

Londoners Have Become Afraid of Public Transit

 citylab.com/transportation/2020/06/public-transit-coronavirus-risk-london-tube-bus-commute/612988/

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A masked rider aboard the London Underground. Hollie Adams/Bloomberg

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As the U.K. capital cautiously reopens, a poll finds 70% of surveyed Londoners are anxious about commuting via bus or Tube. Are their Covid-19 fears justified?

Seventy percent of Londoners no longer feel comfortable with the idea of commuting to work via public transport. So says a poll released this week, which also found that 35% of the surveyed U.K. residents said that going back to a traditional office environment would have a negative impact on their mental health.

The poll was compiled by the accountancy and consultancy firm Theta Financial Reporting, which surveyed 2,000 adults online last weekend. It's a small sample of the city's workforce, but it lays bare the concerns and anxieties many city-dwellers are feeling as they contemplate a return to pre-pandemic routines.

Right now, London is, with the rest of Britain, tentatively emerging from lockdown. Shops open on June 15, when schoolchildren between the ages of 14 and 18 will also start receiving some part-time in-person teaching again. Zoos and safari parks, of all places, are reopening, while socially distanced outdoor gatherings will be allowed for groups of up to six people. As some familiar patterns return, so are fears about crossing paths with contagion. But are those worries underpinned by actual risks in places such as the public transit network?

It's still too early to provide a definitive answer. Figures for May from Japan and France found no coronavirus clusters emerging on public transit in those countries — although this result could reflect less a total absence of transmissions than the difficulty of linking multiple cases to transmission taking place in a particular vehicle at a specific time. The path the virus has taken in London, however, has created some alarming death rates among the city's public transit workers: So far, at least 37 Transport for London employees have died from Covid-19, with 28 of those fatalities occurring among bus drivers.

At this stage it's not possible to confirm precisely when and how these workers were infected, but the government's initial failure to provide adequate PPE was likely a factor. Bus drivers may have especially high rates of illness because they come into close

proximity with passengers on London’s front-boarding buses (and work in some vehicle models that are notorious for their poor ventilation). Across all transit modes on the network, mask-wearing by passengers has been patchy — perhaps understandably so, given that it only becomes compulsory across the U.K. on public transit on June 15.

The coronavirus anxiety that lingers over public transit use is an extension of the broader disdain that many urbanites have for this mode of travel.

On London’s trains, ventilation quality varies considerably across the network, as the map in the tweet below clarifies. The surface-level Overground network of trains feature doors that open to above-ground stations, so there is likely a good level of air exchange. London’s four “sub-surface” lines, created by cut-and-cover methods just beneath the path of pre-existing streets, also have airier single cars, plus tunnels wide enough to accommodate full air conditioning systems. Lines on the so-called “Deep Tube”—excavated far below surface level — are another story: Their tunnels are too narrow to be air conditioned, and have generally poor air circulation on platforms too.

So with temperatures at 33C today, 34C tomorrow and 37C (!!) in London on Thursday - it's time to roll out what i produced last year, and that's the Air Conditioned Map of London! Please feel free to RT ... pic.twitter.com/uwiLGa0qNE

— Geoff Marshall (@geofftech) July 23, 2019

This still doesn’t automatically mean London’s public transit poses a high coronavirus transmission risk for passengers. Unlike drivers, riders aren’t seated in the same vehicle for hours on end as a huge volume of potentially infected people file by. Indeed, French and Japanese public health data suggests — without explicitly confirming — that enclosed spaces such as health facilities, offices or bars, where people remain in close contact for hours at a time, often speaking, offer conditions far more conducive to contagion-spreading than vehicles in which people remain only for short periods, observe some social distancing and talk little.

But places such as London’s Tube still *feel* deeply unsafe for many Londoners, especially those with fresh memories of being packed tightly into rush-hour cars full of commuters every morning. In a sense, the coronavirus anxiety that lingers over public transit use is an extension of the broader disdain that many urbanites have for a mode of travel that (especially in the U.S.) is often dismissed as dirty and unpleasant. Hanging out in a bar might pose a worse risk, but it’s also fun — and drinkers know they can walk out the door at any moment if they feel things are getting too crowded. If you’re deep underground aboard a subway car, it isn’t necessarily easy or swift to remove yourself.