

# Telecommuting Survey Reveals Potential for Greater Shift Towards Remote Work After COVID-19 Pandemic

By Andrew Mikula

The fallout for commuters during the COVID-19 pandemic has left many observers wondering whether working from home will increase in popularity after the crisis subsides. With traffic congestion hampering economic productivity and contributing to air and noise pollution, public officials may look for ways to incentivize businesses to allow working from home in greater numbers going forward. However, the attitude of the public towards such a shift in commuting patterns requires further evaluation, and last month Pioneer Institute issued a survey aiming to capture these attitudes.

The survey had 711 respondents. At least half of the survey's responses were from individuals employed in Massachusetts. With the heavy weight on responses from the Greater Boston and Massachusetts regions, it is unclear how generalizable the results are to the rest of the country. Individual questions often have closer to 500 responses, given that many questions did not apply to those who worked from home before the pandemic.

## The survey questions

- Do you currently work from home?
- What do you like least about working from home?
- What do you like most about working from home?
- Prior to the pandemic, how did you commute?
- Prior to the pandemic, how long was your commute (one-way total)?
- Do you find that you get more or less done when you work from home?
- In a post-vaccine period, how would your attitude towards returning to the workplace compare to working remotely?
- During a transitional, pre-COVID vaccine period, if you were asked to come back to your workplace, would you?
- In a post-vaccine period, would you prefer to work from home?
- If you replied "yes" to the previous question, how many days a week would you prefer to work from home?



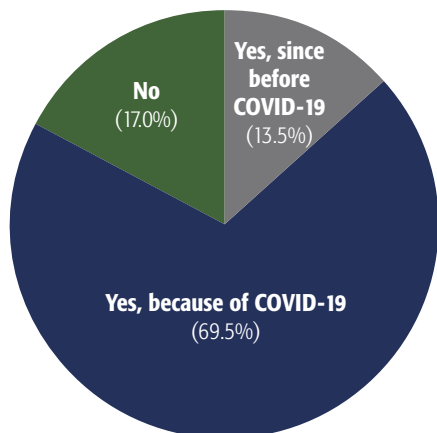
PIONEER INSTITUTE  
PUBLIC POLICY RESEARCH

**Andrew Mikula** is the Lovett & Ruth Peters Economic Opportunity Fellow at Pioneer Institute. Mr. Mikula was previously a Roger Perry Government Transparency Intern at Pioneer Institute and studied economics at Bates College.

## Do you currently work from home?

The present era of social distancing constitutes a large-scale experiment with remote work that allows employees to quickly form opinions about telecommuting. Nearly 70% of respondents to Pioneer’s survey said they were working from home because of the pandemic, with another 14% saying they already worked from home before COVID-19.

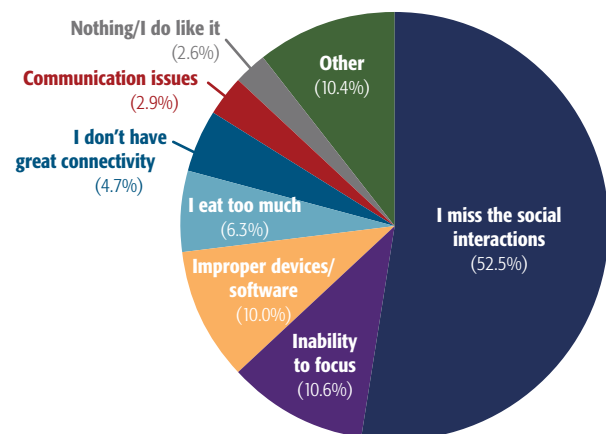
### Do You Currently Work From Home?



## What do you like least about working from home?

Perhaps the most salient drawback of working from home among the survey respondents was the isolating nature of remote work. A slim majority of respondents (53%) cited that they “miss the social interactions” available in their former workplace, with an additional 3% citing communication issues brought about by unfamiliar video conferencing programs and the like. Relatedly, many workers seemed unprepared to work from home full-time in terms of their equipment or home office set-up, with nearly 15% indicating “improper devices/software” or inadequate connectivity as their least favorite element of working from home.

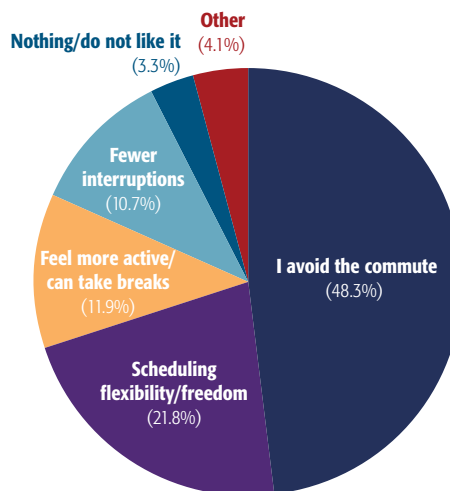
### What do you like least about working from home?



## What do you like most about working from home?

Generally, respondents were more united in their opinions on the most favorable elements of working from home, with 48% most pleased to avoid their commutes and 34% citing improvements in their daily routines (whether via scheduling flexibility or break activities). Survey participants seemed divided on whether a home environment is more distracting than their former workplace, with 10.7% saying “fewer interruptions” was their favorite aspect of remote work, while 10.6% indicating an “inability to focus” as their least favorite.

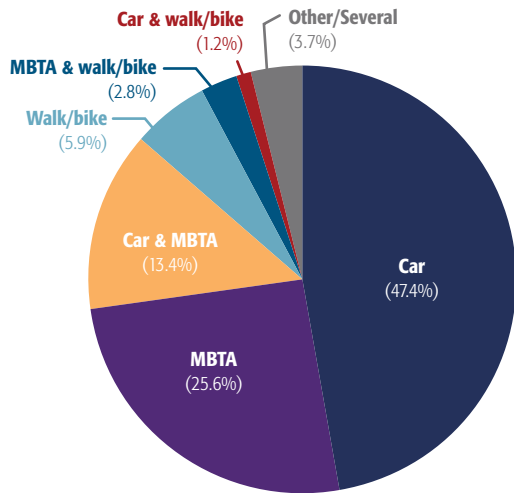
### What do you like most about working from home?



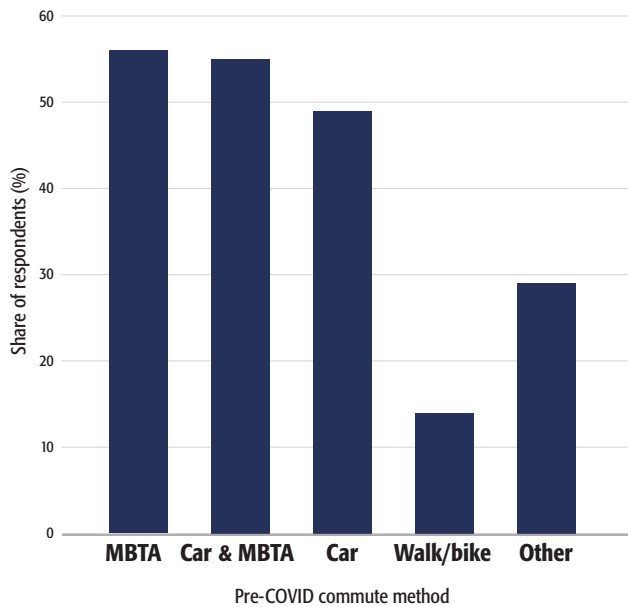
## Prior to the pandemic, how did you commute?

While a plurality of participants said an avoidance of the commute was the best aspect of working from home, the share of respondents who said this varied widely based on both the method and length of their commute before the pandemic. Overall, about 47% of respondents commuted by car alone before the pandemic and 26% commuted by MBTA. Another 13% commuted by both car and MBTA, either by driving to an MBTA station and then riding to their destination or by alternating between each method on different days. These 3 categories of commuters (i.e., some combination of driving a car and riding the MBTA) disproportionately say that “avoiding the commute” is their favorite element of working from home. Meanwhile, foot-powered commuters, such as bikers, pedestrians, and skateboarders, tend to cite other benefits of remote work. The remaining commuters in the analysis use other forms of transit (airplanes, Amtrak, non-MBTA bus services, etc.) or more obscure combinations of vehicles (such as riding the MBTA and then biking to their destination), and these workers also aren’t particularly eager to avoid their commutes.

### Prior to the pandemic, how did you commute?



### Share of respondents saying “I avoid the commute” is what they like most about working from home, by pre-COVID transportation method

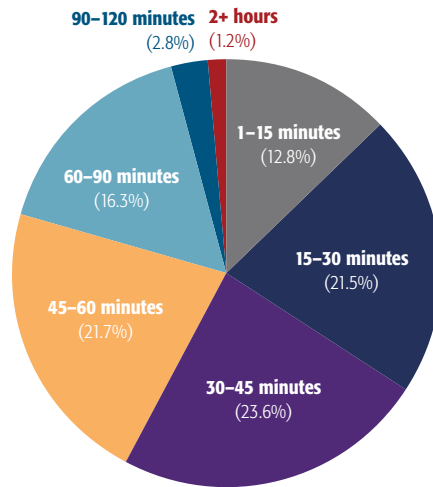


### Prior to the pandemic, how long was your commute (one way total)?

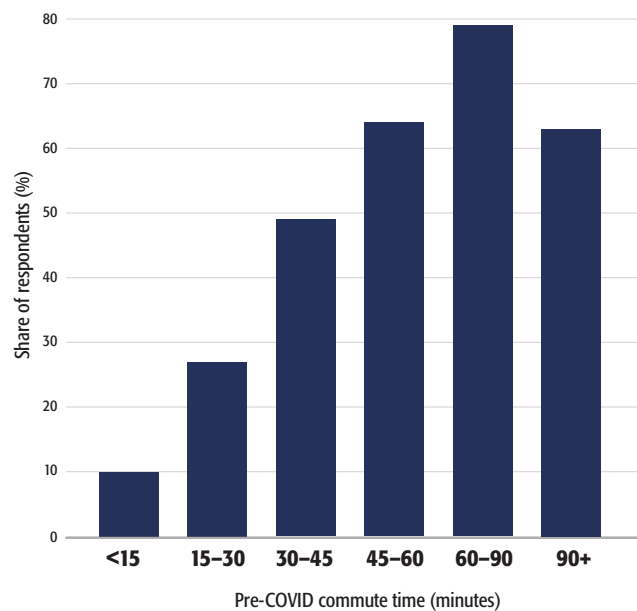
The other principal factor affecting willingness to avoid a commute is the length of the commute itself. The median commute time among survey respondents was 30–45 minutes, with 24% of commuters citing this as a typical commute time for them pre-COVID. Sizable shares of survey participants also said their commute took less time than 30 minutes (34%) or between 45 and 90 minutes (38%). Relatively few participants commuted more than 90 minutes each way (4%).

Generally, participants with longer commutes cited “I avoid the commute” as their favorite aspect of working from home more than participants with shorter commutes. However, respondents with a commute longer than 90 minutes said this at a lower rate than those with a 60–90 minute commute. This is likely due in part to the low sample size among these individuals, but it could also be that people willing to spend so much time commuting simply don’t place as much value on avoiding it.

### Prior to the pandemic, how long was your commute (one way total)?



### Share of respondents saying “I avoid the commute” is what they like most about working from home, by pre-COVID commute time

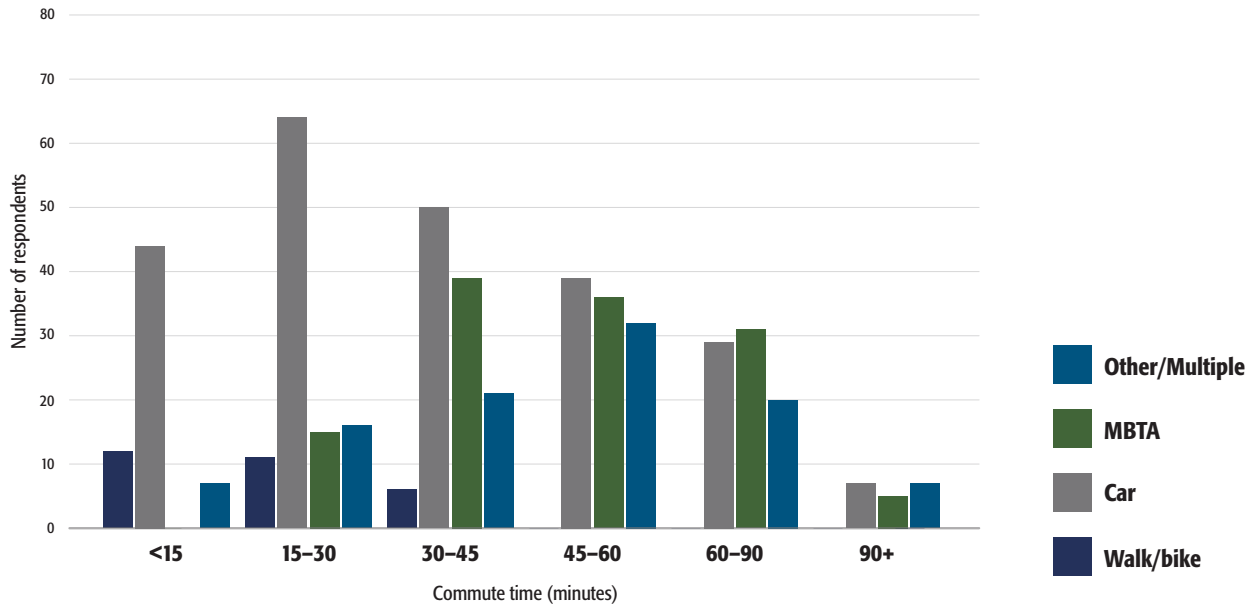


## Commute time and method interaction

Naturally, these two factors affecting attitudes about commuting—the vehicle and the time spent—interact with each other. People who walk or bike to work tend to spend much less time on their commute than those who take public transit or drive. In fact, among foot-powered commuters, the plurality take fewer than 15 minutes to commute each way. For people who

drive a car, 15-30 minutes is the most typical commute time, and for MBTA passengers it's 30-45 minutes. For other forms of commuting, it's 45-60 minutes, likely because these workers must switch vehicles or even modes of transportation before arriving at their destination.

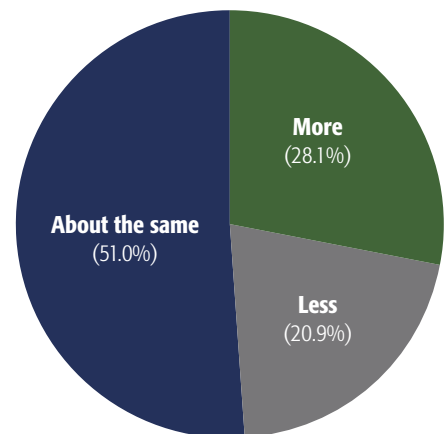
### Pre-COVID commute times by vehicle



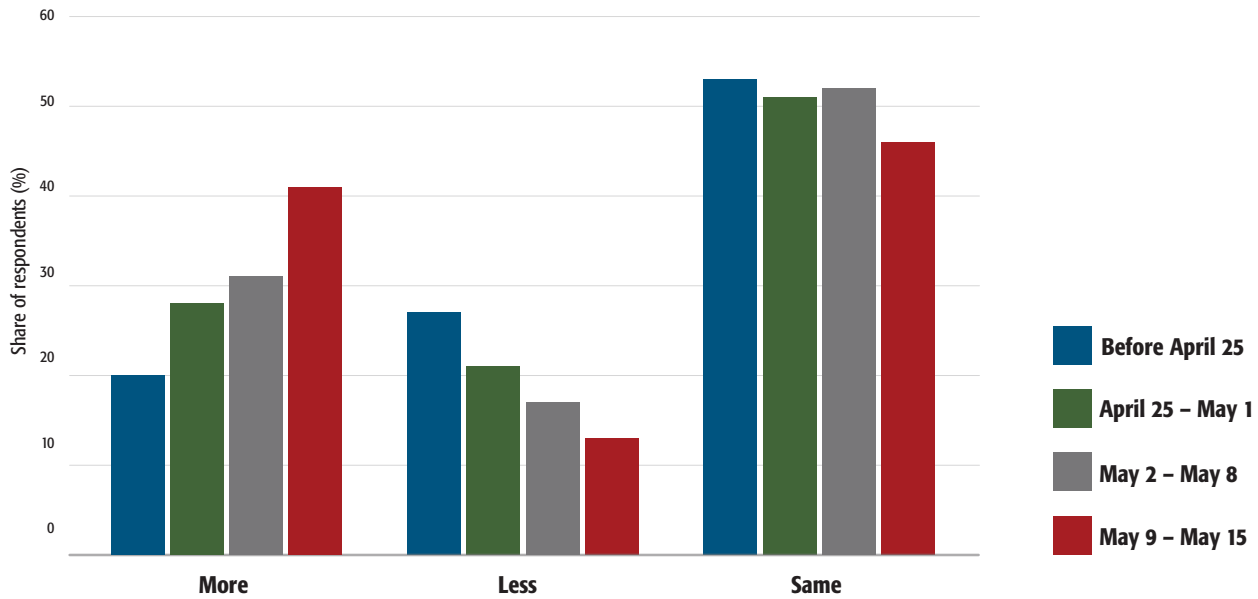
## Do you find that you get more or less done when you work from home?

While the above analysis is important for understanding the standard of comparison for telecommuting, it doesn't necessarily capture people's attitudes about telecommuting overall relative to the alternatives. In this regard, a major consideration for workers and employers alike is whether employees can be as productive at home as in the workplace. Overall, more participants said they get more done when working from home than said they get less done, although the majority of respondents reported little change between the workplace and a remote setting. However, a telling trend in the survey responses is that those who responded to the survey in May tended to report increased productivity at home more often than those who responded to the survey in April. While more research is needed to explore this relationship, it seems that people find ways of enhancing productivity in a home environment after a brief adjustment period.

## Do you find that you get more or less done when you work from home?



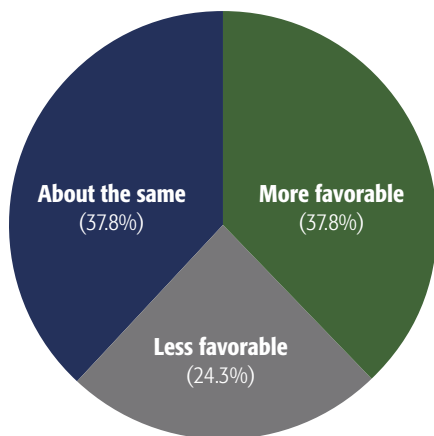
**“Do you find that you get more or less done when you work from home?”  
by date of survey response**



**In a post-vaccine period, how would your attitude towards returning to the workplace compare to working remotely?**

At the same time, respondents expressed general favorability towards returning to the workplace after a COVID-19 vaccine is available. Some 38% of participants thought doing so would be more favorable than continuing to work from home, compared to the 24% of respondents who said the opposite. Another 38% seemed ambivalent between these options.

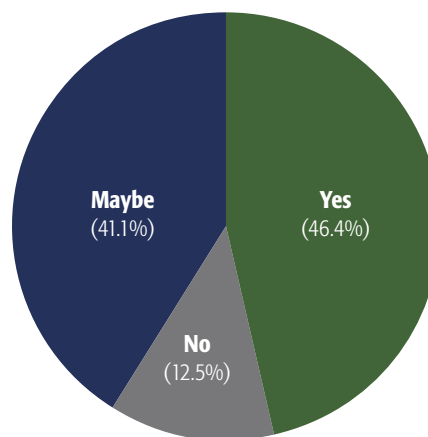
**In a post-vaccine period, how would your attitude towards returning to the workplace compare to working remotely?**



**During a transitional, pre-COVID vaccine period, if you were asked to come back to your workplace, would you?**

Tellingly, a plurality of respondents (46%) said they would return to their workplace upon request, even before a COVID-19 vaccine was available. Only 12% said they would not return if they were asked to, and 41% remained unsure.

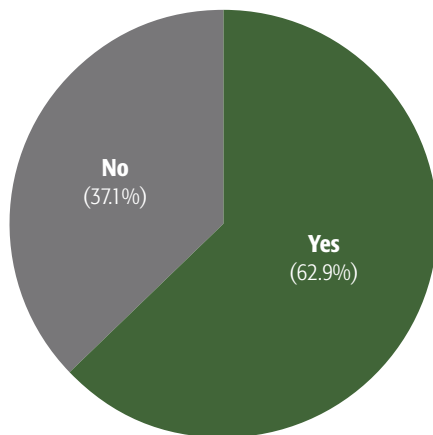
**During a transitional, Pre-COVID vaccine period, if you were asked to come back to your workplace, would you?**



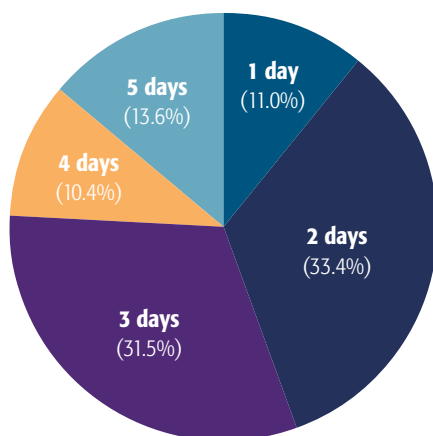
## In a post-vaccine period, would you prefer to work from home? If so, for how many days?

Overall, however, a sizable 63% of respondents said they would prefer to work from home after a COVID vaccine is available, independent of whether their employer asked them to return to a traditional work setting. Among those 63% of respondents, most said they would prefer to work from home either 2 or 3 days per week, with only 14% saying they would rather work from home 5 days per week.

### In a post-vaccine period, would you prefer to work from home?



### If you prefer to work from home in a post-vaccine period, for how many days?



## Conclusion

These survey results make clear that there is significant interest in more widely available work-from-home policies among the current workforce. Early results show:

- Avoiding the commute and a more flexible daily routine are the most appealing aspects of working at home
- Workers need to find ways of remaining socially connected and properly equipped in order for remote work to function in the long-run
- Employees generally report being more productive when working from home, and this sentiment has become stronger over time
- Most workers would prefer to work from home at least 2-3 days a week, although a significant minority would rather come to the workplace every workday

Whether COVID-19 results in a permanent shift in the concentration of remote workers (and thus a shift in commuting patterns) will be determined by how sensitive employers are to employee attitudes expressed in this survey. Pioneer will again survey attitudes toward telecommuting in August to gauge the “stickiness” of these initial results.

