



**To:** Neighbourhoods and City Development

**From:** Adrian Davis

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**Subject:** Essential Evidence on a page: No 101 Digital natives and car use

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Top line: A generation born with the rise of the internet age are developing travel behaviours significantly dissimilar to older generations. These 'digital natives' are often prioritising internet use over car use. This change could have profound implications for transport policy.

The age distribution of motor vehicle drivers has major implications for motor vehicle demand, transport safety, health and environmental consequences of personal transport. An increasing number of studies have focused on the impact of changing demand among young people as part of wider changes in travel behaviour. In the USA, for example, the number of miles driven increased annually from 1945 up to the turn of the century when this changed and Americans started driving less. By 2011, the average American was driving 6% fewer journeys than in 2004. The trend of less driving, sometimes termed 'peak car'<sup>1</sup> has been led by young people and commenced prior to the current recession, although it has been further supported by the effects of recession. Indeed, this trend towards reduced driving has occurred even among young people who are employed and/or are financially secure.<sup>2</sup>

Young people in the developed world are less likely to hold a drivers license than recent previous generations and, if they can drive, they are driving less. This is a remarkable trend that is not well understood. Part of the reason for this change, it has been suggested, is due to an increasing use of technology that is reducing the need to travel as those born after 1980 have grown up with the internet (sometimes referred to as digital natives). US research indicates that 35% of 18-24 year olds prefer the internet as a means of keeping in touch with friends and family rather than driving to see them in person.

One study examined the recent changes in the percentage of persons with a driver's license in 15 countries as a function of age.<sup>3</sup> While there was an *increase* in the percentage of older people with a driver's license in all countries, in 7 countries (Sweden, Norway, GB, Canada, Japan, South Korea and Germany) there was a decrease in young drivers (up to age 24). Of particular note was the finding that a higher proportion of internet users was associated with a lower license rate in all countries. This finding is consistent with the hypothesis that access to virtual contact reduces the need for actual contact among young people. Given largely fixed travel time budgets it appears highly plausible that increasing internet use is being off-set by decreases in other activities. A caveat is that most studies focus on cities where the range of other transport choices to car use are greater than in rural areas. Nonetheless, websites and smart phone apps that provide real-time transport data make public transport use easier to use, particularly for infrequent users. In addition, technology has also increased the opportunities for car sharing and bike sharing services that are increasingly found in towns and cities.

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.gordonstokes.co.uk/transport/peakcar.html>

<sup>2</sup> Frontier Group US PIRG Education Fund, 2012 Transportation and the next generation. Why young people are driving less and what it means for transportation policy. <http://www.resilience.org/stories/2012-04-18/transportation-and-new-generation-why-young-people-are-driving-less-and-what-it-m>

<sup>3</sup> Sivak, M., Scoettle, B. 2011 Recent changes in the age composition of drivers in 15 countries, University of Michigan: Transportation Research Institute.