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Bolstering Mobility and Enhancing Transportation Options for Low-Income Older Adults

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Research Topic

Central city neighborhoods host multiple bus lines, mixed-use environments, and offer more affordable housing. For this reason, they tend to attract low-income racial and ethnic minority older adults, many without cars. These neighborhoods and mixed-use environments seem to be naturally transit-oriented, walkable, age-friendly communities. However, these neighborhoods also pose unique obstacles to the older adults navigating them. Through the lens of a dense, ethnically diverse, low-income urban neighborhood in Los Angeles, the researchers sought to understand how aging and the built environment affect mobility in a population mostly comprised of non-drivers and many non-English speakers.

Age-friendly cities will have transportation services available to older adults to facilitate trips to medical services, grocery stores, and social networks. The ease of transportation is especially important to older adults, many of which experience limited mobility due to age and disability. It is not enough that the bus routes or sidewalks be simply available, but that they are also physically accessible and comfortable to experience.

This research focuses on transportation and physical mobility for low-income older adults who live in dense urban areas of the central city. In particular, the researchers studied existing travel data and data collected from focus groups to investigate how older adults access their daily needs and what challenges they face in doing so. The researchers wanted to understand what it would take to create a thriving transportation system in an age-friendly city.

I want to take a rest break on this little wall. You see there is nowhere for me to sit and take a rest

-Focus Group Participant

Study Approach

This study seeks to explore the travel patterns, needs, and mobility problems faced by diverse (regarding age and ethnicity), low-income, central-city older adults in Los Angeles with the aim to identify solutions to their mobility challenges. The researchers reviewed municipal policies and services geared toward older adult mobility across six cities: Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, Houston, Phoenix, and Miami. Researchers drew from the California Household Travel Survey to present data on how older L.A. residents move around in the city — where they go, by what modes and when.

The researchers conducted focus groups, interviews and mobility audits with 81 older adults residing in Los Angeles' central-city neighborhoods. Researchers conducted six focus groups with older adults in English, Spanish, and Korean, collected 31 completed questionnaires from one-on-one interviews, and walked with 10 older adults along a short route

I try to walk fast, but we can't really run and it's dangerous to walk too fast due to risks of falling. So there's plenty of things to worry about these days.

-Focus Group Participant

around the Westlake neighborhood, one of the densest, most diverse, and oldest neighborhoods in Los Angeles.

This analysis culminates in recommendations for improving mobility for older central-city adults. While the recommendations are specific to Los Angeles, many of the themes and lessons are worthwhile considerations for other cities as well.

Key Themes

- Older, central-city, low-income, minority residents of Los Angeles take shorter, more frequent trips than older adults living outside the central city. These trips are more frequently completed by walking or using transit and less frequently by driving than the Los Angeles County overall average or even older adults living outside the central city. This suggests that older, central-city adults comprise a regular part of consistent transit riders.
- Many of the concerns expressed by low-income, older adults echo those of frequent transit riders, such as fare prices, bus schedule, and bus frequency. Older adults also expressed concern about the quality of the trip, including getting on and off the bus, finding a seat, and the safety of the bus ride. These are concerns shared with other groups of transit users, such as disabled riders and women.
- Older adults often need to take long trips for routine medical appointments at facilities that are far away from home, resulting in lengthy and time-consuming trips, especially when completed on public transit.

- Use of cars is constrained by finances, lack of fluency with rideshare technology, or scheduling and regulatory constraints that characterize the city- or county-subsidized paratransit services.
- While older, central-city adults enjoy walking both recreationally and to accomplish daily tasks, they identified several obstacles to comfortable walking in the central city. In particular, they identified uneven or unmaintained sidewalks, litter, competing sidewalk uses, and a lack of street furniture for rest or shade as some of these hurdles (see Figure 1).

Recommendations

- Public transit is an essential mode of transportation for older, central-city adults. Buses should offer accommodations for older adults to ride them comfortably, including clearly posted information about bus schedules, increasing driver awareness of older adult mobility needs, and making it easier for older adults to request a ramp.
- Cities should prioritize streetscape improvements such as regular trash clearing, adding benches and trees along sidewalks, and quickly fixing cracked sidewalks to allow older, central-city adults to navigate streets safely.
- Central-city, older adults frequently do not have access to a car, but would benefit from more door-to-door transportation services. Cities can improve on options by encouraging rideshare companies to initiate pilot programs that serve older adults, offer taxi vouchers to very low-income older adults, and advertise real-time tracking information to Access LA paratransit services.



Figure 1.

Environmental impediments word cloud.

- Mobility complementary improvements, where destinations could be brought to older adults through delivery and telehealth services, can help reduce the need for older adults to make long trips. These improvements may include encouraging grocery stores to offer delivery services to senior housing, establishing telehealth stations at senior centers or pharmacies, and offering internet access in common areas of housing for low-income older adults.
- Policymakers need to consider not only the physical environment but also the social interactions of older adults during their daily journeys. Cities can improve feelings of safety by using ambassador programs and working in collaboration with social workers in areas of high homelessness.

About the Authors

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For More Information

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