

HEALTHY AGING IN THE SUBURBS

A Literature Review

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Introduction

Older adults who reside in suburban communities face unique challenges that are particular to their geographic location and community structure. This review covers the main themes prevalent in the research on suburban aging in Canada and other Western countries, to gain insight into the possible issues that older adults in Ottawa's suburbs are facing. It highlights the main barriers that suburban communities must overcome for older adults to experience healthy aging.

The key points presented in the review are that suburban areas need to be more pedestrian-friendly; offer more age-friendly natural spaces; reduce car-dependency and improve transportation structures; offer mixed housing options that are affordable and accessible; and attract and retain more local businesses and services.

The review is divided into five sections: walkability, natural spaces/parks, transportation, housing, and local services and businesses. Each section presents the key points that are found in the literature regarding that issue, and ends with key implications for the healthy aging of older adults in suburban communities.

Walkability

Walkability is an important factor to consider when evaluating the age-friendliness of a community. There are several key barriers to the mobility of senior pedestrians in suburban areas.

Sidewalks / Pedestrian Crossings

- First of all, there are a lack of sidewalks in general. This is a particularly relevant issue for older adults living in conventional residential areas in suburban cities, rather than those living closer to city centres.
- Often, there are either “no sidewalks or sidewalks only on one side of the street” (Mitra, Siva, and Kehler, 2015, p. 14). This means that people must walk on the street, where there are cars driving along. This discourages all people in the area from walking around, including older adults. Seniors feel unsafe walking in such neighbourhoods (Mitra et al., 2015).
- Second of all, the sidewalks that are present often have issues with accessibility and maintenance which make them unsuitable for older adults with mobility issues.

- Some of these barriers are inherent in the design of the sidewalks.
 - Many sidewalks are too narrow, and thus do not make space for wheelchairs and other mobility aids used by older adults (Mitra et al., 2015).
 - Additionally, some sidewalks may be too close to busy streets, leaving less of a buffer zone between pedestrians and vehicles passing by (Negron-Poblete, Seguin, and Apparicio, 2016, p. 65).
 - When it comes to pedestrian crossings, a common issue in many suburban communities is that pedestrian signals are not designed with the walking speed of aging adults in mind (Mitra et al., 2015; Negron-Poblete et al., 2016).
- Other barriers are related to poor maintenance:
 - Sidewalks with “uneven pavements, cracks, and/or loose stones” pose a hazard to older adults (Mitra et al., 2015, p. 14). They are at risk of tripping and injury.
 - The presence of physical obstacles on sidewalks also makes seniors feel unsafe; whether the obstacles are from construction or garbage left behind by others. Older adults are particularly vulnerable as they experience age-related declines in sight (Garvin, Nykiforuk and Johnson, 2012, p. 376).

Design of Streets

The way streets are designed has implications for the mobility of older adults.

- Suburban areas have an overabundance of cul-de-sacs and dead-end roads. Again, this is a result of their automobile orientation. These types of roads are cited by older adults as barriers to walking.
- Such roads do not offer a pleasant walking experience, as seniors have commented that they do not lead to anywhere and do not make a walk feel “purposeful” (Mitra et al., 2015, p. 14).
- With a greater number of curved routes and cul-de-sacs, some suburban areas have many two-leg or three-leg intersections, which reduce accessibility as distances are extended (Negron-Poblete et al., 2016, p. 64).

Security

Older adults in suburban areas have also highlighted that they would walk more if they felt safer and more secure in their neighbourhood.

- Fear of crime is a key barrier to seniors’ willingness to walk. Older adults in suburban areas often express fears related to being assaulted or mugged by other community members or strangers while walking (Mitra et al., 2015, p. 15; Garvin et al., 2012).
- Seniors have indicated that they would feel safer if their neighbourhoods had more street lights, along with neighbourhood watch signs or security cameras in certain areas (Mitra et al., 2015, p. 15).

Winter Maintenance

The effects of the long Canadian winters on seniors’ mobility must be acknowledged.

- Snow and ice on sidewalks; windrows on sidewalks; ice dams and clogged drains are all barriers to seniors trying to cross roads in a safe manner during the winter months (Garvin et al., 2012, p. 379).
- Seniors have suggested that although extreme winter weather may be off-putting itself, it can often be the lack of sidewalk maintenance that discourages them from walking, rather than the weather on its own (Mitra et al., 2015, p. 13). Thus, suburban communities should ensure that they are pedestrian-friendly year-round.

Implications

- Research has found that seniors most commonly identify walking as their preferred form of physical activity (Mitra et al., 2015, p. 10). Exercise is important for the physical and mental health of aging adults. Walking has been proven to protect older adults against health issues related to body weight, cardiovascular problems, diabetes, osteoarthritis, colon cancer, and dementia (Mitra et al., 2015). Without pedestrian-friendly features, suburban communities fail to encourage older adults to walk and be active.
- Walking is an important means of transportation for suburban older adults. As people age and lose their ability to drive, lose their licence, or are unable to afford a car; they need other forms of transportation. Older adults may walk to local businesses or services, or walk to connect with public transit routes (Mitra et al., 2015; Garvin et al., 2012). Since walking is an important means of transportation for seniors, efforts should be made to strengthen and improve pedestrian infrastructure and make suburban areas more walkable.
- Lastly, walking facilitates social engagement of older adults with others in their neighbourhood. Research has found that older adults who walk around their neighbourhood more often tend to have more acquaintances in their neighbourhood and feel more connected to their community (Alidoust, Bosman, & Holden, 2017). This is a key factor to consider when attempting to combat social isolation and loneliness amongst seniors.

Natural Spaces/Parks

The topic of natural spaces and parks frequently came up in the literature on suburban aging. While suburban areas are perhaps more likely to have natural spaces and parks than urban areas, the literature highlights that there are still barriers to seniors' access of these spaces.

Accessibility of Parks

There is a lot of room for improvement to make parks more accessible to older adults.

- Parks need more rest spots for aging adults. With a lack of rest spots, such as benches to sit on or trees to provide shade, older adults are less likely to visit parks and natural spaces in their neighbourhood (Mitra et al., 2015; Garvin et al., 2012).
- Even when parks do have seating, it is not always suitable to the needs of older adults. Park benches need to be a good height for seniors; have handrails; have garbage cans

nearby; and be made of materials that do not get too hot or cold with the weather (Garvin et al., 2012, pp. 376-377).

- Winter maintenance: Seniors in some Canadian communities have revealed that they enjoy visiting parks in the winter for recreation and leisure (Novek and Menec, 2013, p. 1066). Therefore, it is important to continue the maintenance of parks, trails, and natural spaces in the winter and ensure they are accessible to seniors throughout the year. There should be sufficient snow removal on trails and in parks during the long winter season.

Implications

- The presence of natural spaces like parks, trails, and gardens makes it more likely that seniors will walk around their communities (Mitra et al., 2015; Alidoust et al., 2017). Older adults need accessible natural spaces to get the essential physical activity they need for good health and well-being in old age.
- In addition to encouraging walking and physical activity, parks also benefit older adults' mental and spiritual health and well-being. Older adults often report feeling mentally refreshed or fulfilled after spending time in nature (Mitra et al., 2015). Research has shown that just seeing greenery is calming for older adults, even if they have mobility issues and cannot navigate much in parks and natural spaces (Butler and Cohen, 2010).
- Lastly, public natural spaces are a popular place for seniors to socialize and connect with others in their community. Older adults have reported that they enjoy going to parks to see what others in the neighbourhood are doing (Mitra et al., 2015). In the summer, seniors in suburban areas use parks as meeting places, where they connect with friends and community members (Garvin et al., 2012, p. 378). A recent national survey by CARP (2017) revealed that living near a park and visiting it frequently was one of the top significant factors reducing loneliness in old age. Accessible natural spaces are a vital feature of any community that wishes to maintain social engagement among aging adults.

Transportation

Suburban areas are car-dependent and lack adequate public transportation structures that meet the transportation needs of older adults.

Automobile-Oriented Communities

- As discussed in the Walkability section, residential areas in suburbia favour automobile transportation, with:
 - Prevalence of wide streets and cul-de-sacs;
 - Lack of sidewalks;
 - Unsafe pedestrian crossings (Mitra et al., 2015).
- Retail areas in suburban neighbourhoods also tend to favour car access, with huge parking lots that make it difficult for older adults to navigate commercial areas (Negron-Poblete et al., 2016, p. 65).

- Research on suburban seniors has found that they are a highly car-dependent population (Zeitler, Buys, Aird, and Miller, 2012; Mitra et al., 2015). They are reliant on automobiles for their transportation.

Public Transit: Low Frequency

Issues with reliability and frequency of public transit affect all commuters, and aging adults in suburban areas find them to be a barrier to using public transit.

- A key issue in suburban neighbourhoods is the low frequency of public transportation.
- Public transit schedules in suburban areas tend to be structured around the working day; buses run most frequently during the typical start and end times of the working day (Zeitler and Buys, 2015, p. 802). However, seniors' transportation needs are often not related to work; such as transportation to social activities, shopping, or medical/community support.
- The low frequency of buses in their area makes seniors less likely to rely on public transit to get to their destinations. Moreover, in some cases transit does not even go to their desired destinations (Zeitler et al., 2012, p. 7).

Public Transit: Accessibility

Despite some attempts over the years to make transit more accessible to aging adults and those with mobility issues, there is still much room for improvement.

- Research has shown that many older adults still do not feel safe on public transit. They have concerns that public transportation is not accessible and safe for them.
- In terms of buses themselves, older adults may be unable to get on/off buses safely; encounter bus drivers who do not fully utilize accessibility features; or feel uncomfortable and unsafe in overcrowded buses (Zeitler et al., 2012; Garvin et al., 2012).
- The location of bus stops is also a common barrier to seniors' use of transit in suburban areas. If the bus drops an aging adult too far from their destination, they are less likely to use public transit to get to there (Zeitler & Buys, 2015, p. 800). This is probably especially true in Canadian winter weather.
- Bus shelters are also a common topic that seniors highlight in their concerns about transportation. Particularly during the winter season, the quality of bus shelters suffers. There is a lot of litter in shelters in the winter and spring months. Older adults have expressed that this makes bus shelters feel dirty, disorderly, and uncomfortable (Garvin et al., 2012, p. 380).

Implications

- Lack of transportation has an impact on the health and social engagement of aging adults in suburban areas. Many older adults in suburban areas are reliant on their cars for transportation. This may not be such a problem—until older adults lose their ability to drive or lose their driving licence. Losing access to a vehicle or the ability to drive means that seniors find themselves living in communities they can no longer navigate.
- Older adults' health is dependent on their ability to connect with essential medical and health services. Some seniors in the suburbs rely solely on cars for regular appointments

and visits to their service providers (Zeitler & Buys, 2015, p. 800). With the lack of accessible, reliable, and frequent public transit or special transportation services; seniors who cannot use vehicular transportation are unable to reach essential health and social services when they need them.

- Social disengagement and social isolation are a major concern for aging adults (Alidoust et al., 2017). Research has highlighted that suburban older adults have an active social life, and rely on public transportation to connect with people across multiple neighbourhoods in their region (Garvin et al., 2012). It is important that the transportation structures of suburban communities allow seniors to maintain their social lives as they age. Public transit and special transportation services should be more accessible, affordable, and reliable so that older adults can stay connected to family and friends.

Housing

Suburban areas lack accessible and affordable housing for the older adult population.

Lack of Accessible Housing Options

Older adults—whether they are looking to move into or to remain in a suburban community—are likely to encounter a lack of age-friendly housing options.

- Development in Canada’s suburban communities mostly consists of homogenous land use. Residential development primarily consists of single-family homes and neighbourhoods designed for auto-dependent lifestyles (Miller, 2017, p. 10).
- As developers tend to specialize in a single type of development, they do not usually introduce a variety of housing options. Moreover, the perception amongst developers is that single homes are more likely to sell fast; thus, they prioritize this type of housing (Miller, 2017, p. 10).
- As residents in Canadian suburbs begin to feel the health effects of aging, begin to lose some mobility, or begin to find it difficult to maintain their large single homes; they find themselves without alternative housing options in their communities (Miller, 2017).
- With limited housing options, and seniors’ desire to age in their communities, many seniors choose to stay in their single-family, inaccessible, and age-unfriendly homes (OPPI, 2009, p. 3).

Housing Affordability

- Housing is “affordable” when an owner or renter does not spend more than 30% of his or her income on housing—including on utilities (COAO, 2017, p. 14). In Ottawa overall, 20% of older adults spend more than 30% on housing (COAO, 2017, p. 14).
- Many older adults in Canadian suburbs are paying over 30%—affordable housing is a key issue for them. The issue is more pronounced for certain groups of seniors, such as renters and single individuals. In the large suburban region of Peel, about 75% of “single-senior renter households were spending in excess of 30% of their income on shelter” (White et al., 2011, p. 11).

- In addition to this, older adults who need low-income housing encounter long waiting lists in communities across Canada. In Peel region, the wait is around six years (White et al., 2011, p. 12). The lack of affordable housing for diverse income levels is a key issue for older adults in suburbia.

Restrictions on Home-sharing and Second Units

Cities often have restrictions on adaptive housing solutions that are desired by a growing number of senior residents.

- Older adults tend to prefer remaining in their current homes as they age (Miller, 2017, p. 2). Some aging individuals who face growing ill-health and mobility issues which compromise their ability to take care of or pay for their homes have expressed interest in converting their homes into shared seniors' accommodation. In this arrangement, the homeowner continues to reside in their home, and invites other older adults to rent space in the home as well—thus offering an affordable age-friendly housing arrangement to seniors in the community (OPPI, 2009, p. 6).
 - While this is an increasingly desirable housing option amongst seniors, many seniors who wish to adopt it face zoning and land-use restrictions that prevent them from converting their homes (OPPI, 2009).
- Second units are basement apartments or in-law suites that constitute independent units within larger houses. Older adults and their family/caregivers find second units appealing as they allow older adults to reside with their family or friends, and are an affordable housing option (Pfeiffer, 2015).
 - However, in some suburban communities, seniors and community members interested in developing second units encounter regulatory restrictions and/or community stigma against second units (Pfeiffer, 2015). This needs to change to accommodate the housing desires of a growing number of aging adults.

Implications

- As noted by Miller (2017), seniors prefer to age in their current homes and communities. The lack of accessible housing options for older adults in suburban areas means that they either have to leave behind the home and community that they are attached to; or continue to reside in a home that increasingly does not meet their needs. A mismatch between their home and their health means that many of these adults are lacking a comfortable, accessible home that facilitates their independence and healthy aging.
- Unaffordable housing—which consists of homeowners or renters spending more than 30% of their income on housing—limits the amount of financial resources an aging individual can dedicate to other important needs (White et al., 2011). Older adults should be able to use that income to purchase other services and goods they need for their health and well-being. Thus, housing issues are interconnected with other facets of an aging individual's life, and negatively influence health and quality of life overall.

Local Services and Businesses

Some suburban communities are suffering from a lack and/or decline of diverse local businesses and health and social services that meet the needs of aging adults.

Low Density and Homogenous Land Use: Lack of Services and Businesses

Overall, the low housing/population density and homogenous land use prevalent in suburban communities has led to a lack of key services and businesses that adults need as they age.

- Low housing density in suburban areas leads to low population density; which in turn leads to a lack of services or commercial offerings in the suburbs (Negron-Poblete et al., 2016; Miller, 2017).
- Suburban communities discourage mixed land use, which integrates both residential and commercial areas so that residents have more local services available (Miller, 2017).
- Older residents of suburban areas often report having to travel by car for their regular medical and health appointments, as they are too far to suit any other means of transportation (Zeitler & Buys, 2014; Alidoust et al., 2017).
- The most common type of retail shopping done by older adults, and perhaps the most important, is related to food. Yet research on older adults in suburban neighbourhoods, such as the neighbourhoods constituting greater Montreal, has shown that many do not have access to food stores within 500 metres of their home (Negron-Poblete et al., 2016).

Large Shopping Centres Displace Local Shops

There is a lack of diverse, accessible retail offerings that meet the daily living needs of older adults in suburban areas.

- Local retail options in suburban areas are not diverse or competitive. The increasing prevalence of mega shopping centres contributes to this. Large malls tend to discourage competition, and wipe out smaller retailers that are located along local streets which are more accessible to seniors (Negron-Poblete et al., 2016).
- Local shops are crucial to age-friendly communities. Older adults in suburban areas have expressed how convenient “corner stores” are for them (Mitra et al., 2015, p. 16). Local or corner stores in suburban neighbourhoods are more accessible for seniors.
- Large shopping malls are mostly suited to car-dependent visitors, and seniors with mobility issues can have difficulty navigating the accompanying large parking lots (Miller, 2017; Negron-Poblete et al., 2016). Moreover, huge parking lots take up valuable land and reduce commercial density (Negron-Poblete et al., 2016, p. 69).
- Researchers have suggested that the trend towards large shopping centres could lead to a “commercial ‘desertification’ of many suburban neighborhoods” (Negron-Poblete et al., 2016, p. 69).

Implications

- When asked, older adults in suburban communities are more likely to express a desire to age in their present residences (Miller, 2017). They are likely to choose living in an unsuitable location without local services and businesses out of attachment to their

community and friends and family. This means that many seniors end up remaining in areas that do not offer the services they need. Since they are not likely to move, it is important to consider retrofitting present suburban areas to increase population density, and increase the number of local services offered to senior residents (Zeitler & Buys, 2015; Miller, 2017).

- Seniors frequently highlight the importance of local community meeting places for their social lives. Seniors meet up at coffee shops, libraries, and shopping centres to interact with others (Garvin et al., 2012, p. 380). In fact, the CARP (2017) survey also highlights that proximity to libraries is a significant predictor of lower levels of loneliness amongst aging adults. In winter weather, older adults are even more reliant on the accessibility of local gathering places like libraries (Garvin et al., 2012).
- Older adults continue to move into Canada's suburbs. If suburban communities do not ensure the availability of local services and businesses, many of these newcomers will not experience healthy aging in their new communities. Without nearby services and businesses that meet the needs of an aging population, suburban communities force their seniors to use vehicular transportation to access the key goods and services they need for their health and well-being. Older adults who do not have access to such transportation will not experience healthy and independent aging.

Conclusion

Suburban communities have a lot of room for improvement with regards to their age-friendliness. The key barriers to overcome are related to walkability, natural spaces, transportation, housing, and local businesses and services. Suburban areas need to be more pedestrian-friendly. They need to offer more natural spaces (gardens, parks, trails) that are accessible to aging individuals. They need to reduce car-dependency and improve their transportation structure and transit services. Suburban housing needs to become more affordable, accessible, and mixed. Finally, suburban areas need to attract and retain more local businesses and services to meet the needs of their substantial aging population.

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