

Taking the car? A survey

Think back to the oil shocks of 1973—or even 2008: the more it costs at the petrol station, the less people are inclined to use their cars. It's simple intuition, and many OECD governments are now using fuel taxes, in part to discourage the use of personal vehicles in favour of more environmentally friendly transport choices. A 2008 survey of households in 10 OECD countries reveals that cars are still the most popular means of getting around. The survey also explores the factors influencing how we choose to travel. Results are based on more than 10,000 responses.

The survey shows that people who are particularly concerned about the

environment are generally less likely to own a car. This would imply that raising public awareness about the environmental effects of private car use can complement financial incentives, particularly if aimed at people who use cars the most: men, middle-aged people and those with higher incomes and education.

Survey findings also show how useful it is to provide information on fuel-efficiency and environmental impacts so that consumers can make informed decisions about the cars they buy.

But more is needed to dissuade people from getting into their cars. Survey results

confirm that improved access to public transport will reduce car ownership and use. What improvements would encourage people to use public transport more? Mexicans are particularly concerned about security. The Swedes cite reliability. In France, convenience is ranked as the most important factor. Overall, being within five minutes of a public transport stop will have a pronounced effect on car use.

In general, the results underline the importance of looking at choice of transport mode and travel purpose together. Cars are the most common mode for almost all travel purposes. Some 70% of respondents report that they use their cars regularly for shopping, indicating perhaps that planning decisions to keep shops and services easily accessible, rather than encouraging out-of-town commercial centres, would reduce car use significantly.

Results of the survey imply that a mix of push-pull instruments is required to encourage more sustainable transport choices. Increasing the cost of driving and accessibility to public transport must go hand-in-hand, while taxes and regulations would be more effective when combined with information campaigns.

What about the trusty bicycle? Not surprisingly, there is a close relationship between accessibility to dedicated bicycle paths and the willingness to use bicycles. People surveyed in all of the countries are more likely to use bicycles to commute to work or go shopping than to go to school or visit friends. Policymakers are now taking cycling more seriously. Thanks to innovative payment and security technologies, there are now 24/7 self-service rental points in main cities and towns, particularly in Europe, and many areas are reporting more bicycling as a result. In other words, when it comes to personal transport choices, policies can make a difference. *MA*

More survey results are available at www.oecd.org/environment/households. For more information, contact Yse.Serret@oecd.org or Nick.Johnstone@oecd.org

