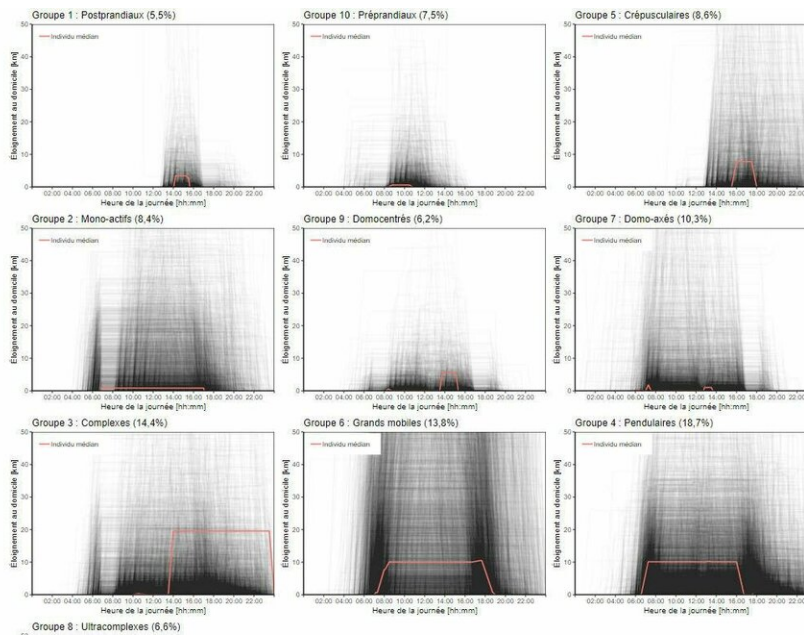


Examining the highly organized lives of long-distance commuters

March 28 2019, by Sandrine Perroud



Commuting patterns in Switzerland over 24 hours, measured as part of a LaSUR study. Credit: Alexis Gummy – LaSUR, EPFL

When both parents face lengthy commutes to work, how do families handle the additional stress? An EPFL scientist took an in-depth look at the strategies these parents use for managing their time wisely and dealing with unexpected challenges.

"Most studies on long-distance commuters focus on high-ranking

executives who live and work in different countries. But I wanted to look more specifically at families where both [parents](#) have to travel long distances day in and day out," says Guillaume Drevon, a geographer at EPFL's Urban Sociology Laboratory (LaSUR). His research has been published in a new book titled *Proposition pour une rythmologie de la mobilité et des sociétés contemporaines* (available in French only).

Drevon has developed a new approach that investigates how the fast pace of modern life is affecting people's behavior and society more broadly. His work analyzes the frequency and geographic dispersion of a given community's activities and how individuals within the community perceive time. With his approach, scientists can obtain a better understanding of how new technology like email, 24-hour news channels and social networks – coupled with the increasing pressure to work quickly and always be productive – have accelerated the pace of life.

Changing perception of time

Drevon's book describes a [paradigm shift](#) in both the theory of sociology and the [research methods](#) used, suggesting that scientists break down societies not according to conventional criteria like age and income group, but rather based on pace of life. "People's perception of time has changed. Everything moves more quickly now that people are under constant pressure to be productive if they want to be accepted by society. That's why we believe our research is particularly relevant today," says Drevon.

The first section of his book discusses how individuals' pace of life can be used to analyze commuting patterns. The second describes the pace of life of around 8,000 people who commute between their workplace in Luxembourg and their home in Belgium, Germany or France. And the third gives the personal accounts of around 20 couples with [small children](#) where both parents have long commutes to work. The third

section also outlines the strategies and methods these parents use to juggle the many demands on their time.

With a little help from my friends

Drevon found that these busy parents rely on modern apps – such as WhatsApp groups with their neighbors, shared Google calendars and Facebook posts – as well as more conventional methods like carpooling to and from children's lessons, relying on nearby grandparents and using a bulletin board in the kitchen. And while this list of solutions may seem long, it also highlights inequalities in the resources available to different groups of parents. "Lower-income families and single parents who don't have friends and family close by often run up against serious time-management challenges," says Drevon.

In busy families where days are planned down to the last minute, even the smallest delay can throw schedules off track and trigger a huge amount of stress. Over time, such hectic lifestyles can eventually lead parents to separate, move or experience burnout. Drevon suggests that parents take advantage of time-saving services like nannies and cleaning ladies. His research shows that on a community level, an excessively fast-paced lifestyle can become a public health issue related to parents' mental and emotional well-being.

Arrhythmia and eurythmia

Drevon's approach is a way of taking a society's pulse, spotting cases of arrhythmia – people who work a night shift, for example – and eurythmia, or times when communities come together such as at local fairs and festivals. He and other scientists at LaSUR are developing a method for measuring a community's pace of life by analyzing commuting patterns (the accompanying graphs show commuting patterns

in Switzerland over a 24-hour period) and housing. The scientists hope that their method can help policy-makers make better-informed decisions regarding transportation systems and housing developments.

Provided by Ecole Polytechnique Federale de Lausanne

Citation: Examining the highly organized lives of long-distance commuters (2019, March 28) retrieved 20 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2019-03-highly-long-distance-commuters.html>

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