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Transportation and Young Adults: Driving is Down, Biking and Public Transport Way Up

New research shows that young people from the U.S. and Canada to Germany and South Korea are driving less, biking more and using public transportation in significantly higher numbers.

Leslie Brokaw • April 09, 2012

READING TIME: 3 MIN

New research shows that young people in the U.S., Canada, Germany, South Korea, and other countries are driving less, and, in the U.S., biking more and using public transportation in significantly higher numbers.

[“Transportation and the New Generation: Why Young People are Driving Less and What it Means for Transportation Policy,” \[pdf\] a report by the U.S. Public](#)

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- **Driving is down:** The number of vehicle miles traveled by 16 to 34-year-olds in the U.S. dropped 23% between 2001 and 2009. As well, the share of 14 to 34-year-olds without driver's licenses grew between 2001 and 2010 from 21% to 26%.
- **Biking is up:** In 2009, 16 to 34-year-olds in the U.S. took 24% more bike trips than in 2001 – even with that age group shrinking in size by 2%.
- **Public Transport is up:** Public transport use by that same group also rose in the same period — passenger miles traveled are up by a huge 40%.

The report says that reductions in driving are “a phenomenon becoming characteristic of developed countries.” A 2011 study by the University of Michigan Transportation Research Institute showed that seven developed countries — Canada, Great Britain, Sweden, Norway, Japan, South Korea and Germany — had decreases in the percentage of young people with driver's licenses. As well, “vehicle-miles traveled have either leveled off or fallen in Western European countries including Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, The Netherlands and Spain.”

Among the reasons cited for the changes in the U.S.:

- **It's easier to use a phone when you're not driving.** “Public transportation is more compatible with a lifestyle based on mobility and peer-to-peer connectivity than driving,” notes the study.

- **Environmental commitment.** In a KRC Zipcar survey, 16% of 18 to 34-year-olds said they strongly agreed with the statement, “I want to protect the environment, so I drive less.” Only about 9% of older generations said the same thing.

- **Bike-sharing programs are more available.**

Technology “makes bike-sharing programs possible and convenient,” says the study. In just the past two years, at least nine U.S. cities have launched bike-sharing services, including Boston, Chicago, New York, and Washington D.C.

- **Car-sharing programs are also on the rise.** Says the report: “Technology has also led to the creation of transportation options that did not exist 15 or 20 years ago. With car-sharing services such as Zipcar, for example, the Internet and smart phone applications allow users to reserve, pay for and locate cars easily, at any time of the day.”

The report notes that, of course, “people who are unemployed or underemployed have difficulty affording cars, commute to work less frequently if at all, and have less disposable income to spend on traveling for vacation.” But, significantly, the report says that the trend toward reduced driving “has occurred even among young people who are employed and/or are doing well financially.”

Phineas Baxandall, senior transportation analyst for U.S.

SOURCE: KRC RESEARCH, “DRIVING IS DOWN, BIKING AND PUBLIC TRANSPORT WAY UP”

transportation policy. “America needs to understand these trends when deciding how to focus our future transportation investments, especially when transportation dollars are so scarce.”

The report’s recommendation:

“America’s transportation policies have long been predicated on the assumption that driving will continue to increase. The changing transportation preferences of young people — and Americans overall — throw that assumption into doubt. Transportation decision-makers at all levels — federal, state and local — need to understand the trends that are leading to the reduction in driving among young people and engage in a thorough reconsideration of America’s transportation policy-making to ensure that it serves both the needs of today’s and tomorrow’s young Americans and moves the nation toward a cleaner, more sustainable and economically vibrant future.”

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