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Do Cities Have Too Much Parking?



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Urban land is a limited resource, and allocating it to infrastructure devoted to storing motor vehicles — parking — reduces the amount of space available for other priorities, including housing, economic development, and green space. This issue brief synthesizes research on the large share of land devoted to parking in urban areas, the large share of parking spaces that go unused, and the role of minimum parking requirements in creating this oversupply of parking. Eliminating minimum parking requirements can curb excess parking supply and give cities greater flexibility to allow more space to be dedicated to land uses that support their other goals.

Key Research Findings

1. Parking consumes a substantial share of urban land.

Research consistently finds that large portions of cities are devoted to parking. Studies using assessor data, curb inventories, and minimum parking requirement records estimate that parking covers about 14% of incorporated land in Los Angeles County, 10% in the Phoenix metropolitan area, and 8% in the San Francisco Bay Area, with far higher shares in some areas, such as central business districts.^{1,2,3} For example, parking consumes about 40–44% of land in several Bay Area downtowns and industrial zones.² Other methods using aerial imagery find similar patterns: parking lots alone cover about 5% of urban land in four Upper Great Lakes states and 7% in Tippecanoe County, Indiana, even when excluding driveways, garages, and on-street spaces.^{4,5} More recent research uses machine-learning analysis of satellite imagery to measure parking at larger scales; analyzing 15 cities, one such study found that off-street surface parking occupies between 3–11% of taxable land citywide and between 2–32% within central business districts.⁶



Parking lots occupying a large share of urban land near downtown Walnut Creek, California.

Source: Google Maps © 2026 Airbus, Maxar Technologies, Vexcel Imaging US, Inc., Map data © 2026.

2. Minimum parking requirements are a major reason why so much parking is built.

Zoning codes across the United States require each new building and business to provide a minimum number of off-street parking spaces. These mandates are often binding, meaning they require developers to build more parking than they would voluntarily provide. Several types of evidence point to the binding nature of the requirements: Developers frequently seek variances or exemptions that allow them to provide less parking, many projects build exactly the required number of spaces, and when parking requirements are reduced in a given place, the amount of parking provided falls as well.

Studies comparing required parking with actual provision show that minimums were likely binding for about two-thirds of office

and industrial developments in Los Angeles County. These analyses also suggested that reducing minimum parking requirements for office buildings to the lowest requirement in Los Angeles County (two spaces per 1,000 square feet) could have resulted in 50 acres less parking, or 6,226 fewer spaces, for the 249 office developments in the sample.⁷ Studies from Los Angeles, Seattle, London, and New York City show that minimum parking requirements often constrain housing near transit and in dense urban areas, where building parking is costly.^{8, 9, 10, 11}

Evidence from cities that removed parking minimums suggests that requirements likely inflated the overall parking supply, as new developments generally built less parking after the requirements were lifted. Minimums do not bind in every case — developers sometimes provide more parking than required — but overall, the evidence shows that parking requirements frequently compel developers to build more parking than they otherwise would.

3. Many parking spaces are unused, even at peak hours.

Although parking is usually free to drivers, numerous studies across different building types show that much of the supply sits mostly empty. Researchers have compared the number of cars parked during the busiest time of day with the number of off-street parking spaces across a wide range of sites, including: shopping centers along transit routes, suburban office buildings, mixed-use districts, transit-oriented developments, apartments near suburban rail stations, affordable housing developments, and residential garages. Even where minimum parking requirements were reduced, studies consistently found far more parking than needed. Occupancy ranged from 28–78% across studies at various U.S. sites.^{5, 12}

Other studies indicating underuse considered vehicle ownership data relative to parking supply or the share of zero-vehicle households with a bundled parking space included in their rent. In the United States, 73% of renter households with no vehicle still have a bundled parking space included with their rent, and in Australia, 65% of zero-vehicle households have a bundled space.^{13, 14} In Sacramento, California, households have on average 1.6 more available parking spaces than cars.¹⁵ Overall, the data show widespread underuse of parking spaces and suggest that most buildings supply far more parking than necessary.

Policy Implications

If we put the three factors above together, we see that minimum parking requirements often produce empty or underused spaces, giving cities “too much” parking. Oversupplied parking occupies valuable urban land, limiting the space available for other municipal priorities. Eliminating parking minimums allows parking to be provided more flexibly, on a case-by-case basis according to demand. This approach slows the growth of unnecessary parking, encourages more efficient use of existing spaces, and allows underused parking to be repurposed for higher-value uses, including new housing, public parks, community spaces, outdoor dining, or other commercial development that generates tax revenue.

Further Reading and Sources

The research literature that informed this issue brief is summarized in greater detail in [The Impacts of Minimum Parking Requirements: A Research Synthesis](#).

Endnotes:

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