



## Social and support networks of older adults in rural Canada

Making a meaningful difference in the lives of older adults and their families by bridging research, policies and practice

### Summary

There is a belief that older people in rural areas receive the support they need from friends and family members, buffering them from a lack of services that is commonplace in rural Canada. We investigated this assumption by conducting a national telephone survey of 1,322 older adults, aged 65 and older, who resided in Royal Canadian Legion households in rural communities across Canada. We asked older adults about the family and close friends that they knew (*their social networks*), those people who provided day-to-day support by providing advice, monitoring, and/or instrumental activities (*their support networks*), and the nature of this support. We found that:

- All respondents reported having at least one person in their social network, although the vast majority have from 5 to 13 people. The median is 10 people. On average, rural seniors' social networks are comprised of women and men, kin and non-kin, people of various ages, and people living nearby and at a distance. These individuals are the 'warm bodies' who provide the potential for support.
- Rural seniors' support networks are smaller and less diverse than their social networks. Almost 12% of rural seniors have no support networks, with a further 30% having two or fewer people that provide them with support. The median is 3 people. Support networks are more likely to include only women, kin, people 45-64 years, and those living in the same community.
- While over half of participants have someone who checks up on them to make sure they are okay (56%), and almost half have someone who does some meal preparation for them (49%), the majority report that they do not receive assistance with other tasks. Perhaps some older adults do not need assistance with certain tasks at this time.
- Checking up and emotional support are received at least several times a week, whereas assistance with financial matters and making arrangements is less frequent. Although few people get a break from their caregiving activities, those who do receive this support often.
- Spouses often are unrecognized as providers of support. There likely is more everyday support being provided to rural seniors than reported in our study.
- The majority of rural seniors are overwhelmingly satisfied with the amount and adequacy of support they receive. This is surprising considering fewer than half reported that they received assistance with most day-to-day tasks normally exchanged between family and friends.
- Although some rural communities are tight-knit where older adults are known, this does not mean they are supported. While some seniors may not need support, for those who do, family and friends are not necessarily available to provide assistance when needed. Clearly, there is still a place for formal services within rural communities.

Rural communities are often regarded as supportive because they are seen as close-knit, with people helping each other out in sparsely populated areas where access to services may be limited. It is thought that rural seniors may be buffered from a lack of services by having people around them who are available and willing to provide support.

Yet, we cannot assume that everyone who is known to an individual will provide them with support. Understanding the difference between social networks and support networks challenges existing assumptions about rural Canada and provides a clearer picture of how well older adults are supported.

### Research objectives

- To identify the size and composition of social and support networks of rural seniors in Canada.
- To describe the types and amounts of support that older adults receive from family and close friends.
- To determine older adults' satisfaction with the support they receive.

### Data

We used data from a telephone survey of 1,322 households of Royal Canadian Legion members who were aged 65 or

older and who lived in a rural community in Canada.

The sample was stratified based on regional proportions of the older rural population from the 2001 Census. Quota sampling at the household level was done based on age (50% aged 65 to 74 years and 50% aged 75+) and gender (50% male and 50% female). Compared to the Canadian population, our sample included a higher proportion of people over the age of 75, more married women, and participants who had slightly higher incomes.

The telephone surveys were conducted in the spring of 2004 by trained interviewers from the Population Research Laboratory at the University of Alberta using its centralized Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) facilities. Average survey length was 38 minutes. The response rate was 51%, which is higher than most telephone surveys.

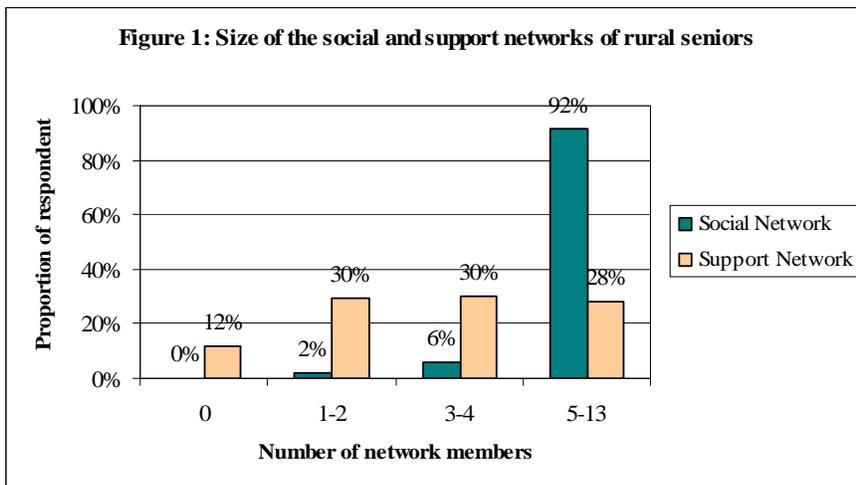
We first identified the size and composition of *social networks* by collecting information on people known to rural seniors and with whom they have close links, including their gender, age, proximity, and relationship to the participant. This information described the structure of rural seniors' social networks, and who the 'warm bodies' are who might provide support.

We then asked participants if they received assistance within the past month on each of 13 tasks including meal preparation, housekeeping, outdoor work, shopping, transportation (medical, social, necessary), financial matters, making arrangements, emotional support, being checked up on, miscellaneous household tasks (watering plants, picking up mail, etc.), and short breaks from providing care. For each task received, we asked who provided the support. People named are presumed to be part of seniors' *support networks*, because they provide day-to-day advice, monitoring, and/or instrumental activities. Characteristics of support network members were collected if those named were not listed prior as social network members. Information on why and how often support was provided was also obtained.

### Analysis

Descriptive analyses were used to determine:

- the characteristics of the social and support networks of rural seniors surveyed;
- the types and amounts of support they received;
- their satisfaction with the amount and adequacy of support received over the past 12 months.



### Social networks are diverse

Most rural seniors have family members and close friends (see Figure 1). All reported having at least 1 person in their social network; the vast majority (92%) had from 5 to 13 people. The median was 10.

Most rural seniors have diverse social networks comprising both women and men (96%), a mix of kin and non-kin (97%), people of various ages (95%), and people living both nearby and at a distance (90%).

Proximate social networks are important to rural older adults. We found that many (78%) felt that having old friends close by was very important in making their community a good place to grow old.

### Support networks are smaller, more homogenous

In contrast to their social networks, almost 12% of rural seniors had no support network,

with a further 30% having two or fewer members that provided them with support (see Figure 1). The median was three, suggesting that while most rural seniors have a relatively large and diverse social network, most of their everyday interactions and support come from a small group of people.

There is somewhat less diversity in the composition of support networks compared to social networks. They are more likely to include exclusively women (20%), kin (25%), and people 45-64 years old (15%). In addition, nearly 40% of support networks include only people who live in the same community.

### Support received varies

Most rural seniors (88%) received support with one or more tasks. Figure 2 shows that while more than half of participants reported having someone check up on them (56%), and almost half received

assistance with meal preparation (49%), the majority said they did not receive assistance with other tasks such as housekeeping, outdoor work, or shopping. Perhaps some older adults do not need assistance with certain tasks at this time.

The frequency with which rural seniors received assistance also varied. Figure 2 shows the proportion of seniors who reported receiving the task at least several times a week. Checking up and emotional support are received most often, whereas assistance with financial matters and making arrangements are received less frequently. The latter tasks are likely not needed everyday, explaining the lower frequency. Although few people get a break from their caregiving activities, those who do receive this support often.

### Support received may be under-reported

There may be more day-to-day support being provided than reported in our study. Most participants were married and are likely doing things for each other such as preparing meals, doing housework, shopping, and yard work. It seems likely that support from spouses is so much part of everyday routines that it is taken for granted.

In fact, when rural seniors were asked why support was provided to them, they most commonly

replied “*that’s the way things are done with family/friends.*” This may also reflect the neighbourliness of some rural communities.

### Rural seniors are satisfied with support received

Despite the finding that fewer than half of participants reported receiving assistance with most of the day-to-day tasks normally exchanged among family and friends, the overwhelming majority are satisfied with the amount (92%) and adequacy (93%) of support they receive. Given the diversity among seniors’ support networks, this is surprising. Perhaps some seniors may expect less support and be content with the support they receive, while others may not need much support in their

everyday lives.

### Policy Implications

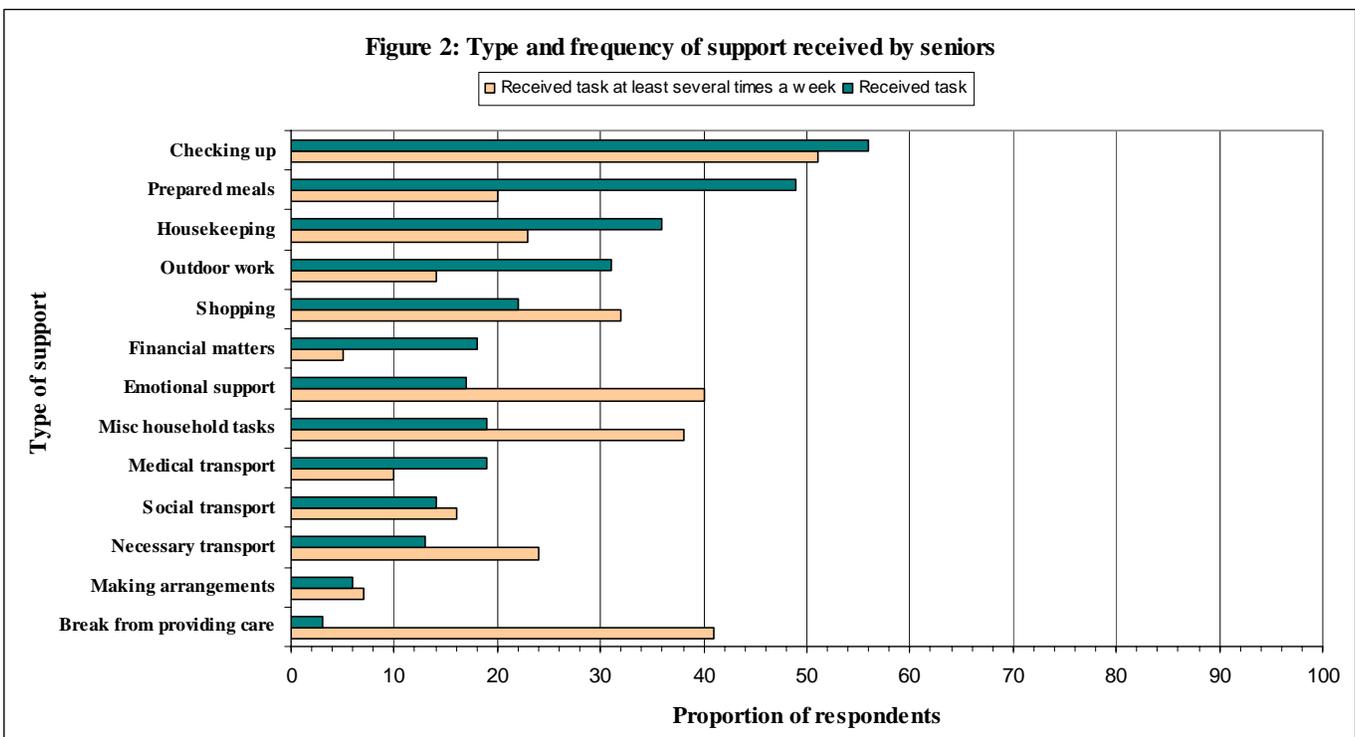
While it is assumed that rural communities are tight-knit, and older adults are known and integrated into local social networks, it is clear that being known does not necessarily translate into support received. Although there may be ‘warm bodies’ around with the potential for support, this is very different than having people who actually provide support. Therefore, it can not be assumed that seniors’ support networks provide assistance and buffer them from a lack of services in rural communities.

Current policy and practice relies heavily on the assumption of familial support, yet results challenge the assumption that

family/friend support is readily available. We found that some rural seniors receive assistance with a wide range of tasks while others receive few. Some receive support on a regular basis, while for others support is more episodic. While some seniors may not need support, for those who do, family and friends are not necessarily available to provide assistance when needed. Clearly, there is still a place for formal services within rural communities.



This fact sheet was written by Jennifer Swindle, RAPP doctoral student.



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