



Farewell to the keys: profile, security, and the moment of transition

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Not too soon, not too late

Dear reader:

At Fundación MAPFRE, we care about people and their well-being and strive to prevent injuries in all areas of life, particularly traffic and mobility. On this occasion, we address a moment we can define, with zero chances of being inaccurate, as “vital”: the point at which one must stop driving their vehicle due to old age, which also entails the search for alternatives and, in any case, more or less significant changes in the way of life of our older population.

The first title of this work, “Farewell to the keys,” already provided an intriguing opportunity for internal reflection. To some people, it sounded excessively negative because of its connection to the final stages of our existence. In reality, we should perceive it as a transition that most people will have to face, since the natural aging process means we will have to give up certain activities gradually. These include daily work, certain high-intensity sports, or driving a vehicle – at least in most cases.

We have learned from this study that the social debate on this issue is situated at different levels in different countries. In Spain, for example, accidents involving older car drivers spark significant social and media concerns, often raising the question of “when should one stop driving” or if the driving age should be limited. Our position at Fundación MAPFRE (and we believe most people concerned agree with this) is that the answer should be: “not too soon, not too late.” People’s mobility should not be unnecessarily restricted, nor should they continue driving if this poses a threat to drivers themselves or those with whom they share the road.

This research, carried out in collaboration with CEBRAP, represents a first approach to the social reality of older drivers in Brazil and reveals that the debate is at another level. Perhaps it might even reflect that the picture is remarkably different in Brazil. When we asked older people who have participated in this study and regularly drive if they have considered how they will face this moment of transition, their reaction was striking. The majority responded with discomfort as if it were an irrelevant debate, very distant (which is probably true in many cases) or almost negative (for suggesting the finitude of life), and even offensive (due to the connection they made between having to stop driving and something adverse, such as the definitive loss of “social value” or freedom). This circumstance is not specific to the Brazilian reality since it occurs in practically any context or place, to a certain extent: in Spain, for example, for many older people, there is only one situation worse than having to stop driving, namely, having to move to a nursing home.

It is also very significant that the press does not address the debate mentioned above. It merely describes a restricted number of accidents involving older people: often, pedestrians and victims of aggressive road behavior on the part of other younger drivers. Only on one occasion does the newspaper mention the lack of skills of the older driver who caused the accident.

This contrasts with the focus groups and interviews with people who no longer drive but did so regularly until relatively recently. Most report having adapted to their new reality, walking more on foot (which is associated with better health), and having learned to use public transport

and ride-hailing apps (references to Uber are particularly abundant in this group). Several of these people also indicate cost savings by switching to public transportation, ride-hailing apps, or (evidently) walking. On the other hand, several study participants manifested feelings of sadness and loss of autonomy or independence, along with the abandonment of some social activities, especially at night, which is highly relevant and must be taken into consideration.

Another clear aspect is that driving is essential for many older people, but also their families. Some male and female drivers indicate that driving keeps them mentally and physically active and offers them a sense of freedom and fulfillment, as they continue to feel helpful to their families for many errands (shopping, accompanying relatives in their vehicles, etc.). Family members also highly value the support older people offer to the family circle and manifest that, once older motorists stop driving, they often have to spend more time taking them to doctors' appointments, shopping, etc.

This sociological analysis also highlights a recurring word: fear. Several participants, especially women, refer to the dangers (robbery, theft, among others) of traveling on foot or by public transport in certain places or at certain times. Their private vehicles or ride-hailing apps are mentioned as the best alternatives. However, driving one's vehicle does not eliminate the feeling of fear: in this case, very violent traffic is cited, with a large number of drivers driving too fast, too aggressively, or even with clearly antisocial or criminal behavior (several references are made specifically to the fear of motorcyclists or "motoqueiros"). In particular, stopping at red lights is mentioned as critical due to the high risk of urban violence.

In the same way that free public transport for older people in São Paulo is regarded as one of the key positive measures in the city's mobility (which was mentioned by most older participants in the study who have already stopped driving), road and urban violence should become another priority action focus. Speaking of public policies or initiatives, this study's connection with the WHO "Age-friendly cities" initiative is exceptionally relevant; it constitutes an enterprise we will undoubtedly seek to foster.

Indirectly, this work by Fundación MAPFRE and CEBRAP points to another very relevant aspect today, namely, the digital divide. Using apps for mobility or navigation services does not present a challenge for some older people, while for others, it does raise certain suspicions (several participants indicate, for example, that they "do not trust" drivers because they can take them to insecure areas of the city).

From a statistical point of view, the study reminds us that the number and percentage of older drivers (over 60 years of age) have been increasing in recent years, currently (2020) representing roughly 18% of all drivers, most of which are men. On the other hand, older people represent about 15% of all casualties in Brazil due to traffic accidents between 2015 and 2020: an average of 4,977 older people lost, about 14 a day. Of the total number of people killed, 43% were pedestrians; 32% were drivers; 24% were passengers, and 1% were getting on or off some type of vehicle. Older drivers are no more dangerous than younger drivers. On the contrary, they are involved in three times fewer traffic occurrences than younger drivers, according to a study carried out in the Federal District with data from 2011 until 2017. They respect the rules more, drive at a lower speed and cause fewer accidents than the rest of the age groups. They

are obviously the most experienced drivers behind the wheel and tend to compensate on their own for the gradual loss of physical and mental abilities. Nonetheless, that does not mean traffic authorities should not improve driving license access and renewal processes, as science and societies are advancing. In this line, it is interesting to notice how drivers' relatives mention visual problems as reasons to stop driving more often than older drivers themselves.

Finally – and returning to the beginning of this prologue – it is impossible to establish an age limit over which a driver becomes harmful just because they have reached that stage. A 70-year-old person can be a better driver than a 60- or 50-year-old, no question about it. But, at the same time, one must recognize how difficult it is to identify situations related to mild cognitive impairment or very incipient dementia that can pose a risk when driving. This is where debate and research should focus, as well as in understanding that, as we get older, sooner or later, there will most likely come a time when we must look for alternatives to our own vehicles. We hope that this work will help in this regard.

Jesús Monclús
Director of Prevention and Road Safety, Fundación MAPFRE

Executive Summary

This research seeks to understand how the Brazilian older population (i. e., those aged 60 years or older – defined as “elderly people” by Federal Law 10,741 of October 2003) decides to stop or not to stop driving. We first lay out a bibliographic review on the topic. Subsequently, we employ a mixed methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative techniques. In the quantitative stage, we developed original data linkings between official databases and other research previously carried out by Cebrap. In the qualitative phase, we carried out a media analysis regarding traffic incidents with the older population in widely circulated newspapers. In addition, we held focus groups with older women and men who stopped driving vehicles as well as with people from the same public who continued to do so. Finally, we conducted in-depth interviews with these people’s relatives. We list here the main findings of this research and present its conclusions concisely.

Elderly driving vehicles

- Transportation is one of WHO’s eight topic areas in the Global Age-Friendly Cities Project launched in 2007. This is due to the fact that transport is a key element in older people’s environments, enabling active aging processes (WHO, 2007).
- The WHO considers the car a crucial means of transport for the older population. That is why it recommends that cities fulfill some conditions to allow these individuals to continue driving (WHO, 2022).
- Studies show that older people who drive and have access to a car go out more often than those who do not own this asset (CEBRAP, 2021; BARRETO, 2012).
- The car is the preferred mode of transport for the older population and is used more by older men than by older women (BARBOSA, 2014).
- Driving is an activity that conveys autonomy to older people (BARRETO, 2012).
- On the other hand, this population undergoes significant sensory and cognitive losses that can influence their driving skills. In the range of 70 to 74 years old, roughly 14% of older adults already sustain substantial visual impairments. Visual losses affect 32% of people aged 85 and over (MATAS, 2014).
- The sight tests comprised in the renewal of the National Driver’s License are not sufficient to assess the complexity of visual stimuli required to drive a car, according to the analyzed study (LENARDT, 2017).
- Muscle mass decrease constitutes one of the changes resulting from aging processes, which is related to higher traffic occurrences (MORLEY, 2014).
- A study in the Federal District (PITTA, 2021) shows that older people are less involved in traffic incidents, probably because they put themselves in less risky situations than younger people, favoring daytime trips and shorter distances.
- In Brazil, a small proportion of older people drive with some degree of cognitive impairment, since driving is a complex task requiring considerable mental capacity (LENARDT, 2018).
- Studies with tests among older drivers identify more driving errors the higher the age. The main errors are related to a lack of attention (WILLSTRAND, 2017).
- Despite this, studies show that older people develop compensatory behaviors that can optimize decision-making processes regarding traffic, according to self-perceived cognitive or physical deteriorations (ERNST, 2019).
- Long-term driving experience by older drivers is a beneficial factor in executive functions, minimizing the risk of occurrences in drivers without cognitive decline (ERNST, 2019).

How older people move around in Brazil – Impacts of the pandemic

- The data refer to a representative sample for the population of 5 Brazilian capitals: São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Recife, Salvador, and Porto Alegre.
- Older people started to leave the house less during the pandemic. Most left their homes at most three times a week.
- Before the pandemic, work was the most common reason for this population to leave their homes. With the pandemic, the most common behavior at the time of the research was not leaving the house to work. 73% of older people in Salvador did not leave their homes for this reason.
- Older people also started to go out much less to visit relatives and friends or for leisure activities.
- During the pandemic, older people's preferred modes of transport and those that most maintained their use frequency were walking (78%) and the car (60%).
- Both insecurity and fear of being robbed while traveling are remarkably common among older people, especially in Recife and Salvador.

Profile of older people licensed to drive vehicles in Brazil

- The ratio of older people among those eligible to drive cars is on the rise in Brazil, from 11% in 2013 to 18% in 2021.
- Women are a minority among those licensed to drive (44%) when one considers all ages. This ratio drops as age increases: From 61 to 70 years old, women represent 37% of all drivers, only 29% in the 71-80 age group, and 23% in the 81-or-older group.
- The ratio of licensed older people is higher in the South (18%) and Southeast (19%) of Brazil when compared to the North (10%), Northeast (14%), and Midwest (14%).

Older people and traffic occurrences in Brazil between 2015 and 2020

- Older people accounted for roughly 15% of the casualties related to traffic accidents in Brazil between 2015 and 2020, with an annual average of 4,977 people. This number dropped slightly in 2020, probably due to the pandemic.
- Half (51%) of the older people who died in Brazilian traffic in the period were between 60 and 69 years old, 33% were between 70 and 79 years old, and 16% were 80 or older.
- Women are a minority (16%) among the elderly who died in traffic in the period. However, the older the age, the greater the women's ratio. They represent 18% of casualties among older people aged 60 to 69, 26% in the 70 to 79 range, and 30% in the 80 or older range.
- Half of the older people (52%) who died in traffic in the period were identified as white. Almost the entire other half were identified as black (4%) or brown (43%), totaling 47% among people of color.
- 43% of the older people killed in traffic were pedestrians. A third (32%) were driving a vehicle, a quarter (24%) were passengers, and 1% died getting on or off a vehicle.
- While collision-free occurrences represent less than 10% among non-elderly people, this ratio reaches 15% among older people. These occurrences result from situations in which the individual may have had some sudden illness, but also from falls due to inadequate infrastructure or signaling.
- Among older people who died while driving a car, the vast majority were white (76%) males (92%) between 60 and 69 years old (60%).

- We identified merely ten pieces of news concerning older people and traffic incidents in the newspapers analyzed (*Folha de São Paulo* and *O Globo*). These comprised eleven claims in total.
- Most of the older people involved in traffic incidents that appeared in the newspaper were pedestrians. In four of the eleven occurrences, the older person was the driver of a vehicle.
- In only one of the four occurrences involving older drivers, the older adult caused the accident due to their faults.
- Among the news we analyzed, the incident ensued due to the imprudence of other drivers who did not respect the speed limit or signaling rules.

The experience of older people who gave up their keys: Qualitative stage of the research

- For women, fear related to public or road safety issues is the main reason to stop driving. Among men, the economic concern prevails, as they consider car maintenance too expensive.
- Older people did not mention health issues as the main reason to stop driving. However, family members of men who stopped driving cited sight impairment as a primary factor.
- For some older people, giving up driving entailed feelings of sadness as well as loss of independence and autonomy.
- Among older people who stopped driving, the modes of transport used instead are walking, carpooling, ride-hailing apps, and public transportation. The most significant benefit they mentioned for switching modes of transport is financial.
- Some older people who stopped driving gave up some activities at specific times and places, such as evening events or short trips.

The experience of older people who continue to drive: Qualitative stage of the research

- Older people who drive often play an essential role in their families precisely because they do so. They drive people around, assisting family members.
- Most older people who drive do not use cell phone apps to learn their routes. They prefer to rely on their own experience or ask other people.
- All older people who drive mention external causes (such as other traffic partakers) as the source of their difficulties.
- Older women who drive feel insecure behind the wheel, either out of fear of urban violence or reckless drivers. On the other hand, older men who drive tend to be violent in traffic and advocate increasing the speed limit for cars.
- Women who drive support severer punishment for those who do not respect traffic rules.
- Older men and women who continue to drive mention freedom among the benefits of driving. Women emphasize more issues related to the cognitive benefits of maintaining this activity.
- Older people who drive do not contemplate stopping so soon and believe they will be able to tell when to do so as the moment arrives.
- Both older people who drive and those who have stopped driving mention motorcyclists as a threat.

Concluding remarks

The ratio of older people licensed to drive vehicles has been rising in Brazil since 2017. Currently, 18% of licensed drivers are 61 years of age or older. Most are men. The literature dedicated to older populations and car driving focuses on the importance of this mode of transport for this group and the autonomy and independence linked to this activity by older adults. In addition, there are many studies on the physical and cognitive losses that can interfere with the activity of driving during the aging process. The literature barely addresses other topics this study found linked to social issues.

The older person's role in the family emerged in connection with their driving activity. For those who drive, helping family members is an important day-to-day activity. For those who do not drive, in turn, the relationship with family and friends also appears to be important as access to travel and commute. This eventually encompasses family members who adjust their activities to drive older relatives around.

The data and the older people who participated in the focus groups indicate that urban and traffic violence are particularly pressing issues. Both those who drive and those who stopped driving are afraid of violence in the city. Women who drive that participated in the focus group are afraid of reckless drivers in traffic and of being robbed, especially at traffic lights. Therefore, they advocate greater punishment for those who do not respect traffic rules. Men who drive, in turn, are violent in traffic, representing the threat of which women are afraid.

The analysis of data and news concerning older people involved in traffic incidents shows that most older victims were pedestrians at the time of the accident and that these usually happen due to the imprudence of other drivers. This supports the idea put forward in the reports and research connected to the Global Age-Friendly Cities Project, namely, that cities need safer and more accessible traffic for the older population, as they do not represent the most significant traffic concern. On the contrary, traffic needs to be friendlier for this audience. In doing so, it will also be friendly to everyone, including women, children, and people with disabilities.

The car symbolizes autonomy and freedom for older people who drive. When these demographics contemplate stopping driving, this interruption suggests the decline of an active life, which also implies the very finitude of life. Among those who stopped driving, freedom was also an important factor while driving. Having to rely on others in certain commuting situations became a grievance to them. Additionally, giving up driving represented substantial financial savings, occasionally the main reason for discontinuing the activity.

The research shows, therefore, how the urban mobility of older people and their decision to stop driving or not comprise different aspects of their social lives. The subjects that proved to be fundamental for older people when contemplating whether to interrupt the activity of driving cars ranged from gender issues to concerns related to the pandemic, violence, and family arrangements.

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