

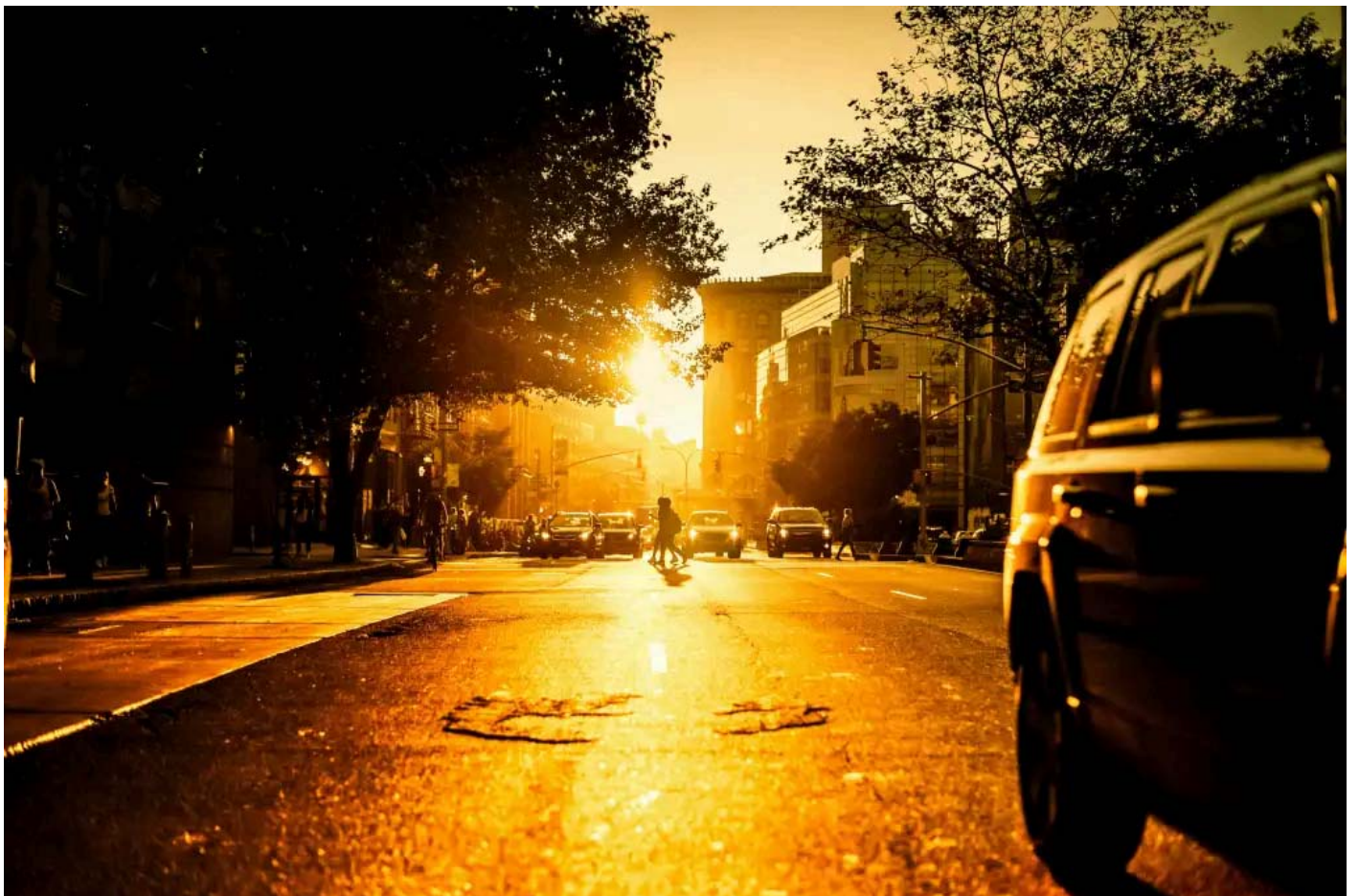
CAR DEPENDENCE

Report: Confronting Car Dependence Won't Just Help With Climate Change; It's a \$6.2 Trillion Opportunity

Making driving truly optional can save the planet — and save American households trillions of dollars.

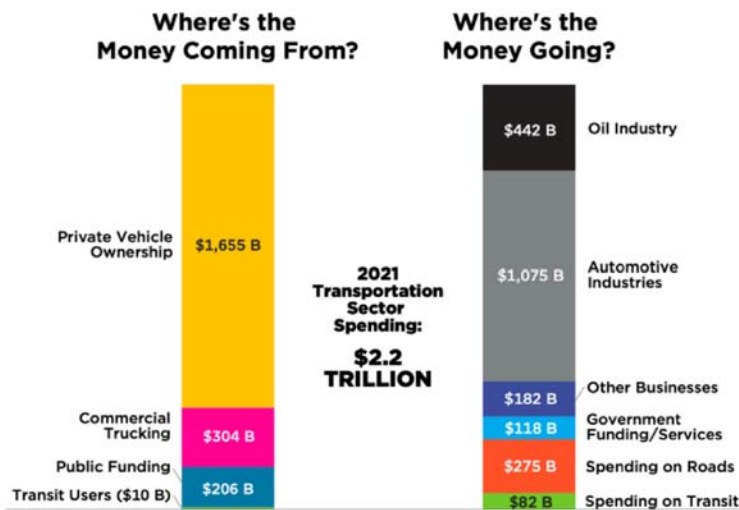
By **Kea Wilson**

6:51 AM EDT on October 30, 2024



Strong policies aimed at reducing how much Americans need to drive wouldn't just decarbonize the transportation sector and make our communities more healthy and equitable, a new study finds – it would also save us \$6.2 trillion *more* than focusing on vehicle electrification alone, the vast majority of which will go directly back into the pockets of U.S. residents.

The Union of Concerned Scientists' provocatively titled [report](#), "Freedom to Move," states that giving Americans the freedom to choose among multiple modes of travel is "key to the climate transition" – and that making "visionary but feasible" changes, like shifting land use patterns and investing in walking, biking, and transit, could get our country to the critical net zero milestone.



Click to view larger. | Graphic: Union of Concerned Scientists

More specifically, the report says that by slashing vehicle miles traveled by about 27 percent from 2035 to 2050 – an amount *lower* than the VMT reduction goals already in place in California and Washington – America wouldn't have to build about \$201 billion in new energy infrastructure that would be necessary to power millions of

electric cars *and* the gas-powered cars that would still be produced as the fleet transitions.

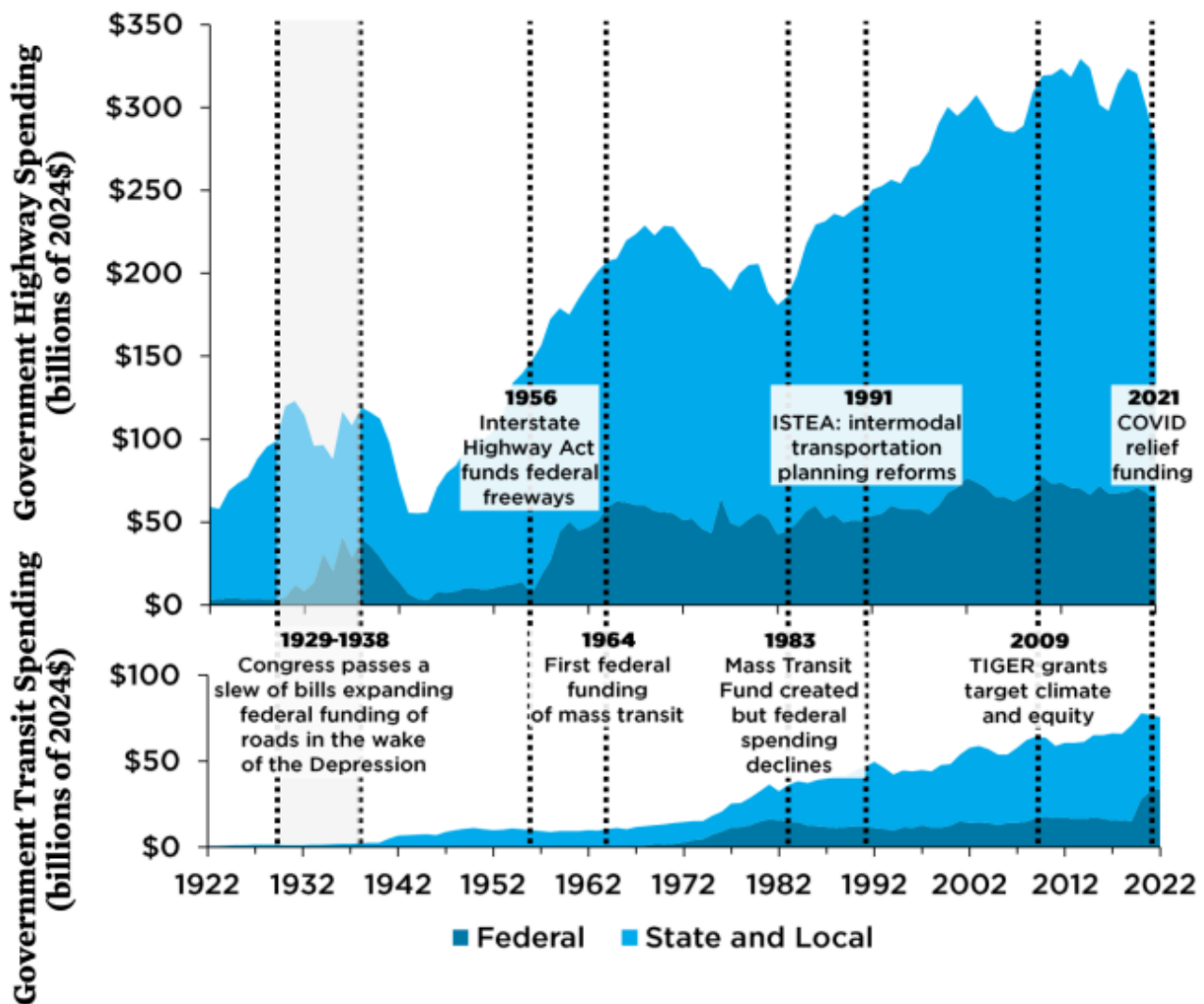
It would also save the country \$128 billion in avoided public health costs from tailpipe emissions, as well as the fine pollutants like tire particles and brake dust that heavier electric cars emit even more of. And then there's the staggering costs of car crash deaths themselves, 250,000 of which could be

avoided if VMT was cut, along with 3.7 million crash injuries that often cost far more than a fatality.

Most staggeringly, though, U.S. *residents* would save a collective \$5.9 trillion in avoided car payments, fuel, insurance, and other vehicle-related costs if we took car dependence seriously — even if most households didn't give up driving outright.

"What we find is that reducing VMT and making sure to provide more transit options would be the most equitable way to make these kinds of changes, and would provide the most benefits to the people out there," said Kevin Shen, the lead author of the report. "And even in more car-oriented communities, this doesn't mean that everybody has to ditch their car. It could just mean that ,instead of buying a second car per household, you shed a car. Or a certain percentage of your trips to the grocery store or to the doctor are met by an e-bike, because your town is is planned [so that] the places you've got to go are more centralized."

Figure 4. Federal, State, and Local Government Road Investments Have Overshadowed Transit Investments over the Decades



Even if he believes that reducing car dependence is within our reach, Shen acknowledges that doing so will require fighting against roughly a century of car culture and all the biases it's ingrained.

Virtually since they were first created, the researchers say that autocentric industries have been "rigging the rules to constrain our options to only driving fossil-fueled cars," and that dismantling their influence will be a steep uphill battle. In 2023 alone, the auto, fossil fuel, and road-building industries spent a whopping \$104 million in documented lobbying time and \$14 million more in political contributions – and those were only the lobbying groups that signed

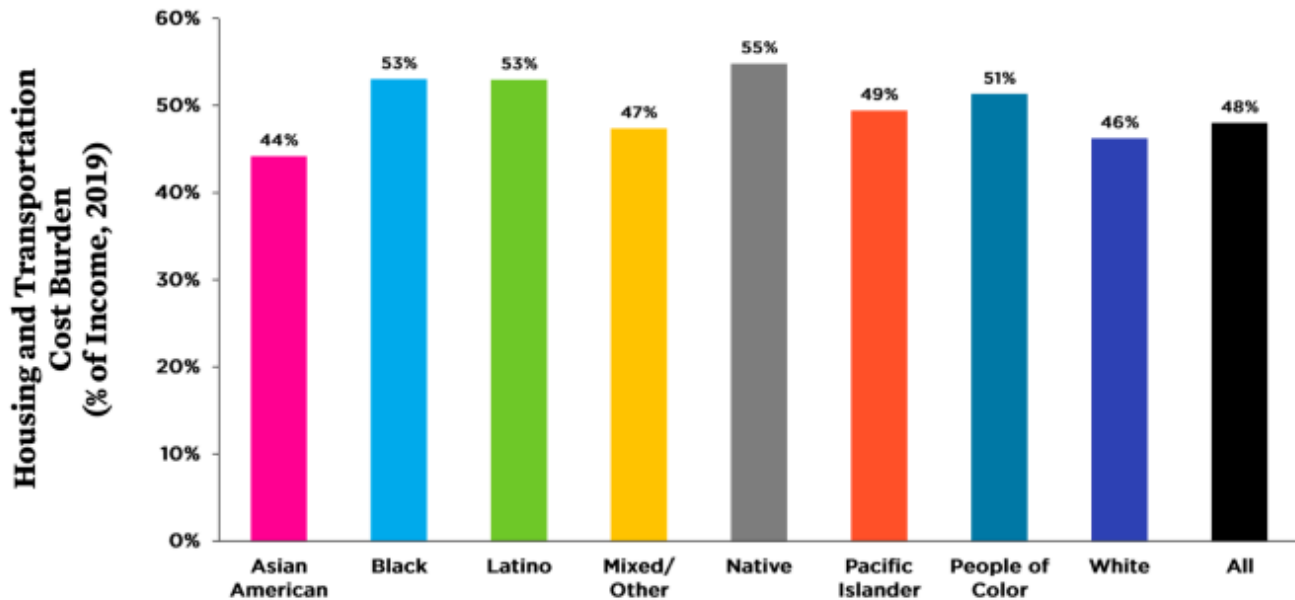
onto a single letter that successfully opposed a rule that would have required states to report their transportation-related greenhouse gas emissions.

All that lobbying, though, hasn't just won government subsidies for highways that have dwarfed transit spending for generations. It's also created a car-dependent world where the American people are functionally required to line the pockets of automakers and oil companies, or else sacrifice opportunities and basic resources that are only reachable with a private automobile.

Put it all together, and the researchers say that auto and oil industries "receive up to around 75 percent of all the money – private and public funds – that we spend on transportation."

"This is not just a 'today' problem. ...The automotive lobby has [mounted] a very coordinated campaign for years," continued Shen. "They used all these arguments to try and reframe what the use of the street should be, like the term 'jaywalker.' And in general, this campaign wound up making it so that streets were no longer for people in all sorts of different modes, but largely privileged fast-moving automobiles. Anything defying that norm was seen as morally wrong."

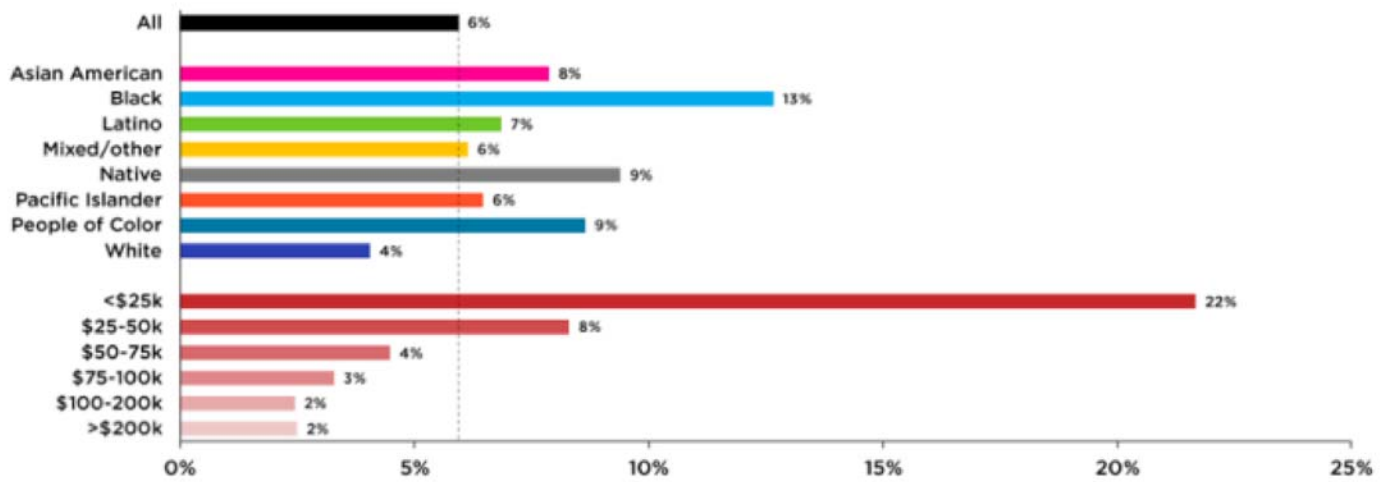
Figure 7. Housing and Transportation Cost Burdens Are High for All, Especially Households of Color



Building enough energy infrastructure to electrify our car-dependent status quo, though, won't be easy, either – and it will be far more expensive and less equitable than the alternative, especially for America's most vulnerable communities.

The researchers point out that roughly 30 percent of U.S. residents don't drive, whether because they are too young, because they have disabilities that make driving impossible, because they can't legally get a license, or even because they simply can't afford to. About 60 percent of Americans live in neighborhoods where the combined costs of housing and transportation are unaffordable, the researchers found, and people of color were 14 percent more likely to be cost-burdened by these basic necessities.

"We titled our report 'Freedom to Move' for a reason," added Shen. "Freedom has long been associated with automobiles. ... But we envision a different kind of future: one where invoking the word 'freedom' doesn't mean just 'freedom to drive,' but the freedom for everyone to have choices."



Percentage of People Living in Households Without a Vehicle by Race/Ethnicity and Household Income

If America can understand the massive benefits of ending car dependence before it's too late, Shen and his fellow researchers hope we can chart a better course to curing climate change — even if their own field has played a role in putting us on our current path.

"Especially as the Union of Concerned Scientists, we have to bring up that for the longest time, the car-dependent status quo has been propped up by antiquated science and modeling," he added. "[But] if you look into the more recent research [about] what actually benefits people in the U.S., it is not automobility. Providing a multitude of options — that's what actually benefits people."



Kea Wilson

Kea Wilson has more than a dozen years experience as a writer telling emotional, urgent and actionable stories that motivate average Americans to get involved in making their cities better places. She is also a novelist, cyclist, and affordable housing advocate. She previously worked at Strong Towns, and currently lives in St. Louis, MO. Kea can be

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– **OldGuy75** 3 weeks ago

Having other options would also reduce uninsured motorist and those driving with suspended license. I remember helping a co-worker with suspended license find a safe route to ride a bike to work. We did a test ride on a quiet Sunday morning. It only took 15 minutes longer than driving and it felt safe. After a week he was back illegally driving a car.

I asked what happened and he said after being run off of the road twice and almost hit, it was too dangerous, sometimes you just have to break the law to stay safe.

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– **cmedred** 3 weeks ago

Good story, Kea. But the UCS missed one of the strongest talking points. Yes, "more transportation options such as transit, walking, and biking, are good for the environment, the economy, and social equity," but what might be far more important is that transportation options such as walking and biking have the potential to increase physical activity in a country facing a deadly slothdemic.

The decline in physical activity (PA) has left U.S. increases in life expectancy lagging years behind life expectancies in Japan, Switzerland, Australia, Italy, Spain, France and on and on. We are now 48th in the world just behind Panama.

Not to mention the U.S. being a world leader in Covid deaths because U.S. society was burdened by so many with physiologically compromised cardiovascular systems, and we may be on the way to becoming a world leader in long Covid for the same reason.

These are problems in the here and now, not off in the future as is climate change.

A JAMA study just warned against the risks of long-Covid in obese and overweight American children and young adults, but the authors conceded their conclusions were limited by a lack of information on physical activity.

https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2825391?guestAccessKey=9d7dd22b-f588-434d-b553-1acba5948840&utm_source=for_the_media&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=ftm_links&utm_content=tf1&utm_term=102824

Obesity itself has, of course, been linked to a lack of PA with another JAMA study just this spring concluding that "genetic risk for obesity is not deterministic but can be overcome by increasing physical activity."

<https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2816822>

Add in the fact that the vaccines do not appear fully protective against post-acute sequelae of SARS-Cov-2 (ie. long Covid) plus the already \$173 billion cost of obesity in this country, and it becomes obvious that modifying American transportation systems to get Americans up and moving tomorrow is arguably far more important need than getting them out of MVs to deal with the climate change threats of the future.

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