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JUST TRANSITION WEBINAR REPORT



Why do people need cars?

**CAR DEPENDENCY
AND CITY'S POLICY RESPONSE**

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WHY DO WE SAY: “That’s not feasible without a car”

POLIS' Just Transition Webinar series kicked off with a deep dive into car usage in cities, the why's, where's, how's... and what policymakers can do to shift car-oriented mindsets.

Nearly 1/3 of total urban greenhouse gas emissions in major cities are generated by transport, with air pollution responsible for over 300,000 deaths per year across the EU27. The race to carbon neutrality and decongestion is on.

London's Ultra Low Emissions Zone, Brussels' Good Move Regional Mobility Plan, Leuven's Circulatieplan and Paris' *zone à faibles émissions mobilité*: cities across the globe are hurrying to dethrone the personal passenger vehicle.

At a neighbourhood level, there is also a range of innovative approaches including, superblock development in Vitoria Gasteiz and Helmond's Brainport Smart District - where locally led reallocation of space to prioritise active travel and public transport is changing mobility from the bottom up.

However, reducing car traffic from our cities is a complex process; as POLIS' previous webinar investigating this issue revealed, there is a spectrum of factors underpinning car use, from age to occupation, childcare responsibilities to physical or cognitive capabilities.

Climate goals may be biting at our heels, nevertheless, efforts to cut carbon cannot overlook the impacts of our ambitious plans on those who depend on car travel.

“The recognition of the need- and urgency- to take impactful action is growing,” said POLIS' Access Working Group Coordinator, Ivo Cré, “Those who don't need to rely on privately owned cars to get around in cities, use the needs of those who are bound to their car as an argument against change to the urban mobility system.”

A leading challenge for our cities and regions now is identifying different user needs, understanding individual relationships with car-centric mobility and pinpointing opportunities for shifting mindsets.



NO AVERAGE DRIVER, NO AVERAGE TRIP

Understanding Eva Van Eenoo's research on car-dependency at the Cosmopolis Centre for Urban Research (VUB)



The pros and cons of urban vehicle access regulations are a much-rehearsed argument, and one which often involves impassioned exchanges. But what if there is a different way of looking at it? What if instead of rehashing polarising battles, we unpick what “car dependency” really means?

What are car-dependent places, dependent users and dependent practices?

To help traverse this complex topic, POLIS' Just Transition Webinar elicited an expert on the topic, Eva Van Eenoo, to disentangle actual and perceived car dependence, and examine the opportunities for tailor-made interventions to reduce car use.

Eva Van Eenoo works at the research group Cosmopolis Centre for Urban Research (Vrije Universiteit Brussel), where she is investigating car-dependent places, people and practices.

Her research asks:

1. How to define car dependency and how it can be measured?
2. Is there a discrepancy between perceived car dependency by inhabitants of urban areas and actual car dependence?

By mapping car-dependent regions based on several land use & transport characteristics and comparing these findings with the actual travel behaviour, Van Eenoo is exploring the extent to which accessibility and travel behaviour are shaping one another.

THE SETTING

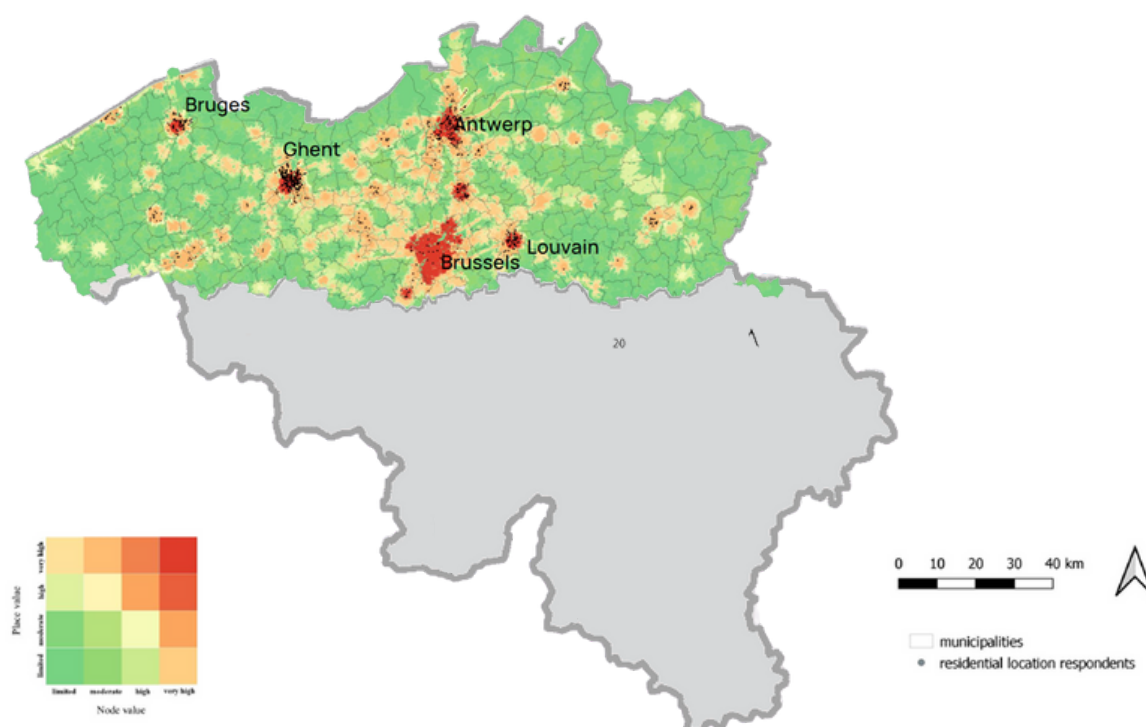
Flanders is perceived as a very car-dependent region, and discussions about curbing car use are often fraught.

High car ownership and a low share of public transport, combined with scattered land use, ribbon development and extensive road network all contribute to the sense of Flanders as car-centric.

By mapping car-dependent regions based on several land use & transport characteristics and comparing these findings with the actual travel behaviour, we can assess the extent to which accessibility and travel behaviour resonate with one another.

Van Eenoo performed a cluster analysis on data around car use, examining how different people in urban areas in Flanders use their cars, and bicycles and the number of kilometres travelled.

Her research revealed that differing perceptions of dependency were not necessarily directly akin to the length and duration of car usage. Groups travelling longer and shorter distances both saw themselves as “dependent” on their vehicles.



WHAT ARE THE CHARACTERISTICS OF CAR-DEPENDENT GROUPS?

This research highlighted some interesting characteristics of car-dependent motorists and cyclists.

Car-dependent motorists who used their car for longer distances were often higher income, with an overrepresentation of men.

Car-dependent motorists who used their cars for short distances were often lower income and older age groups.

Meanwhile, car-independent cyclists had the highest propensity to travel by public transport, using their cars largely for leisure and/or holidays.

CONCLUSIONS

Car ownership does not necessarily induce perceived car dependence for people who can easily get around by bicycle. Regardless of the frequency or length of car trips and even when exhibiting multimodal travel patterns, people can perceive their car as indispensable. Perceived car dependence is not necessarily correlated with high VKT (vehicle kilometres travelled) or high frequency of car use.

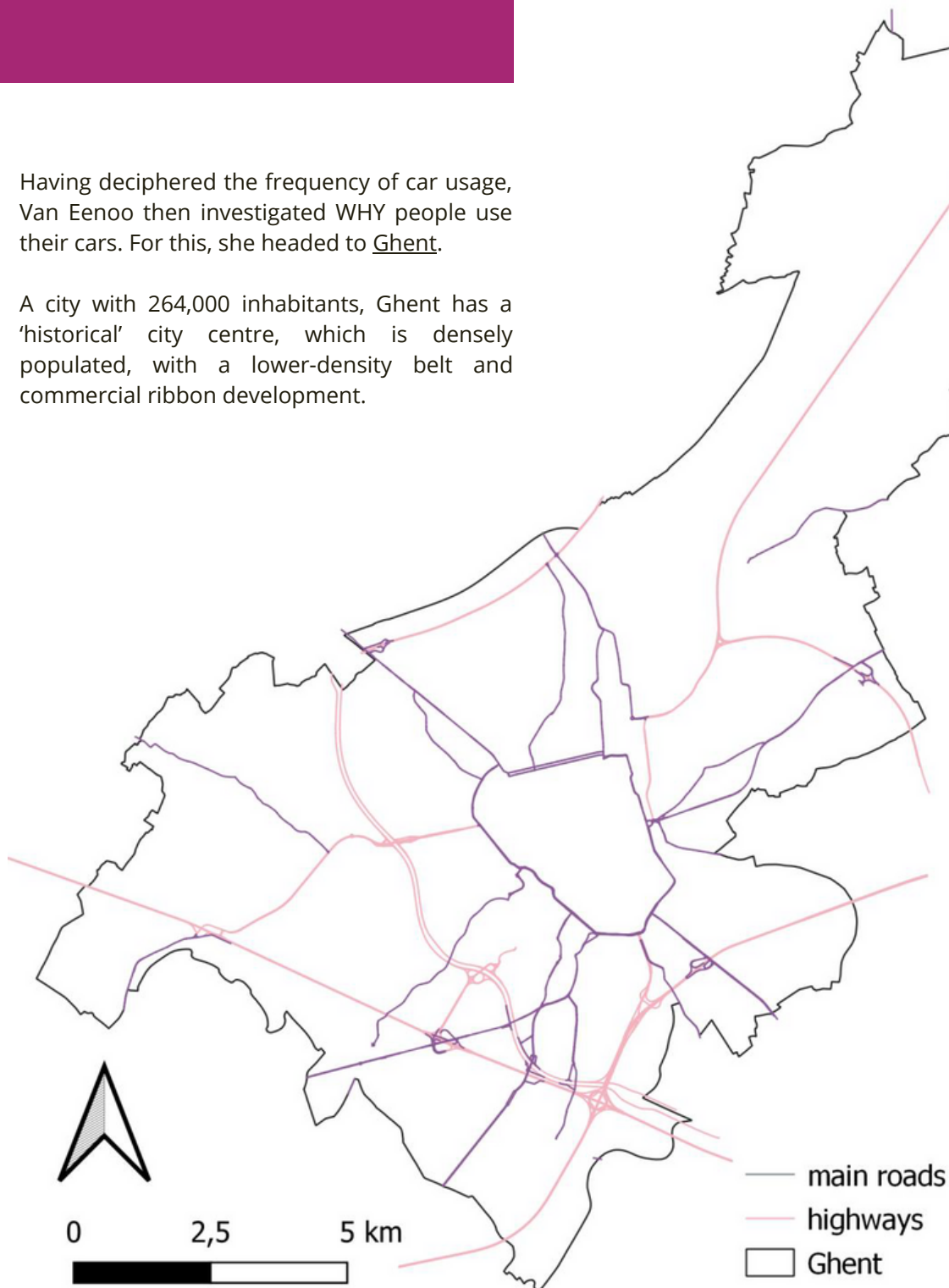
The research also suggests that we cannot conclude that multimodality necessarily leads to less VKT.



WHY DO PEOPLE USE THEIR CARS?

Having deciphered the frequency of car usage, Van Eenoo then investigated WHY people use their cars. For this, she headed to Ghent.

A city with 264,000 inhabitants, Ghent has a 'historical' city centre, which is densely populated, with a lower-density belt and commercial ribbon development.



KEY REASONS FOR CAR TRAVEL EMERGED:



CARGO FUNCTION

Many respondents stated they used their cars multiple times a week to run errands. Many even asserted they had purchased their car to conduct this work.



SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

Visiting friends and family was key, particularly for families with young children. Many saw their car as essential for their connection with others.



CARING ROLES

Fetching and carrying children to activities (particularly during the evening and on weekends), assisting older relatives.



WORK

Business trips were seen by many as important. Even when some took the train for certain work trips, several regarded the car as indispensable to their work and careers.

THE IMPACTS OF CAR RESTRICTIONS IN THE CITY CENTRE

Car restrictive measures in Ghent's city centre are having an impact. The city has introduced an ambitious new circulation plan in 2017, to unburden the city centre of ongoing traffic.

Indeed, respondents did not often take their car to the city centre, instead opting for bikes and public transport- with many finding it a far more pleasant place with new urban planning regimes.

However, some respondents had begun to avoid the city centre as they found it difficult to access, especially those that do not feel confident riding a bicycle. As a result, some residents felt isolated while others were heading to amenities on the urban fringe- amenities which were also often available in the city centre or close to their work location.

CAN WE MANAGE WITHOUT A CAR?

There was acknowledgement that changes would need to be made without a car, which many may struggle with, and others were reluctant to do so.

The inability to ride a bike, lack of reliable and safe public transport, and fear of public spaces (especially at night) were noted as reasons for using a car.

“There is an underlying social norm set by the car, the pace, comfort and flexibility of a car is used as a benchmark to evaluate all other modes, where the car always wins in this case,” said Van Eenoo.



So, what does this mean for our cities? Recommendations for policy

It is important to understand whom to focus on, and what to focus on,” asserted Van Eenoo.

“There are groups which are less inclined to cycle- often lower income and older groups; these are also those who are likely to lose out financially from shifting traffic circulation and access plans.”

Van Eenoo called for a stronger urban planning policy to reduce urban sprawl, where less sustainable travel is more prevalent and encouraged by such dispersed inhabitation and amenities. She also highlighted that multimodality by itself will not lead to less car usage or fewer vehicle kilometres travelled, and policies should be aligned with research results.

“Multimodality is not a goal in itself,” she warned.

And what about beyond Belgium?

Belgium’s relatively extensive cycle infrastructure and company car culture undoubtedly create a somewhat unique environment for prompting- and deterring- car usage. Nevertheless, research across Europe which has explored the role of age, income and culture reflects many of the key findings in Van Eenoo’s work.



KEY TAKEAWAYS

1

No one-size-fits-all:

Car-dependent people and practices differ extensively

2

The role of carsharing:

Many car-dependent practices can be enacted and planned with car sharing; however, focus groups revealed a strong reluctance to use car sharing with fear of the inability to plan trips.

3

Importance of age:

Old age & physical (in)capacities play a critical role in attitudes & mobility behaviour. However, Van Eenoo also described that this is also underpinned by travel perceptions, and reluctance to adapt long-standing habits

4

A wide-eyed view:

Cities should not only consider their city centres but also intervene in fringe areas, as these induce a lot of car traffic. Urban planning and zoning are key in this respect.

5

Multimodality - a tool not a goal:

Multimodality alone will not reduce car usage or fewer vehicle kilometres travelled and policies should be aligned with research results.

FIND OUT MORE

- Mental car dependency in urban areas in Flanders, <https://urbanstudies.brussels/person/eva-van-eenoo>
- Van Eenoo, E., Fransen, K., & Boussauw, K. (2022). Car dependency beyond land use: Can a standardized built environment indicator predict car use?. *Journal of Transport and Land Use*, 15(1), 117-136
- Van Eenoo, E., Fransen, K., & Boussauw, K. (2022). Perceived car dependence and multimodality in urban areas in Flanders (Belgium). *European Journal of Transport & Infrastructure Research*, 22(1)
- Cutting cars from cities, from research to action!, Access Webinar: Cutting cars from cities, from research to action! | polisnetwork.civi-go.net
- Understanding the links between mental health, loneliness, travel and transport- [PowerPoint Presentation \(polisnetwork.eu\)](#)
- Striving for equality - Improving public transport services in Budapest, [PowerPoint Presentation \(polisnetwork.eu\)](#)
- Mechelen's multidirectional engagement strategy to enhance sustainable transport, [3F.-Lorena-Axinte-Veerle-De-Meyer.pdf \(polisnetwork.eu\)](#)
- Which alternatives to cars for families? Exploring their willingness to use cargo bikes, [PowerPoint Presentation \(polisnetwork.eu\)](#)
- Findings from the ReVeAL project, [ReVeAL wraps up with final tools and guidance for UVAR - POLIS Network](#)



ABOUT THE JUST TRANSITION WEBINAR SERIES

At the 2021 Annual POLIS Conference in Gothenburg, we launched the [Just Transition Agenda](#).

This webinar series traverses the multifaceted ways affordability, gender-related mobility patterns, age, cognitive capacities (and more), can guide the future of our cities and regions.

From freight to parking, traffic efficiency to active travel, electromobility to safety- and everything in between- we begin to discuss how each sector has its part to play, the challenges ahead, and how cities and regions are treading new ground.