SHEET

FINDINGS FROM THE SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA PUBLIC OPINION SURVEY (SCS)

Vol. 1 No. 10

<http://lewis.spa.ucla.edu>

June 2005

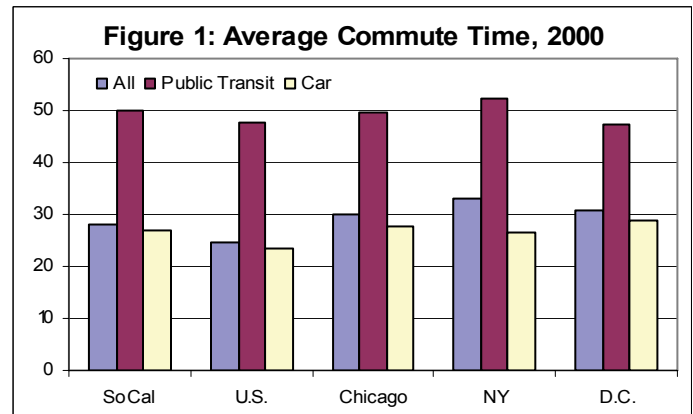
## Perceptions of Congestion Not Universal

### INTRODUCTION

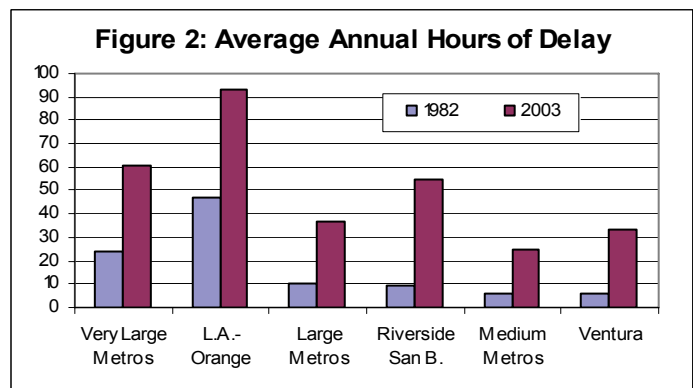
Public opinion surveys can play an important role in decision making by complementing standard data sources such as the Decennial Census and Current Population Survey. This Fact Sheet presents findings from a recently completed survey of Southern California residents (those living in the counties of Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, and Ventura). Details of the survey can be found in the appendix. The information from the survey can inform elected officials about the public's concerns and priorities, and can also help the residents of this region gain insight into themselves as a community. In particular, the information can help us understand people's perception of one of the most pressing daily inconveniences — traffic congestion. Delays on freeways and streets impose a cost on residents in terms of lost time, higher fuel bills, and greater air pollution. The problem is not unique to this region, but Southern California has more than its share. Key findings from the survey are that a majority frequently encounter delays while driving. The perception of the problem varies with economic and demographic characteristics, and most find government action wanting in terms of improving transportation.

### BACKGROUND

Despite the popular image of the Southern Californian commute as the prototypical nightmare trip to work, workers in this region spend less time commuting to their jobs than workers in other large urban areas. According to the most recently available statistics, the counties comprising Southern California are not among those with the highest average commute times (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). Out of 233 counties, Los Angeles ranked 39th, and Orange ranked 83rd. Riverside ranked the highest at 18th, while San Bernardino came in at 49th and Ventura at 101st. Most of the counties in the New York, Chicago and Washington, D.C. metropolitan areas ranked higher than the average for this region. Moreover, the Southern California averages in 2003 are roughly comparable to those reported from the 2000 Census, indicating essentially no increase in recent years.



Average commute time is lower in Southern California than in other major metropolitan areas because this region is more automobile oriented. Figure 1 summarizes the statistics from the 2000 Census for four metropolitan areas. There are three major patterns. Commute times in these regions are higher than for the nation as a whole because large urban areas require longer commutes and have slower speeds. In all regions, commute times by public transit are considerably higher than by automobile, despite the fact that transit trips tend to be shorter. Finally, average commute time by automobile in Southern California is roughly the same as those in the other three regions.



### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

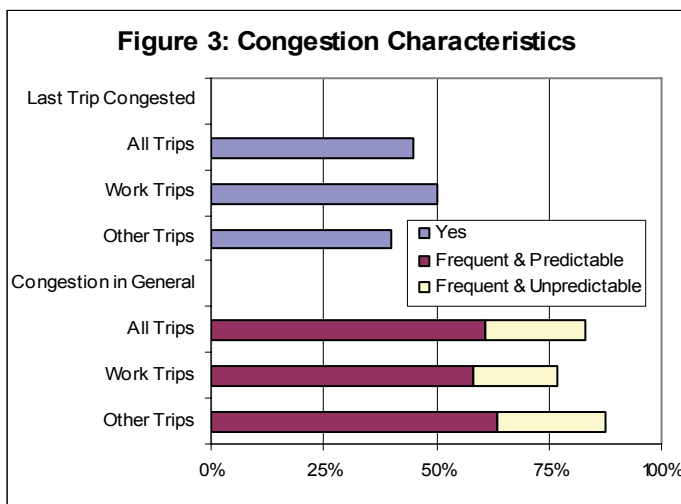
**Paul Ong** is a professor in urban planning, social welfare, and Asian American studies at UCLA and Director of the Ralph and Goldy Lewis Center for Regional Policy Studies.

**Kim Haselhoff** is a post-doctoral fellow at the Lewis Center for Regional Policy Studies.

What makes Southern California stand out is the level of congestion. Nationally, there has been a noticeable increase in three measures of congestion between 1982 and 2002: percent of trips affected, average minutes of delay per vehicle, and the number of hours with congestion per day (Thompson, 2004). In terms of the average hours wasted annually per traveler due to delays, the combined Los Angeles and Orange area has the worst congestion among very large metropolitan areas, as well as among all metropolitan areas (Schrank and Lomax, 2005). The Riverside and San Bernardino area tied for first place out of 27 large metropolitan areas, and Ventura tied for seventh out of 30 medium metropolitan areas (see Figure 2). The delays, rather than just commuting time, is the source of frustration with travel within the region.

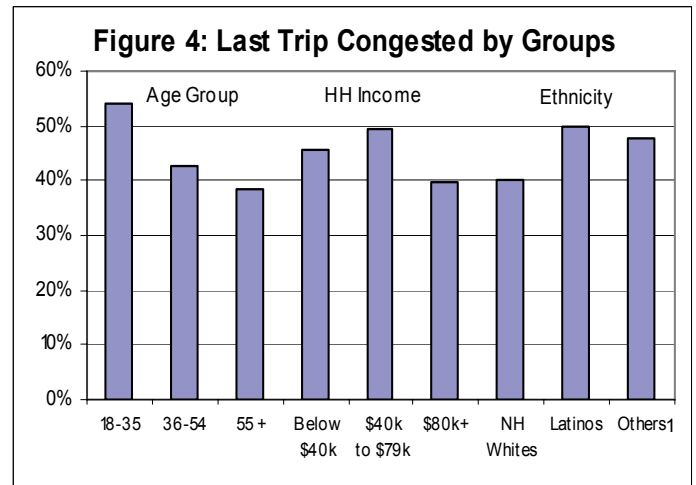
## ENCOUNTERING CONGESTION IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

Figure 3 summarizes the SCS findings on the proportion of commuters affected by congestion. The statistics are based on two questions. The first asked whether traffic congestion was a problem on the last driving trip, with slight modifications in wording for work trips and for other types of trips. Over two-fifths of those responding to this question encountered congestion. Congestion was more likely for those commuting to work, due in large part because they are more likely to travel during peak traffic periods.



The second question asked respondents to choose one of the following to best describe traffic congestion in general: 1) frequently a problem but it is predictable, 2) frequently a problem and it is not predictable, or 3) not a problem. Over four-fifths of the respondents are in the first two categories, that is, they frequently experience congestion. Interestingly, the rate is higher for those whose last trip was not a work commute. This may be

due to differences in subjective standards, but may also be due to the fact that the last trip is an imprecise proxy for the range of trips taken by the respondent. For most, the pattern of congestion is fairly predictable. Although the question does not define what is meant by “frequent”, cross tabulating the responses to this question with the responses about the last trip indicates that half of those who stated “frequently” experience congestion for any given trip.

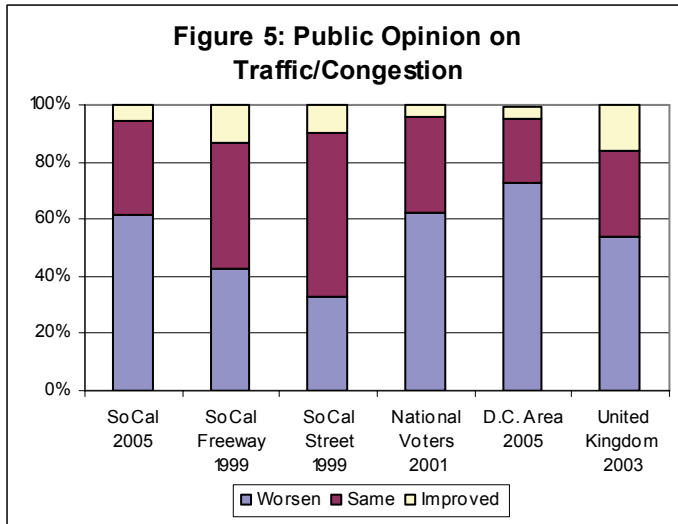


How often congestion is encountered varies systematically by income and demographic groups (see Figure 4). For the last reported trip, younger adults, minorities and those from lower-income households are more likely to experience congestion than their respective counterparts. These differences are likely due to both variations in travel patterns and geographic locations.

## PERCEPTIONS IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA AND ELSEWHERE

The most common question in public opinion surveys to gauge perceptions of traffic is to ask whether congestion has become worse, is the same, or is getting better over time. Figure 5 summarizes the findings from the Southern California Public Opinion Survey and several other recent surveys. In 2005, a large majority (61 percent) of residents in this region stated that congestion is worse than a year ago. This is considerably higher than the results from a 1999 survey of Southern California, which asked separate questions for freeway traffic and street traffic (SCAG, 2000). Opinions regarding traffic reported in this survey are consistent with results from a 2001 national survey of voters and a 2005 survey of residents of the Washington, D.C. area (NAR, 2002; *Washington Post*, 2005). The percent stating “worse” in the D.C. area (73 percent of those with a valid response) is higher, but this may be due to asking if traffic has changed over the last five years. Finally, it is worth not-

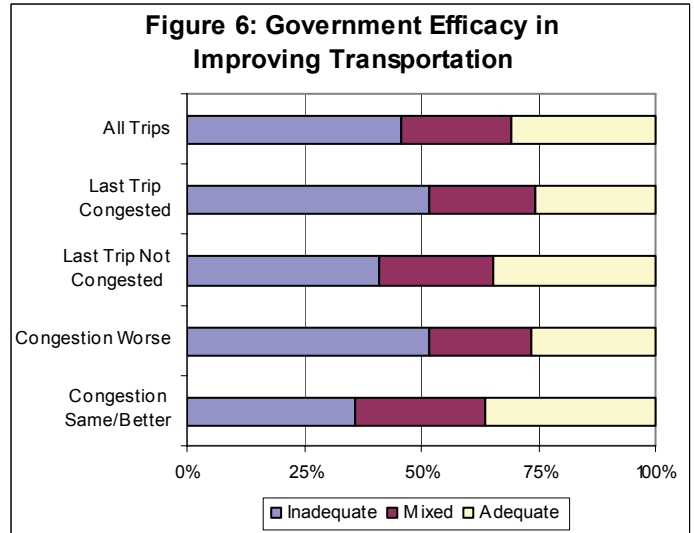
ing that frustration with congestion is an international phenomenon. Over half of those in the United Kingdom believe that “roads had got worse over the last two years” (United Kingdom, Office for National Statistics, 2004).



The responses to the congestion question should not be interpreted as objective and reliable measures of change in the prevalence or level of congestion. For example, the difference in the Southern California responses for 1999 and 2005 is surprising given that there is little evidence that the average commute time increased substantially during this period. Instead, the responses are probably due to both real world traffic conditions and people’s declining tolerance. Over time, a similar situation can be perceived as being worse. The answers, then, indicate the extent of the frustration with congestion. At the same time, they are not completely subjective. The responses are correlated with the odds of encountering congestion. Half of those giving a “worse” response encountered congestion on their last trip, compared to only a third giving a “same” or “better” response.

## OPINIONS ON GOVERNMENT PERFORMANCE

Given the pervasive dissatisfaction with traffic congestion, it is not surprising that solving transportation problems has emerged as one of the top issues for local government. When municipal elected officials were asked which condition in their respective city has deteriorated the most, they ranked traffic first more often than any other issue (Brennan and Hoene, 2004). Moreover, half stated that traffic conditions have gotten worse over the last year. The regional planning agency for Southern California, the Southern California Association of Governments has identified traffic congestion as a major regional problem requiring inter-governmental coordination and cooperation.



While elected officials recognize the congestion problem and are working to address it in a wide variety of ways, residents are, in general, not impressed with their collective efforts. Respondents were asked whether the efficacy of Southern California’s elected officials in improving transportation has been generally inadequate, mixed, or generally adequate (see Figure 6). Nearly half believe that the officials have done an inadequate job, and nearly another quarter gave them a mixed review. Not surprisingly, those who encountered congestion are more likely to give a lower rating. To be fair to the public sector, it should be noted that there is no quick, easy, or inexpensive solution. Traffic congestion is rooted in an automobile-oriented urban structure that took decades to build (Crane and Ong, 2004). Congestion is also the product of what economists term a market failure because there is no immediate and direct financial disincentives to discourage travel during peak time periods. Seemingly rational individual actions have generated a less than optimal outcome for society as a whole. Fixing the congestion problem will require time, concerted effort, and resources; nonetheless, addressing this issue is high on the public’s priorities.

<sup>1</sup>“Other” includes Asians, African-Americans, and mixed ethnicities, as well as respondents who did not indicate their ethnicity on the survey.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank Norman Wong, Margaret Johnson, Lucy Tran, and Diana Tran for formatting and editing the Fact Sheet, and the UCLA Institute of Transportation Studies for their input and suggestions.

## DISCLAIMER

Neither the University of California, the School of Public Affairs nor the Lewis Center for Regional Policy Studies either support or disavow the findings in any project, report, paper, or research listed herein. University affiliations are for identification only; the University is not involved in or responsible for the project.

## RECOMMENDED CITATION

Ong, P. & Haselhoff, K. (2005). “Perceptions of Congestion Not Universal.” *SCS Fact Sheet*, Vol. 1, No. 10, UCLA Lewis Center for Regional Policy Studies.

## **APPENDIX: SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA PUBLIC OPINION SURVEY, 2005**

The 2005 Southern California Public Opinion Survey is supported by the UCLA Ralph and Goldy Lewis Center for Regional Policy Studies and is designed to gather the views and opinions of Southern California residents on critical public policy issues in this region. The survey was developed with input from campus and community organizations. UCLA units include the Center for Communications and Community, the Institute of Transportation Studies, the Center for Civil Society, and the Anderson School of Management. Three public agencies participated in the process: the Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG), the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority, and the Los Angeles Economic Development Corporation (LAEDC). Several UCLA faculty provided valuable input: Professors Vickie Mays, Michael Stoll, Brian Taylor, Amy Zegart, Frank Gilliam, Helmut Anheier, Chris Thornberg and Ed Leamer.

The 2005 Survey gathered basic demographic data and covered seven topical areas: 1) major issues facing the region, 2) the efficacy of local government, 3) transportation, 4) the state of the regional economy, 5) housing, 6) civic engagement, and 7) major disasters. When possible, questions were worded to parallel existing questions from other surveys. Half of the respondents were asked questions related to their commute and the other half to their last trip in a car.

The Survey was conducted in English and Spanish during the months of January and February 2005 using random digit dialing, and the data were collected by The Social Science Research Center at California State University, Fullerton. There are 1544 completed surveys for the five counties: Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, and Ventura. The sample is divided proportionally by county household population. The characteristics of the sample by age, ethnicity, income and home ownership categories are consistent with the 2004 March Current Population Survey. There is a sampling error of +/- 2.6 percent at the 95 percent confidence level for the full sample, and +/- 3.7 percent for the subsample answering the questions related to their commute or their last trip in a car. (Sampling error may be larger for subpopulations).

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