

Staying Connected to the World, Even After You Put Down the Wheel Older Persons' Right to Mobility

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When the state advises older adults to put down the wheel, what exactly do they lose?

In South Korea, the road fatality rate among drivers aged 65 and older stands at 15.1 per 100,000, 2.2 times the OECD average of 6.8 (as of 2021). Of the 2,551 traffic fatalities recorded in 2023, nearly half, 1,240 people, or 48.6 per cent, were aged 65 or older. The numbers make clear that older drivers have become a public health issue the country can no longer postpone addressing. In response, the government runs a voluntary licence surrender program. Since 2025, surrendering drivers aged 70 and older receive 300,000 won (Korean Won, KRW) if they can document that they actually drove, such as by proving vehicle ownership, or 100,000 won for simply turning in their licence (Ministry of the Interior and Safety, 2025).

Yet the actual surrender rate was only 2.2 per cent as of 2024 (Lee, 2025). In a nationwide survey of 1,000 adults aged 18 and older conducted by Hankook Research, 58 per cent of older drivers who said they would not give up their licence cited the loss of freedom of movement as their main reason. Sixty-two per cent worried that surrendering their licence would infringe on their right to mobility, and 66 per cent feared it would diminish their quality of life. This gap, between agreeing with the policy's intent and being unable to act on it, is where the current state of older adults' mobility rights in Korea actually lies.

Why They Won't Let Go of the Wheel: Mobility Is Life Itself

Not surrendering a license is not simply attachment to a car. At a senior welfare center in Seoul, not a single member of the group had surrendered theirs. One woman in her early eighties, who had driven herself there that day despite the sweltering heat, put it plainly: "It was too hot out today, so I drove. I'm not giving it up."

Still, she was clear-eyed about her own limits.

"If my mind starts to go, of course I'll give it up. And I hear you'll still need a license

even for self-driving cars, so I plan to hold onto mine."

Others at the centre echoed the same sentiment: they would like to give up their licences, but where they live, public transit is so poor that a car is a necessity, so they haven't been able to (Yoo, 2024). Behind this gap, between supporting the policy and being unable to comply with it, lies a more fundamental question about what mobility actually means.

Oh (2025) frames older adults' right to mobility as operating on three levels: first, a negative right not to be obstructed in moving about freely; second, an equal right not to be discriminated against on the basis of age while doing so; and third, an affirmative right to demand that the state and local governments actually build the conditions that make mobility possible. This third level is the crux of the matter. Without the institutional conditions in place, even the first two levels of rights cannot function in practice.

Restricted mobility is not a mere inconvenience; it produces compounding health and social consequences. Research by Kang (2022) and Kim and Shin (2023) show that older adults with limited transportation access visit medical services less often, see their social networks shrink, and report lower life satisfaction. When getting to a hospital is difficult, chronic conditions go unmanaged; when seeing other people becomes difficult, depression and isolation deepen. This is why mobility is not a transportation issue alone, but a compound problem that intersects with health and welfare policy.

The issue is closely tied to ageing in place (AIP), the ability to grow old within the community one has always lived in. Where mobility access is not guaranteed, older adults are effectively cut off from medical care, markets, and social participation, an outcome that produces the very paradox it was meant to avoid: entry into a care facility becomes the only remaining option. The Independence principle set out in the UN Principles for Older Persons (1991) holds that older people should be able to live independently in their communities through access to appropriate transportation. The right to mobility is the baseline condition for a dignified old age, and the starting point of older adults' basic rights themselves.

Kim (2023) pushes the analysis further, framing the issue through the lens of ageism. Treating older drivers as a uniformly high-risk group on the basis of age alone, and stripping them of their means of mobility as a result, is what Kim terms an "exclusionary" approach, one that disregards individual ability and need and amounts to age-based discrimination. As an alternative, Kim proposes a "corrective" approach: meet the underlying need for mobility while addressing safety through institutional means. The argument that expanding alternative transportation should take priority over compelling licence surrender is, at its core, a call to redesign transportation policy around inclusion rather than exclusion.

In South Korea, institutional efforts to close this mobility gap have been underway since 2012, beginning with demand-responsive (DRT) taxi services and, since then, extending to buses as well.

A Response to the Gap: Demand-Responsive Transport (DRT)

In November 2012, Asan introduced a demand-responsive taxi service called Majung Taxi ("Pick-Up Taxi"), charging a fare of just 100 won. This small experiment, connecting rural older adults stranded in public transit blind spots to hospitals and traditional markets, became the prototype for the "100-won taxi" model that would go on to spread nationwide (Lee, 2019), and as of 1 August 2019, has operated under the renamed service "Arirang Taxi." With no fixed route or timetable, a single phone call brings a car right to the village, bringing a mobility gap that the existing transit system had effectively written off into the realm of formal policy for the first time.

DRT services: Majung Taxi, the 100-won taxi, and Majung Bus



그림 1. Majung Taxi launch ceremony in Cheonan (top left); Arirang Taxi, formerly the 100-won taxi, in Miryang (top right); Huimang Taxi in Chuncheon (bottom right); Majung Bus in Hongseong County, South Chungcheong Province (bottom left)
Source: Cheonan City Hall (2015, top left); Newsis (2023, top right); Nongmin Shinmun (2014, bottom right); Hongseong County (2016, bottom left)

The following year, in 2013, Seochon County launched Huimang Taxi ("Hope Taxi") and enacted a corresponding ordinance. Under this model, a driver assigned to each village operated three to four days a week, centred around local market days, and the service came to do more than simply provide transportation, functioning as a check-in on

residents' well-being and a form of informal care (Go, 2014).

The 100-won taxi model then spread rapidly across the country. As of 2024, more than 33 local governments operate similar services, which have since evolved into a range of forms under the broader policy category of demand-responsive transport, or DRT.¹ Suwon's Ttok Bus represents this trend's evolution into an urban form. According to the Suwon Research Institute (2024), over the one-year period from June 2023 to June 2024, the service logged 329,501 cumulative calls, achieved a user satisfaction rate of 89.9 per cent, and cut operating costs by 58.4 per cent compared with a conventional village bus.

Gyeonggi Province's Ttok Bus and Ttok-ta call platform



Figure 2. Promotional material for the Ttok-ta app (left); exterior and interior of a Ttok Bus vehicle (right)
Source: Gyeonggi Province News Portal (2023)

The evidence that DRT actually works does not stop there. A study evaluating DRT services in small and mid-sized regional cities found that monthly demand rose steadily after introduction, with passenger wait times stabilising mostly within 5 to 15 minutes (Roh, 2026). Notably, satisfaction was high despite the service's disproportionately older user base, thanks to low fares and improved accessibility, empirical confirmation that DRT delivers real gains in mobility for transport-vulnerable populations, older adults included. The common worry that app-based services create barriers for older users turns out not to hold where DRT is carefully designed for accessibility, with phone reservations offered alongside the app, for instance. Done well, it works for older riders just fine.

There is still room to refine the model, of course. The same study notes that demand dips during certain periods, such as vacation season, and that a high share of solo, non-shared rides points to a need for smarter vehicle deployment (Roh, 2026). Accessibility design also remains uneven from place to place. Services like Suwon's Ttok

Bus, which only support booking through a smartphone app, still present a real barrier to older adults unfamiliar with digital devices. Kim (2024) identifies this as a core limitation and recommends running a phone-based call centre alongside the app. By contrast, Roh's (2026) research found that in areas running phone reservations in parallel, satisfaction among older riders was actually higher. In the end, that points to a matter of design, not a limitation of the technology itself. DRT is no longer an ad hoc experiment; it is becoming a policy instrument whose effects can be measured and improved.

That track record, though, was built under a particular set of conditions, transit-poor areas without existing service. In big cities with subway lines, an entirely different and far older system, not DRT, has protected older adults' right to mobility from the start.

Older Persons in the City: The Light and Shadow of Free Subway Rides

South Korea's free subway program for older adults is a transit welfare policy with few real parallels anywhere in the world, drawing international attention for its welfare effects and fiscal sustainability (Jun et al., 2018). Since its introduction in 1984, anyone aged 65 or older has been able to ride the subway free of charge, with no restrictions on income or frequency of use. Full, unconditional free rides based on age alone are rare elsewhere. Most countries attach at least one additional condition, whether income, time of day, or some combination, and international practice tends to fall into two broad models (Kim, 2026a; Kook, 2025).

The first is the off-peak model. London's Freedom Pass, available from age 66, guarantees free travel but restricts use during the weekday morning peak, from 4:30 to 9:00 a.m. It's a way of easing rush-hour crowding while still substantively protecting the right to mobility.

The second is the means-tested model. Tokyo's Silver Pass, for residents 70 and older, is a paid pass with an income-based annual fee ranging from 1,000 to 20,510 yen. Paris offers a 50 per cent discount on transit passes to unemployed residents 62 and older, while New York applies a 50 per cent discount for those 65 and older, reserving fully free rides for narrower groups such as recipients of basic income support. Osaka and various Australian systems combine off-peak benefits with income- or usage-based conditions into a hybrid structure.

But the program has become a source of serious fiscal strain and generational tension.

As of 2025, the six major metropolitan rail operators nationwide reported combined losses from free rides of roughly 777.9 billion won, of which 448.8 billion won was borne by Seoul Metro alone. In the Hankook Research survey, 68 per cent of respondents said the program should be kept but reformed, while 14 per cent called for scrapping it outright. Even among older adults, a growing share now agree that reform is needed. It is a striking paradox: a program built on the idea of solidarity across generations has become a flashpoint for conflict between them.

Expert debate over the direction of reform is also taking clearer shape. Central government cost-sharing should be the starting point for reform, the argument goes, alongside a mismatch between who benefits and who pays: a large share of the older riders using the Seoul metropolitan subway system actually live not in Seoul but in surrounding Gyeonggi Province (Kook, 2025).



Choi Jin-seok, Senior Research Fellow, Korea Transport Institute: "If the law were amended so that the central government covers up to half the cost, in order to improve mobility for older adults, metropolitan areas could receive partial support for free-ride costs, while regions without subway service could design mobility welfare policies suited to their own conditions. [...] We also need to determine what share of ridership comes from residents of each area, and have those local governments jointly shoulder part of the cost of free rides."



Discussion has also intensified around raising the eligibility age. The city of Daegu plans to raise the free-ride age by one year annually through 2028, eventually reaching 70, while Daejeon already offers free public transit only from age 70. Suk Jae-eun, a professor of social welfare at Hallym University, argues that adjusting the age threshold alone will not be enough.



Suk Jae-eun, Professor of Social Welfare, Hallym University: "Raising the threshold gradually from 65 to 70 should be acceptable to most people. But we also need to consider measures like other countries have adopted, such as off-peak discounts or discount rates that vary by income and age."



Taken together, these proposals are pushing the debate away from a simple binary of keeping the program fully free or scrapping it altogether, and towards a more careful redesign of its conditions and structure.

Underlying the controversy is a more basic question: who is the free-ride program actually for? K, 65, took up subway courier work in Seoul this year, right after becoming eligible for free rides. He crisscrosses the city, transferring lines several times a day, and earns roughly 700,000 won a month.



K (age 65): "If Seoul raises the free-ride age to 70, I'll have to go find some other kind of work."



Ko Hyun-jong, Chair, Senior Citizens' Union: "A lot of the older people riding the subway during rush hour are on their way to work, and some are heading out to look after their grandchildren. Those who rely on free meal programs downtown head out early in the morning because they need to be in line on time to get lunch."



According to the Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs' 2023 Survey of Living Conditions and Welfare Needs of Older Koreans, 83.3 percent of employed adults aged 65 to 69 said they work to cover living expenses. Free subway access, then, is not simply a welfare perk. It is a practical foundation for the economic activity of low-income older adults. When reform debates narrow down to fiscal rationalisation alone, the first to be hit are the vulnerable older adults for whom mobility and income are directly bound together (Shin, 2026; Kim, H., 2026).

Older Persons Outside the City: The Reality of Transportation Deserts

North Chungcheong, North Jeolla, South Jeolla, and Jeju have not a single subway station anywhere in the entire province (Kim, 2026b). That is why the heated debate over reforming free subway rides in cities is, from the outset, someone else's problem for older adults outside them. Even DRT, the one thing they might otherwise lean on, has not closed the mobility gap in non-urban areas entirely. Most DRT services cannot cover their operating costs through fares alone and depend entirely on local government funding. With population decline and deteriorating local finances unfolding at the same time, securing stable funding is difficult, and the services themselves can waver with the state of the budget. The Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport did not publish its Guidelines for Introducing and Operating Demand-Responsive Transport (DRT) until December 2025, a full 13 years after the 100-won taxi

was first introduced (Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport, 2025).

“ P (age 71): "Without my own car, I can't get anywhere. Free rides? What good would that do me? Out here there's not even a bus, let alone a subway..." ”

P and his wife rely on their car for everything, farm work, grocery shopping, and doctor's visits, and spend 200,000 to 300,000 won a month on gas. Y, 64, of Yeongwol County in Gangwon Province, will become eligible for free rides next year, but has no interest, since there's nothing for her to actually use it on. "For people like me who live in the countryside, it just doesn't matter," she said. She spends about 100,000 won a month on fuel (Kim, 2026b).

The same story repeats in Muju, North Jeolla Province. K, 76, who farms peaches on his own, shakes his head at any mention of surrendering his licence. He's just as unmoved by the government's incentive, a 200,000-won local gift certificate.

“ K (age 76): "Without a car, I can't get to the hospital or the market. If they tell me to give up my licence, I'd just have to stay home." ”

“ L (age 79): "A lot of older people live alone these days, and the village bus mostly only goes as far as the town centre. I also have to drive my own farm equipment, so giving up my licence isn't even something I can consider." ”

“ P (age 74): "What am I supposed to do with 200,000 won? That's gone after three or four taxi rides. The bus only comes twice a day, so getting to the hospital eats up the whole day. If I can't drive, I'd just have to stay home." ”

This is not a matter of personal choice, but of structural issue. A survey by the Korea Rural Economic Institute found that 94.8 per cent of farmers aged 65 and older who drive have no intention of surrendering their licence, citing their livelihoods and the lack of public transit (Bang, 2026).

According to the Korea Transport Institute (2023), the average distance between bus stops in rural counties is 3.4 times greater than in the greater Seoul metropolitan area,

and rural cities run only a fifth as many daily bus services as the metropolitan region. This transportation gap tracks closely with a financial one. An analysis of the Ministry of Data and Statistics' Survey of Household Finances and Living Conditions found that single- and two-person older households outside the metropolitan area spend between 30,000 and 174,000 won more per year on transportation than their metropolitan counterparts, even though their net assets amount to only about half those of metropolitan households (Kim, 2026b). The free subway program is thus not only narrowly targeted in its reach but also regressive in effect: the funding for a benefit used mostly by higher-income urban older adults depends in part on the taxes of low-income rural older adults who cannot ride a subway even once. Amid this vacuum in public transit, the day-to-day world of an older adult without a way to get around shrinks down to the four walls of home. They cannot get to a clinic, cannot get to a market, cannot see other people.

In this environment, the first level of mobility rights that Oh (2025) describes, the right not to be obstructed, fails to function in any real sense. And where public transit infrastructure is simply absent, so long as the third level, the right to demand that real conditions for mobility be built, remains uninstitutionalised, any recommendation to surrender a licence can only be experienced as the stripping away of a means of survival. In rural areas, a car is not a convenience so much as it is survival infrastructure.

Conclusion: Mobility Rights as the Floor of Older Adults' Basic Rights

Korea's policy landscape for older persons' mobility rights remains fragmented. Cities have free subway rides, but the program carries within it both generational conflict and fiscal crisis. Non-urban areas have thirteen years of DRT experimentation behind them, and the evidence for its effectiveness keeps getting more rigorous, but because its funding still rests entirely on local budgets, how far and how fast it spreads varies sharply from one place to the next. A system that urges people to surrender their licences while failing to substantively guarantee their mobility afterwards captures this contradiction in miniature.

Measured against Oh's (2025) three-level framework for mobility rights, the current state of affairs remains unfinished. The first level, the right not to be obstructed in one's movement, is still violated depending on where one lives, while the third level, the right to demand that real conditions for mobility be built, has only just begun to be institutionalized. Closing that gap is the task now at hand.

First, the gap in DRT services between rural and urban areas needs to close, and the

current financing structure, which relies solely on local government budgets, needs a stable source of national-level funding layered on top. Second, parallel access channels, such as phone-based call centres, must be guaranteed for older adults left behind by digital tools. Third, license surrender incentives need to be designed as a package that connects to guaranteed mobility afterwards, whether through DRT, voucher taxis, or hospital escort services, rather than stopping at a one-time cash payment. And underpinning all of this, establishing a firm legal basis for the right to mobility itself remains the work still ahead.

At a moment when countries across Asia and Europe are grappling with accelerating aging and facing this same challenge, guaranteeing mobility rights as a matter of institutional design can no longer be confined to the category of welfare policy alone. It is a matter of human rights. The right to remain connected to the world even after giving up the wheel: that is the floor beneath which mobility rights cannot be allowed to fall.

Endnote

1. Demand-responsive transport (DRT) is a transit service that adjusts its routes and schedule in real time based on user calls, rather than running on a fixed route or timetable. It goes by many names, including the 100-won taxi and Ttok Bus, and mainly serves mobility-vulnerable populations in areas underserved by conventional public transit.

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