Good to Go: Assessing the Transit Needs of New York Metro AARP Members

Executive Summary

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AARP is a nonprofit, nonpartisan membership organization that helps people 50+ have independence, choice and control in ways that are beneficial and affordable to them and society as a whole. We produce *AARP The Magazine*, published bimonthly; *AARP Bulletin*, our monthly newspaper; *AARP Segunda Juventud*, our bimonthly magazine in Spanish and English; *NRTA Live & Learn*, our quarterly newsletter for 50+ educators; and our website, www.aarp.org. AARP Foundation is an affiliated charity that provides security, protection, and empowerment to older persons in need with support from thousands of volunteers, donors, and sponsors. We have staffed offices in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

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Access to goods and services is crucial for maintaining an independent lifestyle and favorable quality of life. Flexible transportation options are essential for accessing health care services, establishing and maintaining social contacts, and preserving independence and general well being.\(^1\) As the older population increases in age and number, it is important to identify existing barriers to transportation accessibility with the goal of ensuring mobility for older individuals. In addition, the issues of mobility for the aging population cannot be addressed by merely responding to the transportation needs of the overall population.

AARP New York conducted this study to examine transportation issues among older adults and to help assess the overall transportation needs of older New York Metropolitan residents. This mail survey was conducted with a randomly selected sample of New York City area AARP members between June 1 and July 18, 2006. The sample included members age 75 and older in the following counties of the metropolitan area: New York, Queens, Kings, Bronx, Rockland, Nassau, Suffolk, Westchester, Putnam, Orange, and Richmond. Of those surveyed, 1,128 returned completed questionnaires by the survey end date, yielding a response rate of 56 percent. The survey has a sampling error of plus or minus 2.9 percent.

The results of the survey show experiences in how and when one gets out and about in their community vary not only according to whether one drives but also by other factors, such as gender, income, race and residence location, also appear to contribute significantly to the experiences one has in this regard. These differences as well as the findings from the overall population surveyed are discussed in the full report. Some of these key findings include:

- The majority of respondents (60%) generally drive to the places they want to go. Those without a license are more likely to get a ride with others (58% vs. 27% licensed), walk (41% vs. 33% licensed), or use public transportation (40% vs. 29% licensed).

- More than eight in ten (81%) older New York metro respondents report getting out of their home three or more times per week. However, about one in six (16%) only get out once or twice—if at all—and those without licenses are twice as likely to be homebound this often (35%).

- Most respondents say transportation problems do not interfere with their ability to get to where they want to go. However, those with licenses are more apt to be satisfied with how they get around their community than those without a license (83% vs. 67%).

\(^1\) Houser, A. *Community Mobility Options: The Older Person’s Interest.* AARP Public Policy Institute, 2005.
• More than eight in ten (81%) respondents indicate public transportation is available in their community. Of these, about two-thirds (67%) report a public transportation stop is less than one-quarter of a mile from their home. Few respondents report difficulties when using public transportation. The top three things liked most about public transportation are: it gets them where they want to go (69%); it is affordable (67%); and it is convenient (61%).

• Of respondents who are licensed and have driven during the past two months, more than half (55%) agree it would be difficult for them to remain in their current neighborhood if they were unable to drive. Nearly six in ten (58%) respondents indicate they would be likely to choose a new neighborhood with better public transportation if they were no longer able to live in their current neighborhood. The two modes of transportation most desirable in a new neighborhood are community/senior vans (37%) and buses (31%).

• Race: Compared to white respondents, African American respondents are less likely to have licenses (62% vs. 79%) and more often use public transportation as their primary mode of transit (48% vs. 29%). In addition, African Americans are more likely to report having problems while using public transportation, such as getting a seat (63% vs. 44%), having shelter from the weather (76% vs. 58%) and being worried about crime (61% vs. 35%). Moreover, African American respondents are less likely to say they have no problems getting to key destinations, such as medical appointments (59% vs. 70%) and activities with family (53% vs. 67%). All together, African American respondents get out of their homes less frequently than white respondents do (5 times/week: 37% vs. 54%).

• Income: Those with incomes below $20,000 are least likely to get out of their homes more than five times a week (32% vs. 79%). In fact, those with incomes below $20,000 are substantially more likely to have problems using public transportation and getting to places such as medical appointments (30% vs. 7%) and grocery shopping (18% vs. 8%). Not surprisingly then, those with low incomes are more likely to express dissatisfaction with their ability to get around in their communities (13% vs. 2%). However, high income drivers more often say they would have difficulty remaining in their current neighborhood if they were no longer able to drive (23% vs. 12%).

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2 Due to small numbers of other racial/ethnic respondents, only comparisons between Black/African Americans and White/Caucasian are reported.
3 Comparisons are between respondents with incomes below $20,000 a year and those with incomes $75,000 or more.
• **Residence:** City dwellers, suburbanites, and small town residents also experience transportation issues differently. Most notably, those who reside in suburbs or small towns are more likely than their city counterparts to say they could no longer reside in their current neighborhood if they were no longer able to drive (suburb, 42%; town, 47%; city, 13%). Additional differences include:

- City dwellers are least likely to have a driver’s license (city, 68%; suburb, 81%; and town, 88%), and are more likely to walk, (city, 52%; suburb, 25%; and town, 19%), ride public transportation, (city, 52%; suburb, 19%; town, 9%), or take taxis (city, 26%; suburb, 8%; town, 3%) to where they need and want to go. City-dwellers who use public transportation are more likely to experience difficulties with being able to find a seat, (city, 52% vs. suburb, 36%)\(^4\) and the condition of public transportation stations and vehicles (city, 42% vs. suburb, 35%).

- Those who reside in small towns are most likely to be licensed, and rely most heavily on driving to get them where they want to go (town, 78%; suburb, 73%; city 39%). However, they are also more likely to report that they are satisfied with how they get around their community when they want or need to go someplace (town, 85%; city, 78%; suburb, 78%).

- Suburbanites, like those in small towns, more often rely on driving for their primary mode of transportation. However, they are more likely to use public transportation than those in small towns. When using public transportation, suburban residents more often report having difficulty getting where they want to go (suburb, 37% vs. city, 26%) and getting to a stop (suburb, 50% vs. city, 30%) than do those living in the city.

The findings from this study illustrate that older New York Metro AARP members have different transportation patterns and problems based on a number of factors. In planning service options and delivery systems, it will be critical to consider all of these factors. Clearly, crafting a one-size-fits-all solution will not address the diversity of needs.

\(^4\) Due to the small number of respondents who reside in small towns and use public transportation, only comparisons between city and urban residents can be made.
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