

**The New York Times**

June 29, 2013

# The End of Car Culture

By **ELISABETH ROSENTHAL**

PRESIDENT OBAMA'S ambitious goals to curb the United States' greenhouse gas emissions, [unveiled last week](#), will get a fortuitous assist from an incipient shift in American behavior: recent studies suggest that Americans are buying fewer cars, driving less and getting fewer licenses as each year goes by.

That has left researchers pondering a fundamental question: Has America passed peak driving?

The United States, with its broad expanses and suburban ideals, had long been one of the world's prime car cultures. It is the birthplace of the Model T; the home of Detroit; the place where Wilson Pickett immortalized "Mustang Sally" and the Beach Boys, "Little Deuce Coupe."

But America's love affair with its vehicles seems to be cooling. When adjusted for population growth, the number of miles driven in the United States peaked in 2005 and dropped steadily thereafter, according to an analysis by Doug Short of [Advisor Perspectives](#), an investment research company. As of April 2013, the number of miles driven per person was nearly 9 percent below the peak and equal to where the country was in January 1995. Part of the explanation certainly lies in the recession, because cash-strapped Americans could not afford new cars, and the unemployed weren't going to work anyway. But by many measures the decrease in driving preceded the downturn and appears to be persisting now that recovery is under way. The next few years will be telling.

"What most intrigues me is that rates of car ownership per household and per person started to come down two to three years before the downturn," said Michael Sivak, who studies the trend and who is a research professor at the University of Michigan's Transportation Research Institute. "I think that means something more fundamental is going on."

If the pattern persists — and many sociologists believe it will — it will have beneficial implications for carbon emissions and the environment, since transportation is the second largest source of America's emissions, just behind power plants. But it could have negative implications for the car industry. Indeed, companies like Ford and Mercedes are already rebranding themselves "mobility" companies with a broader product range beyond the personal vehicle.

“Different things are converging which suggest that we are witnessing a long-term cultural shift,” said [Mimi Sheller](#), a sociology professor at Drexel University and director of its Mobilities Research and Policy Center. She cites various factors: the Internet makes telecommuting possible and allows people to feel more connected without driving to meet friends. The renewal of center cities has made the suburbs less appealing and has drawn empty nesters back in. Likewise the rise in cellphones and car-pooling apps has facilitated more flexible commuting arrangements, including the evolution of shared van services for getting to work.

With all these changes, people who stopped car commuting as a result of the recession may find less reason to resume the habit.

On top of that, city, state and federal policies that for more than half a century encouraged suburbanization and car use — from mortgage lending to road building — are gradually being diluted or reversed. “They created what I call a culture of ‘automobility,’ and arguably in the last 5 to 10 years that is dying out,” Ms. Sheller said.

New York’s new bike-sharing program and its skyrocketing bridge and tunnel tolls reflect those new priorities, as do a proliferation of car-sharing programs across the nation.

Demographic shifts in the driving population suggest that the trend may accelerate. There has been a large drop in the percentage of 16- to 39-year-olds getting a license, while older people are likely to retain their licenses as they age, Mr. Sivak’s research has found.

He and I have similar observations about our children. Mine (19 and 21) have not bothered to get a driver’s license, even though they both live in places where one could come in handy. They are interested, but it’s not a priority. They organize their summer jobs and social life around where they can walk or take public transportation or car-pool with friends.

Mr. Sivak’s son lives in San Francisco and has a car but takes Bay Area Rapid Transit, when he can, even though that often takes longer than driving. “When I was in my 20s and 30s,” Mr. Sivak said, “I was curious about what kind of car people drove, but young people don’t really care. A car is just a means of getting from A to B when BART doesn’t work.”

[A study last year](#) found that driving by young people decreased 23 percent between 2001 and 2009. The millennials don’t value cars and car ownership, they value technology — they care about what kinds of devices you own, Ms. Sheller said. The percentage of young drivers is inversely related to the availability of the Internet, Mr. Sivak’s research has found. Why spend an hour driving to work when you could take the bus or train and be online?

From 2007 to 2011, the age group most likely to buy a car shifted from the 35 to 44 group to

the 55 to 64 group, he found.

Whether members of the millennial generation will start buying more cars once they have kids to take to soccer practice and school plays remains an open question. But such projections have important business implications, even if car buyers are merely older or buying fewer cars in a lifetime rather than rejecting car culture outright.

At the [Mobile World Congress](#) last year in Barcelona, Spain, Bill Ford, executive chairman of the Ford Motor Company, laid out a business plan for a world in which personal vehicle ownership is impractical or undesirable. He proposed partnering with the telecommunications industry to create cities in which “pedestrian, bicycle, private cars, commercial and public transportation traffic are woven into a connected network to save time, conserve resources, lower emissions and improve safety.”

While President Obama’s efforts to reduce emissions will benefit from Americans’ reduced interest in driving, China’s leaders will have no such luck: there, personal car ownership is growing by more than 10 percent annually.

*Elisabeth Rosenthal is a reporter who covers environment and health for The New York Times.*