Traffic Congestion in Harare: Causes, Impacts and Potential Solutions

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Abstract

Urban traffic congestion was a growing challenge in many developing cities, including Harare, Zimbabwe. This study investigated the causes, impacts and potential solutions to traffic congestion in Harare using a qualitative research methodology. Guided by Systems Theory and the Urban Political Economy framework, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with purposively sampled participants, including commuters, public transport operators, city planners and traffic enforcement officials. The purposive sampling approach was chosen to ensure insights were drawn from stakeholders directly involved in or affected by urban mobility challenges. The study identified five major causes of congestion: poor road infrastructure, proliferation of informal transport systems, weak institutional planning and enforcement, uncoordinated land use and urban sprawl and increasing private vehicle ownership. These factors were found to interact in complex ways, producing negative effects on mobility, productivity, the environment and public safety. Participants proposed various solutions, including infrastructure investment, regulation of informal transport, spatial planning reforms and strengthening public transport systems. The study concluded that congestion in Harare was a systemic problem requiring coordinated, inclusive interventions. It recommended further research using mixed methods and comparative urban case studies to support more comprehensive transport policy development.

Keywords: Traffic congestion, Harare, Urban mobility, Qualitative research, Purposive sampling

Introduction

Urban traffic congestion emerged as a persistent and complex challenge affecting cities across both developed and developing regions. Globally, increasing urbanisation, economic restructuring and rising mobility demands placed sustained pressure on urban transport systems. As cities grew in population and spatial extent, road networks frequently experienced levels of demand that exceeded their designed capacity, resulting in traffic delays, unreliable travel times and reduced efficiency in the movement of people and goods. (World Bank, 2002). Gwilliam (2011) observes that congestion in many cities of the Global South is closely linked to structural imbalances between demographic expansion and infrastructure development, highlighting the extent to which congestion reflects broader urban management and planning challenges rather than isolated transport failures.

At the continental level, African cities faced distinctive mobility challenges shaped by historical, institutional and economic conditions. Much of the urban transport infrastructure in Africa was developed during earlier periods of lower urban populations and limited motorisation yet continued to serve cities experiencing rapid demographic growth and spatial expansion. (UN-Habitat, 2013a). Public transport systems in many African cities were often described in the literature as constrained in coverage, capacity and reliability, prompting residents to rely heavily on road-based and informal transport modes. (Kumar & Barrett, 2008). These structural conditions contributed to congestion becoming an increasingly visible feature of everyday urban life across the continent, although the nature and intensity of congestion varied considerably between cities.

Within the broader sub-Saharan African region, changing patterns of vehicle ownership and transport provision further reshaped urban mobility systems. Rising levels of motorisation, particularly through the growth of private vehicle ownership, were widely noted in the literature, often occurring in contexts where road network expansion and maintenance lagged behind demand. (Kumar & Barrett, 2008). At the same time, informal transport systems—such as minibuses and shared taxis—became integral to urban mobility, filling gaps left by formal public transport provision. (Behrens, McCormick & Mfinanga, 2016). While these systems played a critical role in ensuring access to mobility, they also introduced complex governance and management challenges that were frequently discussed in relation to traffic congestion, safety and regulation.

Traffic congestion has significant economic, socialand environmental dimensions that extended beyond transport efficiency. Globally, congestion was associated with time losses, increased fuel consumption and higher transport costs, with implications for productivity, household welfare and business competitiveness. (Litman, 2021a). Socially, unreliable and prolonged travel times could affect access to employment, education and essential services, particularly for lower-income urban residents. (UN-Habitat, 2013a). Environmentally, congested traffic conditions were commonly linked to elevated emissions and local air pollution, raising concerns about public health and urban sustainability. (World Health Organisation, 2016). These multidimensional impacts underscored the need to examine congestion through integrated economic and governance lenses.

Despite the extensive international and regional literature on urban traffic congestion, there remained uneven geographical coverage in academic research. Studies have tended to focus on large metropolitan areas such as Lagos, Nairobi, Johannesburg and other globally prominent cities (Salon & Gulyani, 2019). While these studies provide valuable insights into congestion dynamics, they may not fully capture the experiences of smaller or less internationally visible cities, where institutional capacities, fiscal constraints and governance arrangements differ significantly. This uneven research focus highlights the importance of expanding empirical inquiry to a wider range of urban contexts.

Against this broader international, continental and regional backdrop, Harare, the capital city of Zimbabwe, presents an important context for examining urban traffic congestion. Over the past two decades, Harare has undergone notable demographic and spatial changes associated with its role as the country's administrative, commercial and industrial centre. (Muronda, 2018). These changes have coincided with increased volumes of daily travel within the city, particularly between residential areas, employment centres and service nodes. Policy documents, media reports and everyday observations frequently identify traffic congestion as a growing urban concern in Harare, especially during peak travel periods along major transport

corridors. (Munuhwa et al., 2020). However, the specific factors shaping congestion patterns in the city, as well as their relative influence, were not comprehensively examined through systematic empirical research.

Urban spatial development patterns in Harare have also featured prominently in discussions of mobility and accessibility. The outward expansion of residential areas and the growth of peri-urban settlements have been accompanied by longer commuting distances and changing travel behaviours. (Kamete, 2017). While international literature often associated such spatial configurations with increased travel demand (Cervero, 1998), the extent to which these patterns contributed to congestion in Harare remained an empirical question that warranted careful investigation rather than assumption.

Similarly, changes in vehicle ownership and transport service provision formed part of ongoing debates about urban mobility in Harare. As in many sub-Saharan African cities, commuter omnibuses (*kombis*) constituted a central component of the city's transport system, providing essential mobility for a large proportion of residents. Academic and policy discussions frequently raised questions regarding regulation, traffic management and operational practices within this sector. (Rusinga, 2025). At the same time, the growth of private vehicle use was often cited in broader regional analyses of congestion. (Kumar & Barrett, 2008). How these various elements interacted to shape congestion dynamics in Harare, however, remained insufficiently understood and required empirical examination.

The economic, social and environmental implications of traffic congestion were also relevant in the Harare context. International literature suggested that congestion could influence productivity, household expenditure and environmental quality. (Litman, 2021a; UN-Habitat, 2013a). While these impacts were widely acknowledged at a general level, their specific manifestations, distribution and severity within Harare had not been systematically documented. This lack of localised evidence limited the ability of policymakers and urban managers to design context-sensitive responses to congestion.

The challenge of traffic congestion was further situated within broader debates on sustainable urban development and economic management. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 11, emphasised the creation of inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable cities. Within this framework, urban mobility was increasingly understood as a governance and planning issue with direct implications for economic performance and social inclusion. (Cervero, Suzuki & Iuchi, 2013). These considerations were particularly pertinent for cities such as Harare, where resource constraints and institutional capacity shaped policy options.

This study adopted Systems Theory as its primary analytical framework to examine traffic congestion in Harare. Systems Theory conceptualised cities as complex and interconnected systems in which changes in one component—such as land use, transport infrastructure, or governance—affected the functioning of the whole. (Bertalanffy, 1968; Forrester, 1969). Applied to urban traffic, this perspective allowed congestion to be examined as an emergent outcome of interacting processes rather than as the result of a single predetermined cause.

To complement this approach, insights from Urban Political Economy were employed to situate transport systems within broader power relations, policy choices and historical trajectories of urban development. (Harvey, 2008). This combined theoretical orientation provided a framework for analysing traffic congestion in Harare while remaining attentive to

institutional, economic and governance dimensions central to business and economic management scholarship.

Against this background, the study sought to examine the nature, patterns and implications of traffic congestion in Harare and to explore policy and management responses that may be considered within the city's specific economic and institutional context. By drawing on empirical data, stakeholder perspectives and urban transport analysis, the research aims to contribute to scholarly debates on urban mobility in African cities and to inform evidence-based transport policy and urban management practices in Zimbabwe.

Research Methodology

The study employs a qualitative research methodology to investigate the causes, impacts and potential solutions to traffic congestion in Harare. Qualitative research was particularly well-suited for exploring complex, context-specific urban challenges, as it allowed for the collection of rich, descriptive data grounded in lived experiences and institutional perspectives. (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study was guided by Systems Theory, which viewed urban environments as interconnected systems wherein changes in one component—such as infrastructure, behaviour, or governance—could produce cascading effects throughout the city. (Bertalanffy, 1968; Forrester, 1969). This framework informed both the research design and the interpretation of findings, helping to identify the systemic nature of traffic congestion in Harare.

To gain diverse insights into the phenomenon, data were collected through two primary methods: semi-structured interviews and non-participant field observations. Semi-structured interviews were chosen to allow flexibility in probing emerging themes while maintaining consistency across respondents. A total of 45 key informants were purposively selected based on their professional involvement or experiential knowledge of urban transport in Harare. These included officials from the Harare City Council, representatives from the Zimbabwe Republic Police (Traffic Division), commuter omnibus operators, urban planners and daily commuters. The purposive sampling strategy ensured that the sample captured multiple dimensions of the urban transport system, including policy, enforcement, service delivery and commuter experience.

In addition to interviews, field observations were conducted at major congestion hotspots—such as Julius Nyerere Way, Samora Machel Avenue, Mbare Musika and Enterprise Road—during peak morning and evening hours. These observations focused on traffic flow patterns, driver behaviour, interactions between formal and informal transport modes and the presence or absence of traffic management mechanisms. Observational data served to complement and contextualise the interview narratives, providing real-time insights into how congestion manifests in different parts of the city. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data analysis followed a thematic analysis approach, involving systematic coding and categorisation of qualitative data to identify recurring themes, patterns and contradictions. (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process was iterative and closely aligned with the Systems Theory framework, which enabled the classification of data into interconnected thematic areas such as infrastructural constraints, governance failures, commuter behaviours and land-use dynamics. By emphasising interrelations among these categories, the analysis aimed to move beyond surface-level explanations and reveal how congestion in Harare emerged from a

complex interplay of systemic factors. Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the relevant institutional research ethics board and all participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity.

Results and Discussion

This section presents and discusses the five principal causes of traffic congestion in Harare, derived from qualitative interviews and triangulated with field observations and scholarly literature. The analysis was framed within Systems Theory, which conceptualised cities as complex, interdependent networks—where dysfunction in one subsystem (for example, infrastructure, regulation, or land use) produced ripple effects across the whole urban system. (Bertalanffy, 1968). Additionally, the Urban Political Economy perspective was used to interpret how structural power, governance gaps and economic policy choices shaped traffic patterns and access to mobility. Each of the five causes was explored in depth: (1) inadequate and poorly maintained roads, (2) proliferation of informal transport, (3) weak institutional planning and enforcement, (4) uncoordinated land use and urban sprawl and (5) the growing dominance of private vehicle ownership.

Inadequate and Poorly Maintained Road Infrastructure

A key contributor to congestion in Harare was the widespread deterioration of road infrastructure. Respondents cited numerous challenges such as potholes, inadequate road width, worn-out markings and non-functional traffic signals. One municipal engineer remarked, “We are trying to manage 21st-century traffic on 1980s roads. That mismatch is the root of many of our congestion problems.” These findings echo Gwilliam (2011), who found that cities in sub-Saharan Africa face chronic underinvestment in road infrastructure due to constrained public finances. In Harare’s case, infrastructure investment has lagged population growth and urban sprawl, undermining traffic efficiency.

These infrastructural deficits cause ripple effects throughout the urban transport system. Damaged roads reduce vehicle speeds, increase repair and maintenance costs and raise the risk of accidents. From an environmental standpoint, poor roads contributed to elevated emissions as vehicles idle or manoeuvre around obstacles. As one kombi driver put it, “Sometimes I zig-zag just to avoid potholes. That slows everyone behind me.” According to Litman (2021b), such delays multiplied into broader economic inefficiencies, especially when commuters lost hours daily in traffic.

Respondents advocated for urgent but targeted infrastructure rehabilitation. This included resurfacing key arterials, improving junction design, fixing traffic lights and implementing a coordinated maintenance regime. The use of traffic data and congestion mapping was also recommended to identify high-impact intervention areas. However, as Harvey (2008) warns, infrastructure investments must be politically neutral and equitably distributed—avoiding favouritism toward politically connected neighbourhoods.

Nonetheless, interviewees highlighted that maintenance efforts alone could not succeed without institutional continuity, climate-sensitive engineering and proper budgeting. For instance, several roads were damaged repeatedly during rainy seasons due to faulty drainage systems. As noted by Majuru (2025), infrastructure degradation in Zimbabwe was often a result of fiscal mismanagement and institutional decay. A planner observed, “You can’t just patch

potholes—you need a plan that includes drainage, weight limits and climate durability." Thus, holistic infrastructure reform was needed, not just piecemeal repairs.

Proliferation of Informal Transport Systems

Another prominent cause was the dominance of informal transport operators—particularly kombis and mushikashika (unregistered pirate taxis). While they served essential mobility needs in the absence of a reliable public system, their operations often worsened congestion. Kombis frequently stopped in undesignated areas, created roadblocks by competing for passengers and ignored formal traffic laws. This was confirmed by one traffic officer who explained, "There's no discipline. They stop wherever people are, even at roundabouts." Similar patterns have been documented in Southern Africa by Smith (2019), who describes informal transport as both necessary and disruptive.

The impact was significant. Informal operators' behaviours interrupted traffic flow, caused pedestrian safety issues and amplified travel unpredictability. Congestion around the CBD, particularly near Copacabana and Fourth Street, was worsened by kombis idling in the roads. One commuter shared, "You're late not because of traffic, but because kombis block the road waiting for more passengers." The lack of structure in the sector contributed to inefficiencies for both drivers and passengers.

To address this, stakeholders recommended regulatory reform aimed at integrating informal operators into a semi-formal or formal transport framework. Suggestions included route rationalisation, provision of designated stops, use of permits and incentives for fleet modernisation. These reforms echo UN-Habitat's (2013b) call for "hybrid mobility systems" that blended formal oversight with the adaptive strengths of informal modes.

However, institutional attempts to regulate kombis faced resistance due to political patronage, economic survival concerns and mistrust between operators and authorities. (NewsDay, 2025). A city transport officer admitted, "Many kombi owners are protected by people in power—that's why rules aren't enforced." Hence, reform must be participatory, inclusive and carefully phased to avoid disrupting livelihoods while improving traffic conditions.

Weak Institutional Planning and Enforcement

Weak coordination among transport agencies and inconsistent enforcement were also found to exacerbate traffic problems. Interviewees described how the absence of a central urban mobility authority results in fragmented policy implementation. The police, for example, may enforce traffic laws sporadically, while city councils lacked jurisdiction over certain roads. One policymaker observed, "There's no single agency to coordinate traffic policy—we're all operating in silos." This institutional fragmentation was a textbook case of system disintegration, as per Systems Theory. (Bertalanffy, 1968).

The consequences were widespread. Laws were flouted with impunity: illegal parking, sidewalk encroachment and signal violations were commonplace. This fostered a culture of lawlessness that worsened traffic inefficiencies. Commuters expressed frustration with a system where rules seemed optional. As one said, "Sometimes the police are there, sometimes they're not—and even when they are, they don't do much." These observations mirrored Kumar and Barrett (2008), who found out that governance failures often undermined transport systems in African cities.

Interviewees supported the establishment of a metropolitan transport authority to streamline planning, enforcement and investment decisions. Digital tools—such as surveillance cameras, automated ticketing systems and traffic analytics—were proposed to strengthen monitoring and enforcement capacity. For success, such institutions must be insulated from political interference and equipped with legal authority and adequate budgets. (Harvey, 2008).

Yet, institutional reform was no easy feat. As Marumahoko et al. (2025) noted, Harare's governance structures were deeply politicised, with overlapping mandates and turf battles. Even well-drafted policies often failed in the implementation stage (Marumahoko & Nhede, 2021; Marumahoko, 2023; Marumahoko, 2024; Marumahoko, Moyo & Tashu, 2025). A senior planner commented, "It's not about plans—we have those. It's about execution and coordination and that's what we lack." Thus, any planning or enforcement reform must prioritise inter-agency cooperation, political neutrality and public accountability.

Uncoordinated Land Use and Urban Sprawl

A fourth cause is Harare's spatial expansion without corresponding transport planning. New residential developments emerged far from employment zones, while informal settlements lacked service provision. An urban planner noted, "We're building houses faster than we're building roads or transit routes." This trend of "horizontal city growth" without mixed-use planning is a known driver of congestion. (Porter, 2014). Many workers commuted from Chitungwiza, Budiriro, or Caledonia to the CBD daily, placing strain on radial routes.

This pattern resulted in long commutes, high transport costs and increased pressure on already congested corridors. The morning and evening rush hours were especially intense due to the single-direction travel trend. As one commuter explained, "Everyone's heading to the same place at the same time—there's no alternative job centre or office park elsewhere." This contributed to inefficient use of infrastructure and reduced productivity.

Stakeholders recommended reforms such as mixed-use zoning, decentralisation of economic activity and promotion of Transit-Oriented Development. (TOD). These strategies encouraged development around transport hubs and reduced the need for long-distance travel (UN-Habitat, 2013b). Other suggestions included encouraging vertical development and improving non-motorised transport infrastructure within residential zones.

Yet several barriers existed. Land tenure disputes, poor enforcement of zoning laws and weak incentives for developers to pursue TOD approaches were mentioned. Mbara and Pisa (2019) pointed out that urban planning in Zimbabwe was often reactive and disconnected from transport realities. As one official said, "We approve housing but don't ask how people will get around. That's the missing link." Thus, spatial planning must be integrated with mobility strategies for long-term decongestion.

Rising Private Vehicle Ownership and Modal Imbalance

The growing rate of private vehicle ownership in Harare had become a major contributor to traffic congestion. This trend was fuelled by a combination of deteriorating public transport services, growing middle-income populations and cultural preferences that associated car ownership with status and personal freedom. One interviewee stated, "It's not just convenience. A car is dignity—you avoid harassment, delays and overcrowding." This aligned with findings

by Litman (2021c), who argues that when public transit is unreliable or unsafe, people naturally gravitate toward private vehicles, increasing the burden on limited road infrastructure.

The impact was most visible during peak hours, when the city's roads were saturated with private vehicles, especially single-occupancy cars. This contributed to longer travel times, fuel wastage, elevated emissions and greater stress for all road users. Parking is another major problem—drivers park on sidewalks, in intersections, or double-park in the CBD, obstructing lanes and increasing delays. These conditions further discouraged public transport use and created a self-reinforcing cycle of congestion and modal imbalance. As one planner noted, "The more people switch to cars, the worse congestion gets—yet it's happening because the system leaves them no choice."

Addressing this issue requires a multi-pronged approach. First, significant investments must be made to improve the quality, reliability and safety of public transport—without this, demand for private cars will remain high. Second, demand-side policies such as higher parking fees, congestion pricing and vehicle import restrictions could discourage unnecessary car use. Respondents also suggested creating dedicated bus lanes, improving pedestrian infrastructure and offering incentives. (for example, tax breaks, employer subsidies) to shift commuters to public or shared modes. As per Systems Theory (Bertalanffy, 1968), reducing reliance on one subsystem (private vehicles) while strengthening others (public transit, non-motorised transport) improves system-wide resilience.

However, behavioural and cultural barriers complicated the shift away from car dependence. Several interviewees pointed out that public transport was not just seen as inconvenient, but also as unsafe and socially stigmatised. One respondent remarked, "Until kombis are clean, safe and polite, no professional will leave their car at home." Mbara and Pisa (2019) highlight that without sustained investment, public perception of public transport will not change, regardless of policy incentives. Additionally, fuel pricing policies and second-hand vehicle imports made car ownership relatively accessible, even in a struggling economy. Therefore, reversing the trend would require a sustained cultural shift, built on visible improvements to public mobility and long-term planning that linked transport, economy and urban design.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study set out to investigate the underlying causes, impacts and potential solutions to traffic congestion in Harare using a qualitative research approach. Drawing on interviews with transport operators, commuters, planners and policymakers and guided by Systems Theory and Urban Political Economy, the research identified five interrelated causes of congestion: deteriorating road infrastructure, the proliferation of informal transport, weak institutional planning and enforcement, uncoordinated land use and urban sprawl and the rising rate of private vehicle ownership. Each of these factors interacted with others to produce systemic inefficiencies that compromised urban mobility, increased travel times, raised environmental and economic costs and diminished the quality of life for residents.

The study revealed that congestion in Harare was not merely a technical or infrastructural problem, but a deeply embedded issue rooted in governance challenges, socio-economic inequalities and policy gaps. While proposed solutions—such as infrastructure upgrades, formalisation of informal transport, improved urban planning and demand-side management of car use—are viable, their success depended on political will, institutional coordination and inclusive stakeholder engagement. Moreover, cultural attitudes toward car ownership and

public transport must also be addressed through public education and the improvement of service standards.

By applying Systems Theory, the study underscored the importance of seeing traffic congestion as a problem emerging from interlinked subsystems that required coordinated intervention. Likewise, the Urban Political Economy perspective highlighted how mobility outcomes were shaped by power relations, policy decisions and resource allocation. The findings suggested that without systemic reform, congestion will likely worsen, particularly as urbanisation and motorisation continue.

Future studies could build on these findings by employing a mixed-methods approach to include quantitative data such as vehicle counts, commuter flows, or GIS-based congestion mapping. Longitudinal studies examining the evolution of congestion over time in response to policy interventions would also be valuable. Additionally, comparative research involving other African cities facing similar challenges could offer transferable insights and help develop a regional framework for sustainable urban mobility.

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