

What's making traffic worse in Chicago? Signs point to Uber, Lyft.

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Photo by Jon Reinfurt

As a driver for a messenger service downtown, John Forbes knows the streets backward and forward. In recent years, he says, his job has become more dangerous, not just because of the increase in cars on the road, but because of ride-hailing services Uber and Lyft, which he says are clogging busy intersections with cars that appear to be lurking aimlessly. "It's anarchy," he says. "Every time I'm driving, there's always some kind of close call. They'll stop suddenly for no reason or poke along because they don't know where they're going."

Data suggests the frustration is real. Gridlock in Chicago is getting worse, according to a traffic analysis performed exclusively for Crain's by the Chaddick Institute for Metropolitan Development at DePaul University. Based on traffic data provided by the city, the analysis finds a citywide vehicle slowdown of 2.4 percent between 2013 and 2017. In 2013, the average speed was 24.65 mph; it was 24.07 in 2017. The slower speeds impacted 27 of the city's 29 traffic regions last year, and in some areas the slowdown was more than double the

city average. "The drops in speeds are spread out citywide. It seems that more people are on the road driving," says Chaddick Assistant Director C. Scott Smith, who performed the analysis.

Smith finds that over the past five years, only 12 regions of the city had less gridlock than the city average. The areas where congestion is greatest are South Deering, Rogers Park, Douglas Park, West Town, North Park/Albany Park/Lincoln Square, the Southwest Side, Bridgeport and Humboldt Park.

Speeds in the Loop fell 1.6 percent between 2013 and 2017. From 2016 to 2017, however, the average drop in speed nearly doubled to a slowdown of 2.3 percent, suggesting worsening traffic downtown is a relatively recent phenomenon.

ADVERTISING

Another takeaway by Smith is that while falling gas prices in recent years contributed to an increase in driving, last year's surge in prices—jumping nearly 9 percent since February 2017—did nothing to stop speeds from grinding down, which supports the idea that other factors are driving the gridlock. "The conventional relationship between gas prices and congestion may be changing because now you have more people on the road despite the gas prices going up," he says. Of course, in a booming economy, a 9 percent rise might not be enough to affect decisions to drive.

The conclusions are supported by the **Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning**, which focuses on traffic on surrounding interstates.

Not only did travel times on downtown expressways increase in the final quarter of 2016 by 15 minutes compared to the same period the previous year, but road congestion is costing the region \$7 billion a year in lost time and wages, according to the **Texas Transportation Institute**. That breaks down to a personal loss of \$1,445 per driver.

"There is more congestion and more people on the road," says CMAP Senior Planner Tom Murtha. He says the data is approaching the pre-recession peak years of 2006 and 2007, when congestion in Chicago was at a historic high.

CMAP says the gridlock can't be blamed on a single factor. Cheaper gas and increases in personal income and road construction are common culprits, but according to data recently gathered by Chicago Tribune, the city's congestion problem also happens to correspond to the astronomical rise in ride-hailing vehicles on its streets.

In less than three years—from March 2015 to December 2017—the number of licensed ride-hailing vehicles in Chicago increased an astonishing 339 percent to nearly 118,000 on the road at any given time, according to data from the city's Department of Business Affairs & Consumer Protection. Uber and Lyft would not provide those numbers to Crain's; the Tribune obtained them after filing a Freedom of Information Act request.

Uber spokeswoman Molly Spaeth says the company has only 30,000 "active drivers," or those who complete four or more trips a month. Lyft did not respond to a follow-up request asking for specifics on numbers.

As ride-share companies have taken off, the conventional cab industry has suffered. There were 4,000 cabs on the streets in March 2017, down from 5,800 in March 2014, says David Kreisman, spokesman for Cab Drivers United/AFSCME Local 2500. So while there may be, say, conservatively, 40,000 "active" ride-share drivers on the streets, there are just 1,800 fewer taxis, making for a net gain in vehicles on the roads.

Andrew Payne, a senior commercial credit analyst at Community Bank of Oak Park River Forest, commutes from Lincoln Park to work in his own car. He says the "stop-and-go flow of traffic" in the city is exacerbated by the lack of geographic knowledge of typical ride-share drivers who hesitate or stop to get their bearings. Likewise, he says Uber Eats and other ancillary ride-share delivery services add to traffic woes when drivers park on narrow streets.

IDLING FOR FARES

Both Uber and Lyft insist their mission is to prevent gridlock because their services are intended to complement public transit by getting people into shared cars. They cite a recent study that found use of their services is highest during weekend and evening hours and not during rush hour, when public transit use tends to be highest. The study is from the Shared Mobility Center, a nonprofit research organization in Chicago and Los Angeles that focuses on alternative transportation.

Yet in New York, which could hold lessons for Chicago, a recent study shows that the sudden explosion of ride-hailing vehicles—to a total of 68,000 currently in that city in about three years, according to the **New York Times**—is contributing to what is described as unnecessary density. One-third of ride-hailing vehicles are empty at any given time during weekdays in New York's main business district. In fact, the report shows that ride-share cars tend to be empty longer than conventional taxis—11 minutes of idling time compared to eight minutes for taxis. Overall, idling taxis in New York's central business district were unoccupied for 29,000 hours last year, which represents a 15 percent decrease from 2013; ride-hailing vehicles totaled 37,000 unoccupied hours.

Bruce Schaller, a transportation policy consultant in Brooklyn who wrote the **December report**, says that while there is clear evidence people use ride-share vehicles from Uber and Lyft as a substitute for their own car, the numbers aren't high enough to see much of a difference on the streets.

It's time, he says, for cities and states to start requiring ride-hailing services to limit the time their drivers spend waiting for their next trip request. "Their numbers are growing in every city. There are just more cars out there. They are having an impact on congestion, and that needs attention," he says.

CTA HIT HARD

Public transit ridership is suffering with the growth of ride-hailing services, too, which may end up causing more gridlock. **The Chicago Transit Authority reports that total ridership has been falling over the past 10 years.** In 2016, ridership fell to 498 million, a nearly 9 percent drop from the decade's peak in 2012 of 546 million and nearly identical to 2006, when ridership reached 495 million. Uber's Spaeth says ride-hailing is helping strengthen the CTA because of the millions it will receive from a 20-cent fee hike the City Council approved last year. The fee is now at 50 cents per ride and will increase steadily to 70 cents in 2019.

Despite those fees, ride-hailing is "skimming" from the money that otherwise would be dedicated for transit use at a time when those aging systems need ridership income most, says Regina Clewlow, a researcher at the Institute of Transportation Studies at the University of California at Davis. In **a report published in October,** she finds that ride-hailing leads to a 6 percent reduction in transit use among Americans in major cities.

"One of the challenges for cities like Chicago is that the rise of these services occurred at the same time U.S. infrastructure is aging. (Ride-hailing) has contributed to the perfect storm to create a drop in ridership," she says. "If we don't have good mass transit systems, then it's going to be a congestion nightmare."

Her research discovered that if these services didn't exist, as many as 61 percent of ride-hailing trips would have been made by walking, biking or transit, or they would not have been made at all, which compounds the perception that the congestion created by ride-hailing is unnecessary. "Based on all the evidence, there are more cars on the road at any given time," she says.

CALLS FOR BETTER PLANNING

While Chicago has instituted higher fees for ride-hailing, CMAP is recommending that local and state authorities go one step further and institute congestion pricing. This model, designed for expressways and not city streets, would affect all cars and would create express toll lanes that would give drivers the option "to pay more to move faster," says Murtha. "It would cost more, but it would reduce the delay." A version of the plan is being pursued in New York, where Democratic Gov. Andrew Cuomo wants toll zones in congested areas of Manhattan. He has also established a task force, FixNYC, to find solutions to the clogged streets.

Cuomo's congestion pricing model has led to pushback from those within his own party because of the costly logistics, and it has not been popular among the public, according to a recent poll. This may be why the Emanuel administration is not interested in exploring a similar plan, nor does it want to cap the number of ride-hailing vehicles operating in Chicago. According to city spokesman Grant Klinzman, the city is instead "committed to ensuring consumer choice among safe, reliable transit options," which includes taxis, Divvy bikes, charter buses and ride-hailing.

Yet transportation policy advocates like the Active Transportation Alliance want something done to better handle more vehicles downtown. Besides congestion pricing, they'd like to see Chicago pilot a program incorporating special pickup and drop-off zones in busy corridors to

cut down on ride-hailing drivers circulating as they wait for passengers to book them because, besides clogging streets, they also block bus and bicycle lanes. "We think that it's fair to set policies that prioritize models that have the best long-term impacts on our city," says Kyle Whitehead, the organization's government relations director.

It's a model Schaller supports. The Brooklyn transportation consultant also says cities can require ride-hailing companies to do a better job of reducing the time vehicles are empty through smarter algorithms that prioritize drivers according to the distance they are away from potential passengers.

Clewlow of UC Davis says regulating ride-hailing is only part of a greater effort needed by cities to reduce travel on their roads, because the money to maintain infrastructure is not keeping up with the density. "Major cities continue to grow," she says. "It's something you can't control. But you can plan for it better."

Jose Gonzalez of Oak Park has been driving for Uber and Lyft for a year. "I'm one of the drivers out there adding to the traffic, for sure," he says. He starts at 7 a.m., and 90 percent of his first rides are to the Loop, down Roosevelt Road or Washington Boulevard, taking an hour, and then he circles the city. Three weeks ago, he says, it took an unbelievable 70 minutes to go from the Loop to O'Hare at 10:30 a.m., when traffic normally subsides and travel times are typically 30 to 40 minutes. "I see a lot more (ride-share) drivers than non-drivers."

Steven R. Strahler contributed.

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