

NEWS



SHUTTERSTOCK

### A NATIONAL AND GLOBAL PHENOMENON

The emergence nationwide of so-called “super-commuters” is redrawing economic geographies, according to a 2012 study by the Rudin Center for Transportation Policy and Management at New York University’s Wagner School of Public Service. The researchers, Mitchell L. Moss and Carson Qing, define a super-commuter as a person who works in the central county of a given metropolitan area but lives beyond the boundaries of that metropolitan area, commuting long distance by air, rail, car, bus or a combination of modes.

A rapidly growing segment of the workforce, super-commuters are mirroring global economic trends, Moss and Qing write. These long-distance travelers are the “new force in transportation.”

As of 2009, Fulton County ranked fourth in the country for incoming super-commuters, with 47,700 traveling into the Atlanta area, or 7.5 percent of the workforce. Atlanta may soon slip from this ranking and be overtaken by cities with faster-growing rates of super-commuters, like L.A., Seattle and Manhattan. Houston ranks first nationwide, with 251,000 or 13.2 percent of the workforce super-commuting, and continues to attract ever more super-commuters.

Super-commuters, the researchers say, “are well positioned to take advantage of higher salaries in one region and lower housing costs in another.”

“The expansion of city labor sheds exemplifies how the economic geography of American cities has evolved in the information age, as cities begin to share labor/commuter sheds and social and economic activities become increasingly inter-regional,” they write.

“Twin” cities used to be 40 miles apart, but now they’re 100 to 200 miles apart, with ever-growing inter-commutes. Labor sheds that extended into the exurbs of a metropolitan region are now spilling into other regions hundreds of miles away.

The trend is global, with far-apart regions increasingly sharing social and economic activity and infrastructure, such as the Pearl River Delta and Yangtze River Delta megalopolises in China, the Rio-São Paulo corridor in Brazil and the Gauteng mega-region in South Africa.

Moss and Qing argue the phenomenon calls for increased economic integration among regions and offers “tremendous opportunities to become more economically competitive through increased coordination in goals, resources and policymaking.”



# Super-commuters soar despite

## ATLANTA AT FOREFRONT OF TREND TOWARD LIV

BY KATJUSA CISAR  
Contributing Writer



Jennifer Silverberg lives in Atlanta but flies each week to her job in Orlando, Fla.

Every Sunday afternoon, Alan Varnson flies from Atlanta to his job as vice president of marketing at the Jackson Hewitt Tax Service headquarters in Parsippany, N.J. He stays all week, then returns on a Friday afternoon flight to his wife, six kids, five dogs and two cats in Buford.

If that sounds glamorous, like the life of the jet-setting protagonist played by George Clooney in “Up in the Air,” think again.

The experiences of real-life air commuters – people who fly to get to and from work – are neither as sexy nor as bleak as “Up in the Air” portrays. Regular, long-distance commuting, as opposed to occasional business travel, requires thrift, compromise and careful coordination with family back home, but those who manage it say they’ve discovered unexpected benefits, like closer bonds with family, better focus at work and career opportunities for spouses.

A recent study (see sidebar) found the Fulton County workforce ranks fourth in the U.S. for so-called “super-commuters,” those who commute from outside the boundaries of the metropolitan area where they’re employed. The Atlanta area is not among the fastest-growing for super-commuting workers, however. Houston leads the trend, with Los Angeles, Seattle, Manhattan and Philadelphia also showing high rates of growth for incoming super-commuters.

Varnson is quick to debunk the notions of glamor in his lifestyle.

“You can always spot another road warrior” at the airport, he said, by the “dull gaze of domestication. You’re dehumanized, like cattle.”

If that dull gaze sounds familiar, you’ve probably seen it on the faces of drivers stuck in rush-hour traffic on Interstate 285.

“A lot of people in Atlanta are commuting an hour each way, each day,” said Jennifer Silverberg, 48. That adds up to at least 10 hours on the road weekly – more time than she spends in total flying Monday mornings to her job at a tech startup near Orlando, myList, and returning Friday evenings to her home in Virginia-Highland. Since she has an apartment across the street from the company, her flights to Florida and back are the extent of her commute.

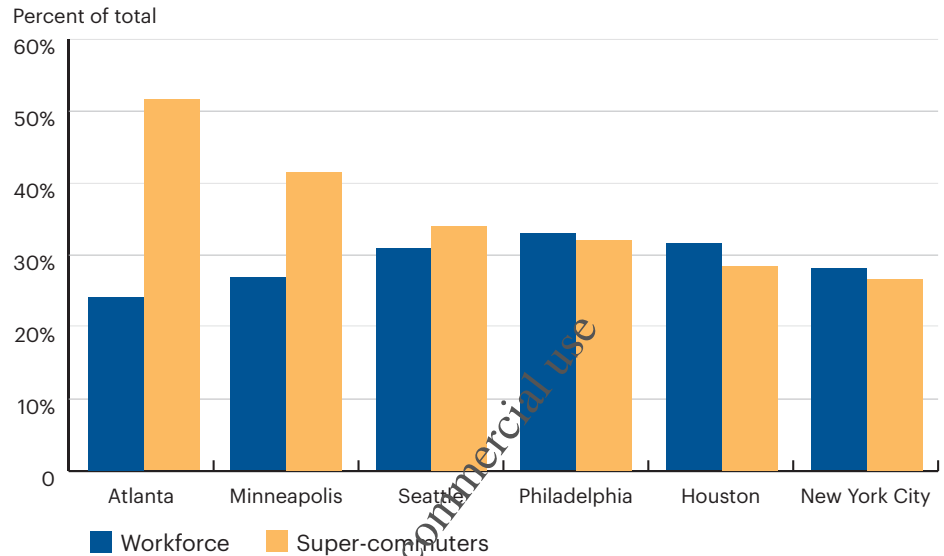
“It takes me four to four and a half hours doorstep to doorstep,” she said. “I’m putting in eight hours, but it’s in big chunks.”

“A relief” is how Lindy Benton, 57, describes her decision three years ago to air-commute from her home in Orlando to Atlanta, where she’s president and CEO of Norcross-based health-care tech company MEA|NEA. Before that, she commuted by car to a job in Tampa – 350 miles closer than Atlanta, but a bigger hassle to get to when she was sitting in traffic.

“I don’t have to deal with traffic jams.

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PERCENT CHANGE IN SHARE OF COUNTY WORKFORCE AND SUPER-COMMUTERS EARNING MORE THAN \$40,000/YEAR CITY COMPARISON 2002-2009



SOURCE: RUDIN CENTER FOR TRANSPORTATION POLICY AND MANAGEMENT AT NEW YORK UNIVERSITY'S WAGNER SCHOOL OF PUBLIC SERVICE



Umashankar Ramasubramanian, left, with his wife, Nandita Godbole, and their daughter. 'Uma' commutes to his job in Los Angeles.

PHOTOS/JOANN VITELLI

# Despite heroic schedules

LIVING IN ONE CITY, WORKING IN ANOTHER, SOMETIMES FAR-AWAY CITY

What I have to deal with is weather," she said. But she's become skilled at avoiding the typical flight delays and cancellations, like a driver who knows when to get off the freeway and take side streets.

"You'll never see me stuck at an airport," she said.

Like Silverberg and Benton, Varnson stays during the week in an apartment. It's a three-minute drive from his workplace. He shares it with his friend and fellow air commuter Mike Williams, who is Jackson Hewitt's chief marketing officer and travels from Nashville. The men, both 50, treat the apartment as a kind of "frat house" for their jobs, Varnson jokes. They talk business constantly, over dinner and workouts, but challenge each other to "cut the umbilical cord" to their iPhones over the weekend when they're home with family.

So why commute cross-country in the first place?

Moving to New Jersey was out of the question when Varnson was hired in his current position about three years ago. It still is.

"My family would fire me and find a new dad if I moved them there," he said. His wife and six kids, ages 12 to 21 and all living at home, have roots in the Atlanta area. Even though Varnson and Williams absorb the cost of their commutes, it's cheaper than relocating. Varnson said his family "couldn't come close to affording a house" in the greater New York City area. A self-described vagabond, Silverberg

has long been accustomed to business travel. She even passed the train down to her adult daughter, a professional cellist who tours the country from their shared home base in Atlanta.

**47,700**

The number of super-commuters traveling into Atlanta.

But when Silverberg was hired at my list two and a half years ago, it was quickly obvious that working remotely, with occasional trips to Florida, wouldn't cut it. The startup phase of a company is intensive, and there's a limit to how much of it can be done practically via conference calls, she said. The company valued her on-site presence enough take into account her travel expenses as part of the overall cost of hiring her.

The benefits of her commute go beyond practicality. Living in two distinct regions, instead of just popping in and out for visits, has given Silverberg valuable insights as a marketer into regional cultural differences.

"I don't just hear about them, I experience them," she said. "What I've found is I'm a better marketer now."

She's also done some cross-regional pollination, soaking up Orlando's active lifestyle and bringing Atlanta's tennis culture to Orlando by starting up a little tennis club. Without much of a social life in Orlando to distract her, she's also had

time to develop a popular health and fitness blog, Eat Yourself Well.

For Umashankar Ramasubramanian, 44, who goes by Uma, the reasons are complex for his long-term (but temporary) split life between his family home in Roswell and his work home near Los Angeles. When the University of California at Riverside hired Uma as senior campus planner in 2010, his wife, Nandita Godbole, 42, and their then-7-year-old daughter initially planned to follow him to the West Coast.

But as they were preparing to move, Godbole's artisanal, small-scale catering business, Curry Cravings, started taking off in Atlanta, and it didn't make sense to abandon it just as she was building a loyal customer base.

It's no coincidence that Curry Cravings took off quickly when Uma started spending three weeks at a time away from home. "She had more time to focus on what she needed to do," he said of his wife. Now Godbole even has a Kickstarter-funded cookbook on the way. She's also been cultivating a customer base in the L.A. area during trips to visit her husband - with an eye toward hitting the ground running when she and their daughter eventually join Uma in L.A., probably later this year or in 2015.

Godbole is used to the uncomprehending reactions she gets to her unusual family living situation. "You must be so relieved," girlfriends told her at first, imagining a carefree, husband-free home

with fewer chores and more time for mid-day glasses of wine. "Have a glass of wine for me," Godbole told them. "I have work to do."

Their daughter was confused in the beginning, too, asking, "Are you guys getting divorced?"

"That was really hard on a 7-year-old. How do we make a child understand? It was a tricky few weeks," Godbole said.

Now she's proud of how she and Uma are showing the girl firsthand that two spouses can pursue their dream jobs, support each other and stay a strong family.

Uma said the last few years of long-distance commuting have actually improved the time he spends at home, a sentiment echoed by other air commuters.

"We've started to value the time more than when we were all under one roof. We invest more into ourselves now," Uma said.

For Benton, long-distance commuting is only possible with the support of her significant other, so the couple plans their weekends ahead - and they honor this time together.

"It's something we hold sacred," she said.

Time together is a commodity, Varnson said: "Thirty years ago people wanted adventure and travel. Now people want more time." The 48 hours he spends at home each week are special. "We look at it as a two-day vacation every week." **Z**