

BBC NEWS

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Why are US teenagers driving less?

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By Brian Wheeler
BBC News, Washington

American teenagers are taking to the road in fewer numbers than ever before. What's behind this trend and does it mean the end of the car as adolescent status symbol and rite of passage?

If Ferris Bueller had a day off now, would he spend it on Facebook?

Recent research suggests many young Americans prefer to spend their money and time chatting to their friends online, as opposed to the more traditional pastime of cruising around in cars.

For the high school students in films like Ferris Bueller's Day Off and American Graffiti, cars were the ultimate expression of individuality and personal freedom - just as they have been for generations of Americans.

"It was a rite of passage and something to look forward to. You were only one of the cool kids if you drove and had your own vehicle," says Kristin Nevels, of the American Automobile Association.

Keith Martin, editor of Sportscar Market magazine, puts it more poetically: "Kids in the 50s and 60s wanted a set of wheels and they wanted a set of sexy wheels.

"It goes back to the the Wild West, when you got your first horse. You don't have to sit in your mom and dad's buggy any more. You have personal mobility."

'Act of rebellion'

But with money tight in many households, and the cost of gas and insurance soaring, some youngsters are having to choose between buying a car and owning the latest smartphone or tablet.

In a survey to be published later this year by Gartner, 46% of 18 to 24-year-olds said they would choose internet access over owning their own car. The figure is 15% among the baby boom generation, the people that grew up in the 1950s and 60s - seen as the golden age of American motoring.

Wally Neil, a 25-year-old wholefood salesman, from Raleigh North Carolina, was determined to stand out from the crowd by not getting a driving licence and a car as soon as he was old enough.

But it was a decision made easier by the fact that he could speak to his friends online and play games with them over the internet so did not feel he was missing out.

"We were all pretty closely connected, even before Facebook.

"So we were not driving to our friends' houses, there was the gaming network and all that. We were putting the car on the back burner.

"There is a lot to be said for the video game killing the need for a car for a lot of kids."

For Wally, whose father Dan is a motoring writer and sports car enthusiast, walking everywhere or taking the bus when he was a teenager, rather than learning to drive, was "an act of rebellion".

Tougher tests

But he still had to put up with the taunts of his friends, he says, who could not wait to get behind the wheel and thought public transport was "for losers".

"I was ridiculed a little bit in my peer group but I was also saving a lot of money at the

time."

There is no question that fewer teenagers are on the roads in the US.

In 1978, 50% of 16-year-olds had obtained their first driving licence. In 2008, according to the US Transportation Department, it was just 30%.

The number of those aged 19 and under with driving licences has also been in steady decline since its 1978 peak, when 11,989,000 had one. In 2010, it was 9,932,441, or 4.1% of American drivers.

In the UK, 683,273 teenagers have driving licences - just 1.85% of total licence holders, according to Department of Transport figures from September 2010.

But the decline in the US may have more to do with tougher tests and the introduction of graduated licences in many states, which force drivers aged under 16 to be accompanied by licensed drivers of 21 years and older, than the growth of social networking.

Regional variations

In recent years, the annual number of journeys being made by American drivers of all ages has declined significantly for the first time ever.

Car use began falling in 2007, when average petrol prices almost doubled to \$4.12 a gallon, and the economy started its slide into recession.

But there are signs it is back on an upward trajectory and America remains a country dominated by the automobile.

It has a higher number of cars per head of population than any other country in the world, apart from the tiny principality of Monaco.

"Vehicles will always be a popular mode of transportation in America. You have to take into consideration some places don't have access to mass transit. Cars are the only way some people can get around," says Kristin Nevels.

This makes driving an imperative in some rural states, where roughly twice as many teenagers are on the road than in major metropolitan areas.

Nevertheless, Wally Neil's father Dan, a motoring writer for the Wall Street Journal, is convinced that "American youth have fallen out of love with automobiles" because of the rising cost of motoring and the fact that they are "living their lives online".

He refuses to get misty-eyed about the "golden age" of teenage driving, however.

"The sadder of the two generations may be the earlier one, who spent their teenage years driving aimlessly around, with the car at the centre of all their mating rituals, struggling to make sense of where they were, clearly associating their status with the kind of car they drive.

"There is a great deal of pathos in America's love affair with the car and the open road as a symbol of freedom.

"The road isn't free. There is a fantastic downside of life based around the automobile."

'Safety regulations'

Keith Martin, who has teenage children, in addition to a collection of 10 high-powered classic sports cars, says American's post-War "sense of self-confidence" found perfect expression in its automobiles, which were "noisy, sexy and stylish".

Today's teenagers still love fast cars but as fantasy objects, he argues. Driving is much less fun than it used to be because of increased traffic congestion and the fact that the kind of cars most people can afford are "utilitarian" and difficult to customise.

"Modern cars are impossible to work on without screwing up the safety regulations," he says.

But he adds: "Teenagers are finding their own way in a different world to the one we grew up in. They have different means of connecting. In the 50s and 60s jumping in the car was all they had."

Wally Neil thinks the American teenager's romance with the automobile is far from over: "I think it will come back. I just don't see any longevity in Facebook or Twitter."

He finally obtained a driving licence two years ago and says he has never looked back.

"I have moved close to work now but I still use my car to get here. It is just so good to

have it now. I know the value of it to a tee."

[Your comments \(214\)](#)

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92. MikeSimplex

28TH NOVEMBER 2011 - 9:45

+15

Motoring is beyond the reach of most young people, unless they have wealthy parents or they are prepared to risk the danger of driving as a named driver. Increasingly the insurers are not prepared to accept named drivers on parents policies unless they meet ever more limiting restrictions.

Motoring is becoming even for adults 30+ on clean licenses a financial burdon bordering on the rediculous.

72. Khurram

28TH NOVEMBER 2011 - 8:36

+2

There is one VERY IMPORTANT not mentioned in the article for the loss of car-love in American public: SPEED LIMITS!

I doubt there were strict speed limits in 50s/60s and I've heard that driving was pure fun.

Think about this: why should I buy a V8 muscle car when I can go no faster than a Toyota Yaris?

67. rupertroque

28TH NOVEMBER 2011 - 8:19

-2

In the '60's the three curses of our age had not been invented- Global wa---sorry, they now hedge bets with 'climate change', don't they? health & safety and the laptop. Kids did not have to feel overprivilaged or anti-social if they drove, and actually had to leave the house and discover the world for themselves. I'm one 64 year old whose happy to let others scramble for the moral high ground.

63. Mosaid

28TH NOVEMBER 2011 - 8:06

+2

Totally disagree with Wally's dad, I couldn't wait to get behind the wheel and drive around showing off and most of all exploring my sexuality. We were never lost or driving aimlessly, the whole concept of going out into the big world understanding adulthood came free, now you have kids who are not streetwise know nothing and rely on their parents to spoon feed them the latest gadgets.

58. Jack Kilms

28TH NOVEMBER 2011 - 7:21

+4

I am not sure it is fuel prices. If you have an old Mustang you spend more time polishing it than driving it.

Unfortunately my experience of American (and other) young adults involves locked up in your room on Facebook, texting at meal times and performing the tasks you need to live as quickly as possible

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