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# Year 24 Final Report

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## Assessing Alternative Transportation Options for Older Users

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## **Project Description**

While the aging of the population represents the triumph of advances in medicine, technology, education and public health, this unprecedented demographic shift has resulted in new kinds of challenges around how to help older adults navigate their new longevity. This study explored questions and challenges around keeping an aging population mobile. In the US, driving one's personal vehicle is the majority of people's preferred means of getting around. For many older adults, however, the driving mode is not just a means to an end, but an end in and of itself: the act of driving is central to their senses of identity and autonomy (Donorfio et al. 2008a). Driving gives the individual the ability to make choices about the timing of trips and the order of stops and the overall sense of control over one's life. A great deal of work on older adults and transportation has focused specifically on driving, much of it around driving self-regulation: older adults' voluntary reduction of when and where they drive in order to stay safe (e.g., Donorfio et al. 2008b; Molnar et al. 2010; Owsley, Stalvey and Phillips 2003; Ross et al. 2009). Less work has explored how older adults think about their transportation alternatives, and more precisely, how the fastest growing segment of the population – the oldest old, those ages 85 and older – think about their transportation. Many studies focus on the younger old – those who are still active and may have on average 15 or more years of life ahead of them. In contrast, someone reaching the age of 85 today has on average another 6.7 years to live, and he or she is likely is a more frail condition than he or she was 10 or 15 years earlier. Yet transportation is just as vital to the oldest old as it is to the younger old. This study used a qualitative approach to explore older adults' assessments of their transportation options and alternatives, including transit and personal vehicles.

## **Methodology**

This work drew on a brief questionnaire and then discussion groups with a group of people ages 85 and older who live in the metro Boston area. The group is the 85+ Lifestyle Leaders Panel at the MIT AgeLab, and they meet bimonthly at the AgeLab in Cambridge, MA, to engage in discussion around a predetermined topic. In November 2015 the focus of the discussion was transportation, a topic that had generated a great many reactions from Panel participants in previous discussions. When participants arrived at the AgeLab they completed a written questionnaire asking about their transportation preferences and practices. Following the questionnaire, participants broke down into smaller discussion groups in order to talk in greater detail about their experiences and their feelings about the choices available to them.

## **Findings**

The work revealed that although many of the oldest old in the Lifestyle Leaders Panel still had strong emotional attachments to and preferences for driving themselves, a number of them had reached the point where they felt that they could no longer drive safely. Their discussions around driving and transportation alternatives revealed some new themes that have not emerged in prior work because the focus in this work was on an older population.

Those who could no longer drive themselves had to rely on alternative means of transportation to get around. For some, mass transit was not an option; they lived in suburban areas where no subway service existed and bus service was relatively rare. Beyond that, many people reported that they did not enjoy taking mass transit – it was not comfortable, they faced some challenges in accessing it (e.g., in walking to the bus stop), and in some cases they did not feel wholly

personally secure. Getting rides from other people was also an avenue people reported, although they also noted that they tried not to impose on others too often. For example, two people in the group came from the same town and were friends; one drives and the other does not. The one who does not drive reported not asking the driver for rides all of the time because she did not want the driver to feel burdened by having to take her with. One of the most popular options among participants who did not drive was an on-demand paratransit service that offered them door-to-door transportation and was relatively inexpensive.

Among those who still retained a driver's license were some who did not drive; the license was important as a source of identification and for "just in case" moments – where something locally needed to be done and the participant would be forced to drive him or herself. Other drivers indicated that while they drove themselves, they had stopped doing any driving for others. One person reported that although he was happy to drive himself different places, he would not give anyone else a ride because he did not want to be responsible for anyone else's safety. Still others happily continued to drive and to drive others, dreading a day when they might have to stop or to make other arrangements to get around.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, this research underscores the importance of being attentive to different groups of people within the category of "older adults," and in particular focusing attention on how the fastest growing segment of the US population thinks about their transportation choices. Participant in the qualitative work revealed a strong preference for on-demand paratransit services, but for a society where the population is aging, paying for these kinds of services – without making a change in the business model – may be prohibitive. The work also suggests that how people think about their own driving as they grow older may be different among the oldest old, and the kinds of limits or self-regulation habits they may engage in may also differ from people ages 65 to 84. Learning more about the transportation preferences and practices of this population segment will be important in order to devise solutions and alternatives that meet their needs.

### **Output**

The results of this research are being drafted into a white paper to share with the Lifestyle Leaders Panel. Following this, these results, in conjunction with analysis from national data sets like the National Household Transportation Survey, will be used to draft a paper for submission to the Transportation Research Board.