

## How the Travel Patterns of Older Adults Are Changing: Highlights from the 2009 National Household Travel Survey

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Older adults comprise an increasing share of the nation's travel. Although individuals are traveling less, particularly in private vehicles, public transportation use is up. Older men are more mobile than older women; however, the gap has been narrowing. The number of older nondrivers has grown by more than one million, raising concerns about future mobility needs.

### Older Adults Comprise an Increasing Share of the Nation's Travel

The 2009 National Household Travel Survey (NHTS) reflects how the aging of America has influenced travel in the United States. This is not surprising, given that the population age 65 and older grew more than 2 percent annually between 2001 and 2009. Transportation planners can expect additional changes in the composition of travel, as the population age 65 and older is projected to grow by another 60 percent over the next 15 years.<sup>1</sup>

### Share of trips has grown

As the population ages, so does the proportion of older trip-makers. In 2001, 11 percent of all trips in the United States were taken by persons age 65 and older. By 2009, that share had increased to 12 percent. The total number of *trips* by older adults increased by 11 percent, to 45.5 billion trips. These include trips by all means of surface and water transportation.

### Share of miles has grown

The number and share of miles of travel by older Americans continues to increase.

### Different Ways to Measure Travel

1. Average number of *trips* a person makes per day
2. Average number of *miles* a person travels per day
3. *Driving*, as measured by vehicle miles traveled (VMT)

The first two measures are typically calculated for *all* means of personal travel—made in private vehicles, on public transportation, walking, bicycling, and so on. Trips can be of any length—a short walk to the corner store or a cross-country trip by train. To gain a more accurate picture of everyday travel, the authors excluded airplane trips from the calculations. Travel on a per capita basis includes the entire population, whether people travel or not.

Driving is measured only for the miles logged by the *driver of a private vehicle* (primarily a car, noncommercial truck, or sport utility vehicle).

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The total number of miles traveled by people 65+ increased by 7 percent.

The miles logged by older adults now account for 10 percent of all miles traveled in the United States, up slightly from 2001.

**Share of drivers has grown**

The age distribution of drivers<sup>2</sup> is changing. The percentage of U.S. drivers age 65 and older increased 1 percentage point to 15 percent, and researchers project that one in every five drivers will be over the age of 65 by 2025.<sup>3</sup>

**Travel by Americans of All Ages Decreased from 2001 to 2009**

Because of the growing population of older Americans, the absolute amount of travel and share of travel by people 65+ has grown. However, on a per capita basis, Americans of all ages are traveling less today than at the beginning of the century, taking fewer trips and traveling fewer miles in 2009 compared to 2001.

On average, older adults (those age 65 and older) took 6 percent fewer trips and logged nearly 10 percent fewer miles in 2009 than in 2001. Today they take an average of three trips and travel about 24 miles each day (table 1).

Driving shows a similar decline. Per capita vehicle miles traveled (VMT) for persons

65+ declined by 7 percent, compared to 11 percent for people of all ages.

This decline in travel is likely due *in part* to rising gas prices and a struggling economy when the survey was in the field (April 2008 through April 2009). In a separate survey by AARP in July 2008, two-thirds of adults age 50 and older reported limiting their daily driving to accommodate higher gas prices.<sup>4</sup>

However, gas prices and a struggling economy may not fully explain the decline. Following several decades of increase, the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) has documented steady declines in travel for several years. Between 1969 and 1995, surveys showed steady increases in travel, in terms of both average daily person trips and miles. Per capita *trip making* declined for the first time in 2001,<sup>5</sup> while 2009 marked the first year when the *average number of person miles* also declined. *Driving* began to plateau in 2004, and dropped in 2007 for the first time since 1980.<sup>6</sup> It may be that Americans hit peak travel in the first decade of the century.<sup>7</sup> More time and more study are needed to isolate the effects of high gas prices and unemployment from real trends in travel.

In 2009, the only people traveling more were older adults in rural areas, who logged more miles for the same number of trips.

| Age           | Average Daily Miles Traveled Per Person |      | Average Daily Trips Taken Per Person |      |
|---------------|---|------|--------------------------------------|------|
|               | 2001                                    | 2009 | 2001                                 | 2009 |
| 16–49         | 43.4                                    | 38.2 | 4.4                                  | 4.0  |
| 50–74         | 38.7                                    | 35.5 | 4.0                                  | 4.1  |
| 75+           | 19.5                                    | 17.7 | 2.8                                  | 2.7  |
| 50+           | 35.0                                    | 32.3 | 3.9                                  | 3.7  |
| 65+           | 26.3                                    | 23.8 | 3.4                                  | 3.2  |
| All Ages (5+) | 37.4                                    | 33.8 | 4.1                                  | 3.8  |

\* Excludes travel on airplanes.  
Source: AARP Public Policy Institute Analysis of the 2001 and 2009 National Household Travel Survey.

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**Older Adults' Modal Preferences in 2009 Changed in Notable Ways**

Importantly, while overall trip making is down, the proportion of trips by mode has changed. Trips in private vehicles have declined, while trips by public transportation have increased (figures 1 and 2).<sup>8</sup>

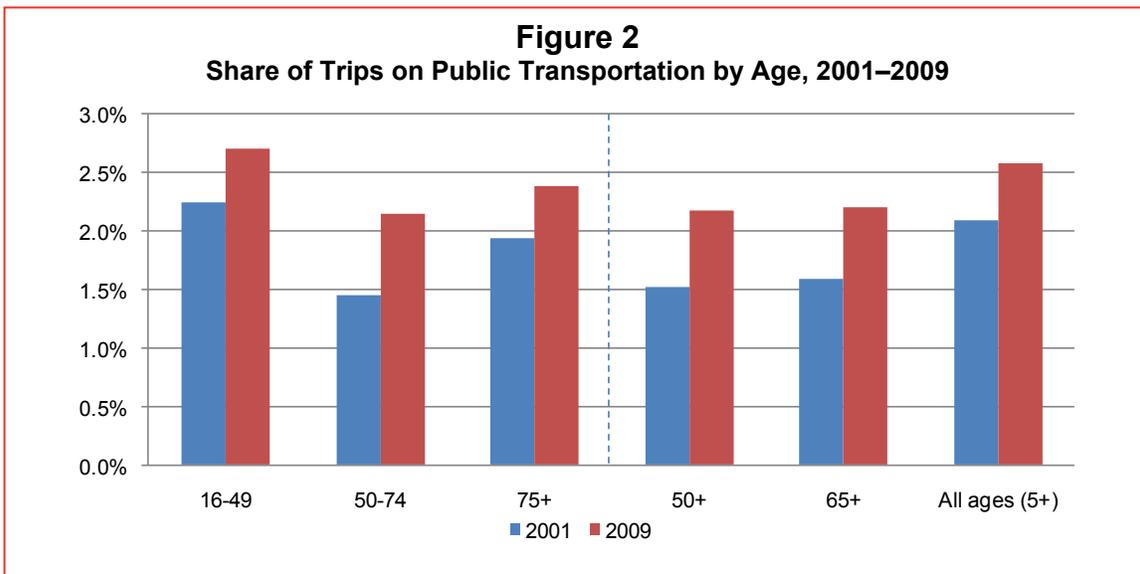
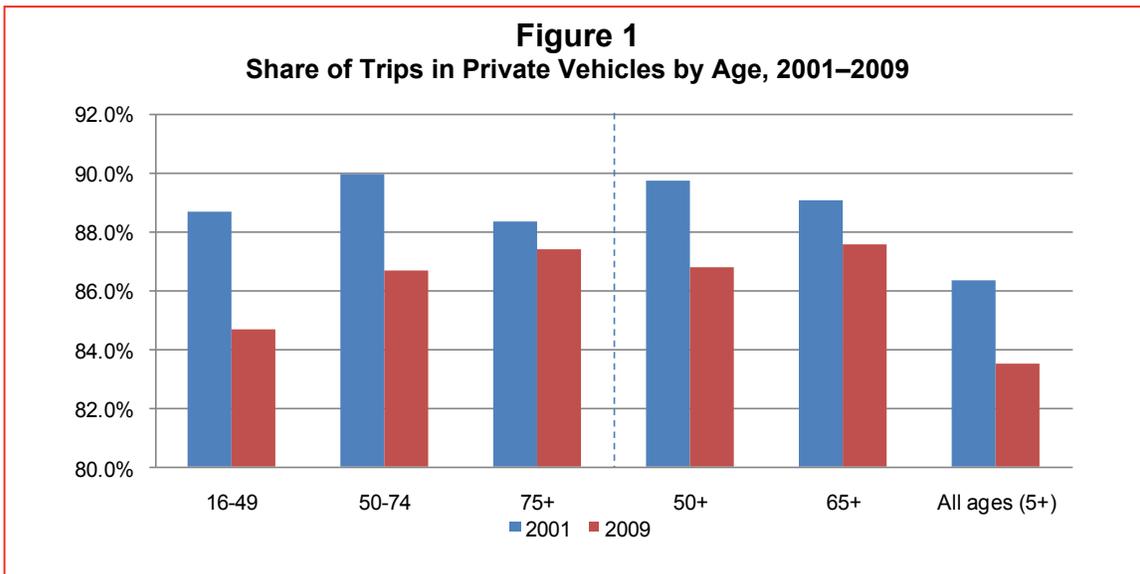
**Older adults chose public transportation for a greater share of their trips—reversing a trend seen in previous decades**

Transit use by people age 65+, as a share of all the trips they take, increased by a

remarkable 40 percent between 2001 and 2009 (figure 2). This is particularly significant in light of previous declines in public transportation use among persons in this age group.<sup>9</sup>

In 2009, older adults took more than 1 billion trips on public transportation (a 55 percent increase over trips recorded in 2001). Fifteen percent of persons 65+ with access to public transportation reported having used public transportation in the past month. Those who did took approximately two trips per week on average.

**While older adults retained their preference for automobile travel, they chose public transportation for an increasing share of trips.**



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As can be seen from figure 2, public transportation use increased among all age groups, not only among older adults.

Several factors may explain this increase in ridership. First, Congress increased federal funding for public transit by 46 percent with the passage of the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU) in 2005. Several states and cities, eager to revitalize urban centers, provided large funding matches to build light rail and other fixed guideway systems.<sup>10</sup> Technology applications such as real-time bus arrival information and other operational improvements offered riders higher-quality services. At the same time, highway congestion continued to grow, as did public awareness and concern about global warming and dependency on foreign oil reserves. Finally, while fluctuating on a quarterly basis, the underlying trend line for gas prices was clearly up between 2001 and their historic high in summer 2008.<sup>11</sup>

**Older nondrivers continue to rely on public transportation to a greater extent than drivers, but that difference is shrinking**

Significant numbers of older nondrivers (1.4 million individuals) continue to rely heavily on public transportation. Among those with transit available to them, 23 percent of nondrivers age 65 and older reported having used public transportation in the past month, compared with only 13 percent of drivers. Older nondrivers take 9 percent of their trips on public transportation.

While still very low (only 1.5 percent), drivers age 65+ doubled their share of trips on public transportation.

**Walking is the second most popular means of travel among people 65+**

In both 2001 and 2009, the share of trips by walking ranked second after travel by car. Older adults now take 8.8 percent of their trips on foot. Walking accounts for a greater share of their trips than either

public transportation (2.2 percent) or taxi (0.2 percent).

**Gender Differences in Travel**

Per capita travel rates for both men and women declined between 2001 and 2009. Following historic trends, older women’s overall travel remained significantly lower than older men’s. Older women took 17 percent fewer trips and traveled 35 percent fewer miles each day than older men in 2009.

Older men continue to drive more than women of the same age, although the gap is narrowing. On average, men age 65+ drive twice as many miles as women. While older men’s per capita VMT declined between 2001 and 2009, older women’s increased (figures 3 and 4).

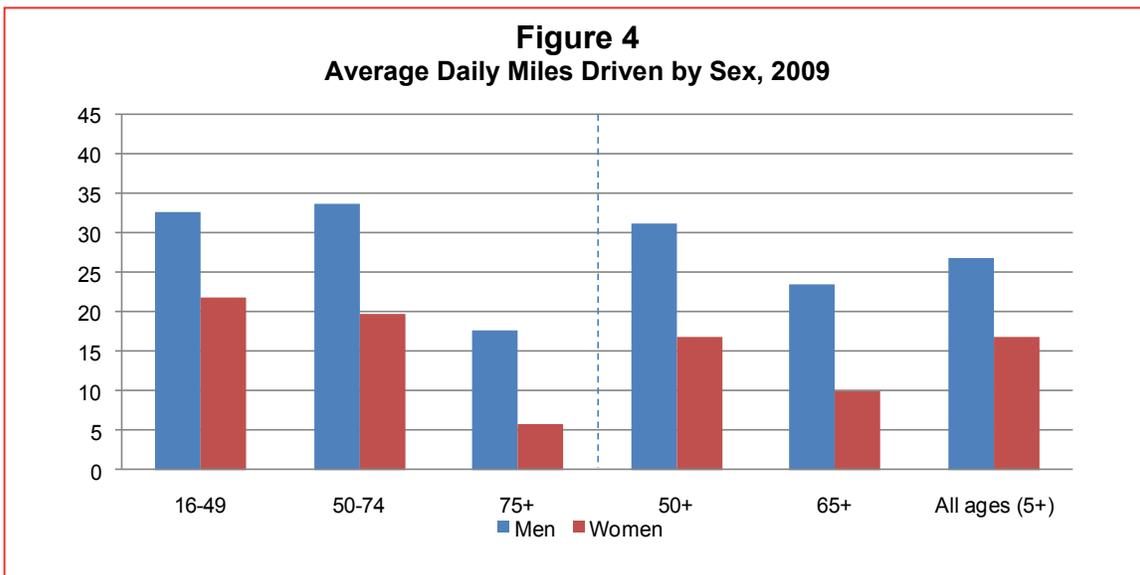
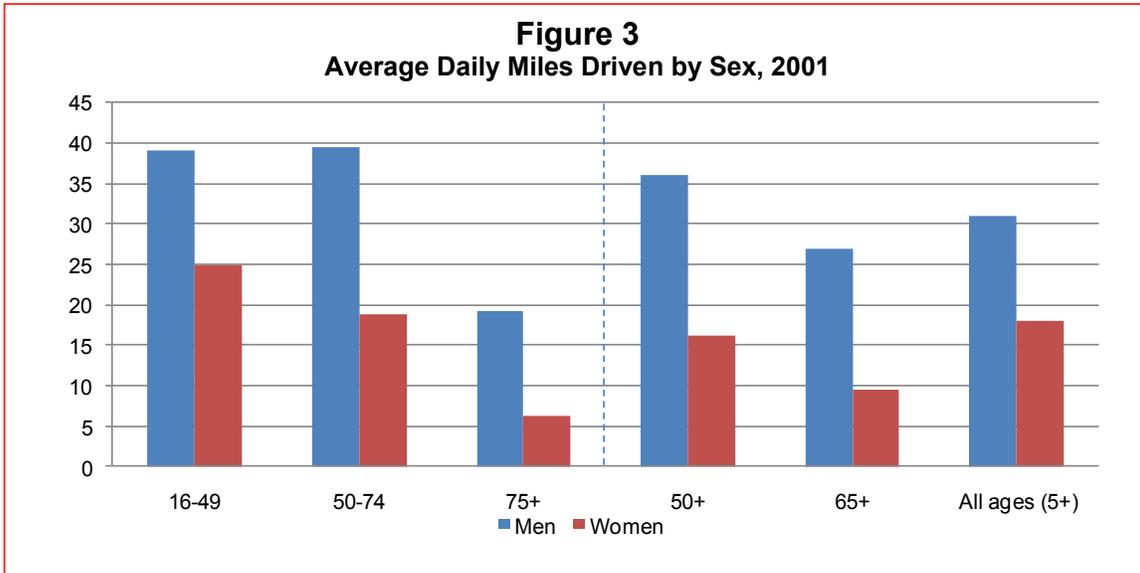
The percentage of women age 65 and older who are drivers continues to increase. At the same time, the percentage of older male drivers is now on the decline. Nonetheless, older men’s licensing rates still exceed older women’s (table 2). The NHTS recorded 89 percent of older men as drivers, compared with only 73 percent of older women. But because of their greater numbers, there are more female drivers age 65+ on the roads today than male drivers.

Regardless of gender, the population that drives declines with age (table 2), and this has important policy implications.

| Age   | Percent |       |      |
|-------|---------|-------|------|
|       | Men     | Women | All  |
| 16–24 | 78.3    | 79.6  | 78.9 |
| 25–49 | 94.5    | 91.5  | 93.0 |
| 50–64 | 95.1    | 89.0  | 91.9 |
| 65–74 | 92.9    | 84.1  | 88.0 |
| 75+   | 82.9    | 60.5  | 69.4 |
| 50+   | 93.2    | 83.3  | 87.9 |
| 65+   | 88.6    | 72.8  | 79.5 |

Source: AARP Public Policy Institute analysis of the 2009 National Household Travel Survey.

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**The Number of Older Nondrivers Has Grown Significantly**

The percentage of the 65+ population that does not drive remained the same (21 percent) between 2001 and 2009. But because of the growth in this population cohort, the number of older nondrivers increased by more than 1.1 million. Despite rising licensing rates among women of this age group, female nondrivers still outnumber male nondrivers three to one.

**Many Older Adults Would Like to Get Out More Often**

Among adults 65+ who report not having taken a trip outside their home in the past week, a little more than half reported that they would like to get out more often. In general, as age increases, travel outside the home decreases. This may be due to declining health and increasing disability that makes it physically more difficult and exhausting to get out and about.

## Transportation Planning and Policy Must Shift Focus

The 2009 NHTS shows subtle, yet remarkable changes in the composition of Americans' travel, including that of older adults. These changes could foreshadow a major shift in how Americans choose to get around in the future. As the driving population ages, the United States may see a sustained slowing or reversal in the growth of VMT.

To accommodate the mobility needs of an aging population, the focus of transportation planning and policy must shift from increasing road capacity to providing more multimodal solutions. For instance, many communities are adopting plans to "complete the streets" through investments that serve transit users, pedestrians, bicyclists, and drivers of all ages and abilities. More balanced investment in the nation's transportation system will accrue health benefits as people increase their active transportation.<sup>12</sup>

Americans have responded positively to recent investments in public transportation by shifting a share of their trips to this mode. It is essential that policymakers not lose sight of these gains. Disinvestment in public transportation following demonstrable success would reverse these positive trends.

At the same time, older adults' predominant means of travel continues to be their personal vehicles. Their share of the driving population will continue to grow. Therefore, investments in retroreflective<sup>13</sup> signs and pavement paint and other measures that improve older driver safety are prudent.

Because of their lower licensing rates and levels of travel, older women may be at particular risk of social isolation when they can no longer drive. A surface transportation authorization law that adequately funds safe and accessible

public transportation services and in particular specialized transportation is essential in meeting their needs. Support for volunteer driver programs and implementation of the CLASS program<sup>14</sup> could help older adults pay for transportation services that allow them to remain in their homes and communities even as they age past driving.

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<sup>1</sup> Population Division, U.S. Census Bureau, Table 2. Projections of the Population by Selected Age Groups and Sex for the United States: 2010 to 2050 (NP2008-T2), August 14, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> A driver is a derived variable in the NHTS data set for all respondents who (a) said they were a driver, (b) were reported as a driver on travel day; or (c) were reported as the main driver of a household vehicle. A driver in the NHTS need not hold a driver's license.

<sup>3</sup> Testimony by Deborah Hersman, chair, National Transportation Safety Board, at the November 9–10, 2010, Public Forum on the Safety, Mobility and the Aging Driver, Washington, D.C.

<sup>4</sup> Laura Skufca, *Is the Cost of Gas Leading Americans to Use Alternative Transportation?* (Washington, DC: AARP, August 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Pat S. Hu and Timothy R. Reuscher, *Summary of Travel Trends, 2001 National Household Travel Survey* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Transportation Federal Highway Administration, 2004), table 11.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Puentes, *The Road Less Traveled: An Analysis of VMT Trends in the U.S.* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> FHWA reported 3 trillion VMT in 2010, the highest level since 2007 (Traffic Volume Trends Report, December 2010, <http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/ohim/tvtw/10dectvt/index.cfm>). However, by spring 2011, gas prices had reached nearly \$4/gallon, the summer 2008 high, and there are some market indications that consumers may be reducing their driving (Michael A. Fletcher and Ylan Q. Mui, "\$4-a-gallon gas fueling fears for recovery," *The Washington Post*, April 12, 2011). The U.S. Energy Information Administration forecasts sustained increases in the price of motor gasoline through 2035 (<http://www.eia.gov/oiaf/aeo/tablebrowser/#release=AEO2011&subject=0-AEO2011&table=3-AEO2011&region=1-0&cases=ref2011-d120810c>).

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<sup>8</sup> Public transportation is defined broadly to include all forms of both intra-city and intercity trips on buses, trains, specialized transportation vehicles, shuttle buses, and school buses (where the trip purpose was not school-related).

<sup>9</sup> Sandra Rosenbloom, “The Mobility Needs of Older Americans,” in *Taking the High Road: A Transportation Agenda of Strengthening Metropolitan Areas*, ed. Bruce Katz and Robert Puentes, 227–54 (Washington, DC: Brookings Press, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> A “fixed guideway” refers to any transit service that uses exclusive or controlled rights-of-way or rails, entirely or in part. It includes light rail, heavy rail, or bus service in dedicated bus lanes.

<sup>11</sup> U.S. Energy Information Administration, [http://www.eia.doe.gov/dnav/pet/hist/LeafHandler.ashx?n=PET&s=EMM\\_EPM0\\_PTE\\_NUS\\_DPG&f=W](http://www.eia.doe.gov/dnav/pet/hist/LeafHandler.ashx?n=PET&s=EMM_EPM0_PTE_NUS_DPG&f=W), accessed 4/15/2011.

<sup>12</sup> David R. Bassett Jr., John Pucher, Ralph Buehler, Dixie L. Thompson, and Scott Crouter, “Walking, Cycling, and Obesity Rates in Europe, North America, and Australia,” *Journal of Physical Activity and Health* (2008) 5, 795–814.

<sup>13</sup> Retroreflective materials return light back to its source rather than diffusing it.

<sup>14</sup> CLASS (Community Living Assistance Services and Supports) is a voluntary national insurance

program established by the Affordable Care Act to help individuals pay for long-term services and supports. Eligible individuals who pay into the

program for at least five years will receive a daily cash benefit to purchase nonmedical services and supports necessary to remain independent and in the community. Examples of these services and supports include home modifications, assistive technology, homemaker services, respite care, personal assistance services, home care aides, nursing support, and accessible transportation. The amount of the cash benefit is based on the degree of impairment or disability and will be no less than an average of \$50 per day. CLASS will be financed by voluntary premium contributions paid by working adults through payroll deductions or direct contributions. Because of the five-year vesting period, CLASS benefits will not take effect until 2017.

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