

Social Isolation, Aging and Transportation¹

“Social integration, the opposite of social isolation, has been found to be generally beneficial to health across adulthood into old age.”

Source: Cornell Institute for Translational Research on Aging, Research Review, March 2007

Social isolation is less social contact than an individual wishes. Being isolated may lead to increased risk of depression, poor mental health, more disability from chronic illness, and even premature death.

Who is most at risk?

- People with limited assistance for everyday activities (shopping, transportation)
- Those with low emotional support
- People age 80 and older who: live alone, have fewer leisure activities, low support with routine activities
- Men who have low emotional support
- Women who: have low support for routine activities, reduced leisure activities, live alone

Having an adequate transportation system within one’s community is an important component to prevent social isolation because transportation physically enables individuals to more fully participate in an active community life. Having an inadequate transportation system restricts individuals’ opportunities to community resources that may be available. Individuals with poor access to food and community resources (such as food stamps or home-delivered meal programs), and those who are in need, but without a caregiver, are more likely to experience poor eating behaviors (Ryan & Bower, 1989; Davies, 1984; McIntosh, Shifflett, & Picou, 1989; McIntosh & Schiflett, 1984).

Under the current transportation system, cars are often the safest, most practical way for the older transportation user to get around. “People who stop driving actually show an increase in overall road fatalities because they’re much more likely to be killed as pedestrians than they are when protected by 4,000 pounds of structure,” says John Eberhard, Senior Research Psychologist for the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

28%
**of Americans
over the age of
65 live alone.**

Source: Cornell Institute for Translational Research on Aging, Research Review, March 2007



“Ensuring seniors have transportation is a key to keeping social connections.”

— Dr. Jill M. Berke, Certified Aging in Place Specialist

More than one in five Arkansans age 65 and older do not drive because of declining physical or mental health, safety concerns, or limited access to a vehicle. Arkansas is part of one of the most isolated regions in the nation for older nondrivers, with more than two in three non-drivers staying home each day. Older adults in auto-centric suburbs and rural communities are 50 percent more likely to stay home than those living in denser neighborhoods because they lack transportation options.

Older non-drivers take 65% fewer social, family, and religious trips than older people who still drive. However, when walking, biking or public transit are safe options, older adults take advantage. About 30% of older non-drivers walk in dense areas, compared to 7% in more spread out areas. The difference is even more evident with public transit.

Source: Bailey, Linda. Aging Americans: Stranded Without Options. Rep. The Surface Transportation Policy Project, Apr. 2004. Web. Sept. 2009. <<http://transact.tranguard.com/report.asp?id=232>>.



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¹ Unless otherwise noted, information compiled for this handout comes from the Traffic Safety Center Online Newsletter, Volume 1, Number 1: August 2002.

“If we offered people alternatives, they might very well give up driving sooner or in dangerous situations, and we would also address the problem of people who were self-regulating in ways that really restricted their mobility and lifestyles.”

20-25%

of the population is expected to be 60 or older when the aging of the population peaks!

Older respondents reported in surveys that they avoided transit because they feared being victimized by criminals, according to

Martin Wachs, Director of the Institute of Transportation Studies at UC Berkely—an impression that is supported by statistics. In transit settings, “older people are more likely to be victimized than people of other age groups,” Wachs said.

Because driving is so important, there is a great need to help older adults extend their safe driving years and to present opportunities for a gradual transition to other

modes—before they are forced to give up their cars completely.

In a study of older drivers in Tucson, Sandra Rosenbloom found that a significant percentage of older people had no plans for getting around after the time when driving ceased to be feasible. As a result, when that time came, they suffered a dramatic, sudden drop in trips.

“We believe that there is a substantial group of senior citizens who are intimidated by the traffic environment to such a degree that they are not able to walk in their communities and as a result, miss out on the physical and mental benefits of an active lifestyle.”

—Ton Van Demark, Oakland Pedestrian Safety Project

Changing the Environment

Existing roadways, cars, public transportation services, and pedestrian facilities were generally not designed with the older person in mind. “In traffic engineering, highway design, and the high technology sector, they need to have a better understanding of the characteristics of older people. One size doesn’t fit all is an underlying theme that needs to be presented to the engineers,” according to John Eberhard, Senior Research Psychologist for the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

Slower reaction times, less acute vision and hearing, difficulty with physical movement such as turning one’s head, and the effects of medication, or of health conditions such as a recent stroke are among the factors that designers of transportation facilities and cars need to consider.

The majority of people with some type of impairment or disability in relation to transportation are older people, Martin Wachs has noted. And any improvements made on their behalf would also rebound to the benefit of other disabled users and, most likely, the general population.

Examples include larger road signs with better illumination, improved edge delineation on the road, longer crosswalk signals, repaired sidewalks, and safe and available public transportation. There is no “single, simple answer,” Wachs said.



“The strongest predictor of premature death among older people is social isolation.”

—Patricia Waller, Senior Research Scientist, Texas Transportation Institute