Jay grew up poor. The real kind of poor, where you can only afford to pay one bill each month so you choose whether to risk getting the water or the electricity cut off. His family didn’t have cable. They didn’t have a phone.

Jay’s in his early thirties now and teaches high school in Leavenworth County, Kansas, but his early years were tough for his family. His mom never finished high school, wasn’t married, and struggled financially as a waitress and bartender. Jay talks about the year his mom spent in prison and he spent bouncing around staying with friends and family.

There were periods when they couldn’t afford a car, which was especially difficult where he lived. There weren’t a lot of good options to get around other than driving. Then things got a little better. His mother got her GED, married, got a better job, and was able to send him to college and scrape together enough to buy him a used car.

“My mom bought me a car with her tax return money. She spent $1,000 on an old-school Oldsmobile with a fifth wheel on the back.”

When he was growing up, owning a car was something he aspired to, but it was out of reach financially. The Oldsmobile was transportation, but just barely, and certainly not what he was looking for as he entered adulthood. After he graduated and got his first teaching job, he knew he had to get his own wheels. It was all about demonstrating status.
“It was a silver, tinted windows, it had the disc changer CD, black leather seats. It was decked out. It was a Volkswagen Jetta and it was amazing. I thought I was the coolest person ever. And it was cool for a year.”

Then reality set in. Cool came with a price, and it wasn’t a price he wanted to pay. “The $450 car monthly payment was not cool. So after a couple of years, I realized this is idiotic that I’m paying this much for a car. You get older and smarter. So I traded that in and I got a Hyundai Elantra, which is almost paid off. And I can’t wait. I’m going to just rock that thing until the wheels fall off because I do not want a car payment for a while.”

Many marketers are probably reading this with mixed feelings. Since he’s an apartment dweller, the car is the most expensive thing Jay owns. It’s the kind of purchase that should confer some kind of status and should at the very least provide some sort of enjoyment. But Jay’s not feeling it. On the other hand, at least he owns a car, which puts him at odds with one popular sentiment about Millennials: that they don’t drive. If you read *The Atlantic* or the *New York Times* or the writings of urbanists like Richard Florida, you’ll see both theories and hard data showing that Millennials, the oldest of whom are now entering their thirties, drive a lot less than previous generations did at their age. At the even younger end of the scale, fewer teenagers are getting their driver’s licenses. Those who do are driving fewer and fewer miles each year.

Here’s what the data looks like: those aged sixteen to thirty-four drove 23 percent fewer miles at the end of the last decade than they did at the start, according to the federal government’s National Household Travel Survey. Looking back further, per capita mileage in the U.S. hasn’t increased since 1996.¹

Fewer than half of teenagers who could be driving are. That’s down from nearly two-thirds of teenagers who had a license in 1998.²

The implications of these simple facts are far reaching. Certainly they’re going to have a big impact on car makers and dealers. It’s big for agencies and media, too. According to the *Ad Age* Datacenter, GM, Ford, Fiat’s Chrysler Group, and Toyota are all among the top twenty advertisers in the U.S. Also, as people drive less, it plays into how and where they live and shop. For IKEA, for instance, this trend can account for part of the 40 percent rise in customers using the delivery services the furniture maker offers.³