

## TRANSPORTATION CONFERENCE 2026

### REVEALING PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARD CONGESTION IN WELLINGTON CITY

(This paper has been peer reviewed)

Dr Rajan Ghosh (Presenter)  
Senior Advisor – Transport Strategy  
Wellington City Council, Wellington, New Zealand.  
Email: rajan.ghosh@wcc.govt.nz

Joe Hewitt  
Manager, City Insights  
Wellington City Council, Wellington, New Zealand.  
Email: joe.hewitt@wcc.govt.nz

### ABSTRACT

Traffic congestion is one of the most pressing urban transport challenges impacting travel time, economic productivity, and quality of life. In cities like Wellington, where geography and infrastructure constraints limit road expansion, understanding peoples' behaviours and exploring demand-side interventions are necessary for developing effective solutions.

Research from the Pōneke Transport Survey 2025 explored Wellingtonians' travel behaviours and attitudes towards congestion and the concept of congestion charging in the absence of a scheme proposal. The analysis shows more than two thirds of respondents identified congestion as a problem during weekday peak hours (7am–9am and 4pm–6pm). Among those travelling in the morning peak, more than four out of five respondents reported the main trip purposes were commuting to/from work. Nearly one in ten reported attending education institutions. For all these trips, more than one third reported private vehicles as the main mode followed by one third by public transport and nearly one third by active modes.

When asked about supporting a congestion charge to reduce travel times, nearly half of all respondents opposed the idea compared to a third supported paying a charge. Among those willing to pay, most were only comfortable to pay a very small charge per trip. Only a small proportion indicated they would switch modes to public transport or active transport in response to a congestion charge.

These findings suggest a strong public recognition of congestion as an issue but a limited willingness to pay a congestion charge and a lack of willingness or ability to change travel modes. These findings highlight the importance of further investigation into behavioural incentives and exploring demand-side interventions to inform policy development and any future congestion management in Wellington City.

# 1. INTRODUCTION

Traffic congestion is one of the most pressing urban transport challenges, influencing travel time, economic productivity, environmental health, and the daily experiences of residents and commuters (Choudhary et al. 2022). In Wellington City, the issue is further intensified by unique geographic and infrastructure constraints. The city’s compact urban form, narrow transport corridors, limited alternative route options, and reliance on a constrained state highway network make large-scale road expansion difficult. As a result, supply-side solutions, such as building new roads or widening existing ones, and other large-scale multimodal expansions, may not be feasible to address increasing traffic demand.

Travel behaviour and public attitudes play a critical role in shaping the effectiveness of any congestion management strategy (Banister, 2008; Schuitema et al., 2010). Understanding how people choose to travel, the purposes of their trips, and their perceptions of congestion can provide valuable insights into the opportunities and barriers for change. Demand-side interventions, including pricing measures such as congestion charging, aim to influence travel decisions by encouraging a shift in travel time, mode choice, or destination (Ministry of Transport et al. 2020). The success of such interventions depends on both the availability of viable transport alternatives and the level of public acceptance.

In early 2025, the New Zealand Government was proposing a Time of Use Charging Bill, which is now an Act (New Zealand Parliament 2025). Therefore, it is timely to explore this topic in the context of Wellington City. This paper presents findings from the Pōneke Transport Survey 2025, focusing on the extent to which Wellingtonians perceive congestion as a problem and their attitudes toward the possibility of supporting congestion charging as a possible demand-management approach.

# 2. METHODOLOGY OVERVIEW

Data used in this report was collected through the Pōneke Transport Survey (PTS), which is a 10– to 15–minute online survey initiated and managed by Wellington City Council since early 2023. This research protocol has been reviewed and approved by the Aotearoa Research Ethics Committee (Reference: AREC23\_03; April 2023).

PTS data is collected three times a year: wave 1 through a market research company in April–May, wave 2 via the Wellington City Council (WCC) research panel in July–August, and wave 3 through social media in September–November. For this report, all three waves of 2025 data were used. The survey was conducted using the online survey software Voxco.

The target participants for PTS were adults aged 18 years or older residing in Wellington City. Individuals were excluded from analysis if they did not provide consent, were under 18 years of age, lived outside Wellington City, or did not complete the survey (Figure 1).

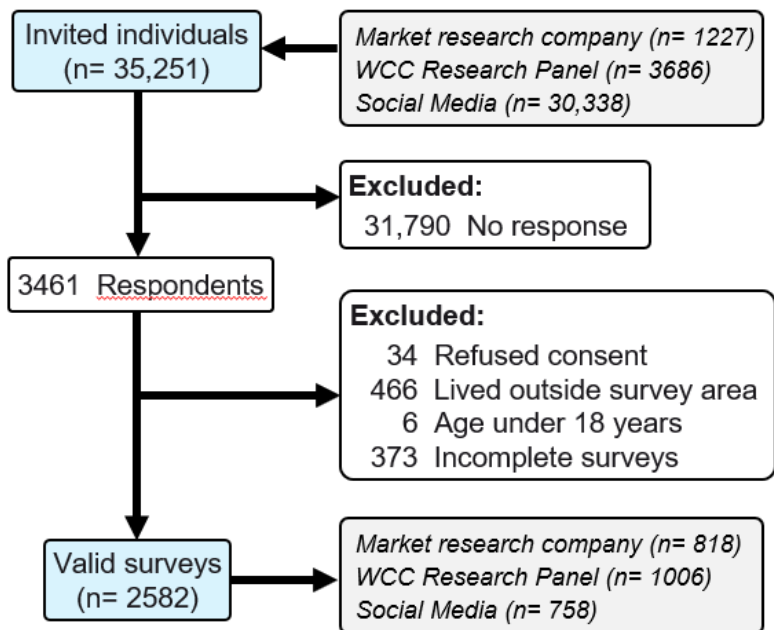


Figure 1. Participants selection flowchart

The congestion section of the survey was designed to gather insights into respondents’:

- socio-demographic characteristics;
- perceptions of traffic congestion within Wellington City;
- primary mode of travel during weekday mornings;
- main purpose of their trips during weekday mornings;
- attitudes towards congestion charging; and
- likely behavioural responses to a congestion charge.

### 2.1 Data analysis

Data was analysed using descriptive statistics for the overall sample of valid respondents to each survey question. Data related to respondents’ agreement or level of support were collected on a 5-point Likert scale (‘strongly agree’ to ‘strongly disagree’ for agreement; ‘strongly support’ to ‘strongly oppose’ to the level of support) with an additional ‘I don’t know’ category. For certain analyses, these data were recoded into 4-category variables (‘agree’, ‘neutral’, ‘disagree’, and ‘I don’t know’ for agreement; ‘support’, ‘neutral’, ‘oppose’, and ‘I don’t know’ for level of support). All analyses were performed using SPSS Version 29.0 in November 2025.

## 3. RESPONDENTS’ SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

The results presented in this report are based on the analysis of responses from 2582 respondents. However, sample sizes vary across different sub-sections depending on the number of responses to each question.

In this sample, 55% were female; 42% were young adults between 18 to 39 years of age; 71% were New Zealand European; and 8% were Māori (Figure 2).

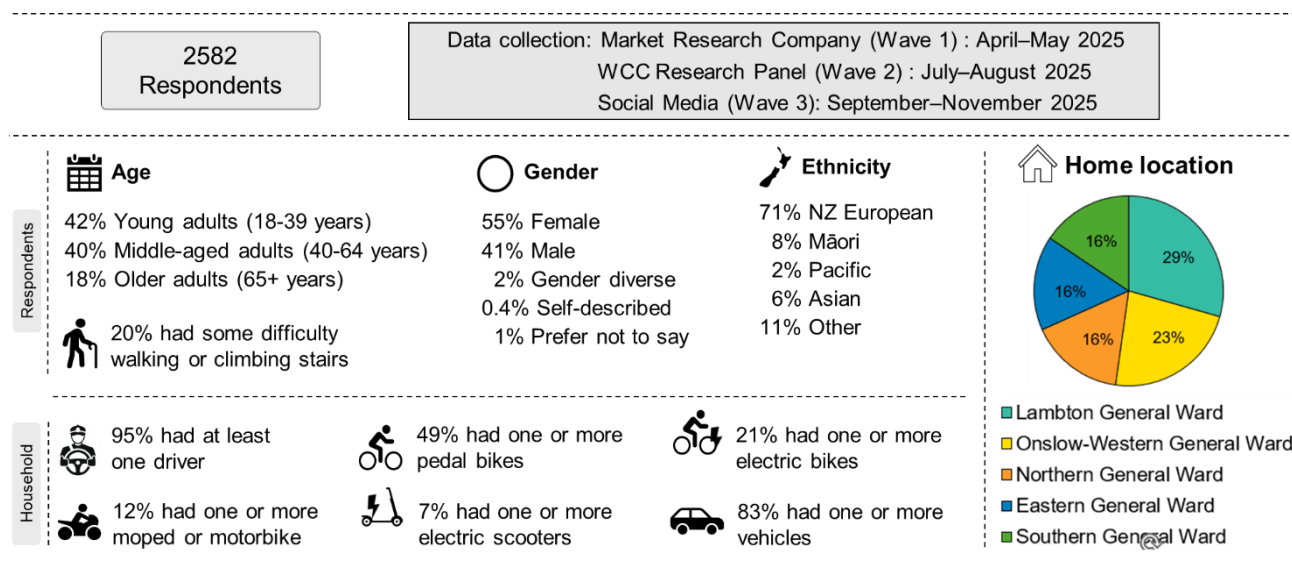


Figure 2. Socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1 Perception of congestion in Wellington City

The survey participants were asked if congestion is a problem in Wellington City. Analysis shows that:

- Over two thirds of respondents indicated that congestion is a problem during weekday peak periods (7am–9am and 4pm–6pm) (Figure 3).
- Nearly half of respondents reported that congestion is a problem during weekends middays (11am–3pm).

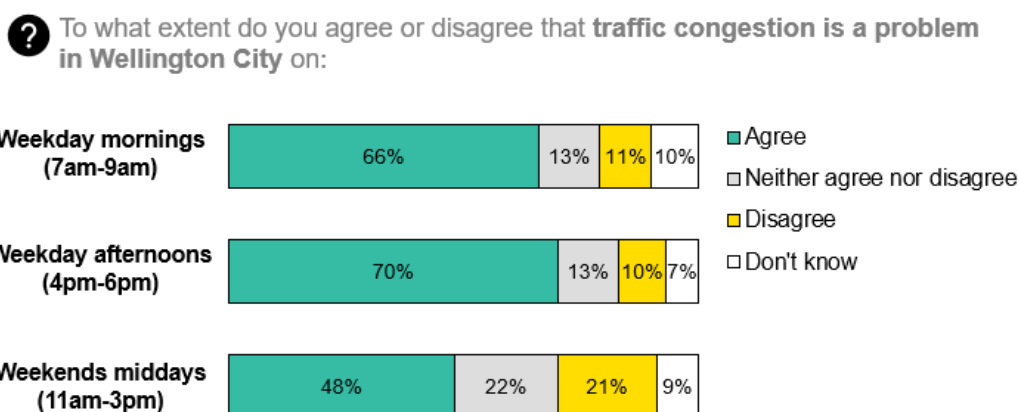


Figure 3. Level of agreement that congestion as a problem in Wellington City during weekdays and weekends peak periods

### 4.2 Wellingtonians’ travel behaviors

Approximately two thirds of respondents reported that they usually travel during weekday mornings between 7am-9am. The survey took the opportunity to explore respondents’ primary trip purposes and the modes of transport used for those trips.

#### 4.2.1 Primary purposes of the trips

- Among those people who travelled during weekday morning peak periods, the majority were mainly travelling for work purposes, accounting for 85% of trips (Figure 4).
- Nearly one in 10 respondents reported their trip purpose was travel to education and only 4% reported their trip purposes were for leisure activities or shopping.

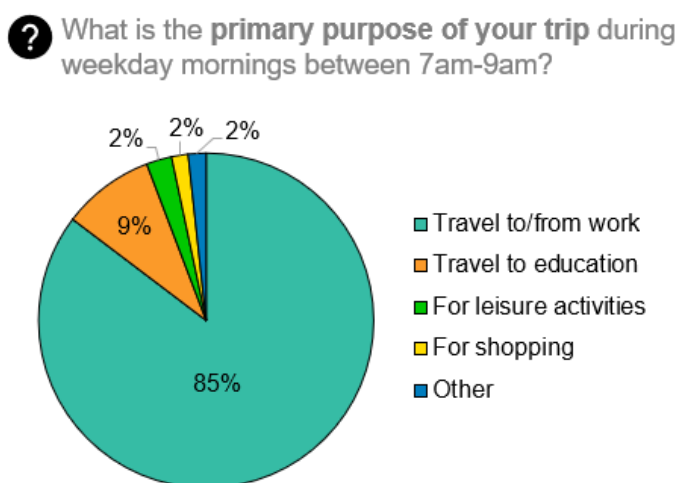


Figure 4. Primary purposes of the trips

### 4.2.2 Primary modes of travel

- Results show that many of the weekday morning peak travelers used either private vehicles (29% mainly driving themselves) or public transport (29% mostly using buses) as their primary modes of travel (Figure 5).
- Nearly one third of respondents travelled by active modes, mainly on foot (17%) followed by e-bike (7%) or pedal bike (7%).

❓ What is your **primary travel mode** during weekday mornings between 7am-9am?



Figure 5. Primary modes of travel

### 4.3 Attitudes toward congestion charging

The survey sought to provide some basic understanding of Wellingtonians’ attitudes towards the concept of congestion charging in the absence of a scheme proposal.

#### 4.3.1 Supporting a congestion charge for reducing travel time

When asked about supporting a congestion charge to reduce the travel time, around half of the respondents opposed that idea whereas a third expressed support (Figure 6).

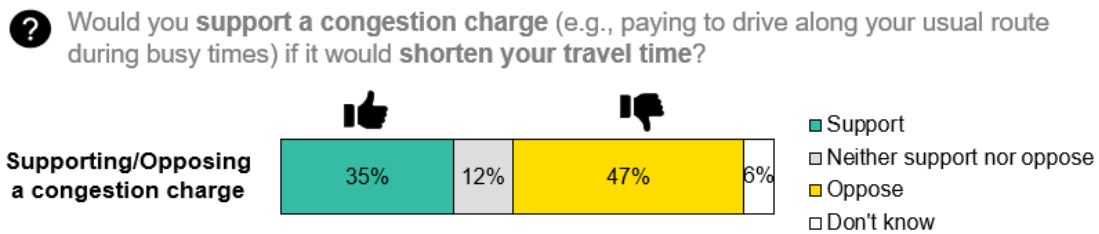


Figure 6. Opinions about supporting a congestion charge to shorten the travel time

When the analysis was done based on different travel mode users, distinct differences in attitudes toward congestion charging emerged. Results show that:

- More than two thirds of regular<sup>1</sup> private vehicle users opposed the idea of a congestion charge to shorten their travel time (Figure 7).
- Nearly half of regular public transport users opposed the idea of a congestion charge.
- Regular walkers were more evenly divided, with similar proportions expressing support for and opposition to a congestion charge.
- Over two thirds of regular cyclists supported the idea of a congestion charge to shorten the travel time.

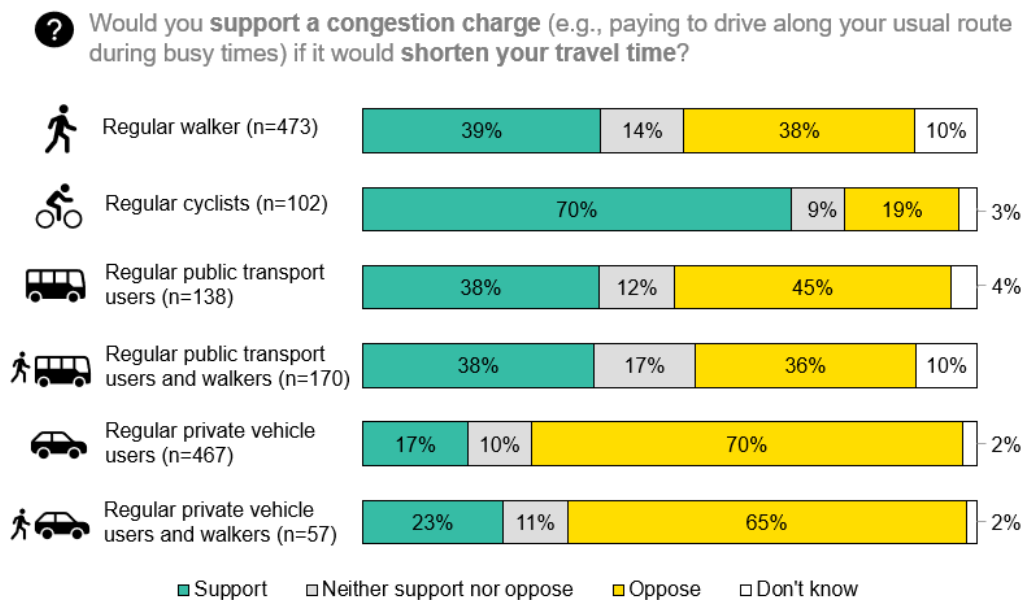


Figure 7. Opinions about supporting a congestion charge by different mode user groups

<sup>1</sup> Regular mode users refer to respondents who used a particular travel mode (walk, cycle, public transport, and private vehicle) five or more days per week and reported using all other modes less frequently. In addition to these four user groups, people who used a combination of two modes five or more days per week and reported using all other modes less frequently also referred as regular mode users.

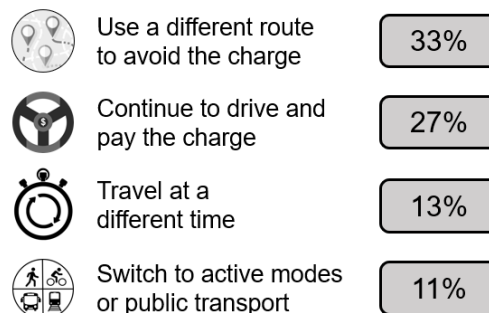
### 4.3.2 Likely responses to a congestion charge

The survey asked the private vehicle users what they would most likely do if a congestion charge was implemented along part of their usual route during weekday mornings peak periods.

The analysis shows:

- One third of the respondents preferred to use a different route to avoid the charge (Figure 8)
- More than a quarter were willing to drive and pay the charge. Among those willing to pay, 41% were comfortable paying \$5 or less per trip and a quarter reported 'don't know'.
- Only one in 10 respondents reported that they would either travel at a different time or switch to active or public transport.

**?** If a congestion charge was implemented along part of your usual route during weekday mornings between 7am-9am, what would you most likely do?



Note: Responses that are 10% and more have been presented in this figure.

Figure 8. Likely responses to a congestion charge by private vehicle users

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The findings reveal strong public recognition of congestion as a problem during weekdays and weekends peak periods in Wellington City. However, there is limited willingness to support pricing mechanisms such as congestion charging, particularly among private vehicle users. The results also show limited willingness or ability to change travel modes.

These findings highlight the importance of further investigation into behavioural incentives and exploring demand-side interventions to inform policy development and any future congestion management in Wellington City.

## 6. LIMITATIONS

Limitations of this research and findings presented in this report need to be acknowledged. The main limitations include the potential risk of bias due to participants' self-selection to complete this survey based on their interests, potential non-participation of residents who were not native English speakers due to a language barrier, and inability of people with visual and hearing impairments to contribute their views to this survey.

Another limitation is that the survey did not ask about the scale of congestion in Wellington City, so the results do not indicate whether respondents view congestion as a major or minor problem. Future research could consider this aspect.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors thank the research participants for sharing their views. The authors also acknowledge the Wellington City Council's Transport Strategy Team, Research and Evaluation Team, and Social Media Team for their input and support in designing the survey questions and data collection.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Dr Rajan Ghosh led the data analysis, interpretation, and drafting of the paper. Joe Hewitt reviewed the paper. Both authors contributed to the conceptual framework.

## REFERENCES

BANISTER, D. (2008). The sustainable mobility paradigm. *Transport Policy*, 15(2), 73–80.

CHOUDHARY A., et al. (2022). Urban traffic congestion: its causes-consequences-mitigation, *Research Journal of Chemistry and Environment*, 26(12), p.164-176.

Ministry of Transport et al. (2020). *The Congestion Question: Technical Report*, July 2020, p.139.

New Zealand Parliament. (2025). *Land Transport Management (Time of Use Charging) Amendment Bill*, November 2025.

Schuitema, G., et al. (2010). Explaining differences in acceptability before and acceptance after the implementation of a congestion charge in Stockholm. *Transportation Research Part A*, 44(2), 99–109.