SUSTAINABLE RURAL COMMUNITIES IN AN ERA OF POPULATION AGING

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...acknowledgements
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?
...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)
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
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-Rivières, 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."

...e.g., Peterborough, Ontario

www.trentu.ca/aging
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 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
“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

Skinner et al. (2008) in Canadian Journal of Nursing Research
3. Evolving role of voluntarism
...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)
...e.g., role of older library volunteers in sustaining aging rural communities

Colibaba (2018) MA Thesis, Sustainability Studies, Trent University
"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"
…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

Sustainable Community Development

Older People

healthy Aging in Place

Aging Places

Skinner (2014: 164) in Voluntary Sector Review
...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

[Image: Health geography research team in Elliot Lake (June 2007)]
…key take-away messages

• Reliance on older volunteers who are at risk of being over-burdened 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’
...further information

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