

Americans Driving Less — Enjoying not Driving More?

For decades the use of automobiles grew in the U.S. each year. Then the Great Recession hit in 2007. Average auto usage dropped. For some groups it plummeted.

In July of 2004 driving hit an average of 900-miles per month per individual. Last month the Federal Highway Administration released statistics showing miles traveled fell to 820-miles per month in July of 2012.

That's a 9% drop.

However, the good news — if you sell automobiles, oil, tires, or other auto related goodies — is per capita auto use is now back to the level it was in the 1990s. That's awesome for the economy. Or is it?

Pickrell and Pace is a firm that tracks economic growth. One bit of data used to determine the health of the economy is the average number of miles we drive. The tracking company says the economy is tracking better than auto use.

That's unusual. The economy is recovering. Auto use is not.

The group using autos the least are teens and people in the 20s and 30s. More of them are living at home and driving for teens is not the right of passage it used to be.

The question researchers keep asking is why. Some contend the hard hit economy is the reason people have slowed their driving. Others say it is fundamental changes in how we view the automobile as a society. Those living in central cities find traffic and parking problems and costs just aren't worth the price of driving.

Young adults and teens find purchasing and maintaining an auto a daunting proposition. The Center for Automotive Research found the average price of a new car is \$31,000. The Ann Arbor, Michigan firm's chief economist Sean McAlinden said, "We're not selling to everyone. We're selling to upper-middle class to upper class."

The rest buy used cars, or take the bus, or ride a bike.

The cost of insurance, parking, maintenance and other things are also prohibitive. Younger people are more likely to be unemployed than those that are older. This, too, deters auto purchasing and auto usage.



The AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety did a survey and it said those 18 to 20 who live in a household with incomes of \$100,000 or more are three-times more likely to have a driver's license than someone 18 to 20 in a household with \$20,000 per year in income. "I don't think it's a change in people's preferences. I think it's all economics. It might last if the economics stay the same. But if they improve, I think people will come back to driving more. ... Give a person a good job 25 miles away and they'll be at the dealership the next morning," McAlinden said.



In other words, behavior analyst Nancy Mc Guckin — who specializes in auto transportation — notes, "The idea that the car means freedom, I think, is over. The car as a fetish of masculinity is probably over for certain age groups. I don't think young men care as much about the car they drive as they use to."

She also thinks another reason may be that people can't tinker with cars like they used to when the auto was simpler. "You can't open the hood and get to know it the way you used to."

Another change is lifestyles. More people bike to work and use public transportation. Shopping has also changed with more of us going online to purchase goods and services. We also do more bill paying and communication with companies online rather than in person.

The University of Michigan did a study that shows social networking is taking the place of in person visits. We can chat face-to-face on Skype and with mobile device communication applications.

All of this applies to all age groups except 45 to 55. This is when we're the most productive and have the most income says Alan Pisarski who wrote a paper called ***Commuting in America***. These are the Baby Boomers and they're getting older and more sedentary. "They are still the dominant players, and they are moving toward a quieter transportation lifestyle," Pisarski said.

Here's another interesting factoid about driving. Pickrell and Pace say more women than men now have driver's licenses. While driving has declined in every age group except 65 and up — they're driving slightly more — it has not dropped as much for young women and teenage women.