

The Commuting Community
Jina Kim, 4/29/2003

My dad once explained to me how he got to work. He carpooled with other people, he said. More specifically, he waited with a crowd of people at a corner, where people in cars would come and pick them up. I was so confused because what he described wasn't really carpooling. Was there a schedule like in the bus system? Was there a list of people who had to be picked up? No, he said. I was still confused, but it didn't seem like a big deal so I dropped the topic.

It turns out that my dad's commuting experience is a big deal, or at least important enough to hit the *New York Times*. Peter T. Kilbourn explains "slugging", the commuters' solution to I-95 and I-395 to Washington, the "most enervating, most crash-prone, most congested rush-hour arteries in the nation" (4/29/2003, A22, "To Commute to Capital, Early Bird Gets 'Slugs'"). My dad's description wasn't far from the truth: people do just wait around, usually in parking lots, until people with cars come by.

Slugging evolved with the implementation of high occupancy vehicle (HOV) lanes on the busiest highways. Vehicles with at least three people can take the HOV lane, speed by the traffic, and cut down commuting time by one-fourth. Slugging is a quick way to pick up riders and more flexible than traditional carpooling. It helps the environment, relieves road congestion, and contributes significantly to the success of HOV lanes.

Slugging is not limited to only the Washington D.C. metropolitan area. A woman in San Francisco replied to Kilbourn's article, saying that it has been implemented in her city for twenty years. It is called "casual carpooling" on the West Coast, but has the same informal system and set of rules.

Interestingly, it works. The government does not organize slugging, and there are no regulatory laws. But despite its loose structure, no “slug” – those who get free rides – or drive could cite instances of crime. Perhaps there is no crime because drivers need slugs, and slugs need drivers.

Furthermore, it is not a totally rule-free system. There is an informal code that slugs and drivers abide by in order to avoid violence or crime. Slugs are not allowed to talk unless the driver initiates conversation. Politics and religion are prohibited topics of discussion. Smoking, talking on the cell phone, or fiddling with the radio are not allowed. These rules, although seemingly odd, provide a safe ride for everyone.

Slugging gives me hope for the human race. We are still able to trust our fellow man, even if it is only for a ride to work. Humans are not mistrusting creatures with only bad intentions, but know how to cooperate and help each other. Slugging is no technological innovation. It only takes trust, which can be hard to build than a nuclear reactor.