

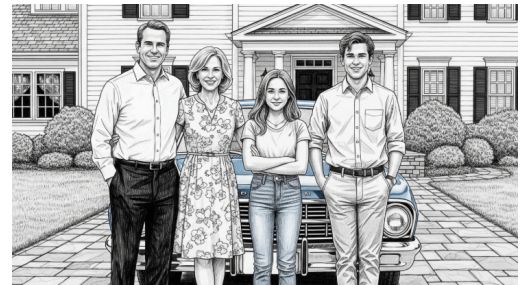


Beyond Transportation: How Car Culture Defines Modern American Life

(Advanced, C-Level)

Marc Franco

Car culture fundamentally defines how Americans live, work, and interact with their communities. With 92% of American households owning at least one car (Valentine), automobiles are the backbone of American lifestyle and identity. Owning a car can create a significant financial burden in the form of fuel, monthly car payments and insurance, and maintenance.



Nonetheless, it is difficult for many Americans to imagine not having a car. Without a car, a typical 15-minute suburban trip becomes a 2.5-hour journey by walking or public transit, making car ownership practically mandatory for most Americans. In addition, Approximately 78% of workers drive alone to work (Schaeffer) and spend an average 60 minutes commuting to jobs that are an average of 30 miles away.

Drive-through culture also exemplifies this car-centric lifestyle. Drive-through restaurants recovered much faster during COVID-19, with visits only 4% down compared to 48% down for non-drive-through establishments (Mishram, Chopra, and Stamatopoulos). Americans also embrace road trips as a cultural tradition, with 75% planning road trips each summer (Summer Travel Survey) and 80% taking road trips in 2022 (AutoNation).

Suburban Living Patterns and Car Dependence

Suburban living patterns reinforce car dependence. Fifty-two percent of Americans live in suburban areas specifically designed around car ownership. This suburban growth, which nearly doubled to 74 million residents between 1950-1970, created communities where cars are essential for accessing jobs, schools, shopping, and social activities.

Most population growth in recent years has occurred in auto-oriented suburbs and exurbs (NewGeography). On average, rural residents drive about 10 more miles per day than those in cities, while suburban residents drive 3–4 more miles daily than urban dwellers (DOE). In sum, most Americans live in communities where car ownership is more than an optional luxury. It is a necessity for basic daily functioning.



Cars as Symbols of Identity

Beyond transportation, cars function as status symbols and expressions of personal identity. The United States has one of the world's highest car ownership rates(Who Owns the Most) with approximately 860 motor vehicles per 1,000 people. The car Americans drive signal wealth and success (i.e., driving luxury cars, large SUVs, high-end sports cars), rugged individualism (i.e., driving pickup trucks, off-road SUVs or all-terrain vehicles), or lower status (i.e., driving sedans, minivans, aging vehicles).

Essentially, cars embody core American values of independence, freedom, and individual achievement. As a result, not being able to afford a luxury car or rugged vehicle can feel to many Americans like a personal failure. It may feel like a reminder that they are somehow falling short (Klochikhin). In many parts of the U.S., especially outside urban centers, a car is not only transportation but also part of one's identity.

Read it online at <https://snaplanguage.io/passages/c/car-culture-and-modern-american-life-page-1>

Comprehension Questions

Answer the following questions based on the passage. (See "Answer Key" for the answers.)

1. What is the central point of the passage?
 - a. Although maintaining a car is expensive, most Americans will do what it takes to own a car.
 - b. Deeply embedded in American life, car culture shapes not only how people get around but also how they live, work, and see themselves.
 - c. The majority of Americans own cars in the United States, particularly those living outside city centers.Cars are cheap in the United States.
2. According to the passage, what percentage of American households own at least one car?
 - a. 75%
 - b. 78%
 - c. 92%
3. What does the passage suggest about drive-through culture during COVID-19?
 - a. Drive-through restaurants recovered much faster than non-drive-through establishments.
 - b. Drive-through restaurants suffered more than traditional restaurants.
 - c. Drive-through restaurants were completely unaffected by the pandemic.



4. Based on the passage, why is car ownership “practically mandatory” for most Americans?
 - a. Public transportation is completely unavailable in American suburbs.
 - b. Cars are required in most large American cities.
 - c. Without a car, simple trips become extremely time-consuming and impractical.
5. What can be inferred about the relationship between suburban design and car dependence?
 - a. Suburban areas were inadvertently designed in a way that requires cars.
 - b. Suburban communities were intentionally planned around car ownership, creating a cycle of dependence.
 - c. Suburban design played a small role in car dependence because people chose to live far from urban areas.
6. How does Franco present cars as status symbols to support the main argument about American car culture?
 - a. The author argues that status symbols are harmful to American society.
 - b. The author shows that cars are purely functional tools with no symbolic meaning.
 - c. The author demonstrates that car choices reflect core American values and personal identity.
7. Evaluate the author's use of statistics throughout the passage. What is the primary effect of these numerical details on the overall argument?
 - a. The statistics are used mainly for entertainment value rather than supporting the argument.
 - b. The statistics are used to create a sense that there is something very wrong with the way Americans use their cars.
 - c. The statistics provide concrete evidence that transforms abstract claims about car culture into measurable, undeniable realities.
8. How do suburban living patterns reinforce car dependence?
 - a. Suburbs are built in ways that require driving to reach jobs, schools, and shops.
 - b. Suburbs provide many public transportation options to reduce car use.
 - c. Suburban neighborhoods are designed to support walking and biking over driving.
9. Which of the following details does Franco provide to show how car culture is reflected in everyday American life?
 - a. The popularity of walkable city centers.
 - b. The use of drive-throughs and road trips as common activities.
 - c. The decline of all road travel since 2020.
10. What tone does Franco use in the passage?
 - a. Franco uses a neutral tone to present facts and statistics to the reader.
 - b. Franco uses a persuasive tone to convince readers that car culture is harmful.
 - c. Franco uses a critical tone to highlight the negative effects of American car culture.



Vocabulary Lesson and Quiz

Key Vocabulary List

1. **ATV** /,ei ti 'vi:/ (noun) • abbreviation for all-terrain vehicle, a small motor vehicle designed for off-road use. Examples:
He rode his **ATV** through the forest trails all weekend.
The farm uses **ATVs** to navigate the rough landscape quickly.
2. **backbone** /'bæk,bəʊn/ (noun) • the main support of something; a central or fundamental part; also, courage or strength of character. Examples
The **backbone** of the company is its dedicated employees.
It takes a strong **backbone** to stand up for what you believe in.
3. **burden** /'bɜ:rdn/ (noun) • a heavy load, especially a difficult responsibility or hardship. Examples
She felt the **burden** of caring for her elderly parents every day.
Financial **burdens** can make life stressful.
4. **commute** /kə'mju:t/ (verb) • to travel regularly between home and work or school. Examples
Many people **commute** to the city by train every morning.
I listen to podcasts when I **commute** to and from work.
5. **embrace** /ɪm'breɪs/ (verb) • to accept or support something willingly and enthusiastically; to hold someone closely in your arms. Examples
The community **embraced** the new cultural festival with excitement.
She **embraced** her friend after years apart.
6. **exemplify** /ɪg'zemplə,fai/ (verb) • to be a perfect example of something; to illustrate or clarify by giving an example. Examples
Her leadership style **exemplifies** patience and kindness.
The building **exemplifies** modern architecture.
7. **exurb** /'eksɜ:rb/ (noun) • a district outside a city, usually beyond the suburbs, often inhabited by wealthier residents. Examples
Many families moved to the **exurb** to enjoy more space and nature.
The **exurb** is known for its quiet streets and large houses.



8. **fall short** /fɔ:l ʃɔ:rt/ (phrasal verb) • to fail to reach a goal or expectation. Examples

The team's performance **fell short** of what the coach expected.

Despite his efforts, the project fell short of the deadline.

9. **luxury** /'lʌkʃəri/ (noun) • something expensive or rare that gives great comfort or pleasure; great comfort or elegance. Examples

They stayed in a **luxury** hotel by the beach.

Having time to relax is a **luxury** in a busy life.

10. **mandatory** /'mændətɔ:ri/ (adjective) • required by law or rules; compulsory. Examples

Wearing a seatbelt is **mandatory** in most countries.

The company holds **mandatory** training sessions every year.

11. **rugged** /'rʌɡɪd/ (adjective) • having a rough, uneven surface; strong and durable; tough in character. Examples

The hikers prepared for the **rugged** mountain terrain.

His **rugged** looks make him seem a bit intimidating, but he's actually a very gentle man.

12. **status symbol** /'steɪtəs 'sɪmbəl/ (noun) • an object or possession that shows someone's social or economic status. Examples

Driving a luxury car is often seen as a **status symbol**.

For some, owning expensive watches is a **status symbol**.

13. **SUV** /,ɛs ju 'vi:/ (noun) • abbreviation for sports utility vehicle, a large vehicle designed for both on-road and off-road driving. Examples

Families often choose an **SUV** for its space and safety features.

The **SUV** handled the snowy roads with ease.



Vocabulary Quiz

Complete each sentence using one of the words in the vocabulary list.

backbone • burden • commute • embrace • exemplify • exurb •
fall short • luxury • rugged • status symbol

1. For many, owning a high-end car is seen as a _____ that shows personal success.
2. Drive-through restaurants _____ the American preference for convenience and car access.
3. Despite efforts to reduce emissions, many new policies _____ of achieving real environmental change.
4. Owning a car represents a significant financial _____ for low-income Americans.
5. Some older people find it difficult to _____ new technologies because they are used to doing things a certain way.
6. Off-road vehicles are designed for _____ terrain, where regular cars might not perform well.
7. The interstate highway system is often considered the _____ of the country's transportation infrastructure.
8. Having two or more vehicles in a household was once considered a rare _____.
9. Many Americans _____ long distances every day to get from their suburban homes to city jobs.
10. An _____ is a residential area located far outside a city, often requiring car travel for daily needs.



Answer Key

Reading Comprehension

1. b
2. c
3. a
4. c
5. b
6. c
7. c
8. a
9. b
10. a

Vocabulary Quiz

1. status symbol
2. exemplify
3. *(3 possible answers)* fall short, have fallen short, or fell short
4. burden
5. embrace
6. rugged
7. backbone
8. luxury
9. commute
10. exurb

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