

Musings on Having a Driving License
March 28, 2012

The *New York Times* had an [article on March 23, 2012](#) about GM's efforts to attract young adults to their vehicles. According to the article, teens and young adults today are far less interested in cars than young people of past generations. Today's young people prefer to spend their time on the Internet and using communications devices. The article noted that only 46 percent of potential drivers 19 and under had driving licenses in 2008 compared to 64 percent in 1998.

I found this falloff in driving licenses remarkable, leading me to look at the Federal Highway Statistics figures on licensed drivers. In fact, the falloff in drivers' licenses among the young is not quite as remarkable as the numbers show. The estimates of potential drivers under age 16 in 1998 and 2008 are not consistent, exaggerating the falloff. But even if one focuses on the population 16 to 19, for which the data are consistent, there has been a pronounced decrease in the share of young people with drivers' licenses: from 64 percent in 1998 to 55 percent in 2009.

I confess that the *Times* story and the driver numbers made me feel old – and also concerned. When I turned 16 back in 1960, my first priority was to acquire my driver's license. All my friends had the same goal. It was a symbol that you had grown up and it conferred previously unavailable freedoms – even if, like most teens, you had to borrow your parents' car. But that is not a reason for concern. Tastes change and I can accept that young people today may find it more fun and more status enhancing to interact with their friends and acquaintances through their computers and I-phones than drive around. It is probably safer too.

But what I do find concerning is that lack of a driver's license cuts one off from many economic opportunities. Many localities are not served or are served very poorly by public transit. If you want a job, you have to drive. Manufacturing facilities in particular are often located in suburban or semi-rural areas and are only accessible by vehicle. Is it a coincidence that the fraction of young adults with jobs has fallen dramatically over the same period that the share of young people with licenses has also fallen?

Earlier in the same week as the article on young people's flagging interest in cars, the *Times* had a [piece on several men who had moved to North Dakota](#) to take advantage of the job opportunities created by oil development there. Almost all the stories began with the man packing his bags into his car and driving 8 or more hours to North Dakota. In a couple of cases, the men lived out of their cars for a time while they searched for jobs. Eventually, these men found jobs and while the life was pretty Spartan and lonely, they were able to repair their financial situations and support their families. Without the ability to drive, these men would not have been able to accomplish this.

It might not matter if the lower fraction of young drivers in 2009 were simply a case of driving delayed, but that appears to be only partly true. For those in the 20 to 24 age bracket, 81 percent had drivers' licenses in 2009 compared to 88 percent in 1998. For those 25 to 29, the fractions were 85 percent in 2009 compared to 96 percent in 1998.

It is possible that these figures are distorted by faulty population estimates. The population denominators are based on intercensal population estimates. In other words, they are not based on a recent decennial census. So it is conceivable that the population estimates for 1998 were lower relative to the true population numbers than the 2009 estimates. But another aspect of the license data suggests that something real - and concerning - is taking place: The share of younger men with licenses has fallen relative to the share of women.

The data show fewer young men with licenses than women in 2009. Only in the older age brackets - those 40 and older - do the shares of men with licenses surpass those of women. Among those 70 and older males are substantially more likely to have licenses.

| | Drivers as percent of age group | | | |
|-------|---------------------------------|----------|--------|----------|
| | Men 09 | Women 09 | Men 98 | Women 98 |
| 16-19 | 54.6 | 54.9 | 64.3 | 64.0 |
| 20-24 | 79.4 | 82.7 | 87.6 | 87.9 |
| 25-29 | 83.0 | 87.7 | 97.1 | 94.0 |
| 30-34 | 88.3 | 91.3 | 94.2 | 90.8 |
| 35-39 | 91.0 | 92.0 | 94.2 | 92.6 |
| 40-44 | 92.6 | 91.9 | 96.8 | 94.7 |

In 1998, the shares of teens (16-19) and young adults (20-24) with licenses were similar for males and females; and in older age groups, men were more likely to have licenses than women.

A driver's license greatly expands one's employment opportunities, both by increasing the geographic range of accessible jobs and by enabling the driver to work jobs with unusual hours - jobs on night shifts or jobs with shifting schedules. Additionally, driving is an essential element of many jobs - obviously, truck and bus drivers, but also many sales positions, repair and maintenance jobs, and construction work. Further, many of these driving intensive jobs have traditionally been male dominated.

Of course, if the falloff in the fraction of drivers is concentrated among highly educated individuals living in areas well served by public transportation, we might not care. But I doubt that is so, particularly in view of the lesser decline in licenses among women. Rather, I fear that just as young men are not keeping pace with women in attending college and earning a degree, they are falling behind in securing

another credential that is important to their future economic success – a driver's license.
