

The new paradox: Mobile but sedentary

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The distance people travel for professional purposes is increasing. Scientists are taking a closer look at these 21st century nomads, uncovering the reasons behind the long kilometers and the consequences on commuters' lives.

It's the crack of dawn and they're already behind the wheel, in the train or at the airport. Some spend several nights a week in a furnished studio in another city or a suburban hotel. These heavy business travelers ("grands mobiles" in French) are the 21st century's western nomads. They are often quite attached to their homes, but have been uprooted professionally, sometimes by choice, sometimes not.

Based on a European study conducted in 2007 and 2011, EPFL researchers have sketched the profiles of these travelers: people who

spend more than two hours a day commuting and bi-residents who spend more than 60 nights a year away from their primary residence.

These kinds of commuters are not outliers any more: about a quarter of the European population falls into this description. Almost half of those working on the continent experience a period of heavy professional travel during the course of their careers. Improvements in transport availability, tight job markets, rising land values, and regional disparities are all factors that have played a role in the growth of this phenomenon.

Mobility is spatial rather than relational

Other factors not associated with work also play a role in choosing these kinds of commuting solutions. "Heavy commuters are often very sedentary; they're spatially mobile, but not socially mobile," explains Stéphanie Vincent-Geslin, who led the research study with Emmanuel Ravalet in EPFL's Urban Sociology Laboratory. "Moving to a new place, that's a huge change. When you live somewhere, you develop a network that you don't necessarily want to leave. These roots play a big part in the choices these commuters make."

Long distance commuting touches every socio-professional category, city and country dwellers alike. But it doesn't affect them all in the same way, according to research funded by the Forum Vies Mobiles, a think tank of the French National Railway system (SNCF). These differences depend on individuals' so-called "motility," or their potential for mobility. Can I manage—materially, financially, practically – a long-distance commute? To what extent can I deal with the unexpected, organize the commute, and spend my time productively while commuting? "Those who do best in this situation are those who have the most possibility to stop doing it," says Ravalet.

The new normal

Reflecting the growing uncertainties in society, heavy commuting is becoming more and more accepted – but not without social consequences. Women are choosing to wait to start a family, and when they do take the plunge, they have fewer children. Single parents are often forced into long commutes just to make ends meet. Singles start commuting and then, habituated, have a strong inclination to continue this kind of lifestyle. And finally, couples in which one partner is regularly absent run almost twice the risk of separating. "Heavy commuting goes way beyond the issue of transport," conclude the researchers. This fall they will be publishing a short book highlighting the portraits of six fictitious [commuters](#).

Provided by Ecole Polytechnique Federale de Lausanne

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