

Hidden Costs

Invisible
ContributionsThe interplay of age, disability, and
community context on social participation**Summary**

Meaningful participation in society has been linked to quality of life. Yet it often is assumed that age, disability, and even community context may impact people's ability to contribute. Life expectancy of persons with disabilities is increasing. Thus it is important to explore the interplay of age and disability in determining social participation in urban and rural communities. A life course contextual approach allows for investigation of normative transitions as a result of aging and those that may occur as the result of the onset of disabilities at any age. These changes are set in urban and rural contexts. Using Statistics Canada's 2003 General Social Survey (GSS) on social engagement, we determined the impact of age, activity limitations, and community context on volunteerism and helping others.

Trends across the life course:

- The proportion of individuals who volunteer peaks at age 65-74. The proportion of older adults age 75 and older who volunteer is about half of what it is among those aged 25-44 years.
- The mean number of tasks with which adults help others declines steadily across the life course. Adults aged 25-44 help others with two to nearly four times as many tasks as do those 75+.

Impact of activity limitations:

- Activity limitations do not have a large effect on ability to volunteer. In most cases, 5% fewer people with activity limitations volunteered 5 or more hours per month compared to their peers without activity limitations.
- Having activity limitations also has modest effects on the ability to help others. In six of eight age-community categories, those with activity limitations helped others with slightly fewer tasks than those without activity limitations.

Trends across community context:

- Activity limitation rates are higher in rural areas. One in four adults 25 and older living in rural areas reports having an activity limitation compared to 1 in 5 in urban settings.
- Rural residents volunteer more and help others with more tasks than their peers in urban settings, regardless of age or activity limitation. As many as 10% more rural than urban residents volunteered 5 hours or more a month, and rural residents helped others with slightly more tasks than their urban counterparts.
- While many recent retirees (age 65-74) are involved in volunteer work, increasingly they are viewed by governments as an untapped source of highly skilled, low cost labour. It is important to ensure that older adults are not conscripted to volunteer because of a lack of community services.
- For adults with disabilities of employment age, volunteering should not be the default to paid work. Public sector employment support programs may be a key to their active, productive community engagement.

Meaningful participation in society has been linked to quality of life. It often is assumed that age and disability limit people's ability to be engaged in their community. Likewise, community context may create opportunities or constraints for an individual's social participation. Such personal factors may change over time so that the extent and patterns of participation vary across the life course.

With the life expectancy of people with disabilities increasing, it is important to explore age and disability in determining social participation in urban and rural communities. A life course approach allows for investigation of both normative transitions related to aging and those that may occur as the result of the onset of disabilities at any age.

Research Objectives

- To examine how activity limitations and age intersect to impact social participation across the life course.
- To determine whether urban and rural locations influence the social participation of those with and without disabilities across the life course.

Data source

From the total sample of 24,951 respondents to Statistics Canada's 2003 General Social Survey (GSS) on social engagement, we drew a subsample of 5,070 rural and 16,536 urban residents aged 25 and over, with and without activity limitations. Activity limitation is used as a proxy for disability. Those who replied 'often' or 'sometimes' to the following question were classified as having an activity limitation:

Does a physical condition or mental condition or health problem reduce the amount or the kind of activity you can do at home, work, school, or in any other activity such as transportation or leisure?

We used two measures of participation: volunteering and helping others. **Volunteering** included time spent with youth groups, sports teams, churches, political parties, and other organizations. Given the distribution of volunteer hours reported, we grouped respondents as having either volunteered 5 or more hours or fewer than 5 hours a month. **Helping others** involved performing tasks for a family

member, friend or neighbor. Tasks included domestic work, transportation, running errands, child care, teaching, giving practical advice, or helping a person in some other way. We used the total number of tasks provided to others in one month in our analysis.

Qualitative data from two other research projects were used to illustrate findings. These were interviews from the Caring Contexts of Rural Seniors Project^a, and focus group interviews from the Hidden Costs, Invisible Contributions Project^b.

Analysis

In order to examine the interplay of disability and age we looked at eight categories of individuals with and without activity limitations in each of four age categories:

- adults 25-44 years
- adults 45-64 years
- adults 65-74 years, and
- adults 75 and older.

We used analysis of variance (ANOVA) to understand the impact age, activity limitations, and community context had on volunteerism and helping others.

¹Rural was defined as areas with populations fewer than 10,000 that are outside the commuting zone of cities.

Activity limitation rates are higher in rural areas

A higher portion of the population in rural Canada has activity limitations. One in 4 (25%) adults 25 years and older living in rural areas has a disability compared to 1 in 5 (20%) in larger urban settings. The challenges of rural occupations may result in more people with disabilities. Alternately rural communities may be more accommodating of persons with disabilities than previously thought.

Trends across the life course

Figure 1 shows that the proportion of individuals who volunteer increases with age, peaking at 65-74 years. This is a period in people's lives in which they likely are recently retired and looking for ways to contribute actively to their community. More rural (28%) than urban (21%) adults 25-44 years without activity limitations volunteer 5 or more hours per month.

In contrast, the proportion of adults aged 75 and older that volunteer is about half that of those who are 25-44 years. This difference may result from older individuals needing more time to care for spouses or friends, or adjusting the ways they contribute to their life stage.

"My mother has made 75 afghans for kids in our family... she is now 95 and her contributions isn't in volunteering activities, it's in the people she meets and befriends."^b

There also is a consistent pattern across age groups in the extent to which participants helped others (see Figure 2). The mean number of tasks that adults help with declines steadily across the life course. Adults aged 25-44 help others with two to nearly four times as many tasks as those age 75 and older. Even though the frequency of help-oriented tasks decreases in older individuals, perhaps they are still making meaningful contributions to their community in other ways, such as buying goods and services, making donations, or paying taxes.

"I don't know if it is innate or if it has something to do with our upbringing, but we feel that we ought to help out if we can..."

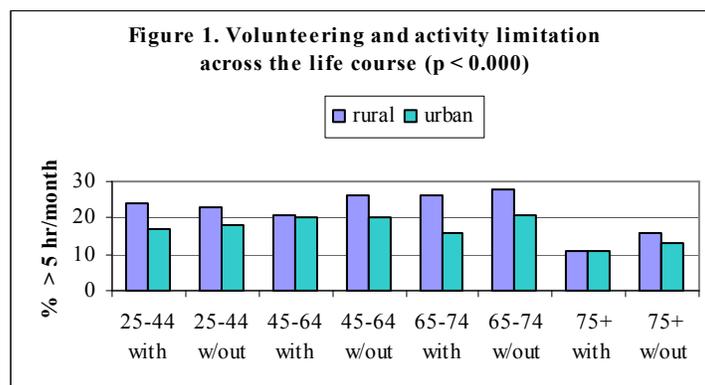
I'm in my 70's. I feel a little bit guilty because I am not helping out, but really I'm having such a good time."^b

Impact of Activity Limitations

Activity limitations have a modest influence on the likelihood that people will volunteer. In most cases, 5% fewer people with activity limitations volunteered more than average compared to those without. This trend holds regardless of age or community context.

"Not every one has the type of energy you need to go, to reach out to others, to do all these kinds of things. Some people just have so many interior problems that they really can't [volunteer]."^b

Similarly, having activity limitations has modest effects on the ability to help others, more so later in life.



In six of eight age-community categories, those with activity limitations helped others with slightly fewer tasks than those without. Young adults with activity limitations were the exception, helping with slightly more tasks than their peers, regardless of community context.

“Volunteer organizations are one of the few people who accept me as I am. ...there is a lot of satisfaction I get from unpaid work...they don't worry about your resume or experience. They accept you.”^b

Trends across Community Context

Rural residents are more involved in volunteerism across the life span than their urban counterparts. As many as 10% more rural than urban residents volunteered 5 hours or more a month. This may be because some rural communities have fewer resources and rely more heavily on volunteers than do cities.

“One of the nice things about a small town is that you can get involved in things that you wouldn't get involved in a larger place because you don't have the experience in them.”^a

Rural residents also help others with slightly more tasks than their urban peers. This pattern was constant across all age groups, regardless of disabilities. The smaller population of rural communities may contribute to greater social cohesion and willingness to help people you know.

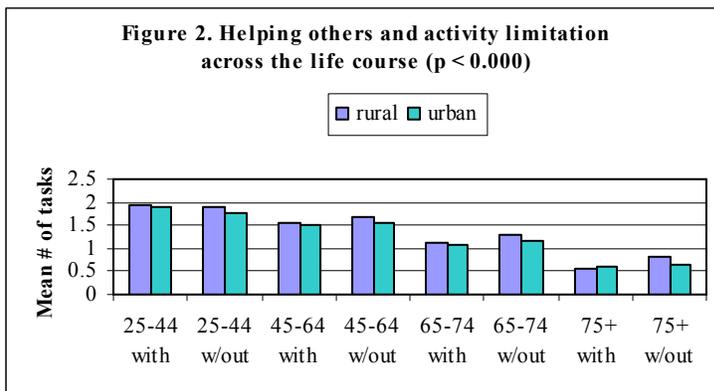
“If you want to live in a certain type of community, you have to make a contribution to making it that type of community...and to get involved is the only way to do that.”^a

Policy implications

There is a need to publicly recognize the productive contributions of older adults and adults with disabilities and to refine policy approaches to further support their social

participation. Though many recent retirees (age 65-74) are involved in volunteer work, increasingly they are viewed by governments as an untapped source of highly skilled, low cost labour. While the federal New Horizons for Seniors program encourages older adults to contribute to their communities, it is important to ensure that they are not conscripted to volunteer because of a lack of basic community services. Such risks are greatest in rural areas where rates of volunteerism are higher than those in cities. Volunteering should be a choice; given the diversity among older adults, some may choose to contribute through community engagement while others will not.

For adults with disabilities, volunteer activity is an important means of social participation. However, for those of labour force age, volunteering should not be the default to paid work. Many adults with disabilities are looking for opportunities for labour force engagement. For them, public sector employment support programs may be a key to their active, productive community involvement.



This fact sheet was written by Dustin Kolb, HCIC undergraduate student.