Mapping Teen Mobilities: New Ethnographies for Digital Lives

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Supported by New England University Transportation Centers/USDOT; 2011-12
Goals

• Understand teen mobility in context of different land-use/transportation contexts

• Explore role of information & communication on teen mobility
Phase 1: Parent & Teen Surveys

Two high schools near Burlington, VT

- South Burlington (SBHS): rich in activity/travel choices
- Champlain Valley Union (CVUHS): regional (4 towns), HS near small village
Survey Sample

• Total student population: ~2,000
  – Parent survey: N = 253 (226 gave permission to teens)
  – Teen survey: N = 147 (65% of those given permission)
• High income, education households (HH):
  – 59% >$100k (county median: $59k)
  – 81% bachelor’s or higher (county: 45%)
  – 91% own home (county: 66%)
  – 90% 2 or more vehicles, 0 with no vehicle
• 91% White, 7% Asian (county: 92% & 3% respectively)
• 98% HH have internet access, 97% parents cell phones
• Teens: 50/50 gender; even distribution of 9th to 12th
Phase 2: Mapping & Messaging

- Intensive session with 5 teens; wide spectrum of license, car access, phone use & type, destinations, home/neighborhood context
- 4 activities: collaborative paper map exercise, Google map route planning, focus group discussion, & ‘text review’
‘Text Review’ as Method

• ‘Vulnerable’ population… IRB, privacy, etc.
• Based on older methods like oral histories
• Use of GPS & other devices in recording & generating transportation data
• Recognize intersection between communication and transportation
• Not just using digital devices, but studying shifts toward ‘digital lives’
Analysis: ‘Student Vignettes’

Eryn is a junior at South Burlington HS, age 16, and has lived in South Burlington her whole life. She lives with her mother and younger brother, ‘Paul’, age 15. She got her license in June 2011, as soon as she turned 16. Eryn’s mother is an ‘executive’ with a household income over $100,000. Their household has internet and all three residents have cell phones with data plans. Eryn’s mother bought a new car and gave Eryn her SUV for the following reason:

*I’m a single parent and needed help transporting my children. Eryn having a car made this possible.*

She went on to say that the biggest household change since Eryn got her license was this:

*I’m not spending hours in my car each day. Our gas usage has actually gone down as she drives the less economical vehicle much less than when I was driving it everywhere.*

Eryn is a very sociable teen who texts, Tweets, and uses social media a great deal. She uses her phone and data plan more than 7 times per week to plan transportation (survey). This communication use is reflected in her network of friends plotted out in the paper map exercise. She uses her phone extensively to maintain this network of communication but also visits friends’ houses frequently. In her survey she said that getting her license allowed her to “be involved in more activities and be with my friends more”.

Implications for spatial thinking across undergrad curriculum

• Participatory engagement in creating geographic information & producing knowledge
• Teens as indicators of emerging practices by broader population
• Teens in high school now soon will be undergrads

... how can we leverage their existing technological savvy (e.g. communication, social media) while incorporating **spatial concepts** (mobility, access, social constructions of the built environment, environmental concerns)?
Thank You

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