

Summary:

Social trends affecting car use

The car – embedded in everyday practice

In the project "social trends affecting car use" we have studied changes in the car use over the last two decades and discussed trends that may influence car use in the future. Mobility in general – and travelling by car in particular – has increased significantly. Thus car availability is no longer the main explanation for variations in car use. Among high salary commuters the share of the car mode is inversely related to the level of education. No one uses the car less than young women in large cities. And no one uses the car more than suburban families living around the large cities. While youth to a lesser extent than before appear interested in owning and driving cars, children, paradoxically, seem to become more socialised to car dependency. With the coming 'elderly boom' in the population there is reason to expect that much higher shares of elderly women will become car users. Whether the prevailing reurbanisation and a preoccupation with the environmental and health aspects of mobility are just volatile variations or more stable changes that will influence car use significantly in the future, is still to be seen.

Nearly 9 out of 10 Norwegian households have a car, and 4 out of 10 have at least two. Car ownership thus having become a mass phenomenon, its socio-cultural or symbolic meaning may well have been reduced and become second to its merely pragmatic aspects. The car has its main importance as a practical and – over time – rather necessary tool for a smooth organisation of daily life. Owning a car no longer provides important social status, nor does it carry significant cultural meaning. At the same time, mobility forms in general and car use in particular seem to be more justified as a part of lifestyle choices than before.

Empirically, we have in particular drawn on the Norwegian National Travel Surveys from 1985 and 2005 documenting important changes in the mobility pattern over the two decades' period. The travel volume shows small changes except for daily travels as a car driver. At the same time, the share of those having not travelled at all has decreased substantially. People's access to transport resources has improved considerably: 87 percent of the grown-up population has a driver licence; only 13 percent of the households have no car. What has really changed in the 20 years period, is the access to more than one car: 40 percent of the households have two (or more) cars in 2005, in contrast to 22 percent in 1985. Women have increased their driver licence share in the period, from around six to eight out of ten. Young people, however, have not increased their driver's licence share.

When it comes to modal split, the car use has increased its share at the expense of all other travel modes, in particular the public transport mode. Since 1980 the travel volume has increased by 63 percent. 70 percent of the growth is due to the private car. Most of the changes took place already in the eighties. In general, men have better access to car, use the car more and drive far longer than women, while women in their thirties use car as much as men for commuting. No one uses the car as much as people living in the suburbs around large towns/cities. In city centres there is far less car use, mostly due to a good public transport supply. The young and the elderly use the car far less than others. Car use is not unequivocally related to income: up to a certain income level, car use increases with income. But in the upper income brackets car use is inversely related to the level of education.

The coming elderly boom in the next decades probably implies far more car users, not least because most of the women will still use their cars when they get older. The age-health relationship is also likely to make a difference: Elderly people with bad health will have fewer alternatives to car use, while elderly people in good shape might be car users at even higher age levels than today. However, certain contrasting trends may also be observed. If more elderly people move into city centres, the demand for car use will decrease considerably.

The fact that young people today seem to have less interest in cars and car use might imply that cars will be of less importance in the future (Nordbakke & Ruud 1985). However, an opposing trend is also clearly salient. Children seem to be far more car dependent than before, parents frequently drive them to school and even more frequently to their leisure activities (Fyhri & Hjorthol 2006).

The urbanisation trends are crucial for the mobility pattern. Along with the dominant and long-lasting trend of suburbanisation around the main cities, there is also more recent trends of re-urbanisation, e.g. when low-status areas close to city-centres are vitalised and transformed to attractive urban districts, socially as well as aesthetically. These two trends have opposing effects on car use – while suburbanisation is totally car based, the re-urbanisation trend is liable to reduce car dependency.

Information and communication technology (ICT) significantly influences everyday life in general and activity and mobility patterns in particular. While in 2000 only half the population had access to the Internet, five years later three out of four had it. The use of mobile phones has also increased a lot. Both the car and the mobile are important tools for a smooth daily organisation and thus strongly embedded in everyday life (Hjorthol et al 2005 and 2006).

Transport research has traditionally framed car use within an economic-rationalistic perspective, based on the utility-maximising ‘economic man’ – or ‘*homo economicus*’. But car use is not only about the ‘instrumental’ transport from A to B. Of no less importance is the societal participation, the access to (and from) the kind of economic, political and cultural activities that is necessary for a normal social life. Car use is also a socio-cultural phenomenon, related to lifestyle and travel experience. The ambiguity surrounding the car and its use might be coined both in terms of its instrumental and its expressive aspects. The car has since long had a strong appeal to ‘*homo ludens*’. Nevertheless, it looks like the everyday car somehow has lost some of its symbolic and strongly status-providing significance. The car has become accessible to all and thus democratised. Being,

however, strongly embedded in our everyday life and activities, as a highly practical device, the car seems to be as dominant as ever. Nowadays, the car is first and foremost of significant importance for '*homo pragmaticus*'.