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## A Generational Shift In Driving?

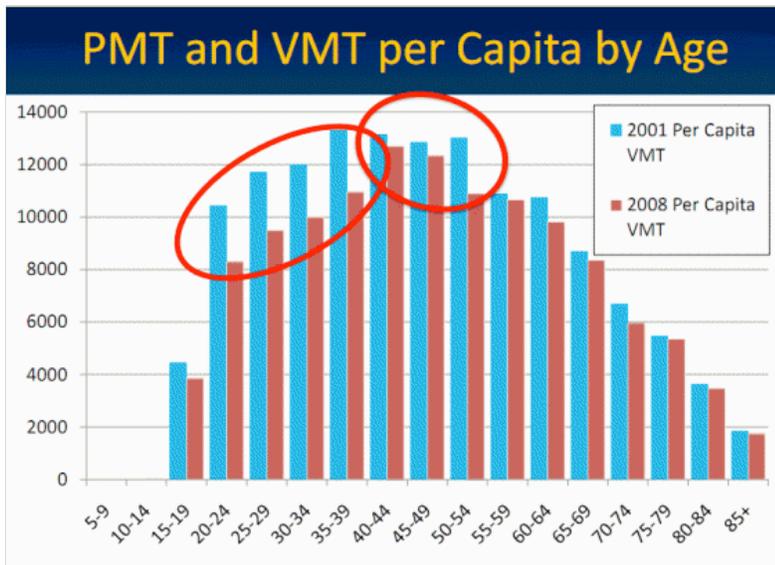
National survey shows sharp decline in driving among younger Americans.

Clark Williams-Derry on August 25, 2011 at 9:18 am



This post is 16 in the series: [Dude, Where Are My Cars?](#)

From a [presentation](#) on the [Transportation Research Board](#) website, a comparison of age-specific driving habits in 2001 vs. 2008:



Both data series come from the National Household Transportation Survey – the blue from 2001, the red from 2008. Among older folks, driving didn't change that much between the two studies. But among younger Americans, driving habits changed radically: folks between the ages of 20 and 40 drove far less in 2008 than their counterparts did in 2001.

This is perhaps the most compelling piece of evidence I've seen suggesting that there's been a profound generational shift in America's driving habits.

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That doesn't exhaust the analysis, of course. Some portion of this trend may be simple economics: the recession of 2008 may have hit younger folks a bit harder than the [recession of 2001](#). (The fact that both surveys were taken in the midst of a recession was just pure dumb luck.) And there are still all sorts of questions about what's at the root of this trend: is it young folks substituting life online for life behind the wheel? Environmental concerns dampening their enthusiasm for cars? More young people choosing to live car-lite city lifestyles? I'm sure there are dozens of theories out there, and probably many that have a grain of truth.

And then there's the anomaly of 50-54 year olds, who looked more like 30-somethings than 50 or 60 year olds. Is that just a data glitch, or a real trend?

Regardless, the evidence is pretty compelling for a broad generational shift: on average, folks under 40 are driving less than their counterparts from previous years. And if that trend keeps

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up, it will mean less and less driving per capita, as today's low-mileage 20- and 30-somethings hit their peak driving years.

(Hat tip to Tony Dutzik from the [Frontier Group](#).)

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Alan Durning says:

August 25, 2011 at 10:05 am

Fascinating!

[Reply](#)

OctaviusIII says:

August 25, 2011 at 1:27 pm

Love it.

[Reply](#)

Derrick says:

August 26, 2011 at 9:37 am

Could it start with safety concerns among parents and more strict rules regarding teenage driving and then become a lifestyle choice by young people? Either way it's very compelling.

[Reply](#)



Clark Williams-Derry says:

August 26, 2011 at 9:47 am

I think that could be part of it. And on a similar note, I'm told that driver's ed is typically an extracurricular activity these days. When I was growing up, it was taught during the school day.

But I don't think that's all of it – particularly because 2008's 35-39 year olds were 28-32 in the 2001 survey. In short, they were adults with (allegedly) well-established driving habits in 2001, and yet they were driving significantly less in 2008 than they did 7 years earlier.

To me, that suggests changes in economics, technology, and culture that are affecting young adults as a whole – and not just a change in how driving habits are being formed in the teens and early 20s.

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Eric Hess says:

August 26, 2011 at 9:55 am

When I took Driver's Ed in 2001, it was an optional summer program  
—sparsely attended as you might imagine.

John Niles says:

August 26, 2011 at 12:55 pm

What's also interesting is modifying the graphic above so that the vertical bars represent the same people as they get older. The red and blue readings are seven years apart, and the static interval for each cohort is in five year spacings, but roughly, very roughly, we can match every blue bar to the red bar one over to the right to measure the same folks as they get older. Take a deep breath and do it, takes a minute or two, and then come back here ....

See how red bars are lower than blue bars for almost everybody as time moved on and they got older, but not for teens going to twenties? Big drop for older people with more static income? Driving less happened to me as my 50s went into my 60s, and likely to you.

(Personal confession: I got rid of my car for two years mid 2007 to mid 2009 to see what that was like. Good but not great. Still voted against Sound Transit's profligacy both times. Acquired another car with higher mpg than the last. Now drive less than before.)

My quick and dirty analysis ... price of gasoline went up from 2001 to 2008, by a lot, and driving dropped, by a lot, across all age groups. <http://www1.eere.energy.gov/vehiclesandfuels/images/facts/fotw512a.jpg>

But personal, door-to-door mobility saves lots of time. Public transport, rule of thumb, makes trips take twice as long. Trust me on that, or you can look it up. That's the force that works counter to rising energy prices and environmental consciousness so far as driving is concerned.

I predict the world motorized personal mobility industry (aka car companies) will find a way to make personal door-to-door mobility less expensive over time, both for the pocketbook and the environment. Small, recyclable cars that get 150 miles to the gallon that are connected wirelessly to other cars and to the road boundaries for accident avoidance and automated driving are on the horizon. Road use fees to shape behavior away from peak period driving are approved public policy in this region and will spread throughout our country and the world.

And I assess Clark's last concluding statement about a "broad generational shift" as wishful thinking and dead wrong for USA and Canada given evidence in the USA 2010 census of ongoing suburbanization trends. Plus, car use is rising in Europe, Asia and everywhere else.

Or as I like to put it, if we don't make cars a lot cleaner and better, the planet is screwed.

[Reply](#)



Clark Williams-Derry says:

August 26, 2011 at 1:59 pm

I agree with you on some things, including cleaner cars. But others (obviously) not so much.

When I do your visualization exercise, John, I see that individuals of every age group but teens and early 20s are driving less than they did 5 years ago. The declines are reasonably consistent.

But among older people, the declines were close to what was expected, given the pattern of steady VMT declines over age 50. Yes, gas prices had an impact, but it was fairly modest.

Among younger people, the declines were substantial, and the OPPOSITE of what one would have expected given the 2001 patterns. Based on the 2001 patterns, young people would drive substantially more as they aged. Instead, they drove

substantially less. The dividing line is quite clearly at 40.

So gas prices (or something else) affected the young in a way that they did NOT affect those of us who are over 40.

I may be guilty of wishful thinking. But my thinking has changed based on my read of the evidence. Almost exactly a year ago, I [wrote a piece](#) arguing that the declines in driving among young people were mostly due to economics and gas prices, not the “cultural shift” that some observers believed. Fewer teens hold jobs, the real value of the minimum wage has declined – those factors struck me as explaining the declining rates of driving among teens and 20-somethings better than “cultural shifts.”

But these numbers (among others) convince me that there’s something else going on. The data here show that under-40 crowd has not responded to high gas prices the way over-40s have. So unless (a) the 35-39 year old set was being hit by unemployment in 2008 in a way that the 40-45 year old set was not, (b) or the data are simply wrong, we have to start looking for some other explanations for the generational divide that we’re seeing.

[Reply](#)



Clark Williams-Derry says:

August 26, 2011 at 2:09 pm

Also, about “personal door to door mobility saves time”. Agreed, compared with transit. But other things save time too – like not taking a trip. I “save” a lot of time on the internet. I’m sure that my family wishes that I didn’t.

[Reply](#)

John Niles says:

August 26, 2011 at 2:49 pm

Clark:

Roger copy all you say. I’ll keep looking too.

On being there vs going there, that is, taking a trip vs calling in or logging in instead, note

<http://www.globaltelematics.com/big-idea.htm> Oldie but a goodie.

The family impact you note for yourself personally is why some people would rather commute to an office than stay at home to work. The macro economic evidence that the Internet is taking down travel demand is slim to none, and there is evidence of the opposite as well. The Internet helps us decide the best places to visit, the best meetings to go to, and we know the choices better than ever.

This is a different but related topic, but again, we need to explore whether the younger generation is so heavily invested in the online electronic world of the screen and headphones that they don’t need/want to move around so much. As a starting hypothesis, I don’t believe it, but maybe it’s so. Let’s keep working on figuring this out.



Clark Williams-Derry says:

August 26, 2011 at 2:30 pm

OK, last thought for now: it’s possible that under-40s have a higher share of “discretionary” trips than over-40s. Or more precisely, it could be that under-40s take more “low-value” trips than over-40s – trips or trip-miles that they wouldn’t pay much to make – which would mean that under-40s are more responsive to changes in gas prices.

That's begging the question, potentially, since it could be a generational/attitude shift that makes trips seem low-value. And you'd have to go back to 2001 and figure out how much under-40s valued their trips, compared with 2008 or today. Maybe there were a lot of trips that under-40s took that they wouldn't have taken if gas prices were higher — i.e., there's been no shift in culture, just a shift in gas prices. But that's PhD-level research, not something that can be answered without serious empirical work.

[Reply](#)

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**John Niles** says:

August 26, 2011 at 2:50 pm

Again, roger copy.

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**Terry** says:

August 27, 2011 at 8:05 am

This doesn't control for the price of gasoline.

Gasoline prices spiked to their highest levels ever in 2008 with oil approaching \$150/bbl before tumbling in the recession. (Right now, it's about \$85/bbl.)

The VMT differential may, in fact, reflect who could AFFORD to pay the higher gasoline prices in 2008—largely those in middle age who were near their peak earning power, not the young or the old.

NTL, that may be a sign of things to come. As gas prices go up, those with less income will switch away from their personal vehicles to transit, taxis, walking, biking, etc.

This isn't generational change, it is the price elasticity of demand.

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**Ken** says:

August 27, 2011 at 8:20 am

I wonder what the acronyms pmt and vmt stand for?

[Reply](#)



**Alan Durning** says:

August 29, 2011 at 3:16 pm

“passenger miles traveled” and “vehicle miles traveled”

[Reply](#)

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**AndyA** says:

August 27, 2011 at 11:30 am

I don't see how this is evidence of a “generational change” in attitudes to cars or driving. As others have suggested, it may simply reflect a disproportionate effect of the economic downturn on younger people. Another possibility is that the age at which people are getting married and having children is rising. Perhaps immigration is also playing a role. Immigrants tend to be younger and poorer than the general population, and the proportion of the population that is foreign-born close to record highs.

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**PB** says:

August 27, 2011 at 2:36 pm

Too poor to buy cars.

[Reply](#)

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**carfreecouple.com** says:

August 29, 2011 at 2:37 pm

It's not that we are too poor to have a car, it's just that we'd rather spend money on other things (e.g. the latest apple product, international travel, or retirement savings). We also prefer to spend more to live in an urban area with a high Walk Score so our errand time becomes our fitness time, by biking/walking to the grocery store, post office, library, hardware store, etc. We're both 26 years old and we see many of our friends choosing the same lifestyle; it's easier (and safer) to surf your iPad on the bus than while driving!

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**Hazel Stone** says:

September 1, 2011 at 11:16 am

Is there a way to look at this info broken down by state?

[Reply](#)



**Clark Williams-Derry** says:

September 1, 2011 at 11:21 am

Great question. As far as I can tell, you'd have to go back to the original data to do that. It seems possible, but it's likely that the sample sizes will start to shrink pretty dramatically, which could make the numbers pretty inconclusive.

[Reply](#)

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**Willie Weir** says:

September 1, 2011 at 5:13 pm

I wrote a post called, "Are your friends making you bike?" It was a take on the article published in the NY Times titled, "Are your friends making you fat?" by Clive Thompson.

The idea is that social behaviors can be contagious. We are influenced not only by our friends, but the friends of our friends.

The folks in their twenties that I talked with in Portland were riding their bikes ... because their friends rode bikes. That was the number one reason.

If your friends ride bikes or transit, when they choose a place to go and socialize, it is more likely to be close by. Because the majority are walking or busing. Even if you own a car, you are less likely to drive it, because you want to fit in.

When I arrived at fourth grade with my brand new "Yellow Submarine" lunchbox, I was jazzed. That is, until I realized (no one had informed me) that fourth graders brown bag it. Immediately my lunchbox became an object of embarrassment. I walked home and told my mom I was sick.

She new something was wrong. In tears, I finally confessed that I couldn't be seen at school with a metal lunch box. She transferred my lunch to a brown paper sack, my tears disappeared, and I skipped happily back to school.

Swap out "metal lunch box with "car" and "paper bag" with "bike" and you have one of the possible explanations for the stats above.

Most people don't think of the environmental impacts of their choices. They just want to fit in.

[Reply](#)**Alan Durning** says:

September 1, 2011 at 5:19 pm

Great story, Willie.

Also, your tale about the kitchen worker in Portland is relevant. Care to relate it again here?

[Reply](#)**Willie Weir** says:

September 3, 2011 at 10:19 am

I was talking with a cook at a rib joint in Portland. He was in his 20's. I asked him if he rode a bike. He replied, "Yeah." His one-word reply was delivered with a downward inflection.

It was an odd response. Bike riders are normally an enthusiastic bunch.

I asked him why he rode a bike.

"So my friends don't give me sh\$%."

I was amused and amazed. Portland has actually turned our American (car culture) social norms upside down. Here was a guy who rode a bike, not for exercise, or to save the planet, or even to save money. He rode a bike to fit in.

Now when the day arrives that pop lyrics contain more references to bikes and buses than cars ... WOW! Hope I live long enough to hear it.

**John Bailo** says:

September 1, 2011 at 5:44 pm

They may be "driving less" but are they being driven as much or more...as in by parents and peers in their automobiles?

Seems like kids weaned on soccer Mom's taxi would be playing that out as long as possible, living in their bedrooms until 35 and playing Xbox until 6am.

[Reply](#)**Clark Williams-Derry** says:

September 1, 2011 at 7:44 pm

Maybe. But if parents were doing their driving for their kids, I think you'd see a \*boost\* in driving among the older set – but instead, you saw across-the-board declines.

Still, perhaps older parents were doing some extra driving for 20- and 30-something "kids." But it may be hard to disentangle how much of that shift was economic necessity, and how much was lifestyle choice. The two have a tendency to intertwine: sometimes, people rationalize actions taken by necessity as "choices," and vice versa.

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