

ANALYSIS BRIEF

MODE LOYALTY: USUAL VS ACTUAL COMMUTE



Nancy McGuckin
www.travelbehavior.us

The National Household Travel Survey (NHTS) asks workers about their ‘usual’ commute in the same way the American Community Survey (ACS) asks about worker’s usual means of transportation to work ‘last week’. In addition, the NHTS obtains travel data for a single, assigned day which includes how these same workers actually traveled to work. We find important differences when comparing how workers reports their “usual” commute and how they actually traveled to work on the assigned day. Greater day-to-day variations in commuting can make it difficult to assess the proportion of workers using a specific mode of travel, complicating the travel demand estimation and forecasting commonly used in infrastructure design and transit planning.

The NHTS data shows that workers who report ‘drive alone’ as their usual means of commuting ‘last week’ are the most loyal—nationwide, people who drive are the most likely to either drive alone or share a ride for their commute on the assigned travel day. Over a quarter of workers who reported that they usually walked to work commuted in a vehicle on the travel day (7.3 percent drove alone, and another 18.4 percent shared a ride). Almost one out of five workers who usually took transit commuted in a vehicle on the travel day (4.8 percent drove alone, and another 18.4 percent shared a ride).

Figure 1 – Percent of Workers by their Usual and Actual Means of Commuting (2017 NHTS)

Worker's 'Usual' Means of Travel to Work: 	Usual Mode Share:	Same worker's commute mode on the travel day: 				
		Drive Alone	Share a Ride	Transit	Walk	Bike
Drove Alone	76.6%	86.1%	12.9%	0.2%	0.6%	0.1%
Carpool	11.4%	36.8%	60.3%	1.1%	1.4%	0.2%
Transit	6.9%	4.8%	14.8%	70.5%	7.0%	0.8%
Walk	2.9%	7.3%	18.4%	2.6%	69.6%	0.9%
Bike	1.2%	8.1%	12.1%	3.3%	4.6%	70.2%
Actual Mode Share:	100%*	71.0%	18.8%	5.3%	3.2%	1.0%

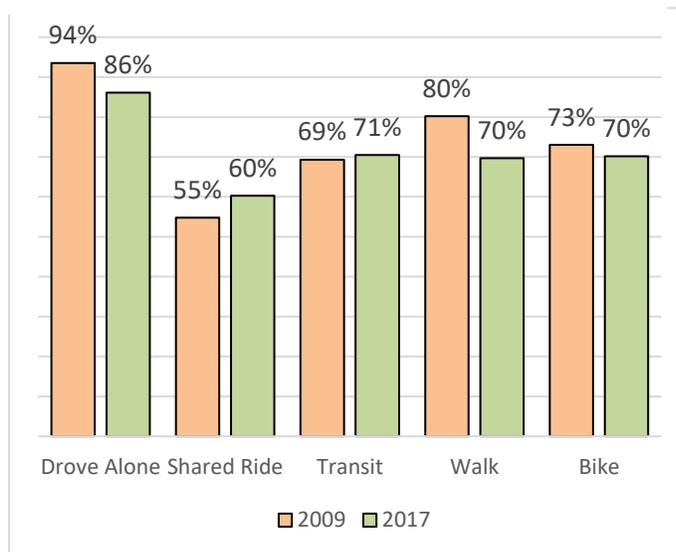
Note: Based on workers who reported both a usual commute mode 'last week' and a commute trip mode on the assigned travel day. Table does not show all means of travel. 'Shared Ride' does not include 'Uber/lyft'.

However, there is evidence from the NHTS data series that workers who usually drive may be less loyal to driving than previous decades (Figure 2). For example, the trend data show that in 2009, 94 percent of workers who usually drove alone to work reported driving alone on the travel day. In comparison, in 2017 86 percent of workers who usually drove alone reported driving alone on the travel day. Just this

small proportional difference represents over 12.5 million workers shifting their commute behavior (nationwide).

People—especially younger workers-- in large urban areas with many travel options are less loyal to their 'usual' means of travel for commuting than in the past. Figure 3 shows the perceived optimal situations, benefits, and barriers for the major means of commuting from an attitudinal study conducted recentlyⁱ. Some days workers may want to engage in active travel during their commute (walking or biking), on others they may drive. Some transit riders identify the ability to use their device for games or leisure activities or to continue to work as a reason to use transitⁱⁱ.

Figure 2 – Trends in the Percent of Workers who Commuted by 'Usual' Means on Travel Day



Whatever the individual's reason for shifting commute mode, developing a greater understanding of the variation in day-to-day commuting is important for regional travel demand modeling which builds on the Census/ACS journey-to-work data, and for policy and performance measurement related to congestion and peak travel characteristics.

Figure 3 –Perceived Benefits, Barriers, and Optimal Situations for Commute Means

	Walking	Driving	Bus/Rail	Bicycle
Optimal Situations	Nice Outside Need Exercise	Getting There ASAP Bad Weather Shopping	To or From Work Alone	Nice Outside Need Exercise
Perceived benefits	Better for Environment Affordable Connected to Community	More Personal Space Flexible	Pay-per-Use/Affordable Better for Environment	Better for Environment Affordable Connected to Community
Top Barriers	Slow	Too Expensive	Lack of Personal Space	Slow Not Child Friendly Not Compatible with Other Modes

ⁱ TCRP Web-only Document 61, *Millennials and Mobility: Understanding the Millennial Mindset and New Opportunities for Transit Providers*, 2016, available at: <http://www.trb.org/Publications/Blurbs/169527.aspx>, Latitudes Phase 2 Findings, page 15

ⁱⁱ Chaddick Institute, *The Digitally Connected Commuter: The Rising Use of Personal Electronic Devices on Chicago Commuter Trains*, DePaul University, 2015. Available at: <https://las.depaul.edu>