

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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### Background

In the words of the Ontario Professional Planners Institute, a ‘grey tsunami’ is approaching. In 2006, 15% of Kingston’s population were senior citizens (which exceeds both provincial and national proportions) and Kingston is among the top 10 Canadian communities where the senior citizen population is growing the fastest. Since Kingston is already experiencing a “senior surge”, it is a prime example of a community that needs to make the needs of senior citizens a high priority. One essential component for quality of life is satisfactory levels of mobility, where mobility is considered the ability to make trips outside the home to access goods and services. Suburban sprawl in Kingston makes many important amenities accessible only by private automobile; therefore seniors who do not drive must figure out alternative ways to get around. However, in a car-oriented setting,

- 1) What are the coping mechanisms of senior citizens who do not drive?
- 2) How effectively are they coping?
- 3) What factors affect their ability to cope without a car?

These are the questions that are especially important in an aging community. This study’s intent is to answer some of these questions.

### Methods

To find out how seniors coped without a car, one-on-one interviews with seniors guided by a semi-structured survey were completed. The participants were recruited through posters put up in places where seniors often frequent, such as the Seniors Centre, churches, coffee shops, and libraries. Many of the seniors were also referred by agencies, such as the KFLA Public Health Unit and the North Kingston Community Health Centre, which provide specialized programs for seniors.

In total, 22 seniors were recruited and interviewed over the period of February 2009 to July 2009. Eligible people were those 65 years or over, who do not drive or have given up driving, and do not live in an institutional setting. An effort was also made to interview both males and females of various living arrangements, neighbourhood locations, incomes, and health statuses. Their responses were analysed through qualitative research methods, focusing on finding themes and exploring the unique experiences of the individuals who are coping without a car. Some patterns and relationships are identified from the results, but the emphasis is not on making broad generalizations; rather the objective is to highlight the mobility issue as these seniors see it. Future researchers can use these findings as a starting point in exploring mobility issues facing seniors in other communities.

### Results

#### *Many Transportation Options Are Used*

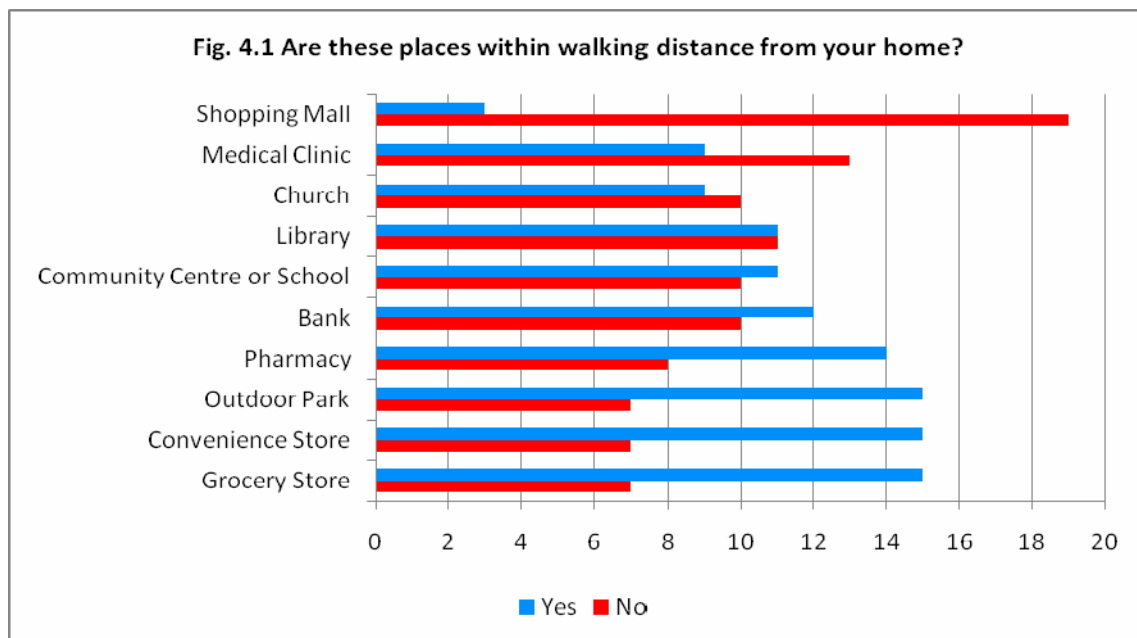
Even without private car use, the senior citizens who participated in the research remain active in many different activities: 65% of the seniors regularly attend religious services, 55% have volunteer commitments, and 90% meet at places outside their homes to socialize with friends and family. Seniors citizens have found a variety of ways to get around without a car. Riding the bus is a common coping mechanism, with nearly 70% saying they ride the bus often (3 or more times a week). Many seniors also walk to the places they need to go to. Other well-known options available to seniors are relying on rides from family members or friends, using taxi services or specialized transportation services.

### Option 1: Riding the Bus

Many of the seniors emphasized the importance of maintaining their sense of independence when it comes to mobility. Riding the bus provides seniors with a high degree of flexibility, and an important sense of independence; however waiting for the bus, enduring poor weather conditions when using the bus, the relative slowness of bus travel, and the sometimes discourteous drivers are some of the barriers to riding the bus.

### Option 2: Walking

Many seniors also walk as a regular mode to get to places they need to go. Seniors can walk a range of distances from “a couple of blocks” to “ten blocks with breaks” to seven kilometres! However, for many seniors, the places they they want to go to are not within walking distance from their homes. The shopping mall is the least accessible by walking for most seniors. (Figure 1.1) A medical clinic is also far from most seniors, though there are a handful of seniors who do walk to their doctor’s appointments. Fortunately a grocery store is within walking distance for most seniors, in addition to a convenience store, an outdoor park, and a pharmacy. Even so, a senior’s ability to regularly walk to places can be impeded by poor weather conditions, poorly maintained sidewalks (especially in the wintertime), and the senior’s personal health.



### Option 3: Rides from Family or Friends

Some seniors also rely on rides from family members or friends, but usually only because their poor health prevents them from being able to walk or take the bus. When seniors get rides, it is easiest when it is from someone who is going to the same place already, or if it is for an errand that is commonly considered essential, such as grocery shopping or medical appointments. Non-essential or discretionary errands (such as visiting with friends at a coffee shop or browsing at the mall) are activities that seniors will avoid asking for rides, if possible. Discretionary trips are sometimes even cancelled if no convenient ride can be found.

#### Option 4: Taxi

Most seniors do not use taxis as a regular mode of travelling because it is simply too expensive. One senior reported that a round-trip fare to the Cataraqi Town Centre from her home near the Kingston Centre would cost \$30. However, otherwise, seniors do find taxis easy to use and convenient.

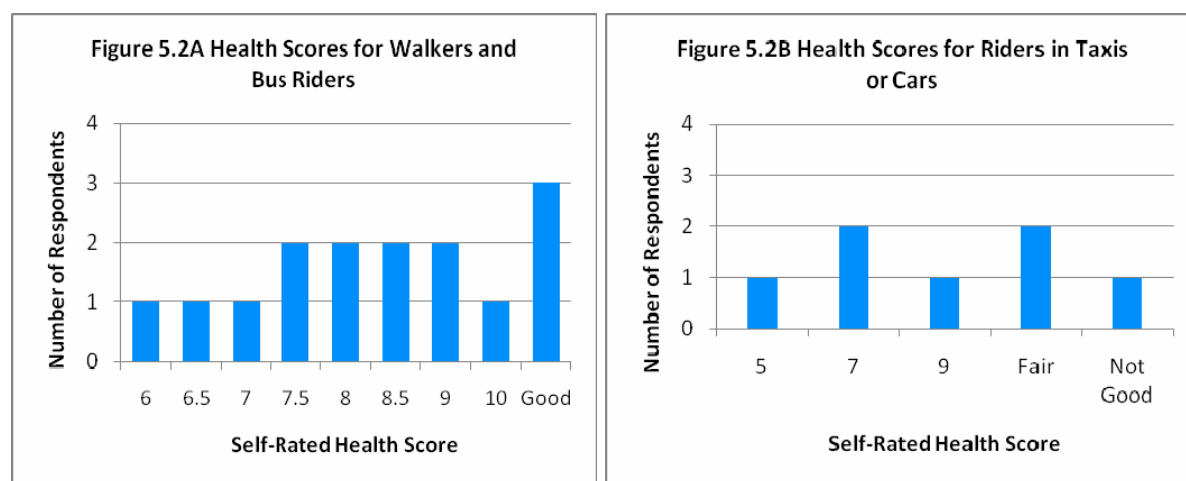
#### Option 5: Specialized Community Transportation Programs

The Kingston Access Bus is a specialized community transportation program to service those with physical disabilities who, otherwise, cannot use regular Kingston Transit bus services. One senior uses the Access Bus regularly, but many of the other seniors reported that it is not convenient or flexible enough to adequately meet their needs. A more flexible service would be the SMILE program, an option whereby volunteer drivers take individuals to their appointments and errands using community vans. However, this service is less well-known amongst the seniors who were interviewed.

#### Factors That Influence Mobility

Based on the results, there were a few factors that appeared affect the abilities of these seniors to make use of various modes of transportation.

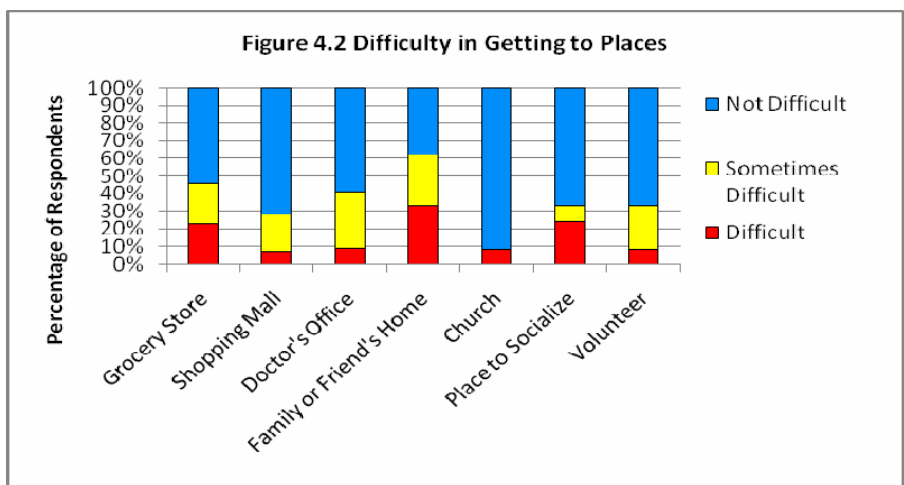
Health is an important factor that determines whether the senior can do activities outside the home. Most seniors gave themselves high ratings of health (7 or above, on a scale of 1 to 10). Seniors who ride the bus and/or walk regularly tended to have higher health scores than those who regularly depend on rides from family or friends or use taxis (Figures 5.2A and 5.2B).



The senior's living arrangements can also affect their mobility. Some seniors lived with partners who could still drive and would rely solely on this option; however, others only relied on their partners for certain trips and would use the bus or walked on most other occasions. Individuals with family members living in town or strong social networks could also rely on rides from them. Therefore, helping seniors to access such networks may help improve their overall mobility. However, as was mentioned previously, senior citizens have trouble asking for rides, and the informal nature of these networks means that they are not necessarily reliable means of getting around.

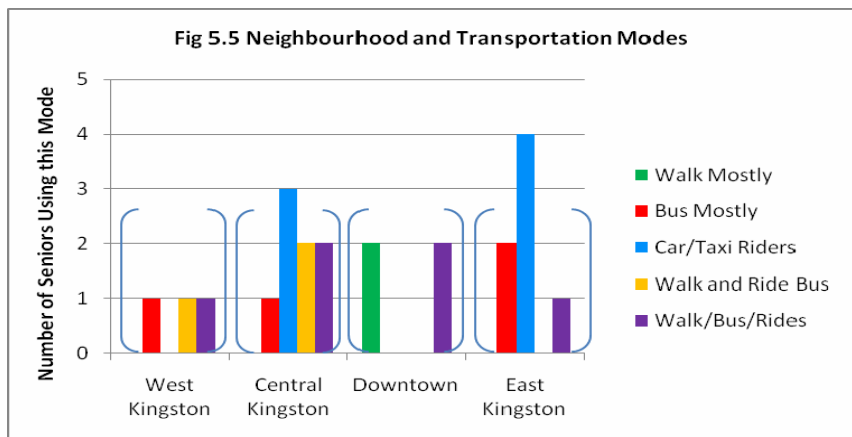
The effect of income on mobility was also examined. There was no difference in the options used by people of different income levels. There was also no significant difference in the difficulty level that people of different income levels had in getting to places they needed to go to. Therefore, this indicates that experiencing difficulty may be more strongly associated with the type of trip or location of certain places, rather than the financial means available to an individual.

Of the most common places that the senior citizens go to, church is usually the easiest to get to. Visiting family or friends' homes or going to places to socialize with family or friends are the hardest to find transportation to get to. Both the grocery store and doctor's offices were easy for some and not for others, but generally most did not find these places difficult to get to.



### Neighbourhood Built Form

The urban layout and design of a neighbourhood may also be an underlying factor affecting mobility for senior citizens. Overall, when neighbourhoods have a grid street design and/or permit mixed uses, seniors are more likely able to consider walking as a main transportation option. Those living in more conventional suburbs, defined by curvilinear street design and separated residential areas from commercial uses, could also walk, if their health was good, but average walking distances were longer. For those living here, the public bus was usually more efficient than walking. For the most part, however, there appeared to be no difference in the types of preferred travel modes and neighbourhood location (Figure 1.4).



## Recommendations

Initiatives to improve mobility for seniors can be undertaken by many agencies. Improving mobility for seniors should be guided by the following principles.

*1. Facilitate seniors' independence.*

The National Advisory Council on Aging defines senior's independence as follows: "To be able to carry out life's activities within a normal community setting, to be able to make choices about these activities and to have a degree of control over one's life."

*2. Recognize the diversity of the seniors' population.*

Seniors are not a homogenous population. They differ by age, gender, education, income, physical health, and ethnicity, etc., which can shape their everyday experiences.

*3. Reflect the progressive aging of the seniors' population.*

The age composition of the seniors' population is not static, with current cohorts growing older and new cohorts being added.

*4. Respect the everyday lives of older people.*

Plan-makers need to see seniors as older *people*, not as a "problem" requiring attention.

*5. Embody the integral relationship between housing, transportation, and community support.*

All three are cornerstones of seniors' independence.

*6. Provide a balance of options.*

An array of options should be provided where possible to allow seniors to exercise choice and choose options that reflect personal and diverse needs.

Seniors in this study have identified the following criteria as most important for improving their independent mobility:

- Convenience and flexibility
- Accessibility
- Customer Service
- Information and awareness
- Reliability

In Kingston, the following agencies and organizations could make improvements to serve the City's senior citizens better:

- Kingston Transit
- Kingston Access Bus
- Kingston Taxi Companies
- Non-Government Organizations in Kingston
- City of Kingston Municipal Government
- Local Businesses
- Government of Ontario

While some recommended actions might be more challenging and therefore require more time and financial investment to implement, there are several initiatives that can be taken immediately to improve mobility for seniors without delay.

### **Conclusions: Investing in Improving Mobility for Seniors is Worthwhile**

As the first of the baby-boomer population prepares for retirement as early as the year 2011, nearly all communities across the country will be experiencing a surge in the number of senior citizens – and their impact will be substantial. But senior citizens are important members of our communities and providing them with a high quality of life will have many positive returns:

1. *Seniors are still active contributors to the economy.*

In 2006, 19% of seniors in Kingston were earning wages, 7% were self-employed.

2. *Seniors contribute to the richness of Canadian life*

Over two-thirds of seniors are providing some kind of unpaid assistance to their spouses, children, grandchildren, friends and neighbours. Statistics Canada found that 44% of seniors spend an average of 2.2 hours a day as volunteers.

3. *Healthy aging will help to minimize health care costs*

In 2003, providing health care for seniors accounted for more than 44% of all provincial government health spending. These costs can be controlled and reduced when older people remain healthy enough to live in the community in a variety of supportive living arrangements.

While improving transportation and mobility in communities is not a new problem, the fast approaching retirement of the baby-boomer generation makes the issue more significant because the number of seniors in our communities is growing exponentially. Unfortunately, many seniors are facing difficulty maintaining good mobility in our current car-dominated communities. It is also important to recognize that, especially for seniors, mobility is not just about access to places they need to go to, but also about a sense of choice and independence, as well as social inclusion – this is what contributes to a high quality of life. There is much that can be done by planners, policy-makers, and service-providers to improve this. Lastly, from a community planning perspective, their efforts will not only benefit the senior citizen population, but could also have wider implications for people of all ages who are experiencing difficulties with transportation and mobility.