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## Passenger Flows through the Cascade Gateway: Changes from 2013 to 2018

Border Policy Research Institute

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# Passenger Flows through the Cascade Gateway: Changes from 2013 to 2018

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## The Passenger Vehicle Survey<sup>1</sup>

The survey includes questions about the following:

- Country of residence
- Origin and destination
- Length of stay
- Trip purpose and frequency
- NEXUS enrollment/usage
- Routing/navigation assistance
- Use of border wait time signs

The survey is conducted every five years, and data is collected over a five to six week period in both summer and winter. During the summers of 2013 and 2018, nearly 25,000 surveys were conducted.

In 2013, 82% of cross-border travelers were Canadian. That percentage dropped to 71% in 2018. There was also a 12% decrease in the volume of cars crossing the border during the summer months between 2013 and 2018.

The survey is administered through the partnership of the International Mobility and Trade Corridor Program, with funding support from numerous sources. The next survey is planned for 2023/2024.

**Introduction.** Every five years, the BPRI partners with the Whatcom Council of Governments to conduct a passenger vehicle intercept survey at four ports of entry between British Columbia and Washington State.<sup>2</sup> Students from Western Washington University intercept drivers as they cross the border in both directions and ask them a variety of questions related to trip purpose and travel characteristics (see sidebar). This Border Brief provides a preliminary analysis of survey findings from the summer of 2018 and compares them to the responses collected in the summer of 2013.<sup>3</sup> It also considers the impacts of changes in cross-border travel in the Cascade Gateway during this time frame.

**Background.** There are a variety of reasons that people cross the Canada-U.S. border, and these vary based on geography. In the Cascade Gateway, these reasons also vary based on residency, with more Canadians crossing to shop and make purchases, and more Americans crossing for vacation or recreation.<sup>4</sup> The origin and destination of these flows has important implications for transportation needs, economic development activities, and local government planning.

**Trip Purpose.** The table below displays the main trip purpose for Canadians (CAN) and Americans (U.S.) in both 2013 and 2018 during summer. There are markedly different reasons why people from each side of the border decide to cross, and these have changed over time.

Trip Purpose	2013		2018	
	CAN	U.S.	CAN	U.S.
Shopping	37%	3%	23%	4%
Gas	17%	—	18%	—
Recreation	19%	26%	15%	22%
Vacation	11%	34%	16%	28%
Mail	5%	—	11%	—
Family Visit	5%	20%	8%	26%
Business/Work	3%	13%	3%	8%
Other <sup>5</sup>	2%	4%	5%	12%

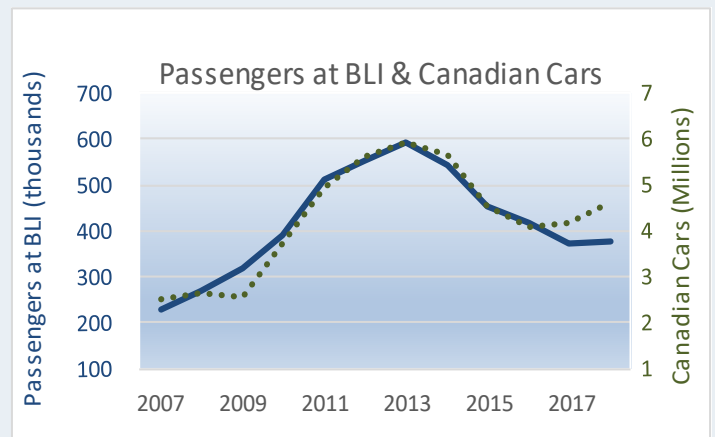
**Origins, Destinations, Trip Frequency.** Data on destinations shows that the small towns adjacent to the border grew in popularity for Canadians, while visits to destinations in British Columbia that are farther from the border increased for Americans. The largest percentage of Canadians making cross-border trips are originating in Surrey, and 42% of Canadians

are traveling just across the border to Blaine, Sumas, and Lynden. For U.S. travelers crossing into Canada, more than half originate in locations over 60 miles south of the border and 37% are bound for Vancouver. In addition, the median duration of a cross-border trip to Canada is one day, while the median duration for U.S. bound trips is three hours. The median frequency of cross-border trips is also higher for Canadians (5 trips per year)<sup>6</sup> than for Americans (4 trips per year). These findings reveal another major difference in travel characteristics based on residency: Canadians are primarily taking short cross-border trips more frequently to locations nearby, while Americans are traveling farther and making fewer cross-border trips, yet staying longer.

**Shifts in Cross-Border Travel.** Between 2013 and 2018, the number of cars crossing at the Cascade Gateway dropped from a peak of nearly 8 million to just over 6 million vehicles per year.<sup>7</sup> This 25% decrease in total volumes was primarily driven by fewer Canadian travelers (U.S. travelers increased during this time, but remained low), and was heavily impacted by the value of the Canadian Dollar, which fell by 20% compared to the U.S. Dollar between 2013 and 2018.

**Impacts on Border Communities.** There are a variety of impacts related to the recent decrease in the number of cross-border trips taken by Canadians. These range from fewer retail purchases to reduced congestion both at the border and in retail locations. Additional impacts include:

- *Tax revenues.* Previous Border Briefs have explored the economic impact that Canadians have on sales tax revenue in small border communities in the Cascade Gateway, which are largely due to mail order purchases.<sup>8</sup> Despite fewer Canadian visits, there was an increase in the percentage of Canadians crossing to pick-up mail order purchases. The sales tax accrued to local communities from these purchases is significant.
- *Lower wait-times at the border.* From a processing standpoint, inspection agencies are better able to accommodate reduced volumes, resulting in reduced delays. This is particularly true for non-NEXUS travelers during summer weekends, which are the busiest travel times in the Cascade Gateway. In 2013, wait-times peaked at 44 minutes, compared to a peak of 33 minutes in 2018.<sup>9</sup>
- *Shifts in air travel demand.* The Bellingham International Airport (BLI), which serves a relatively small population in the U.S., has benefitted from the large population north of the border. Direct flights to destinations such as Las Vegas and Palm Springs are frequented by Canadians. The graph to the right displays the number of cross-border trips taken by Canadians and the number of passengers departing BLI; a relationship between the two is evident.<sup>10</sup> The dampening effect of the exchange rate, the expansion of the Vancouver International Airport, and low cost flights from Abbotsford have impacted flights at BLI.



Ongoing data collection on passenger flows is valuable to local communities, inspection agencies, and regional transportation departments. The ability to assess changes over time can be particularly helpful for infrastructure planning and regional economic development. This type of field-based research should be replicated at other cross-border locations whenever possible and used to supplement quantitative analyses of cross-border flows at local and regional scales.

#### Endnotes

1. For more information on the passenger vehicle survey, see <https://theimtc.com/passengersurveys/>.
2. The Cascade Gateway includes Peace Arch/Douglas, Pacific Highway, Sumas/Huntington, and Lynden/Aldergrove.
3. This Brief only includes data from the summer portion of the project because findings from winter 2019 are not yet complete.
4. Vacation is defined as more than one day, while recreation is a single day.
5. 'Other' category includes airport, religious event, medical, and school.
6. In 2013, the median frequency was once per month.
7. Source: U.S. Customs and Border Protection.
8. See Winter 2015 Border Policy Brief ([https://cedar.wvu.edu/bpri\\_publications/8/](https://cedar.wvu.edu/bpri_publications/8/)) and Winter 2016 Border Policy Brief ([https://cedar.wvu.edu/bpri\\_publications/5/](https://cedar.wvu.edu/bpri_publications/5/)).
9. Source: The International Mobility & Trade Corridor 2019 Resource Manual (<https://theimtc.com/documents/2019-imtc-resource-manual/>).
10. Data provided by the Port of Bellingham and Statistics Canada.