

THE PROBLEM:

# 15-Minute Cities: Modern Dystopias



The “15-minute city” is an urban design concept that aims to provide people with every necessity for daily life within a 15-minute walk, bike ride, or transit ride. Advocates of this concept claim that they create people-centric communities that provide more choice and access, help save the environment due to reduced carbon emissions, improve public health, and enhance “equity.”

In reality, 15-minute cities are a pipedream of central planning bureaucrats that rely on increasingly coercive measures to manipulative the way people live. These include car-free zones, limiting areas of travel, and punishing citizens for driving outside of any “permitted zones.” Put into practice, 15-minute cities will crush industry, create a surveillance state, impede travel freedom, reduce choice and opportunity, and harm vulnerable people.



## Suburban Sprawl Increases Opportunity

Prior to the invention of the private vehicle, most people lived in dense cities that clustered around factories and industrial businesses. This was not necessarily by choice, but a necessity driven by limited mobility. The invention of the automobile changed everything about how people choose to live and organize communities.

In the words of philosopher and professor at University of Virginia Loren E. Lomasky, “because we have cars we can, more than any other people in history, choose where we will live and where we will work, and separate these two choices from each other. We can more easily avail ourselves of near and distant pleasures, at a schedule tailored to individual preference. In our choice of friends and associates, we are less constrained by accidents of geographical proximity. In our comings and goings, we depend less on the concurrence of others. We have more capacity to gain observational experience of an extended immediate environment. And for all of the preceding options, access is far more open and democratic than it was in preautomobile eras.”

**Today, we live in an amazing built environment where people have immense opportunity and choice in where they live, work, recreate, and explore. Private vehicles have directly shaped our communities and land use patterns, created suburban sprawl, and upended the more restrictive urban cores of the past.**

## 15-Minute Cities Restrict Travel, Choice, and Access

Though 15-minute cities are sold as providing more choice and access, by purportedly giving people “additional options” such as walking and biking, it is a ruse that always requires the diminishment of roads and comes at the expense of drivers. In 2020, the first official 15-minute city was implemented in Paris, France by Mayor Anne Hidalgo during the COVID lockdowns. From 2021 until 2026, 112 miles of permanent separate bike lanes will be built in Paris, in an attempt to be a “100% cyclable” city. The goal is to “expel cars” and eventually execute a “total ban on gas-powered cars by 2030.” Despite the dramatic upheaval to the city’s infrastructure, including converting one of the most heavily used expressways in Paris into one big sidewalk, they failed in their attempt to force Parisians to abandon their vehicles and instead the fewer roads available are choked with congestion as residents try to escape the city to access their jobs.

The misery of this induced gridlock is not a problem for Mayor Hidalgo and 15-minute city sympathizers. The solution? Quit your job and find one that is on a public transit route or within walking distance. Or just work from home. It helped that COVID lockdowns socialized these behaviors. In fact, COVID was seen as, “an unmissable opportunity to accelerate the shift to...urban planning approaches such as the 15-minute city,” according to C40 Cities, a global organization of local governments working together to save the world from “cataclysmic climate change.”

Ultimately, 15-minute cities are incompatible with an economy and society self-organized around responding to individual choice and preference. It is the personal vehicle and the corresponding sprawl that provides people with the mobility freedom to access the schools, healthcare facilities, and churches of their choice.

## 15-Minute Cities Harm Vulnerable People

If a 15-minute city could work for anyone, it would be the young, single, and physically fit individual. Beyond that, it fails. Especially harmed, however, are more vulnerable individuals such as the elderly, disabled, children, and pregnant women. Some people simply cannot walk or bike. Fixed transit routes provide little flexibility to accommodate families with small children or provide comfort to someone in a wheelchair and are often riddled with crime that particularly endangers the defenseless. Places such as Tucson and Tempe have committed to orienting their land use policies around 15-minute city concepts in their "Climate Action Plans." It's not just inconvenient to walk or bike in these cities, it can be downright fatal. It should be obvious that in places as unbearably hot as Arizona for months out of the year, or as rainy as Portland, Oregon that has pledged to be 90% walkable and cyclable by 2030, are inane places to relegate people to walking and biking to get around.

## 15-Minute Cities Usher in a Surveillance State

When cities inevitably fail to convince people to adopt these "other options" and they continue to use their cars, governments revert to increasingly coercive policies to force the behavior change. In England, many towns started with trial "low traffic neighborhoods (LTNS)," which block cars from entering certain areas or roads by placing barriers, planters, and prohibitive road signs. When this didn't work, boroughs such as Canterbury installed cameras that read the license plates of automobiles that drive through restricted areas to automatically fine drivers. According to one local media outlet, "short, direct journeys across the city - whether to supermarkets, retail parks, or GP surgeries - will be prohibited in a bid to encourage residents to walk, cycle, or use public transport." This level of invasiveness and control provoked thousands of residents to protest, yet council officials maintained unconvincingly that the traffic restrictions will not "be used to confine people" to a given area because "everyone can go through all the filters at any time by bus, bike, taxi, scooter, or walking."

## What's Wrong With Giving People Everything They Need?

It's absurd to believe that by building more bike lanes and creating more density you are improving people's health, saving the environment, and advancing justice. In reality, if you support 15-minute cities for moral reasons, you aren't "saving the world," you're just riding a bike.

At the philosophic crux of 15-min cities is the idea that government can fulfill every want and need of people. This is fundamentally flawed, because it fails to understand human nature and accept the diversity of individuals. People do not want to be "satisfied", they want to be fulfilled by challenge, exercising agency, and adventure. These are also complex problems, way outside the scope and expertise of a central planning bureaucrat.

The idea that systems can be erected and improved to provide complete equity isn't new, even as it relates to the discipline of urban planning.

"We think that high standards of health and sanitation and of life in general can be achieved in an environment where all it takes to leave the built-up area is an easy walk. In other words, the limits of the whole area should be kept within the range of a twenty-minute walk."

This quote sounds as if it was said by a modern-day proponent of 15-minute cities. It is actually from the 1968 book, "The Ideal Communist City" written by several soviet architects from the University of Moscow. The book aimed to dismantle the concept of private property and suburban life. "The new city is a world belonging to each and all."

As to who coined the term "15-Minute Cities," that would be Carlos Morena, a French-Columbian professor and former member of Columbia's M-19 an openly known communist group.



## The Solution is CHOICE & FREEDOM.

People vote with their feet, and that vote is overwhelmingly people choosing to live in suburban communities, desiring private homes with driveways and garages, and a backyard. Some people do choose to live in mixed-use developments, in apartment complexes, relegating themselves to relying on walking, biking, and taking transit. The market naturally provides that option to the minority who want it, and that's good. That is different than central planners redesigning existing communities, selling some utopian vision, and forcing it on people.



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