Older male and female drivers in car-dependent settings: How much do they use other modes, and do they compensate for reduced driving to maintain mobility?

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Why do this research?

Around the world, high-income countries, including Australia, are characterised by a rapidly ageing population. An important social challenge for an ageing population relates to their mobility. Within Australia, mobility is directly impacted by a variety of factors including geographic factors (e.g., the decentralised nature of our population), transport policies and economic factors (e.g., lack of public transport infrastructure and high cost of paid services like taxis).

Much remains unknown about how older drivers currently manage their mobility, therefore this project sought to understand the variety of mobility undertaken by drivers aged 61 years and older.

What did we do?

295 older drivers completed a telephone interview exploring their travel mode including driving, being a passenger, and walking.

What did we find?

The number of days driven each week didn’t vary across drivers aged 61-65 years, 66-70 years, and above 70 years, with an average of 4.5 days driven each week. The number of hours driven each week did differ considerably, ranging from 9.5 hours for the youngest older drivers to 5.5 hours for the oldest older drivers. The number of hours as a passenger did not differ significantly, with an average of 1.7 hours each week for all drivers. Whilst the number of hours spent as a pedestrian ranged from 2.9 hours each week for the youngest older drivers to 1.9 hours each week for the oldest older drivers, this difference was not significant.

Overall, this means that the reduction in the amount of time spent driving isn’t compensated for by the oldest older drivers by time spent as a passenger or by walking.

When we look at gender, overall males spend less time as a passenger than females, increasing their time as a passenger from age 71 onwards.

Across the three age groups, 80% of males and 65% offemales prefer to drive for themselves while 5% of males and 30% of females prefer to be driven by someone else. Females reported
considerably larger periods of their time spent driving as a single vehicle occupant (77% of the time compared to 60% of the time for males).

**What does it mean?**

Overall, vehicle-related mobility declines with age amongst older drivers, and is not compensated for by increasing walking. It appears that the shift to shorter driving trips (which is shown through a decrease in driving time but not a decrease in driving days) may demonstrate that the destination of the travel (such as for socialising or shopping), may move to closer locations. The finding that, in general, a larger proportion of the aging population is female and that older female participants prefer not to drive alone has implications for policies and programs that are designed to improve the road safety and the mobility of older drivers, suggesting not only targeted interventions for older road users but gender-specific older road safety interventions.