

VIDEOS

02/18/2014

Highly mobile or highly sedentary?

By **Emmanuel Ravalet** (Socioeconomist) 18 February 2014

Long-distance commuting is increasing in Europe, as are multilocal living arrangements. But does that really signify greater mobility? Rather, isn't it a sign that we are becoming more sedentary?

Highly mobile people travel frequently and on a regular basis as part of their job. This applies to both long-distance commuting between homes and places of work and dual residency, where an individual has a "pied-à-terre" in the town or city where he or she works and a principle residence for the weekend. The challenge for these people is combining their professional activities with the personal ties, habits and preferences as regards family life. Today, long-distance commuting for job-related reasons is increasing, as are multilocal living arrangements. The question is, why is it increasing?

Why have long-distance commuting and dual residency increased?

1. Better transport

The first reason we can cite is the improvement in the transport offer, with high-speed trains, better road transport provision and, obviously, low-cost airlines, which enable people to travel fairly regularly to rather distant cities at fairly low cost and in relatively little time. Then we can look at factors on either end of these journeys, i.e. housing and work.☒

2. Job uncertainty

Jobs are becoming increasingly specialised, both in terms of the type of work and the location. There are areas with tons of jobs, and others where there are few or none. The second point is that there is a growing number of short-term contracts and, thus, a lot of change: you can work one place for quite a short time and then have to change job locations. And the third reason is obviously unemployment. Difficulty finding a job leads some people to seek employment further from home.☒

3. Residential inertia

While long-distance commuting and all types of work-related travel are on the

While long-distance commuting and all types of work-related travel are on the increase, it's not only due to work-related factors. At the other end of the line, with regard to housing, there are also reasons related to what we call 'roots'. In other words, moving house means changing everything. Living somewhere means growing roots, meeting people, having social and family networks, friends, developing habits and appropriating these places. So there's a certain inertia in terms of residential location. The second point is that a dual-income couple has to manage two different workplaces. Thus, there is no optimal or perfect residential location that will enable them to minimise their travel time between home and work. If we go back to the habits and to the roots developed around the place of residence, we can expand a bit on this question of habits. And then, it is also linked to comfortable living. When you look for somewhere to live, you look for somewhere where you will feel good. This can be broken down by what is called 'self-segregation', meaning the preference people have for living in places where the population that already lives there is like them from a social, cultural and other points of view, creating segregation. We can also talk about references and habits, be they social, familial, institutional or cultural. In this case, I'll use the example of people living near the border and who prefer to stay their country. They may be willing to long-distance commute to work on the other side of the border. These daily commutes can take an hour and a half, two hours, or even more, and are done to remain in familiar surroundings and maintain institutional and, or cultural roots, all of which can help them better cope with changes that may be taking place in their personal lives. Finally, these different forms of commuting and dual residency result from the various arrangements people are required to make in order to manage space and time.

Being more mobile to be more rooted

If we ask the question "why this increase in long-distance, job-related mobility?", we can broaden the idea we have of the concept of mobility. Mobility isn't just physical movement in space. People have social and economic preferences, which also determine their choice of residential location. In order to understand dual-residency, multilocational living arrangements, we also have to look at the social dimension associated with spatial mobility. Summarizing a bit what we said earlier, one realizes that highly mobile people sometimes are forced to choose long-distance mobility for professional reasons, to protect their residential roots. So, ultimately, those who are mobile spatially may not be particularly mobile socially. They may not want to change, to be faced with otherness, to something different from what they know. What's interesting is that intensive commuting may develop, but not at the expense of roots. The highly mobile are sometimes highly sedentary. Intensive commuting is on the rise, but at the same time, sedentariness is not decreasing, nor is the importance of local roots.

Avoiding professional demotion

Another point is that we cannot necessarily move house as easily as we change jobs. The greater the labour market's demand for flexibility, the higher the

job. The greater the labour market's demand for flexibility, the higher the unemployment rate, and the harder it is to find another job. As a result, we are required to increase the distance between home and the workplace, and eventually have to make a choice regarding the place of residence. We can therefore easily imagine accepting long-distance commuting for a career, a better-paid job or a better professional situation. But we realize that, more and more, long-distance commuting for professional reasons is not, in fact, linked to securing a better professional situation, but rather is a way to avoid being demoted. It can also be a way of avoiding unemployment and, at the same time, safeguarding certain aspects linked to comfort and quality of life, and which allow us to find our personal balance.☒

Ability, desire and action: inequalities facing highly mobile lives

At this point, it's fair to ask whether highly mobile people are actually happy with their situation. We can also explore the question of inequalities linked to highly mobile lives. The literature on the inequalities of mobility invites us to look not at the differences between those who are mobile and those who aren't, but between those who could be mobile and those aren't. Regarding this question, we looked at people's actual behaviour in a study on professional mobility called 'Job-Mob'. Are they mobile? Are they highly mobile or not? What kind of people are in each of these situations? Could they become highly mobile or not? Do they want to? This ability, desire and action are, in fact, related to the idea of motility, developed by Vincent Kaufmann, wherein ability is approached from the point of view of access and skills, or, in other words, contextual access: is there a train or a motorway nearby? Does the individual have personal means? Does he or she have a car, a monthly, annual rail pass, etc? And does he or she have the skills needed to become highly mobile?☒

What are the skills of the highly mobile?

What kind of skills are needed to be highly mobile? It means being able to read maps and find your way in a space. It also means the ability to productively use your travel time and know how to manage uncertainties or changes. For example, when there are problems with public transport or traffic jams, the ability to organise your time with respect to such unforeseeable events. All of this involves a certain amount of skill involved, which we will look at in terms of the idea of ability: can we be more mobile? We looked at this using a database called "data panel", which contains data collected from the same individuals on two different occasions. We interviewed them in 2007 and again in 2011. This way, we were able to study any changes. The other feature of the database we used is that it is pan-European: so we were able to see what was happening in Spain, in France, in Switzerland and in Germany at the same time.☒

1. First conclusion: there is no correlation between potential mobility and actual mobility

If we look at actual mobility skills and people's potential mobility based on

access and, or skills, we notice that there are economic differences between the wealthiest and the most disadvantaged, as well as social differences between those with the highest levels of education and the others, and also between men and women. However, the most surprising thing is that those with the greatest ability, meaning those who could be the most mobile, are actually not the most mobile people. So, there is no link between the ability to move and actually moving.☒

2. Second conclusion: the experience of mobility is determined by mobility skills

However, what we notice is that the ability to do more, and therefore to have the best potential to move, is usually a sign of a more comfortable mobility. People who are mobile have a better experience of it. We saw this in some of the answers to questions we asked about comfort and how people experienced their mobility. It's clear that those with the best skills, the best abilities and the best access have a better experience. This, however, doesn't fully address the issue of inequalities. If we look at actual behaviour, we find a wide variety of profiles among the highly mobile. What allows us to discuss inequalities is listening to what people say about being high mobilities. By asking them if they want to be mobile, we can compare their answers with their actual mobility abilities. What we find is that, if people are willing to be mobile, they will actually become so, at least in the short or medium term.☒

3. Third conclusion: there is no correlation between the desire and the ability to move

However, there is a lack of correlation, a kind of gap, between people who can be mobile and people who want to be. The profiles of those who can and want to be mobile, who are very motile, who have a great deal of mobility capital, who have the means to travel and actually do so, are varied. But we also found people with high potential but little desire. Who decided not to long-distance commute, even though they had the skills and access to do so. Conversely, there are people who are willing to be highly mobile but who have little possibility of doing so. This is the category of individuals that most interests us in terms of inequalities, because these are people who declare their willingness to move but who have weak skills or access and, as a result, might find it hard to cope. Or perhaps, and it's a fair question to ask, they are forced to be mobile against their will.

4. Fourth conclusion: the economic crisis, a factor in long-distance mobility

If we look at these segments of the population, we realize that these people are either unemployed, are potentially at risk of becoming unemployed or have recently been unemployed. Ultimately, unemployment has a major impact on the possibility of becoming highly mobile. This is something that we noticed distinctly in Spain given that the study was conducted in 2007 and in 2011, before and during the economic crisis. We realise that people's abilities have changed little in terms of access and skills. Yet, at the same time, their

willingness to travel has increased dramatically; lots of people are now willing to long-distance commute or make multilocational living arrangements, even though they are in difficult social and economic situations.☒

5. Fifth conclusion: living or suffering mobility over a long period☒

Finally, the complexity of these arrangements in the space between the home and workplace results in periods during which people will be long-distance commuters or highly mobile. These periods may be long or short in duration. What emerges from the 2007 surveys carried on these two separate occasions is that some of the people in who didn't want to be mobile still are, while people who said they were willing to be mobile are no longer so, etc. There is a gap between words and deeds, which is interesting. We realize clear that those who are happiest with their mobility and are in the most favourable situations are those with the greatest facility to put an end to it, to stop their long-distance commuting. Once again, over time, we see that there is great inequality in terms of managing long-distance mobility.

Guaranteeing the right to mobility and to immobility

As a final point, there is now the risk of long-distance mobility becoming the norm, the need to be highly mobile in order to survive or at least to live better, in social terms. Action undoubtedly must be taken against this pressure to be highly mobile. Clearly, it is important to safeguard the possibility of moving and to work on the right to mobility. But, according to the results of our research, it is also clear that we need to work on protecting the right to immobility, in other words, to safeguard the right to not be highly mobile if we don't want to be. It's something that is increasingly difficult. In any case, for the period we analysed, it's something that is developing very rapidly. Being highly mobile in itself is neither a good nor a bad thing, nor is it something that we must be fight for or fight against. But we must guarantee everyone the possibility of being mobile if they wish to be, and not to be if they don't want to be. We must also ensure that people can get out of situations of mobility if they so wish, or remain mobile if they so desire. So there are a lot of different situations. We have to consider all of these profiles if we are to truly combat the inequalities linked to long-distance mobility.

Mobility

Broadly, the word mobility can be defined as the intention to move and the realization of this movement in geographical space, implying a social change.

More

Sedentariness

To be sedentary is to opt for stability and to put down roots, both social and spatial, whether by choice or not.

More

Movement

Movement is the crossing of space by people, objects, capital, ideas and other information. It is either oriented, and therefore occurs between an origin and one or more destinations, or it is more akin to the idea of simply wandering, with no real origin or destination.

More

Motility

Every person, every group can be characterised by greater or lesser propensities for moving around a geographic, economic and social space. "Motility" has been the name given to these aptitudes, a reference to the use of this term in biology.

More

Keywords : Lifestyles, Commuting, User

Disciplines : Social sciences

Transport mode(s) : All modes of transport



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To quote this publication:

Emmanuel Ravalet (2014, 18th of February), « Highly mobile or highly sedentary? », Mobile Lives Forum. Connexion on 22nd of April 2019, URL:

<http://en.forumviesmobiles.org/video/2014/02/18/highly-mobile-or-highly-sedentary-2176>



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