Paris's parking policy for healthier cities

Paris's policy adjustment in February, 2024, aimed at curbing the influx of large high-emission vehicles into its urban core by escalating parking fees for non-residents, embodies a sophisticated blend of urban planning, environmental quality efforts, climate action, and public health policy. This move is a nuanced approach to discourage the use of vehicles that disproportionately contribute to urban air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions. The initiative supports sustainable urban mobility, resonating with a wider European endeavour to minimise car dependency within cities.[1]

This policy intervention draws attention to the increasing trend of vehicle upsizing, with sport utility vehicles (SUVs) emerging as a particular concern because of their substantial environmental, climate, and, hence, health footprints. In Paris, transportation accounts for around 30% of greenhouse gas emissions,[2] with private vehicles, particularly diesel and petrol-powered SUVs, being major contributors. As vehicles grow in size, their emissions and fuel consumption escalate correspondingly, exacerbating urban pollution and contributing to climate change. Data indicate that the average size of an SUV has expanded, with some models now mirroring the dimensions of small tanks, exacerbating their unsustainability. For instance, the average carbon dioxide (CO_2) emissions from new cars registered in 2020 were substantially higher for SUVs, at approximately 134 g/km, which was 13 g higher than the average emissions of other new petrol cars.[3]

This shift towards larger vehicles is driven by a complex interplay of commercial interests and consumer preferences, with automotive manufacturers reaping higher profit margins from sales of SUVs.[4] This trend is alarming because of the clear evidence linking vehicle emissions to clinically significant health risks, including respiratory and cardiovascular diseases. For instance, SUVs have been associated with greater injury severity than regular sized cars, particularly regarding head injuries, because on collision with a cyclist, the cyclist is more likely to be thrown to the ground and subsequently further injured by other cars.[5] Additionally, outdoor air pollution, to which vehicle emissions are a major contributor, is recognised as a leading environmental risk factor, responsible for millions of premature deaths globally.[6]

By making it more costly for non-residents to park SUVs and similar high-emission vehicles, the city of Paris is aiming to deter their use and promotes a shift towards smaller cars or use of public transport. This approach is informed by a broader vision of sustainable urban mobility that prioritises active transportation modes, such as walking and cycling, aligning with the 15-minute city concept.[7] This model proposes a reconfiguration of urban spaces to ensure that residents can access essential services within a short walk or bicycle ride from their homes, thereby reducing the need for car travel and its associated environmental burden.

The implications of such policies extend beyond environmental sustainability to encompass substantial public health benefits. Studies have shown that reducing vehicle emissions can lead to notable improvements in air quality, with consequential reductions in morbidity and mortality from air pollution-related diseases.[8] Furthermore, promoting active transportation contributes to physical health benefits, including reduced obesity rates and improved mental wellbeing, enhancing the overall quality of life for urban residents.[8]

Paris's initiative also reflects a growing recognition of the need to address the climate crisis through urban policy measures. The role of cities in the climate agenda is well recognised and, for the first time, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change is producing a dedicated special report on climate change and cities as part of an upcoming assessment report.[9]

The transportation sector is a major source of CO_2 emissions and cities are on the frontline of efforts to transition society towards low-carbon mobility solutions. The move to restrict high-emission vehicles from central urban areas is a crucial step in this direction, signalling a shift towards more sustainable, health-promoting urban environments. Moreover, the policy is indicative of a broader trend in urban governance that seeks to reclaim city spaces for people rather than cars, fostering more liveable, vibrant, and healthy urban landscapes.

In addition to environmental and health outcomes, the policy adjustment underscores the importance of liveability as a crucial dimension of urban sustainability. By reducing the dominance of cars in the city centre, Paris is enhancing the accessibility and enjoyment of public

spaces, contributing to a more pleasant urban experience for both residents and visitors. This transformation supports the development of communities that are not only ecologically sustainable but also socially inclusive and economically vibrant, aligning with compact city principles.[10]

The Parisian policy could serve as a model for other cities grappling with similar challenges of pollution, congestion, and unsustainable urban growth. It demonstrates the potential of targeted policy interventions to influence consumer behaviour and automotive industry trends, encouraging a shift towards smaller, more efficient, and possibly electric public and active transportation. As such, it contributes to the broader discourse on sustainable urban development, highlighting the interconnectedness of environmental quality, climate crisis, public health, and urban liveability.

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