

A LATER-LIFE TRAVEL BOOM? UNDERSTANDING CHANGE IN LEISURE MOBILITY

Key points

- Many of the older Britons we interviewed currently feel entitled to significant leisure travel after retirement and see this as something they should ideally undertake.
- Varied circumstances and an awareness of personal responsibility make them unlikely to blow their pensions on post retirement holidays.
- Though it is not always physically easy to travel greater distances, older people, like any group, are responding to changing conventions of leisure travel.
- Those hoping to reduce energy demand in this area might challenge the idea that travel is something that older people ought to do.

Introduction

Some sources of evidence suggest that the conditions exist for an imminent later-life leisure travel boom¹. Societies are generally ageing, current older generations appear to have significant disposable incomes and extra free time, and those now entering retirement are thought to be particularly keen on consumption. Through repeat interviews with 60 older people divided into three age cohorts (50-55, 60-69 and 75+), we sought to understand how leisure travel changes as people move towards and through retirement. The aim was to see what this would reveal about whether the problematic energy and carbon emission implications of a later-life travel boom would likely be realised.

Questions

- How have different cohorts of older Britons come to organise their leisure travel?
- How do they imagine themselves to be travelling for leisure in the future?
- What are the most important influences on their current and future travel?

¹ See: Hitchings, R., Venn, S., Day, R (2016) *Assumptions about later-life travel and their implications: pushing people around?* Ageing and Society DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X16000738>



Findings

Leisure travel, as a concept, was valued by our respondents who saw it as important for older people generally and for themselves. This often related to an internalisation of ideas about the value of 'active ageing' in staving off later life decline. 'Travel' was, according to this logic, something that older people should ideally do. Furthermore, for the two younger cohorts 'retirement', was frequently connected to fewer responsibilities and more free time, and was often, as a consequence, linked to the prospect of significant travel.

I do think travel is good for you. So I would recommend it for anybody when they get older.

(Female, oldest cohort, higher socio-economic class)

Yet this vision of significant, enjoyable and socially valued travel was not always realised. For those who had been living in retirement for some time, personal circumstances regarding variable pension incomes, family expectations and caring responsibilities loomed large. Retirement, for them, had rarely ushered in a discrete new phase of enjoyable travel. The idea of a discernible change in leisure travel after retirement was more present for those currently approaching that point, and who seemed much more determined to live out this vision.

Respondents were also well aware of the toll that long distance travel can take on older bodies. Though admiring those who persisted with long haul holidays in later life, physical ageing could also justify returning to nearer destinations or replacing significant travel with other recreational activities.

Though changing societal expectations for travel made some feel they should be taking part in travel too, the physical challenges of ageing often featured in their planning. For example, some intended to do their longer distance travel 'whilst they can' in early retirement, in the expectation that travel would soon become more arduous and therefore less attractive.

While I can travel a long distance, I need to be doing these long distance ones. Europe, more of Europe can wait. (Female, middle cohort, higher socio-economic class)

Significance

Examining how older Britons currently handle the relationship between retirement and travel allows us to learn more about whether leisure travel might become a significant growth area of energy consumption and carbon emissions.

Predictions of an impending boom in senior leisure travel rest on assumptions about how practices change and what retirement is about. These have often been focused on free time, a quest for personal fulfilment and the current economic circumstances of some older people. But there is much more at stake in understanding change in this sector.

Our respondents were evidently adapting to changing societal norms of travel and ideas about the value of certain activities in later life. They were also subject to other influences that currently acted as a brake on their travel. These included valued family responsibilities, a thoughtful approach to future incomes and a careful consideration of physical ageing, both in terms of their current experience and how it might feature later on in their lives. These aspects will likely be just as important in the playing out of expectations of an energy intensive later-life leisure travel boom.

Implications

The demands of global carbon emission reduction imply that long distance travel will increasingly be a focus of attention. Our findings suggest that asking older people to change their travel for these reasons will have limited success. Instead they point to other strategies for reducing the energy consumption linked to the leisure travel of older people, without denying them the valued social benefits that are currently associated with this activity.

- **Understand how social conventions are changing.** Focussing on identified social groups that are expected to be especially profligate is a common strategy when defining targets for energy reduction intervention. But we need to ask more searching questions about how societal expectations for travel come about. Our interviewees were responding to broader changes in the forms of travel that are taken to be socially appropriate and attractive. From this point of view, though a focus on the responsibilities of particular groups may appear more straightforward, it doesn't really take us to the root of the issue.
- **Challenge the link between travel and continued capability.** Having said that, there may be a particular relationship between older people and conventions of leisure travel. If travel is what people are expected to do with their free time, older people in particular may feel they should live up to this expectation because doing so demonstrates a continued ability to take part in society. Future initiatives targeted at this age group might therefore encourage other, less energy demanding, means of demonstrating continued later-life activity.
- **Promote leisure activities closer to home.** One response would be to champion already valued activities that do not happen so far afield. Doing so would be to fight against the idea that distance leisure travel is one of the most socially desirable uses of retirement time, and to acknowledge that this has only recently become a possibility for many older people. This could be encouraged by emphasising the value and enjoyment of local activities that can also often be less physically arduous.



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Further reading: <http://www.demand.ac.uk/situations-sites-sectors/#olderpeople>

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