Tomorrow's Transportation Demographics:

Youth and Young Adults

by Ren Thomas

Summary

Youth and young adults represent important demographics in sustainable transportation planning. A comparison across the 10 largest Canadian cities confirms that young people use public transit, walk, and cycle to work more than adults. In smaller cities, youth represent the majority of public transit users; young adults in larger cities may be delaying car ownership. Supporting their transportation choices could help our cities become more sustainable. But after so many years of chasing the middle-aged commuter, can transportation planners and provincial transportation ministries begin to consider young people as major stakeholders in the provision of public transit?

Résumé

Les jeunes et les jeunes adultes représentent un poids démographique important dans la planification de moyens de transport durables. Une comparaison entre les dix plus grandes villes canadiennes confirme que les jeunes utilisent davantage le transport en commun, la marche et la bicyclette que les adultes. Dans les villes de plus petite taille, les jeunes constituent la majorité des usagers du transport en commun; les jeunes adultes des plus grandes villes peuvent reporter l'achat d'un véhicule. Appuyer les choix qu'ils font pourrait aider nos villes à atteindre une plus grande durabilité. Mais après avoir passé tant d'années à courtiser les banlieusards d'âge moyen, est-ce que les responsables de la planification des transports et les ministères provinciaux des transports peuvent voir les jeunes à titre d'intervenants importants dans la prestation des moyens de transport en commun?

In recent years, transportation planning has been redefined as a contributor to healthy and sustainable communities. New neighbourhoods are often planned to maximize a range of transportation alternatives. Many municipalities and non-profit organizations have developed programs to encourage children and youth to walk and cycle more. Transportation planners and sustainability advocates have enabled post-secondary students to commute to school using U-Passes (universal transit passes).

Because of their life cycle stages and constraints upon their travel patterns, youth (aged 15-24) and young adults (aged 25-34) differ significantly from adults in their choice of transportation mode. These differences could help municipal planners and transportation authorities support sustainable transportation. However, doing so requires a somewhat radical shift in the way we think about transportation for young people.

Young people have different cultural values, understandings, and needs than adults, including environmental awareness,[1,2] political activism,[3] and the tendency to socialize mainly within their own age group, rather than a diverse group of people.[4] They are subject to more legal and social constraints than adults, including graduated licensing procedures and parental restrictions. In many cities, youth and young adults are involved in government, non-profit, and activist groups that promote sustainable transportation.[5] It is not surprising, then, that young people have significantly different travel patterns from adults.

Most people assume that young people only use sustainable transportation modes because they have fewer choices; that as they age, driving will become the norm, as it is for adults. In fact, the trend towards lower car ownership among youth and young adults has been noted in Japan and the US, notably among car manufacturers.[6,7] Although there has been a recent flurry of studies on walking and cycling to school for younger children, there is still a lot that we do not understand about youth or young adults' transportation patterns and behaviours.

The 2006 Census records only the transportation mode used on the commute to work, and given young people's lower labour market participation, it does not tell us the whole story; it merely provides us with a starting point for discussion. Youth (aged 15-24) and young adults (aged 25-34) in Canada's 10 largest Census Metropolitan Areas (CMAs) commute by public transit, cycling and walking more than the general population.[8]

Nationally, only 50.1% of youth drive to work compared to 70.6% of young adults and 72.3% of the general population. But a demographic breakdown of driving commuters shows that youth represent only 10.9% of drivers, the lowest of any Census demographic except those aged 65 and older. Young adults represent about one-fifth of driving commuters nationally and in all 10 cities. Young adults are much less likely than youth to get a ride to work as a car passenger (6.9% compared to 18.6%). Youth are significantly overrepresented among those who commute as car passengers: this mode seems to be related to public transit use. For example, in Hamilton and London, the youth mode share for getting a ride is higher than the national average while public transit usage is lower, and in Quebec, higher than average public transit commuting corresponds with fewer youth getting rides.

Generally, youth have the highest public transit mode share of any demographic in Canada, followed by young adults.

TABLE 1: COMMUTE MODE SHARE FOR YOUTH IN THE 10 LARGEST CANADIAN CITIES

	Commute Mode Share for Youth (Age 15-24)					
	Car (driver) (%)	Public Transit (%)	Car (passenger) (%)	Walking (%)	Cycling (%)	Other (%)
Canada	50.1	16.6	18.6	11.0	2.3	1.4
Toronto	38.3	30.8	18.9	9.5	1.5	1.0
Montreal	42.4	32.9	10.1	10.3	3.1	1.1
Vancouver	46.1	25.9	16.1	9.2	1.6	1.1
Ottawa	39.3	29.6	15.7	11.8	2.7	0.9
Calgary	48.6	23.8	16.1	9.0	1.5	1.2
Edmonton	52.1	16.5	18.6	9.5	1.9	1.4
Quebec	52.0	20.8	10.6	12.2	3.2	1.2
Hamilton	47.8	14.3	24.7	10.5	1.9	0.9
Winnipeg	53.1	18.3	16.6	8.8	2.5	0.7
London	45.5	15.3	22.9	11.9	3.2	1.1

TABLE 2: COMMUTE MODE SHARE FOR YOUNG ADULTS IN THE 10 LARGEST CANADIAN CITIES

	Commute Mode Share for Young Adults (Age 25-34)					
	Car (driver) (%)	Public Transit (%)	Car (passenger) (%)	Walking (%)	Cycling (%)	Other (%)
Canada	70.6	13.5	6.9	6.4	1.6	1.2
Toronto	59.7	26.5	6.4	5.2	1.3	0.9
Montreal	62.0	25.4	4.4	5.5	2.1	0.7
Vancouver	63.2	19.4	6.3	7.6	2.3	1.3
Ottawa	60.6	21.1	7.3	8.0	2.2	0.7
Calgary	67.3	16.7	7.1	6.5	1.4	1.0
Edmonton	74.8	10.3	6.8	5.5	1.3	1.2
Quebec	75.9	10.4	4.6	6.9	1.5	0.6
Hamilton	77.1	10.0	6.9	4.4	0.8	0.8
Winnipeg	68.5	14.4	8.3	6.0	2.0	0.9
London	75.7	7.4	8.1	6.3	1.5	0.9

Source: Census of Canada 2006. Mode of Transportation (9), Age Groups (9) and Sex (3) for the Employed Labour Force 15 Years and Over Having a Usual Place of Work or No Fixed Workplace Address Canada, Provinces, Territories, Census Metropolitan Areas and Census Agglomerations Catalogue no. 97-561-X2006012.[8]

Youth travel by transit to work more than other demographics in all 10 cities; in smaller cities like Quebec and London they are twice as likely to take transit as the general population. Interestingly, a demographic breakdown of transit commuters shows that young adults represent the majority of transit ridership in Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver, and ridership in these cities is fairly distributed among those aged 15-54. A different situation occurs in the five smallest cities, where youth represent the largest proportion of transit commuters.

Youth are more likely to walk to work than the general population in all 10 cities, while young adults have a higher walking mode share than the general population in seven of the 10 cities. Youth represent the largest proportion of walking commuters in all cities except Vancouver, where young adults come out on top. While walking to work decreases with age, there are a few exceptions: in Montreal, Quebec, and Winnipeg, the 45-54 age group had higher walking rates than those aged 35-44. Walking commuters are more evenly distributed among age groups in the largest cities, while smaller cities have a higher proportion of youth walkers.

Cycling to work is also more prevalent in the youth demographic: only 1.3% of the general population cycles to work, while young adults are slightly higher at 1.6% and youth at 2.3%. Youth in Quebec and London are most likely to bike to work, while Vancouver has the highest cycling mode share for young adults (2.9%). Generally, biking to work decreases with age and youth make up the largest proportion of bike commuters (27.6%). This pattern holds for the five smallest cities. But bike commuters are more evenly split in larger cities. While young adults often make up the largest proportion of bike commuters in larger cities, the 35-44 age group represent high proportions of the total in Toronto, Vancouver, Ottawa, Calgary and Winnipeg.

Youth and young adults are significant players in sustainable transportation planning, although there is still considerable research to be done. We do not know whether affordability reasons, environmental concerns, or more extensive public transit systems contribute

to higher public transit ridership for young adults in larger cities; we do not know what factors explain higher walking or cycling levels in some cities. These issues deserve further research, particularly the impact of municipal plans and policies in encouraging sustainable transportation, which may explain higher cycling or walking more shares in certain cities. While it is tempting to look at the data and attribute youth and young adults' travel behaviour to their life cycle stages, we do not know whether young adults may be switching from public transit to driving because service in their municipality is not extensive enough, or whether they are cycling more in certain cities because of a better network of bike paths. However, it is clear that walking, cycling, and public transit commuters are much more evenly split among the working population in larger cities, indicating more transportation choices.

Transportation authorities and municipal planners in smaller cities should consider the needs of their largest public transit demographic, primarily through research that would direct service improvements. However, this requires a radical shift in thinking: young people are typically not considered important stakeholders in transportation planning, whether at the local, provincial, or federal level. Public transit services have typically been planned to minimize travel time for commuting adults. Young people are considered "captive riders", because they have low car ownership and therefore fewer transportation options, rather than "choice riders", who have cars but choose transit for some of their trips. They also travel at off-peak times and use transit for non-work travel, meaning they tend to use public transit at times when frequency is often low and unreliable.[1]

Young people have been involved in participatory action research (PAR) projects that promote sustainable transportation.[9,10] A few transportation authorities have begun to integrate younger views: Transit Windsor and the City of Windsor operate a Transit Ambassador Programme whose members act as liaisons between high schools and the transit authority, promoting transit

and suggesting service improvements. Youth input is crucial if transportation planners are to understand the service issues young people face, such as infrequent service at night when many youth and young adults travel extensively.

Youth and young adults' input could be useful in developing and testing targeted service improvements for municipalities with low ridership. In Florida, the St. Lucie Transportation Planning Organization conducted a PAR project to involve youth in the transportation planning process. The students researched transportation systems, interviewed experts, shadowed transportation planning staff, produced a transportation survey and a series of videos on transportation issues. They presented their long-range transportation plan to the county commissioners, Florida Department of Transportation officials, school board members and legislative delegates in June 2002. As a result of their efforts, the commissioners and city council eventually agreed to create a Municipal Taxing Unit to fund long-term transit costs.

Canadian youth and young adults should be a target demographic for transit services, as school-aged children have become for walking and cycling programs. Decreased car ownership among young people has already been observed in several countries, demonstrating a gap that could be met by services targeted to the youth and young adult demographics. The private sector capitalizes on the youth market, witnessed by slick marketing campaigns promoting MP3 players and cell phones: why not promote transit among young adults to slow their transition to car ownership? U-Pass programs have been remarkably successful in increasing transit ridership in the short term, and there is some evidence that they may raise ridership in the long term.[11] But in cities with already high ridership, the U-Pass has become associated with overcrowding because it is revenue-neutral; clearly it cannot be a one-size-fits-all solution. Promoting and sustaining transit ridership among youth and young adults should be linked to provincial sustainability goals, allowing municipalities to demand more funding for public transit service improvements. Again, this requires a new way of thinking about transportation planning and key demographic groups. Supporting public transit, walking, and cycling among young people may in fact be easier than convincing older demographics to give up their cars. ■

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