

# Transportation for an Aging Population: Promoting Mobility and Equity for Low-Income Seniors

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Mobility creates opportunities for better quality of life. Mobility is essential for older adults for the fulfilment of their utilitarian, social and health needs. However, our cities and transportation systems are often not planned with older adults in mind. In particular low-income older adults living in American inner-cities represent a disadvantaged group in terms of mobility because they often do not own private automobiles and live in environments that present impediments to walking.

## Study Methods

This study examines the travel patterns and mobility challenges of low-income older adults in one Los Angeles inner-city neighborhood. It draws information from 1) a systematic literature review of the travel patterns of older adults; 2) a review of municipal policies and services geared toward older adult mobility in Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, Houston, Phoenix, and Miami; 3) a quantitative analysis of the mobility patterns of older adults in California using the California Household Travel Survey (CHTS); and 4) empirical work with 81 older adults residing in and around the Westlake neighborhood in Los Angeles, who participated in focus groups, interviews, and walkabouts.

## Findings

Older, inner-city, low-income, minority residents of Los Angeles take shorter, more frequent trips than older adults living outside the inner-city. They walk and use transit at a higher rate, as they have lower rates of car ownership and, thus, drive less than older adults living outside the inner-city. We can explain these differences by the lower income levels of these older adults as well as their greater accessibility to multiple destinations that typically characterizes higher-density inner-city areas.



For the 81 older adults who participated in the study, walking was their primary mode of transportation around their neighborhood. But while a number of retail and service establishments are in close proximity to their residences, they faced significant physical and social impediments to walking. Study participants shared a deep concern for safety while walking on neighborhood streets. They feared the presence of threatening people and chose to go out during daylight hours rather than after dark. They were concerned about falling because of the broken and uneven sidewalks. They were critical of the trash and debris on the streets, and the general lack of benches and street trees in their neighborhood. The heavy and fast moving traffic contributed to their feelings of danger, and they were particularly stressed when crossing the street. Study participants also used public transit to reach more distant destinations, but transit use involved some significant hurdles for them. These included having to wait for a long time at bus stops without benches or shelters, having difficulties stepping on or exiting from the bus, and finding a place to sit or space to leave their groceries, while on the bus. Some were worried of the possibility of victimization while on the bus or at the bus stop,

and avoided travelling in the evenings. A very small number of study participants owned a car and, thus, at times they had to use other point-to-point travel services. Taxi use was largely constrained because of financial reasons, while they lacked competency with technology to call ride-hailing services, and complained about scheduling and regulatory constraints in regards to paratransit services.

## Policy Recommendations

The study offers five categories of policy recommendations:

1. *Streetscape improvements* in areas with high concentrations of older adults should target fixing cracked sidewalks, cleaning trash, removing graffiti, adding street benches, planting street trees, removing sidewalk obstructions, installing signs and speed bumps near commercial driveways, installing pedestrian street lighting, increasing the length of traffic signal walk cycles, and implementing scramble crosswalks at busy intersections.
2. *Public transit improvements* should include bus design modifications to allow wheelchair space and better bridging of the area between the curb and the bus door, increasing bus driver and public awareness about the transit needs of older adults, moving bus stops and installing bus shelters near concentrations of older adult residences; advertising ways to access real-time bus arrival information, and placing a request button near the transit vehicle's door so that older adults can easily request the deployment of ramp if they need it to board the vehicle.
3. *Improvements to point-to-point transportation services* should include initiating pilot programs to evaluate how to make ride-hailing more accessible, increasing access to taxi vouchers for low-income older adults, and exploring ways to make paratransit services more streamlined with their needs.
4. *Mobility-complementary improvements* should encourage supermarkets to explore possibilities of delivering groceries at a modest cost for low-income older adults, in neighborhoods with high concentrations of senior housing; encourage the establishment of telehealth stations at senior centers and basic medical services at drug stores, and opportunities for increased internet access in common spaces of residential developments that accommodate high concentrations of low-income older adults.
5. *Safety improvements* should include encouraging police departments to expand their "foot beats" near concentrations of older adults and supporting the expansions of neighborhood safety programs and social services.

### About the Authors

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### To Learn More

For more details about the study, download the full report at [transweb.sjsu.edu/research/1704](https://transweb.sjsu.edu/research/1704)



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