



FHWA NHTS

BRIEF

About the NHTS

Conducted periodically since 1969 by the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), the NHTS collects travel data from a sample of U.S. households. The information is used to understand trends in the Nation's trip-making and miles of travel by mode, purpose, and time-of-day for use in policy, planning, and safety.

Data are collected for household members for each day of the year, yielding a rich demographic profile linked to daily travel and vehicle characteristics.

For more information:

<http://nhts.ornl.gov>



U.S. Department of Transportation
Federal Highway Administration

TRENDS IN HOME-BASED WORKING

2017 National Household Travel Survey

September 2018

Working from home is on the rise largely due to advances in information and communication technology (e.g., faster Internet speed, online meeting software, and remotely accessed and/or cloud-based servers).⁽¹⁾ According to the American Community Survey, the proportion of people who reported “working from home last week” increased from 4.3% in 2009 to 5.0% in 2016.^(2,3) Changing trends in home-based working are of interest to transportation planners, as working from home helps mitigate high-traffic volumes and congestion experienced during peak travel periods (e.g., rush hour). This brief explores these trends, particularly the percentage of home-based workers reported over the past two decades by the National Household Travel Survey (NHTS) series as well as changes in select demographic characteristics of those home-based workers.⁽⁴⁻⁷⁾

While the NHTS has included questions related to working from home since 1995, the wording has evolved over time. For example, in 1995, respondents were asked if they worked from home last week.⁽⁴⁾ In 2001, respondents were asked whether they worked from home instead of traveling to their usual workplace on any day in the past 2 months, while in 2009, the focus was on whether they had the option of working from home instead of going into work and, if so, how many times did they work from home in the last month.^(5,6) In 2017, the question evolved into whether respondents usually work from home.⁽⁷⁾ According to the surveys, 12.5% responded affirmatively in 1995 compared to 8.6% in 2001, 12.3% in 2009, and 11.9% in 2017.

An earlier NHTS brief used 1995 and 2001 NHTS data to detail trends in home-based workers.^(8,4,5) That earlier analysis has been extended in this brief to include 2009 and 2017 NHTS survey data to explore key demographic characteristics such as gender, age, household income, occupation, and home location.^(6,7)

As highlighted in figure 1, from 1995 to 2009, the NHTS documented a higher proportion of men reporting to work from home in comparison to women, with the gap between genders widening over time.⁽⁴⁻⁶⁾ This gap narrowed considerably in the 2017 NHTS data, which shows an almost equal proportion of workers by gender in comparison to previous survey years.⁽⁷⁾ Additional research is needed to determine whether this trend is related to the differences in question wording, a change in home-based work patterns, or a combination of these and other factors.

When the NHTS first reported on home-based workers in its 1995 survey, respondents were predominantly younger than 55 years old

(see figure 2), with 29% being 18–34 years old and 53% being 35–54 years old. The remaining 18% were 55+ years old.⁽⁴⁾ A similar general age distribution was captured in the 2001 NHTS (i.e., 31% for ages 18–34, 55% for ages 35–54, and 14% for ages 55+).⁽⁵⁾ In 2009, the proportion of home-based workers ages 35–54 and 55+ increased from 55% to 59% and 14% to 21%, respectively, while respondents ages 18–34 decreased from 31% to 20%.⁽⁶⁾ Although the largest proportion of home-based workers in the 2017 NHTS was still the 35–54-year-old age group, that proportion declined from 59% to 44%, while respondents who were 55+ years old increased from 21% to 34%.⁽⁷⁾ This increase in the 55+-year-old category may be attributed to employers who are trying to maintain their older workers by offering them with home-based positions as a way of enticing them to stay engaged longer.⁽⁹⁾

Table 1 shows additionally observed trends in key demographic characteristics from 1995 to 2017.⁽⁴⁻⁷⁾ Similar to figure 1 and figure 2, the results reflect the proportion of respondents who answered “yes” to the NHTS survey questions previously described.

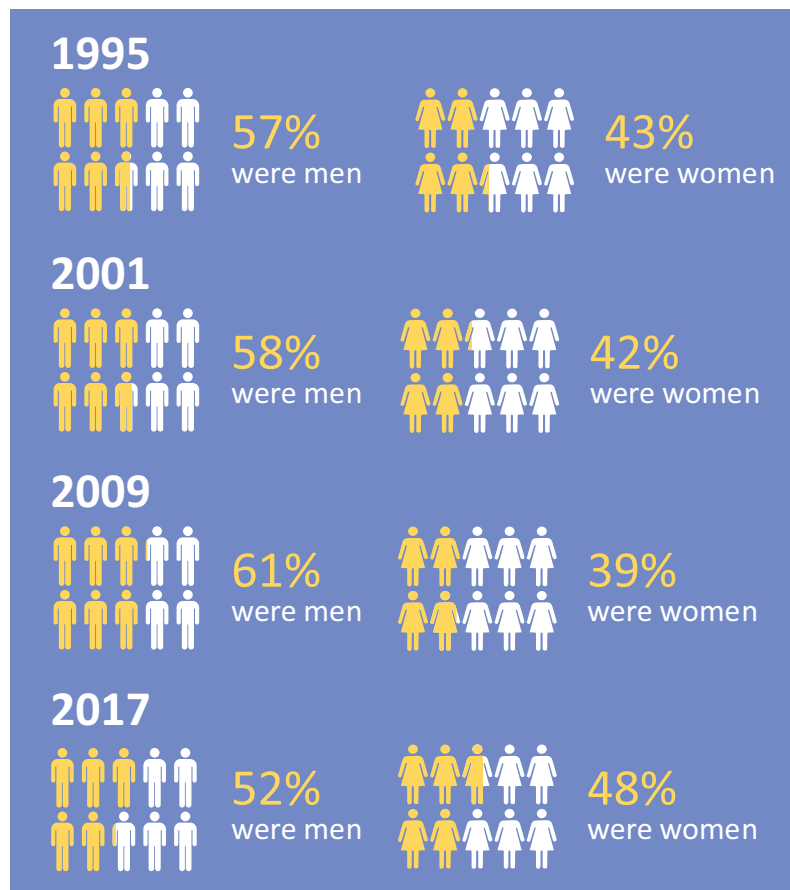


Figure 1. Proportion of respondents who answered “yes” to working from home by gender and NHTS survey years.⁽⁴⁻⁷⁾

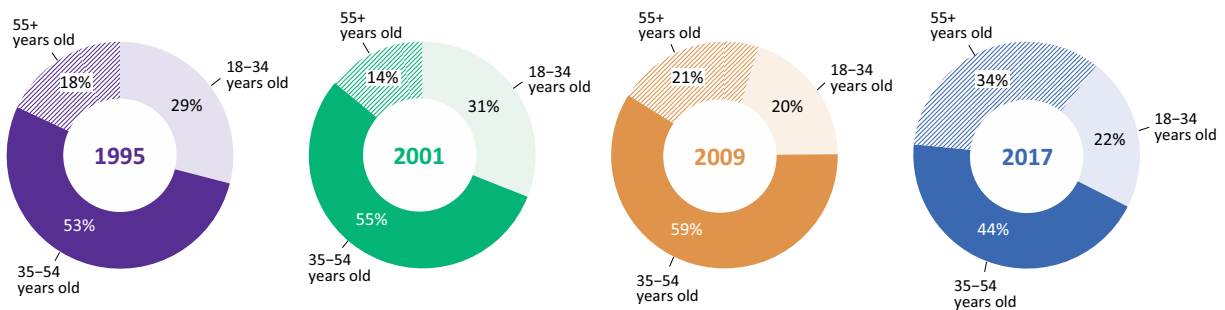


Figure 2. Proportion of respondents who answered "yes" to working from home by age group and NHTS survey years.⁽⁴⁻⁷⁾

Table 1. Proportion of respondents who answered "yes" to working from home by key demographic characteristics and NHTS survey years.⁽⁴⁻⁷⁾

Poverty Level	1995	2001	2009	2017
Household Income				
<\$50,000	59%	28%	17%	30%
≥\$50,000 and <\$75,000	21%	20%	16%	15%
≥75,000 and <\$100,000	11%	21%	22%	12%
≥\$100,000	10%	31%	46%	42%
Occupation				
Sales/service	‡	23%	20%	29%
Clerical/administrative support	‡	7%	6%	7%
Manufacturing/construction	‡	8%	6%	13%
Professional/managerial/technical	‡	62%	67%	51%
Other	‡	0%	1%	0%
Home Location				
Second city	16%	16%	14%	17%
Rural	21%	14%	#	18%
Suburban	27%	32%	33%	25%
Town	21%	23%	#	20%
Urban	15%	15%	18%	20%

Note: Due to rounding, columns may not add up to 100%.

‡Data are unavailable because job category question was not asked in the 1995 NHTS.

#Data are unavailable because town and rural categories were combined into one category in 2009.

Based on the data in the table, there are some clear trends, which are highlighted as follows:⁽⁴⁻⁷⁾

- Variations in household incomes of home-based workers were observed over time. Specifically, between 1995 and 2001, home-based workers were more likely to report higher household incomes; however, between 2009 and 2017, the proportion of home-based workers who reported household incomes of less than \$50,000 increased, with the majority ages 55+ years old. More research is needed to better understand whether these are baby boomers who have semi-retired, retirees re-entering the work force, or some other reason behind this increase in elderly/lower income home-based workers.
- The proportion of sales and service workers increased over time, while that of professional, managerial, and technical workers has declined. This increased proportion of sales and service workers over time could be related to the recent trend of decentralized call centers.⁽¹⁰⁾ Nonetheless, the proportion of home-based workers who describe their occupation as professional, managerial, or technical still accounts for half of the home-based workers (51%) and is consistent with recent Census Bureau estimates.⁽¹⁾
- The general geographic distribution of home-based workers has remained fairly steady over time. The proportion of home-based workers living in urban areas increased slightly over the years (i.e., from 15% in 1995 to 20% in 2017), while the proportion in rural areas decreased from 21% to 18% in the same time period. This trend suggests a much more stable distribution of home-based workers over time than expected. While most agree that avoiding a lengthy commute is a benefit of working from home, the growing proportion of respondents living in urban areas suggests that the desire to work from home may not solely be to avoid a long commute in terms of distance but also time spent in peak morning congestion.

In conclusion, this brief shows that characteristics of home-based workers have evolved over time. In particular, there is a more equal balance of males and females working from home, with baby boomer respondents (i.e., ages 55+) reporting a higher proportion of home-based work in the 2017 NHTS.⁽⁷⁾ As the proportion of older home-based workers has increased, so has the proportion of workers reporting a household income of less than \$50,000, although more research is needed to confirm that these two characteristics are related and whether the older home-based workers are fully engaged in the workforce or semi-/fully retired. The actual composition of the home-based workforce has remained largely the same in terms of occupation and geographic location, reflecting the reality that certain types of jobs and industries are better suited for home-based work as compared to others. As working from home continues to become more commonplace, further research is needed to identify a more precise method for capturing home-based work in the NHTS with respect to the question wording and categories of workers.

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