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<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3bp2q1rr>

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Publication Date

2025-03-01

DOI

10.7922/G2GF0RWW

Young Adults Aren't Leaving Home, Socializing, or Traveling as Much Post-Pandemic

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March 2025

Issue

During the COVID-19 pandemic, daily travel per person declined significantly in the U.S as activities that required leaving home were increasingly replaced by information and communication technologies (ICTs), such as smartphones, personal computers, streaming services, and social media. Trips for most purposes declined drastically in the spring of 2020 at the start of the pandemic, and public transit use in particular plummeted. With most of the disruptions of the pandemic over by early 2022, we investigated whether the travel effects of COVID-19 have persisted, especially among young adults (defined as those between the ages 15-29).

We focused on youth, as any long-term shifts in their travel behavior might persist for decades. These younger travelers are transitioning to adulthood by obtaining drivers' licenses, joining the workforce, living independently, and so on. Youth travel may be affected differently by the pandemic than older adults as they are more likely to substitute ICTs for travel, so we examined how youth travel patterns and trends compare to those of middle-aged adults post-pandemic.

Using National Household Travel Survey data from the years 2001, 2009, 2017, and 2022, we analyzed travel patterns—trip-making, travel distance, trip purpose, and travel mode—of young adults (aged 15-29) over time compared to middle-aged adults (aged 30-59). We consider 2022 to be early post-pandemic, while the earlier surveys reflect pre-pandemic trends.

Key Research Findings

Although young adults saw a greater decline in travel vis-a-vis older adults prior to the pandemic, both age groups saw a similar, dramatic decline in travel between 2017 and 2022. The pandemic's effect on travel appears to have persisted despite the end of the public health emergency, though some of the decline may be a continuation of pre-pandemic trends. It is possible that the pandemic, which encouraged the replacement of trips with ICT use, accelerated pre-pandemic travel decline trends.

Vehicle miles traveled (VMT) per young adult driver did not significantly change between 2017 and 2022. This suggests that despite notable pandemic-related declines in trip-making, young adult drivers tended to make fewer trips, but the post-pandemic trips they did make were longer and more likely by car, truck, or motorcycle than before. On the other hand, VMT per driver among middle-aged adults declined, albeit modestly.

Trips for almost every purpose declined between 2017 and 2022, particularly for errands and medical trips, while social/recreational trips fell disproportionately among young adults. It appears that travelers may be substituting online shopping for trips to the store, while young adults replaced substantial numbers of social/recreational trips with increased use of social media, streaming, and gaming (see Figure 1).

Commuting to work is modestly down for all travelers, though more so for middle-aged adults than young

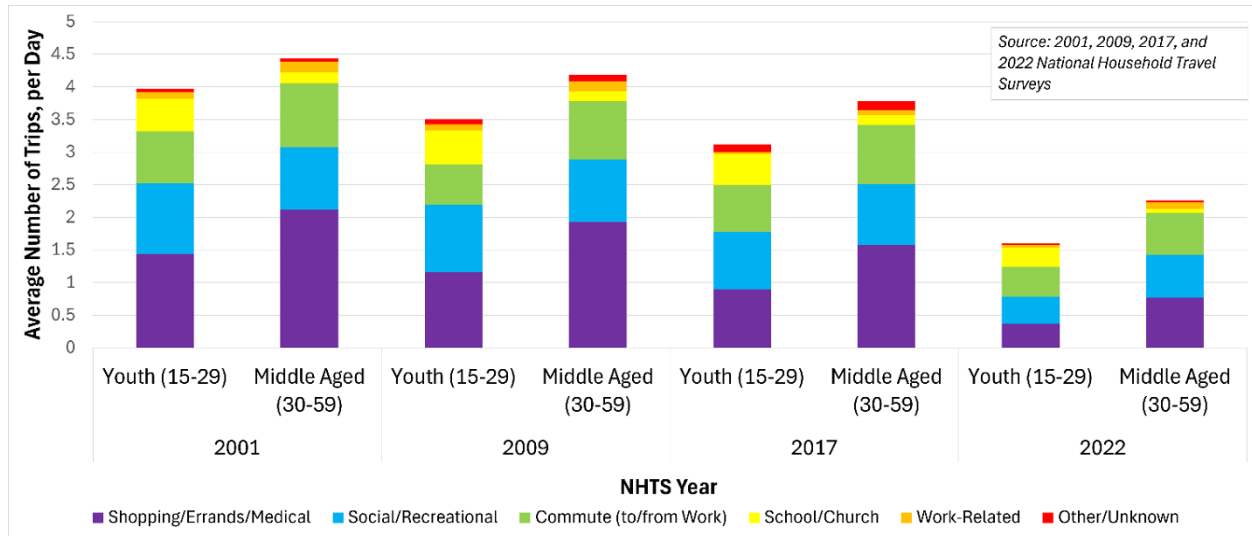


Figure 1. Average Daily Trips per Person by Purpose, 2001-2022

adults. Although the most widely reported post-pandemic trend has been the rise of working from home (enabled by ICT use), the percentage decline in commuting was much smaller than for errands and medical trips for both age groups, and for social/recreational trips among young adults.

Post-pandemic travel appears to be more car-centric than before. Although private vehicle use declined from 2017 to 2022, private vehicles now make up an even larger share of all personal travel, at the cost of more sustainable modes of transportation—walking, biking, and public transit. Public transit use among young adults is particularly down, though driving remains well below that of middle-aged adults.

Conclusions

Our findings have mixed implications for transportation systems, the environment, and individual well-being. The drop in individual trips, especially shopping, may lead to fewer traffic delays and help to lower tailpipe emissions, but not if most of these trips are over longer distances, more often by car, and are replaced to some extent by rising commercial deliveries.

Research presented in this policy brief was made possible through the Resilient and Innovative Mobility Initiative (RIMI) led by the UC Institute of Transportation Studies (UC ITS). RIMI is supported by the State of California through a one-time allocation in the 2021 State Budget Act. The UC ITS created RIMI as a living laboratory – bringing together university experts, policymakers, public agencies, industry stakeholders, and community leaders – to inform the state transportation system’s immediate COVID-19 response and recovery needs, while establishing a long-term vision and pathway for directing innovative mobility to develop sustainable and resilient transportation in California. Established by the California Legislature in 1947, the UC ITS has branches at UC Berkeley, UC Davis, UC Irvine, and UCLA.

Project ID UC-ITS-2024-43-3AB | DOI: 10.7922/G2GF0RWW

The well-being of young adults may have also been negatively affected by post-pandemic shifts in travel and at-home activities toward increased ICT use, underscored by an extremely low level of youth trips for social/recreational purposes. Replacing such trips with online activities may be one factor in the increased depression and loneliness observed among adolescents who spent more time on social media during the pandemic. While transportation policy in recent years has focused on ways to reduce vehicle travel, planners in the years ahead may be grappling instead with ways to coax residents, especially youth, out of the house.

More Information

This policy brief is based on a forthcoming report, “Headed Out Less: Analyzing Teen and Young Adult Travel Trends in the 21st Century,” which will be share to the project webpage at <https://ucits.org/projects/working-from-home-and-travel-what-does-the-future-hold/>. For more information about the findings in this brief, or the report please contact Brian D. Taylor at btaylor@ucla.edu. We would like to thank Phoebe Chiu in the UCLA Institute of Transportation Studies for her assistance with this research.