

Cars are killing us – so how do we wean ourselves off them?

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Road traffic accidents are the number one cause of death among 15 to 29-year-olds. If no action is taken, [it is predicted](#) that road traffic will kill as many as 1.9m people worldwide per year by 2030. Add to this the negative impacts of [greenhouse gas emissions](#), [air and noise pollution](#), [chronic diseases](#) such as heart disease or diabetes and [rising levels of obesity](#), and a future full of cars looks bleak indeed.

These are the concerns underpinning [European Mobility Week](#) – an annual campaign, which began in 2002 – to promote sustainable forms of urban transport. This year, more than 1,700 local authorities from 42 different countries play host to a range of public events such as bicycle masses, talks and seminars about green mobility patterns, walk-to-school initiatives and many other public activities to support the uptake of sustainable and active travel.

Breaking the habit

Over the past few decades, most cities around the globe have been shaped by the car. The majority of our public spaces have been transformed into endless flows of traffic, to better accommodate our dependence on this form of transport. As the number of people living in urban areas [continues to grow](#), so too will the number of cars on the roads. There is a serious risk that this type of car-centred urbanisation will become unsustainable, and damage living standards for all.



Take a walk. [ChrisGoldNY/Flickr](#), [CC BY-NC](#)

As a result, governments are becoming increasingly committed to controlling the number of conventionally-fuelled cars on the roads. To complete the transition from a heavily car-dominated society to a resource-efficient one, cities will need to achieve a more equal “modal share” – that is, city-dwellers need to be encouraged to take up alternative modes of transport

in greater numbers. As a part of this effort, [hundreds of cities](#) in Europe and around the world – from Barcelona, to Brussels, to Istanbul – will encourage motorists to give up their automobiles for 24 hours, typically by closing their central streets to cars, as part of World Car-Free Day.

Moving on

About [half of all car trips](#) in countries like the UK, the Netherlands, and the US are fewer than five miles long. Replacing cars with other modes of transport for these short journeys would be a colossal step in the right direction. To this end, policy-makers, transport planners and traffic engineers have a variety of stick and carrot measures to make car use undesirable or unnecessary.

The stick measures are often regulatory; designed to force people to reduce car usage. These mechanisms range from congestion charges, toll roads, parking levies, traffic calming and road restrictions to fuel taxes, vehicle excise duty and even expensive car ownership permits.

The carrots are often soft measures, which give car users the options they need to be able to change their travel behaviour on a voluntary basis. One example is to make additions and improvements to alternative infrastructure, such as bus and rail services. But they can also include things such as the provision of cycle routes, pedestrianisation, priority bus lanes and other special rights-of-way.

Hybrid public transport modes and cheaper fares also help, as do initiatives for buying alternatively-fuelled cars and tools or information to help people practice smarter and more fuel-efficient driving, which makes the most of advanced vehicle technologies, when car use cannot be avoided. The sharing economy has stepped in, too, with ride sharing apps and websites like [BlaBlaCar](#) and [iThumb](#) and more than 900 dedicated public bicycle programmes worldwide.

Events like car-free days are important reminders of the steps that need to be taken to ensure safe and sustainable urban development. We need to use all these tools, and more, to meet the travel needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to enjoy liveable cities.