

Tallying traffic's hidden costs

Motorists frequently complain that they pay more than their fair share for the use of roads, bridges, and highways. But a new study indicates that drivers "are actually beneficiaries of immense subsidies," says energy economist Charles Komanoff, a New York City-based consultant and confirmed bicyclist.

For instance, New York State roadway expenditures in 1990 exceeded revenues collected from motorists by \$1.9 billion, he reports. Prorating this and similar figures for New Jersey and Connecticut, he found that "direct fiscal subsidies to motorists amount to roughly \$750 million a year in New York City proper and \$850 million for the rest of the metropolitan region." Workers and area firms pay the subsidies through various taxes on income, sales, and property.

Together with Brooklyn-based consultant Brian Ketcham, Komanoff also calculated motoring's hidden costs. Their analyses, again focusing on the New York metro area, suggest that the public at large pays almost half — \$26 billion — of the estimated \$55 billion in indirect costs attributable annually to motoring. Among the subsidies, they calculate, lurks the about \$5.7 billion each that the public pays annually for accidents and for air pollution damage to health and property.

The researchers valued public land used by private cars at \$4.9 billion annually and traffic noise in New York's metro area at \$2.8 billion. The remaining \$6.3 billion in public costs is paid for in congestion (time lost by bus passengers, pedestrians, and cyclists), vibration damage to various structures, increased military costs to keep foreign oil flowing, and climate change costs from burning fossil fuels.

This analysis indicates that indirect public subsidies to drivers total more than 30 times the direct government subsidies —

or an amount "equivalent to \$3,000 taken forcibly and unawares every year out of the pockets of each man, woman, and child in the New York metropolitan area," Komanoff says.

National figures, he maintains, "are very similar to those for the New York area on a per capita basis" — although the public's share is greater in New York, where 56 percent of the city's households don't even possess a car. Komanoff and Ketcham recommend that policymakers shift more of driving's costs to motorists by phasing in new annual levies on vehicles — perhaps \$750 per car and \$14,000 for each large truck. Such taxes would offer better equity, they argue, and provide an economic carrot for reducing both vehicles and travel.

Incremental auto insurance

Mohamed M. El-Gasseir of Rumla, Inc., in San Francisco offers another tack for discouraging unnecessary motoring: pay-as-you-drive insurance. For each gallon of gas purchased during the year, drivers would pay an additional, state-regulated, at-the-pump fee. Such payments — not a tax — would supplement fixed annual fees that drivers pay the insurer of their choice. Together, fixed and supplemental fees would be structured to average only what drivers now pay for coverage.

Under such a system, "practically everyone benefits," El-Gasseir says. Drivers pay only for the miles they travel. And because the gas-pump fees will reduce the number of uninsured drivers, he notes, insurance companies should be able to lower their fixed costs. Finally, by discouraging travel, the plan should cut traffic congestion and accidents. El-Gasseir cites a study by the state of California indicating that in the long run, this plan might cut gasoline use by 16 to 41 percent.

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contrary evidence that appeared in *PSYCHOPHARMACOLOGY*.

In fact, Spilich's data fly in the face of common sense. It is clear that smokers are not impaired in their complex thinking in everyday life. For example, Agatha Christie, Pablo Picasso, Molière, Richard Feynman, Johannes Brahms, Henry Ford, Orson Welles, Sigmund Freud, Jean Paul Sartre, Winston Churchill, Federico Fellini, Charlie Chaplin, Rudolph Nureyev, Helen Keller, Albert Einstein, Coco Chanel, and almost every sculptor and poet I can think of smoked.

All of these people have demonstrated complex thinking in their work. If Spilich is right, then it would have to be argued that they would have been even better thinkers as nonsmokers. That I find hard to accept.

David M. Warburton
Professor of Psychopharmacology
University of Reading
Reading, England

... there's debate

Warburton and Pritchard miss the points stressed in the original *BRITISH JOURNAL OF ADDICTION* article and in *SCIENCE NEWS*: (1) research that purports to investigate effects of smoking upon cognitive performance by comparing active with deprived smokers only measures deprivation effects; (2) research limited to simple, rapid, sensory motor tasks cannot generalize to overall cognitive performance; (3) tobacco lowers the available ceiling of performance — if task demands never reach this lowered ceiling, no appreciable deficit will appear.

Warburton responds that a "vast body of contrary evidence" exists. As I point out in the original article, studies that use nonsmoking controls or complex tasks provide a picture that disagrees with the view Warburton so hopefully espouses. The list of distinguished smokers proves nothing; their output without tobacco might have been quantitatively or qualitatively better.

Pritchard's first criticism is that my controlled smoking procedure is not like real smoking. I agree. Replication of the research using ad lib smoking procedures shows that as demands become heavier and the task less perceptual, cognitive performance of smokers still declines relative to deprived smokers and nonsmokers.

I was surprised by Dr. Pritchard's expert opinion (which directly contradicts Warburton's claims of intellectual enhancement) that "on average, smokers have lower IQs than nonsmokers," and I wonder how tobacco companies might work that into their advertisements. He claims correctly that the active smokers stayed at the driving simulator longer than deprived or nonsmokers, but since the analysis of vehicular collisions was expressed in terms of collisions per minute, his criticism is invalid.

If Pritchard's claim is correct — that preexisting personality differences (as opposed to tobacco use) account for smoking's effects — then why have he, Warburton, and their colleagues been so intent on studying the effects of tobacco?

George J. Spilich
Professor of Psychology
Washington College
Chestertown, Md.

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