

# SUSTAINABLE RURAL COMMUNITIES IN AN ERA OF POPULATION AGING



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# ...acknowledgements



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# 1. Introduction

## MY GOAL

- **Introduce you to the dynamics of aging rural communities**
- **Provoke you to think critically about volunteers and the voluntary sector**
- **Invite you to consider the implications for rural community sustainability**

# ...first, are rural communities sustainable?

## Prairie curling clubs are dying along with small villages



Al Thompson with a trailer full of old curling rocks at his facility a few kilometers east of Winnipeg Thursday May 19, 2011. Thompson finds old curling rocks from rural prairie towns and resells them, mainly to the US where the sport is taking off.

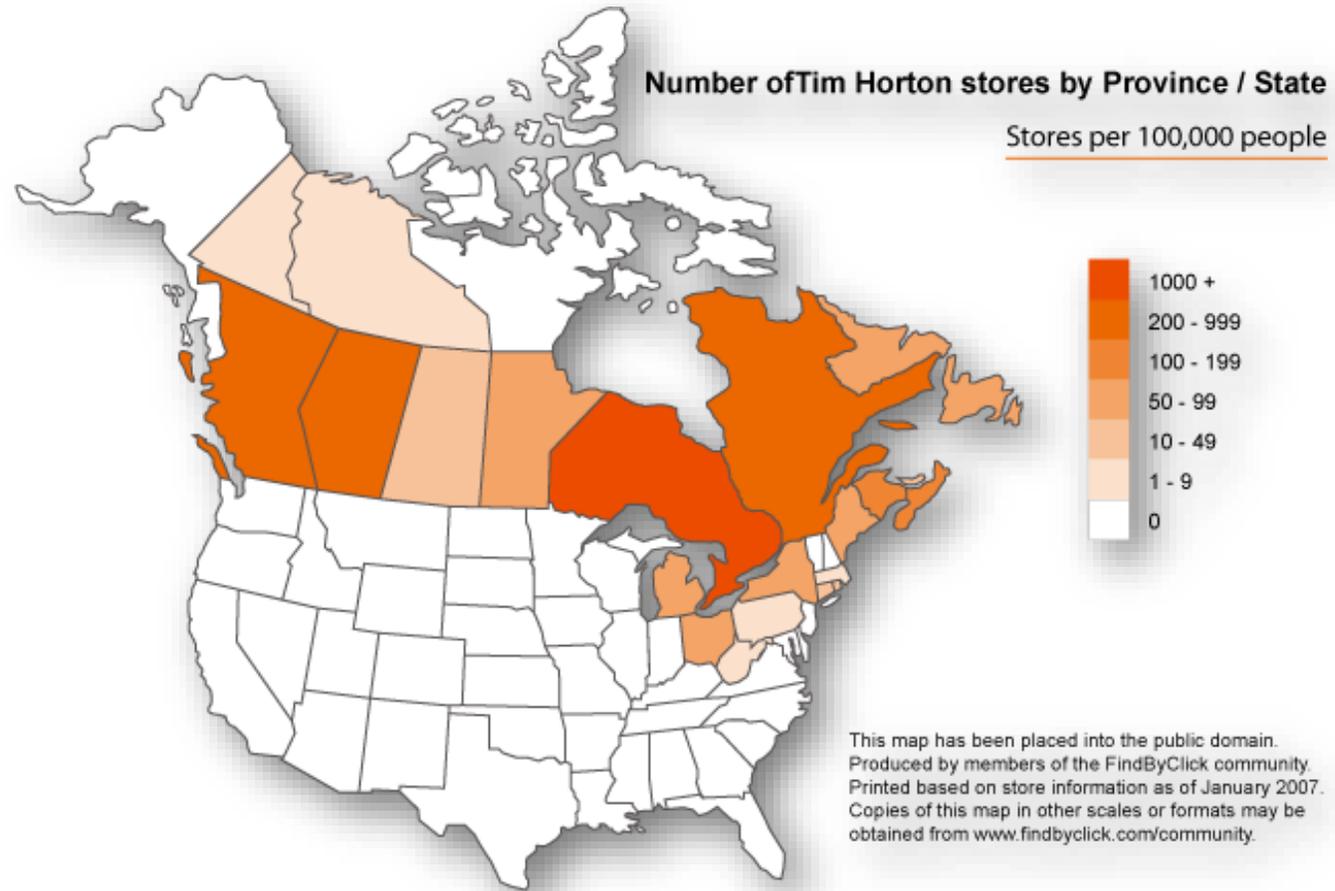
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# ...rural community sustainability

Rural, remote and small towns across Canada are integral to our environment, our cultural fabric, and provide natural resources for both urban and rural communities – yet many of them are struggling to survive. Aging populations, youth migration, skills shortages and the lack of immigration are just some of the many challenges facing rural Canada. *Since each community faces its own unique set of challenges, we must approach these issues in different ways.*



# ...rural geography (place)

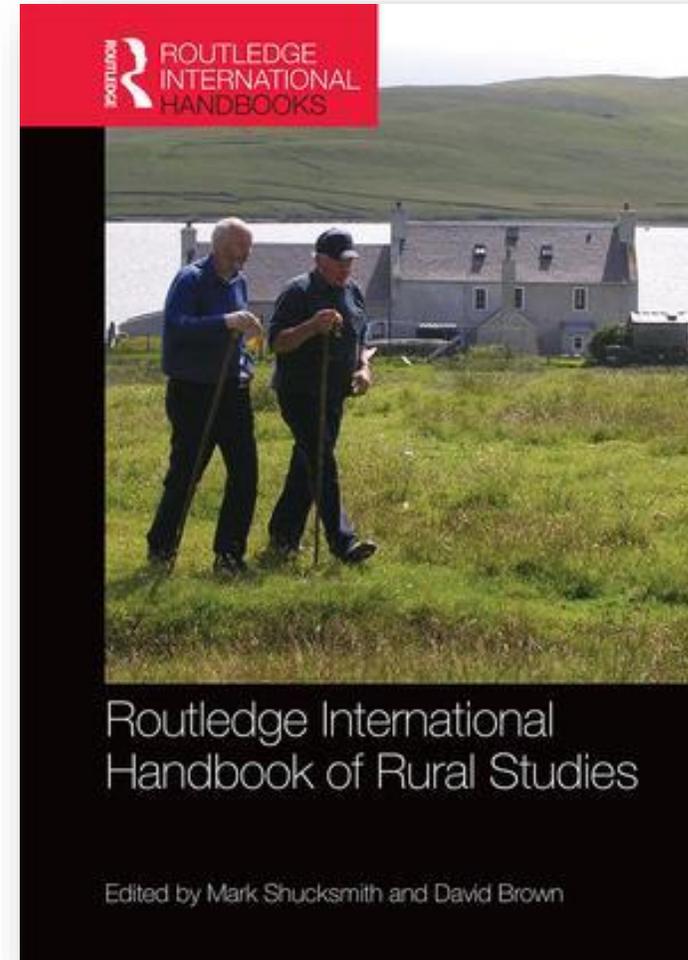


# ...rural gerontology (aging)



# ...rural geographical gerontology

***There is a gap in understanding the diverse experiences of older rural people and the complexities of aging rural places...and what this means for the sustainability of rural communities***



## 2. Aging rural communities



# ...an era of population aging

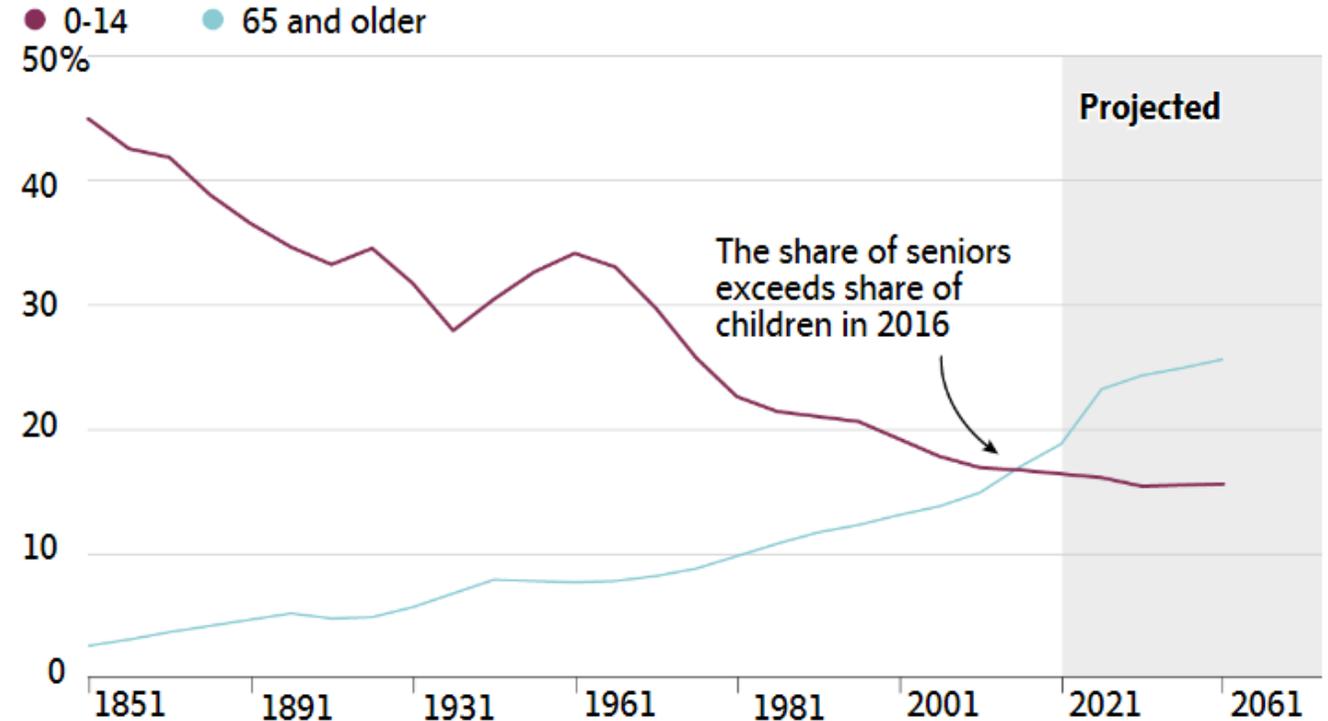
Population by years of age in Canada for 2016

Hundreds of thousands



THE GLOBE AND MAIL, SOURCE: STATSCAN

Proportion of children 14 years & under and people aged 65 & older in Canada



THE GLOBE AND MAIL, SOURCE: STATSCAN, 2016 CENSUS

# ...e.g., Peterborough, Ontario

June 21, 2013

## HUFFPOST LIVING CANADA

### Canada Census Aging Communities: Peterborough, Kelowna Among Top Spots For Seniors In 2011

The latest census figures from Statistics Canada show nearly one in five people in Peterborough was aged 65 or older in 2011 -- 19.5 per cent, the highest ratio in the country among municipalities. Trois-Rivieres, Que., was next on the list at 19.4 per cent, followed by Kelowna, B.C., St. Catharines, Ont., and Victoria, B.C.

"We can be kind of a pioneer in showing that an aging population is nothing to be afraid of," said Jim Struthers, a professor of Canadian studies who examines the impact of aging from his perch at Peterborough's Trent University.

"We can actually show the way for innovation which will be necessary for the rest of the province and the rest of the country."

## TRENT CENTRE FOR AGING & SOCIETY

Showcasing Trent University's leadership in interdisciplinary aging studies



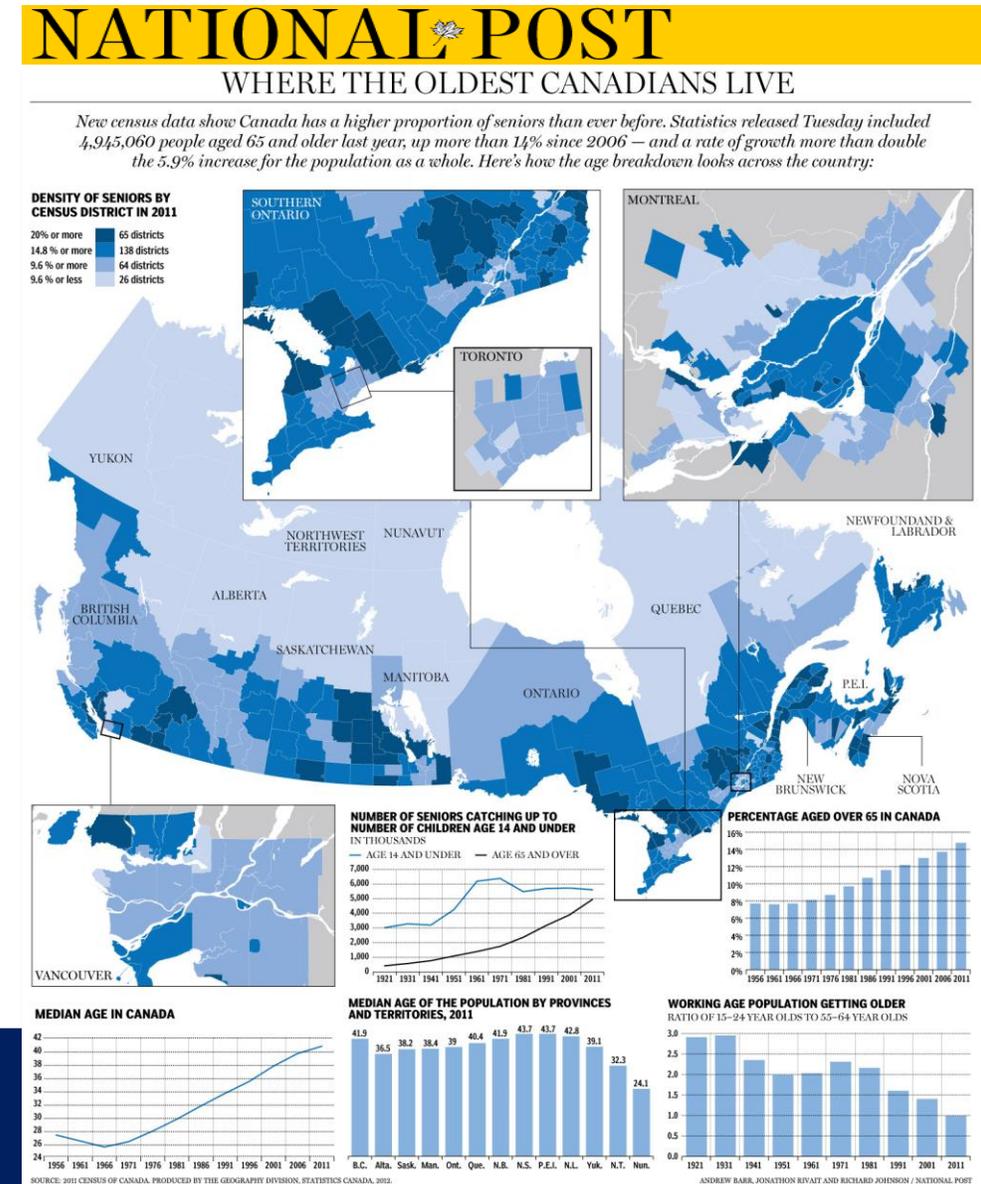
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# ...rural aging trends

- Globally, rural populations are aging faster (*proportionally*) than urban populations
- Demographic shift due to *youth out-migration* (for employment, education), *ageing in place* (of older residents), and *retiree in-migration* (for retirement living)
- Increasing vulnerability (health status) and strained support networks (distance)



# ...rural aging challenges

- Rapidly aging rural populations
- Restructuring of rural economies (agriculture, resource industries, rural-recreation sectors)
- Rural service deprivation and decline
- Raises critical questions about whether ageing rural communities are “good places to grow old?”

**RURAL ONTARIO** Part two of a three part series  
Examining the outcome of a declining population

## YOUNG TO LIVE HERE

Tranquil, but Ontario's rural communities take a hit as factories close in nearby larger centres

**DEBORA VAN BRENK**  
ON AGENCY

**FLORENCE** — It's high noon on an autumn day and the loudest sounds are the rattling of crickets and the occasional call of an in-town rooster echoing out of town.

A shabby new playground and a community hall sit in the middle of Florence, empty this time of day, and there's a road to nearby Grand Centre that isn't yet laid down.

Florence — part of the south-western Ontario township of Dawn-Euphemia, where Middlesex, Kent and Lambton counties meet — is at the intersection of everything, but far from the center of the universe.

Once within buggy distance of a tractor dealership and other amenities, the township has lost 1% of its total population in the past decade.

"Welcome to Florenceville," reads a dealer sign for Emory Husky quips.

But it's clear he's convinced this place is Canada's heartland — not its hinterland: High-speed internet, clean water, seasonal woodlots, close to major centres, helpful neighbours. And all the tranquility a body needs.

That's why it troubles him the hamlet where he lives and works is — like many rural Ontario communities — shrinking. The statistics of the migration are more significant to some, but to him are the 366 faces of his friends.

"This factory in a city like Windsor is just a big, one factory here. If it closes, is the difference between getting your mortgage paid or not," Husky says.

And he knows this first-hand, having been on the receiving end of more than one factory closing when he worked in the area, deep in the heart of one of the nation's richest farm belts, but with manufacturing cities nearby. The closing of a Chrysler truck plant and the loss of thousands of other industrial jobs have cost the community dearly.

The rural communities are more economical to live in, providing the area has to drive 40 miles to your job," says Dawn-Euphemia Mayor Bill Ritchie, who was born and raised in the township and has been its mayor or mayor, and always its biggest booster, for 30 years.

Out here, you can grow your own garden, canoe on the river, borrow a library book, buy lumber and know everyone by name, occupation and

**What went wrong with rural Ontario**

**DEBORA VAN BRENK**

Rural demography is about as tough to get a grip on as man-to-standing in the country fall fair.

And figuring the reasons for rural population decline is either all good and bad or just why-never.

It's a complex landscape with the 19th-century farms in place, for better and for worse. As a result, rural Ontario has a diverse mix of rural Ontario. There's more rural Ontario than you can shake a stick at.

One of the reasons for rural population growth is that, while the nation as a whole has a low population growth rate, rural Ontario has a higher rate. Why? It's not clear, but it's likely that rural Ontario has a higher rate of population growth because of its rural Ontario.

**FARM MECHANIZATION**  
Cows virtually milk themselves now and house-great combines harvest corn. There's more need for knowledge and less for people on today's larger, more technologically advanced farms. Young would-be farmers have a tough time coming up with money to enter the business.

**TRANSPORTATION**  
Good roads go both ways. But for rural communities, they're often off-broad to enrich big-city coffers, where a 20-minute drive and \$10 gets you a burger and a movie. A lot of the money that could help small centres grow flows into larger ones.

**EDUCATION**  
Rural routes are littered with old schools converted to houses or storage sheds. Populations shrink and schools close, leading more families to leave and fewer to move in if there are no schools.

**REGIONAL ECONOMIES**  
So many rural people have jobs in cities that an economic downturn in industry makes country living financially impossible. And if the only jobs they can find is minimum wage, they're not going to contribute two hours a day for that.

**AGING**  
Older rural residents often resist moving to town — but as their health fails, they often have to migrate out to be closer to health clinics.

**IMMIGRATION**  
Most immigrants go to cities, drawn by a similar population or language. One saving grace? Western European farmers with plenty of money and large families are rebuilding some rural economies.

**COMMUNICATION**  
Some rural places still lack high-speed internet. Try studying, shopping or just staying without that. Conversely, rural centres often with high-speed internet can stay put with access to markets worldwide.

**NETWORKS**  
They coincide as hamlets wane. The service club or church may close. The softball league becomes a single team, then strikes out altogether.

**Tips to keep rural Ontario thriving**

**QMI AGENCY**  
In one Ontario hamlet, where school enrollment was falling, townships decided to merge their schools. Instead of having their kids go to city schools, they had to go to rural schools. It was an example of educational excellence — then, city officials started looking to the country for schools.

Preserving small-town amenities is a key to a strong rural revitalization strategy. Bill Ritchie likes to cite when talking with struggling rural areas.

Ritchie is a professor at Centralia University, one of North America's smallest public universities. His research suggests that building rural communities is a long-term investment.

**Look beyond your community**  
In one Ontario hamlet, where school enrollment was falling, townships decided to merge their schools. Instead of having their kids go to city schools, they had to go to rural schools. It was an example of educational excellence — then, city officials started looking to the country for schools.

**Find and exploit your niche**  
Maybe it's a social event or a cultural landmark or maybe an idea that's unique to that area.

**Integrate strangers**  
Create a rural welcome wagon of sorts, and make sure newcomers know where to find social supports.

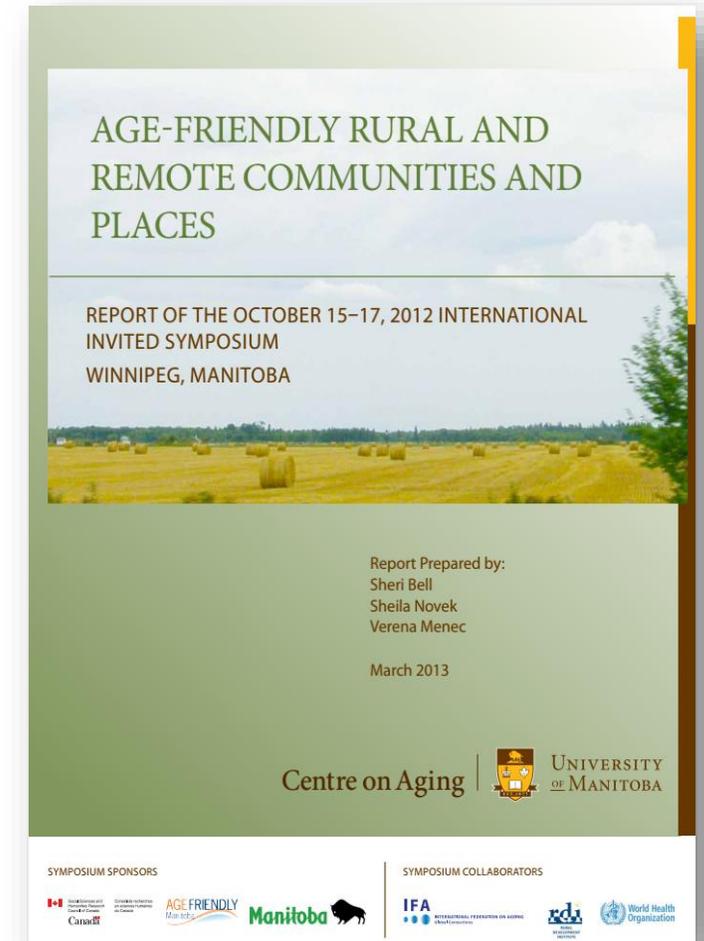
**Build social infrastructure**  
Book clubs, church communities, little league baseball teams — and make them fun to go to.

**Build capacities and links**  
Labour should connect with charity and recreation and go on, to make it a better place.

**Think regionally**  
Interdependence is often a catchphrase of rural life, but interdependence should be more important. When their main products, such as food or raw resources, come from the rural areas, urban areas are benefiting their own self-interest to ignore or downplay the economic, lifestyle and environmental benefits they get from rural areas.

# ...rural aging opportunities

- **Economic renewal via rural retirement migration (e.g., *Retirement Living*)**
- **Contributions of older residents (community support, volunteering, leadership)**
- **Rural innovations (age-friendly communities, rural health care integration, etc.)**
- **Rural lessons about resilience and sustainability**



# ...uncertainty about aging in rural places

*“There’s a sense that in smaller, rural communities where we don’t have an agency and don’t provide services, people know one another, they know their neighbours, and even if they live miles and miles away, they know people through church, so services can be provided at an informal level at the very least, but I’m not convinced that’s really the case.”*

Community support coordinator, rural PEI



# ...pivotal for aging rural communities

## For rural health and social care (*policies*)

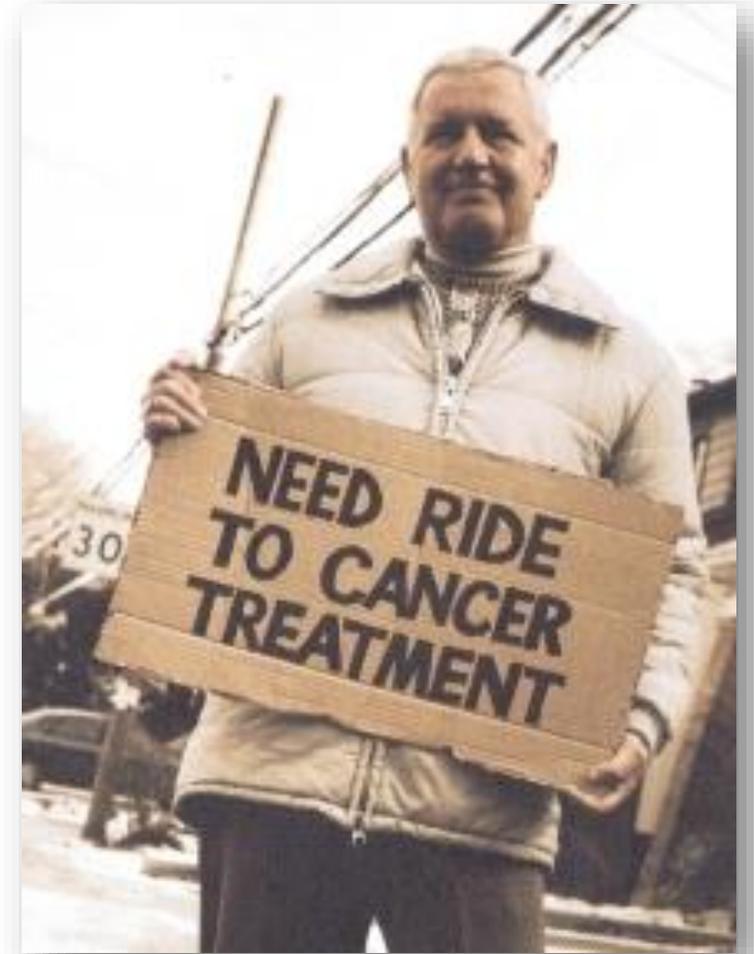
- Volunteers essential across 'continuum of care' (hospitals, public health, long-term care, community support, hospice/palliative care)
- Board members, fundraisers, formal programs, informal care

## For aging rural communities (*places*)

- Volunteering a key element of 'age-friendly' communities
- Older rural residents the main source of volunteer-based support

## For older rural persons (*people*)

- Volunteering contributes to 'healthy aging' (physical, emotional and cognitive health benefits; participation)
- Volunteer-based supports enable 'aging at home' (independence)



# ...voluntarism and older people

- **Social gerontologists have brought attention to ‘volunteering in later life’**
- **Emphasis on uncovering the benefits of volunteering for ‘productive’ and ‘healthy’ aging for individuals and groups of older people (social inclusion)**
- **Calls attention to the challenges associated with volunteering (ethics, marginalization) and the need for a critical perspective (diversity, gender, life-course)**



# ...voluntarism and aging communities

- Geographers have brought attention to the ‘uneven landscapes’ of volunteering
- Emphasis on understanding how and why volunteering occurs differently within and among communities
- Calls for greater attention to the importance of ‘place’ in shaping processes, outcomes and experiences of volunteering (e.g., age-friendly communities)



**AGING & SOCIETY SEMINAR SERIES**

**MARCH 13**  
11 am – 1 pm  
BL 201, Bata Library  
Free lunch at noon  
RSVP at [aging@trentu.ca](mailto:aging@trentu.ca)

**VOLUNTARISM, COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT, AND AGING IN BC'S NORTHERN INTERIOR: PROSPECTS FOR PLACE INTEGRATION**

Dr. Hanlon will explore intersections of population aging, community development, and voluntarism as enacted in two resource-dependent communities in the Interior of British Columbia. Voluntary-led efforts to make communities more age-friendly offer great potential for enhancing place integration, not only for older residents who stand to benefit directly from these community development efforts, but also for community leaders and residents more generally. The talk will conclude with a discussion of ways to acknowledge the social dynamics of voluntary-led community development initiatives as an exciting new area of inquiry in the study of social and geographical gerontology.



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Professor of Geography  
University of Northern British Columbia

**TRENT UNIVERSITY**

Presented by  
Trent Centre for Aging & Society  
and the School of the Environment

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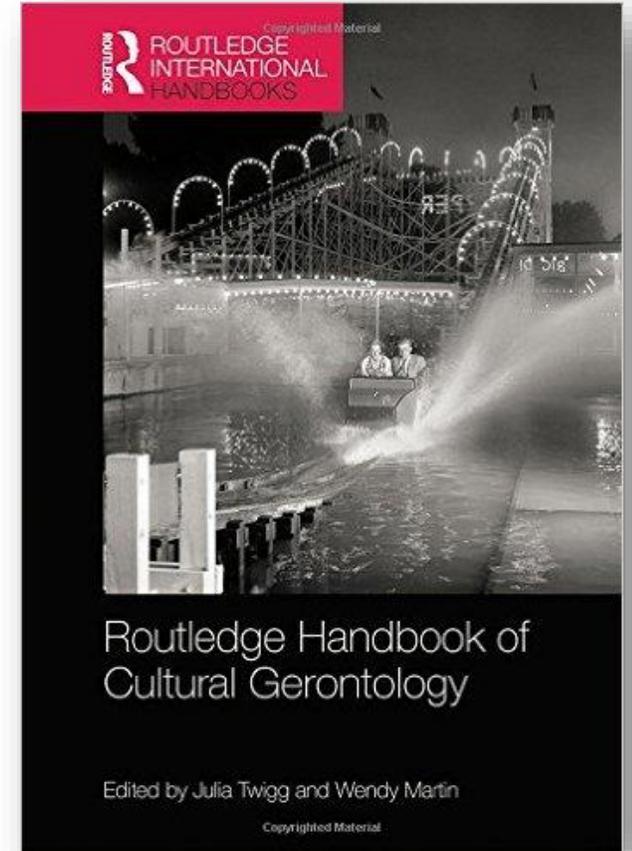
# ...e.g., role of older library volunteers in sustaining aging rural communities



# ...so, what's the problem with voluntarism?

***“Volunteering is a broad and diverse activity that has potential to add meaning to life at a time of critical transition, through providing positive role identities and health benefits, as well as addressing social isolation, though this is not without risks”***

Twigg & Martin (2015) in *Routledge Handbook of Cultural Gerontology*



# ...paradoxes of voluntarism

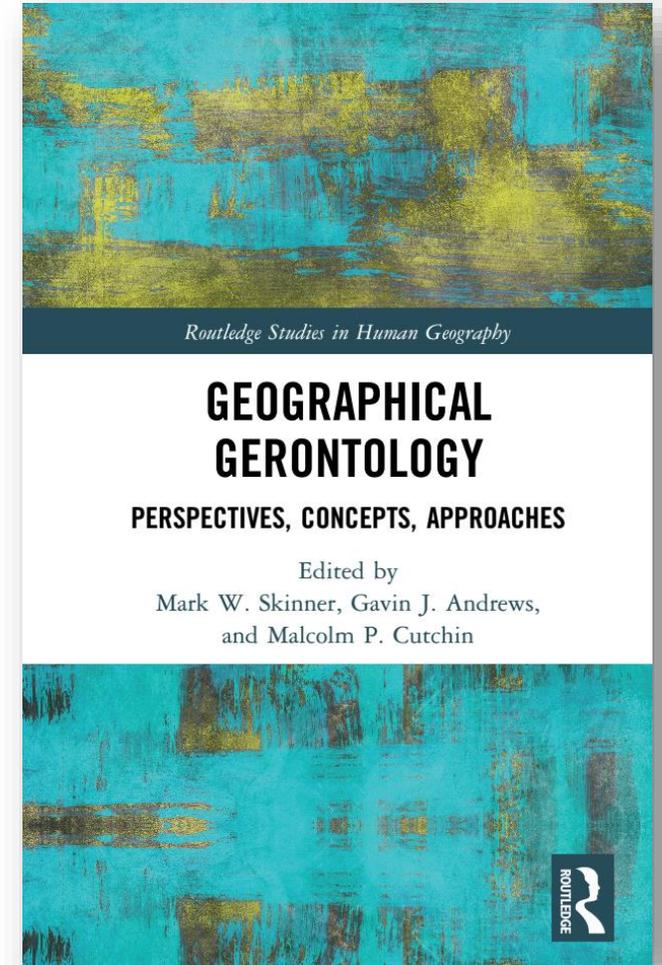
- 1. Volunteering promotes exclusion as well as inclusion  
(*marginalization?*)**
- 2. Uneven capacity for voluntarism puts some (but not all) residents  
and communities at further disadvantage (*spatial justice?*)**
- 3. Vulnerability of older volunteers calls into question ongoing  
capacity of voluntarism in support of aging in place  
(*sustainability?*)**

# 4. Current rural aging research



# ...place-based approaches

- ‘Place’ is a phenomenon that is both *physical* (location, environment) and *social* (community, process)
- Often not accounted for in policies on how to support older rural people
- Requires approaches that are sensitive to ‘place’ as a phenomena *in which* (where) and *through which* (how) people experience and transform the processes and outcomes of aging



# ...an integrative approach



...learning from older volunteers

*“I’m only one step away from needing the meals that I am delivering...”*

Meals on Wheels volunteer driver, rural Manitoba

...learning from service providers

*“Volunteering is all we have,  
but it may not be enough...”*

Community Care Coordinator, rural Ontario

...learning from community leaders

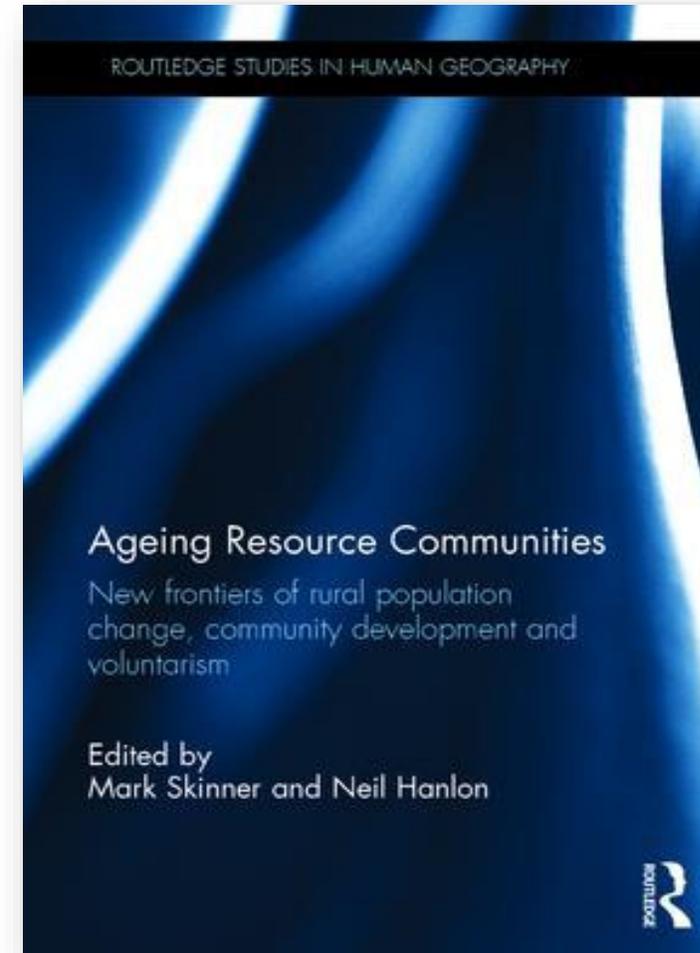
*“If you retire here, you better be willing to volunteer here...”*

Community leader, rural Ontario

# ...learning from the 'frontiers' of rural aging



**“SENIORS SAVED  
TUMBLER RIDGE  
AFTER THE MINES  
CLOSED”**



Skinner & Hanlon (2016) *Ageing Resource Communities* (Routledge)



***“We always seem to learn more from our failures than successes...”***

Community Leader, rural BC

# 5. Concluding comments



Health geography research team in Elliot Lake (June 2007)

# ...key take-away messages

- **Reliance on older volunteers who are at risk of being overburdened has potential to create unsustainable and unhealthy aging communities (...a cautionary tale for policy makers)**
- **Aging rural communities provides a new window into the diversity, complexity and dynamics of community sustainability (...opportunities to learn from frontiers of gerontology)**
- **Voluntarism offers opportunities to think differently about older people and aging communities (...integrative approaches)**

# ...importance of 'rural lessons'

## Prairie curling clubs are dying along with small villages



Al Thompson with a trailer full of old curling rocks at his facility a few kilometers east of Winnipeg Thursday May 19, 2011. Thompson finds old curling rocks from rural prairie towns and resells them, mainly to the US where the sport is taking off.

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# ...further information

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...thank you!