

Summary

The travel behaviour of young adults is changing. They use the car less often. This trend is clearly visible in Western countries like Germany, England, France, the United States, Australia and Japan. Young people in the Netherlands also travel less by car and are more inclined to travel by bicycle and public transport. As they get older, however, they travel more frequently by car. Explanations for this change in travel behaviour may be found in altered social-economic circumstances and changes in the residential environment, but there is no indication of a fundamentally different attitude to the car.

Young adults are travelling less frequently by car. This is often put down to the advent of 'Generation Y', the cohort of young adults born between 1980 and 2000. According to some researchers, this group appear to take a different view of mobility and car ownership than previous generations. According to these researchers Generation Y have a different attitude to life. They are more interested in buying a smartphone than a car, for example, and think that occasionally renting or borrowing a car is a perfectly good alternative to owning their own car.

If this explanation is correct, it could have far-reaching consequences for mobility in the longer term, because it is assumed that as Generation Y grow older they will remain sceptical about mobility and car ownership, with previously unrecognised consequences for the trends in car use. But exactly how significant is this trend in the Netherlands? After all, the declining mobility of young adults may also be explained by other, situational, factors.

Little empirical evidence has been put forward to support this picture of Generation Y. Rather, it is based on a limited number of studies and publications in which hypotheses are presented and then invoked as factual explanations for the changing travel behaviour of young adults. In this report, quantitative data are used to test the explanatory power of these hypotheses for the situation in the Netherlands.

Declining car use among young adults

Between 1995 and 2009 Dutch young adults from 18 to 30 years old became less mobile (by car). This can be concluded from analyses of data obtained in the Dutch National Travel Survey (1995–2009). This decline in car use was expressed in both the number of trips and the number of kilometres travelled. Compared with their behaviour in 1995, young adults travel less by car, but more frequently by train. They travel greater distances for mainly educational purposes, but travel shorter distances for social contacts and shopping. Much of the reduction in the mobility of young adults is among those living in urban areas. This group travels less by car and more by train and bicycle, particularly for educational activities.

More car use after settling down

The travel behaviour of young adults changes when they enter a new life stage. By following the generation of young people that were 18–24 and 25–29 in 1995 through time, we found that they displayed a tendency to travel more frequently by car as they got older. After their 24th year their car use increased considerably and thereafter remained constant. Although car use by young adults is declining, this shows that when they are older they again travel more frequently by car.

Explanations: situational factors do matter

The changing social-economic position of young adults has had an effect on car use. The number of working young adults has decreased while the number of students – who drive less than working young people – has increased. Besides, young adults may well find it difficult to own a car during an economic downturn. A third obvious explanation for the decline in mobility is that labour participation among women has reached a ceiling, at least for the time being.

The residential environment also has an influence on car use. An increase in the number of young adults living in urban areas combined with the growth in the number of students has led to a shift in transport mode among young adults from the car to the bicycle and public transport. Furthermore, during the last fifteen years there has been little change in the proportions of young adults in possession of a driving licence and owning a car. This is therefore not a sufficient explanation for the decline in car use among young adults in the Netherlands.

Finally, it is questionable whether the intensive use of social media by young people has been a factor in the decline in car use. A considerable proportion of young adults say that social media make it easier for them to make dates and appointments, that they have got to know new people through social media and that they see their friends and acquaintances more often. At least for the time being, therefore, there is little reason to suppose that social media have significantly reduced the desire for physical contact.

Explanations: no fundamental difference in attitude

While various situational factors provide explanations for the declining car use among young adults in the Netherlands, there is no indication of a fundamental difference in attitude. The car enjoys a high status among Dutch young adults, and for many young people status is important: they want a car to show off who they are. A clear majority of young adults say that in the future they want to own a car. When they are older, settled down and enter the next phase of their lives, they will be more inclined to buy and use a car.

For most young adults, taxes and the environment are not decisive arguments against owning or using a car. Although young people tend to be slightly more amenable to sharing a car than older people, the car share concept has not yet really caught on.

Permanent or temporary?

There are therefore several possible explanations for the declining car use among young adults in the Netherlands. The question is how permanent this trend is, or whether it is only temporary. Where an explanation has a situational background, the trend may be temporary in nature. For example, it is likely that many young people are consciously travelling less (by car or other forms of transport) because of the economic recession, and that when the economy picks up again they will become more mobile and may want to own their own car. Moreover, it is highly likely that young people are delaying buying a car because car ownership does not fit in with their current lifestyle.

If there is a real and widespread change in attitude, the level of car ownership among the members of Generation Y will remain low: as young people become older, they will remain focused on other things than cars. However, the research results do not provide any solid evidence that this will in fact be the case. It is therefore too early to conclude that young adults are turning their backs on the car. Generation Y does not want to be car-less, but car-later.