An investigation into the travel behaviour of cohabiting couple families

Helena Titheridge  
Centre for Transport Studies  
University College London

Cohabiting (not married) couple families are the fastest growing family type in the United Kingdom (ONS, 2007). The proportion of cohabiting couple families has grown over the last decade from 9% in 1996 of families to 14% of families in 2006. The proportion of lone parent families increased by less than 1% over the same period. There are now as many cohabiting couple families in the UK as lone parent families. The number of cohabiting couple families is also increasing elsewhere in the world (Wydick, 2007). Despite this increase in the numbers of cohabiting couple families little research has been done to investigate the extent to which the travel patterns of this group differs from those of married couple families.

There are a number of reasons why the travel behaviour of cohabiting couple families may differ from that of married couple families. Cohabiting couple families in the UK tend to be younger than married couple families. Over half of cohabiting couple households were headed by a person aged under 36 in 2001, compared with around 1 in 10 for married couple households (ONS, 2007). Cohabiting couple households are also likely to have fewer children than married couple households. There are also differences in employment and education attainment levels between cohabiting and married couples, see for example Gamundi’s (2007) study of Spanish couples.

The demographics of the household, such as differences in the number of children, the age profile of family members and their employment characteristics, for example, may not be the only explanation for differences in travel behaviour between cohabiting couple families and married couple families. A number of psychology and sociology studies have looked at the quality of the relationship between cohabiting couples and married couples; the relationship of cohabiting couples is generally found to be of lower quality, e.g. Brown and Booth (1996). Others have studied how the different household types organise and coordinate household resources and household chores. Members of cohabiting couples are more likely to manage their finances separately than married couples (chaloupkova, 2006), whilst males in cohabiting couples tend to perform more household chores than their counterparts in married couples, whilst women in cohabiting couples tend to perform fewer household chores than those in married couples (Baxter, 2005; Davis et al, 2007). A number of studies looking at within-household

---

1 A family is classified as a household with either a married or co-habiting couple (with or without children) or a lone parent with child(ren). The child(ren) may be dependent or non-dependent.
interactions have found that travel behaviour is influenced by the way in which household members allocate chores and activities among each other and the numbers and types of activities in which they jointly participate (e.g. Srinivasan et al, 2005; Lee et al, 2007; Srinivasan and Bhat; 2005). Although none of these studies considered the quality and type of relationship between couples.

This study aims to investigate the extent to which travel behaviour differs between co-habiting couple families and married couple families using the Great Britain National Travel Survey of 2002-2004. This data set records travel of participating households using a weekly travel diary and includes data on 8320 individuals in married couple families and 1436 individuals in co-habiting couple families. In particular, the study will examine differences and similarities in terms of the number and types of trips made, time spent travelling, modes used, the numbers and types of escort and accompanied trips both within and between the different household types. The research will then explore the extent to which these differences can be explained by differences in demographics between the different family types.

References


Wydick, B. 2007, "Grandma was right: Why cohabitation undermines relational satisfaction, but is increasing anyway", Kyklos, vol. 60, pp. 617-645.


