



This publication was downloaded from the National Aging and Disability Transportation Center's website (www.nadtc.org). It was developed by Easter Seals Project ACTION, a technical assistance center operated by Easter Seals, Inc. through a cooperative agreement with the U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Transit Administration.

National Aging and Disability Transportation Center
contact@nadtc.org
866-983-3222



Rural Transportation Topic Guide Series

INTRODUCTION

Introduction to the Series

The National Rural Transit Assistance Program (National RTAP), Easter Seals Project ACTION (ESPA) and the National Center on Senior Transportation (NCST), as providers of technical assistance and education for transportation and human services organizations that serve people with disabilities and seniors in rural areas, have collaborated to *Rural Transportation Topic Guide Series*. The series includes individual topic guides on community assessments, financing transportation options, and volunteer driver programs.

The topic guide series provides practical information to help rural communities address their transportation needs, especially those related to transportation access for people with disabilities and older adults. This Introduction sets the stage for the series by providing economic, social, and transportation-related statistics for rural America.

Rural areas are defined as areas with populations less than 50,000. In rural communities residents are more likely to face unique challenges when it comes to accessing public transportation than their urban counterparts due to rural characteristics such as terrain, capacity, and funding.

Fast Facts on Rural America

The following fast facts about **Population, Diversity, Geography, Transit, and the Rural Economy** describe the current rural landscape in the United States.

Population

Rural residents make up approximately 27 percent of the United States population.¹

Diversity

36 million people with disabilities in the U.S. are living in non-institutionalized environments. 11 million people with disabilities live in rural areas.¹ Older adults comprise more than two-thirds of rural area residents.²

Geography

Geographic factors that affect transportation availability and service in rural America include:

- long distances between population centers, employment opportunities, retail, and medical facilities—especially true for tribal communities and Indian reservations located in areas defined as frontier (i.e., based on travel time, distance to services, and persons per square mile)³,
- limited cellular phone reception,
- challenging terrain, such as steep mountains and grades, and
- desert weather conditions and patterns.

Transportation in Rural Areas

According to a 2011 Rural Policy Research Institute (RUPRI) policy brief *Rethinking Federal Investments in Rural Transportation: Rural Considerations Regarding Reauthorization of the Surface Transportation*



Act, 38 percent of rural residents live in areas with no public transportation.⁴ Public transportation, as defined by the Federal Highway Administration report from which the statistic is drawn, includes buses, commuter rail, demand response services (usually vans), light rail, and vanpools.

According to the RUPRI brief, there are currently approximately 1,200 public transportation systems operating in half of rural counties. In addition, there are 3,700 specialized rural transportation systems serving older adults, people with disabilities and human service agency programs.

Transportation changes that have affected rural mobility include the long-lasting ripple effects of deregulation of the transportation industry in the 1970s and 1980s. Intercity bus services have declined from 11,000 locations in the 1980s to 5,000 locations in 2010. When Amtrak was created in 1971, half of the passenger routes in rural areas were left without rail service. Rural transportation facilities (roads, vehicles) have been predominantly funded by county and local governments. A loss of revenue leaves county governments struggling to identify funding sources to preserve the transportation network—both roads and transit services.

High rates of retirement in rural areas lead to an increased demand for transit to access health and personal needs. Higher rates of poor health may be associated with demand for—and possible lack of—accessible health care transportation. For those with disabilities, access to employment and education may be limited by transportation options. And rural youth below age 18 have need of school transportation.

The Rural Economy

Rural employers and agencies are often more limited in resources and technical capacities than their urban area counterparts. In addition, rural communities have limited funding to support new programs. As rural employment and healthcare has become more centralized, rural residents are traveling farther to reach jobs and medical appointments. About 91 percent of the American population residing in rural areas now earns salaried incomes, often in urban areas, and farming operations have increasingly become commercialized. American farmers grow or produce 10 percent of the country's wheat, 20 percent of its meat, and 50 percent of its corn. The efficiency and level of output of these farms is due in large part to the commercialization of the farming industry, and not single family operations.⁵

In both urban and rural areas, residents with disabilities have lower employment rates than workers who do not have disabilities. National statistics for both urban and rural areas indicate that people with disabilities have a 39 percent employment rate compared to 80 percent for those without disabilities.⁶

A 2011 RUPRI study, *Transportation, Economic Development, and Quality of Life in Rural America*, identified demands on county-level transportation policies and priorities, including:

- growing populations,
- agriculture dependence (which increases movement of heavy machinery and truck traffic from farms),
- tourism (which places seasonal demand on auto access and transit use),
- lower incomes or higher rates for poverty, and
- dispersed populations relying on automobile travel for long-distance

drives to employment, healthcare, and shopping.⁷

In the current rural landscape, local and regional agencies are seeking innovative ways to provide affordable, accessible transportation. With rural economic and demographic factors in mind, *The Rural Transportation Topic Guide Series* offers ideas for conducting community transportation needs assessments, finding funding to implement rural transportation services, and getting a new transportation program off the ground.

References

1. Rural Assistance Center. U.S. Census Bureau. 2000 Census. Retrieved 8-11-11 from http://www.raonline.org/info_guides/disabilities/disabilitiesfaq.php#howmany
2. The Brookings Institution, Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy. (2003). *The Mobility Needs of Older Americans: Implications for Transportation Reauthorization*. Rosenbloom, S.
3. National Center on Senior Transportation and National Rural Transit Assistance Program. (2011). *Crossing Great Divides: A Guide to Elder Mobility Resources and Solutions in Indian Country*.
4. Rural Policy Research Institute. (2011). *Rethinking Federal Investments in Rural Transportation: Rural Considerations Regarding Reauthorization of the Surface Transportation Act*. Columbia, Mo.: Dabson, B., Johnson, T. & Fluharty, C.
5. Rural Development Perspectives. Rural Development Research Report No. Vol. 12 No. 1. (1997). *The Value of Rural Life in American Culture*. Howarth, W.
6. U.S. Census Bureau. (2008). American Community Survey.
7. Rural Policy Research Institute. (2011). *Transportation, Economic Development, and Quality of Life in Rural America*. Columbia, MO: Johnson, T., Dabson, B., Miller, K., Figueroa Armijos, M., Kelrick, P. & Gautam, S.

Approximately 38 percent of rural residents live in areas with no public transportation.



About the Technical Assistance Centers



Advocacy. Action. Answers on Aging.



Easter Seals Project ACTION

Easter Seals Project ACTION is a federally funded technical assistance center serving people with disabilities and the transportation and service provider communities. Since 1988, ESPA has achieved its mission through the provision of training, technical assistance, applied research, outreach and communication.

ESPA

1425 K Street N.W.
Suite 200
Washington, D.C. 2005
(800) 659-6428
(202) 347-7385 (TTY)
www.projectaction.org

National Center on Senior Transportation

NCST is a federally funded training and technical assistance center administered by Easter Seals, Inc. in partnership with the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging. The NCST mission is to increase transportation options for older adults and enhance their ability to live more independently in their communities.

NCST

1425 K Street N.W.
Suite 200
Washington, D.C. 20005
(866) 528-6278
(202) 347-7385 (TTY)
www.seniortransportation.net

National Rural Transit Assistance Program

National RTAP operates under a cooperative agreement between the Federal Transit Administration and the Neponset Valley Transportation Management Association. The overarching mission is to address the needs of rural, small urban and tribal transit operators across the nation.

National RTAP

5 Wheeling Avenue
Woburn, Mass. 01801
(888) 589-6821
www.nationalrtap.org



This document is disseminated in the interest of information exchange. Easter Seals, n4a, the Neponset Valley Transportation Management Association, and the U.S. DOT, FTA do not assume liability for its content or use.