



WAKA KOTAHI RESEARCH SUMMARY

MARCH 2021

The relationship between transport and mental health

What do we know about the relationship between transport and mental health in urban Aotearoa New Zealand? This field of research is a new and important area of investigation. There is a rise in psychological distress in our communities, and we need to understand the role transport plays in contributing to or mitigating this distress.

In this report the researchers identify and summarise relevant research to understand the ways that transport and mental health interact to shape urban wellbeing. They include research on urban populations in general as well as the specific impact on tāngata whaiora (people living with mental health challenges). They summarise the impacts of transport experiences on mood and trip satisfaction, longer-term life satisfaction, and levels of anxiety, depression and psychological distress in communities.

The researchers found that the groups who experience the highest levels of psychological distress in Aotearoa New Zealand are women, youth, Māori, Pacific peoples, and those on low incomes. They then examined the relationship between transport and wellbeing for these groups.

The report also brings together three qualitative datasets to explore transport and mental wellbeing in Aotearoa. The first is based on interviews with mental health and transport professionals. The report also provides insights from secondary data analysis of the Electric City e-biking project and the Inclusive Streetscapes project to learn about transport users' experience of transport and mental health. Finally, they draw on early research findings on transport and mental health during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic.

WHAT LEADS TO TRANSPORT-RELATED PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS?

The researchers learned that aspects of Aotearoa's transport system are likely contributing to the rise of distress levels in our communities. These include increased noise pollution and neighbourhood severance, and declining levels of active transport use from increased private car use. International evidence suggests the changes in our commuting conditions, such as increasing commute times for car and bus journeys and increasing travel congestion, likely lead to higher levels of commuting stress in our larger cities. Ongoing issues with transport poverty and inaccessible environments are also likely stressors for low-income households and people living with disability.

WHAT TRANSPORT SYSTEMS PROTECT MENTAL HEALTH?

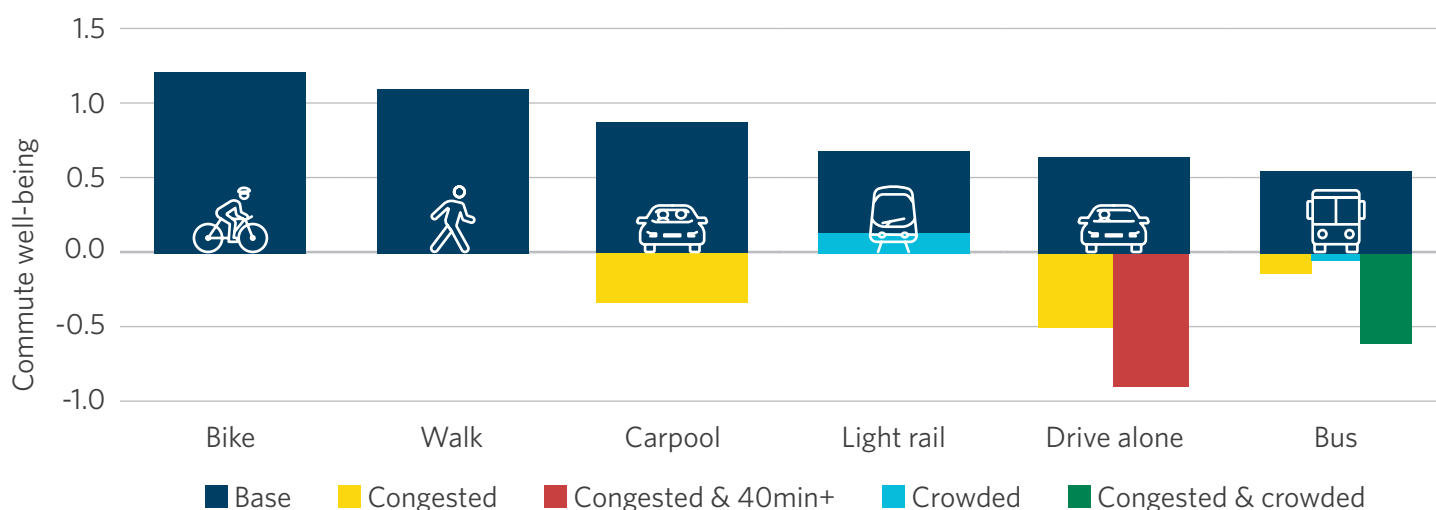
The research also identifies the transport conditions and environments that protect good mental health. These include high-quality walking (or wheeling) environments for gentle exercise and social interaction in low-stress traffic conditions. Low-cost and accessible transport systems are essential to mental health and allow people to access employment, medical care, food, and social support without financial hardship. And people value transport environments that make them feel included and welcomed. Participants provided important insights into how public transport environments could be more comfortable and 'comforting' spaces for city dwellers.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

The researchers recommend that the transport sector can support good mental health in our cities by:

- improving neighbourhood walkability
- reducing long commutes
- increasing active commuting
- reducing the cost and improving the comfort of public transport
- researching and monitoring the ongoing transport needs of population groups with the highest psychological distress
- better monitoring of transport-related stress sources such as noise pollution, community severance, lengthening commutes, traffic stress in active commuters and transport-related financial stress within low-income households.

Commute wellbeing by transport mode (Adapted from source: Smith, 2017)



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