

# **Women caregivers are stressed; transportation infrastructure could help**

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Caregiving travel—such as taking a child to school or a parent to the doctor—can be associated with stress and decreased happiness among women but not men, according to a University of Michigan study.

The imbalance, the researchers say, is a reflection of how society—and transportation services and infrastructure—has historically valued travel for jobs more than travel for "mobility of care."

The study, [published](#) in *Transportation Research Part D: Transport and Environment*, offers recommendations for public transportation planners to help close the gap. It is believed to be the first quantitative analysis of how caregiving travel affects well-being, and it builds on recent research showing that women tend to do this type of domestic labor more often than men.

The researchers analyzed data from the U.S. Department of Labor's 2021 American Time Use Survey to explore the relationships between self-reported [daily activities](#) and levels of happiness, stress and sense of meaning.

They found that regardless of women's employment status or that of a [male partner](#), women were roughly 60% more likely than men to engage in caregiving travel on a typical weekday. The probability for women was 23%, compared with 14% for men. And during those trips, only women reported increases in stress and decreases in their happiness and sense of meaning, compared with levels of those feelings during leisure activities.

Time pressure could be the culprit, the researchers say, given that

women were often juggling family and job responsibilities. Specifically, the findings showed that in the sample, [full-time](#) employed men who performed caregiving travel spent more time on work than equivalently employed women. They were able to do this by spending less time on caregiving itself, as well as on household shopping and maintenance.

"Men who work full time have a lower probability of providing caregiving travel on weekdays compared to men who are not employed. Further, men whose female partners work tend to have a higher probability of performing caregiving travel compared with unpartnered men. For women, neither of these trends apply," said Atiyya Shaw, U-M assistant professor of civil and environmental engineering and senior author of the study.

The study notes that the analysis does not distinguish between same- and different-sex partners and cannot assess the relationship between [caregiving](#) travel and well-being across the full spectrum of gender identities and family types.

The researchers underscore the role transportation planning has played in causing this disparity, and also how improvements to it can reduce it.

"Transportation engineers are increasingly recognizing how culture, [social norms](#) and values influenced the design of our transportation systems, and in turn, people's lives," said Amy Fong, U-M doctoral student of civil and [environmental engineering](#) and first author of the study.

U.S. transportation systems were primarily designed for daily commutes, reflecting the greater societal value placed on income-generating activities over unpaid domestic labor.

"These findings are a great example of how much work there is left to do

when it comes to understanding the impacts of our existing transportation infrastructure systems on all of our lives," Shaw said.

Shaw and Fong's recommendations include:

- Local government entities should ensure that alternative walking, biking and transit options for care recipients who typically rely on being escorted are safe and accessible.
- The [federal government](#) can coordinate funding across agencies to improve [transportation services](#) for people with disabilities, older adults and low-income individuals.
- State departments of transportation can prioritize projects facilitating independent travel for [older adults](#) and people with disabilities.
- Local governments and school districts can partner with programs that promote the independent mobility of children, like [Safe Routes to School](#).
- Researchers conducting travel surveys should distinguish mobility of care trips from leisure, shopping and social trips in order to understand the specific impact of mobility of care on quality of life.

**More information:** Amy Z. Fong et al, Well-being implications of mobility of care: Gender differences among U.S. adults, *Transportation Research Part D: Transport and Environment* (2024). [DOI: 10.1016/j.trd.2024.104109](#)

Provided by University of Michigan

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