Introduction

This is a summary of the report, “Traffic Safety Among Older Adults: Recommendations from California”. The report was developed by the California Task Force on Older Adults and Traffic Safety and contains recommendations on what California can do to reduce traffic-related injuries and fatalities among older adults. The full report can be obtained by calling the Center for Injury Prevention Policy and Practice at 619-594-3691 or downloaded on www.eldersafety.org.

An Aging California

Fueled by the aging of the baby boomers, California is facing a rapid growth in its population of older adults. (See Figure 1) From 1990 to 2020, California’s senior population is expected to more than double in size, with those 85 years and older representing the fastest growing segment of California’s population. This means a large increase in the number of older drivers and older adults using California’s roadways.

Are Older Drivers Dangerous?

Older drivers are not a serious threat to the safety of others on the road. They are not involved in as many crashes as younger drivers, and the crashes they are in rarely kill other people. (See Figure 2) When in a crash, it is older adults themselves that are very likely to be killed or seriously injured. In fact, the risk of dying increases dramatically with age. Since they drive less than younger persons, however, older drivers have a high rate of serious crashes per mile driven.
How Big is the Problem?

From 1997-2000, Californians age 60 and over experienced an average of 27,803 injuries and 754 fatalities per year as drivers, passengers in motor vehicles, pedestrians, and cyclists. As people age, they are less able to recover from injuries. This means that as you get older, you are more likely to die from injuries you sustain in a traffic crash. In fact, in crashes involving restrained motor vehicle occupants, people age 75 and older were over 3 times more likely to die from their injuries than persons age 16-20. (See Figure 3) Finally, pedestrians age 65 and older have the highest pedestrians death rates of any age group in California. (See Figure 4)

What’s the Cost?

Traffic-related injuries and deaths to older Californians cost an average of over $226 million dollars per year (in 1996 dollars). Once injured in a crash, older adults are more likely than younger persons to: be admitted to the hospital; have a longer hospital stay; and require more outpatient visits for follow-up care.

Task Force Recommendations

1. Institutionalize a statewide system for the prevention of traffic-related injuries among older adults.

A statewide, comprehensive and coordinated approach is the most effective way to prevent traffic-related injuries to older adults. Current efforts to address older adult traffic safety are fragmented and uncoordinated. California policy makers need to designate and support a state agency that can spearhead and coordinate this important effort. The Task Force recommended the California Highway Patrol as the appropriate state agency to spearhead the improvement of traffic safety among older Californians and the implementation of the recommendations contained in this report.

2. Institutionalize effective and equitable driver assessment and licensing practices within the California Department of Motor Vehicles.

Older drivers visit the California Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) for evaluation when they are seeking to renew their license or when referred for a reexamination by law enforcement, health care providers or family members. California law prohibits DMV testing on

Figure 3: Fatality to Injury Ratios by Age, Restrained Vehicle Occupants, California 1999

Figure 4: Traffic-Related Pedestrian Fatality Rates, California 1991-2000
the basis of age alone. In addition, since no two older drivers are functionally alike, even those of the same age, it would not be practical for the DMV to make licensing decisions on the basis of age. An improved system of testing needs to be implemented that is based on assessing driving-relevant functional abilities and incorporates opportunities for corrective action and rehabilitation into the process. The DMV is currently evaluating such a system: the 3-Tier Driver Assessment System. Implementation of the validated components of this system will greatly improve the way DMV currently evaluates driver license renewal applicants and drivers referred for a reexamination.

3. Facilitate older adult risk assessment and reduction practices.

One way to prevent motor vehicle-related injuries is to change individual behavior. Two ways that agencies and organizations could effectively facilitate the identification and reduction of traffic safety risks are by developing and/or promoting simple tools that older adults can use to self-assess their driving and walking risk, and by conducting a social marketing campaign. However, it is also important to develop a statewide system of non-regulatory, community-based driver assessment and rehabilitation services. This system would be vital as a referral system for the health care community, in helping older adults self-regulate their driving, and in minimizing the effects of functional impairments on safe mobility (this system would not be for official licensing purposes).

4. Improve the ability of health care and service providers to assess traffic safety risk and minimize the impact of health impairments on safe mobility.

Health care and service providers are well positioned to identify, and help minimize or correct impairments that may interfere with safety in the traffic environment. These professionals, who routinely interface with older adults, are in a position to screen for traffic safety risk and provide guidance and referral options to older adults and/or their support systems. California must work closely with professional associations to develop tools and training programs for these groups to aid in their health risk identification, assessment, and counseling of older adults.

5. Establish roadway infrastructure and land use practices that promote safety.

As people age, many find that navigating complex road environments and making rapid, complex decisions becomes increasingly difficult. Roadway design can provide a passive way to compensate for declines in physical, sensory and cognitive abilities that can come with advancing age. Rather than removing older adults from the road, infrastructure changes and improvements can facilitate the safety of older adults as both drivers and pedestrians.

The California Department of Transportation should collaborate with local transportation agencies to adopt and implement the 2001 Federal Highway Administration “Guidelines and Recommendations for Older Drivers and Pedestrians”. Included in these guidelines are recommendations for features such as delineation of curbs and medians, protected left turns at signalized intersections, longer timing for pedestrian control-signals, and roadway signs that are easier to read. These roadway design and traffic device changes should also make the roads safer for road users of all ages.
Changes to things such as road signs can be done as part of routine maintenance or while modifying highway signs to conform to federal standards.

**6. Promote safer motor vehicle design.**

The increasing number of older adults using California’s roadways creates a greater need for vehicles that better protect older adults from injury and are easier for older adults to drive safely. “Older” crash test dummies should be developed and used to evaluate a vehicles’ effectiveness in preventing injuries to older persons. This is particularly important given that older adults are very vulnerable to injury. Establishing acceptable crash test criteria for the protection of older occupants should also make vehicles safer for people of all ages. Adding crash avoidance systems and even simple changes, such as wider mirrors, night vision windshields and user-friendly displays, can help make vehicles easier for older adults to drive.

California state legislators and advocacy groups should work with the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, insurers, and motor vehicle manufacturers to promote motor vehicle designs and safety standards that improve the safety of older adults as occupants of motor vehicles and as pedestrians.

**7. Expand the existing research and knowledge base about older adult traffic safety.**

Research is needed both to improve the knowledge and understanding of the traffic safety and mobility issues that are unique to older adults, and to gain a comprehensive picture of crashes, injuries and fatalities among older Californians. Surveys and studies that provide a clearer understanding of the traffic safety experiences and needs of diverse groups of older adults will help better target resources for prevention programs.

References:


---

San Diego State University  
Graduate School of Public Health  
6505 Alvarado Road, Ste. 208  
San Diego, CA 92120  
619-594-3691  
www.eldersafety.org

Funding for this program was provided by a grant from the California Office of Traffic Safety.