

COMMUNITY MOBILITY OPTIONS: THE OLDER PERSON'S INTEREST

The Importance of Transportation Alternatives for the Older Person

Mobility is a crucial component of everyone's quality of life. Affordable, easy-to-use, and flexible transportation options are essential for accessing health care services, establishing and maintaining social and family contacts, and preserving independence and general well-being. As the boomer generation ages, an increasing proportion of the population—because of where they live and the lack of transportation alternatives like public transportation and walkable communities—risks becoming isolated and immobile if they are unable to drive.

Demographics

The social and demographic implications of the “graying of America” will be felt in many areas of community life. Between 1960 and 2003, the number of individuals age 65 and older in America more than doubled, increasing 116 percent. It is expected to nearly double again by 2029, when the last of the boomer generation reaches age 65.¹ Increasingly, these older persons live in suburban and rural areas, where they often rely heavily on private automobiles.

Not only is the elderly population growing, but the proportion of that population that drives is growing rapidly as well. The percentage of persons age 65 and older who are licensed drivers has increased from 61% in 1980 to 72% in 1990 and 80% in 2003.²

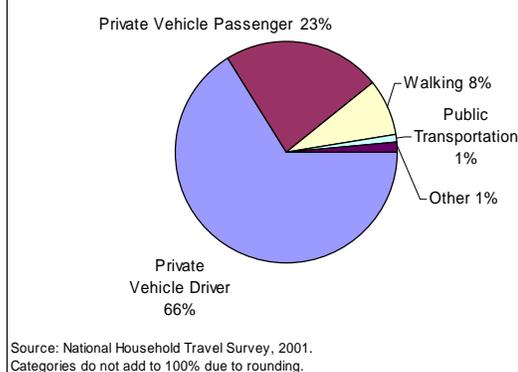
The Use of Private Vehicles

Older individuals—those age 65 and older—use private vehicles more than any other mode of transportation. Older persons make 89 percent of their trips in a private vehicle, either as a passenger or driver. Even in urban settings where public transit is more widely available and less expensive than in suburban and rural areas, most still use private vehicles, and nondrivers rely heavily on family members or friends for rides. When not in a car, older individuals are more likely

to walk to their destination than to use public transportation (see Figure 1).

While most older persons retain their driving skills, for some, the aging process may impair the cognitive, sensory, and/or physical functions on which these skills depend. Many older individuals choose to discontinue driving or limit their driving to off-peak hours, use only familiar roads, or drive only during the day for safety reasons.

Figure 1: Trips Taken by Persons Age 65 & Older, by Selected Mode of Transportation, 2001

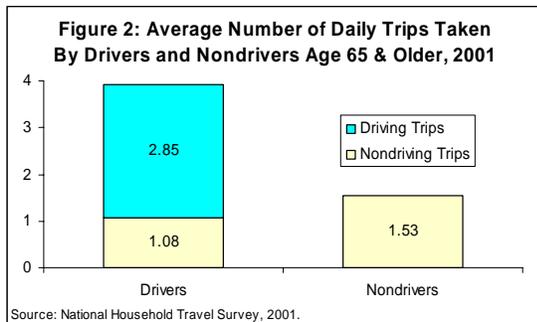


Nondrivers: Physical, Financial, and Community Design Barriers to Independent Mobility

Driving is not a viable alternative for many older persons. Currently, almost 7 million persons age 65 and older do not drive. Almost 80 percent of these older nondrivers are women, and more than half have a medical condition that makes travel difficult.³

But health and safety concerns are not the only reasons that older people choose not to drive. Limited income also restricts driving because of the cost of owning, maintaining, and insuring an automobile. People age 65 and older with low incomes are less likely to own a vehicle than those with moderate or high income. In 2001, 42 percent of older households (in which at least one person was 65 or older) with incomes below \$10,000 per year did not have a vehicle. In contrast, only 3 percent of older households with incomes above \$25,000 did not have a vehicle.⁴

Overall, older nondrivers are much less mobile than drivers. Drivers age 65 and older make an average of about 4 daily trips, while nondrivers make an average of only 1.5 daily trips (see Figure 2).



While public transportation plays only a minor role in the mobility of older people who can drive, it is an essential mode of travel for many who cannot. One in seven nondrivers age 75 and older uses public transportation as their primary mode of getting around.⁵

Despite the needs of this population, the availability of public transportation is often limited, particularly in rural areas. About two-thirds of persons age 65 and older living in urban areas and inner suburbs are within 10 minutes of public transportation, compared with only one-quarter of those living in small towns and rural areas.

There are also many barriers to walking. Commercial and service areas—the destination of many daily trips—are often located far from residential areas. In addition, these areas may lack pedestrian facilities, such as sidewalks, crosswalks, and resting places. More than one-fifth of individuals age 50 and older see the lack of sidewalks and resting places as a large problem for walking.⁶

Strategies for Extending the Years of Independent Mobility

Different jurisdictions and organizations have developed strategies for older people to remain independent—either by extending the length of time that they are able to drive safely, or by providing and enabling other mobility options. They include the following:

- “Graduated driving licenses” that impose restrictions tailored to compensate for particular impairments for drivers of any age. These licenses can extend the time

that a person with specific limitations is able to drive safely.

- Design of roadways, road signs, and vehicles for greater driving safety, such as dedicated left-turn lanes and signals, and large, easy-to-read road signs.
- Older driver education, such as the AARP Driver Safety Program, which serves more than 700,000 drivers each year.
- Networks of volunteer drivers who provide door-to-door, on-demand transportation, usually by car.
- Point-to-point paratransit for older persons and persons with disabilities.
- Improved quality and availability of public transportation services.
- Additional sidewalks and resting places such as benches for pedestrians; improved intersections with such features as signals timed to allow pedestrian crossing, median refuge strips on multilane roadways, and traffic-calming measures to reduce vehicle speed.
- Communities designed to support pedestrians; for example, allowing commercial development in closer proximity to residences.

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¹ U.S. Census Bureau, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2004-2005*.

² Population from U.S. Census Bureau, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2004-2005*, licensed drivers from Federal Highway Administration.

³ AARP Public Policy Institute, analysis of data from Department of Transportation, National Household Travel Survey, 2001.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ritter, Straight, and Evans, *Understanding Senior Transportation*, AARP Public Policy Institute, 2002.

⁶ Ibid.