



What makes a rural community a good place to grow old? Views of older adults

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

Summary

According to the World Health Organisation, ‘age-friendly’ communities have physical and social contexts that support and enable older people to live in security, enjoy good health, and participate fully in society. To ascertain what characteristics were important to older adults in making rural communities good places to grow older, we conducted a national telephone survey of 1,322 older adults, aged 65 and older, who resided in Royal Canadian Legion households in rural communities across Canada. We found that:

- Most participants had positive views of their rural community overall. When asked how they would rate their community as a place to grow old, older adults’ responses ranged from poor or fair (8%), good (19%), very good (36%), to excellent (37%).
- Although the level of importance assigned to specific community characteristics varied, five features stood out as very or extremely important in making rural communities good places to live as an older adult: (1) having good neighbours (88.5%); (2) living in a community that is clean and tidy (87.4%); (3) living in a community that is quiet (86.1%); (4) living in a community that is affordable (85.9%); and (5) having people recognize and talk to me (81.6%).
- While there is diversity among older adults, there are some trends. Older women were significantly more likely than older men to rate social features of their communities as being important determinants of whether their rural community is a good place to grow old.
- Younger seniors (aged 65-74 years) were significantly more likely than older seniors (75-84 years and 85+) to indicate that physical features of communities were important to making their rural community a good place to grow old.
- There were no significant differences in the importance of physical and social features among those who are married, widowed, and not married, and between those who have a long-term health problem and those who do not.
- Although the 14 community characteristics are not exhaustive, the list provides some concrete indications of what rural seniors deem as important characteristics of communities in which they want to grow older.
- Differences in the importance ascribed to social and physical features of communities suggests that what makes a rural community ‘age-friendly’ differs among older adults.
- More research is required to understand age-friendly communities, and how diversity among elders influences the features that are important.



In 2006, the World Health Organisation (WHO) initiated a global project to encourage cities to become more age-friendly. **Age-friendly communities** have physical and social contexts that support and enable older people to live in security, enjoy good health, and participate fully in society.

Canada followed WHO's lead with an initiative focused specifically on rural and remote communities. The aim of the project was to identify and raise the awareness of the features of communities that are accessible by and inclusive of older people with varying needs and capacities. In this study, we augment this by summarizing the views of older adults living in rural Canada on the features that are important to them in making their rural communities good places to grow older.

Research objectives

- To determine whether rural older adults perceive their community as a good place to grow old.
- To investigate the importance of selected community characteristics in making a rural community a good place to grow old.
- To explore how the importance of community characteristics varies by older adults' age, gender, marital status, and health.

Data

We conducted a national telephone survey of Royal Canadian Legion member households, interviewing 1,322 adults aged 65 or older who lived in a rural community in Canada.

The sample was stratified based on regional proportions of the older rural population from the 2001 Census. Quota sampling at the household level was done based on age (50% aged 65 to 74 years and 50% aged 75+) and gender (50% male and 50% female). Compared to the Canadian population, our sample included a higher proportion of people over the age of 75, more married women, and participants who had slightly higher annual incomes.

The telephone surveys were conducted in the spring of 2004 by trained interviewers from the Population Research Laboratory at the University of Alberta using its centralized Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) facilities. Average survey length was 38 minutes. The response rate was 51%, which is higher than most telephone surveys.

Participants were asked to rate the importance of 14 community characteristics in making their rural community a good place to grow old (see Figure 1 for a complete list of characteristics). Questions were developed based

on the literature on attachment to place. Participants rated each characteristic from 1 '*not at all important*' to 5 '*extremely important*.'

Respondents were then asked overall "*How would you rate your community as a place to grow old?*" Responses ranged from 1 '*poor*' to 5 '*excellent*.'

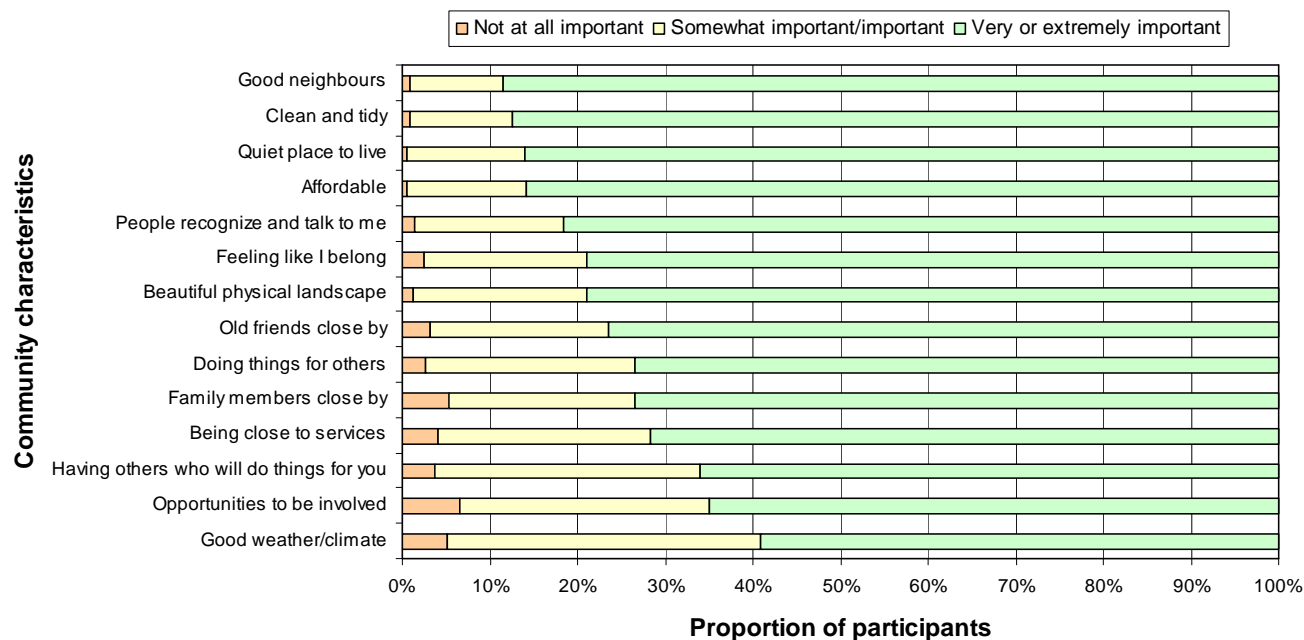
Analysis

Descriptive analyses were used to investigate the importance of the 14 community characteristics and determine participants' overall rating of their community as a place to grow old.

Factor analysis was used to group the 14 community characteristics into two smaller sets of related items. **Social features** of communities were comprised of items such as having friends and family close by, while **physical features** included items such as the physical landscape of the community, its affordability, and cleanliness.

Two hierarchical multiple regressions were run to determine whether individual characteristics (gender, marital status, age, and health) made a difference in participants' view of the importance of both social and physical features in making their community a good place to grow old.

Figure 1: Older adults' ratings of the importance of community characteristics that contribute to a good place to live



Most rural seniors like where they live

Older adults varied somewhat in their perceptions of whether or not their community was a good place to grow old. Responses ranged from poor or fair (8%), good (19%), very good (36%), to excellent (37%). To understand why ratings differed among participants, we explored specific features of communities that might contribute to their overall feelings.

Importance of community characteristics differs

As shown in Figure 1, the level of importance assigned to community characteristics varies. This pattern suggests that what makes a rural community

'age-friendly' differs among older adults.

However, five features stand out as very or extremely important to a majority of older adults in making their rural communities a good place to live: (1) having good neighbours (88.5%); (2) living in a community that is clean and tidy (87.4%); (3) living in a community that is quiet (86.1%); (4) living in a community that is affordable (85.9%); and (5) having people recognize and talk to me (81.6%). While these features illustrate that both the physical and social aspects of communities are important to older adults, how might importance vary by participants' personal characteristics?

Social features are important to older women

Women were significantly more likely than men ($p < .001$) to rate social features of their rural communities as important determinants of whether their community was a good place to grow old (see Table 1). Social features of communities comprise items such as having friends and family close by, good neighbours, and people who know and talk to the older adult. This gender difference supports a longstanding notion that women are the kin keepers in families and social connectors to others. There were no gender differences with regard to the importance of physical features.



Younger seniors value physical features

Physical features of communities were significantly more important to those seniors aged 65-74 years than those 75-84 years or those over 85 years ($p < .01$). Physical features include having a beautiful landscape, a clean, quiet, and affordable community, and services close by. It may be that younger seniors spend more time in the community, perhaps shopping, walking, or golfing, while older seniors may be less mobile and more apt to spend time in their homes. Thus, the physical environment is more relevant to the everyday lives of younger seniors. Social features were of equal importance to all age groups.

Ratings were not influenced by health or marital status

Neither health nor marital status influenced the importance older adults assigned to social and physical features that made their communities a good place to live. There were no significant differences among those who were married, widowed, and not married; or between those who had a long-term health problem

and those who did not. Perhaps having social connections with friends and family is of equal importance, regardless of marital status or health status. While physical features like being close to services may seem more important to those with a health problem, those rural seniors with long-term health problems may make do with services available locally so that they may continue to live in communities in which they are deeply rooted.

Policy Implications

Older adults are diverse. Our findings begin to show the variability among older adults in the range of features that are important in creating age-friendly communities, and how level of importance varies by selected individual attributes. The 14 community characteristics are not exhaustive, yet the list provides some concrete indications of what rural elders deem as important characteristics of communities in which they want to grow older. This information augments the eight domains being explored currently in the WHO Age-Friendly Cities

Project: respect and social inclusion; social participation; civic participation and employment; community support and health services; housing; outdoor spaces and buildings; transportation; and communication and information.

Differences in the importance ascribed to social and physical features of communities were associated with gender and age (and not marital or health status). This suggests that different approaches may be required to create age-friendly communities that reflect the diversity among older adults. For example, older women may be more responsive than older men to programs that enable them to maintain their social connections. There may be other individual factors that account for differences, such as income, ability to drive, and length of time in the community. Clearly, more research is required to understand age-friendly communities, and how the diversity among older adults influences the features that are important.



This fact sheet was written by Jennifer Swindle, RAPP doctoral student.

Table 1: Importance of community features by personal characteristics

Community feature	Personal Characteristics of Participants			
	Gender	Marital status	Age	Long-term health problem
Social aspects of community	significant $p < .001$	n/s*	n/s	n/s
Physical aspects of community	n/s	n/s	significant $p < .01$	n/s

* - no significant differences

This project was funded by Veterans Affairs Canada and conducted in partnership with the Royal Canadian Legion. The views expressed herein are solely those of the authors.