

Less Travel, more Dependence? Changing travel patterns of disabled people in England

Introduction

For a number of years, the National Travel Survey (NTS) has recorded data on how people who identify as having a mobility difficulty travel in England. This short paper identifies some key aspects of how disabled people* travel, using data from 2015 (Table NTS0709 of the NTS) (1). This Table includes statistics on the travel by people with mobility difficulties in the eight years up to 2015. This paper uses this longitudinal data to examine what changes there have been in travel patterns over these eight years and to briefly consider evidence that might help explain them.

Literature review

The most comprehensive recent compilation of data on disabled people's travel in England can be found in the DfT's recent *Disabled people: attitudes towards travel* (2). This, and the useful Disability and Travel Factsheet (3) illustrates some of the findings explored below - for example that disabled people make fewer trips than non-disabled, and have different patterns of using various modes of transport. A considerable literature on transport and disability emerged in Britain in the 1990s (4), but there appears to have been less analysis of the issues in recent years. In particular, there appears to be a gap in identifying and understanding trends of travel behaviours. As a snapshot, the DfT Factsheet is of limited value in this respect.

Travel by disabled people

Table 1 below shows the average number of trips people made in 2015 (the most recent year for which data is available) broken down by different modes as recorded in the NTS. As can be seen, people reporting a mobility difficulty travel much less frequently than non-disabled people, making an average of 606 trips: only 63% of the number of trips by those without a mobility difficulty.

The main forms of transport for people who have a mobility difficulty are (in order of frequency): by car (as a driver), by car (as a passenger), walking and by bus. These are also the main modes of travel by people who do not identify as having a mobility but for this group, travel by car (as a driver) and walking are much more frequent.

Non-disabled people made more than twice the number of trips as a car driver, and more than twice the number of trips on foot, compared to disabled people. The only modes of travel that disabled people made more frequently than the non-disabled are by car (as a passenger), taxi and 'other private' (which includes minibus, motorcycle, etc). Train and bicycle are modes which disabled people use noticeably less frequently than the non-disabled.

* (I use the term 'disabled people' here interchangeably to refer to those who identify as having a mobility difficulty. Of course, not all disabled people have a mobility difficulty and some people with a mobility difficulty may not identify as having a disability).

Table 1: Trips (2015) made by people...

	...with mobility difficulty		...without mobility difficulty	
	trips	%	trips	%
car-van driver	229	38%	496	51%
car-van passenger	179	30%	133	14%
walk	95	16%	196	20%
bus	54	9%	65	7%
other private	21	3%	7	1%
taxi	16	3%	10	1%
rail	5	1%	37	4%
bicycle	4	1%	20	2%
other public	3	1%	3	1%
all modes	606	100%	967	100%

Changes in travel patterns

Having seen how people travel in 2015, we can now look at how travel patterns have changed since 2007. The first headline observation is that both these who have, and don't have a mobility difficulty made fewer trips overall. However the fall in trips by disabled people (10%) was greater than that of non-disabled (7%) over the same period (Table 2). This fall was more pronounced in the period to 2014, as an increase in the number of trips made by people with mobility difficulties in the year to 2015.

Table 2: Total trips made, 2007-2015

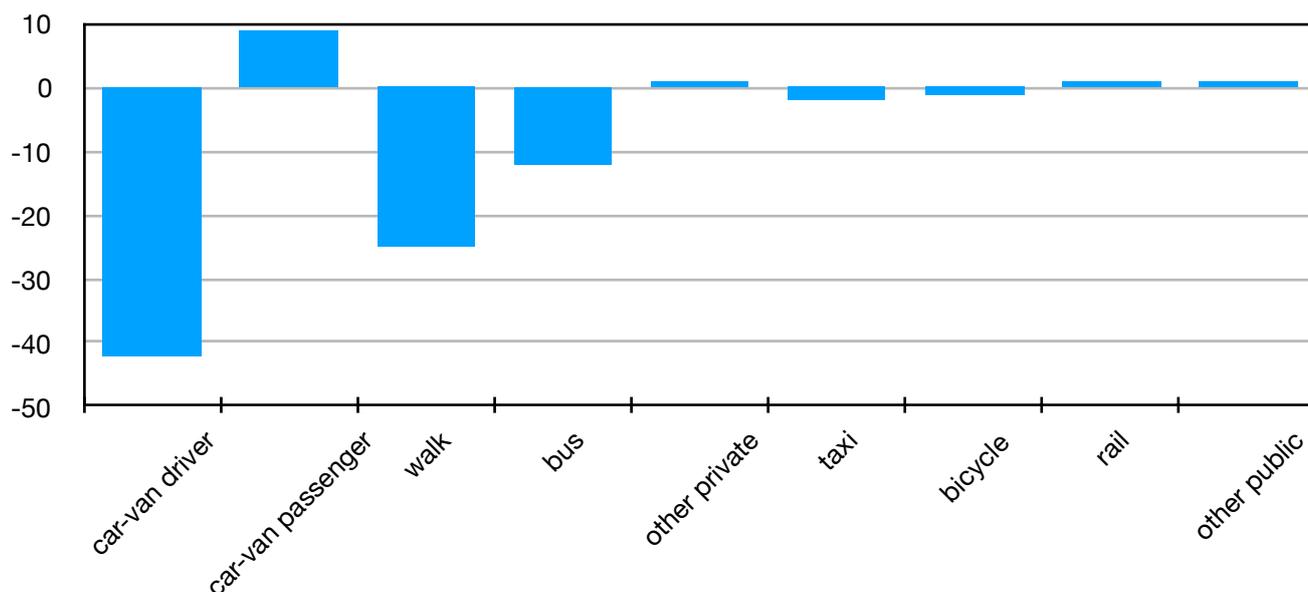
	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	change
Mobility difficulty	676	685	693	652	664	646	572	569	606	-10%
No mobility difficulty	1042	1057	1031	1025	1013	1014	977	981	968	-7%

Table 3 and Chart 1 below show the change in number of trips by mode between 2007 and 2015 for people with mobility difficulties. Proportionately, there have been particularly significant declines in travel by disabled people using some important forms of travel, notably walking (-21%), bus (-18%) and car as a driver (-15%). In contrast the only major mode of transport which showed an absolute increase in number of trips was car (as a passenger). In 2007, 25% of trips by people with mobility difficulties were by car (as a passenger). In 2015, this mode had risen to account for 30% of all trips. This appears to suggest that disabled people have become more dependent on other people to meet their mobility needs.

Table 3: Trips by mode (people with mobility difficulty): 2007-15

	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	change 2007-15
car-van driver	271	280	292	271	268	276	223	218	229	-42
car-van passenger	170	170	163	165	175	168	169	163	179	9
walk	120	107	128	107	109	99	85	94	95	-25
bus	66	68	63	65	65	56	43	49	54	-12
other private	20	27	16	17	16	21	19	17	21	1
taxi	18	21	17	16	17	17	23	18	16	-2
bicycle	5	4	4	4	6	5	1	2	4	-1
rail	4	6	7	6	5	3	7	4	5	1
other public	2	2	3	2	4	3	2	4	3	1
all modes	676	685	693	652	664	646	572	569	606	-70

Chart 1: Change in number of trips by people with mobility difficulty, 2007-2015



Analysis

The reasons for these changes are not immediately apparent. The overall reduction in travel by people with mobility difficulties largely pre-dates the significant social security changes involving the move from Disability Living Allowance to Personal Independence Payments (PIP), which has widely been seen as adversely affecting disabled people (5). The period of declining trips also coincides with an increase in Motability users: their numbers grew from 540,000 in 2010 (6) to 648,000 in 2016 (7). This growth might suggest that the number of trips by disabled people using a car (especially as a driver) would increase, rather than decline. Bus accessibility also improved over the period; in 2007, around 60% of buses on service in England had a low floor, while by 2015, this had increased to over 90% (8). Again however, despite better accessibility, bus use fell.

There are also on the other hand, a number of trends which do broadly follow the pattern of falling trip numbers. Overall car traffic in the UK declined in the period 2007-2015, falling from 251 billion miles in 2007 (9) to 247 billion miles in 2015 (10). While this broadly mirrors the downward trend in the number of trips by those both with, and without a mobility difficulty, the fall in traffic is much less pronounced than the reduction of trips reported through the NTS. The number of Blue Badges (parking concessions) in the UK fell by 6% from 2.55 million in 2010 (11) to 2.39 million in 2015 (12). Bus services also contracted over a similar period by around 3%, from 2.14 billion miles in 2008 (13) to 2.08 billion miles in 2015 (14). There is evidence of falling dial-a-ride use over the similar period (15), but this mode of transport forms only a very small proportion of total trips and cannot account for a significant part of the overall pattern.

There appear to be then a number of trends which correlate with the changing travel patterns of people with mobility difficulties; and also a number of trends which appear to run counter to them. As the Disability and Travel Factsheet points out, there are some similarities between the travel patterns of disabled people and those of people on low incomes; there is of course a considerable correlation between income and disability. However, there is no obvious cause arising from this data which plausibly accounts for the reduction in travel by disabled people, or the changes in mode.

Conclusions

It appears then, that people with mobility difficulties are not only travelling less than they were, but they are travelling less relative to their more mobile counterparts. They are also more reliant on others (probably family, friends and carers) to drive them for the trips that they do make, and this reliance appears to be increasing. In short, they are becoming less independent as well as less mobile.

With fewer trips overall by both those with, and without, mobility difficulties, it is possible that the need for travel has reduced. However, on the face of it, the reduction in number of trips overall together with the apparent reduction in independent travel, is a matter of concern that should be investigated further. It would be useful to establish if the changes in travel are associated with particular demographic among people with mobility difficulties - for example older people, or those in rural areas? As the DfT's recent synopsis of transport and disability research concluded, "people with disabilities should not be viewed as a homogeneous group in regard to travel".

It would also be useful to understand more about why travel by some modes - such as walking - appear to have declined so much among people with mobility difficulties. Qualitative studies such as the 2009 Department of Transport's research on *Travel behaviour, experiences and aspirations of disabled people* (16) may also provide insights.

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