



Characteristics of rural communities influence their capacity to support older adults

Making a meaningful difference in the lives of older adults and their families by bridging research, policies and practice

Summary

Nearly one quarter of all Canadian seniors live in rural areas. There are opposing views of whether rural communities are supportive to older adults. Positive characteristics attributed to rural communities are that they are warm and friendly places where people are surrounded by friends and family. However, rural communities also are considered to be isolated and lacking in formal services, thereby limiting potential to be responsive to the needs of older residents. To address these competing views, we examined 2,759 rural communities using Statistics Canada's 2001 Census to identify the physical and social characteristics of rural communities that contribute to their capacity to be supportive to older adults. We found that:

- Rural communities across Canada differ in their supportiveness of seniors. In some places, only 1% of rural residents reported helping a senior. In others, more than half (56%) reported helping a senior. On average, one in five rural residents provided unpaid help to a senior.
- Differences in community supportiveness exist across regions. The average proportion of people providing support to seniors is significantly higher (24%) in the Prairies (Saskatchewan and Manitoba) and lower (17%) in British Columbia than Alberta, Ontario, Quebec, or Atlantic Canada.
- Overall, one quarter of rural communities provide strong levels of support (25% or more of residents provide unpaid help to a senior), while 30% of rural communities provide weak levels of support (fewer than 18% of residents provide unpaid help to a senior).
- Characteristics that distinguish those rural communities that provide more support to older adults include: smaller population size, further from a service centre, having more seniors and widowed persons, lower household incomes, having more long-term residents (greater than 5 years), and having more people providing unpaid assistance (child care and domestic work).
- Of these, four characteristics were key in discriminating among rural communities' level of supportiveness to older adults. Highly supportive communities were relatively small in size, had higher proportions of older adults and long-term residents, and more hours of unpaid work.
- As the average proportion of people over 65 increases, so too does the level of supportiveness to seniors, which suggests that older adults both receive support and contribute to caring rural communities by providing support. Findings from other parts of the project indicate that rural seniors provide support to other seniors through their volunteerism and acts of neighbourliness.
- Program planners should be cognizant of the diversity among rural communities and the characteristics that influence their capacity to be supportive towards older adults. Weak support communities may require more direct programs to support older adults, while strong support programs may benefit from programs that promote seniors' contributions to capacity building.

Almost one quarter (23%) of older adults in Canada live in rural areas. While the image of rural communities is of warm and friendly places to live, little research has been done on how rural communities might differ in their capacity to support older adults. By adopting a community-level approach to examine the context in which rural seniors live, we identified those characteristics that distinguish among rural communities that provide different levels of support to their older residents.

Research objectives

- To identify characteristics of rural communities that affect community supportiveness to older adults.
- To determine a set of characteristics that differentiates rural communities that provide different levels of support to older adults.

Data

Data came from Statistic Canada's 2001 Census of the Population. Rural communities were selected using Statistics Canada's Rural and Small Town definition which considers population size, density, and distance from larger centers. Non-Aboriginal and non-Territorial communities with a population of 250-<10,000 were selected. From a total of 4,605

rural communities, 2,759 met the inclusion criteria.

Analysis

Community supportiveness was determined through the following Census question:

Last week (refers to Sunday, May 6 to Saturday, May 12, 2001) how many hours did this person spend providing unpaid care or assistance to one or more seniors? (Some examples include providing personal care to a senior family member, visiting seniors, talking with them on the telephone, and helping them with shopping, banking or with taking medication).

All respondents who reported some hours of assistance were deemed to have provided support. Based on the proportion of residents that provided assistance to a senior, rural communities were then categorized into weak, moderate, and strong levels of support. Categories were created using half the standard deviation of the median proportion of residents providing support (see Figure 1).

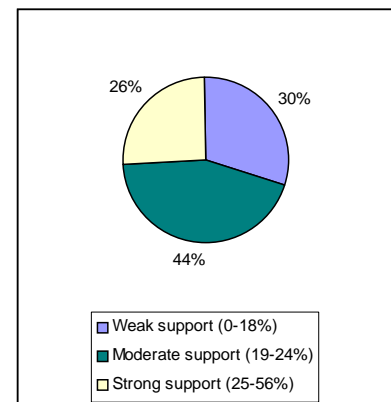
Two sets of analyses were undertaken using *rural communities* as the unit of analysis.

We used Analysis of Variance (ANOVAs) to determine whether the *physical* (population size, density, and distance from

service centre) and *social* (age, gender, marital status, living arrangements, education, income, employment status, migration patterns, and unpaid work) characteristics of rural communities were related to level of community supportiveness.

Discriminant Function Analysis was used to determine the set of community characteristics that discriminated among levels of supportiveness to seniors living in rural communities.

Figure 1: Distribution of level of community supportiveness to seniors across rural communities in Canada



Rural communities vary in level of supportiveness

On average, 21% of people in rural communities provided unpaid help to a senior. There are, however, big differences across rural communities. There were some communities where less than 1% said they provided unpaid help to seniors and others

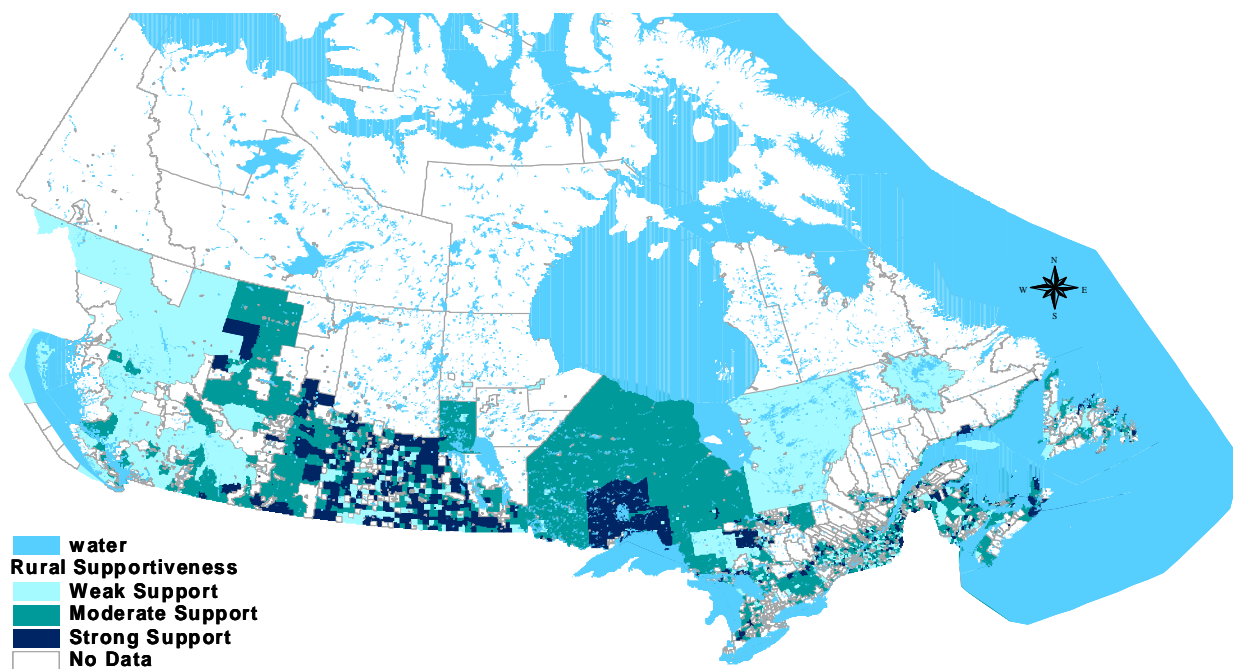


Figure 2. Supportiveness of rural communities towards older adults.

where over half (56%) the community reported providing support to older residents.

Figure 2 shows the variability in community support provided to seniors across Canada. The average proportion of people providing support to seniors in rural communities is significantly higher (24%) in the Prairies (Saskatchewan and Manitoba), and lower (17%) in British Columbia compared to other regions of Canada (Alberta-20.9%; Ontario-21.2%; Quebec-19.9%; Atlantic Canada-20.7%). This diversity in part reflects differences in the proportion of seniors in these areas. That is, British Columbia has the lowest proportion of

rural seniors in the country and the Prairies the highest.

Overall, we found that rural communities that provide more support to older adults are smaller in population size, further from a service centre, have a greater proportion of seniors and widowed persons, lower household incomes, greater proportion of long-term residents (5 years or more), and a greater proportion of persons providing unpaid child care and domestic work.

Of these, four characteristics were key in discriminating among supportiveness in rural communities: population size, proportion of seniors, proportion of long-term residents, and

average hours spent on unpaid work.

Smaller communities are more supportive to seniors

While rural communities differ considerably in population size (average is 1,736 residents), smaller communities tend to be more supportive of older adults. The average population size of strong support communities is 1,106 people. In comparison, moderate and weak support communities average 2,243 and 1,534 people respectively.

This trend provides some support for the long-held belief that smaller is better. People in smaller rural communities may be more familiar with one



another's circumstances, which contributes to being supportive.

Communities with lots of seniors are more supportive

There is a direct relationship between presence of older adults and level of community supportiveness. In strong support communities, an average of 17% of the population is over 65 years. In moderate support communities 15.7% of the population is over 65 while it is just 13.9% in weak support communities. This may reflect the fact that seniors themselves are both providers and receivers of support.

Communities with more long-term residents are more supportive

As the number of long-term residents (those people who have lived five or more years in the same place) increases, so too does the level of supportiveness. Rural communities that provide moderate and strong levels of support to seniors have a higher proportion of residents who have lived in their community for at least five years (83.5% and 85.8% respectively) compared to weak support communities (81.4%). The increased familiarity among long-term residents may contribute to stronger bonds and increased helpfulness among community members.

Communities that provide more unpaid work are more supportive

Rural communities providing strong levels of support to seniors are more likely to have persons providing, on average, greater hours of unpaid housework (both within and outside their household), and a higher proportion of persons providing unpaid child care than moderate and weak support communities. In strong support communities, people spend nearly 1½ hours more per week on unpaid housework (20.2 hr/wk) compared with moderate (18.8 hr/wk) and weak (18.6 hr/wk) support communities. Similarly, in strong support communities, an average of 40% of residents provided unpaid child care (both within and outside their household) compared with moderate (38.0%) and weak (37.3%) support communities.

These results may be related to the lack of formal services in rural communities and the increased pressures on the family/friend sector to fill the gaps.

Policy Implications

As rural Canada undergoes significant social and economic change, its diversity will challenge those involved in developing models of service delivery for older adults. Acknowledging that rural

communities are not all the same, and that they vary in their capacity to be supportive towards older adults is a first step in addressing this challenge.

Rural communities that provide strong levels of support typify the rural idyll, being small in size and having more long-term residents, more seniors, and a culture of helping one another. The federal government's New Horizons for Seniors Programs (NHSP) may suit such strong support communities. The NHSP provides funding for community-based projects across Canada that enable seniors to participate in social activities, pursue an active life, and contribute to their community.

In comparison, weak support communities, which have fewer long-term residents, fewer seniors, and people who spend less time on unpaid work, may require more direct services for seniors. Programs that provide support with meal preparation, shopping, housekeeping, and outdoor work, and which facilitate social engagement may benefit older adults living in rural areas in which community members provide more limited support to each other. Clearly our findings demonstrate that when it comes to rural Canada "one size does not fit all."



