

Young people and transport in rural areas

Young people in the countryside often experience particular difficulties with transport to get to education and work and to maintain a social life. This study, carried out by Pamela Storey and Julia Brannen at the Thomas Coram Research Unit, Institute of Education, examines young people's experience of transport in rural areas. Three representative cohorts of young people aged between 15 and 24 and living in rural locations in South West England were studied. The study found:

- f High fares and poor publicity about public transport are barriers to young people making use of the limited public services which do exist in rural areas. Young bus passengers feel discouraged by unfriendly attitudes of bus drivers and older passengers.**
- f Most young people believe that paying the full fare on public transport whilst still in full-time education is unjust.**
- f Young people below driving age rely on getting lifts for most journeys. Those living in households with only one or no car are at a particular disadvantage, since parents are the main source of lifts.**
- f The end of compulsory schooling at age 16 presents new travel problems. Over 40 per cent of those aged 15 to 16 say that transport issues influence their decisions about post-16 education. Limited public transport in rural areas means that those entering employment or training are restricted in where and when they work.**
- f Learning to drive and getting a car are major priorities and are seen as the solution to dependency on lifts. Over 40 per cent of 17- to 18-year-olds and over 80 per cent of 22- to 24-year-olds in the study were car owners.**
- f Young people who get financial help (usually from parents) towards driving lessons and buying a car, learn to drive and own cars at a younger age than those who get no help. Parents continue to help with 'loans' to keep cars roadworthy.**

Background

Life for young people in the countryside is characterised by a lack of public services and facilities close at hand. As a consequence, issues of travel and transport loom large in young people's lives. This study, conducted in four locations in South West England, looks at the experiences and views of young people living in typical rural areas.

The areas surveyed share many common features - high employment, high levels of car ownership, and rising populations as more people move out to the countryside. Further education colleges and the main centres for employment are all located away from the local area, as are the main recreational facilities. Most of the young people taking part in the study live with their parents and very few (less than 3 per cent) live in households without cars.

Getting to education and work

In rural areas, most sixth forms and further education colleges are located in main towns so that staying on in post-16 education often means having to travel further afield; 40 per cent of 15- to 16-year-olds say that transport issues played a part in their decisions about post-16 education. Where transport is provided to further education centres, getting to the pick-up points often requires linking transport. Usually transport is provided for only one return journey each day so that students can find themselves 'trapped' at school or college if they miss the bus.

Young people who leave education at 16 are severely restricted in where and when they can take up employment and training opportunities. As new entrants to the labour market, they often find employers reluctant to negotiate flexible working hours in order to fit the working day around any existing public transport:

"My Mum drove me in. You do have to be there on time. They wouldn't give me any flexible time of arriving ten minutes late and leaving ten minutes late."

Young people depend on parents, friends or employers to provide lifts to work or to public transport pick-up points and then learn to drive as soon as they can.

Seeing friends and having a social life

"I live one mile from a village with 377 OAPs and no shop."

Getting to see friends or going out at night are significant problems for young people without their own transport. Often there are no other young people living locally, so seeing friends outside school or college is dependent on the availability of transport.

Even if friends do live nearby, there is often nowhere to meet outside the home, except the village pub, the playing field or perhaps a bus shelter. When young people do meet friends locally, their public presence within a village is high profile so that they feel that whatever they do is open to scrutiny and comment:

"Everyone tells everybody everything in a small place, everyone hears. If I was seen in a pub, it would be straight back the next day."

Getting into town for an evening out, either for entertainment or just to meet friends more privately, usually requires a car since few villages have bus services which operate after 6 p.m. Young people rely heavily on persuading parents to provide transport for their leisure pursuits, but often have problems arranging lifts home late at night.

The transport options for the under-17s

Lifts

Lifts are the most frequent method of travel, accounting for over two-thirds of non-school journeys. Many lifts are 'special journeys' with the lift giver acting as taxi driver. As most lifts are from parents, access to lifts depends on the number of cars and drivers in the household and on competing demands on parents' time. Giving young people lifts so they can see their friends is rarely top of parents' agendas. Those living with a lone parent or living in households with only one car or driver usually have fewer options to call on and therefore more limited access to lifts:

"We've only got one car; [mother] is having to take my dad into work everyday and then come back and then take herself off to work and then she has to go and get him in the evening...I suffer from that because she says, 'I'm not taking you anywhere'."

Some young people describe organising elaborate cartels, making use of available parents to provide them and their friends with lifts. But negotiating lifts underlines young people's dependence on their parents and limits their autonomy. Activities requiring lifts become visible to parents and potentially subject them to parents' supervision. With services such as health centres and banks centralised in only the largest villages and towns, young people reliant on lifts may have to involve parents in matters which they would prefer to keep private.

Walking and cycling

Around a quarter of journeys are made on foot or by bicycle. Although both methods offer the freedom to travel without parental supervision, neither is a

popular option. The volume of traffic on rural roads and the distances involved mean that most young people only walk or cycle on short journeys or for recreational purposes.

Mopeds

"Who wants to be seen on a 50?"

Mopeds are a transport option for young people at age 16 but very few use them. Many report being discouraged by their parents on grounds of safety and describe mopeds as giving them the wrong image, being too slow and unexciting. However, a Moped Loan scheme, being piloted in one of the study areas, was unable to meet demand from young people in need of transport to get to college or to work.

Public transport

For most young people, their public transport experience is limited to the school bus, with only 5 per cent of all non-school journeys made on a public service. Most express dissatisfaction with services, although recent users often take a more positive view. Additional Sunday and evening services, recently introduced through the Rural Bus Subsidy Grant, were mentioned by regular bus users, while non-users were unaware of these improvements. These initiatives were too new to have yet made an impact on the everyday lives of young people.

Poor publicity about services and inaccessible timetables mean that young people, especially those living in households with no culture of bus use, are often poorly informed about local buses which do operate. Even young people who use buses relatively frequently report problems finding out when and where buses run.

Young people who do use buses express a low sense of entitlement to public transport services. They report 'dirty looks' from older passengers and describe a voluntary segregation of passengers, the elderly to the front, the young to the back, a separation which fails when buses are crowded or when smaller, shuttle buses are operating:

"They start to complain, the old people and that, that there's no space on the bus and it's all taken up by young people."

Others report confrontations with bus drivers and feel that they are singled out because of their age. They sense that drivers expect young people to cause problems on the bus.

The fares structure on buses compounds for young people the feeling that services are provided for adults, not for them. With bus operators often having the

power to decide the 'right' age for full fare, young people experience localised inequalities in fare structures, with some paying full fare from age 14:

"Mum doesn't take me shopping to help carry everything because she has to pay full fare for me. I always try and lie [about my age]."

Young people see this as 'unfair', particularly when pensioners are given concessionary fares. With the majority of young people staying on in full-time education or training until they are at least 18, young people question their treatment as 'adult fare-paying passengers' when, by contrast, they are treated as 'less than adult' with regard to driving, buying alcohol, voting and pay (under Minimum Wage legislation).

Taxis

Very few young people use private taxis since, in rural areas, these are rarely based locally. Consequently fares are high, particularly in the evenings and at night when young people are most likely to need a taxi. At the time of the study there were no shared taxi schemes or dial-a-ride services in operation in any of the areas.

Learning to drive

"Until you get to 17 and you can get a car and a decent paid job, you can't get anywhere and you can't see your mates."

By the time young people reach their seventeenth birthday, many have experienced a good deal of difficulty and inconvenience with transport. Not surprisingly, most aspire to learn to drive as soon as they are legally permitted. Driving is perceived as a key step to achieving personal freedom and being in charge of one's own life, the solution to dependency on parents for transport. Some take up driving more reluctantly, concerned about environmental damage from cars. They consider that their rural situation gives them a stark choice - either get their own transport or move away to town.

Young people living in rural locations learn to drive at a younger age than those living in urban areas. The majority pass their driving test and get their own cars before they reach the age of 20, reflecting the high priority of car ownership for the rural population in general. In this study, over 40 per cent of 17- to 18-year-olds and over 80 per cent of 22- to 24-year-olds are driving their own cars.

Since most become car owners while still in full-time education or very soon after starting their first job, financial help, usually from parents, is a necessity. Those who get assistance generally learn to drive and

get cars at a younger age than those who have to pay for everything themselves. First cars are generally old ones, and young people continue to rely on parents to provide 'loans' for unexpected repairs or replacements:

"I'm lucky. If something went wrong and I needed some money, my mother would lend it to me, rather than me drive it around illegally."

Driving on rural roads can be challenging for inexperienced drivers and few young drivers get any special tuition to develop the additional skills needed for this type of driving. Many car drivers interviewed described accidents with their cars. Despite the high proportion of young people learning to drive by the time they are 18 years old, pre-driving skills courses, which emphasise safe driving, are not routinely offered at rural secondary schools.

However, not all young people in rural areas get a car of their own to drive. Some lack the financial means to pay for lessons or to run a car, and others are precluded from learning through illness or disability. Living in areas where car ownership is widespread amongst peers accentuates the feeling of disadvantage and exclusion for those who do not drive. The non-drivers in their early twenties who took part in the survey were working mostly in local manual occupations or were unemployed. The 'no car, no job' situation is a classic face of disadvantage in rural areas:

"The job centre doesn't look favourably on you if you're looking for work, live in a village and have no car for they know like you, your chance of a job is almost zero. And no job, no money for a car."

About the study

The study was carried out in four rural areas in South West England. During 1999, over 700 young people, comprising three cohorts aged 15 to 16, 17 to 18 and 22 to 24, took part in the study. The study involved a questionnaire survey of a representative sample of young people in each age group and a series of group and individual interviews with 40 young people. For the youngest cohort, young people attending local secondary schools completed the questionnaire survey and provided travel diaries. The two older age groups were identified from the electoral registers of the wards approximating to the schools catchment areas. The 17- to 18-year-olds were selected as 'rising eighteens' of the 1998 and 1999 registers. Young people for the oldest age group were identified from their first entry to the registers in 1993 and 1994.

How to get further information

The full report, **Young people and transport in rural areas** by Pamela Storey and Julia Brannen, is published for the Foundation by the National Youth Agency (ISBN 0 86155 234 2, price £12.95 incl. p&p).

Further information on the study is available from Pamela Storey (Tel. 01458 241722 and 0207 612 6957/8, email: tcru4@ioe.ac.uk and tetcpas@ioe.ac.uk), Thomas Coram Research Unit, Institute of Education, 27 Woburn Square, London, WC1H 0AA.