

# Social Participation of Adults Aging with Long-Term Physical Disabilities: The Role of Transportation and Urban vs. Rural Living

Adults aging with long-term physical disabilities (AAwPD) may face health conditions and symptoms related to both disability (e.g., fatigue, pain) and aging (e.g., osteoporosis, diabetes). They are also more likely than people without disabilities to face social exclusion and disadvantage, as well as the impact of barriers in the environment like poor sidewalk conditions, lack of ramps or curb cuts, and transportation that is not available or accessible. All of these factors can affect a person's participation in important life activities, including social roles and activities like visiting with friends and family. To learn more about how these factors—neighborhood/environment factors like transportation and urban or rural residence; personal factors like symptoms and health; and social factors like education and employment—relate to social participation, we looked at data from the first year of our 3-year study on health and participation in AAwPD.

## About the Study

All participants were 45-65 years old and had a self-reported physical disability for at least 5 years. They filled out a survey on their health and participation once a year for 3 years. For this study, we looked at Year 1 data on:

- Personal factors
  - Demographics (e.g., age, race, gender)
  - Health and symptoms (e.g., physical health, pain, fatigue, physical function)
- Social resources and factors
  - Annual income, marital status, education
- Neighborhood/environment factors
  - Area of residence (urban or rural)
  - Environmental barriers to participation
  - Usual form of transportation
- Social participation
  - Ability to participate in social roles and activities
  - Satisfaction with participation in social roles and activities

## What We Found

In Year 1, 331 people from Missouri took the survey. Almost half said they were unsatisfied with their social participation, and the majority said that availability of transportation was a barrier.

Personal health and demographic factors like pain, depression, race, and physical function had the strongest associations with social participation. These were followed by neighborhood/environment factors, including transportation, and then social resources and factors.

Taking a closer look at transportation, we found that two-thirds of study participants used private transportation like driving themselves, getting rides from family or friends, and using taxis or ridesharing services (e.g., Uber, Lyft). The other third used public transportation methods like the MetroLink, buses, and paratransit. Participants who used public transportation had significantly higher social participation

ratings than those who used private transportation, with paratransit users reporting the highest participation.

The setting where the person lived was also associated with their social participation; those who lived in urban areas had higher participation. However, this association was not as strong as the association between transportation and participation.

### Implications

Pain, physical function, demographic factors, and transportation barriers significantly affect social participation for people aging with physical disability. Policy and environmental changes, including improving access to and availability of transportation, can promote social participation for AAwPD. The findings of this study may help community organizations, policymakers, and urban planners help promote social participation for AAwPD.

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