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## [LIBRARY](#)

► [VOLPE JOURNAL](#)

## [HIGHLIGHTS](#)

[PUBLISHED AND  
PRESENTED](#)

[BIBLIOGRAPHIES](#)

[TRANSPORTATION  
STRATEGIC PLANS](#)

[LINKS](#)

## Volpe Journal Spring 97

[Previous Section](#) | [Contents](#) | [Next Section](#)

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### **Transportation and Our Aging Population: Volpe Center Helps Shape Future Policy**

The issue of providing our aging population with viable transportation alternatives to the private automobile is gaining increased attention from policy makers, particularly as members of the baby boom generation approach their retirement years. But the problem is made even more complex by the lack of adequate transportation options in the suburbs, where most of our elderly population now lives. Research conducted at the Volpe Center's Strategic Planning and Analysis Division is helping to shape the public policy debate on this important issue.

Most of the projects undertaken by Volpe Center staff are focused on the application of technical solutions to the very real issues facing the transportation industry as we near the end of the twentieth century. But what transportation issues will we face in 10 or 20 years? And what new approaches will we need to develop to meet those challenges?

Not surprisingly, the Volpe Center's Strategic Planning and Analysis Division is actively engaged in helping to define the transportation issues of the future. This division researches demographic, technological, and economic developments that may foreshadow the transportation problems and opportunities we will face in the next century. As such, their work is helping to frame the policy debate on what steps we can take now, as well as those we will need to take in the future.

Typical of the work being conducted by the Strategic Planning and Analysis Division is the research recently undertaken on transportation issues facing older Americans by Dr. Joseph Coughlin of EG&G Dynatrend and Annalynn Lacombe of the Division. In an effort to begin a dialogue on how the transportation community provides mobility and access to that increasing portion of the population who no longer can or want to operate an automobile, Coughlin and Lacombe have identified a number of myths associated with providing transportation options for the elderly. Their findings were presented earlier this year to a Department of Transportation (DOT) panel convened to discuss the particular mobility requirements of the elderly. These findings will help to define the ongoing dialogue about this important issue.

As often happens in policy development, Coughlin and Lacombe's analysis of alternate mobility options for the elderly supported an initiative announced last year by then-Transportation Secretary Federico Pena to further investigate

transportation issues facing our aging population. That investigation, and the resulting report, was led by the Volpe Center's Drs. Donald Sussman, Mary Stearns, and David Skinner of the Operator Performance and Safety Analysis Division. Funded by the Federal Transit Administration's (FTA's) Service Innovation Division, Coughlin and Lacombe were able to produce materials in support of Secretary Pena in this important policy area.

### **Transportation and the Aging of America**

It should come as no surprise that the population of the United States is aging rapidly. In fact, the nation's average age has been increasing steadily for the past 35 years. Millions of baby boomers—that generation of Americans born between 1945 and 1960—are now turning 50 every year, and this generation will reach 65 just 15 short years from now. In fact, by the year 2020, between 17 and 20 percent of the entire U.S. population will be over 65, representing more than 50 million Americans.

The transportation issues facing the elderly in modern society are not new. But until the 1950s, large portions of our elderly population lived in urban areas and were able to take advantage of mass transit systems to maintain mobility. With the exodus from the cities to the suburbs in the 1950s and 1960s, however, most Americans assumed the responsibility for their own transportation needs. Indeed, many recent initiatives to provide mass transit options to suburban residents have failed because of our dependence on the personal automobile.

Unfortunately, as suburban populations age and become incapable of transporting themselves, the inadequacies of most public transportation options will become all too apparent. According to Volpe Center research, more than 75 percent of today's elderly live in suburban areas where the most widely available transportation option is the private automobile.

In addition, the sheer number of aging boomers forecasted to reach their senior years during the first decades of the twenty-first century will present significant transportation issues of a completely new dimension. Add to this the boomer generation's highly active lifestyle and the problem of providing transportation alternatives for the elderly of the future will reach an unprecedented magnitude. ([View Graphic](#): *Seventy-five percent of Americans over the age of 65 live in areas where the primary mode of transportation is a private automobile.*)

### **Motivations for Seeking Transportation Alternatives**

There are other compelling reasons to develop transportation alternatives for the elderly. Perhaps foremost is the public safety issue that emerges from an increasingly aging driver population. Age-related physical and cognitive deterioration as well as the potential for interactions from multiple medications place elder drivers at greater risk to themselves and others than the driving population as a whole. While many elderly people are sensitive to the limits that age imposes on their reaction time and take reasonable precautions behind the wheel or stop driving altogether, other drivers are unwilling to forfeit the independence provided by an automobile and refuse to admit to physical impairments that make them unsafe operators.

This problem is further complicated by traffic safety officials, doctors, family, and friends, who fail to limit an elder's driving for fear of imposing unfair

restrictions on his or her mobility. A survey conducted in 1995 by the Volpe Center's Coughlin and Roger Cobb, a professor of public policy at Brown University, found that licensing examiners and supervisors in all 50 states often hesitate to suspend or revoke the licenses of elderly drivers for this very reason. Further, more than half of the examiners admitted that a lack of readily available alternative transportation was an important consideration in determining whether to revoke the license of an elderly driver.

These findings coincide with a symposium of physicians conducted at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, in which participants acknowledged that the absence of transportation alternatives offering "choice and dignity" similar to that offered by a private automobile was a determining factor in their decision on whether to recommend revocation of the driver's license of elderly patients.

But providing transportation alternatives for elders is not just a matter of public safety. In many cases, otherwise active seniors lack private transportation, either because they never learned to drive or because they cannot afford a car of their own. Even more important, mobility is critical to the emotional well-being of people of all ages, and continued interaction with family, friends, and the larger community is a key ingredient in maintaining the psychological health of our aging citizens. That interaction is made easier when acceptable transportation alternatives are available.

### **Uncovering the Myths About Transportation and the Elderly**

Volpe Center research by Coughlin and Lacombe makes an important contribution to the public debate on the elderly and their transportation needs by helping to identify many of the myths that pervade our thinking about the issue. Myths are not necessarily falsehoods, Coughlin and Lacombe point out, but the truthful core of a myth is often shrouded in the misconceptions around it.

For example, many believe that the majority of our elderly population live in urban areas and simply need to take advantage of current public transportation options. But, while millions of elderly Americans do have access to urban mass transit options, 75 percent of seniors live in nonurban and even rural areas where the lack of transportation alternatives makes dependence on private automobiles a virtual requirement. Further, according to a 1995 study produced for the Congress of New Urbanism, 82 percent of our elders live in detached, single-family homes—a very different picture from that of seniors clustered in urban apartment buildings, and one that presents its own set of logistical issues.

Another common myth explored by Coughlin and Lacombe is that the majority of the elderly have fewer mobility needs than the rest of the population. They rightly point out that many of us think of transportation primarily as a means of getting to and from our places of work. We reason that, once we no longer need to work, our transportation needs will diminish significantly or disappear altogether.

But here, too, further analysis presents a more complex picture. According to the 1990 National Personal Transportation Survey, travel to and from work may constitute the majority of miles traveled for many, but the number of trips to and from work account for only 25 percent of the total number of trips we take.

The remainder of our trips include the travel required as a normal part of life, such as trips to the grocery store or the bank, as well as visits to family and friends within driving distance. And seniors also have unique transportation needs—they may require more trips to the doctor and for other forms of medical attention—which add to the number of trips they make. The reality is that the transportation needs of the elderly are just as significant as those required of younger, non-retired populations. Add to that the increased need for transportation options for those whose age or physical condition make it impossible for them to take advantage of traditional forms of public transportation, and the transportation issues facing the elderly take on even greater significance.

For Coughlin and Lacombe, identifying these and other myths is a critical part of the exercise in formulating policy decisions around this issue. Uncovering the larger story behind these myths can help to shape an objective understanding of the problems by public officials, policy makers, and transportation authorities, and can lead to the identification of legitimate solutions.

### **Funding Options for Elderly Transportation Alternatives**

Some of the more pervasive myths surrounding the issue of transportation and the elderly involve how transportation alternatives can be funded. The common misconception is that funding sources for such services are shrinking, when in fact a number of public agencies continue to provide financial support for transportation programs designed to include the elderly.

In their research, Coughlin and Lacombe have identified that funding for elderly transportation can be found in a number of federal public transportation and human service programs, which together account for almost 55 percent of all public funds available for senior transportation. Under public transportation programs, for example, Coughlin and Lacombe identified several grant programs under the FTA that contributed nearly \$2.5 billion to transportation programs in urban and rural communities in fiscal 1995.

Further, human service programs operating under the federal Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) earmarked an additional \$1 billion in fiscal 1993 for transportation services to the elderly. The majority of these funds are provided through federally sponsored, state-run Medicaid programs that are intended to ensure access to healthcare services for low-income citizens, primarily the elderly. Other assistance comes from community block grants and funding to local agencies dedicated to providing services to persons age 60 and older.

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When federal funding comes from multiple sources, there is always a danger that initiatives will be duplicated, wasting valuable resources and minimizing the effectiveness of the funds being spent. But Coughlin and Lacombe note that, in this arena, the federal government has taken important steps to ensure coordination between DOT and HHS programs to maximize the benefit that these expenditures provide. They point to a unique Memorandum of Understanding to Improve Transportation Services for Older Americans signed in 1990 by the FTA and the HHS's Administration on Aging. This agreement has led to numerous efforts to reduce program costs and to increase the provision of transportation services for greater numbers of seniors.

Beyond public funding options for transportation alternatives for the elderly, Coughlin and Lacombe advocate exploring to what extent seniors and their families are able or willing to fund access to transportation alternatives. Certainly, outright payment for services is one option for a number of people. Furthermore, many seniors have children or other family members who would be willing to pay for transportation services that would provide their elders with mobility options.

Even elderly citizens of modest means often continue to maintain a personal automobile long after they have stopped driving. Coughlin and Lacombe argue that these costs could be alternatively viewed as a "mobility budget," which could be applied to a wider range of transportation alternatives.

In addition, potential private funding avenues can be explored. Coughlin and Lacombe suggest, for example, that retailers looking to capture a greater market share could subsidize transportation alternatives that would bring greater numbers of senior shoppers to their stores. Such ventures are typical of the kind of innovative approaches that need to be explored further as we look for ways to deal with this issue in the future. ([View Graphic](#): *By the year 2020, between 17 and 20 percent of the United States population will be older than 65 - - this represents more than 50 million Americans.*)

### **The Role of the Volpe Center in Supporting Policy Formation**

The Volpe Center's research on transportation alternatives for the elderly is typical of other projects undertaken by the Strategic Planning and Analysis Division. For example, the division has been actively involved in crafting the Congressionally mandated Surface Transportation Research and Development Plan. Likewise, this group is actively supporting the White House's National Science and Technology Council, which is in the process of developing a vision for a national transportation research and development program.

These and other projects conducted by analysts like Coughlin and Lacombe are consistent with the mission of the Strategic Planning and Analysis Division to develop an understanding of our nation's future transportation requirements. Such projects can also help to identify today the technology requirements that will allow us to meet the challenges presented by those requirements, and to evaluate emerging technologies that may offer the promise of solutions to problems as yet unknown.

Finally, these "advance guard" efforts by the Volpe Center are the lynchpin to the Center's ongoing efforts to provide its clients with support for their

policy-making efforts and program development activities. By establishing the social, economic, and technological frameworks from which future transportation issues will likely emerge, studies like Coughlin and Lacombe's will serve as the foundation for new work at the Volpe Center and will ensure the Center's continued ability to support transportation policy makers and administrators in the years to come.

### **Resources**

"Improving Transportation in a Maturing Society," Volpe Center Issue Paper, April, 1996.

"Who Is Driving Miss Daisy? Policy Project," Roger W. Cobb and Joseph Coughlin, Brown University.

"A Ten-Year Follow-Up of Driving Patterns Among Community Dwelling Elderly," Human Factors, Vol. 34, pp. 25–31.

The Geography of Nowhere: The Rise and Decline of America's Manmade Landscape, James H. Kunstler, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1993.

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[Return to Top](#)