Institute of Transport Economics
Norwegian Centre for Transport Research

ENGLISH Summary

Mobility, barriers and attitudes towards on-demand transport among older people

A survey among older people in three municipalities in Vestland county

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In autumn 2024, TØI conducted a survey among people aged 75 and older in the municipalities of Bømlo, Kvinnherad, and Sveio to map travel habits, mobility needs, and attitudes toward on-demand transport. The results show that most older people are active, but activity levels decline with age in parallel with increasing physical challenges related to different modes of transport. More than half state that they would like to participate more often in various activities but face barriers such as health problems, long distances, and transport challenges. The most commonly used modes of transport are walking and private car, while very few use regular public transport. Many older adults experience difficulties with this, such as poor accessibility and lack of service. Attitudes toward on-demand transport are generally positive, and quite a few state that they are likely to use such a service, especially those who face transport challenges. The study points to a clear unmet mobility need and that on-demand transport appears to be a potentially important measure to strengthen older adults' independence, social participation, and quality of life in rural areas.

Purpose of the report

The purpose of this report has been to gather knowledge about transport use, activity levels, unmet mobility needs, transport challenges, and attitudes toward on-demand transport among older adults in the municipalities of Kvinnherad, Bømlo, and Sveio. The analyses are based on a survey among a sample of people aged 75 and older in these municipalities.

Activity and social contact

Most (89 percent) go out at least once a week. More than half are relatively active, going out at least three times a week. Activity levels gradually decline with age. The most common activities outside the home are grocery shopping, visiting friends and family, and walking in the neighborhood.

Although activity levels outside the home decrease, face-to-face social contact with family and friends increases with age. This may indicate that more visits take place at home and/or that more receive help from family and friends, who then come to their home (e.g., grocery shopping or transport help). There are no signs that digital contact or phone calls compensate

for a lack of physical contact with friends and family. On the contrary, the more often people meet friends and family face-to-face, the more often they also stay in touch with them by phone, email, social media, etc.

Unmet activity needs

Most (81 percent) say they get out in their neighborhood as often as they wish, but this proportion decreases with age. While 90 percent of those aged 75–79 say they go out as often as they want, only 34 percent of those aged 90 and older say the same.

Even though many are active, a large proportion (57 percent) say they would like to do some activities more often than they currently do. Activities they would like to do more often include visiting family and friends, hiking in the countryside, and going to cafés/restaurants or cultural events (cinema, theater, concerts, etc.). The main barrier is health related. Transport problems are the second most important barrier. Other barriers mentioned include long distances, lack of local activity offerings ("Cultural offerings are gone due to centralization, e.g., cinema, library," "live in the countryside, nothing here"), lack of friends and family to do activities with ("Uncomfortable to go alone") and having a spouse/partner who needs care and cannot join due to health issues ("My wife has Alzheimer's. She deserves all my spare time," "my husband has mobility problems and cannot join").

Transport use and challenges

Using a car (as driver or passenger) and walking are the most common ways to get to activities. Very few uses public transport, and although we do not have directly comparable data, figures from the national travel survey RVU 2019 indicate that public transport use is much lower in these municipalities compared to the national average.

The main reported challenges with using public transport are linked to the service itself (long distance to stops, no service to the desired activity, unsuitable timetables, and too few departures) or lack of activities in the area. Open responses also highlight that services are not just poor but often non-existent. Other barriers include steep slopes to/from stops and no seating available while waiting.

Walking and driving decline gradually with age, while being a passenger in a household car remains stable. Being a passenger with someone outside the household increases with age, supporting the hypothesis that older adults increasingly receive help with transport, which also explains the observed increase in face-to-face contact with family and friends.

The most common physical barrier is difficulty walking (20 percent), followed by difficulties cycling (14 percent), using public transport (11 percent), and being a car passenger (10 percent). The proportion reporting physical difficulties with various transport modes increases with age, especially after 85.

Small differences between municipalities in mobility, activities and challenges with public transport

Few differences were found between the three municipalities, except for variations in weekly activities and which activities people wish to do more often. These are likely explained by differences in available activities and natural surroundings. There are also small but significant differences in reported problems with public transport between the municipalities.

The role of transport in everyday life

More than half say that transport is necessary for them to lead an active and social life, and that transport is central to their quality of life. Nearly 80 percent agree with the statement “I will feel old the day I can no longer go out.” At the same time, almost 60 percent disagree with the statement “Depending on friends and family for transport is fine with me.” This suggests that freedom and independence in transport are more important than activity levels per se. Still, 41 percent agree with the statement “There will always be a solution, transport is not something I worry about.”

Attitudes toward on-demand transport

Most respondents are very positive (65 percent) or somewhat positive (15 percent) toward a shared door-to-door on-demand transport service. This attitude is independent of age, gender, municipality, driver’s license status, car use, or living situation. Surprisingly, those who assess their health as good or very good are the most positive, which might be due to personality traits—those with a generally positive outlook may also assess both their own health and on-demand transport more favorably. This is however only a hypothesis that needs further exploration with other data also measuring personality traits.

Few express concerns about using such services. The main concerns are difficulty understanding how to book and fear of being late for appointments.

A considerable share (42 percent) say it is very or somewhat likely they would use such a service if available. Having physical difficulties with other transport modes is positively associated with likelihood of use. There is also a tendency that those who assess their health as less than “very good” are more likely to use it. No effects were found for gender, living situation, or car use. There is a slight tendency for higher age to increase the likelihood of reporting probable use.

Conclusions

This study shows that many people aged 75 and older experience unmet activity needs, due to both health issues and transport challenges. Many also report that the regular public transport service is poor or lacking. The study shows that problems with walking and driving—the most common transport modes in these municipalities—increase with age. Given these findings, there is reason to believe that on-demand transport could help older adults maintain independence and autonomy longer than without such a service. Those who say they are likely to use on-demand transport are also the target group: they face physical difficulties with transport, regardless of age, gender, health, or living situation.

Many state that they will feel old the day they depend on friends and family for transport, and very few agree that such dependence is acceptable. This suggests that freedom is not primarily about being active every day but about being able to choose when and where to go. On-demand transport can help preserve this freedom, especially in areas where public transport is nearly absent or very poor. It can also remove today’s barriers to public transport use, such as long walks to bus stops, lack of benches at stops, and steep incline.