Data show Bay Area residents challenged the limits of shelter-in-place orders

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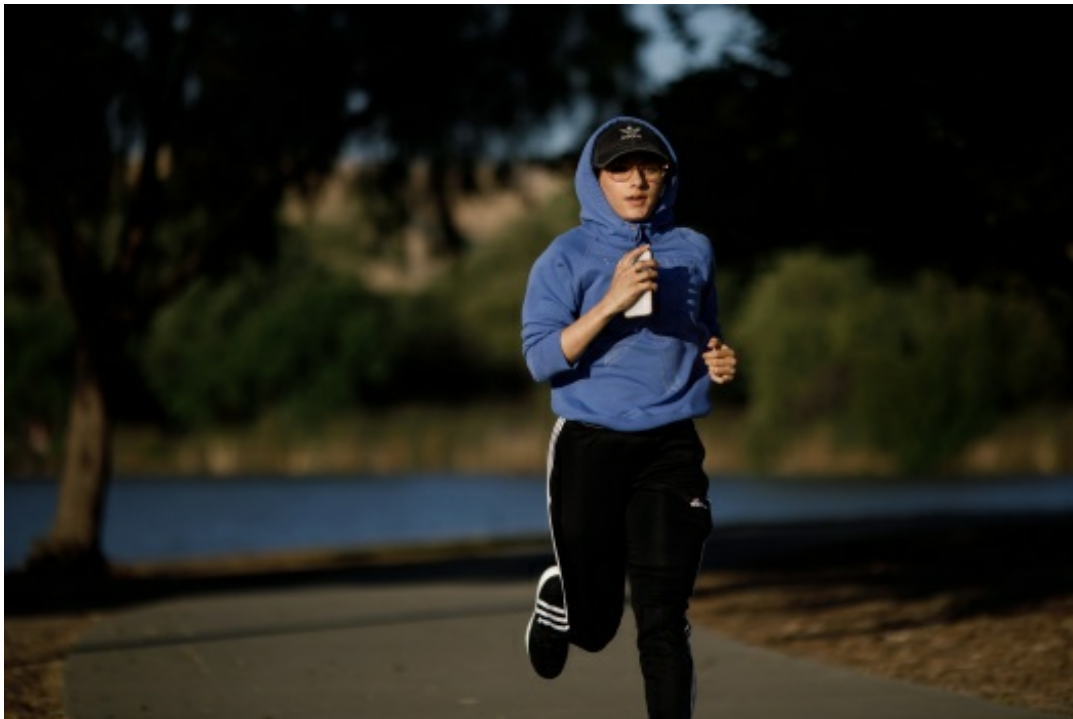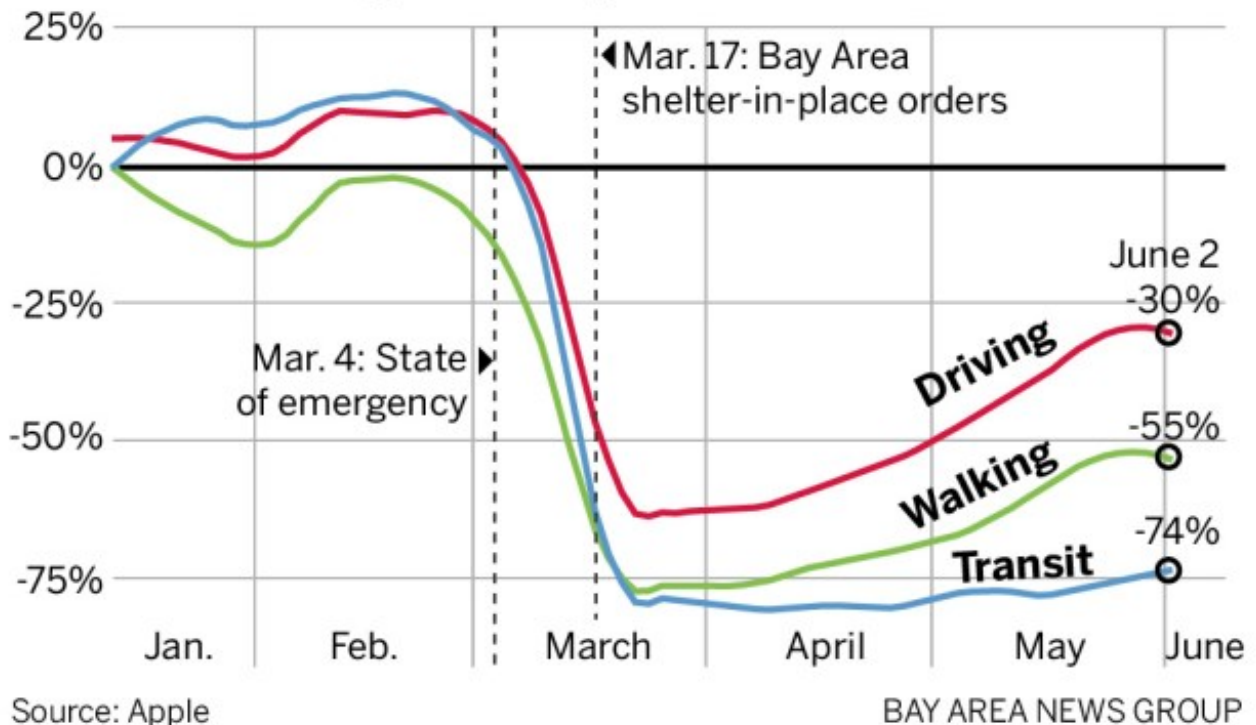

By Jerimiah Oetting, Correspondent

Bay Area residents went into a self-imposed lockdown about two weeks before being ordered to stay home, then started venturing out from their homes just days after "shelter-in-place" mandates went into effect, according to a Bay Area News Group analysis of cellphone data from Apple and Google.

The data show a steep decline in Bay Area residents' mobility after the pandemic prompted Gov. Gavin Newsom to declare a state of emergency on March 4, as news reports of the coronavirus spreading worldwide reached a fever pitch. But after most Bay Area counties ordered a lockdown to begin March 17, residents began leaving home more and gradually increased their travel by car and on foot as the stay-at-home orders wore on, the data shows.

BAY AREA RESIDENTS ON THE MOVE

Data from Apple and Google show Bay Area residents began staying home en masse around March 4, when Gov. Gavin Newsom declared a state of emergency because of the pandemic. But residents began venturing out of their homes just days after shelter-in-place rules took effect nearly two weeks later. Travel by car and on foot gradually increased as the lockdown wore on, but residents are still avoiding public transit.

Trendline of % change in mobility

Mar. 17: Bay Area shelter-in-place orders

Mar. 4: State of emergency

June 2

Driving -30%

Walking -55%

Transit -74%

Source: Apple

BAY AREA NEWS GROUP

The big exception as far as transportation options has been the use of public transit. As Bay Area residents continue to avoid entering enclosed spaces with strangers, their use of buses, trolleys and trains remains stuck at historically low levels.

As Bay Area counties gradually ease shelter-in-place rules, residents recounted in recent interviews how their behaviors began "loosening" shortly after the lockdown orders took effect. Some described going on long "therapy drives" and finding creative ways to "escape," yet remain safe. Others selected small groups of friends to interact with, often without wearing masks or staying 6 feet apart.

Milpitas resident Khadijah Ahmad's journey through the pandemic reflected the data gathered by the two tech giants.

Until a few months ago, the 25-year-old recruiting specialist filled her day with work, exercise and UC Santa Cruz Extension courses. But all of that was upended by the coronavirus. A week before the Bay Area's lockdown, Ahmad jumped at the chance to work at home when her employer, Nelson Staffing in Pleasanton, encouraged the practice.

"I started to feel really uneasy," she said. "At first, I would just walk around the neighborhood. But I wasn't getting the kind of fulfillment that I would get when I would go and have a really good workout at the gym." She even found herself missing her morning commute.

"It's a sense of loss, so you kind of grieve it," she said.

Ahmad said she quickly realized she needed to develop a new routine. So she took up walking and running at Fremont's Lake Elizabeth and other scenic spots and began working out with weights at home. She started going on leisurely drives on Skyline Boulevard in the Santa Cruz Mountains.

In early May, a group of friends invited Ahmad over to their house for the first time in a month and a half. She said they now regularly interact without face masks and social distancing, but they've agreed to immediately warn each other if they feel ill and might be infectious.

Ahmad said she feels safe around her friends. "We're very transparent with each other," she said. "I think that helps ease people's minds when it comes to opening up our social circles just a little bit."

Jeff Hancock, a professor of communication at Stanford, said the behavior Ahmad describes is becoming more common as people push the boundaries recommended by public health officials. He said people have routinely bent shelter-in-place rules and social-distancing protocols — which include limiting close contact to household members, staying at least 6 feet apart from others and traveling by car only to run essential errands and go to important appointments — based on their own perceptions of risk. Those perceptions are shaped by those in their circles in a process known in psychology as "norm-setting."

"Now everything's been thrown upside down and twisted around and we don't know what the norm is anymore," he said. "People are figuring out what social behaviors are OK. And as you do that, you rationalize them. We think about them, talk about them with our peers. We kind of figure out our new normal."

Experts say that people in lockdown are often taking their mental and emotional well-being into consideration when they decide to push boundaries meant to keep them isolated.

Elissa Epel, a professor in UC San Francisco's Department of Psychiatry, said there's little doubt that social distancing is causing a "dramatic elevation in depression and anxiety" across the country.

A survey from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Census Bureau released on May 26 showed that a third of Americans reported feeling anxiety or depression during the pandemic — triple the percentage measured around this time last year.

"The statistics on mental health are partly due to loneliness and the lack of social connection," Epel said. "And I believe that people are finding a lot of relief in starting to connect with others socially."

The data from Apple Maps, Google Maps and other applications is available online, but the companies say it's aggregated in a way that makes all the personal data private.

While Apple's data details how people are traveling, Google data focuses more on where people are spending their time.

In recent weeks, Google's data showed a spike in the amount of time Bay Area residents spent at parks compared with a five-week period in January and February, before most Californians were aware that COVID-19 was spreading in their communities. In Santa Cruz County, the number of visits to parks jumped 80 percent.

May's mostly warm and sunny weather also drove people to parks, which many Bay Area residents now see as places where they can get some fresh air while keeping their distances from other park visitors.

"We've been stuck in homes or apartments with very few" other people, Hancock said. "And we have a fundamental need to extend beyond that."

San Mateo residents Larry and Cheryl Blair know the feeling. They've been sheltering at home with their two teenage girls, both of whom have autism.

"It's been stressful," Larry said. "The lack of structure with no school has been really tough."

Two weeks ago, they became so desperate to get out of the house that they conscripted Cheryl's father, who lives with them, as a babysitter for a night. They found a room at a Marriott hotel only five minutes from their house for under a hundred dollars, less than half of what it cost before the pandemic emptied hotels across the nation. The Blairs ordered pastrami sandwiches from the Refuge restaurant in San Carlos through DoorDash — "a cheap way to do room service," Larry said with a laugh.

"It was wonderful," Cheryl said. "It felt clean. It felt very safe to me."

The Blairs were so thrilled with the experience that they later decided to spend another night at the Marriott to celebrate Cheryl's recent birthday.

Experts like Hancock say that spending a night in a hotel and socializing with small groups of friends are examples of behaviors that felt more dangerous in the early days of the pandemic, but have become more socially acceptable. People have a tendency to break the rules in ways they believe are safe, he said.

Ahmad, for example, said that when her gym opens back up, she won't be rushing back until she feels she faces little danger of getting infected with the coronavirus when she works out there. Eventually, though, she plans to ease back into her old routine — with a few new additions, such as her new love of running.

"I see myself kind of hanging onto some of these new things that I've started to incorporate into my life," she said. "I'm stronger now than I was at the beginning of this."