

## Fewer Cars (Same Traffic)

by Bruce Schaller

Friday, March 18, 2005 12:00 AM

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What's going on with auto ownership and traffic in New York City?

News reports in February highlighted an 8.4 percent decline in the number of registered autos in the five boroughs between 2000 and 2003. Vehicle registration data posted on the [Department of Motor Vehicles \(DMV\) website](#) in late February show a further 1.6 percent decline from 2003 to 2004.

Ex-car owners and various experts offered a assortment of explanations for the decline in registrations. Rising costs of owning a car was one favorite. A research firm quoted in Crains New York estimated that car ownership costs rose 15 percent since 2001. The cost of parking in Manhattan garages is climbing, as are gas prices. Fines for parking violations increased 30 percent in 2004, spurred by a 20 percent increase in the number of tickets issued.

A [Newsday article](#) cited not only costs but also the scarcity of parking spaces and the soaring costs of housing, which consumes a larger share of the household budget.

Another possible explanation is that more people are registering their cars out of town. However, while the streets are sprinkled with parked cars sporting out of state license plates, it is not clear that the number is increasing.

A Department of Motor Vehicles spokesman suggested that maybe more people are ditching their cars and using mass transit. Indeed, in 2004 subway ridership hit its highest level since the mid-1950s, with 1.4 billion riders passing through the turnstiles.

Funny thing is that the decline in vehicle registrations has not made finding a parking space any easier. Nor has it reduced traffic congestion. Although auto traffic into Manhattan dropped after 9/11, the number of vehicles entering Manhattan showed renewed growth in 2004. According to the NYS Transportation Department, total vehicle miles of travel in the New York region increased in 2001 and 2002 despite the effects of 9/11. (Figures since 2002 are not available.)

So if traffic is up and auto registrations are down, what's going on?

Part of the answer is undoubtedly that it's not the high-mileage drivers who are selling their cars. An ex-car owner quoted by Newsday said that in order to avoid losing her curbside parking space, she hardly ever used her car. Drivers stuck on the Gowanus "Expressway" did not see her before and won't be missing her now.

Most likely it is the occasional drivers who finally decided that they could simply do without their cars. These would seem to be the folks who bought an unlimited ride Metrocard and so "ride free" after hours and on weekends. They can use transit and the occasional taxi ride as their wheels to move around the city.

Another part of the answer is undoubtedly the economy. Car registrations dropped during the early-1990's recession and then bounced back during the boom years of the late-1990s. While

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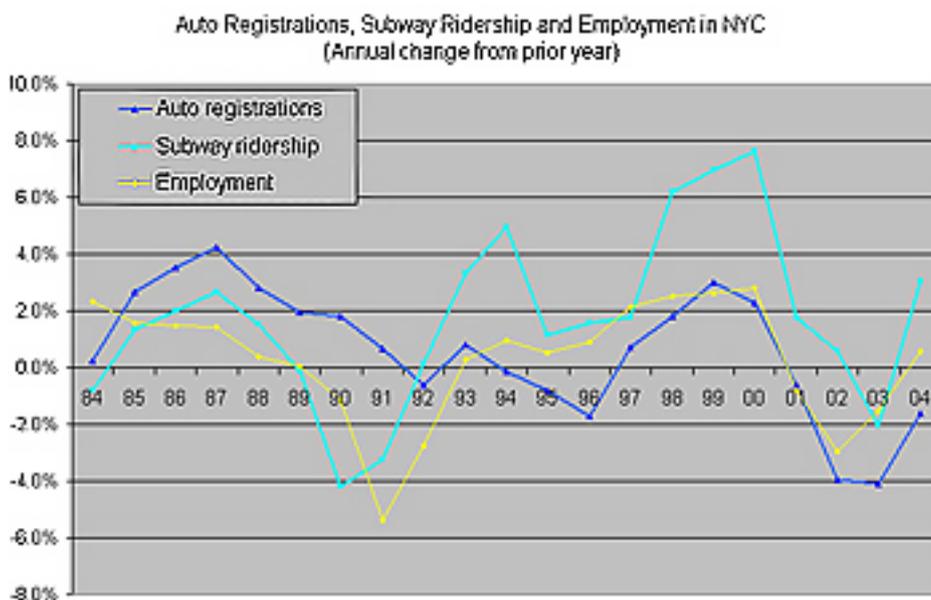
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registrations continued to decline in 2004 even as the economy began to turn around, the rate of decline was less than in the prior two years.

Whether the ranks of auto owners grow again remains to be seen. There has, however, been a fundamental shift from auto ownership to subway ridership. While auto registrations and subway ridership both rise and fall with the economy, as the chart below shows, prior to 1992 auto registrations grew more quickly than subway ridership (or declined by a lesser percentage). It was a consistent pattern evident year after year.

But since 1992, subway ridership has grown more quickly (or declined by a lesser amount) in every year – even years that there was a transit fare increase. On the margin, then, more people are plunking down money for their Metrocards than for their vehicle registrations.

This reversal of fortune does not mean that the city's roads and highways are likely to be cleared of traffic congestion anytime soon, or that drivers will spend less time circling the block to find a parking space. But it does suggest that there is a viable choice, one chosen by more and more New Yorkers -- taking the subway.



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