

# Caring Contexts of Rural Seniors

Phase I - Technical Report

*Executive Summary*

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Rural communities in Canada are experiencing significant change as a result of social and economic forces that are contributing to the aging of rural Canada. Demographic composition and proximity to service centres of rural communities in Canada likely will influence the experience of seniors in these communities. Yet there has been little research on how rural communities might differ in their capacity to care for seniors or the ways in which the independence of seniors in these communities is affected by their relationships with formal and family/friend networks of support. It is particularly challenging to develop policies and programs to support those living in rural areas where small, dispersed populations mean that urban models of care and support may not be appropriate.

This report presents findings from Phase I of a three-year research program, funded by Veterans Affairs Canada, to investigate the question, “Is rural Canada a good place to grow old?” Using data from the 2001 Canadian Census of the Population, we investigated how support provided to seniors differs by rural community characteristics. Three research questions were examined:

- How do rural communities in Canada differ on characteristics that may be important in determining community supportiveness to seniors?
- What is the relationship between characteristics of rural communities and their supportiveness to seniors?
- What is the set of characteristics that distinguishes rural communities that provide strong, moderate, and weak levels of support to seniors?

There has been little research to address two prevailing notions about rural communities and the older adults who live there. The first is that smaller is better and that seniors who live in rural communities are surrounded by networks of family and friends who will support them. The second is that rural communities afford reduced access to formal services due to distance from service centres. Part of the difficulty in assessing these assumptions is that in the vast body of literature on aging and caregiving, there are few studies of rural seniors and fewer still that are focused at the community level. Thus, our understanding about community-level support to seniors, specifically in rural contexts remains limited. Nonetheless, there is some evidence that a number of social aspects of the community may influence rural communities’ support to seniors. These include age and gender distributions, average income, migration patterns and unpaid work in the community. Associations between these characteristics and supportiveness to seniors are expected.

In this phase of the research program, three sets of analysis were undertaken to understand community supportiveness to seniors. All use the community as the unit of analysis, drawing on Census Sub-Divisions (CSDs) as the study’s proxy for community. Rural communities are defined in accordance with Statistics Canada’s Rural and Small Town criteria which consider population size, density as well as distance from larger centers. In addition, the rural sample was selected to include non-Aboriginal and non-Territorial CSDs and those with population size greater than 250 and less than 10,000. These selection criteria resulted in 2759 rural communities. For all analyses, examination by region of country was included.

### *Diversity in rural communities*

Section 3.1 presents findings from univariate analysis which indicates that rural communities throughout Canada are diverse on many descriptive level characteristics thought to influence supportiveness to seniors. These include: physical locality (population size, land area and population density), and social aspects of communities (proportion of seniors, community economic indicators, residents' tenure in the community). Communities across the country differ substantially in their supportiveness to seniors. They range in their supportiveness to seniors from low support to more than half of community members supporting seniors. As well, patterns of regional differences emerge. Communities in Atlantic Canada, on average, have higher proportions of persons living with others, higher proportions of long term residents, lower household incomes, higher part-year/part-time employment, and fewer persons with at least some post-secondary education. Conversely, rural communities in British Columbia differ from all other regions. Their communities, on average, have a lower proportion of persons living with four or more others, a lower proportion of widowed persons, higher education levels, and the lowest proportion of residents who provided unpaid help to seniors. The Prairies is the only other region with strong differences from all other regions. Their rural communities, on average, have the lowest levels of part-year/part-time employment, the highest proportion of seniors, and the highest proportion of the population providing help to seniors.

### *Characteristics of rural communities and community supportiveness to seniors*

Section 3.2 presents findings from bivariate analysis demonstrating that the diversity among rural communities extends to characteristics that are related to supportiveness to seniors. Rural communities with the following characteristics have a greater proportion of their residents providing support to seniors: smaller population size, further from a service centre, greater proportion of seniors and widowed persons, lower household incomes, greater proportion of long term residents, greater proportion of persons providing unpaid child care. These characteristics typify communities in which residents may have had opportunities over time to know one other and have established patterns of helping perhaps because of physical locality features such as size and remoteness. This national profile of supportive rural communities is not consistent across the regions. This may, in part, be due to the unique demographic composition of regions, especially age and migratory patterns influenced by education and employment opportunities.

### *Characteristics that differentiate community supportiveness*

Section 3.3 presents findings from multivariate analysis which demonstrate the contribution of a particular set of characteristics in understanding community supportiveness to seniors, while accounting for the interrelationships that exist among the independent variables. Both physical locality and social aspects of community are important to the level of community supportiveness to seniors. In particular, population size, proportion of seniors, proportion of long term residents, and average hours of unpaid housework provided to others emerge as key variables. Strong support communities appear to benefit from having residents who have lived a longer time in the community. They also are smaller in size which may facilitate familiarity and increased interaction with one another. In combination, these conditions may contribute to these communities having established helping norms, including help to seniors. In contrast, weak support communities are larger in population size and experience more fluctuation in terms of persons recently moving into the community. Residents in such communities may be less engaged and familiar with the needs of their communities and therefore less inclined to participate in supporting others. This model, however, cannot be applied consistently across the regions. An examination of rural communities in the Prairie region compared to other regions, suggests that this set of community characteristics operate differentially at the regional level.

The only patterns between the regions that are similar in classifying communities as weak, moderate or strong pertain to proportion of seniors. Differences exist for population size, proportion of long term residents, and average hours of unpaid housework. While the reasons for such similarities/differences are not necessarily clear, these results point to the need to recognize regional differences in any discussion of rural Canada.

### *Conclusion*

Rural Canada is undergoing significant social and economic change, and this rate of change varies across the country. Such macro level influences are shaping communities' migratory patterns, demographic composition, and availability of essential health and social services. These conditions present challenges for seniors' independence. In this report, we have begun to address some of the assumptions about rural Canada and its supportiveness to seniors. Specifically, we illustrate the ways in which the complexity of rural Canada might influence the ways in which rural communities support seniors. Findings from this phase of the study suggest that supportive communities are relatively smaller in size and are those in which residents have lived for a long time, have a higher proportion of seniors, and a culture of helping one another is in place. These results can inform policy and practice as they demonstrate that older adults are contributors as well as receivers of support. However, an over-reliance on aging seniors in creating supportive communities, without access to formal support services, may place some communities at risk.

### *Next steps*

While this work has begun to address the paucity of empirical research on community-level supportiveness to seniors, much more is to be learned about the experiences of older adults within rural communities. The next step in this program of research is to move the lens toward the older adults who live in rural Canada. The goal of Phase II is to explore seniors' views about the supportiveness of their communities and of their connections to personal networks of family and friends.