Traditionally, people in the empty-nest stage of life (which most people reach in their 50s) travel more for leisure than either older or younger people. The 2009 National Household Travel Survey shows that people in their 50s and 60s are taking more weekend getaways in place of one big annual vacation. The shift to more frequent but shorter leisure trips means that more people will be driving to their destinations, which in turn may affect safety due to increased exposure to traffic. People aged 70 and older reported both more trips and more miles. Accessibility planning and implementation for air, rail, and bus terminals, stations, and vehicles will increasingly make a difference in the ability of older people to travel and their comfort while doing so.

In the United States, tens of millions of baby boomers are moving through the empty-nest stage, which typically occurs between the ages of 50 and 60. Among the many changes this stage of life brings is a change in travel patterns. People in their 50s generally commute less, make fewer trips to ferry children, and travel more for leisure.

An analysis of the National Household Travel data series shows that overall, people aged 50 and older reported more leisure trips of all lengths in 2009 than in 2001. On a per capita basis, the number of leisure trips per person aged 50 and older (including those who travel and those who don’t) rose from 6.3 trips per year to 10.2 per year between 2001 and 2009 (“All 50+” in figure 1).

This pattern, however, was not uniform across all older life stages. People in their 50s took nearly twice as many leisure trips in 2009 as in 2001, the greatest increase in the number of leisure trips of all the age groups analyzed.

Defining Leisure Travel

Leisure travel can include trips of many purposes, from spending a lazy afternoon at the library to flying to Bali for a month on the beach. For this analysis we used data from the most recent National Household Travel Survey (NHTS), which includes detailed purposes (more than 25 categories) of trips made by more than 300,000 respondents.

The type of travel analyzed in this Fact Sheet belonged to a single category: “rest and relaxation/vacation,” which is termed leisure travel. The term “vacation” is reserved for a subset of leisure trips to places 75 miles or more from the respondent’s home.

The 2009 NHTS was collected from April 2008 through May 2009. This period included the beginning of the recession, as well as a spike in gas prices for a few months in 2008—both of which may affect the incidence and type of leisure travel.
People in their 60s reported the next greatest increase in the number of leisure trips per person, while people aged 70 and older reported a less significant increase.

During this same period, there was a decline in total leisure miles among the population aged 50+ (see figure 2). This decline spread across many more trips means that, compared with 2001, leisure trips in 2009 averaged about half the distance per trip. Overall, people aged 50 and older had a 62 percent increase in the number of trips and a 40 percent decrease in the miles per trip for leisure travel.

There are dramatic differences by age cohort. Every age group over 50 reported a greater number of trips. However, people in their 50s and 60s reduced their miles per trip, whereas those aged 70 and older increased their miles per trip.

To evaluate whether there was a real decline in traditional long-distance travel for leisure, trips of 75 miles or more from home were analyzed separately (the NHTS data define long-distance travel as 75 miles or more from home).

Analysis of longer vacation trips reveals both fewer long-distance trips and fewer miles for leisure travel among people in their 50s—that is, they reported fewer long-distance vacation trips and also chose places closer to home in 2009. In contrast, people aged 70 and older took about the same number of vacation trips of 75 miles or longer but traveled to places farther from home.

A separate survey conducted for AARP Services, Inc., in November 2010 supports these trends. In this survey, those aged 50 to 59 were more likely to report that they will travel less because of the economic recession than those aged 70 to 75 (43 percent vs. 33 percent). A quarter of all respondents aged 45 to 75 reported that they would be more likely to travel to destinations closer to home.3

People in households with reported incomes of $80,000 or more a year changed their behavior the most (see table 1). People 50+ in higher income households more than doubled the number of reported trips for leisure—from 9 to 20 per year. At the same time, people in higher income households

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Figure 1

Annual (per capita) Leisure Trips by Age Group, All Trip Lengths, 2001–2009

Source: National Household Travel Survey data series.
Reflects all trip lengths and all means of travel, including by car, train, bus, and plane.

Leisure Travel of the 50+
traveled 38 percent fewer miles in 2009 than they did in 2001—553 miles compared with 761 miles for all leisure trips combined, or an average of less than 30 miles per trip compared with nearly 85 miles per trip in 2001.

The sharp decline in miles of leisure travel may indicate a shift from higher priced air to lower priced auto travel for leisure trips, in addition to choosing destinations closer to home. The AARP Services, Inc., survey found that 62 percent of respondents would use their personal vehicle for their upcoming long-distance leisure trip.4

Gasoline prices are volatile and were higher when the NHTS was fielded in 2008 and 2009 than in 2001.5 Over the past decade, ticket prices for air travel (not including fees and other related costs) have dropped, perhaps as a result of the increased ease of comparison shopping on the Internet. However, on a per-mile basis, while domestic air travel has become much cheaper (not including fees) and gas costs have risen, auto travel is still about half the cost of air travel, at 15 cents per mile versus 28 cents per mile for domestic air (see figure 3).6

### Table 1

Per Capita Annual Leisure Trips and Miles by Household Income
(all people aged 50 and older)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Trips/Person</th>
<th>Miles/Person</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than $40K</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$40–80K</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$80K and over</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: National Household Travel Survey data series.
Conclusions and Implications

This analysis indicates that people in their 50s took more leisure trips to places closer to home in search of rest and relaxation in 2009 than in 2001. People in their 50s historically travel for leisure because it provides a break from work, and those who are in the empty-nest stage of life have more leisure time than when they were raising children. Even with higher gas prices and a bleak economy, this research shows that the desire for leisure travel is high—people in their 50s take about 10 leisure trips per year. However, they seem to have replaced longer distance vacation trips with more, but shorter, trips.

People in their 50s are a large age cohort, and their trends in choice of leisure affect many critical sectors of the U.S. economy, including airlines, hotels, cruise ships, restaurants, and historic, natural, and entertainment destinations. The travel industry has an opportunity to focus on the growing segment of the 50+ who are taking trips closer to home.

While leisure travel (as measured by the total miles traveled) declined for people in their 50s and 60s, it increased in the same period for people aged 70 and older. If leisure travel continues to increase for the oldest age groups, accessibility planning and implementation for air, rail, and bus terminals, stations, and vehicles will increasingly make a difference in the ability of older people to travel and their comfort while doing so.

Shorter leisure trips may indicate a shift from air travel to vehicle travel, which in turn may affect safety, increasing travelers’ exposure to traffic risk.

The NHTS allows us to observe travel for a series of snapshots in time. It is too early to say whether the changes observed in leisure travel between 2001 and 2009 mark the beginning of a longer term trend toward leisure travel closer to home that will continue even after the economy recovers. Future waves of the NHTS with a special component to measure long-distance travel will reveal how the trends in leisure travel develop.

Figure 3
Estimated Cost per Mile of Travel, Domestic Air Ticket Prices and Gas Prices for Private Vehicle
(adjusted to 2011 dollars)

Source: See notes 5 and 6.
Endnotes


2 Nancy McGuckin and Jana Lynott, Work-Related Travel in an Era of Extended Employment, (AARP Public Policy Institute, forthcoming).

3 Unpublished survey conducted for AARP Services, Inc., by Ipsos in November 2010. Respondents were recruited from national panels who met the following criteria: age 45–75, at least a high school diploma, annual income >$40,000, and likely to travel.

4 Ibid.

5 The average adjusted (2011 dollars) cost of gas in 2001 was $1.98 a gallon; currently and during the NHTS data collection period, the pump price was $3.48 in 2008 and $3.68 in July 2011, the last data available.