



Does Everyone in America Own a Car?

By Robin Chase



Green Light for Midtown, a one-year test of closing part of New York City's Broadway to traffic, became permanent in February 2010. ©AP Images

Car-sharing Offers Convenience, Saves Money and Helps the Environment

It is true that 95 percent of American households own a car, and most Americans get to work by car (85 percent). It wasn't always this way, nor is it likely to stay this way.

Until World War II and into the late 1940s, many Americans did not own cars. People lived in cities and towns, and 40 percent did not own cars but used public buses, trolleys and trains. Soon after the war, a surge in low-cost, mass-produced houses occurred

outside cities to accommodate returning soldiers and their growing families.

The new housing pattern was accompanied by the National Interstate Highway System, which was started in 1956. During the next 50 years, 46,876 miles (75,440 kilometers) of highways were built across America. Americans could live in affordable suburbs in houses built on cheap land, and they could get to distant jobs with cars.

As a result, only 5 percent of Americans use public transportation to get to their jobs today, but this pattern is changing.

It has been nearly 60 years since America embarked on the plan that influenced how we live and travel today, and we have experienced some shortcomings. Car travel and the infrastructure needed to support it are poorly suited for dense urban areas where increasing numbers of Americans live.

And while the United States, like other parts of the world, is turning to alternative-fuel and fuel-efficient vehicles to help reduce carbon dioxide emissions and address climate concerns, we realize these new cars will not meet the travel needs of all Americans. The young, the old, the poor and those living in dense urban areas need other options.

Letting Go of the Car

Car ownership has declined since it peaked at 1.1 cars per licensed driver in 2001. By 2008, the average number of miles driven in the United States fell for the first time in history, declining 3.6 percent from 2007. At the same time, the number of trips by public transportation rose to a 50-year high. (It is too early to tell if this change was the result of high fuel prices in 2008.)

More people are choosing to live in cities where they don't need a car. New York City has the lowest rate of car ownership, with only 50 percent of households owning cars.

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Good sidewalks, reliable public transit and safe bicycle networks are a priority in many cities. In July 2009, New York City made itself more friendly to bicycles by adding 200 miles of bike lanes separated from car traffic within the city.

During the past decade American cities have seen the rise of a service called car-sharing. Shared cars owned by private companies are parked throughout dense metropolitan areas and university campuses. Members rent them by the hour or day instead of owning cars. The advantage to members is that they pay only for what they use; they don't have to worry about maintenance, parking or insurance expenses, and they can choose a car that fits a specific trip (a pickup truck, four-door, or two-door vehicle).

In New York City, more than 100,000 people share about 2,000 cars. Each shared car replaces 10 to 20 private cars and is used by 40 to 50 people. Car-sharing in New York dramatically reduces the number of cars and parking spaces needed to satisfy the needs of a large population.

New York City also has become safer to people who walk, with the permanent closing of two sections of Broadway to traffic. The Green Light for Midtown project created public plazas for pedestrians and bicyclists in Times Square and Herald Square. Pedestrian injuries decreased by 35 percent during the one-year test.

Looking to the future, it is likely we will see a reduction in the

number of car trips Americans take and a rise in the number of trips they take by foot, bicycle, public transit or train. Car-sharing will become more common, and more people will take advantage of carpooling (many people sharing the same trip).

Wireless technologies and smart mobile phones also are making it easy to find different ways to travel. Phone users can check schedules; compare items like cost, speed, convenience and carbon emissions; and choose the best method for each trip. America's transportation picture once again will be highly diversified.

