

Transcript

Welcome to Boring Facts. This podcast is dedicated to taking what you hear or read in the news and making it boring. This podcast takes out the drama, the partisanship and the arguments and just presents the facts. That's it. No punditry, no debate, just plain old boring facts.

The experience of parking in the United States varies dramatically based on where you live. Do you live in large dense city like New York, the suburbs, the country, a small midwestern town? Even within these locations the experience of parking may vary from block to block.

There are about 97 million passenger cars registered in the United States as of 2023. This number is reported as being down from 135 million in 1995.¹ But has been made up for by the larger collection of approximately 161 million pickups, vans, SUV's and other light duty trucks that might fit in a parking space.² This does not include buses, tractor trailers, farm trucks, or other medium-duty and heavy-duty trucks that would not be using standard parking spaces.

This comes to approximately 258 million vehicles in the US that would fit into a conventional parking space.

And how many parking spots are there in the United States? The number that is being quoted is around two billion.³ While this number has been difficult to verify independently, we will use it for our purposes. Taken together this means there are 7.7 parking spaces for each registered vehicle that could fit in a standard parking space.

If we estimate a parking space to be nine feet by eighteen feet, then each parking spot consumes 162 square feet.⁴ Breaking out the trusty calculator we find that 2 billion parking spaces would cover around 11,621 square miles⁵.

This number only accounts for the parking spaces themselves. Not, for example, the travel lanes in each row of a large retail parking lot. The actual space consumed would be

¹ <https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/policyinformation/statistics/2023/>

² <https://www.bts.gov/browse-statistical-products-and-data/national-transportation-statistics/number-us-truck>

³ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-05-30/parking-policy-is-hot-thanks-to-donald-shoup>
While tracing this number back this is the first article I found that did not link to another article quoting the same number. The ultimate source is unknown to the author and therefore somewhat suspect despite being often quoted

⁴ <https://www.welovepaving.com/standard-parking-space-size-in-usa-a-complete-guide-to-dimensions-regulations-and-design-tips/>

⁵ $(162 \text{ sq. ft/space} * 2,000,000,000 \text{ spaces}) / 5280^2 \text{ sq. ft/sq. mile} = 11,621.9 \text{ sq. miles}$

significantly larger since in a large retail lot these travel lanes could result in 50 percent or more additional space being consumed.

A number this large is hard to picture. To provide a frame of reference, it is larger than any of the 9 smallest states. In fact, it is larger, by about four hundred square miles, than the states of Maryland and Delaware combined.

If every car in the U.S. was parked at the same time in a standard parking space they would all fit inside the state of Delaware, with space left over. The state of Maryland would be one entirely empty parking lot.

One last thought exercise for you. Imagine you live in a city where street parking costs \$1.50/hour. One parking space, occupied for 24 hours, would cost thirty-six dollars.

If a 500 square foot apartment was rented at the same rate per square foot, it would cost approximately \$3300 per month⁶. Depending on where you live this may seem like a great deal or incredibly expensive.

As with most facts, these numbers do not tell the whole story. Parking is a complicated social, economic, and environmental issue. These aspects aside, just having parking available where it is needed and when it is needed requires trade-offs and compromises.

If you are interested in knowing how your city or state has chosen to manage these compromises and tradeoffs, you will need to research the zoning requirements that relate to parking for residential and commercial property in your area.

Thank you for listening to Boring Facts. A link to the transcript with references, data, and calculations used in this story is in the show notes. If you have a suggestion for a topic you would like us to make boring, please click on the link in the show notes.

Sound Effects

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⁶ 500 Sq.ft * ((36 dollars/day)/162 sq. ft) * 30 days/month= 3300 dollars/month