



Why People Drive

This PSDI research report investigates why most people prefer to use private automobiles rather than public transportation or other modes of travel—despite the massive amounts of expenditure constantly being pumped into building, running and improving subways, buses and bicycle infrastructure.



Peter Homenuck PhD, RPP, Pro. Dir.
Susan Robinson MES
Adrienne Scruton MES

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	Page ii
Preface	Page iii
Introduction	Page 1
Shorter Time Travel	Page 3
The Value of Time	Page 5
Flexibility	Page 9
Comfort	Page 12
Personal Safety	Page 15
More Than a Means of Transportation	Page 15
Emotional Value	Page 19
Symbolic Value	Page 20
Choosing Private Vehicles over Public Transit	Page 21
Captive Riders	Page 21
Reliability	Page 24
Hygiene	Page 25
Personal Safety	Page 26
Comfort	Page 28
Inconvenience	Page 28
Passenger Behavior	Page 29
Conclusion	Page 31

Preface

This research was stimulated by many years of watching politicians and planners propose solutions to problems they don't understand and promoting concepts that are not rooted in evidence. This kind of approach has increased costs substantially for residents and businesses while leading to a declining quality of life for people in major urban areas.

This approach of trying to control people and their behaviour to meet objectives that are out of step with the general needs of society has created a set of additional problems. Nowhere is it more obvious than with the policies seeking to force people to embrace public transit. Because these policies are universally unsuccessful, we decided it was important to investigate why people prefer to drive as an input to ongoing policy and political debates.

In many countries around the world, driving is the most popular mode of transportation. There are more than 1 billion motorized vehicles on the road today and that number is expected to double by the year 2030 (Sperling and Gordon, 2008). While cars offer benefits to individual users, such as comfort, speed and convenience, some argue that cars have environmental and social costs, such as contributing to air pollution and climate change. These points of view currently dominate urban policies that seek to diminish private vehicle travel.

Government agencies have taken a wide range of approaches aimed at getting people out of their cars. Common strategies include road tolls, taxes and parking fees, as well as improving access and facilities for public transit, walking and cycling. Design-based approaches include increased housing density, promoting mixed-use development and building communities around transit stations. By trying to make the alternatives to driving more attractive and accessible, policy-makers and planners expect that more people will choose not to use their cars. However, this expectation is often not met, even when significant measures are taken. For example, Tallinn, Estonia removed all transit fees which only resulted in a 1.2% increase in demand (Ferro, 2014). In Los Angeles County, despite a \$9- billion investment in new light rail and subway lines, the transit authority currently has fewer riders than it did thirty years ago, when buses were the county's only public transit option (Nelson and Weikel, 2016). These are only two of many places throughout the world where, although considerable investment and efforts are being made to promote other forms of transportation, the vast majority of people continue to choose to drive.

There clearly are flaws in the assumptions that if good options are provided, then people will use them. Other forms of transportation may get people to where they need to go, but there are many reasons people choose to drive, besides getting from one place to another. People are not cargo, and their transportation decisions are more complex than simply choosing the most accessible or the most affordable mode. People have different lifestyles, needs and preferences that influence their transportation choices. For example, commuting by bike may work for someone that is travelling short distances in moderate weather, but it is not the most appropriate choice in snowy weather or taking a child to daycare or picking up groceries.

This PSDI research paper examines the numerous reasons why people prefer to drive. While not every reason applies to every person, there is clearly an overwhelming preference for driving in North America and elsewhere, regardless of the significant efforts and massive expenditures to try and shift people from private vehicles to others forms of travel.

The reality is that expenditures on other non-car forms of travel do not meet the needs of people in the 21st century. Indeed, the options being prompted are rooted in an understanding of societal patterns from 60 or more years ago. Planners and decision makers need to remember that their roles are to ensure a good quality of life for people and not control or dictate behaviour patterns that are clearly out of touch.



Introduction

Transportation is an inescapable component of people’s daily lives. People need to get from one place to another, whether it is for work, school, shopping or recreation.

While there are several ways to accomplish this, driving is by far the most popular choice. In the United States, 85% of people commute to work by a private automobile, and only 5% use public transportation (Figure 1). As shown in Figure 2, 81% of Canadians depend on cars to get to work (Turcotte, 2011). In Canada, 78% of people of driving age own a vehicle and 74% use private vehicles for all trips (Cato, 2014; Turcotte, 2008). Even in dense, urban areas where alternative modes of transportation are readily accessible, cars are the preferred method for most people. For example, in the Toronto Census Metropolitan Area (CMA) 58% of people living less than 5 kilometers from work choose to drive for their daily commute (Heisz and LaRochelle-Côté, Table A4, 2005).

Travelling by private automobile is the most popular form of transportation in the US and Canada

How Americans Commute to Work

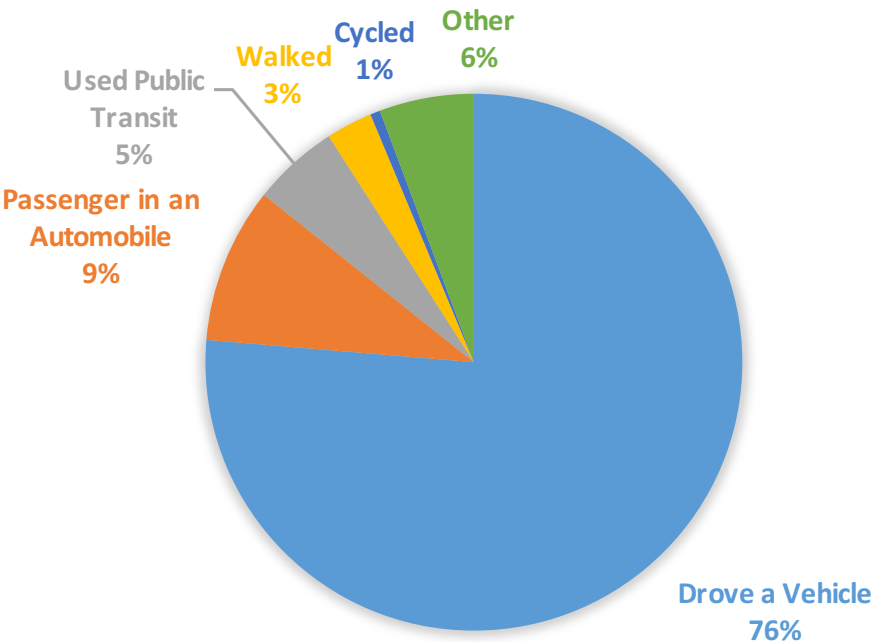


Figure 1: How Americans Commute to Work (2013)
Source: Adapted from US Census

How Canadians Commute to Work

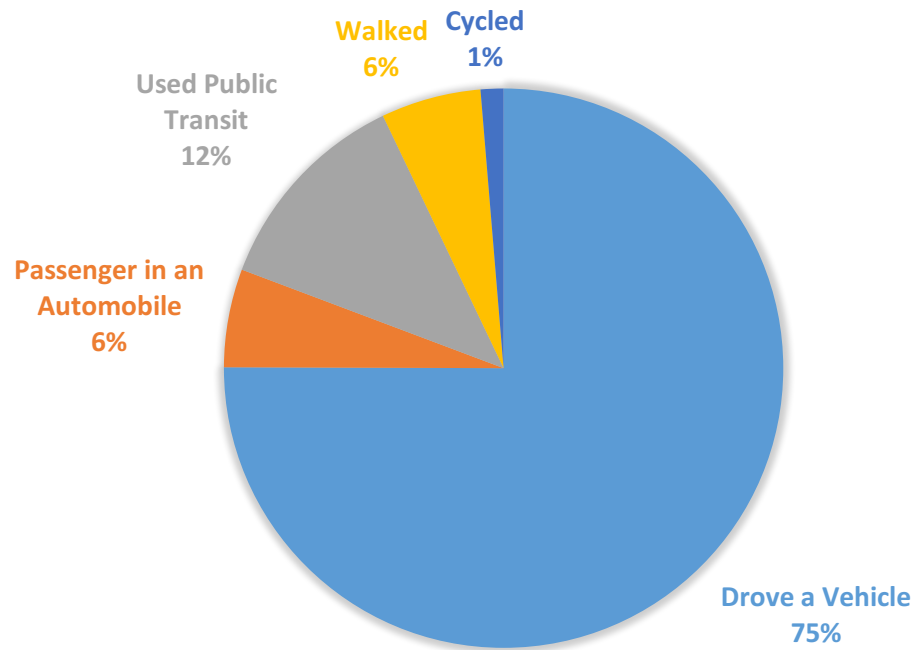


Figure 2: How Canadians Commuted to Work in 2011
Source: Adapted from Statistics Canada National Household Survey, 2011

People's preference for driving is not easily changed. In one experimental study, participants had to select their preferred method of travel. Those who chose to drive continued to make that choice even when the researchers made public transit options faster and more affordable (Innocenti, Latturolo and Paziena, 2013). While the researchers interpreted the decision to stick with driving as "irrational," since they had seemingly made public transit the more attractive option, the choice may actually reveal the complexity of the preference for driving. Travel decisions are not always a simple calculation of the cheapest way to get from one place to another. People choose to drive for a variety of reasons. Policymakers, planners, traffic engineers and anyone who is involved in transportation planning must understand the numerous factors and values that play into the decision to drive. If they do not, they risk making poor transportation planning decisions. In an effort to contribute to the understanding of the strong and persistent preference for driving personal vehicles, the key reasons people choose to drive are explored in this paper.