

Family Networking and Recreation Participation of Older Adults in Small Towns

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INTRODUCTION

Contrary to some misconceptions, people do not grow old alone. Rather, the aging adult creates an environment which includes interdependence on others. The people involved in such interdependent relationships can be either family or friends. In both cases, a sense of belonging and mutual benefit is established. The support systems thus established create the main ingredient for a person's social life (Sullivan, 1986; Kelly et al., 1987). The potential development of a support system is further enhanced in this situation when older adults live in close proximity to family members. Recent studies have shown that migration decisions are often made which bring older adults closer to family members, either by the older adult returning to the area where he or she was raised, or by children moving closer to an aging parent (Litwak and Longino, 1987; Gober and Zonn, 1983). The close association with family members can have a profound bearing not only on an older person's daily living, but also his or her overall recreation participation patterns.

Leisure service delivery models suggest the importance not only of the individual and the supporting network of leisure service organizations, but also one's social environment. In areas where there is a well developed leisure support system, one may not depend as heavily on personal support networking (either family or friends). However, where such leisure service organizations are less developed, such as rural areas, the older adult must depend more on personal relationships to meet recreational needs.

METHOD

In this paper, the recreational patterns of older adults living in small communities (2,500 to 15,000) are examined in conjunction with the geographic characteristics of family location. Data were gathered by interviewing 105 older adults from fourteen separate small communities in Ontario. All towns between 2,000 and 15,000 in Ontario were grouped by means of cluster analysis using the indicators of percentage of population over 65 years of age, total population size, and the per capita recreational opportunities provided by the public, private, and commercial sectors. There were ten clusters generated, and towns were randomly selected from the five largest clusters.

A comprehensive list of older adults was not available, therefore a "snowball" sampling strategy of name generation was used (Babbie, 1989, pp. 268-269). A few older adults were requested to give names of others who might be interviewed and they, in turn, were asked to give further names. Approximately half of the names generated belonged to seniors' organizations, which agrees with the general population breakdown. It was therefore felt that the sample was reasonably representative. Information recorded included participation in a variety of recreational pursuits, awareness and use of local recreational facilities, and proximity of family members and interaction of the older adults with family members as well as others.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results indicate that the majority of older adults have family living close by and that a strong recreational support system is developed among them. In the areas studied, the majority of time spent in recreation and the majority of different recreational pursuits are carried out with family members. This result corresponds to what would be expected based on recent elderly migration research.

The findings indicate that older adults in small towns rely upon family members for much of their recreation. This is primarily the result of geographic and family relationships that exist in rural areas.

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