

NEWS MEDIACOM

Why they rack up miles morning and evening for work



30.10.15 - What drives people to spend hours commuting to and from work? A book written by EPFL sociologists analyzes this phenomenon – its structure, its social consequences and how it has changed over time.

There is indeed a glamorous side to the star performer who “spends half his life in the air between New York and Singapore.” Then there is the reality of people who spend two hours every day in a train, bus or car. Sociologists call them ‘highly mobile’ people, whether or not they choose to commute so far and regardless of whether this brings them a big paycheck or career success. Researchers at EPFL’s Urban Sociology Laboratory analyzed how this phenomenon has evolved over the past 10 years in four European countries: Switzerland, France, Germany and Spain. Their work has now been published in book form.* In it, they show how people increasingly accept long commutes in response to economic difficulties.

A highly mobile person is someone who spends more than two hours per day commuting or over 60 nights per year away from home. The book is based on two studies, conducted in 2007 and 2011, that surveyed some 7,000 working people between the ages of 25 and 54. The researchers used the data they collected to construct a biography of these people on the basis of their residential, professional and family lives and their commuting habits over the course of their lives. By revisiting some of the same people in 2011 as in 2007, the researchers were able to measure subtle changes in their behavior and in how they talk about commuting, as well as to estimate the effect of the 2008 economic crisis.

A way out of unemployment

First observation: many people commute a long distance to work. Between 11% and 15% of workers between the ages of 25 and 54 are highly mobile. The rates were highest in Germany and Switzerland and grew between 2007 and 2011. “In these countries, people mainly choose the long-distance commute,” said Vincent Kaufmann, Director of LASUR. “This is facilitated by the fact that long trips are made easy by the very effective transit system.”

On the other hand, in Spain – and to a lesser extent in France – long commutes tend not to be by choice and are sometimes the only way out of unemployment. The 2008 crisis is still being felt. In Spain, the number of long-term commuters fell, while the number of people away from home has doubled. In 2011, one out of every two highly mobile commuters became that way to escape unemployment, versus 28% in France, 22% in Germany and 13% in Switzerland.

In addition to comparisons by country and over time, the book categorizes highly mobile commuters in a way that often belies stereotypes. In most cases they are not well-paid people with a high level of education. And their efforts will not necessarily lead to career success. While it is generally a springboard in Switzerland and for women in France, in Spain it is more the result of need. More personally, the book looks at how people deal with the need to commute a long distance over the course of their lives. Why does one commute? Is it by force, choice or necessity? How do people view their own situation? What do they hope to gain from it?

In the grand scheme of things, what is the social cost of high mobility? In short, marital instability and lower birth rates. Among women surveyed who had never experienced episodes of high mobility, 10% did not have children at the time of the interview. These figures rise to 18% for women who experienced high mobility, 22% among long-term commuters and 23% among those who commuted long distances early in their career. One must add to this stress, fatigue and a “higher burn-out rate,” according to the sociologist. “Professional exhaustion often causes people to rethink their choices and give up the highly mobile life.”

“High Mobility in Europe,” by Vincent Kaufmann and Gil Viry, published by Palgrave Macmillan, August 2015.

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