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Go Ahead and Drive Less, if You Can

By [DANNY HAKIM](#) and [JEREMY W. PETERS](#)

DETROIT

FOR three straight weeks, Americans have been buying less gasoline than they did a year ago. Consumption is dropping at a rate not seen since drivers were waiting in gas lines back in the early 1980's. And people are turning to mass transit in record numbers in some cities.

"Normally we'd expect to see a decline of about 400,000 barrels a day from August to September just for seasonal reasons, as people stop taking vacations," said Doug MacIntyre, a senior oil market analyst for the Energy Information Administration.

But Americans consumed an average of 8.8 million barrels of gas a day for the week ending Sept. 16, down from 9.4 million the week before Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans and roughly 200,000 fewer barrels per day than in mid-September last year.

"That sort of gives an indication of the price impact," Mr. MacIntyre said. "It's a big decline."

There are any number of reasons - from hurricanes to Middle East instability to [China's](#) growing thirst for oil - to be pessimistic that the era of \$1.50-a-gallon gasoline will ever return.

So how much can Americans cut back on their driving? How much time behind the wheel is discretionary?

Consider that the average American household used its cars and trucks for 496 shopping trips in 2001, according to an exhaustive survey of 160,000 Americans conducted by the Transportation Department. Trips were 7.02 miles in length, on average, for a total of 3,482 miles per household per year. That much driving could almost get you from New York to Juneau, [Alaska](#), give or take a few hundred miles.

That's a lot farther than in 1990, when the average household's shopping trips could only get you from New York to Denver. Part of the difference stems from the fact that the length of an average shopping trip was 5.1 miles in 1990. Blame greater suburban sprawl for longer trips these days.

But the average household also took just 341 shopping trips in 1990, back in a pre-latte era when there were just a few dozen Starbucks stores and coffee was something to be brewed at home. People are now taking more shopping trips than trips to and from work.

Of course, determining how driving miles are put to use through surveys is hardly an exact science. "Not only is it difficult, it's getting more difficult, because more people are

blending work and pleasure," said Doug Hecox, a spokesman for the Federal Highway Administration.

What seems clear is that American consumers have been unnerved by the record-breaking gasoline prices this year. The big gas-guzzling sport utility vehicles that have been a Detroit favorite have landed on dealer lots with a resounding thud, with steep discounting required to keep them selling.

Some people are considering carpooling, while others are turning to public transportation, and in record numbers in some cities, according to statistics the American Public Transportation Association will release tomorrow.

The Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority recorded the busiest month ever for its Metro system in June, and ridership was up 10 percent for the year through August, compared with a normal annual growth rate of 2 percent.

In [Texas](#), traffic on the Trinity Railway Express, which links Dallas to Fort Worth, was up 16.4 percent for the first four weekdays of September compared with the same period a year earlier. St. Louis reported a 17 percent increase in mass transit ridership from April to June, compared with a year ago. In San Francisco, traffic on the Bay Area Rapid Transit system was up almost 4 percent during the first two weeks of September, compared with a year ago, and Sept. 15 was the busiest day for the system in a year.

"These are probably the highest growth levels in four decades," said William W. Millar, the president of the public transportation association, a nonprofit group representing transit authorities across the country.

Drivers can only bend so far, however.

"People can't change where they live," said Richard Porter, an economics professor at the University of Michigan. "They can't change where they work, and there aren't any clear substitutes to gas. You can't run your car on much else. It's not like switching from oranges to grapefruits."

But people can squeeze some savings here and there, even if less shopping is out of the question. Consider other areas of driving inflation. The average household is making 47 trips to doctors and dentists each year, up from 18 in 1990, according to the highway administration's surveys. The number of trips to school or church has risen to 105 per year from 89. Driving vacations have quadrupled from two to eight.

About the only thing Americans have been cutting back on is visiting friends and relatives, with such trips down to 129 per year from 149 in 1990. At 14.89 miles per visit on average, cutting out an additional 20 would save 300 more miles per year. Don't worry, your mother-in-law won't miss you.

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