

ANALYSIS BRIEF

CAREGIVING TRAVEL



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As a result of greater longevity, more and more people find themselves caring for an elderly parent-- including driving them to the grocery, for errands, and to medical services. Not every older parent lives in the same household with their caregiver son or daughter, which makes the National Household Travel Survey an incomplete inventory of travel provided as part of care-giving (since the NHTS data are collected from the members of a single household). But a very small subset of the 2009 NHTS--8 percent or 12,000 sampled households—are families with adult children (18-64) living with one or more parents over the age of 65.

This brief analyzes the people in these households and their travel. The older person in these multi-generational households is called the ‘elderly parent’ and the adult child the ‘caregiver’, although when the age range skews toward the younger—for example, a 30 year old adult child living with a 65 year old parent—these terms may not reflect the status of the people in that particular household. And when the age range skews older—for example, an 80 year old adult child living with a 98 year old parent—the idea of caregiver also stretches the imagination.

The adult children (caregivers) in households with an elderly parent are most often women aged 40-55, but over a third are age 55 or older and 13 percent are themselves 65 years old or older. The caregivers are less likely to be employed although those who work report holding multiple part time jobs. And while the adult caregiver and elderly parent live in a home that is owned rather than rented, they report less income than average for other adults.

Many of the elderly parents who live with their adult children are likely to have a medical condition that makes it difficult to travel and are unlikely to be a driver (see Table 1). As a result of their health status and inability to drive, twice as many elderly parents living with their adult children report not leaving home on an average day compared to all people aged 65 and older.

Table 1 –Characteristics of Elderly Parents Who Live with Adult Children (2009 NHTS)

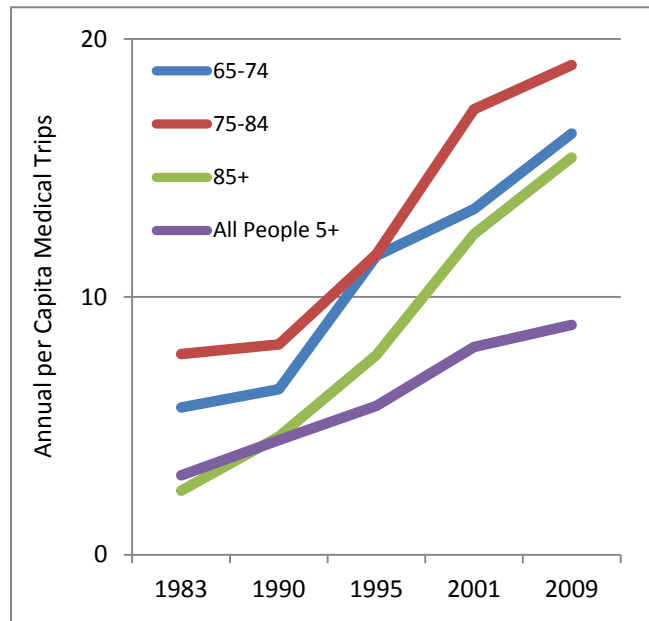
	All People 65+	Elderly Parent Living with Caretaker Adult Child
Average Age	74.7	80.3
Does not drive	20.5	64.3
Did not travel on reporting day	25.7	51.4
Has a travel disability* and has:	26.7	51.5
Reduced Day-to-Day Travel	83.9	92.2
Asks Others for Rides	58.0	67.1
Uses Special Transit Services	13.6	12.4
Limits Driving to Daytime	42.1	27.1

*In the NHTS, this is asked as: “Do you have a medical condition that makes it difficult to travel (outside the home?)?”

The elderly parents living in multi-generational households who do not drive need assistance to travel to daily activities--for more than 4 out of 5 trips the parent is a passenger in a vehicle, and the caregiver is the driver on most of these trips. While the elderly parent who does not drive travels on average less than half the rates of comparable drivers there is one critical exception: non-driving elderly parents report more than four times the number of medical trips as do those who drive. It is a vital element of care-giving to provide transportation for the elderly parent's doctor's appointments, recurring treatment, and other medical services.

Importantly, per capita travel rates to access medical services (including people who travel for medical and those who don't) have increased almost three-fold since 1983, and have skyrocketed for people in older age groups. The increased burden of the astounding growth in travel to access medical services has not been studied.

Figure 1 - Annual per Capita Trips to Access Medical Services by Age Groups, 2009 NHTS



This analysis provides evidence that transportation for medical services is one of the primary needs of older people, and that many older people depend on family caregivers to provide transport for them.

Further research would be needed to assess the impact of the increase in travel for medical services on elderly patients and their caregivers. Does the elderly patient forgo some treatments because of lack of transportation, or because of distance, frequency, or time of day issues? Do doctors regularly ask how the patient will access prescribed medical services, and have information on options if the older patient doesn't drive? How much time do care-givers spend in medical transport? Does the requirement to help and elderly parent travel impact the ability to work, or to work fulltime? Does it impact the types of vehicles they own?

Importantly, national surveys should consider collecting more detail on activities related to caring for an older relative to obtain more comprehensive data on this phenomenon and to track trends.

Note: This work was originally conducted with funding from AARP

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