

THEME 01

Will new generations travel differently?

MOBILITY

TECHNOLOGICAL
INNOVATION

GENERATIONAL
DIFFERENCES

Many analysts have claimed that younger generations are no longer interested in owning a car and will display rather different travel behavior from their predecessors. While some change is already observable today, they travel less and do so by car less frequently, it is not entirely clear whether this is reflective of an underlying shift in mentality or simply the result of (temporary) socio-economic factors. Because of this, it is still unclear whether they will start buying and driving cars as soon as they get older and wealthier, or whether they will remain open to other, more sustainable, flexible or shared modes of transportation.

Our observations

- [In OECD countries, more than 80%](#) of passenger transport takes place by car. In non-OECD countries this is only 41%, but this percentage will increase, along with growing wealth, to more than 50% towards 2040 (at the expense of public transport and two-wheelers).
- In The Netherlands, people in the age group 18-24 made [22% fewer trips](#) in 2009 than they did in 1995 and covered 8% fewer kilometers. Also, travel time reduced by 9%, which is quite a significant deviation from the supposedly constant [travel time budget](#). Time, distance and number of trips dropped steadily over this period (i.e. no direct relation to economic growth or decline). It was mostly young men who travelled less (far).
- The average distance travelled by car, by the 18-24 age group, dropped from [20 to 17 km](#) during this period (and remained more or less stable as a percentage of total distance travelled). A similar drop was visible for the 25-29 age group, although they travel more in general, and much more by car (~50% of distance travelled). Our living world is increasingly supplied with sensors and with the resulting data, we increasingly gain insights into the complexity of the interdependencies between living organisms. For instance, sensors and the datafication of forests have laid bare the [complex web of communications between trees](#).
- More recent data also shows that, in the Netherlands, car ownership is rising in general (from 494 cars per 1,000 inhabitants in 2006 to 530 in 2016). Only the age group 18-30 has shown a [decline in ownership](#) (from 308 in 2006 to 284 per 1,000 inhabitants in 2016).
- In the U.K., in the period 2010-2014, people aged 17-29 travelled [36% less often by car](#) as compared to the same age group in 1995-1999. Driver's license ownership declined similarly from 48% to 29% for 17-20 year olds and from 75% to 63% for 21-29 year olds (between 1992 and 2014).
- In the U.S., millennials (i.e. those born between 1979 and 2000) [travel less, own fewer cars](#) and have lower driver's license rates. Moreover, the youngest in this cohort (born between 1988 and 1994) spend significantly more time in-home than older millennials.
- Data from the Netherlands, the U.K. and the U.S. suggests that the most fundamental trend underlying these changes is an "extended youth" of studying longer, hence having less income available for (ever more expensive) travelling by car (and acquiring a driver's license). Also, young people tend to live in [urban areas](#) more often and this is where the decline in (car-based) travel is strongest. Data from each of these countries also suggests that these changes are mostly temporarily; as soon as millennials find (full-time) employment and start a family, they exhibit similar travel behavior as older people.
- There is sparse evidence of a changing attitude towards cars. [Australian](#) youth still consider owning a car a symbol of adulthood and maturity, but not so much of status, and an [American](#) study shows that young Americans no longer see their car as an absolute necessity.
- The Dutch bicycle-as-a-service company [Swapfiets](#) has amassed 100,000 customers in 4 years' time. Most of its customers are young millennials and older members of Gen Z.



Connecting the dots

The notion that young people no longer care about cars as a status symbol has become somewhat of an urban myth. Marketeers and consultants easily point to this “fact”, and even though solid proof is still lacking, the argument is often used to substantiate the claim that new generations will buy fewer cars and be more open to alternative means of transportation (e.g. bicycles, other forms of micro-mobility or public transport).

Interestingly, millennials and Gen Z indeed show different travel behavior from young people in, for instance, the 1990s. They travel less in general, spend more time at home, and travel less by car. Also, they have fewer driver’s licenses and own fewer cars. Yet, as soon as they grow up, find a (well-paying) job and have kids, they are quick to adopt the same kind of travel behavior as their parents and grandparents. Research provides several interlinked explanations for this postponing of “adult travel behavior”. Most of all, it seems, the explanation can be found in young people having less money and less need to travel a lot. They extend their education to when they are well into their twenties, they stay home with their parents longer and more often live in urban areas, where non-car-based travel is more feasible. On the contrary, evidence for a more fundamental shift in attitude towards cars and mobility is still lacking. In Europe as well as the U.S. and Australia, it appears that young people still **want to buy a car** and still recognize it as an important means of expressing themselves and their social status. Moreover, environmental concerns are (at least in the Netherlands) no reason not to travel by car.

Nevertheless, there are reasons to believe that today’s youth and young adults will bring some change to the mobility landscape when they grow

older. They are getting used to different forms of non-car-based travel and even though most of them might end up buying a car, they are also likely to remain open to alternatives and, most of all, not to view their car as the only option available. Also, they are growing up using advanced forms of route planning, including options for cars, bicycles and public transport, and understand that different circumstances (e.g. time of day, weather) favor different modes of transportation. Most of all, these people will grow older in a world where there are many more alternatives available; from car sharing schemes to all sorts of micro-mobility solutions and, eventually, genuine mobility-as-a-service offerings.

Gen Z, and **Gen Alpha** after them, may also show other characteristics that could “prevent” them from buying cars and solely travelling by car. As we have noted before, **Gen Z** are the children of the Great Financial Crisis and they have been raised by (overly) protective parents. This has made for a highly sensitive and vulnerable generation that suffers severely from mental health issues and prefers to stay at home (and travel less). Also, they have grown up using digital platforms, make far less of a distinction between the “real” and the “virtual” and find truly meaningful experiences in online environments such as Fortnite or TikTok, possibly using them to professional aims as well (again, allowing them to stay at home). When they do go out, they expect the real world to exhibit the same kind of frictionless experience as their virtual habitats. As-a-service solutions (for bicycles, like Swapfiets, or mobility in general) tap into that desire and could take flight once this generation has the financial means and need to travel more.

Implications

- The trends of “extended youth” and postponed “adult travel behavior” are structural, but so far, these effects have appeared only to last only until people become “adults” after all. Yet, genuine generational factors (i.e. for Gen Z) may come into play in the coming decade(s), decrease overall travel demand and lead to lower car ownership. Public transport and forms of micro-mobility are likely to profit (at least relative to car-based travel). Clearly, this demand will occur mostly in urban areas with sufficient density for (cost-)effective public transport and last-mile solutions.
- While Gen Z, according to generational theorists, could really show a different attitude towards mobility, their attitude is only one factor in a complex web of factors that shape practices of mobility. Urban shape, mobility infrastructures, social conventions and other factors also matter and change will likely be slower than one would expect from looking solely at generational characteristics.