



# Rural Population Research Network

*A USDA supported multi-state research project on the causes and consequences of demographic change in rural America*

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Brief # 2022-3

## Challenges and Opportunities of an Aging Rural Population

Mildred E. Warner and Xue Zhang

Rural America is aging. Rural areas have a similar proportion of children, but a larger proportion of older adults than urban America, especially in outlying rural counties where 21% of the population is over 65. By contrast only 16% of the urban population, and 18% of suburban and micropolitan populations are over 65.<sup>1</sup> By 2060, the older population in the United States will increase to 24%.<sup>2</sup> Meeting the needs of both children and seniors is a special challenge for rural communities.

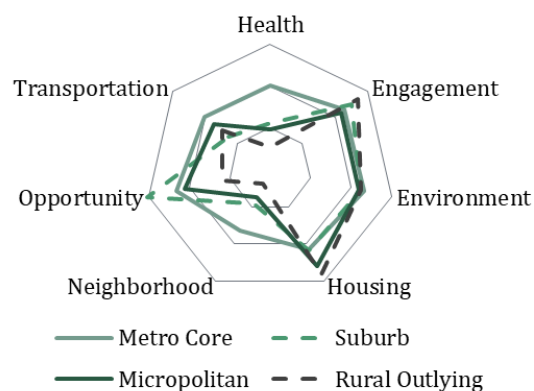
### Rural Communities Lag in Age-Friendly Domains

Around the world, communities are preparing for an aging population. In the U.S., the AARP has identified seven domains that are important for communities to address to best serve older adults: health, housing, neighborhood, environment, transportation, civic engagement and opportunity. The biggest concerns with creating an age-friendly environment are to provide adequate health care, walkable neighborhoods with nearby services, and transportation options. These create communities of opportunity for all ages, but rural communities in the U.S. lag on these indicators.<sup>3</sup>

The radial chart in Figure 1 shows micropolitan and rural outlying counties rank lower on neighborhood characteristics, health, and transportation access. Metro core and suburban communities rank higher than rural communities on all domains except engagement and housing.

### KEY FINDINGS

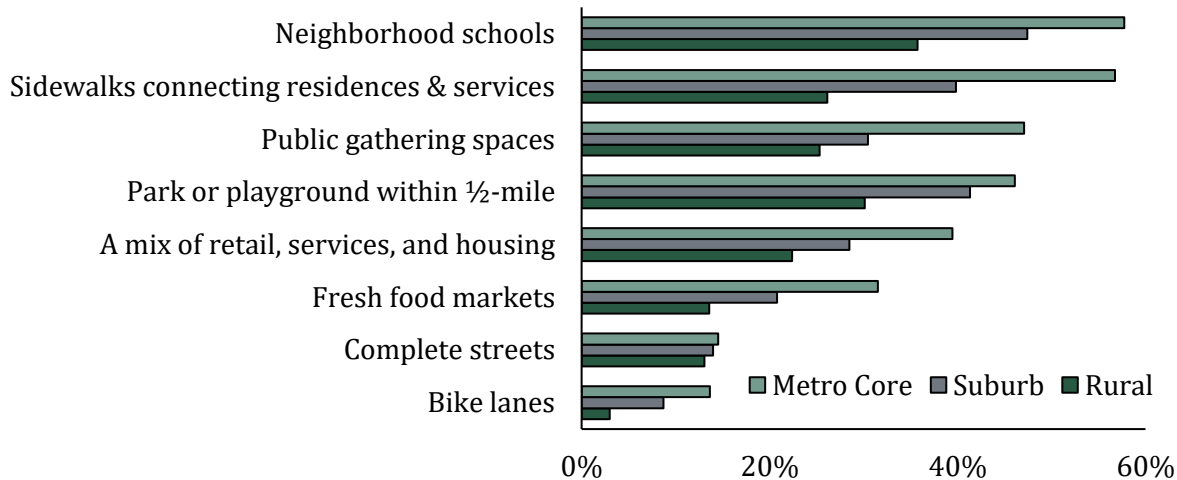
- Local government leadership and civic engagement help communities plan for the needs of all ages.
- Rural areas lack the built environment features of an age-friendly community.
- Cross-agency collaboration - among planning, transportation, housing, health, social service agencies, libraries, schools and fire departments - helps meet the service needs of both children and older adults.
- Planning, public engagement and cross-agency collaboration can create new models in rural communities to better serve the needs of all ages.



**Figure 1. Rural-Urban Differences in Age-Friendly Domains<sup>3</sup>**

*Data Source: Author Analysis, AARP livability indicators, U.S. counties, 2018*

Age-friendly recommendations regarding transportation, neighborhood, health and opportunity are harder to achieve in rural communities. Sparse settlement patterns make walkability, mixed use development (housing *and* services), and public transportation more difficult for rural areas. Rural communities are less likely to have neighborhood schools, parks, and playgrounds within a half mile of residents; and rural residents are less likely to have access to fresh food markets. Rural communities are also less likely to have walkable streets or sidewalk systems connecting residences to services (Figure 2).<sup>4</sup>



**Figure 2 Rural Communities Lag in Age-Friendly Built Environment**

*Data Source:* Planning for All Ages Survey, 2019; N= 1312 US cities and counties

*Note:* The figure shows the percentage of communities reporting that at least half of their residents have the identified feature.

## What Can Be Done?

Local government leadership and resident engagement can help communities better plan for all ages. Community plans set the framework for future action – zoning for the built environment, addressing housing, transportation, health, and recreation needs, and promoting cross-agency collaboration to help communities provide the services needed for an aging population.<sup>5</sup> Planning can help communities identify local needs and stimulate a response from government, other community agencies, and market providers.<sup>6</sup>

Government cannot do it alone. While market demand in rural communities is often inadequate to stimulate a supply response for health, broadband, and other services, together the public, private, and non-profit sectors can help address the challenges rural communities face. New models are needed that address the unique challenges facing rural communities. Where built environment lags, services and public engagement can make up the difference. The AARP livability indicators show that engagement is higher in rural communities. Public engagement can help to identify uniquely rural solutions. Public policy can support these creative community responses to help with home care, transportation, and service delivery.

Service coordination is also critical. Cross-agency collaboration enables planning, transportation, housing, health, and social service agencies to work together to meet service needs.<sup>7</sup> Schools, fire departments, and libraries are especially important partners in providing physical locations for service delivery and help with information sharing. These institutions are highly trusted and important partners for local governments.

Rural America is aging faster than urban America, but most age-friendly models are urban biased. Through planning, public engagement, and cross-agency collaboration rural areas can create new models to better serve the needs of an aging population.

## Data and Methods

This brief uses data from the 2018 AARP livability indicators and the Planning for All Ages survey for 2019 to examine rural-urban differences in age-friendly community characteristics. AARP developed livability indicators for every county in the US based on domains developed by the World Health Organization. For details on the elements included see <https://livabilityindex.aarp.org/>. County level analysis can be found at Zhang, Warner and Wethington.<sup>3</sup> The Planning for All Ages survey data are based on a nationwide survey Cornell University and the International City County Management Association conducted of local governments in 2019. See Warner and Zhang.<sup>4</sup> More information can be found at <http://www.mildredwarner.org/planning/generations>.

## References

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## About the Authors

**Mildred Warner** ([mwarner@cornell.edu](mailto:mwarner@cornell.edu)) is a Professor in the Departments of City and Regional Planning, and Global Development at Cornell University. **Xue Zhang** ([xz435@cornell.edu](mailto:xz435@cornell.edu)) is a Postdoctoral Associate in the Departments of City and Regional Planning, and Global Development at Cornell University.

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The Rural Population Research Network is a USDA NIFA supported network of scholars who conduct research on the most pressing demographic, economic, social, and environmental challenges faced by rural communities in the United States. Our current project (2017-2022) is titled 'W4001: Social, Economic and Environmental Causes and Consequences of Demographic Change in Rural America'. <https://www.nimss.org/projects/view/mrp/outline/18389>