

No going back: European public opinion on air pollution in the Covid-19 era

YouGov survey of mobility and air pollution attitudes among adults in 21 cities across six European countries

June 2020

Summary

The Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown have had a profound impact on mobility and air pollution in Europe. Those living in polluted cities are more at risk from Covid-19, the European Public Health Alliance (EPHA) has warned¹. But with the lifting of its lockdown, air pollution and exceptional traffic have already returned to China. In this context, Transport and Environment (T&E) and the European Public Health Alliance (EPHA) decided to gauge public opinion on air pollution and mobility choices as lockdown measures ease and cities confront a commuter challenge. International research data and analytics firm YouGov² polled 7,545 adults of varied age, income and gender backgrounds living in 21 of the biggest cities across six countries between 14 and 21 May 2020. Unusually for private polling, cities were chosen because air pollution and mobility change has been most significant there. The survey shows that an overwhelming majority of European city dwellers want their mayors and local governments to take effective measures against air pollution from road traffic. The main findings are:

- Roughly two in three people (64%) surveyed do not want to go back to pre-pandemic pollution levels as they experienced good clean air.
- Three quarters (74%) demand protection from air pollution, even if it means reallocating public space.
- Two in three (68%) demand protection from air pollution, even if it means preventing polluting cars entering city centres.
- One in five (21%) plan to cycle more; one in three (35%) to walk more after lockdown.
- Among people who used public transport before the lockdown, 54% will return to use this mode if sufficient hygiene measures are taken. 27% will return regardless of the risk of contagion.

¹ <https://epha.org/coronavirus-threat-greater-for-polluted-cities/>

² <https://yougov.co.uk/>

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Context: Covid-19 forces mobility shake-up

Most countries reacted to the pandemic with physical distancing to slow transmission. 'Lockdowns' reduced economic activity and road traffic, in some places by almost 85%³. As a result, air pollution has fallen sharply⁴. The Italian region of Lombardy, for instance, witnessed a drop of nitrogen dioxide concentrations by about 45% due to the effects of the pandemic.⁵ Air pollution has well established links to a range of suspected Covid-19 co-morbidities⁶ causing health groups to claim urban residents are more at risk. In post-lockdown China, air pollution⁷ has returned, along with exceptional levels of commuter traffic⁸.

A number of cities have introduced 'pandemic-safe' transport measures to lower risk for commuters. This typically includes temporary extra space, priority and infrastructure for walking and cycling as well as lower speed limits and other restrictions for drivers. The goal is to allow pedestrians and cyclists to stay at a safe distance without increasing the risk of road accidents. The public is now walking, cycling and driving more⁹, while use of public transport has fallen¹⁰. Some are calling for temporary measures to be made permanent to prevent a return of air pollution, to boost public health and better control the pandemic.

Scope: a city focus in all major European nations

In the above context, Transport and Environment (T&E) and the European Public Health Alliance (EPHA) decided to gauge public opinion on air pollution and mobility choices as lockdowns ease and cities confront a commuter challenge. International research data and analytics firm YouGov¹¹ polled city dwellers in 21 metropolitan areas across 6 countries between 14 and 21 May 2020. Unusually for private polling, cities were chosen because air pollution and mobility change has been most significant there. The findings have been weighted by age, gender, and area per metropolitan area in

³ <https://www.tomtom.com/blog/moving-world/covid-19-traffic/>

⁴ <https://www.eea.europa.eu/themes/air/air-quality-and-covid19>

⁵ https://www.dlr.de/content/en/articles/news/2020/02/20200505_effect-of-the-coronavirus-on-air-quality-is-now-visible.html

⁶ <https://epha.org/covid-19>

⁷ <https://eeb.org/air-pollution-returns-to-china/>

⁸ <https://about.bnef.com/blog/gridlock-in-beijing-as-commuters-shun-public-transport/>

⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/may/18/a-new-normal-how-coronavirus-will-transform-transport-in-britains-cities>

¹⁰ <https://www.urban-transport-magazine.com/en/decline-in-ridership-adapted-timetables-and-disinfection-robots-the-impact-of-corona-covid-19-on-public-transport/>

¹¹ <https://yougov.co.uk/>

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order to be representative of city populations as a whole. Findings presented below by country are the average of city-level findings.¹². Full uninterpreted results have been published¹³.

Country	Spain	Italy	France	Germany	UK	Belgium
Surveyed metropolitan areas	Barcelona, Madrid	Rome, Milan	Paris, Marseille, Lille, Lyon, Toulouse, Nice	Berlin, Hamburg, Köln, Frankfurt, Munich	Greater London, Greater Manchester, Birmingham, Leeds and Glasgow	Brussels

Table 1. Overview of metropolitans areas covered by the survey

Pollution: no going back to dirty air, say two thirds

During the lockdown, I have sensed/experienced good clean air and I don't want to go back to the air pollution levels we previously had

	Total	Brussels (Belgium)	French cities	German cities	Italian cities	Spanish cities	UK cities
Strongly agree	34%	39%	41%	26%	44%	44%	37%
Somewhat agree	30%	38%	30%	26%	35%	30%	32%
Neither agree nor disagree	21%	11%	18%	25%	15%	17%	22%
Somewhat disagree	6%	6%	4%	9%	3%	5%	5%
Strongly disagree	5%	2%	3%	8%	2%	3%	2%
Don't know	4%	4%	5%	6%	2%	1%	3%
Total agree	64%	77%	71%	52%	78%	74%	69%
Total disagree	11%	8%	6%	18%	5%	8%	7%

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Table 2. Opinion on returning to pre-lockdown air pollution levels

¹² <https://transenv.eu/2MNC0UG>

¹³ <https://transenv.eu/2YheJuC>

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- Around two thirds of people (64%) agreed, across all cities and regions, while one in ten (11%) disagree.
- Countries with the highest level of agreement were Italy (78%), Spain (74%) and France (71%). The lowest level of agreement was seen in German cities (52%), though only 18% disagreed.
- Milan saw the highest level of agreement (80%) followed by Marseille (79%), Rome (77%), Madrid (77%), Brussels (77%), London (76%) and Paris (73%).

Prevent polluting cars from entering cities: Two thirds demand action as strong as vehicle restrictions

Cities must take effective measures to protect citizens from air pollution, even if it means preventing polluting cars from entering the city, for example through Zero-Emission Zones

	Total	Brussels (Belgium)	French cities	German cities	Italian cities	Spanish cities	UK cities
Strongly agree	37%	42%	38%	28%	42%	51%	46%
Somewhat agree	31%	32%	34%	26%	36%	31%	34%
Neither agree nor disagree	15%	20%	16%	18%	11%	8%	8%
Somewhat disagree	8%	4%	6%	11%	6%	5%	7%
Strongly disagree	7%	-	4%	12%	4%	3%	4%
Don't know	3%	2%	2%	5%	1%	1%	2%
Total agree	68%	74%	72%	55%	77%	82%	79%
Total disagree	15%	4%	10%	23%	10%	9%	10%

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Table 3. Opinion on preventing polluting cars from entering the city to protect citizens from air pollution

- Two thirds (68%) of city dwellers across all cities and regions agree, while just 15% disagree.
- Across metropolitan areas, among respondents who said they primarily used the car before the lockdown, 63% agree.

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- Highest agreement was found in Spanish cities (82%), followed by those in the UK (79%) Italy (77%), Brussels (74%) and German cities (55%).
- Cities with the highest level of agreement were London (84%), Madrid (83%), Barcelona (81%), Milan (79%), Glasow (79%), Marseille and Leeds and Manchester (78% each).

Sacrifice: Three quarters ready to reallocate public space to keep clean air

Cities must take effective measures to protect citizens from air pollution, even if this requires reallocating public space to walking, cycling and public transport

	Total	Brussels (Belgium)	French cities	German cities	Italian cities	Spanish cities	UK cities
Strongly agree	41%	41%	40%	34%	50%	54%	48%
Somewhat agree	33%	25%	36%	30%	35%	29%	34%
Neither agree nor disagree	14%	23%	15%	16%	9%	9%	9%
Somewhat disagree	6%	5%	4%	8%	4%	5%	5%
Strongly disagree	5%	4%	3%	8%	2%	3%	3%
Don't know	2%	2%	2%	4%	1%	1%	2%
Total agree	74%	66%	77%	64%	84%	83%	81%
Total disagree	10%	9%	7%	15%	6%	8%	8%

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Table 4. Opinion on reallocating public space to protect citizens from air pollution

- Almost three quarters (74%) across all cities and regions agree, while just one in ten (10%) disagree.
- A similar high level of agreement was seen in Italy (84%), Spain (83%) and the UK (81%), while the lowest was in German cities (64%).
- London saw the highest agreement (86%), then Rome at 85%, Milan 84%, Madrid 84%, Manchester 82%, Toulouse 82%.
- Across metropolitan areas, of all surveyed people that primarily used the car before the pandemic, 69% agree.

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Active mobility: one in five plan to cycle more, one in three to walk more

Which, if any, of the following transport mode(s) are you planning to use more on work days when the lockdown will be fully lifted?

	Total	Brussels (Belgium)	French cities	German cities	Italian cities	Spanish cities	UK cities
Public transport (e.g. bus, train etc.)	30%	39%	30%	28%	35%	47%	23%
Private car (your own or car share)	46%	42%	47%	41%	55%	47%	38%
Cycling	21%	16%	16%	26%	25%	10%	11%
Walking	35%	49%	44%	25%	35%	52%	33%
Ride hailing (e.g. taxi, uber etc.)	3%	3%	3%	2%	3%	7%	3%
None of these	11%	5%	10%	16%	7%	3%	15%
Don't know	3%	2%	4%	4%	2%	2%	4%

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Table 5. Intended use of transport modes when the lockdown will be fully lifted

- 14% were primarily cycling on a work day before lockdown, now 21% plan to cycle more.
- 35% plan to walk more,
- 46% plan to use a car more, but also 30% plan greater use of public transport.
- A surge in cycling interest was found in Milan (33%), Munich (31%), Berlin (27%) and Cologne (26%).

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Back on buses: four in five primarily public transport users willing to return

Which one, if any, of the following statements best contrasts your current and future use of public transport?

	Total	French cities	German cities	Italian cities	Spanish cities	UK cities
I used to go regularly by public transport, but will not do so any longer due to the risk of contagion of the coronavirus	15%	17%	13%	18%	11%	16%
I used to go regularly by public transport and will go back regardless of the risk of contagion of the coronavirus	27%	19%	44%	20%	22%	20%
I used to go regularly by public transport and will return to use public transport if sufficient hygiene measures are taken to prevent contagion (like masks, more capacity to allow for social distancing)	54%	59%	39%	59%	64%	60%
Don't know	4%	6%	5%	3%	3%	4%

This is only people who said they used primarily public transport before the pandemic. Numbers per country are: Italy N=534, France N=377, Spain N = 619, Germany N=795, UK = 321.



Table 6. Intended future use of public transport

- When looking only at people who said they used primarily public transport before the pandemic: just under a third (27%) say they will return regardless of the risk of contagion;
- Half (54%) say they will return if sufficient hygiene measures are taken to prevent contagion.

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8. Conclusions

Covid-19 has had a clear effect on mobility. It is clear that a strong majority in cities throughout the countries polled do not want to go back to pre-crisis levels of air pollution and a large majority are willing to make changes to urban mobility, such as giving up public space for cleaner forms of transport and banning polluting cars from city centres. This should serve as a wake up call to city authorities who should ban private combustion cars and should mandate public and private fleets, such as taxis, to go emissions-free by 2025. Interest in cycling is also up. Though it is hard to maintain physical distancing on public transport, almost all public transport users are willing to return if the right precautions are in place. So modernising and electrifying the bus fleet can offer an opportunity to at the same time put in place provisions to ensure people are feeling safe and comfortable.

Further information

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