

## An Emerging Challenge

Transportation as a form of mobility is critical to an older adult. It allows a person to stay connected to family and friends, access health-care services, and maintain independence. Because of the fear of isolation and lack of transportation options, many older adults continue to drive well into their senior years and some drive longer than is safe which can put them or others at risk.

Santa Clara County will see an unprecedented growth in the number of senior drivers over the next two decades which will create challenges and opportunities for transportation specialists to reevaluate how we design roadways and transportation options to meet the needs of the aging population and the community as a whole.

## The Changing Demographics of Local Drivers

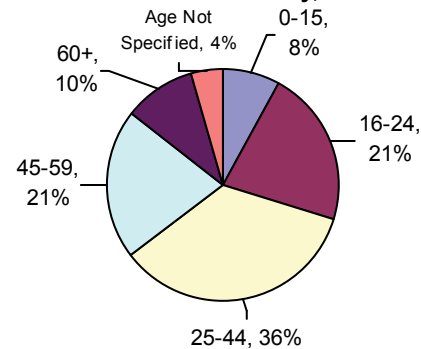
Santa Clara County in 2007<sup>1</sup> had 134,333 licensed drivers age 65 and over. This age group consists of 11.2% of the total number of Santa Clara County licensed drivers. As the Baby Boomer generation ages the number of older drivers will substantially increase. Predictions indicate that from years 2000 to 2020 the number of licensed drivers in the Bay Area age 65 and over will increase 84% and drivers 85 and over will grow 108%.<sup>2</sup>

## The Facts on Senior Drivers

Media coverage of select high profile incidents has portrayed senior drivers as a danger to the community. In fact, as a group, seniors are relatively safe drivers. Persons age 65 and older wear safety belts more often than any other age group except infants and preschool children and are less likely to drink and drive than other adults.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, most older drivers recognize and avoid situations that may put them at risk. They drive less after dark, avoid rush hour traffic or bad weather, and avoid difficult intersections. Although the effects of aging can impact driving skills, age alone does not determine one's driving ability.

Figure 1

**Motor Vehicle Crash Injuries by Age in Santa Clara County, 2006**



Total number of injuries = 9,978

Source: California Highway Patrol, Statewide Integrated Traffic Records System, 2006

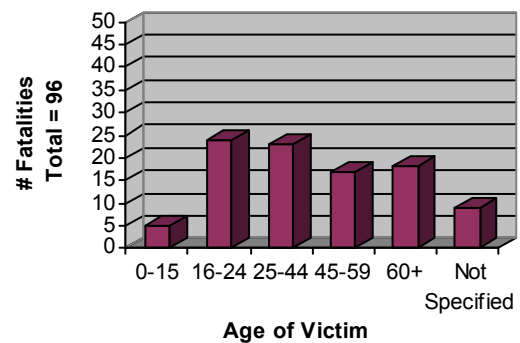
## Crash Data

On average, older drivers cause fewer crashes per year than younger drivers, but because older drivers are 17 times more fragile than 25-64 year olds, they are more likely to be seriously injured or killed by the crash.<sup>4</sup>

In Santa Clara County, drivers age 60 and over comprise 10% of all motor vehicle crash-related injuries (see Figure 1), but they constitute 18% of the 96 crash related deaths (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

**Motor Vehicle Crash-Related Deaths in Santa Clara County, 2006**



Source: California Highway Patrol, Statewide Integrated Traffic Records System, 2006

<sup>1</sup> California Department of Motor Vehicles, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Metropolitan Transportation Commission, Mobility Matters Presentation by Commissioner Adrienne Tissier, May 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System Survey Data, 2002.

<sup>4</sup> How to Help an Older Driver, AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety, 2006.

## Reducing Crash Risk for Older Drivers

There are several strategies that can reduce crash risk for older drivers while promoting safety and independence. Strategies for senior drivers include:

- Participating in driver refresher courses in the classroom and/or behind the wheel
- Maintaining fitness and good nutrition
- Fitting the car to the driver to improve safety
- Being aware of how medications and alcohol can affect driving
- Self regulate driving times or locations (e.g., do not drive on freeways or at night)
- Improving engineering designs, such as bigger street signs with larger lettering.
- Increasing accessibility to alternative transportation such as supplemental transit programs.

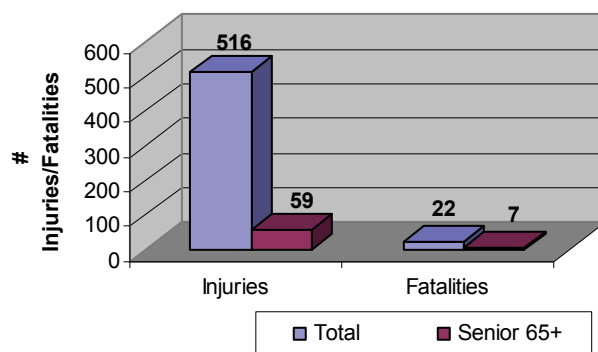
## Senior Pedestrian Safety

Walking offers many benefits such as weight loss, reduced blood pressure, and increased stamina.<sup>5</sup> Many seniors choose to walk after they stop driving but there are risks associated with walking.

In Santa Clara County, pedestrians age 65 and over comprise 11% of all pedestrian injuries; however, they constitute a disproportionate 32% of the 22 pedestrian deaths (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

**2007 Pedestrian Injuries and Fatalities in Santa Clara County**



Source: California Highway Patrol, Statewide Integrated Traffic Records System, 2007

## Risks Increase with Age

Compared to younger pedestrians, older pedestrians are more likely to have decreased visual acuity and visual field, decreased flexibility, and decreased reaction time.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, older adults are frailer and are more likely to be injured or killed in a collision. However, there are several strategies that can increase pedestrian safety for older adults.

## Increasing Older Adult Pedestrian Safety

### What Seniors Can Do:

- Maintain fitness and good nutrition
- Being aware of how medications can affect walking
- Avoid walking in the dark or in bad weather
- Create walking clubs to encourage walking, health, and fitness

### What Communities Can Do:

- Conduct walking assessments in areas with high senior pedestrian volume to identify hazards and possible improvements.
- Incorporate design guidelines to accommodate older pedestrians in road and intersection design.<sup>7</sup> For example, extended pedestrian countdown signals
- Enforce traffic laws that affect pedestrian safety

Fortunately, any improvements made to increase older pedestrian safety will also benefit pedestrians of all ages.

<sup>5</sup> Krause, Kenneth. Street Smarts for Senior Pedestrians, 2009.

<sup>6</sup> Center for Injury Prevention and Practice, San Diego State University, California's Aging Drivers Fact Sheet, July 2004.

<sup>7</sup> Metropolitan Transportation Commission, San Francisco Bay Area Older Adults Transportation Study, December 2002.