



Developing rural insights for building age-friendly communities

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ABSTRACT

Notwithstanding a few exceptions, the global age-friendly literature remains mostly silent on the problem of the longer-term, sustainable implementation of age-friendly initiatives. This paper seeks to address this gap by presenting rural insights from a multi-site case study in Ontario, Canada, that considers the influence of unique, rural community contexts that may differentially impact parameters of success and longer-term sustainability among rural age-friendly programs. Findings from interviews with 46 age-friendly leaders across five rural communities demonstrate that contextual community factors directly affected rural age-friendly sustainability. Specifically, the presence of social connectivity (sense of community) created an opportunity for age-friendly sustainability, whereas a lack of geographic connectivity (jurisdictional fragmentation) presented a challenge. These contextual insights demonstrate an additional pathway to rural age-friendly sustainability – considering the social and jurisdictional level of age-friendly implementation prior to initial development, a pathway which reinforces the need for a specifically rural age-friendly agenda that supports rural older adults.

1. Introduction

Age-friendly programs (WHO, 2007; 2015) emerged over a decade ago and have been implemented in numerous communities worldwide, often with the underlying goal of supporting older adults ageing in place - living in their own homes or communities (e.g., Davey et al., 2004; Golant, 2018). In rural communities that are acutely experiencing population outmigration and ageing (Scharf, Walsh and O'Shea, 2016), the immediate relevance of exploring themes related to rural ageing, as evident in this journal's special edition on *Ageing in Rural Places* (edited by Milbourne, 2012) as well as the more recent international edited volume *Rural Gerontology: Towards Critical Perspectives on Rural Ageing* (Skinner et al., 2021), is increasingly important. Indeed, rural scholarship has been influential since the early stages of the global age-friendly movement, for instance with the establishment of the Canadian evidence-informed *Age-Friendly Rural and Remote Communities* guide in 2007 (Federal/Provincial/Territorial Ministers Responsible for Seniors, 2007). This document increased the awareness of rural older adults' needs and provided a practical guide for rural and remote communities seeking to fostering dialogue and action supporting age-friendly development (Keating et al., 2015).

Age-friendly program structures and their outcomes are incredibly

diverse, typically implemented by community groups or municipalities and funded by subnational governments. Unique approaches to age-friendly implementation have been established (Greenfield et al., 2015), speaking to the need during emergent phases (approximately 2007–2017) to conceptualize age-friendly communities (Menec et al., 2011). The efficacy of this descriptive focus, in the absence of accompanying evaluation or longer-term implementation analysis, has since been challenged (e.g., Menec and Brown, 2018; Menec et al., 2014; Scharlach and Lehning, 2016). Descriptive analyses often simplify complex pathways to age-friendly sustainability in specific environments that may be overlooked without retrospectively examining age-friendly and post-age-friendly perspectives (Russell et al., 2019).

Seeking to address this critique, this paper considers the influence of unique, rural community contexts that may differentially impact parameters of age-friendly initiatives' longer-term sustainability. Sustainability is defined generally as the extent to which programs last, becoming permanent and institutionalized beyond initial development (Savaya and Spiro, 2012), and specific to rural community development, as program and service delivery that effectively maintains future community viability (Markey, 2012). A qualitative analysis of a five-site case study in rural Ontario, Canada, draws together perspectives of age-friendly leaders across the continuum of rural and small town

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settlements. Key findings speak to contextual opportunities and challenges of rural age-friendly sustainability, expanding on what Russell et al. (2019) conceptualized as an implementation gap between early age-friendly developmental stages and long-term viability. In doing so, the present findings advance a specifically rural age-friendly agenda for research, policy, and community development. We begin by situating the research within contemporary developments in the literature to address how community context may contribute to rural age-friendly sustainability.

2. Rural age-friendly scholarship

Rémillard-Boilard (2018) suggests that as most people worldwide are or will grow older while living in cities, there is a convincing need for urban age-friendly work, citing the OECD's (2015) statement that "... the spatially heterogeneous nature of ageing trends make it important to approach ageing from an urban perspective" (pp. 18). Buffel and Phillipson (2018) effectively lay out the framework for an urban age-friendly agenda, consistent with this demographic trend. In the rural context, however, unique factors such as demographic composition, degree of rurality, and community size may "help or hinder" the process of becoming more age-friendly (Spina and Menec, 2015, p. 444). For example, in rural Nova Scotia, Canada, coastal climate change was shown to affect rural coastal communities' work to become age-friendly (Krawchenko et al., 2016). As Buffel and Phillipson (2018) note, the literature's dominant urban emphasis may be insufficient, with limited attention being directed to the numerous implementation challenges of rural communities and small towns (Golant, 2014).

Rural communities often are not fiscally equipped to address older people's increasingly complex needs given population decline, limited fiscal resources, and reliance on volunteerism (Menec and Novek, 2021; Scharf et al., 2016; Skinner and Hanlon, 2016). The latter is seen to be crucial in the early stages of rural age-friendly work (Winterton, 2016); however, high levels of volunteer burnout often limits rural volunteer-based program sustainability (Colibaba and Skinner, 2019; Wiersma and Koster, 2013). Following from this, the sustainability of rural age-friendly programs may be in doubt (Neville et al., 2016; Winterton, 2016). Documenting the effects and outcomes of rural age-friendly initiatives remains a major challenge in this field (Scharf et al., 2016), as initiatives that did not endure may be difficult or impossible to track down for recruitment to research participation.

2.1. Rural age-friendly implementation and sustainability

In keeping with these challenges, there is a growing but still limited understanding of age-friendly initiatives in rural communities. Momentum around rural ageing research has been building over the past twenty years given the rapidity of rural population ageing, amid scholarly and policy recognition of the diversity of rural ageing environments around the world (Skinner et al., 2021). Rural age-friendly perspectives have advanced in parallel with initiatives developing in rural regions, particularly in Australia (Winterton, 2016), Canada (Neville et al., 2016), and Ireland (Walsh, O'Shea, Scharf and Murray, 2012).

Of particular importance has been the emphasis on human ecology perspectives within the emerging rural age-friendly literature (Eales et al., 2008), which is proving to be helpful in building contextual understandings of rural ageing, as integrated meso-levels (local/community) and macro-level (national/regional/state social and policy systems) contexts together influence the broader social context of population ageing (Greenfield et al., 2019; Skinner and Winterton 2018). Keating and Phillips (2008) conceptualize human ecology as a lens through which to view rural ageing and call for a greater attention to the ways in which older people help to shape their individual experiences of ageing as they live in interaction with both their physical and their social environments (contexts) as a means of understanding the diversity of

ageing. Importantly, healthy ageing is significantly influenced by person-environment fit – the differences between older people (e.g., health status, social and community connectivity) and the degree to which they "fit" with their local community context (Keating and Eales, 2012). More recently, Keating et al. (2021) have expanded the scholarship on human ecology to incorporate perspectives of groups marginalized by their contexts, questioning the assumption that rurality in general places older residents at risk, and instead encourages a deeper, critical examination of how individual rural community context may influence ageing trajectories.

Elsewhere, Winterton and Hulme Chambers (2016) found that an interplay of support between rural community programs and broader policy structures must exist to ensure the sustainability of social programs for rural ethnic seniors. Further, Neville et al. (2016)'s meta-analytic review of nine rural age-friendly initiatives found that peoples' experiences of ageing may be specific to individual community characteristics and changing demographics, including shared history, pride in place, interdependency, and ability to work together, with each factor directly and differentially impacting older peoples' ability of to age in place. Community individuality at the meso-level is similarly relevant for age-friendly implementation, as older residents' positive ratings of age-friendliness differed based on individual age-friendly community characteristics (Menec et al., 2013). Likewise, Montepare (2019) succinctly conceptualized this increasingly dominant theme: "if you've seen one age-friendly community, you've seen one age-friendly community" (pp. 801). The present case study research extends these assessments of rural age-friendly programs to consider the influence of unique rural community contexts that may differentially influence parameters of implementation success, and by extension, the longer-term sustainability of rural age-friendly initiatives.

3. Methods

3.1. Methodological background

To allow us to intensively study aspects of rural age-friendly program sustainability in a rich, detailed, complete, and rigorous manner (Flyvbjerg, 2011), we undertook a case study analysis of five rural age-friendly programs in Ontario, Canada that had at minimum surpassed the committee formation and needs assessment stages. Case study sites were systematically selected to cover a range of rural typologies (rural-resource, rural-agriculture, rural-recreational, regional, and small town) and regional jurisdictions in the province (northern, southern, central, eastern, and western) (Skinner and McCrillis, 2019). This allowed a focused elicitation of insights from age-friendly leaders and committee members in five unique and intrinsically different rural communities facing individual challenges and successes in age-friendly program sustainability.

At the time of data collection (2018-19), the Government of Ontario had funded 56 age-friendly programs, providing the overall sample from which the five case study sites were drawn (Government of Ontario, 2018). Programs executed in urban or metropolitan locations ($n = 10$) were excluded. The remaining 46 programs were sorted by rural typology (rural-resource: $n = 3$; rural-agriculture: $n = 3$; rural-recreational: $n = 13$; regional: $n = 11$; and small town: $n = 16$) (Skinner et al., 2008) with one community in each typology selected. This is consistent with Menec et al. (2015)'s finding that degrees of rurality differentially influence communities' age-friendliness. Table 1 provides a detailed profile of each case study site.

Temiskaming Shores (pop. 9920), a rural-resource community that historically was built upon the mineral extraction industry, is situated in Northeastern Ontario. It was established through the 2004 amalgamation of the Town of New Liskeard, the Town of Haileybury, and the Township of Dymond. The amalgamated City of Temiskaming Shores' Age-Friendly Program had surpassed the committee formation and needs assessment stage and were implementing social (e.g., coffee hours,

Table 1
Rural Ontario case study community profiles.

Community	Pop.	km ²	% of Pop. Over age 65	Rural typology	Age-friendly planning stage
Temiskaming Shores	9920	178.11	24%	Rural-resource	Implementation
Arnprior	10,426	12.12	24%	Small town	Implementation
District of Muskoka	60,599	3940.48	26%	Rural-recreational	Needs assessment
Perth County	79,796	2218.52	19%	Rural-agriculture	Needs assessment
Region of Durham	645,862	2523.80	14%	Regional	Implementation

*Provincial average > age 65 = 17%.
(Statistics Canada, 2017)

informative lectures) and physical programming (e.g., fitness and recreation classes) at the time of data collection.

Arnprior (pop. 10,426), established in 1892, is a small town in Renfrew County located in Eastern Ontario. The Arnprior Age-Friendly Community Program conducted a needs assessment, and the Greater Arnprior Seniors Council was founded and tasked with carrying out needs assessment recommendations. Similar to Temiskaming Shores, implementation is underway, including the creation of the Seniors Active Living Centre, implementation of a Men's Sheds program, and the expansion of a local long-term care facility.

The District of Muskoka (pop. 60,599), established in 1971, is a rural-recreational "cottage country" community in Central Ontario that is comprised of 6 municipalities: the Towns of Huntsville, Bracebridge, and Gravenhurst, and the Townships of Muskoka Lakes, Lake of Bays, and Georgian Bay. The local age-friendly initiative, The Muskoka Master Aging Plan (MAP) formed a committee and conducted a needs assessment but have been challenged in moving towards implementation.

Perth County (pop. 79,796), established in 1850, is a rural-agricultural farming community in Southwestern Ontario. The County is comprised of four lower-tier, rural municipalities: the Municipality of North Perth, the Township of Perth East, the Municipality of West Perth, and the Township of Perth South. The Perth County Age-Friendly Program has completed the committee formation and needs assessment stage; however, similar to the District of Muskoka, it is encountering challenges in beginning implementation.

The Regional Municipality of Durham (pop. 645,862), established in 1974 and located in Southern Ontario, is a geographically large region that includes major urban centres as well as small towns and rural areas, fulfilling the "regional" typology designation. It includes some of the Greater Toronto Area (GTA)'s eastern urban cores (City of Oshawa, Town of Whitby, Town of Ajax, City of Pickering) and four smaller, rural jurisdictions (Municipality of Clarington, Township of Scugog, Township of Uxbridge, Township of Brock). The Age-Friendly Durham Initiative has a well-established committee, has completed a needs assessment, and regional implementation has begun, including a senior service inventory and an anti-ageism campaign.

3.2. Participants

Russell et al., 2019 Following university ethics approval from Trent University's Research Ethics Board [information omitted for blind review], we sought to recruit the age-friendly leaders (e.g., committee leaders and members) in each of the five rural case study sites. Recruitment began through making contact with each program's gatekeeper: the individual leading the program and/or committee. In addition to being included as research participants, the gatekeepers provided support in recruiting additional committee members, typically by providing up-to-date member lists and contact information. This

two-pronged approach maximized recruitment of and participation by members of each committee included in the case study.

A total of 46 participants were recruited to the study (Temiskaming Shores, $n = 13$; Perth County, $n = 8$; Muskoka, $n = 4$; Durham Region, $n = 11$; and Arnprior $n = 10$) of which 80% were female, with a mean age of 57 years. Participants sat on age-friendly program committees in various capacities, and our sample was drawn relatively equally from individuals representing each typical category of age-friendly committee participation (municipal staff, 28%, $n = 13$; representatives from community organizations, 20%, $n = 9$; and older community residents involved with the committee, 52%, $n = 24$).

3.3. Data collection

A multi-phase data collection process began with phase one, a lengthy initial in-person interview with each of the five communities' gatekeepers. The goal of these initial gatekeeper interviews, in addition to inclusion as individual participants, was to ensure study rigour. The initial interviews familiarized each committee leader with the study aims and how findings would be used in a mutually beneficial manner (to both researchers and participating age-friendly committees). Further, they provided an in-depth understanding of the age-friendly program and of the community's social, cultural, historical, geographical, and municipal context (Markey et al., 2010). Spending time developing these gatekeeper and community relationships was helpful in fostering interest in the study and in providing comprehensive information required to maximize recruitment.

Phase two included age-friendly committee member interviews. They were conducted during a second community visit, allowing us time to thoroughly organize follow-up recruitment with as many committee members as possible after the initial site visit. As we were first reliant on the primary gatekeepers' singular perspectives, we asked each participant to recommend several fellow committee members whose voices, in their opinion, were critical to our study. Occasionally, these requests introduced us to committee members past or present who we had not previously heard of from gatekeepers or from official members' lists.

In-person interviews were conducted in each of the five communities and followed a pre-determined protocol. However, they remained semi-structured, allowing flexibility in both item order and adaptation of items to the individual community context, and for us to engage deeply in additional and relevant emergent discussion (Dunn, 2016). The interview protocol explored the development of the age-friendly initiative and its current status, its challenges and successes, and sought reflections on sustainability and on themes within the rural context of age-friendly (the community's nature, partnerships, financial capacity, community support, and inclusion of marginalized populations). Individual interviews additionally explored topics and themes that emerged in gatekeeper interviews, with the goal of eliciting diverse perspectives on the individual community as participants came from a range of sectors and backgrounds. Interviews were typically 60 min in length and were held at a location most convenient to the participant. They were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, and transcripts were input into NVivo for coding and analysis.

3.4. Data analysis

A thematic content analysis was performed on the data, following a previously established iterative collaborative qualitative analysis (ICQA) process [Russell et al., 2019; Citation omitted for blind review], which involved developing, testing, and revising a code manual, and employing dual coder collaboration to reinforce dependability. Two coders independently read each gatekeeper transcript to identify prevalent themes from which to construct individual code manuals. These individual code manuals were collapsed into one draft code manual, which was then tested on several transcripts and revised amongst the research team until no confusion or inconsistencies remained, and then a

final code manual was agreed upon. Transcripts were coded both independently, and then collaboratively. The first coder reviewed half of the transcripts, assigning codes to sections of data, consistent with definitions provided by the code manual. These first-coded transcripts were then reviewed by the second coder, who cross-checked first coding against the manual. The second half of the transcripts underwent the same process, but the roles of the coders were reversed. This comprehensive ICQA approach to thematic content analysis strengthened reliability, allowing only crosscutting emergent themes to be included in the present analysis.

4. Findings

The unique nature of rural communities, entrenched within each interview, held a substantial influence upon age-friendly program sustainability. The sense of community associated with living, working, and ageing in a rural community was perceived as an opportunity for longevity, whereas unsuitable geographic levels of program implementation – conceptualized as jurisdictional fragmentation – challenged effective, sustainable implementation. Interviewees assigned their associated age-friendly program to the polarities of presently sustainable (likely to last into the foreseeable future) or unsustainable (likely to terminate soon). These designations were employed freely across each interview and were consistent within the five case study sites.

4.1. Sense of community: the opportunity of implementing age-friendly programs in a rural community

Among participants who evaluated their community's age-friendly program as successful and sustainable, the perspective that a strong sense of community, often considered endemic within smaller or rural communities – an “everyone helps everyone” attitude – dominated the interviews. Participants felt that their region's robust sense of community directly allowed their age-friendly program to flourish, supported by numerous examples, including local grocery stores providing free rides between retirement homes, teenagers helping older people on buses, and quick fundraising of generous quantities of money in support of older residents in need. Support and interdependency were not considered to be unique to age-friendly initiatives; instead, participants reported that they facilitated its rapid and successful early development. Comparisons were often made to urban areas, viewed as low in sense of community, and to other named geographic areas that participants felt lacked entrenched community cohesion. Often linked by participants to historical efforts of the region's founders and pioneers and to the community's degree of remoteness and interdependency (although level of remoteness differed across case study sites), the rural and small town milieu, e.g., sense of community, was thought to streamline; for example, age-friendly efforts toward partnerships, voluntarism, fundraising, in-kind contributions, attendance, and municipal and public support. Keeping age-friendly initiatives at the grass-roots level of the individual community, although challenging at times, was thought to helpfully draw upon these descriptions of rural connectedness:

We started in little communities. We kept that model. It's been a pro and it's been a con because it's expensive to have offices in [three communities in the region] and to staff those, but it's been our strength as well. Where other agencies have gone to a centralized system, we've kept that local. Certainly, it's helped us to identify with the community. It's helped us gather volunteers, fundraising dollars, and serve the community. –Durham Participant 3, Community organization representative

The opportunities associated with a strong sense of community was extended to the process of completing the age-friendly program's needs assessment, in which participants typically felt that hiring an external consultant to formally complete a needs assessment was unnecessary;

and that if it must occur, it should be completed by a local resident. A local person was thought to be more likely to write a *community* document as opposed to a generic document, and that employing consultants who were personally embedded within the community was the best option for generating and maintaining local knowledge within age-friendly planning documents:

Look, we want you to really understand. We're Muskoka, we're not like everybody else. We're not Southern Ontario. We want a plan that is ours, that really fits Muskoka. We don't want a template. –Muskoka Participant 1, Older community resident

Sense of community was conclusively labelled as a factor enabling age-friendly sustainability – something that residents could fully conceptualize:

We seem to have a pretty supportive community. I could see on paper how maybe being where we are situated, that sustainability could be difficult, but I don't actually think it's going to be as much of an issue as others might assume. I think that's been a big part of the success of some of the things that we've been able to do so far. We've had a lot of support from community members and a lot of willingness to participate in the planning process and attending the events. I don't think location will be as much of an issue as maybe it could be, just because there's definitely this sense of, we're a very tight-knit community. We tend to be very supportive of initiatives that have been introduced. –Temiskaming Participant 4, Community organization representative

Despite significant variance in distance from large urban centres across case study sites, participants typically felt that their community's isolation, by degree, forces people to come together to advocate for themselves, their community, and its most marginalized citizens, seeking to find ways to fill gaps left by limited budgets, services, and/or supports:

We're a small community, so budgets are tight, so doing certain things are less feasible here than they might be in other places. Because everyone came together, the sustainability is there. There's the interest in it. There's the commitment to it. We are an isolated community, it's pretty far and the nearest communities are North Bay, an hour and a half; Sudbury's two and a half to three, so we need to make sure that we have the things that we need here. It's not like we can just jump and go get them somewhere else. –Temiskaming Participant 10, Municipal staff

This attitude was attributed to both the older population and to younger people working to them, thereby preserving sense of community and ensuring the success of community-based age-friendly initiatives:

I've seen the 'go-get-it' attitude from our older population. They are a force to be reckoned with. They don't take no as an answer. When they want something, they get it done. That is definitely an asset. But, we have to really look at the fact that, that's not going to happen forever. They're ageing. [. . .] So, when they can't do it or they don't have that energy or fight as much as they're doing now, other people are there to support it and take it on. –Temiskaming Participant 13, Community organization representative

These common goals of supporting the ageing population and understanding the community's essential nature were linked by participants to streamlined partnership development. Participants felt that the efficiency of referrals and connections amongst committee members and community leaders, typically well-connected before the age-friendly initiative was established, expedited and paved the way for partnership development with municipalities, health care organizations, and other local institutions and simplified the committee recruitment process. Without these elements of partnership, connectivity, and the ability

to surpass funding dependency made possible by the rural milieu of support, participants believed that their age-friendly initiative would be less fruitful and sustainable:

You can't do anything without buy-in, especially in a small town. You need buy-in, whether it's the chamber of commerce or the library or the recreation component, you can't do anything without partnerships. –Arnprior Participant 4, Community organization representative

Drawing upon relevant pre-existing resources and social and physical infrastructure was perceived as a more straightforward path of program implementation, as local committee members were attuned to the needs of local older residents and to the spaces where older people gather (e.g. seniors centres). Using pre-existing resources and infrastructure, facilitated by streamlined partnerships and connections, appears to have strengthened the program's trajectory, effectiveness, and ability to adapt to specific community needs. Local governments and major institutions with established connections were aware of and able to prioritize the support of their rapidly ageing population, investing tangibly in the support of ageing in place. This support and priority often allowed committees to at least start to consider some of the bigger picture issues of rural ageing, such as housing, healthcare, transportation, and social isolation, beyond the initial implementation of social programs:

We have testimonies of people who have not been outside of their homes that are now getting outside of their homes. We have 7 or 8 people that have said it's changed their lives. That's powerful. It's making a difference. People were hungry for the senior centre. That's why our membership is so good. –Arnprior Participant 7, Older community resident

Accelerating population statistics of residents over the age of 65 were repeatedly contrasted with the same (lower) statistic in the province of Ontario; further, as the tax base and municipal councillors themselves mostly were over 65, municipal support was thought to be fairly easy to obtain. Given the predominant municipal and public focus on supporting older citizens, age-friendly work was believed to quickly and more directly reach and benefit older residents, and the initiative's sustainability was felt to be inherent.

I'll go back to the population side of it. There are so many people, that collective voice is a little bit louder. There is a need for programming and all the other initiatives that are happening around it. The people are huge. –Arnprior Participant 3, Municipal staff

Committees typically approached initial municipal-age-friendly connections as partnerships, rather as confrontations or expectations of the municipality to take the lead:

We got so much support behind us that even the councilors were like, "Oh, we're hearing about this age-friendly project" from word of mouth, "This is what the community wants," so they were able to keep the ball rolling. I think that was an important part of it. Then when we wrote the plan, we tried to write it in such a way that it wasn't like, "Okay city, you've got to do everything, you must do all of these things." We tried to write it as, "This is a community project, we'd like the city's help, and for a lot of the things we need the city's help, but it's a community project. A lot of things we can do for low-cost or no-cost, let's look at the things that we can partner with the Health Unit or different people in the community and how can we make this work for our community." –Temiskaming Participant 10, Municipal staff

Funding requirements, to some extent, were thought to be overridden by community buy-in and institutional and municipal support:

Small towns, because you don't need money. The rapport with the service clubs is always good if you're doing something good. The

rapport with council is usually good if you're doing something good. The small-town atmosphere has a lot to do with it. –Arnprior Participant 6, Community organization representative

Similarly, the case study site implementing age-friendly programming at the regional level, a geographically large area that includes both urban and rural communities, felt that drawing upon the cohesion within the smaller towns and rural communities at the start of the age-friendly journey was central to the initiative's regional success:

I think the big lesson learned is if you're an upper tier municipality, it's critical to engage all of your lower tier municipalities right from the very beginning. Not as an afterthought, not doing it in house and then trying to push it out, but have everyone around the table right from the very beginning. I think it's really important to also have something that's engaging the community at the same time. –Durham Participant 1, Municipal staff

Among participants drawn from age-friendly initiatives self-rated as successful and sustainable, rural contexts were consistently associated with the opportunities of rural age-friendly sustainability. Essentially, they held that sustainable rural age-friendly implementation featured a sense of community and strong community connection which yielded a simpler, and more efficient, effective, and sustainable program, than those implemented in urban settings.

4.2. Jurisdictional fragmentation: a challenge to rural age-friendly sustainability

In contrast to the opportunities associated with rural community connectedness, the concept of jurisdictional fragmentation – the effects of having separate and unique communities within an arbitrary geographic area operating as one – reportedly added a challenging and problematic layer to age-friendly program implementation. Jurisdictional fragmentation experienced across larger, often seemingly-arbitrarily amalgamated or regionalized geographies was observed between urban and rural areas, or between discreet, unconnected communities within a given implementation area. For example, substantial disconnect was reported between the Region of Durham's rural and urban communities. Participants from the rural communities of Durham specifically felt that their communities were more aligned with nearby Simcoe County, given similarly low population density, and both rural and urban Durham participants expressed concerns that age-friendly program implementation and by extension sustainability was challenged by rural population sparseness. Similar thoughts were echoed in Muskoka, which also lacks population density and whose economy is primarily tourism-focused:

We live in a community that is impacted by social determinants of health, everyone says, "Wealthy Muskoka." Yes, the people who have cottages here and come for the summer, they have the means and come from larger communities where they can tap into the supports. We don't have that up here. The population is really deterred from being able to develop anything that makes any sense. If you're really truly going to be age-friendly, you have to decide. If your doctor can only be in Orillia, how do you get to the doctor or the hospital? What do you do when you're at home and you're the only caregiver within 3 miles and you're the sole supporter of a spouse that has multiple chronic conditions? How are you going to do that? –Muskoka Participant 3, Community organization representative

Amalgamated communities often struggled to identify with nearby towns, creating problems for efficient single-tiered implementation. For example, Muskoka's rural-recreational nature, primarily catering to upper-class seasonal cottagers, was thought to influence the unintended exclusion of rural, local, and fiscally limited older residents. In Perth County, a rural-agricultural community, participants described the fiscal and municipal focus as exclusively farm-related, frugal, and not

particularly concerned with supporting their ageing population:

It's a big farming community. That's part of it. This council just does not spend money. They do not want to spend money. People here in Perth South or any rural community, really; farmers are very independent. It's not until they have to move off the farm and move into a town or city that something like these programs would be...so, again, we don't really have a place for them to move into. When they move off the farm, they leave this immediate area. I think that's another part of why it's not going forward. –Perth County Participant 1, Municipal staff

This challenge of jurisdictional fragmentation often played out among age-friendly programs regionally implemented – a fiscally sensible implementation scenario. Particularly among age-friendly programs struggling with implementation, there was a perception that the limited funds allocated to the rural parts of the region had to be stretched farther to reach more locales that, together, lacked a united sense of community:

Hugely. Its dollars. It's dollars and its community too. You're not working with one community, you're working with 50. [. . .] It's a hard thing, if you don't have the dollars to go to all the corners, then sustainability is really difficult. –Muskoka Participant 1, Older community resident

Regional age-friendly programs often struggled to meet the divergent needs of people living in urban and rural locations and were felt to favour urban centres at the exclusion of older people's needs in the rest of the region, which was especially concerning to participants given limited or nonexistent services for seniors in those areas:

If you live in a rural community, somehow your healthcare needs aren't as important as those who live where the critical mass can give you programs. In rural communities, people were laughing at the survey because it didn't make any sense to them. People who live in rural communities are just expected to survive and rely on their communities. Our most vulnerable citizens are seniors, some with several health and chronic conditions, they're traveling the furthest, they live in rural communities where they may have had a family farm, and some of them don't even drive. –Muskoka Participant 2, Community organization representative

In contrast, the motivation for regional implementation was reported as ensuring the capacity required to reach smaller areas and streamlining inter-regional age-friendly development:

The progress would be slower in [rural communities in the region], but the key to sustainability is parking it with the region so the ultimate responsibility is at the highest level of municipal government for the regional strategy. –Durham Participant 1, Municipal staff

Some participants believed rural issues to be unique; in contrast, for others, the problems were similar to those experienced by people ageing in urban places. Despite this, there existed unanimous agreement that rural solutions were more challenging and complex:

Because of the regional disparity in what is deemed important, as a voice coming from the North [the rural part of the region], it's not always seen as top priority. A priority for us is not always a priority for the South [the urban part of the region] and public transportation is a good example of that. –Durham Participant 6, Community organization representative

5. Discussion

Despite some differences in implementation trajectories, it appears that the balance of opportunities and challenges to rural age-friendly sustainability in this Ontario case study are rooted in connectivity

factors associated with each individual community and at the geographic level of age-friendly implementation. The concept of age-friendly sustainability was readily understood and expanded upon by all participants as a consistent challenge their age-friendly programs confronted and worked toward on a regular basis. Being able to last in the longer-term was the overarching goal underpinning their work, with concerns about developing a program that supported few older adults and for only a short duration of time being at the forefront of the discussion. More specifically, an age-friendly program with limited scope (e.g., primarily social or physical programs) and reach (e.g., unable to affect broader policy and infrastructure that would reach diverse older adults) was not thought to be worth the effort, given that it would be unlikely to be sustained (e.g., not sustainable) (Colibaba et al., 2020). Among rural age-friendly committees, perceptions of connectedness in conjunction with an articulated, organized, and formally led community focus that streamlined partnership development may be linked to the program's success and sustainability. In contrast to those successful and sustainable in their age-friendly efforts, implementing age-friendly programs in jurisdictionally fragmented rural areas such as those recently regionalized, amalgamated, or arbitrarily defined may, as a singular unit, be insufficiently connected to allow the program to overcome sustainability challenges often faced by rural grass-roots organizations.

These findings do not suggest that individual communities involved in the rural Ontario case studies sites that were challenged to implement programs *individually* lacked a sense of community (in fact the literature shows that the opposite is likely). Instead, our data demonstrate that at the macro level at which age-friendly was implemented, or the grouping of individual communities involved in a single program, may not have been sufficiently connected to one another – both in terms of intangible (e.g., social connectivity) and tangible connectedness (e.g., transportation challenges) – to support program success and sustainability. In contrast, those communities involved in the case study who evaluated their initiative as successful and likely to be sustainable similarly experienced implementation challenges, but yet reported that pre-existing sense of community and streamlined partnership development, parallel with the appropriate jurisdictional level at which age-friendly was implemented, was helpful in effectively confronting those challenges.

Menec et al. (2015) and Spina and Menec (2015) have demonstrated the importance of contextual factors in relation to rural communities' abilities to become age-friendly, particularly those specific to population, demographics, and leadership. They suggest that regional age-friendly implementation may be a mechanism by which smaller communities and rural areas may successfully and sustainably initiate age-friendly programs; however, they also caution that cross-municipal coordination must be present to ensure a streamlined implementation (Spina and Menec, 2015). Keating's (2008) extensive development of the rural aging ecological literature (see Keating and Eales, 2012; Keating and Phillips, 2008; Keating et al., 2021) suggests that a fit between older adults and their environment is a critical component of ageing. This concept may be effectively applied to the present findings, in that only with the presence of social and geographic connectivity – or “fit” – at the level of age-friendly implementation may other more generic factors associated with sustainability be relevant for consideration. Further, consideration of the needs of diverse populations of older rural adults may make even more so these findings relevant, as a sustainable program that meets the needs of only some may not also be a successful initiative. Indeed, leading rural studies scholars such as Bryden (1994) (and, more recently, Halseth et al. 2019), describe a sustainable rural community as one that exhibited factors enduring across economic, social, cultural, and ecological domains. It is clear that over a quarter-century later, these comments may be effectively applied to the age-friendly sphere, in that specific and varied community factors may significantly affect the sustainability, or lack thereof, of age-friendly initiatives. The present findings more specifically articulate this, as

there appears to be no consistent pattern by which larger or smaller communities were more or less successful in age-friendly implementation; rather, that connectivity across jurisdictions, integrated as a single age-friendly unit, was important in determining programs' sustainability and successes.

5.1. Contextualizing the age-friendly implementation gap

Research exploring the sustainability of age-friendly communities has conceptualized typical implementation pathways undertaken by age-friendly initiatives, which introduces the concept of an implementation gap between early age-friendly developmental stages and long-term viability (Russell et al., 2019). Such work, drawn from findings in another Canadian province undergoing similar age-friendly programming (Newfoundland and Labrador), suggests that age-friendly committees able to draw upon community champions, engage in partnerships and collaborations, and secure active municipal involvement were more likely to overcome the implementation gap and become sustainable in the longer term. The present research provides an additional contextual layer to understanding this implementation gap concept: rural committees whose jurisdictional level of implementation was consistent with and parallel to naturally-occurring, pre-existing social and geographic connectedness were more likely to be successfully implemented and sustainable in the longer term. More concretely, they were able to take advantage of and engage with factors associated with the pathway to age-friendly sustainability. In contrast, age-friendly programs involved in our case studies that were implemented at arbitrary, fragmented geographic levels often struggled to engage champions and to develop partnerships, collaborations, and municipal involvement, and encountered volunteer burnout and limited committee capacity. Similar, Wiersma and Koster (2013) found that the capacity for supporting age-friendly voluntarism in rural and remote communities could be limited by external structural forces; specifically, economic and demographic factors of community transition, as well as changing aspects of community life. The connected or fragmented nature of age-friendly jurisdictions of implementation extends this finding, situating sense of community as a singularly important factor in the impetus for primarily volunteers to facilitate sustainable age-friendly change.

In essence, when rural age-friendly programs are implemented across jurisdictionally fragmented communities, overcoming the implementation gap is challenging and the initiative is likely to be unsustainable. Aiming to maximize program longevity, breadth, and reach of public investment, initiatives may most effectively avoid the risk of unsustainability by being implemented at the level of pre-existing community connection, drawing upon naturally occurring, pre-existing connectedness and facilitating streamlined program development and sustainable implementation. This is not to say that age-friendly programming should only be implemented on very small scales or that regional implementation is ineffective. Rather, our data show that the level and scale of implementation is most effective and likely to be sustainable when it is not arbitrary and does not exceed that across which individuals and communities are structurally and socially connected and share a common sense of community identity.

5.2. Towards a rural age-friendly agenda

A contemporary agenda for urban age-friendly research and practice has recently been set forth (Buffel and Phillipson, 2018), observing, in part, that the global climate of economic uncertainty and competing resource demands – present at all levels of government – may undermine the second decade of age-friendly initiatives. Buffel and Phillipson (2018) argue that the age-friendly brand may not in practice support older people; that is, in the absence of ongoing funding, initiatives may not have the intended effect of supporting urban ageing. Creating parallel rural insights to age-friendly implementation by extending this

argument to rural contexts is a critical outcome of the present research. As Menec and Novek (2021) remind us, though there are no doubt commonalities across rural age-friendly programs, it would be a mistake to assume that all rural communities and, thus, age-friendly programs are the same, and that a simplistic set of implementation standards are sufficient for successful and sustainable age-friendly work. Instead, our findings demonstrate the need for further, more detailed examination at the individual community level into unique factors associated with sustainability. Similar to that set out by Buffel and Phillipson (2018) for an urban age-friendly agenda, we call for a rural age-friendly agenda that, along with the developing concept of a rural age-friendly implementation gap, incorporates aspects of the rural aging ecological literature of uniqueness and best fit at the individual community level. Specifically, incorporation and consideration of social and geographic connectivity and levels of scale would achieve this goal.

Rural and urban geographies diverge in terms of growth, development, and population trends, but the rural insights presented in this paper add to the growing body of literature (e.g., Keating et al., 2011; Menec et al., 2015; Neville et al., 2016; Russell et al., 2019; Winterton, 2016) suggesting that rural age-friendly programs in their infancy may be similarly vulnerable to these unique economic pressures. Proposing an alternative age-friendly agenda, Marston and van Hoof (2019) advocate for a framework that considered a 'smart' age-friendly ecosystem framework that is scalable and adaptable to new technology developments.

Rural insights observed herein relate to connection and fragmentation at the level of age-friendly implementation. This corroborates and expands upon the current discussion in the field of collaboration and integration with policy, and so we suggest that there may be opportunities and challenges to sustaining rural age-friendly programs, particularly at the level of implementation. Given the emergence of individual community factors as particularly important in influencing age-friendly sustainability, there may be a place for articulating a specifically rural age-friendly agenda, aiming to minimize the implementation gap (Russell et al., 2019) and maximize the longevity, breadth, and reach of public investment in age-friendly initiatives.

With the range of rural typologies and age-friendly planning stages represented in the case studies reported above, the rural insights from Ontario can also be utilized by communities with similar typologies and/or undergoing similar sustainability challenges. Learning from this rural case study may allow communities to reflect upon their current status of connection or fragmentation and work to overcome the implementation gap they may be experiencing.

6. Concluding comments

Focusing on what we can learn from rural age-friendly programs, this research contributes to the literature by demonstrating the problems inherent to assigning a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to determining factors associated with age-friendly initiative success and sustainability, and that even within broad geographic categories such as 'rural' and 'remote' (as well as 'urban' and 'metropolitan'), generalizations can be problematic. Though comparisons are often established across similar age-friendly sites, especially those in rural settings, our rural insights reveal that even within such groupings, social and geographic connectivity is critical to ensuring sustainability. In contrast, committees implementing age-friendly programs across arbitrary, recently amalgamated, or regional rural or small town jurisdictions may, as a single fragmented unit of implementation, lack the natural structural and social connectivity important in ensuring that factors associated with age-friendly sustainability, such as community champions, partnerships and collaborations, and municipal involvement (e.g., Russell et al., 2019), are in place. As such, our findings align with the call by Spina and Menec (2015) for research exploring, specifically, the characteristics that may support or prevent communities from implementing successful age-friendly programs and for a shift away from studying short-term

age-friendly program outcomes.

As the research presented here reflects the opportunities and challenges of five rural communities in Ontario, Canada, it does not represent the full complexity of issues facing rural communities. The rural insights we present do, however, suggest that rural age-friendly programs in other rural jurisdictions that characterize various rural typologies, particularly when age-friendly programs are implemented across jurisdictionally connected areas, may face similar opportunities and challenges to those presented in this research.

Ultimately, our study recognizes rural age-friendly sustainability as not only fraught with challenges but also as potentially able to enhance the initiative's ability to directly support increasingly ageing rural populations. Rural insights uncovered in this research support the notion of community-driven age-friendly programs not as unsustainable entities but as those requiring attention to the critical value of considering individual community connectedness prior to establishing the jurisdiction of implementation.

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Credit author statement

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Declaration of competing interest

None.

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