



Ambulatory and Cognition Challenges among Older Pennsylvanians

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17.8%

of Pennsylvania residents are 65 Plus



10.0%

report cognitive challenges



24%

report ambulatory challenges



Philadelphia County

reports greatest proportion of individuals with ambulatory challenges



Introduction

According to American Community Survey 5-year estimates (2015-2019), 17.8% of residents in The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania are 65 years of age or older, an increase from 16.0% (2010-2014). By 2030, over 1 in 5 Pennsylvanian's are expected to be 65 or older and our older adult dependency ratio is expected to increase to 42.4 (PaSDC 2005). Higher dependency ratios reflect a smaller proportion of the population in prime working ages and engaged in the labor market, and a larger proportion of the population likely to be economically dependent on public sources of support.

As they age, individuals are at increased risk for mobility and cognition challenges. As the elderly population grows in Pennsylvania, we can expect increases in the proportion of the population with cognitive and physical difficulties. Understanding the prevalence rates of these types of disabilities among the elderly population has important implications for the health and well-being of Pennsylvania and can assist governmental and non-governmental organization with planning and policy development designed to address the needs of the differently abled older population.

This brief explores differences in ambulatory and cognition challenges for Pennsylvanians by age group and sex.

Data

Using data from the 2015-2019 American Community Survey (ACS), we produce estimates of the population, aged 65 and older, who reported cognitive and physical difficulties by sex (302,724 Pennsylvanians). We examine three age groups: 65-74 years, 75-84 years, or 85 and older.

Cognitive Difficulties

Cognitive difficulties are defined as challenges in learning, remembering, concentrating, or making decisions due to a physical, mental, or emotional condition.

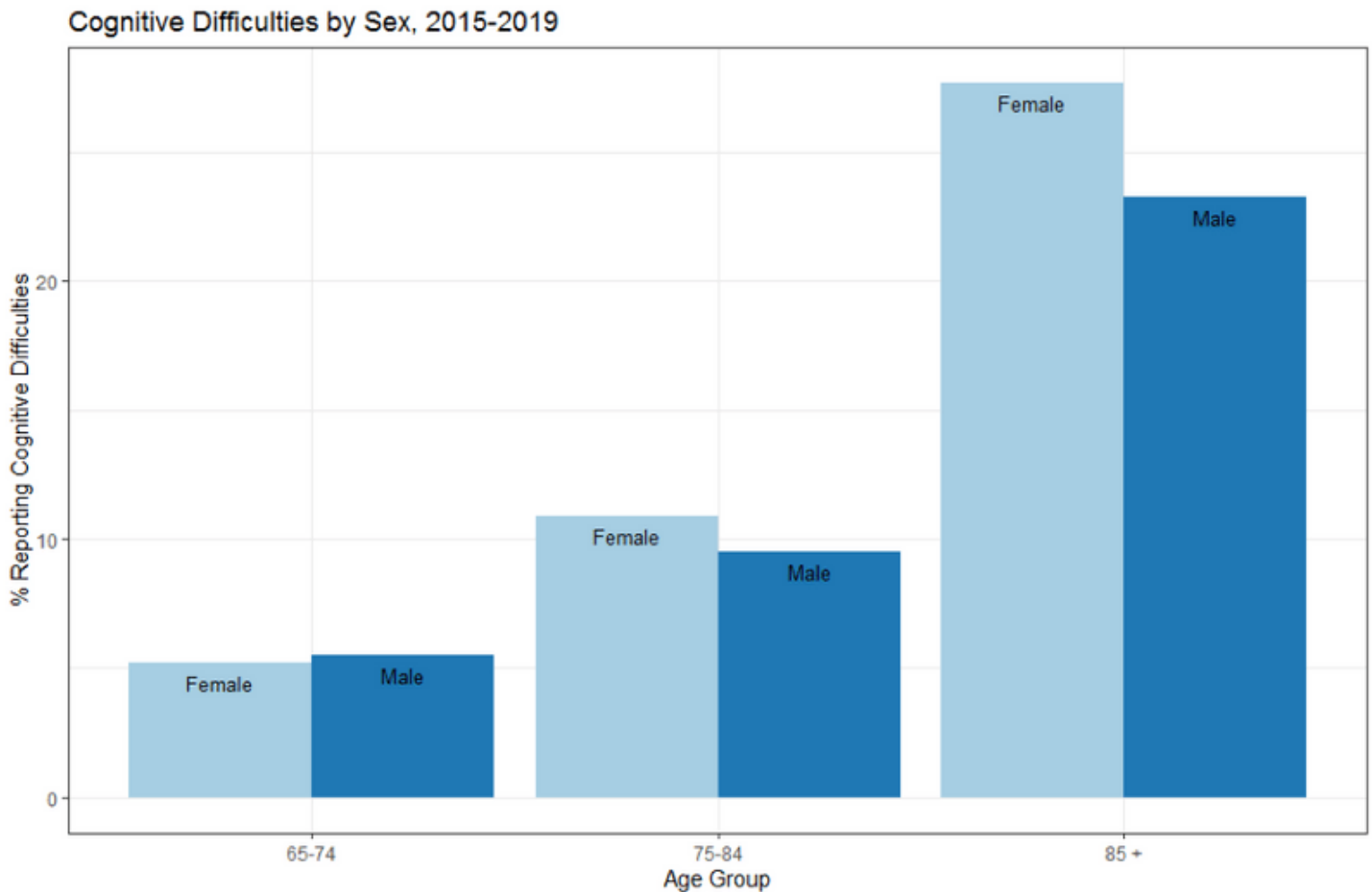


Figure 1. Cognitive Difficulty Rates by Sex, Pennsylvania, 2015-2019

During this period, approximately 10% of older adults in Pennsylvania reported cognitive difficulties. The prevalence rate of cognitive difficulties for women was slightly higher at 11.3%, while the rate for men was 8.9%. The prevalence of cognitive difficulties differs by major age groups (Figure 1). For example, approximately 5% of adults 65 to 74 years reported cognitive difficulties with no substantial gap between males and females. For those aged 75 to 84, the percent of the population reporting cognitive difficulties ranged between 9.5% for males and 10.9% for females.

Unsurprisingly, the highest levels of cognitive challenges are reported among the oldest individuals (85 plus), with females having higher rates than males (27.7% and 23.2%, respectively).

Ambulatory Difficulties

Physical or ambulatory challenges refer to limitations with one or more activities such as walking, climbing stairs, reaching, lifting, and carrying things.

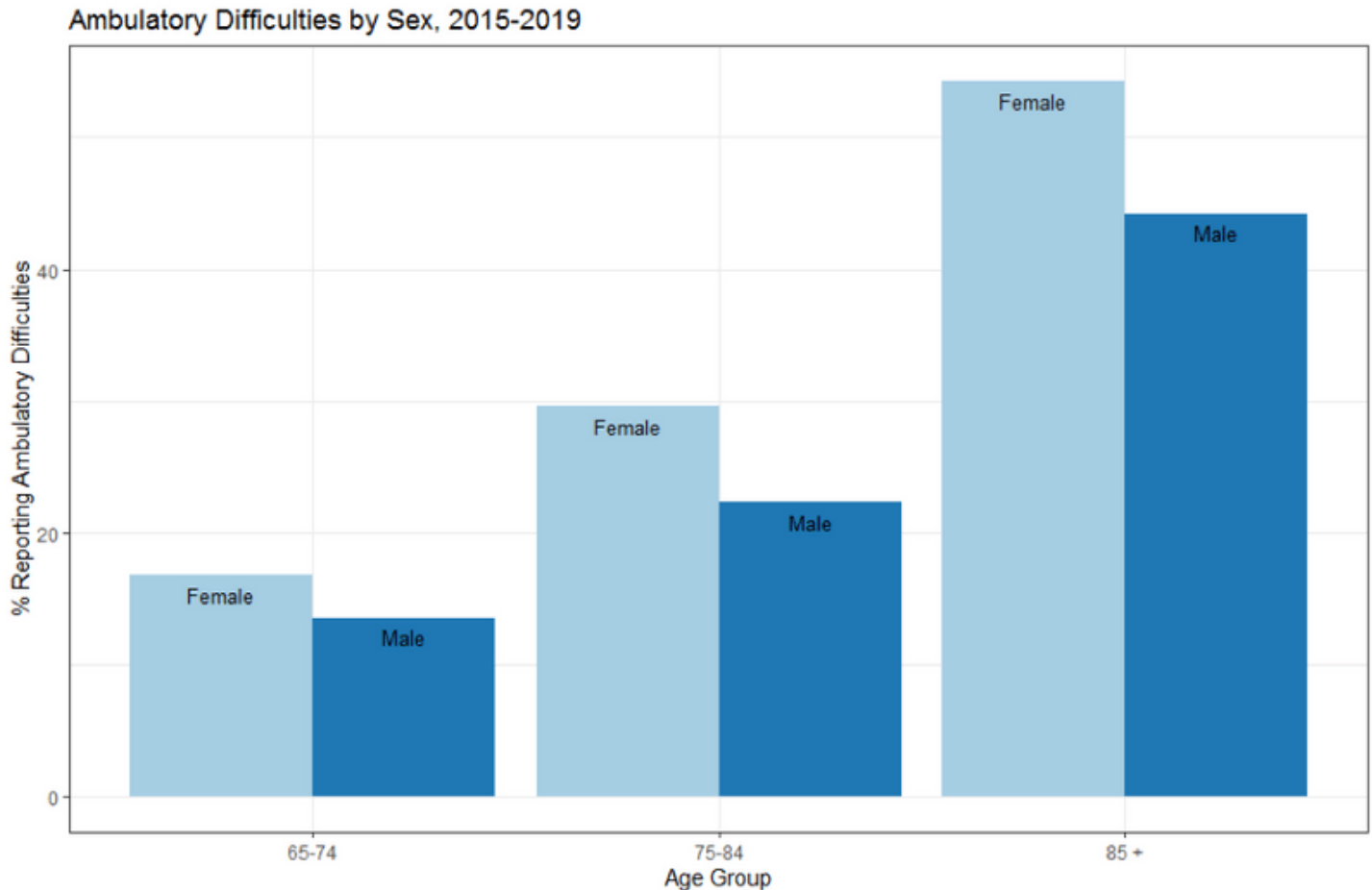


Figure 2. Ambulatory Difficulty Rates by Sex, Pennsylvania, 2015-2019

Of interest is also the percent of older adults who are limited in their mobility. Overall, approximately 24.2% of the older adult population (age 65 and older) in Pennsylvania reported an ambulatory difficulty. As expected, ambulatory difficulty rates increase with increases in age. The overall analysis shows a female-male gap in ambulatory difficulties, with women reporting higher rates than men (27.6% and 19.7, respectively). Ambulatory difficulty rates among Pennsylvanians 65 to 74 remained lower than 20%. Men reported a lower rate than women (16.8% and 13.5%, respectively). Roughly 29.6% of women, 75 to 84, report an ambulatory difficulty, while the rate for men in the same age group was 22.3%. Among the oldest adults (85 plus), just over half (54.3%) of women report ambulatory difficulties, compared to 44.2% of men.

Policy Implications

An estimated 994,823 males and 1,285,897 females over the age of 65 live in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Approximately, 250,000 older Pennsylvanians report a cognitive difficulty and 585,000 an ambulatory difficulty. Analyses conducted by the Pennsylvania Population Network suggest that these rates have remained relatively stable over the past 12 years. Even if these rates remain stable in the future, the projected growth of the older adult population will result in an increase in the number of differently abled individuals in these age groups. Prevalence rates for both cognitive and ambulatory difficulties increase with age and the greatest increase in age groups by 2030 is expected to be among Pennsylvanians 85 and older. Thus, we should anticipate increased need among this population and develop strategies to address demand for services, care, and support.

Research conducted at the Pennsylvania Population Network indicates that older adults in non-metropolitan counties reported higher rates of ambulatory difficulties than those in metropolitan ones for the majority of years on the majority of the years 2007-2019. Analyses of rates by county revealed that older adults living in Philadelphia county report the highest rates of both ambulatory and cognitive difficulties (31.42% and 12.86% respectively). This finding underscores the need to address ambulatory difficulties within urban spaces as a significant number of older adults may face structural challenges in their communities.

The Pennsylvania Department of Aging (2020), published the State Plan on Aging 2020-2024 and summarized the results from a stakeholder survey which indicated the six factors considered critical to age-friendly communities: 1) affordable medications, 2) access to in-home care and services, 3-4) available/affordable housing and transportation, 5) Dementia-capable/dementia-friendly communities, 6) access to mental health services. Access to in-home care and services was cited as the most critical, followed closely by accessible housing and affordable medications. Our results have direct relevance to the policies to be enacted to ensure access to such critical services across the commonwealth. Given the prevalence rates of cognitive and ambulatory difficulties found in our report, we can expect an increased demand for services in the coming years.

Acknowledgements

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About the Network:
The Pennsylvania Population Network (PPN) is a visible program of demographic and health research, application, and outreach focusing on population characteristics and change in Pennsylvania, the United States and the world.

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