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TRANSPORTATION AND THE ELDERLY

(By Peggy Poling Kimsey, Assistant Professor of Family Studies, University of Kentucky, Lexington, Ky.¹)

Transportation has only recently received attention by researchers and scholars interested in gerontology. One theory is that many people do not think about transportation until they do not have it. Transportation can be a barrier to good health, recreation, social activities and many other aspects of a satisfying life. Those with transportation think little about it; those without it, miss it greatly. Transportation is the linkage between a person and the outside environment; it links consumers with goods and services.

The cost of automobiles, auto maintenance and gasoline has also caused both consumers and researchers to examine transportation and the role it plays in our lives. Older consumers have felt the severity of the energy crisis to a greater extent than younger consumers, especially in the areas of transportation needs and resources. As indicated in the 1976 Energy Policy Report of the Ford Foundation, it is necessary to know the level of energy use of various people, what they pay for it, and the manner in which they consume it in order to evaluate present and future energy policies.

Considering the elderly as a large part of the poor, some comparisons can be made between transportation energy consumption of the poor and that of the elderly. The poor represent 17 percent of all households, but they use only 5 percent of the Nation's gasoline and drive 9 percent of its cars. Thus, the poor not only have fewer cars, they also drive their cars less. Since the poor often buy used cars, they are now forced into a market that contains the big gas guzzling cars made in the early 1970's. The older person is also more likely to own a larger, older automobile, versus a smaller fuel efficient car. Therefore, lower income elderly persons will need more gasoline at a higher price, even if their driving patterns do not change (Newman and Day, 1975).

More specifically, transportation has become a major concern to the elderly and those professionals who work with the elderly because of the spiraling costs of that transportation. The transportation component of all household budgets for retired couples has risen in the last 5 years. In 1974 transportation accounted for 6.43 percent of a low level budget for a retired couple, however, in 1979 the transportation component had risen to 6.97 percent of that budget. Even more drastically, transportation accounted for 10.82 percent of a high level budget in 1974 and rose to 12.06 percent of that same type of budget in 1979. See table 1 (U.S. Department of Labor, 1975; Rogers, 1980).

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TABLE 1.—COMPARISON OF 3 BUDGETS FOR A RETIRED COUPLE BETWEEN AUTUMN 1974 AND AUTUMN 1979

	Low		Medium		High	
	1974	1979	1974	1979	1974	1979
Total budget:						
Dollar amount.....	\$4,228	\$6,023	\$6,041	\$8,562	\$8,969	\$12,669
Percent budget increase.....	42.46		41.73		41.25	
Transportation:						
Dollar amount.....	\$272	\$420	\$527	\$820	\$971	\$1,528
Percent budget.....	6.43	6.97	8.72	9.58	10.83	12.06
Percent increase.....	54.41		55.60		57.36	

Are older transportation energy consumers different than younger ones? Curtin (1976) found an interesting fact about consumer adaptation to the energy shortages. When it came to transportation, the young felt they had not and could not adjust. However, the older persons who felt it would be difficult to adjust to household energy problems, stated they could adjust their energy consumption in relation to personal transportation.

Powell (1980) also found differences in older and younger consumers in a study that looked at energy management of household and transportation energy in Kentucky. She found that older persons scored significantly lower on energy attitude. Older persons also scored significantly lower on conservation knowledge. She also found that older consumers had significantly lower overall energy management scores than the younger consumer.

THE PROBLEMS

The elderly face varied transportation problems: total lack of transportation, lack of money for bus fares, or lack of available services to places they want and need to reach. For still others, it is the design and service features of the transportation that is available. Personal transportation is far more important than public transportation to the elderly (Revis, 1976). Most older Americans either walk or rely on their own or a friend's driving.

Brail, Hughes, and Arthur (1976) said that transportation problems of the elderly are compounded because they are poor and disadvantaged. They gave four reasons that the elderly are denied access to transportation: (1) they cannot afford to own an automobile or they cannot drive; (2) public transit is often not available; (3) if they do drive, they face a continual threat of losing their license or their insurance and (4) they are often physically unable to use the available transportation services. Part of this may be unjustified. Revis (1976) said the elderly driver has a better record than the average driver when calculated on the basis of accidents per driver. When calculating, however, on the basis of some measure of driving exposure or amount of miles driven, the elderly record is worse.

Wachs and others (1976) reported that chronological age alone does not explain the special transportation needs of the elderly. They contend that many current planning programs overemphasize the effects of physical aging when considering the special requirements of the elderly. Rather, the elderly are as heterogeneous as a younger population. It is a variety of lifestyles that influence transportation patterns

of the elderly. They identified elements of lifestyle: (1) Racial or ethnic background; (2) social living arrangements; (3) physical living arrangements; (4) economic resources; (5) educational attainment and (6) health. Financial security and ethnic identity were the most important aspects in relation to travel patterns. On the average, elderly residents of black and Spanish American communities traveled less frequently and were more dependent on public transportation. The results of their study also indicated that the ability to drive, the availability of an automobile, and the accessibility of public transportation were especially key aspects of maintaining a desirable lifestyle.

Cutler (1975) stated that aged consumers neither shared equally in the advantages offered by personal transportation nor were they equally able to overcome the obstacles posed in its absence. Functional impairments, difficulties in income maintenance, and characteristics of transportation systems themselves had erected significant barriers to mobility for a large segment of the elderly. Mobility restrictions were associated with low levels of life satisfaction. Older persons having personal transportation available to them had higher life satisfaction scores than those older persons not having transportation available for their use. Low levels of life satisfaction were especially characteristic of older persons who did not have personal transportation available and who lived more than one-half mile from the center of the city. For those living closer to the center of the city, life satisfaction was unrelated to transportation differentials. In essence the highest proportion of older persons with low life satisfaction scores was found among those who did not have personal transportation available to them, who lived at the greater distances, and who were of lower socioeconomic status or in poor health.

THE PRIVATE AUTO

The automobile is the primary source of transportation for the general population as well as for the older population. Dependence on automobile transportation becomes greater as a person ages. However, as people age, the availability of the automobile as a means of transportation decreases as both automobile ownership and licensing decline among the elderly. Nearly 40 percent of all households headed by an elderly person do not own an automobile (Harris, 1978).

The automobile is the key to mobility. In Kentucky, 74 percent of the elderly indicated that there was a car or truck in working condition in their household. However, females, the very old, the disabled, and the low income are the most disadvantaged. Only 65 percent of the females reported availability of an automobile, 50 percent of the low income, and 66 percent of the disabled. (Kentucky Elderly Needs Assessment, 1978.)

A sizable proportion of those older persons who had an auto in the household never drove it, or they were unlicensed. Of the 74 percent of older Kentuckians who had a vehicle in their household, nearly one-third never drove or were unlicensed, making them dependent upon others. Older women and the disabled elderly were especially

dependent upon other persons or other modes of transportation. One-half of the older women who had a working vehicle in the household did not drive or were unlicensed to drive while 40 percent of the disabled elderly did not drive or were unlicensed.

Most of Kentucky's elderly do manage, however, to have access to the vehicle in their household as evidenced by a majority of the elderly responding in the affirmative when asked if the vehicle was available for their use when they needed to go somewhere.

In a more specific and detailed study in Lexington-Fayette County, the most common type of transportation used by all respondents was again the private automobile. Rural and urban core residents, however, used the automobile considerably less than the suburban residents. In all cases the most frequent use of the private auto was as a driver and not as a rider. (Wellons and Kimsey, 1980.)

PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION

Three out of every five older persons responded that taxi service was not available to them. This was particularly true in the rural areas. This was reflecting what they perceived to be true and not what actually existed. However, it can be argued that a service is hardly a service if people do not know about it. Similarly, income also seems to be a factor influencing the use of taxi service.

Most of Kentucky's elderly stated that there was no public transit available in their area or at least they were not aware of it. The availability of public transit followed a trend similar to the availability of taxi service. Ninety percent of the persons residing in nonmetropolitan areas were without public bus service. Even when public transit was available it met elderly's needs only to a certain extent. One-half of the older population interviewed said they could get to "all" or "most" places using public transit. However, this figure decreased for the very old (41 percent) and the disabled (42 percent). One barrier to the use of public transit appeared to be the nearest bus stop. Only 57 percent of the elderly who had available bus service lived less than one block from the nearest bus stop. (Kentucky Elderly Needs Assessment, 1978).

MODAL CHOICES OF THE ELDERLY

How do the elderly get around? The 1978 Kentucky Elderly Needs Assessment study indicated that most older persons rode with family members, drove a car, and/or rode with friends. The least frequent travel mode choices were calling government workers, using public transit, riding in a taxi, and paying someone to drive them. There were also important differentials between males and females regarding the frequency with which the various modes of transportation were used. For example, the modes of transportation most often used for males were driving a car, riding with family members, walking, and riding with a friend. For females, on the other hand, the most popular modes were riding with family members, riding with friends, driving a car, and walking. The relative importance of "driving" between

males and females can be partially explained by the fact that of those females who had an auto available, only 50 percent said they drove, compared with 88 percent males. Income also influenced the frequency of usage for the various transportation modes. The most prevalent modes used by low-income elderly were riding with the family, riding with friends, walking, and driving a car. For middle-income elderly, the ordering of modes by frequency changed somewhat. The third most frequently used mode was driving a car, followed by walking. As might be expected, the high-income elderly drove a car most frequently, and they reported driving twice as often as the lower income group.

Government workers was the least used mode mentioned by all income groups; in fact, none of the high income elderly reported using this mode. Apparently, older persons seek all other options before calling a social worker. Conversely, the first place older people go for help is to their kin. This certainly seems to be the case of elderly Kentuckians with regard to transportation.

Only one-third of elderly persons were aware of special transportation programs in their area. An overwhelming majority of persons who were aware of special transportation programs never made use of them (87 percent for the State). The reasons given for not using the programs were as follows and presented in order of response: (1) They already had transportation; (2) did not need transportation, or (3) relatives and friends took them where they needed to go.

Specialized transportation programs are popular among those who use them. In fact, of those persons who used specialized transportation programs, the large majority gave them a positive rating.

TRANSPORTATION NEEDS

More than one out of five older persons in Kentucky, or over 104,000 elderly persons need additional transportation. By examining specific subgroups of the elderly we find that the poor and the socially isolated were most likely to need transportation services. For example: (1) More than one-third of the low-income elderly (36 percent), have difficulty going places; (2) nearly one-third of the socially isolated elderly (32 percent), have difficulty going places; (3) more than one-fourth of the disabled elderly (29 percent), elderly women (27 percent), and persons 75 years of age and older (27 percent), have difficulty going places; and, (4) of those older persons residing in nonmetropolitan areas, 22 percent have difficulty going places because they lack transportation.

Of those people reporting difficulty going places due to the lack of transportation, a large percentage of older persons reported difficulty going to both "essential" and "nonessential" places.

Moreover, of those persons reporting difficulty going places due to the lack of transportation, over 50 percent reported difficulty going shopping and seeing friends and relatives. Research findings consistently show that the presence of social relationships contribute to life satisfaction or adjustment in later life. Thus, these factors need to be taken into account when designing additional transportation programs. (Kentucky Needs Assessment Study, 1978.)

BARRIERS TO TRANSPORTATION USAGE

More than three-fourths of the elderly Kentuckians stated that the major barrier to usage of transportation services was not enough transportation services. This figure rose to 84 percent for the disabled, 83 percent for the socially isolated elderly, and 81 percent for elderly persons residing in nonmetropolitan areas. Thus, while a large number of older persons received transportation from their family, there still was a scarcity of opportunities.

The second most often mentioned barrier was the cost of transportation services. When specific subgroups of the elderly were examined, more than one-half of the elderly said this was a barrier (regardless of sex, income level, isolation-nonisolation, age, health, and metro-nonmetro residence categories).

Education was also an obstacle, although not to the same degree as other barriers mentioned. Nevertheless, not understanding how to use the services was mentioned by more than one-third of elderly Kentuckians. This figure rose to over 40 percent for males, low-income individuals, the socially isolated, and nonmetropolitan elderly residents. Not only do providers of services need to communicate the availability of their services, but also how to use their services.

One-half of Kentucky's elderly who had difficulty going to places due to lack of transportation, reported health as a barrier. It was difficult for 69 percent of the disabled and 56 percent of the very old to use transportation services because of their health.

With this in mind, it is not surprising that 44 percent of the elderly mention difficulty getting on and off the bus as a barrier. This figure rose to 64 percent of the very old (75 years of age and over) (Kentucky Needs Assessment Study, 1978).

URBAN AND RURAL DIFFERENCES

The differences between urban and rural transportation problems for older consumers are vast. McKelvey (1979) says that the major problem in rural transportation is overcoming the large distances between residents and their destinations. Rural residents are also almost totally dependent upon the private automobile. There is a total lack of transportation alternatives for the rural elderly, and those alternatives which are available, are often inefficient.

In urban areas the problem is more complex. There are two central questions who work in human services areas should ask: First, does the available transportation connect the elderly to their desired destination? Second, do the elderly actually reach those destinations? (Schmitt, 1979). Age alone is a relatively poor criterion for determining the transportation disadvantaged. Instead planners should consider the linkage between the older consumer and essential and desired goods and services.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TRANSPORTING THE ELDERLY

Brail and colleagues (1976) make several recommendations for transporting the elderly. Those alternatives range from simple, inexpensive approaches to more complicated programs. The total range of alterna-

tives, from the simplest to the most complex, include: (1) carpools. The organization of carpools has been a relatively popular method of transporting and may be particularly appropriate for the elderly; (2) occasional transportation. Volunteers generally drive once or twice weekly and may choose not to drive if it is inconvenient or if they are hesitant to travel in certain areas. This is generally limited to private, nonprofit, volunteer transportation programs; (3) regularly scheduled transportation. Such programs use one or more vehicles, ranging from sedans to buses, to transport daily to and from an activity center; (4) fixed route and schedule. Transportation supplied along an established route and at predetermined times characterizes a fixed route and schedule system; (5) advance reservation service. In advance reservation transportation service, a client telephones the dispatching office to make a trip request; (6) demand responsive transportation. These systems are generally characterized by shared rides and door-to-door service. The objective is to supply service at lower prices than conventional taxi service while maintaining the flexibility of taxi service.

Other recommendations that might be considered to meet the wide range of transportation needs of elderly consumers are: (1) subsidized programs to encourage local taxi companies to provide reduced fare structures for older persons; (2) information systems that publicize transportation problems of the elderly in order to encourage the use of formal and informal support systems; (3) government and public transit cooperation to expend and improve existing public transit services to the elderly.

An important recommendation made by Markovitz (1971) that cannot be overlooked or simplified is the need to coordinate housing programs for the elderly with transportation programs for the elderly. Quite often our system has provided housing programs and services for older consumers without the additional necessary planning for transportation services.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Transportation has been a major consumer concern for older persons in the past few years. It has particularly been a problem for females, the low income, the very old, and rural elderly. However, the problems of the elderly consumer are not homogeneous. The elderly, and their transportation problems, are as heterogeneous as the younger portion of society. Age alone is not the criterion for determining a disadvantaged transportation consumer.

In the future the elderly will be better educated, more affluent, more mobile, and able to enjoy a wider variety of lifestyles than the elderly of today. Yet they will continue to experience problems with availability and accessibility of transportation. It is also probable that the cost of transportation will remain one of the major barriers to transportation usage for the older person.

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