

Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation Pilot Study of Technology and Aging

This project developed an 8-10 minute modular survey to measure the existence, addition, and use of assistive devices and home modifications by older adults. The survey instrument was determined to have good statistical properties (i.e., good validity and reliability) and a version of the survey was included as part of the 2006 Health and Retirement Study.

Lead Agency:

Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

Agency Mission:

The Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation advises the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services on policy development in health, disability and aging, human services, and science and data policy, and provides advice and analysis on economic policy. The Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (OASPE) leads special initiatives, coordinates the Department's evaluation, research and demonstration activities, and manages cross-Department planning activities such as strategic planning, legislative planning and review of regulations. Integral to this role, OASPE conducts research and evaluation studies, develops policy analyses, and estimates the cost and benefits of policy alternatives under consideration by the Department or Congress.

Principal Investigator:

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Partner Agency:

National Center for Health Statistics, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
National Institute on Aging
University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey
Johns Hopkins University
The Urban Institute

General Description:

Pilot Study of Technology and Aging

Assistive technologies and home modifications can help older Americans with disabilities and chronic illnesses live independently in the community. Having good information on the home environment and the prevalence and use of assistive devices is therefore critical to policymakers seeking to promote the independence of the elderly; however, national surveys have rarely collected this type of information and we have little knowledge about the extent to which technology mitigates disability and enhances the lives of older persons.

In 2003, the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, in conjunction with the National Center for Health Statistics and the National Institute on Aging, began a project to develop, pilot, and disseminate a new survey on assistive technology use and the home environment. The goal was to develop a set of questions that could be easily added to existing or new surveys that would better capture the population at-risk for a disability because of an environmental barrier or lack of modification to the home, and track the adoption and use of assistive devices and technology. The new instrument could better address key questions such as: what role do assistive technologies and home modifications play in the lives of older Americans?; how extensively are they used?; and ultimately, how effective is assistive technology in increasing older American's well-being, social engagement, and participation in valued activities?

After extensive design, pilot testing, and evaluation, a final 8-10 minute survey instrument was developed that included five modules: home environment, mobility and other devices, effectiveness, information and communication technology, and residual activity of daily living/ instrumental activity of daily living difficulty. A shorter version of the survey instrument that could be administered in 2-3 minutes was also developed. The full instrument was included as part of a module on the 2006 Health and Retirement Study (HRS), a nationally representative survey of the noninstitutionalized population age 50 and older living in the U.S. Preliminary findings indicate that a substantial portion of the HRS sample has access to or uses assistive devices/home modifications. For example, approximately two-thirds of the sample report having at least one assistive home feature (e.g., a ramp at their home's entrance, emergency call system, grab bars in shower/tub, raised toilet seat, etc.); one-third reported adding at least one of these features to their home; and assistive home features were shown to enable independent performance of activities. A final report more fully describing the findings from the HRS will be available in late 2008.