



Georgia is No. 1 in counties with time-wasting trips to work. The sprawl makes homes affordable, but the crawl drives down the quality of life.

Land of the long commute

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Those long commutes you hate so much? Take heart, your endurance has made Georgia a national leader.

No other state can boast as many counties in the U.S. Census' new top 100 list for commute times.

The data, collected in the annual American Community Survey for 2005 and released this week, show 15 Georgia counties among the leaders in piling up the minutes spent going to work. Second place New York has just 12.

What's behind the long commute times? A willingness to trade time on the road for a good deal on a home.

"We don't have natural boundaries that limit growth," said Atlanta Regional Commission Chairman Sam Olens. "You can continue to have sprawl. And let's face it, we have too much sprawl."

The average commute time for the 10 core metro counties has changed little in five years, despite efforts to build live-work-play communities and to encourage workers to use mass transit, such as the Georgia Regional Transportation Authority's Xpress bus service. In 2000, the average commute was 31.77 minutes; in 2005, it was 31.48 minutes.

The 28-county region identified by the federal

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ROAD WEARY WARRIORS

Although Fulton County didn't make the nation's top 100 worst commutes list, ranking 127th with an average commute of 28 minutes, other metro Atlanta counties ranked among America's worst commute times.



County	Minutes	Rank	County	Minutes	Rank
1 Coweta	51.6	1	8 Clayton	31.7	48
2 Paulding	36.5	15	9 Carroll	31.6	49
3 Cherokee	34.4	21	10 Gwinnett	31.5	52
4 Newton	33.6	25	11 Rockdale	30.5	70
5 Douglas	32.9	32	12 DeKalb	30.2	74
6 Forsyth	32.4	39	13 Walton	30.1	76
7 Henry	32.1	42	14 Cobb	29.7	82
			15 Fayette	29.4	89

Note: Out of 776 counties with a population of 65,000

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Commute: Georgia crawls to the top

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government as metro Atlanta ranks fifth nationally in commute time, at an average of 31 minutes. Even drivers in the Los Angeles area, long derided as a tangle of slow-moving super-highways, moved quicker than here, barely in the top 25 with 29 minutes.

Only metro areas in New York, New Jersey and Washington have longer commutes.

Olens also chairs the Board of Commissioners in Cobb County, which has the 14th longest commute time in Georgia, 29.7 minutes, according to the latest numbers.

"I feel my county is being invaded by Paulding County," he said about commuters.

Paulding's commute time, 36.5 minutes, is the second-longest in Georgia and 15th longest in the nation, according to the survey.

But that's a sprint compared to the nation's purported leader, Coweta County, home to about 110,000 people 35 miles south of Atlanta. Coweta's commute time is 51.6 minutes, the survey says.

"Why would I not be surprised?" asked Greg Tarbutton, Coweta's Board of Commissioners chairman. "I work in

Jonesboro — OK — so I understand. It used to take me 45 minutes. Now it's an hour and 10 minutes — on a good day."

Others, however, are skeptical about Coweta's lofty status, including Census representatives, because its commute time is so far ahead of everyone else.

Second place Richmond County, N.Y., also known as Staten Island, lags Coweta by 9.6 minutes.

"It seems hard to believe," said Census demographer Phil Salopek.

But that number doesn't seem out of whack to Henry County commuter Gregg Gallagher, who drives north through the city.

"Given that traffic in this city is horrific, especially coming from the south end on the Downtown Connector, a commute of an hour or more seems the norm," he said. "I wish my commute were 32.1 minutes."

In the 2000 Census, Coweta's commute time was 29.7 minutes.

The nature of Coweta's workforce and the small sampling size — less than 2 percent of the total occupied housing units in Coweta — may have led to an exaggerated commute time.

A little more than half of Coweta's workers commute to

jobs outside the county, which means survey responses can be quite varied depending on the respondents' driving distance.

"A lot of the employment from Newnan and Coweta County is going to places such as the airport area, downtown and Midtown Atlanta, Cumberland Mall," said ARC senior planner John Orr. "And they're having to deal with a lot of the most congested areas in the region with their commutes."

Long commutes point out a problem common to popular outlying counties: Job growth can't keep pace with residential growth. In 2000, Coweta had a work force of about 44,000; an estimated 23,000 held jobs outside the county.

"We don't want to be a bedroom community," said Candace LaForge, president of the Newnan-Coweta Chamber of Commerce. "Our goal as a community is to create more job opportunities so our residents have choices."

While doubt surrounds the validity of Coweta's pace-setting commute time, traveling 40 miles from downtown Newnan to downtown Atlanta during morning rush hour does take an hour.

Traffic moves at a good clip until 22 minutes into the



JOHN SPINK / Staff

A fatal wreck shut down most lanes of I-85 southbound near Jimmy Carter Boulevard on Wednesday morning, affecting traffic for hours. The causes are not always so tragic, but the long commutes in metro Atlanta have resisted every attempted solution.

trip near Union City in south Fulton. Vehicles entering I-85 force traffic to slow to about 40 mph.

But then the pace picks up again, until I-85 and I-75 join 34 minutes into the journey.

Traffic becomes a crawl. Then it stops. From that point to the Edgewood Avenue exit, 5 miles and 18 minutes later, traffic flow is halting.

Olens said Georgia will continue to be a national leader in commute times unless more money goes to mass transit and state growth policy changes to discourage road projects that lead to sprawl.

Georgia Tech professor Michael Meyer suggested imposing variable tolls on lanes to encourage travel during off-peak hours.

"That's not a panacea by any means," he said, "but it certainly is one way of providing halfway decent service to people who can pay the toll."

In the meantime, the ARQ is encouraging mixed-use development that gives people the opportunity to walk to work and shops.

"But short of that," Olens said, "our residents have the right to live wherever they want."