

RURAL TRANSIT NEEDS FOR OLDER ADULTS

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THE ISSUE

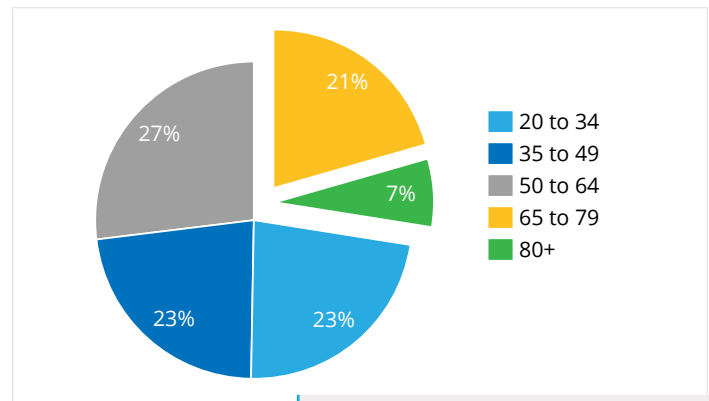
A major indicator of the quality of life of older adults is mobility, which is defined as the ability to move independently.¹ With mobility comes access to people and places, psychological benefits by improving mental health, physical benefits through exercise, and involvement in local communities.² Mobility may decrease as people age, requiring them to rely on transportation provided by others, including family, friends, and public transit.

Nationally, 1 out of 4 older adults aged 65 and up live in rural areas—this percentage increases to 28 percent in Texas.³ Aging-in-place and migration to rural areas by recent retirees make providing transit increasingly important to rural communities. 70 percent of rural counties in the United States provide some transit, but not all rural populations are served.⁴ Limitations in transit districts, especially rural districts, may create barriers for the growing older adult population. Funding issues require communities to be innovative in providing such services.

FACTORS INFLUENCING OLDER RURAL ADULTS' MOBILITY

The older rural adult population is more likely to experience disabilities, suffer from medical conditions, and have lower incomes that make being mobile and active more difficult compared to those living in urban areas.⁵ At the same time, being inactive is a risk factor for unintended falls, chronic conditions like heart disease and diabetes, and disability. Paradoxically, people in rural areas often must travel by car to places that encourage physical activity and social interaction. Older adults favor using personal vehicles for transit, but as they age, medical conditions such as loss of vision or dementia may limit their ability to drive. Economic vulnerability may also cause older adults to reduce driving or give up their personal vehicle.

Rural transportation services may help older adults stay mobile. Limited service availability and stigma associated with using a public service may hinder accessing rural transit resources. Instead, many people opt to forego trips or depend on family and neighbors. These options may lack convenience and safety, especially if friends experience similar driving limitations.



Texas rural population by age.
Data retrieved from United States Census Bureau.

Mobility and accessibility are as much a part of community development and regional planning as transit planning. Accessibility, which refers to the ease or ability in terms of time, costs, and efforts necessary to reach a destination, is often defined as the number of sites available at a given distance or travel time. Accessibility, therefore, depends on the availability and quality of transportation networks, services, and opportunities.⁶ People often need to leave their rural county for services in a regional trade center, and transit districts can assure compatibility of scheduling and vehicles for multi-county trips.

TEXAS RURAL TRANSIT FUNDING

In 2016, fares made up only 4.5 percent of the \$101 million in total revenues from 37 rural Texas transit districts.⁷ The Federal Transit Administration (FTA) funds the majority of rural transit at 47.5 percent, with other federal sources making up 14 percent. State funding and local contributions made up 17.9 percent and 6 percent of revenues. The remaining 10.1 percent of funding is collected from local contributions—primarily by other contracts. The FTA requires state and local governments

¹ Patla and Shumway-Cook, "Dimensions of Mobility," 7-19.

² Metz, "Mobility of older people and their quality of life," 149-152.

³ Texas Demographic Center, *2018 Annual Estimates of the Resident Population by Age Groups*.

⁴ Mattson, *Rural Transit Fact Book 2017* (No. SURLC 17-007).

⁵ Leaning et al., "Does economic vulnerability moderate," 2041-2060.

⁶ Pyrialakou, Gkritza, and Fricker, "Accessibility, mobility, and realized travel behavior," 252-269.

⁷ Cherrington et al., *Sources of Funding Transit in Texas* (No. PRC 15-11.3).

to match federal funds. This is increasingly difficult as local funds are stretched due to growing operating costs, low ridership, and decreasing state funds that are primarily based on population size.⁸ With funding decreasing, it is even more challenging to provide reliable public transit.

COMMUNITY-BASED CONSIDERATIONS

Before evaluating and determining potential solutions, it is necessary to ask whether improvements in rural transit are necessary for your rural community. It is important to determine if the benefits are greater than the costs. Although the older rural adult population and demand for transportation are predicted to increase, the density of the rural area will remain low. Low population density creates a unique challenge in rural areas and may make public transit cost-prohibitive. No two communities are the same, and their differences can determine how efficiently and effectively transit providers can provide services. Economic assessments and evaluations should be conducted to determine whether the proper resources are present to match public transit demand. Unconventional modes of transportation may be necessary to encompass the entire older adult population and address these rural transit issues.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS TO IMPROVE RURAL TRANSIT

Fixed route transit, the standard in bus routes, is successful in urban areas, but it is not practical in many rural areas. Innovative solutions are critical to improving transit in rural areas, but such solutions come with their own set of costs and benefits. Studies have shown that people in rural counties are willing to fund changes to transit, but given rural areas' limited population base, the support may not be able to fund changes under traditional bus models.⁹ With innovative solutions, the future of rural transit can sustainably provide the necessary resources to our aging population. Although increased mobility benefits older adults, communities also benefit by keeping older adults active and engaged.

For further information on possible solutions, see publication [Improving Rural Transit](http://tti.tamu.edu/documents/TTI-2017-1.pdf) and: <http://tti.tamu.edu/documents/TTI-2017-1.pdf>.

⁸Public Transport Division, *2018 Texas Transit Statistics Final Edition*.

⁹Schwarzlose et al., "Willingness to pay for public transportation options," 1-14.



A rural transit bus drives passengers through a community tractor show.

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