

The 15-minute city: Urban planning epiphany or 'climate change lockdown' conspiracy?



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The 15-minute city is either an urban-planning epiphany or a totalitarian nightmare, depending on whom you ask.

The concept, credited to a Sorbonne University professor, promotes self-contained communities where residents live, work, shop and play within a radius of 15-minute travel by foot or bicycle.

A new iteration of old demographic ideas [drew attention in 2020](#) as a pillar in the campaign platform of [Anne Hidalgo](#), the mayor of Paris.

Not until this year, though, did the 15-minute city reap its 15 minutes of

global fame. In early 2023, the concept became swept up in a [swirl of conspiracy theories](#). Social media posts warned of citizens being imprisoned in their neighborhoods and separated from their cars, a distinctly un-American prospect.

The societal conversation about 15-minute cities “emerged as part of the COVID experience,” said Lisa Benton-Short, a professor of geography at George Washington University.

During the pandemic lockdown, many Americans abandoned daily commutes and re-centered their lives around their homes. People rediscovered the simple joys of sidewalks and parks.

Three years later, [remote work endures](#), and the 15-minute city feels within reach.

“People want to have all the things they need relatively close by,” said Andrew Rumbach, senior fellow at the Urban Institute. “You should have access to the place you work. You should have access to the place you live. You should have access to parks.”

Long ago, pretty much everyone lived in a 15-minute city because no one had the means to travel farther than a horse or rail car could carry them. Then came the automobile, which liberated people to travel long distances in short order.

“We started to design cities around the needs of cars, rather than the needs of people,” Rumbach said.

Postwar suburbanization in the 1940s and 1950s put people ever farther from their jobs. Newer American cities were shaped by car culture, an ethos that presumed citizens would drive nearly everywhere. Sidewalks fell from favor.

Bike lanes hadn't really been invented.

In the 1980s and 1990s, sensibilities changed. Urban planners realized "there were some real consequences to the ways we were designing and laying out our cities and creating problems with urban sprawl," Benton-Short said.

The goal then became, "Let's get people out of their cars, end automobile dependency," she said.

A New Urbanism movement, launched in the 1980s, proposed redesigning walkable urban neighborhoods with enough homes, offices and shops to sustain them.

Downtown revitalization projects, urban bike lanes, suburban sidewalks and mixed-use developments near public transit hubs all predate the 15-minute city, and all manifest the same goals.

Melbourne, Australia, has adopted "[20-minute neighborhoods](#)," a planning strategy to place all daily needs within a 20-minute trip by foot, bicycle or public transit.

Britain expanded a "[low-traffic neighborhoods](#)" push during the pandemic, using planters and other traffic filters to block cars and encourage walking and cycling.

But low-traffic neighborhoods have sparked [bitter debate](#). As it turns out, British constituents love the idea of favoring bicycles and pedestrians over cars and congestion, except when it affects their driving plans.

"Everybody wants everybody else out of their cars, but they want to be able to use their own," Benton-Short said.

This year, the protests gained global steam and took a dark turn. Conservative commentators and conspiracy theorists became convinced the 15-minute city was "the latest nefarious plot to curtail individual freedoms," The [Associated Press reported](#) in one of several accounts that attempted to fact-check the conspiracy theories.

Protesters envisioned a "[climate change lockdown](#)," with governments barring citizens from driving their cars or leaving their neighborhoods without permission.

"Urban incarceration," [one commenter tweeted](#), while another warned of a coming "[15-minute dystopia](#)."

As with many conspiracy theories, this one leveraged a grain of truth. The low-traffic neighborhood push in Britain did restrict vehicle travel and inconvenience locals. Drivers [faced fines](#) for steering into low-traffic zones.

American cities did much the same thing during COVID with a network of "streeteries," closing roads to traffic and repurposing the pavement for diners and drinkers. Those street closures sparked [some protests](#), but not nearly to the extent reported in Britain.

The pushback against 15-minute cities in America seems rooted in the sanctity of the automobile, "about as close to a secular god as we have in this country," joked Thomas Campanella, a historian of city planning at Cornell University.

While the 15-minute city has become a loaded term, most Americans seem to like the ideas behind it.

"People are overwhelmingly in support of 15-minute cities if you define it for them," said Rachel Kirsch, a senior creative strategist at the consumer site

eBikes.org.

The e-bike group surveyed 1,000 Americans and found 3 in 4 people [would live in a 15-minute city](#).

Another recent survey, by the Rosslyn Business Improvement District in Northern Virginia, found 21 percent of respondents [moved to a 15-minute city](#) during the pandemic, and another 43 percent said they were likely to move to one in the next few years.

Conspiracy theories aside, there are potential downsides to the 15-minute city. One is the danger of runaway gentrification. The more attractive and self-sufficient an urban or suburban neighborhood becomes, the higher property values are likely to climb. A community could succeed at transforming into a 15-minute city and fail at retaining affordable housing for lower-income residents.

"The 15-minute city isn't necessarily an equitable or just city," Benton-Short said.

Even if a 15-minute city is a desirable goal, it isn't always practical.

Many American cities lack sufficient public transportation and infrastructure to support a 15-minute city, Benton-Short said.

"There are vast swaths of this country where the whole idea of a 15-minute city is absurd," Campanella said.

Some modern cities have an incurable case of urban sprawl: shops, restaurants and parks so far-flung and remote that no number of sidewalks and bike lanes will ever connect them.

"It's like saying, 'Why not cornfields in the middle of Manhattan?'"

Campanella said. "It's not gonna happen."