Downtown Denver Commuter Survey 2014: Executive Summary, Methodology, Limitations and Sources

Executive Summary

Two key objectives of the 2007 Downtown Area Plan are to reinforce Downtown Denver's role as the Rocky Mountain region's transportation hub and to expand and improve Downtown Denver's transportation amenities. To this end, each fall, the Downtown Denver Partnership surveys employees working in Downtown Denver to examine the commuting trends and habits of Downtown commuters.

This year, the Partnership received a record 4,962 valid responses to the 2014 Downtown Denver Commuter Survey in September and early October. Transit and driving alone are the two most commonly used ways Downtown Denver commuters travel to work. When asked how they commuted to work on the day of the survey, 43% reported using transit, 38% drove alone, 7% bicycled, 5% carpooled, 5% walked and smaller numbers teleworked, vanpooled, or used a motorcycle, scooter or moped.

Survey respondents have an average one-way commute of 13 miles. Commuters traveling into Downtown Denver use transit more and drive alone less than the average American commuter. The most highly valued employer-provided benefit among Downtown Denver employees is a transit pass, which is also the most commonly provided benefit with 54% of Downtown Denver commuters receiving a fully or partially subsidized transit pass from their employer.

The Downtown Denver Commuter Survey results revealed the following key differences between groups of commuters:

- Commuting habits change with employee age. Younger commuters have shorter commutes and are more likely to walk and bike to work. Transit use increases with age and driving alone peaks when commuters are in their 30s and 40s, especially for women.
- Males and females have different commuting habits. Male commuters are significantly more likely to bike to work, more likely to walk to work, and less likely to drive alone than female commuters.
- Members of car-sharing programs are more likely to walk or bike to work and less likely to drive to work than the average commuter.
- Commuters who live in certain zip codes have unique commuting habits. The top zip code for driving alone to work is 80238, the top zip code for bicycling to work is 80218, and the top zip code for using transit to travel to work is 80110.
- Employer-provided transportation benefits, such as providing a parking spot or transit pass, have a significant effect on employees' commuting habits. Employees who receive a parking benefit are more likely to drive to work and less likely to use transit than the commuting population as a whole.
- Office location affects employees' commuting choices. For example, those who work in the LoDo neighborhood are more likely to drive to work, while those who work Central Platte Valley neighborhood are more likely to use transit to travel to work (See methodology section for a map of Downtown neighborhoods).
- Commute length has a strong effect on the way commuters choose to travel to work. Unsurprising, those with the shortest commutes are more likely to walk or bike to work. Commuters who drive alone have a shorter commute than those who use transit, and commuters who vanpool have the longest commutes.

Methodology

In September and October 2014, Partnership staff distributed the Downtown Denver Commuter Survey through e-newsletters such Skylines; social media outlets like Facebook and Twitter; and through direct emails to top Downtown Denver employers requesting they distribute the Survey to their employees.

With the Downtown Denver employee population estimated at 118,215 employees (as of the end of Q1 2014), the Partnership set out to receive at least 2,364 (2%) valid responses to the Survey.

Researchers at the Partnership received 5,395 completed surveys. Of these completed surveys, 4,962 were valid responses, representing 4.6% of the Downtown Denver employee population. The Partnership counts a survey as valid if the respondent works 20 or more hours per week in Downtown Denver, as defined by the 2007 Downtown Area Plan (DAP). This DAP definition of Downtown Denver includes the following neighborhoods: Auraria, Arapahoe Square, Ballpark, Central Platte Valley (Auraria, Commons and Prospect), Cultural Core, Golden Triangle, and LoDo. While the zip code 80202 covers much of central Downtown Denver, other zip codes are also included in the DAP. Thus, the Partnership conducted a detailed check of respondents' work addresses to determine if the survey was a valid response.

Respondents completed the Survey from September 8th – October 10th, 2014. During this survey time period, the Denver Metro area experienced slightly warmer than average weather with slightly more precipitation than average. The average high during the survey time period was 74°, slightly higher than the historical average high of 70°. The average low was 46°, also higher than the historical average of 42°. A total of 3.15 inches of rain fell during the survey time period, which is more than the historical average. The average total rainfall for the month of September is 1.13 inches and the average total rainfall for the month of October is 1.43 inches (source: wunderground.com).

The average price per gallon of regular conventional retail gasoline in the Denver Metro area during the time of the survey was $3.51. This is lower than the average price during the 2013 survey ($3.67) but higher than the U.S. average (source:eia.gov).

Limitations

While the Downtown Denver Commuter Survey aims to be as objective, reliable and valid as possible, it is not a scientific survey. Limitations include the issue of self-reporting, reliance on only an online survey and the challenge to reach a representative sample of Downtown Denver employees from a variety of organizations. One way the Partnership measures the validity of the Survey is by comparing the demographic information of survey respondents to demographic information from the U.S. Census Bureau's Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics (LEHD) program. The industry and age of survey respondents roughly matches the industry and age of all Downtown Denver employees as reported by the LEHD program. However, the gender of survey respondents (58% female, 42% male) does not match the gender of Downtown Denver workers as a whole (47% female, 53% male). Because gender influences commuting habits, this is a significant limitation of the survey.

However, the fact that Survey results are incredibly stable from year-to-year, despite changes in respondents' employers, helps to validate the Survey's accuracy. While it is not fully generalizable to the commuting population as a whole, the Partnership believes the Survey accurately represents commuting habits of Downtown Denver employees.

Sources

The source for all data in the Downtown Denver Commuter Survey Infographic is the 2014 Downtown Denver Commuter Survey, with one exception. The follow statistic "Downtown Denver commuters are almost 11 times more likely to commute by bike than the average U.S. commuter" was calculated by comparing Commuter Survey data with U.S. Census American Community Survey data.