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Thanks to the Internet, young Americans drive less

by Audrey Garric, 14 May 2013

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For a long time the car has been the symbol of individual liberty in the United States, immortalized in the legendary *road movies*. But while Americans have continued to roll in an uninterrupted period of 60 years, the number of kilometers driven has started to decrease since the middle of the last decade.



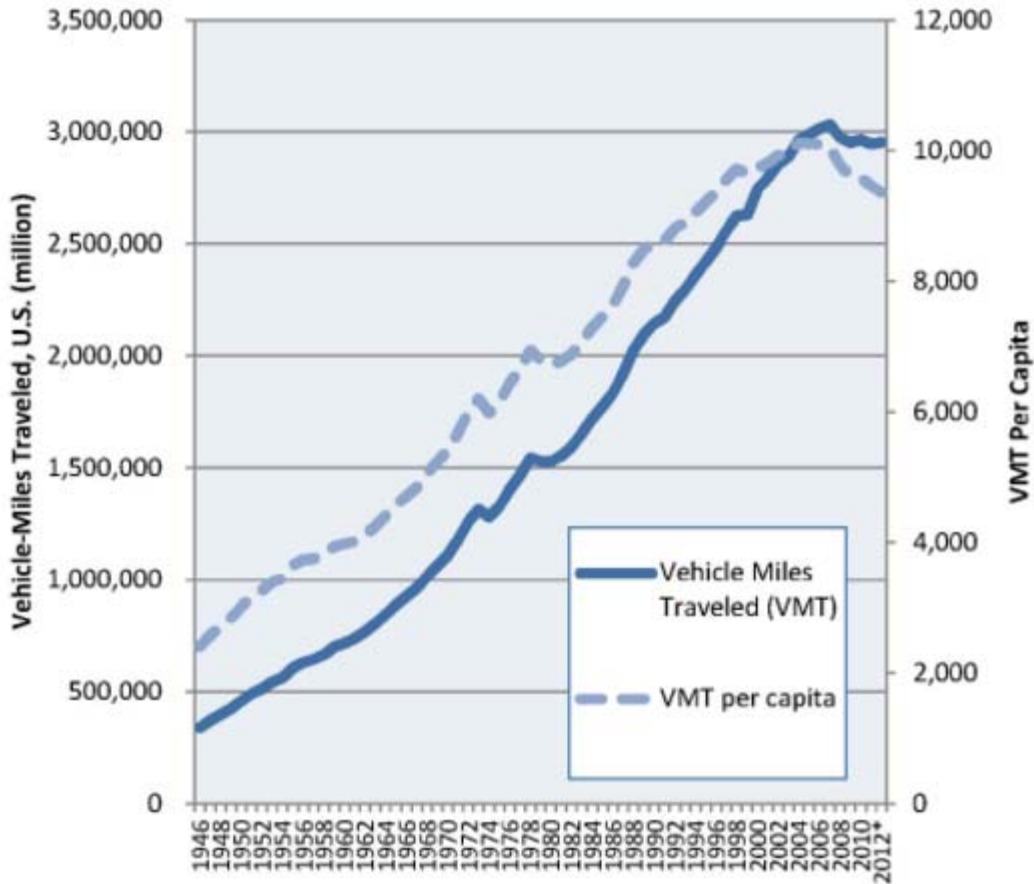
People between the ages of 16 and 34 have driven 23% less kilometers in a car in 2009 compared with 2001, according to a report.

These facts are known and are already the object of research on the other side of the Atlantic. The economic argument is regularly advanced. In fact, drivers have a tendency to take the wheel less in a period of recession, because they work less and try to save money. Above all, the price of gas has exploded since the 1970s.

But according to a new report published Tuesday, 14 May, by the non-governmental agency US Public Interest Research Group, this thesis doesn't explain it all. The modifications of habits of driving have, in effect, preceded the last recession and seem rather to be part of a structural change tied to a demographic evolution. Thus, according to the study, young people are less inclined to drive—or even to have a driver's license—than the preceding generation, for which the car appeared to be a right.

The end of the driving boom

A series of numbers proves all of this: While the distance driven per person per year has pass from 8,700 to 16,100 km between 1970 and 2004 (+85%)—what the report calls the “driving boom”—it has decreased slightly between 2004 and 2012, down to 15,000 km (-7%), the level of 1996. Another proof of this retreat: At the end of 2012, drivers represented 49% of the population over 16 years old against 61% at the last peak, in June 2005.



Evolution of the distance travelled by car each year in total and also per capita by Americans, between 1946 and 2012 (U.S. PIRG).

In opposition, Americans have increased their ridership on public transport by 10% between 2005 and 2011. Travel by bicycle and by foot have also increased.

This tendency is especially notable among the young: In the age bracket 16-34, car miles travelled has dropped 23% between 2001 and 2009. Meanwhile, more and more young Americans don't have driver's licenses: 21% didn't have licenses in 2000, while in 2010 26% didn't have licenses.

The technology of the Internet

“The generation born between 1983 and 2000 is more likely to want to live in urban and pedestrian zones and is more open to using other forms of transport than their elders,” explains the report. “This is also the first generation to adopt fully the mobile technologies of the Internet, which offer rapidly new options for transportation and can even substitute for transportation itself, thanks notably to tele-work, to shopping on-line, and to tele-conferences and to social networks.”

This study corroborates the research led in 2012 by Michael Sivak of the Institute for the Research of Transportation of the University of Michigan, which already had noted that the young were getting fewer driver's licenses than those of the preceding generation. “The greatest proportion of users of the

Internet is associated with a lower rate of obtaining a driver's license," he wrote. "This result is coherent with the hypothesis that virtual contacts reduce the need for real contacts among the young."

If the decline of driving among the young continues to decrease, according to the report by U.S. PIRG, the rate of driving in the United States will stay less than the peak of 2007 up to 2040, even with a predicted growth of the population by 20%.

Despite this evolution, the politics of transportation in the United States remains anchored in the past, regrets the report. "Official predictions continue to count on a constant growth in driving, despite the numbers of the last decade," indicates the study. "Federal, state, and local politics should instead contribute to conditions that allow Americans to be able to realize their desire to drive less.

Augmentation of investments in public transportation, infrastructure for cyclists and pedestrians, and inter-urban rail transport would permit more Americans to profit from a much larger range of options for transportation.