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Mostly mobile – social trends, time use and mobility; insights from the Netherlands

Time use and transport
Mobility has been studied from numerous perspectives over the years. Initially little in the way of in-depth research was carried out. Derived from traffic planning and large-scale investments in infrastructure, attention was focused on the number and types of journeys people make. For the various modes of transport, these studies looked at how often people travelled, where they travelled to and what distances they travelled. The major disadvantage was that journeys were studied in isolation, without being related to the activity patterns which underlay them. In response to this one-sided perspective, the ‘activity-based approach’ was developed in from the 1970s onwards. In this new approach, an attempt was made to study journeys as derivative of activity patterns.

A major drawback of the activity based approach is the amount of data required and the often complicated analyses needed. Probably the best source of information are time use surveys, in which respondents keep a diary of their daily activities and mobility patterns. The Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP) has been involved in a Dutch Time Use Study together with a number of other institutions since 1975. In the survey the respondents keep a diary over a seven-day period recording what they were doing (every 15 minutes) and where they were. In addition a detailed questionnaire was completed. This time use survey has been repeated in virtually unchanged form every five years since 1975. The data lend themselves particularly well to the analysis of trends, and have been used extensively in mobility related research (e.g. Harms 2003, 2006 and 2008).

This contribution gives an overview of social trends, time use and mobility in the Netherlands over a 30 year period (1975 – 2005), based on this Dutch Time Use Study. The results are a summary of a PhD-study on this subject, which has been published this summer (Harms 2008).
A preliminary summary of the main findings is presented below:

**Social trends and mobility**
The mobility of the Dutch population is determined by a number of social developments and trends. A first social driver for the growing mobility are demographic trends, such as population growth. A second explanation is offered by socioeconomic trends, such as the increase in prosperity and the associated increase in car ownership. A third key explanation is formed by spatial development: the expansion of the road network and the separation and dispersion of housing and places of employment. Next to demographic, socioeconomic and spatial trends, four social and cultural trends and developments have been identified, which offer a significant additional explanation for the growth in mobility:

- The first trend is individualisation, a far-reaching social development which manifests itself particularly in the decline in the number of members of households and emancipation of women.
- The second trend is intensification of time use patterns. This means that, within a limited time budget, people have become increasingly accustomed to combining several tasks (e.g. work, household and education) and also to experiencing more diverse leisure activities.
- A third trend is the ‘informatisation’ of society: the use of information and communication technology at all levels of society and the changes this brings in knowledge transfer and information exchange. So far, this has not put a brake on mobility; on the contrary: if anything, the use of ICT generates more rather than less mobility.
- The fourth trend is the internationalisation of lifestyle. A key component of this trend is cross-border mobility in connection with holidays and recreation, which has grown enormously in recent decades.

**Time use and mobility**
In seeking to identify the consequences of social trends on traffic volumes, consideration also needs to be given to the distribution of mobility across the hours and days of the week, and the changes since 1975. Many of the problems caused by mobility, such as the many daily traffic jams, are after all caused by the fact that too many people are making journeys at the same time. In reality this means that the existing infrastructure is used very inefficiently.

The general picture is that commuter and education-related peaks are increasingly coinciding with other forms of mobility, including household and leisure traffic. The morning rush-hour contains a relatively higher volume of household and care-related mobility. In the evening rush-hour it is primarily the proportion of leisure mobility that has increased. Additional analysis has shown that social and cultural trends (see above), and in particular the increased share of working women, double-earners and ‘task-combiners’, have all contributed to a further concentration of mobility at the busiest times of the day.

The conclusion is that more and more people are travelling more and more often at the same times for more and more diverse reasons. A one-sided solution to the congestion problem, aimed purely at commuter traffic, is therefore likely to be relatively unproductive. The fact that traffic congestion can also be partly traced to trends of a social and cultural nature adds an extra dimension to the battle against traffic jams and makes finding solutions more difficult.


*Figure: temporal distribution of commuter traffic in the Netherlands, 1975 and 2005*

Source: Dutch Time Use Study 1975-2005