

America on the Go . . .

Findings from the National Household Travel Survey

November 2003

U.S. Holiday Travel

The Thanksgiving and Christmas/New Year's holiday periods are among the busiest long-distance travel periods of the year. During the 6-day Thanksgiving travel period, the number of long-distance trips (to and from a destination 50 miles or more away) increases by 54 percent, and during the Christmas/New Year's Holiday period the number rises by 23 percent, compared to the average number for the remainder of the year. And although heavy media attention focuses on crowded airports and bus and train stations on the Wednesday before and Sunday after Thanksgiving, when personal vehicle trips are added to the mix the National Household Travel Survey (NHTS) reveals that Thanksgiving Day is actually a heavier long-distance travel day than Wednesday.

Travel Patterns

Most long-distance holiday travel, about 91 percent, is by personal vehicle, such as by car. The percentage of long-distance travelers who travel by personal vehicle during the holidays is not statistically different from the 89 percent who make long-distance trips by personal vehicle during the rest of the year¹. Only 5 to 6 percent of holiday trips are by air, while 2 to 3 percent are by bus, train, ship, or other mode. (Table 1)

Thanksgiving Day is a more heavily traveled day than Wednesday (Figure 1). Among those traveling more than 100 miles, travel is evenly spread throughout the Wednesday-Sunday period, with no statistically significant difference among the traffic flows during those five days.

For those traveling by air, bus, rail, or other commercial mode, Thanksgiving travel patterns follow a traditional pattern where Wednesday's volumes are higher than Thursday's (Figure 2). While crowded airports and bus and train stations receive heavy media attention on Wednesday and Sunday of Thanksgiving weekend, 9 out of 10 travelers use personal vehicles. And, depending on the distance traveled, these travelers have two very distinct travel patterns:

- For those traveling between 50 and 99 miles (44 percent of personal vehicle trips), more travel on Thursday than Wednesday, and more return on Saturday than Sunday (Figure 3).
- For those traveling at least 100 miles away (56 percent of personal vehicle trips), trips are spread almost equally throughout the Wednesday through Sunday travel period. (Figure 3).



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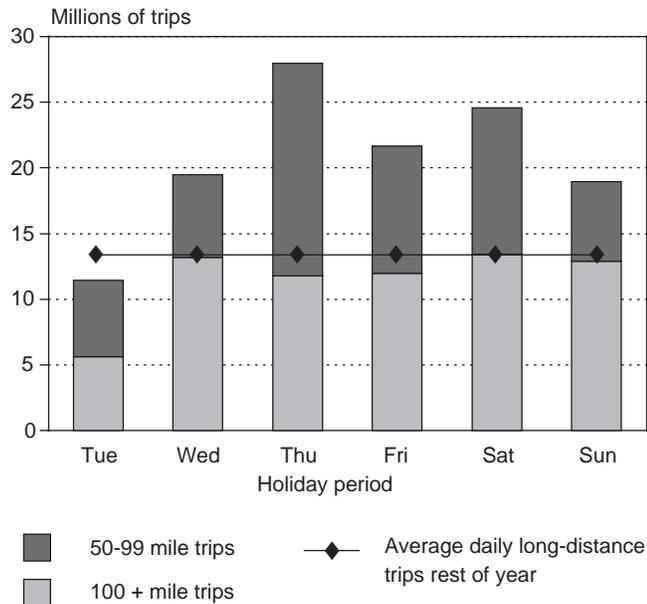
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¹ The 2001 holiday periods, on which the data in this report is based, occurred in the immediate aftermath of the events of September 11, 2001. It is possible that mode choice and travel pattern changes that took place following the events of 9/11 had some impact on holiday travel in 2001.

Figure 1. Long-Distance Thanksgiving Trips (all modes)



NOTE: The number of trips shown represents departing trips plus return trips for each day.

SOURCES: U.S. Department of Transportation, Bureau of Transportation Statistics, Federal Highway Administration, *National Household Travel Survey* (Washington DC: 2003).

Unlike Thanksgiving, which always falls on the fourth Thursday of November, the Christmas/New Year’s travel period, and the resulting travel pattern, varies depending on the day of the week on which the two holidays fall. In 2001, when Christmas and New Year’s Day fell on Tuesday, the Saturday and Sunday preceding Christmas and Christmas Day were generally the busiest travel days of the entire 17-day holiday travel period. The days immediately following Christmas were generally busier than New Year’s Day and the two following days (Figure 4). In 2003, the holidays are on Thursday, which no doubt will change the travel patterns during the Christmas/New Year’s holiday period.

The average Thanksgiving long-distance trip length is 214 miles, compared with 275 miles over the Christmas/New Year’s holiday. For the remainder of the year, average trip distance is 261 miles.

About half of holiday travelers make same-day trips without spending a night away. Long-distance travelers who make overnight trips at Thanksgiving spend an average of just under three nights away. At the

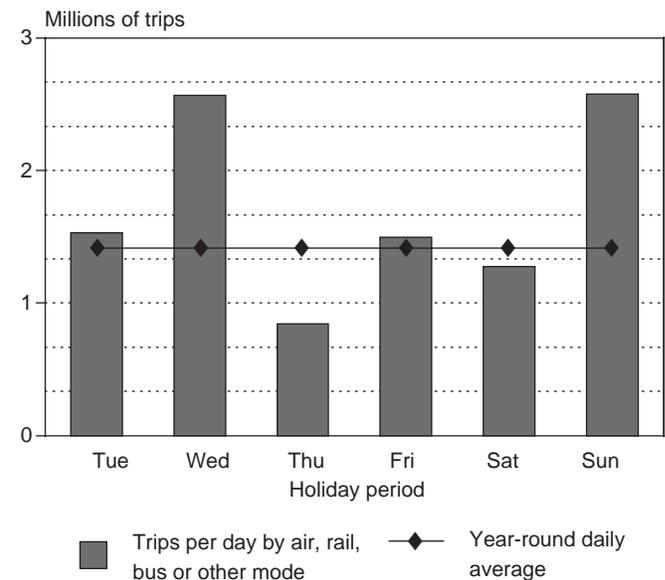
Christmas/New Year’s holiday, the average increases to nearly four nights away. The average during the rest of the year lies between the Thanksgiving and Christmas/New Year’s totals

Most holiday travel is domestic. Over 99 percent of the long-distance trips that begin during the Thanksgiving holiday period are to destinations within the United States. During the longer Christmas/New Year’s period, however, 3 percent of long-distance travel is international.

Why Do We Travel?

Visiting friends and family is the single biggest reason Americans travel during the holidays. Visits account for 53 percent of all Thanksgiving long-distance trips and 43 percent of long-distance trips during Christmas/New Year’s. Visits make up only 24 percent of all long-distance travel during the remainder of the year. While travel to visit family and relatives is up significantly during the holidays, other pleasure and leisure travel remains relatively unchanged.

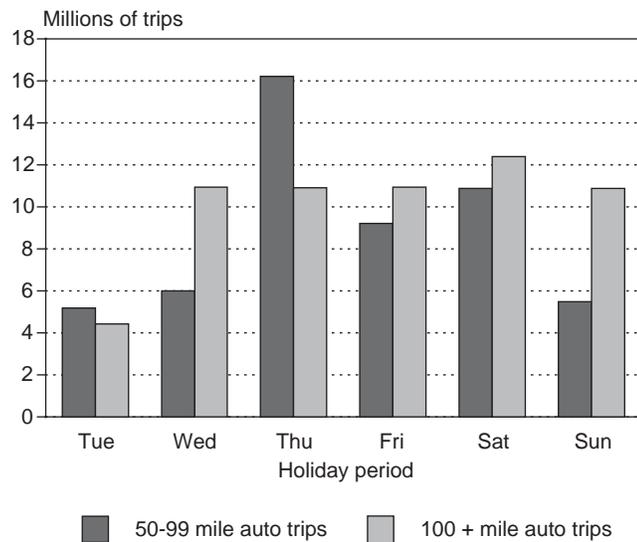
Figure 2. Long-Distance Thanksgiving Trips by Commercial Transportation



NOTE: The number of trips shown represents departing trips plus return trips for each day.

SOURCES: U.S. Department of Transportation, Bureau of Transportation Statistics, Federal Highway Administration, *National Household Travel Survey* (Washington DC: 2003).

Figure 3. Long-Distance Thanksgiving Driving Trips by Distance



NOTE: The number of trips shown represents departing trips plus return trips for each day.

SOURCES: U.S. Department of Transportation, Bureau of Transportation Statistics, Federal Highway Administration, *National Household Travel Survey* (Washington DC: 2003).

Business travel, which accounts for 17 percent of long-distance trips during the remainder of the year, accounts for only 7 or 8 percent during the Thanksgiving and Christmas/New Year’s periods. Because many workers take time off during the holidays, it is not surprising that the percentage of long-distance commute trips drops to only 6 percent at Thanksgiving and 9 percent during the Christmas/New Year’s holiday compared to 13 percent for the remainder of the year.

Who is Traveling?

Travelers who begin trips during the holiday periods are younger than travelers during the rest of the year. The average age of Thanksgiving travelers is just under 34 years and slightly above 36 years for Christmas/New Year’s holiday travelers. During the remainder of the year, the average age is almost 38 years.

During both holiday periods the percentage of male travelers is lower than during the rest of the year when 58 percent of long-distance travelers are male. At Thanksgiving there is a nearly even split between males and females. During the Christmas/New Year’s holiday

period 54 percent of travelers are male, but this is still a smaller majority than during the remainder of the year.

Table 1 shows selected characteristics of Thanksgiving and Christmas/New Year’s holiday travelers who began their long-distance trips during the defined holiday periods.

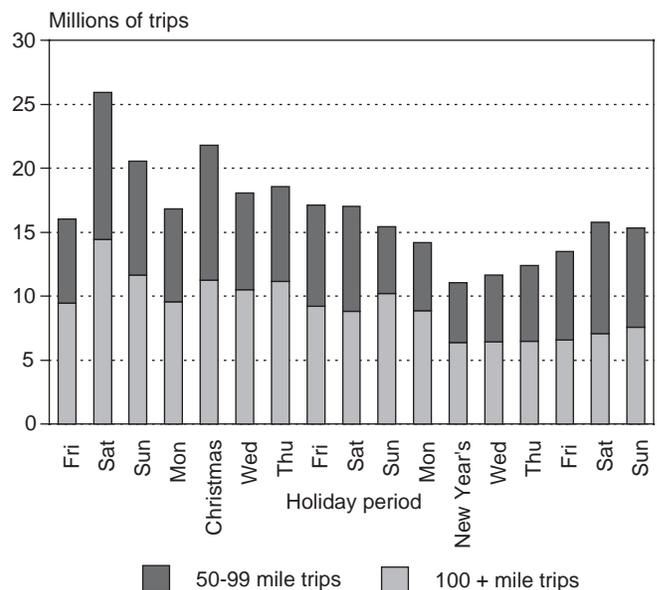
Methodology Notes

Travel and trip definitions differ in NHTS from the 1995 American Travel Survey (ATS). Therefore, the findings in this report should not be compared with those in the earlier *Home for the Holidays* report, issued in December 1997, which was based on ATS data.

The “rest of year” data is based on the period April 1, 2001 through March 31, 2002, excluding the Thanksgiving and Christmas/New Year’s holiday periods. That period represents the 12 months during which the largest sample was obtained for the NHTS.

Comparisons made in this report are statistically significant at a 0.05% level.

Figure 4. Long-Distance Trips Taken During the Christmas/New Year Holiday Period (all modes)



NOTE: The number of trips shown represents departing trips plus return trips for each day.

SOURCES: U.S. Department of Transportation, Bureau of Transportation Statistics, Federal Highway Administration, *National Household Travel Survey* (Washington DC: 2003).

Table 1. Holiday Travel by Selected Trip Characteristics: 2001

Trip Characteristics	Thanksgiving in Percent (except as noted)	Christmas/New Year's in Percent (except as noted)	Remainder of Year in Percent (except as noted)
Total Person Trips (000)	61,821	140,135	2,289,453
Average Per Day (000)	10,304	8,243	6,694
Principal Transportation Mode			
Personal Vehicle	91.7	91.1	89.4
Air	5.3	6.5	7.5
Bus	2.0	1.3	2.1
Train	0.8	1.0	0.8
Other	0.1	0.1	0.2
One-Way Distance			
50-99 miles	43.9	45.3	47.7
100-149 miles	17.5	14.9	17.7
150-249 miles	19.2	15.2	14.4
250-499 miles	12.8	12.5	10.1
500-999 miles	4.3	5.7	5.1
1000+ miles	2.3	6.3	5.0
Mean trip length (miles)	214	275	261
Main Trip Purpose			
Business	7.2	8.1	16.6
Commute	5.9	8.7	13.0
Visit Family/Relatives	52.9	42.8	23.8
Other Pleasure/Leisure	26.6	27.6	30.4
Personal Business	6.3	7.2	12.9
Other	1.1	5.5	3.4
Nights Away from Home			
No nights	50.5	50.6	56.7
1-3 nights	35.8	31.6	31.2
4-7 nights	12.7	12.1	8.5
8+ nights	1.0	5.9	3.5
Mean (nights)	2.9	3.9	3.5
Age			
Less than 25	34.9	27.7	25.6
25-64	56.4	64.9	65.8
65+	8.7	7.4	8.7
Gender			
Male	50.0	54.5	57.9
Female	50.0	45.5	42.1

NOTE: Thanksgiving Holiday travel period is defined as Tuesday through Sunday and is based on Nov. 20-25, 2001. Christmas/New Year's travel period based on Dec. 21, 2001-Jan. 6, 2002 data. Remainder of Year data based on Apr. 1, 2001-Mar. 31, 2002 period, excluding the Thanksgiving and Christmas/New Year's holiday periods.

SOURCES: U.S. Department of Transportation, Bureau of Transportation Statistics, Federal Highway Administration, *National Household Travel Survey* (Washington DC: 2003).

About the 2001 NHTS

The 2001 National Household Travel Survey (NHTS) updates information gathered by two series of travel surveys—the Nationwide Personal Transportation Survey (NPTS), conducted in 1969, 1977, 1983, 1990, and 1995, and the American Travel Survey (ATS), conducted in 1977 and 1995. Results from this report are from preliminary data collected in the long-distance travel section of the survey.