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US CENSUS BUREAU'S 2005 SURVEY

Our long commute just gets longer

Chicago-area residents spend more time getting to and from work, and many of them even go to the `extreme': 90 minutes and up each way

By John McCormick, Jeff Long and Darnell Little, Tribune staff reporters

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The alarm rings at Mary Ellen Patterson's McHenry County home, and she's off--skirting the traffic jams at the high school, motoring down Lake-Cook Road, catching the 7:11 a.m. train at Barrington and finishing with a brisk walk to her Loop office, about an hour and a half after she started.

She is what the U.S. Census Bureau calls an "extreme commuter," somebody who spends more than 90 minutes each way getting to and from work--among the fastest-growing segments of workaday travelers.

The number of extreme commuters in McHenry County grew from about 8,600 in 2002 to 10,700 in 2005, according to census data released Tuesday. In Will County, the number of extreme commuters doubled to about 15,000.

The report also shows average commuting times rising in all five collar counties. Holding down the far corners of the metropolitan area, McHenry County and Will County had average commutes long enough to rank them among the top 25 in the nation.

In spite of gas prices exceeding \$3 per gallon, the data suggest the region's sprawl in search of bigger and more affordable housing marched on unabated last year.

Despite the 5 a.m. wake-ups, despite all the time she has to think about her commute during her 40-mile treks, Patterson said she has no regrets.

"I like the quiet out here," said Patterson, a relative newcomer to the world of extreme commuting, after she filled her mini-van's tank. "Besides, the price of housing in Chicago is unbelievable. I couldn't afford to live down there."

The national average for a one-way commute is 25.1 minutes, significantly lower than the 34.4 minutes reported in McHenry County and the 34.3 minutes in Will. Both counties saw their times grow by more than two minutes between 2000 and 2005. Demographers say the longer commuting times--self-reported by survey participants--are a reflection of suburban employment growth failing to keep up with population growth.

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"The economic base is not sufficient enough in those counties to sustain all of the workers there, so they are going someplace else to work," said Marc Thomas, information services manager for the Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission. "That's showing up in the commute times, as more people move out there to live but still have to work in another area."

Nearly half of McHenry County workers, for example, work in another county, the new census data show, compared with 12.5 percent of those who live in Cook County. Residents of Will County were least likely to stay within their home county, with 57.3 percent saying they work elsewhere.

With limited mass transit available, most suburbanites drive their cars to work. Just 3.9 percent of McHenry County workers report taking mass transportation, compared with 16.7 percent in Cook County and 25.3 percent in Chicago, where trains and buses are more accessible.

In each of the Chicago area's six counties, the most common time to leave for work was between 7 and 7:30 a.m. In some suburban counties, many people leave for work between 6:30 and 7 a.m.

The new data are part of the annual American Community Survey, a program slated to replace the so-called long form that has historically asked the most detailed census questions every 10 years.

The results from the survey previously were only available for cities and counties with at least 250,000 people, but in several releases this summer and fall they are being published for areas with 65,000 people or more.

The new census data come just ahead of a study to be released Thursday by the Los Angeles-based Reason Foundation that shows the Chicago area has the second-most congested roads in the nation, behind the Los Angeles area.

The report, citing data from the Texas Transportation Institute and other state and federal research efforts, says driving times here during peak traffic are 57 percent longer than they are during off-peak times. If trends continue, the report suggests rush-hour drives here could take 88 percent longer than non-peak by 2030.

The report also states that road capacity is not keeping up with population growth and that by 2030 Illinois will need roughly 4,450 new lane-miles of road at a cost of \$55 billion in today's dollars.

Chicago remains the Second City when it comes to commuting times for residents of the nation's largest cities, behind only New York. Chicago clocked in with an average of 34.3 minutes, compared with 39.1 minutes for New York. Los Angeles, without its surrounding metropolitan area, came in fifth, after Philadelphia and Newark, N.J.

City or suburbs, there are few signs of relief on the horizon.

Officials say transportation planning in rapidly growing McHenry County is hampered in part by geography. The Fox River cuts a swath down the county's eastern edge and commuters headed toward Chicago have just two main routes in the southeast corner of the county to cross the river.

Meanwhile, the north-south routes that take commuters to the Northwest Tollway grow more congested every year, including Illinois Highway 31, Illinois Highway 47, and Randall Road, a county highway.

"It appears that people are willing to stomach that because of the quality of life in McHenry County," said County Board Chairman Kenneth Koehler.

The congestion comes at a time when state funding for road projects is dwindling, according to Jason Osborn, the county's transportation planning and program coordinator.

"The rest of the suburbs grew at a time when the highway system was heavily funded, so they could expand" Osborn said.

Meanwhile, with about 300,000 residents now in McHenry County, projections for 2030 say that as many as 450,000 people will call the county home. Osborn predicts congestion will get much worse, even with the lane expansions now under way.

Although riding the train can make the commute more productive for some people, others battle it out in their cars. Jeff Shoemaker, 52, pulled into the Algonquin Citgo on Illinois Highway 62 on Monday evening with a Rolling Stones CD blaring in his black Pontiac Solstice and his usual frustration over the commute home to Lake in the Hills from Oak Brook.

It's about 37 miles to his office, and the drive one way can take from an hour to more than 90 minutes, if weather and construction conspire to slow traffic.

"I think about it every day," he said of the commute. "I hate it."

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