

# The Proportion of Young Americans Who Drive Has Plummeted—And No One Knows Why

**F**or decades, U.S. youth culture revolved around cars. Iconic American hits, from the Beach Boys' "[Little Deuce Coupe](#)" to Bruce Springsteen's "[Thunder Road](#)," sang of horsepower, speed and open highway. The seminal shift from childhood to adulthood occurred at age 16, when seemingly every red-blooded American kid (except the suspect ones who lived in Manhattan) scored a driver's license. Maturity, adventure and freedom came in the form of four wheels and a full tank of gas.

Not, perhaps, anymore. An emerging body of national statistics bears out what observers of the bike-rack gridlock in Millennial-heavy neighborhoods like Washington's Petworth or San Francisco's Tenderloin may have guessed at: Today's American teenagers and twenty-somethings aren't loving—or driving—cars nearly as much as their predecessors did. They're getting their freedom from smartphones, which can travel distances and reach speeds that make cars seem quaint. They're increasingly interested in commuting by bike or public transit. And growing numbers of them say they see cars more as nuisances and less as toys.

If this change proves broad and enduring—a postmodern, post-automotive generational shift — it will have profound implications: for how the federal government spends transportation dollars, for how auto and oil companies make money, for future patterns of U.S. real-estate development. But that's a big "if." The signs of this change are new and spotty, so the extent of the change remains wildly unclear. This may indeed be the end of an era: American car culture running out of gas. Or it may be something less revolutionary: a shift in the interests mainly of an elite, citified segment of the young—and an economically-driven, and thus ephemeral, shift at that.

That today's youth are driving markedly less than their predecessors seems clear. Between 2001 and 2009, a period in which the recession emerged and gasoline prices shot up, Americans of all ages reduced their driving. The U.S. population grew by about 10 percent during those years, but the total distance Americans drove fell by about 1 percent—a reversal from prior decades, when total miles traveled kept climbing, according to the Federal Highway Administration. Driving fell most sharply during the first decade of this century among those aged 16 to 30. Per-person miles traveled fell 2 percent among those 56 and older; 11 percent among those 31 to 55, and a

massive 25 percent—more than twice as much as for the middle-aged group—among those 16 to 30. Another indicator: The portion of Americans aged 16 to 24 who have driver’s licenses fell to 67 percent in 2011, its lowest level in roughly a half-century, according to federal statistics cited in a [report last year](#) by the U.S. PIRG Educational Fund and the Frontier Group, two environmentally oriented organizations.

What’s going on?

Some contend that, in effect, America’s youth are growing up. The Millennials, they say, see adult autonomy in a new sort of contraption: no longer a physical conveyance with four wheels, but now a virtual conveyance with two earbuds. “The Driving Boom—a six-decade-long period of steady increases in per-capita driving in the United States—is over,” claimed last year’s report from PIRG and the Frontier Group, a study that effusively championed such an outcome and that advocated a number of policy moves intended to hasten it. Millennials—today’s older teenagers and twenty-somethings—are, said the study, which spurred widespread press coverage, “demonstrating significantly different lifestyle and transportation preferences than older generations.”

(Even if today’s young Americans are that anti-auto, environmentalists shouldn’t break out their green Champagne just yet: Whatever happens in the U.S., there are many times more young people in developing countries like China and India, and their demonstrably increased interest in driving is likely to overshadow any ecological gains from reduced driving here.)

Others observers see something more passive and less revolutionary at play in the declining propensity of American young people to drive: Baby Boomers are aging beyond their peak driving years, years that coincided with unbridled American economic growth and with cheap gasoline, and Millennials are approaching their own peak driving years at a time of recession and high pump prices. “Youth are making choices about their travel that are being influenced by the constraints of their personal income,” said a [report](#) published last year by the Federal Highway Administration. “[I]s the car still a symbol of freedom for youth as it has been for previous generations?” it asked. “[F]or most youth, the answer is `yes.’”

Several cyclical factors could help explain the current decline in driving among America’s youth—and, in the process, would suggest America is hardly falling out of love with the car. First, the surge in gasoline prices over the past several years has made car ownership more expensive—and it has done so in a way that’s highly visible, slapping drivers in the face every time they roll their cars up to the pump. Second, the recession has hit young Americans disproportionately hard: According to a 2009 Pew Center report, 37 percent of people aged 18-29 were either unemployed or underemployed, the highest percentage in three decades. Less income means less money for a car payment and for gas. Third, many states, in an attempt to minimize teenagers’ crashes, have instituted so-called graduated standards for driver’s licenses, meaning that teenagers who once got unlimited permission to drive at age 16 now can’t get it until they’re a bit older. That reduces the amount of driving younger teenagers legally could do even if they wanted to get behind the wheel and go.

As for how smartphones and other mobile technologies affect young people's proclivity to drive, apparently it cuts both ways. To be sure, having the virtual world in the palm of your hand opens up a host of transportation options that lessen the need to own a car: It facilitates car-sharing services; it tells you the quickest way to bike between two places; it gives you real-time information about when your subway or bus will arrive; and, because it lets you get work done almost anywhere, it makes time riding public transit inherently more productive than time spent behind the wheel. Indeed, transit ridership is up markedly in many cities, particularly among Millennials. And the fortunes of Zipcar and similar car-sharing services are rising.

But technology also can encourage driving, and there's evidence that that's happening, according to the Federal Highway Administration. "In fact, in one survey year, web use is associated with increases in travel," the agency said in its recent report, noting that the people who have the most access to technology also are the people who have the most money—money they can use to travel.

What, then, to make of those Millennials living in carless bliss in trendy urban neighborhoods from coast to coast? They who drink strong locally-roasted coffee, carry their Apples in understated messenger bags, arrange happy hours through Twitter, and commute by foot, bike or bus, in low-carbon style? Are these the early adopters of an anti-automotive sentiment that soon will sweep the nation?

It's too early to tell. [According to](#) data from the Federal Highway Administration, "zero-vehicle households" encompass two Americas, one unusually rich and one unusually poor. Roughly 4% of those households earn more than \$80,000 annually, a wealthy group concentrated in and around New York. Yet 70% of U.S. zero-vehicle households earn less than \$30,000 per year. It's a spread, in other words, much like many others in certain coastal American cities: Some well-off and often-child-free folks up top, some struggling folks at the bottom, and not many in between.

Things may well be changing in the land of the Mustang and the Explorer. But for now, most carless households in the U.S. remain what they've long been: carless by economic necessity rather than by choice.

*Jeffrey Ball writes the biweekly Resources column at The New Republic and is scholar-in-residence at Stanford University's Steyer-Taylor Center for Energy Policy and Finance, a joint initiative of Stanford's law and business schools.*