

Going Nowhere Fast: Why Personal Travel is Down Across the U.S.

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Issue

After a century of almost continuous growth in vehicle travel in the U.S., the first decades of the 21st century saw vehicle miles traveled (VMT) per capita fall slightly, from 9,963 in 2003 to 9,937 in 2019. While some of the decline can be attributed to the Great Recession of 2007-2010, VMT did not fully rebound following the economic recovery. A much slower recovery from the recession among young people, more stringent driver's licensing rules, rising preferences for dense urban living, high gas prices, an aging population, rising environmentalism, and the near saturation of vehicle ownership¹ have all been proffered as possible explanations, but these don't tell the whole story. In a new study, researchers at Clemson University and the UCLA Institute of Transportation Studies suggest we may be seeing a fundamental change in the demand for out-of-home activities that drive vehicle travel. Using data from the American Time Use Survey (ATUS) collected between 2003 and 2019, the authors propose that the fundamental cause of declining per capita travel time is an underlying reduction in the demand for out-of-home activities, driven in part by spectacular advancements in information and communications technology.

Key Research Findings

Out-of-home activity time, excluding travel, dropped by an average of 38 daily minutes between 2003 and 2019, while daily time spent traveling fell seven minutes across the same period. More travel time is associated with being younger, male, higher income, more educated,

Black or Hispanic, a citizen, not widowed, employed, living outside the Midwest, outside of suburbs, and in larger metropolitan areas. Thus, some of the decrease in out-of-home activity time may be due to shifts in overall population demographics, such as an aging society. But these can at best only explain part of the reductions in out-of-home activity and travel time.

Increasing time spent at home may be the result of better computing and communications technology. People are spending more time playing computer games and watching and listening to TV/radio and less time attending live arts, sports, and entertainment events. This suggests that the increasing quality and ubiquity of in-home information and communications technology may be making going out relatively less attractive. Advanced technology has also made remote work, learning, and shopping much easier as both (pre-pandemic) work and shopping outside the home saw dramatic declines during the study period, while in-home work and education-related activity increased. Drops in in-person socializing both inside and outside the home may be the result of increased social media usage and online socializing. In addition to technological advancements, declines in religious observance, volunteering, and caring for others outside the home also explain some of the shift toward in-home activities, and, in turn, to declines in travel.

While nearly all demographic groups reduced their out-of-home activities leading up to the pandemic, young, single, and childless people saw the sharpest drops. This may be because younger people are most likely to adopt new technologies and to have developed their habits

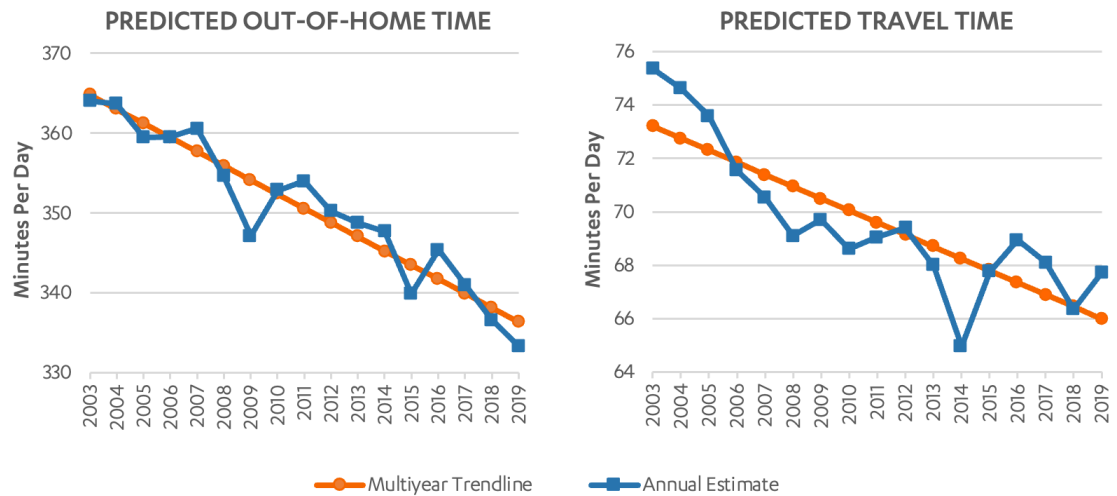


Figure 1. Americans are spending less time away from home and less time traveling over time

during the information revolution.² Another possibility is that younger adults, who spent more time on out-of-home activities in the early 2000s, had more out-of-home time to trade for increased in-home activities by the late 2010s. These long-term secular declines in going out suggest that transportation planners may need to rethink their assumptions about travel demand broadly and latent demand for travel in particular.

While this analysis examined pre-pandemic data, the COVID-19 pandemic likely dramatically accelerated many of the longer-term trends in declining out-of-home activities and time spent traveling. Prior to the pandemic, roughly 6% of Americans were working full-time from home. Following a peak at roughly 40% in May 2020, the current percent of hours worked remotely has persisted at

about 30% through 2022.³ Accordingly, office occupancy nationwide in mid-2022 was only 44% of its pre-pandemic level.⁴ Shopping and recreation shifted into the home as well. As the pandemic becomes endemic, old patterns may reemerge, but those old patterns already entailed declining out-of-home activities and time spent traveling. Remote working, online shopping, and in-home recreation will likely be permanent parts of the landscape of the future. This all points to declining out-of-home activities and personal travel in the months and years ahead.

Further Information

This brief is based on an academic publication under review. For a pre-publication preview, contact corresponding author Eric Morris at emorri7@clemson.edu.

¹ Steven E. Polzin and Xuehao Chu. “Peak Vehicle Miles Traveled and Postpeak Consequences?” *Transportation Research Record: Journal of the Transportation Research Board* 2453, no. 1 (2014), 22–29. <https://doi.org/10.3141/2453-03>.

² Katherine E. Olson, Marita A. O’Brien, Wendy A. Rogers, and Neil Charness “Diffusion of Technology: Frequency of Use for Younger and Older Adults.” *Ageing International* 36, no. 1 (2011), 123–145. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12126-010-9077-9>.

³ Patrick Coate, “Remote Work Before, During, and After the Pandemic,” NCCI, January 25, 2021. https://www.ncci.com/SecureDocuments/QEB/QEB_Q4_2020_RemoteWork.html; Barrero, J. M., Bloom, N., & Davis, S. J. (2021). *Why Working from Home Will Stick* (Working Paper No. 28731; Working Paper Series). National Bureau of Economic Research. <https://doi.org/10.3386/w28731> (with data updated through 2022).

⁴ Weber, L., Grant, P., & Hoffman, L. Big Cities Can’t Get Workers Back to the Office. *Wall Street Journal*, July 7, 2022.

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