

ANALYSIS BRIEF

TRENDS IN VMT



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Since 2004 there has been a slowing of the growth in vehicle miles travelled (VMT) in the US and more recently a decline in the per capita rate of vehicle travel. VMT has been measured for each state and documented by the Federal Highway Administration since 1978. When the total measured VMT is divided by the population the result is a measure of the rate of vehicle travel—per capita VMT. Figure 1 shows the trends in this measure for the U.S. from 1995 through 2012.

This brief discusses some of the differences in VMT trends for people of different ages, genders, and in different parts of the country.

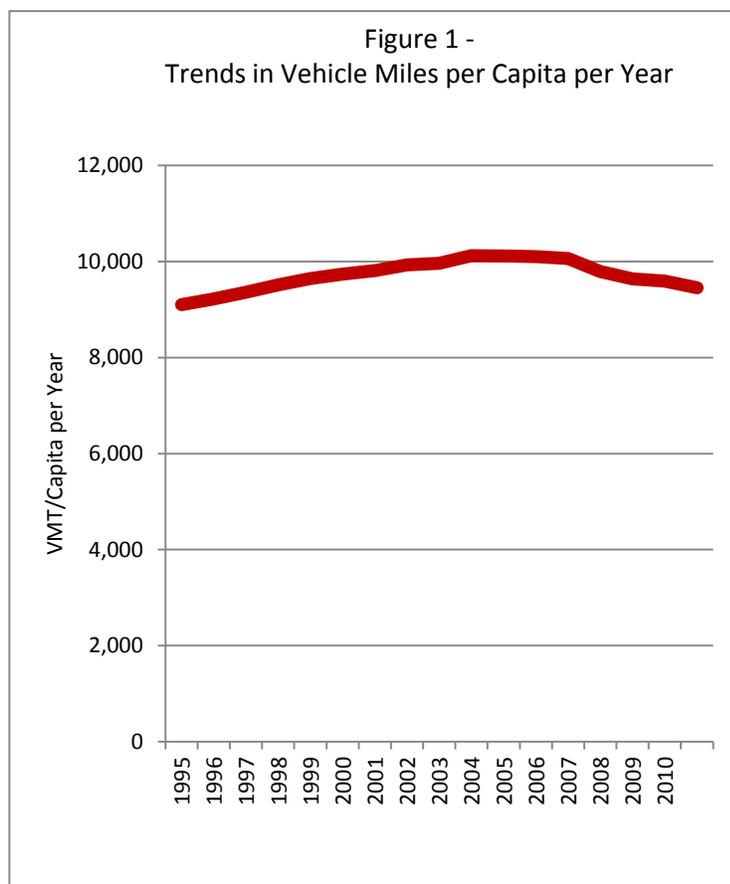
One trend that has been well-documented is the surge of older drivers. About half of people aged 85 and older are driving now compared to less than 15 percent in the 1970s. Older people—especially older women—are driving more miles than in previous generations.

On the other hand, younger people are less likely to be licensed to drive than in the past, and are driving fewer miles. In 1960 almost all (97%) of people aged 20-29 were licensed to drive compared to 8 out of ten people in the same age group today. In addition, young men in particular are driving much less than they did in the past—according to the National Household Travel Survey data series young men aged 20-29 drive 10 fewer miles per day on average than they did in 1995 while young women drive 2.5 miles less on average.

This decline in young men's driving coupled with the smaller decline by women of the same age is an historic shift, erasing a long-standing gender difference in vehicle travel rates between young men and women. There is much discussion of

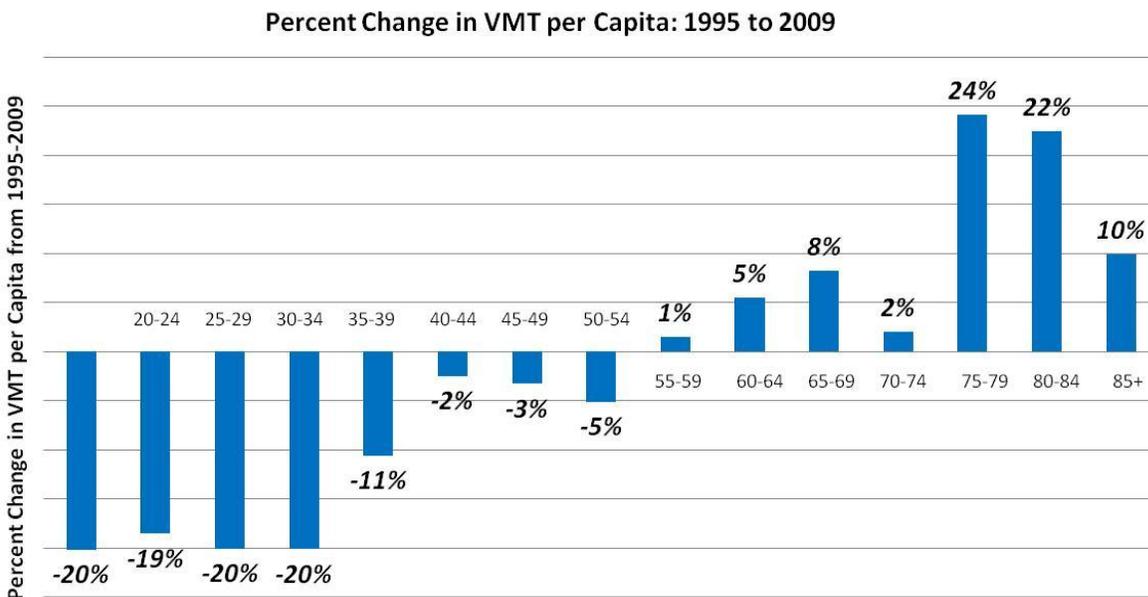
whether these patterns will persist as young people move through their lives. The trends in driving rates by people of different ages are shown in Figure 2.

The declines in driving for young people are most prominent in urban areas where they have revived transit, bicycling, and even inter-city bus—and new modes like rideshare have been invented. During the 1990s young people (16-29) in urban areas drove around 75 percent of the vehicle miles of young people in rural locations but the most recent data show that proportion has dropped to just 56 percent.



The trend is significant in the youngest drivers—those 16-19 years old in urban areas drive nearly 30 percent less than they did in 1995, while their rural counterparts drive just 8 percent fewer miles.

Figure 2 – Trends in Driving Rates by Age Group



Source: McGuckin’s analysis of the NHTS data series

It is important to note that younger people are not just driving less but are traveling less by all means than they did in the 1990s. When measured in minutes of travel—which recognizes the possible effect of a travel time budget—young men (aged 20-29) are spending 15 percent less time in travel by all means and for all purposes than a decade ago and comparable young women 10 percent less time.

But state to state differences in VMT trends are striking—especially when comparing the changes in vehicle miles per capita (which would remove the effect of differences in population growth). Some states have fast-growing populations while others do not—but travel rates are influenced by employment and land-use changes as well. For example, North Dakota had a just 1 percent change in population but a 12 percent increase in VMT per capita (shown in Figure 3¹).

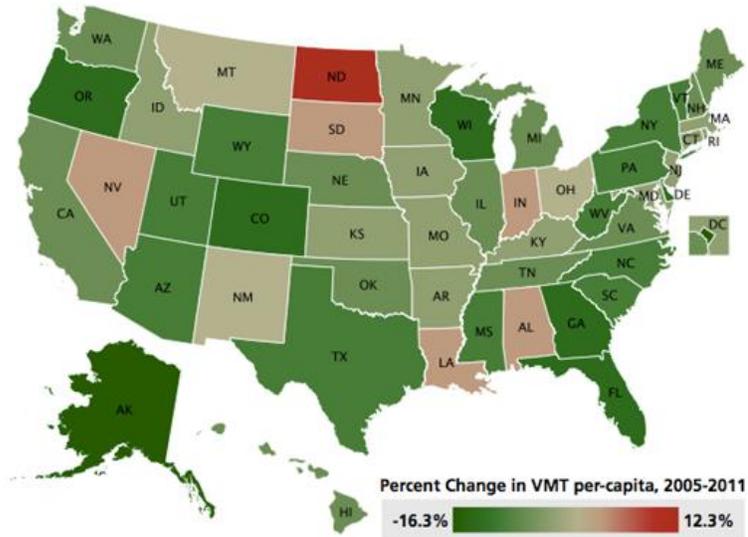
According to a recent report by US PIRG² North Dakota, Nevada, Louisiana and Alabama are the only states in the nation where driving miles per capita in 2011 were above their 2004 or 2005 peaks. Meanwhile, since 2005, double-digit percent reductions occurred in a diverse collection of states: Alaska, Delaware, Oregon, Georgia, Wyoming, South Carolina, the District of Columbia, Pennsylvania, Indiana and Florida.

¹ Source of graphic: “Americans are driving less: the state-by-state story”, Emily Peterson, October 1, 2013 - See more at: <http://www.ecowest.org/2013/10/01/americans-are-driving-less-the-state-by-state-story/#sthash.PvE1cziw.dpuf>

² “Moving Off the Road: a State by State Analysis of the National Decline in Driving” U.S. PIRG Education Fund, Aug 2013 <http://uspig.org/reports/usp/moving-road>

Figure 3 – Percent Change in Rates of Vehicle Travel per Person, 2005-2011

After decades of continual increases in vehicle travel, it is hard to forecast a trend based on the last six or seven years as a ‘new normal’ without a viable theory with sufficient evidence to back it up. The recession and unemployment, extended adolescence and restricted driving rights, shifts to transit and non-motorized travel in resurging urban areas—all of these must certainly play a part.

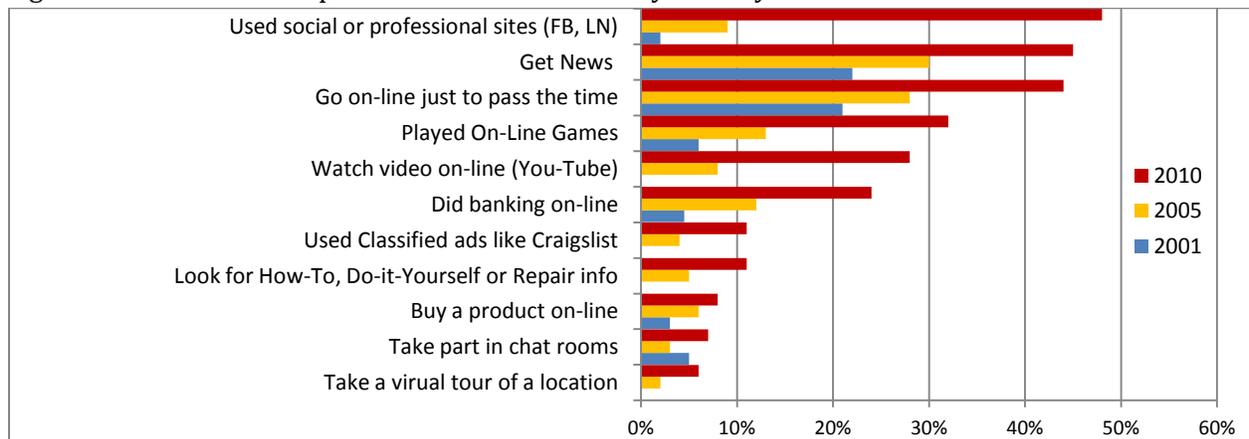


However, one factor that is not mentioned enough is all around us: Information and Communication Technology.

Eighty-six percent of US adults use the internet; Figure 4 shows the percent of these who reported engaging in each selected activity ‘yesterday’. Not every on-line activity has a travel equivalent. Some activities add to travel while some provide substitutes, and many are used in conjunction with travel, such as browsing on-line before purchasing something at the store, or the opposite ‘show-rooming’ in person at the store and yet purchasing on-line later.

System changes can have a complex set of impacts on travel behavior, and there are many historic examples of unexpected shifts. But obtaining evidence on how on-line behavior links to choices about travel might illuminate some of the reasons Americans are driving less.

Figure 4³ - Percent of People Who Use the Internet by Activity



³ Source of the graphic: McGuckin’s analysis of the Pew “Usage over Time” data: www.pewinternet.org/data-trend/internet-use/internet-use-over-time