Rural Insights into the Challenges and Opportunities of Volunteerism in Aging Communities
Introduction – the ‘big picture’
MY GOAL

• Introduce you to the ‘problem’ of volunteerism in aging rural communities

• Provoke you to think differently about how rural communities are responding to key issues, challenges and opportunities

• Invite us to consider the implications for the Peterborough region
OUTLINE

1. Context – Canada’s aging rural communities

2. Problem – evolving role of volunteerism and voluntary sector

3. Research – insights from rural leaders, service providers, seniors

4. Gaps in knowledge – emerging questions, key lessons to follow

5. Concluding comments – implications for the Peterborough region?
...introduction

PREAMBLE

• Drawing insights from rural aging contexts across Canada

• Broad-brush strokes over the nuances of rural lived experiences, community dynamics and policy frameworks

• My perspective: health geography, social gerontology and community-based rural research
...geography?
...health (medical) geography
...gerontology?
...social gerontology
...geography (place) and gerontology (aging)
...community-based research?
Canada Census Aging Communities: Peterborough, Kelowna Among Top Spots For Seniors In 2011

The latest census figures from Statistics Canada show nearly one in five people in Peterborough was aged 65 or older in 2011 -- 19.5 per cent, the highest ratio in the country among municipalities. Trois-Rivieres, Que., was next on the list at 19.4 per cent, followed by Kelowna, B.C., St. Catharines, Ont., and Victoria, B.C.

"We can be kind of a pioneer in showing that an aging population is nothing to be afraid of," said Jim Struthers, a professor of Canadian studies who examines the impact of aging from his perch at Peterborough’s Trent University.

"We can actually show the way for innovation which will be necessary for the rest of the province and the rest of the country."
1. Canada’s aging rural communities

You know that you are rural if there is no Starbucks or Second Cup... you know that you are remote if there is no Tim Hortons

Roger Pitblado, Professor Emeritus
...rural aging is complicated

“Rural ageing is not a clear-cut rosy picture of chocolate box cottages in the glow of hazy sunshine...”

Wenger (2001) in Ageing & Society
...aging rural populations

KEY TRENDS

• Globally, rural populations are aging faster (*proportionally*) than urban populations

• Demographic shift due to *youth out-migration* (for employment, education), *aging in place* (of older residents), and *retiree in-migration* (for retirement living)
New census data show Canada has a higher proportion of seniors than ever before. Statistics released Tuesday included 4,965,060 people aged 65 and older last year, up more than 14% since 2006 — and a rate of growth more than double the 5.8% increase for the population as a whole. Here’s how the age breakdown looks across the country:
...aging rural people

KEY ISSUES

“Rural people are older, sicker and poorer than their urban counterparts”

- Health status issues
- Vulnerability and disadvantage
- Barriers to accessibility
- Distance and deprivation
- Social support and resiliency
...aging rural places

KEY CHALLENGES

Double jeopardy of “vulnerable [older] people in vulnerable [rural] places”

• Rapidly aging rural populations
• Economic restructuring (e.g., agriculture, resource and rural-recreation sectors)
• Service deprivation and decline

Prairie curling clubs are dying along with small villages

THE GLOBE AND MAIL
“There’s a sense that in smaller, rural communities where we don’t have an agency and don’t provide services, people know one another, they know their neighbours, and even if they live miles and miles away, they know people through church, so services can be provided at an informal level at the very least, but I’m not convinced that’s really the case.”

Community support coordinator, rural Canada
...vital importance of volunteerism

For rural health and social care (*policies*)
- Volunteers essential across ‘continuum of care’ (hospitals, public health, long-term care, community support, hospice/palliative care)
- Board members, fundraisers, formal programs, informal care

For aging rural communities (*places*)
- Volunteering a key element of ‘age-friendly’ communities
- Older rural residents the main source of volunteer-based support

For older rural persons (*people*)
- Volunteering contributes to ‘healthy aging’ (physical, emotional and cognitive health benefits; participation)
- Volunteer-based supports enable ‘aging at home’ (independence)
...e.g., volunteer-based community support
2. Evolving role of volunteerism
...a ‘soft and fuzzy’ concept

**VOLUNTEER**
- An individual who performs an activity of their own free will (voluntary), without financial gain (not for profit), for the benefit of society

**VOLUNTEERISM**
- The activities of volunteers and volunteer-based organizations in support of the public good (often considered a policy lever in health and social care)

**VOLUNTEER-BASED ACTIVITIES**
- A diverse range of formal/informal, paid/unpaid, collective/individual activities (philanthropy, service delivery, activism, etc.)
...the ‘voluntary turn’ (policy)

• Unanimous political endorsement of volunteerism in support of health and social welfare (neoliberalism, social democratic, UN)

• Widespread policy application as a ‘panacea’ to fiscal crises of the state (1990s onwards...)

• e.g., Third Way and Big Society platforms (UK), to ‘devolve, divest and download’ state responsibilities for service delivery
Scholarly interest in benefits of ‘volunteering’ is longstanding (e.g., Havighurst’s older people activity studies from the 1950s)

Scholarly interest in ‘volunteerism’ is a more recent critical response to the political panacea (2000s onwards...)

Part of broader interest in ‘voluntary sector studies’ across the health and social sciences (launching of interdisciplinary journals, etc.)
Social gerontologists have brought attention to ‘volunteering in later life’ (e.g., Cook & Spevak Sladowski 2013, Volunteer Canada report).

Emphasis on uncovering the benefits of volunteering for ‘productive’ and ‘healthy’ aging for individuals and groups of older people (social inclusion).

Calls attention to the challenges associated with volunteering (ethics, marginalization) and the need for a critical perspective (diversity, gender, life-course).
“Volunteering is a broad and diverse activity that has potential to add meaning to life at a time of critical transition, through providing positive role identities and health benefits, as well as addressing social isolation, though this is not without risks”

Twigg & Martin (2015) in Routledge Handbook of Cultural Gerontology
...three ‘risks’ of volunteerism

1. Volunteering promotes inclusion as well as exclusion (*marginalization?*)

2. Uneven capacity for volunteerism puts some (but not all) residents and communities at further disadvantage (*ethics?*)

3. Vulnerability of older volunteers calls into question ongoing capacity of volunteerism in support of aging in place (*sustainability?*)
...a ‘rural paradox’ has emerged

Given the uneven capacity for volunteerism across rural Canada, our increasing reliance on volunteers to provide care and support for older rural Canadians will allow some communities to thrive while others wither away...
3. Current research
...volunteerism as a ‘window’ into rural aging

Sustainable Community Development

Older People  VOLUNTEERISM  Aging Places

Healthy Aging in Place

Skinner (2014) in *Voluntary Sector Review*
...applications in rural aging research
...e.g., Community Care Peterborough

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PHASE</th>
<th>METHOD</th>
<th>SAMPLE</th>
<th>DATA</th>
<th>ANALYSIS</th>
<th>DISSEMINATION</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inventory</td>
<td>Inventory (services, supports, programmes)</td>
<td>75 agencies, organisations, groups providing services for older people</td>
<td>Secondary data: community service directories, websites, etc.</td>
<td>Exploratory analysis, electronic spread sheet</td>
<td>Shah &amp; Skinner (2008) - report</td>
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<td>(2007-2008)</td>
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<td>Survey</td>
<td>Telephone survey (volunteer attributes, activities)</td>
<td>Systematic sample of Community Care volunteers, with informed consent</td>
<td>Primary data: 303 survey respondents (36.2% response rate), complete in-person by telephone</td>
<td>Descriptive analysis, electronic spread sheet</td>
<td>Skinner et al. (2008) - report</td>
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<td>Focus groups</td>
<td>Facilitated discussions (volunteer issues, challenges)</td>
<td>Self-nominated sample from survey respondents, with informed consent</td>
<td>Primary data: 66 participants in six focus groups, completed in-person in Community Care offices</td>
<td>Thematic analysis, transcribed notes</td>
<td>Shah et al. (2011) - report</td>
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<td>(2009-2010)</td>
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<td>Interviews</td>
<td>In-depth interviews (service user experiences)</td>
<td>Older residents, carers recruited via Community Care events, with informed consent</td>
<td>Primary data: 30 older people and 14 carers interviews, completed in-person in their homes</td>
<td>Thematic analysis, interview transcripts</td>
<td>Herron (2011) – M.A. thesis</td>
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<td>(2010-2011)</td>
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<td>Herron &amp; Skinner (2013) - article</td>
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<tr>
<td>Consultations</td>
<td>Knowledge exchange (administrator perceptions, validation)</td>
<td>Self-nominated community collaborators, with informed consent</td>
<td>Primary data: meetings with director and 9 volunteer coordinators, completed in-person in Community Care office</td>
<td>Descriptive analysis, transcribed notes</td>
<td>Skinner (2007) - report</td>
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...learning from older volunteers

“"I’m only one step away from needing the meals that I am delivering...””

Meals on Wheels volunteer driver, rural Canada
…learning from service providers

“Volunteering is all we have, but it may not be enough…”

Community Care Coordinator, rural Canada
learning from community leaders

“If you retire here, you better be willing to volunteers here...”

Community Care Coordinator, rural Canada
...learning from the ‘frontiers’

AGING RESOURCE COMMUNITIES

- Single-industry settlements (e.g., Elliot Lake, ON)
- Industrial restructuring, closure of mills, mines
- Rapid population decline, exodus of families
- Rapid aging, older residents, in-migrant retirees

“Challenges of ‘resource frontier ageing’ provides unique opportunity to test theories about rural ageing and voluntarism...”

Skinner and Hanlon (2016: 3) Ageing Resource Communities (Routledge)
...learning from the ‘frontiers’

Aim is to understanding the transformative role of volunteerism in aging resource communities

• Collaborative, community-based case studies of aging resource towns in northern British Columbia involving consultations, media analyses and interviews

• Evidence of reciprocal linkages among priorities of older people (aging at home), service providers (health and social care) and community development (economic renewal via retirement living)

“SENIORS SAVED TUMBLER RIDGE AFTER THE MINES CLOSED”
“We always seem to learn more from our failures than successes...”

Community Leader, rural Canada
4. Gaps in knowledge

Skinner (2014) in Voluntary Sector Review
...key lessons from rural Canada

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<th>CHALLENGES</th>
<th>BARRIERS</th>
<th>APPROACHES</th>
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<td>• Distance and small populations</td>
<td>• Attitudinal</td>
<td>• Human capital</td>
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<td>• Limited services and supports</td>
<td>• Operational</td>
<td>• Financial resources</td>
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<td>• Declining populations</td>
<td>• Communication</td>
<td>• Partnerships</td>
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<td>• Voluntary sector under stress</td>
<td>• Financial</td>
<td>• Smart infrastructure</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Leadership</td>
<td>• Human resources</td>
<td>• ...others?</td>
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<td>• Downloading</td>
<td>• Infrastructure</td>
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*Canadian Journal of Nonprofit and Social Economy Research, 5, 41-56*
...importance of rural insights

• Outlook for rural volunteerism has moved from ‘panacea’ to ‘paradox’ to ‘precarity’ (harbinger of changes to come)

• Rural volunteers and voluntary organizations are under stress

• Rural approaches to innovation and renewal are transferable (integration, partnerships, collaboration, scaling-up, etc)

• Successful initiatives combine priorities (older residents & community development)
...emergent research questions

1. How to account for the diversity of older people’s experiences of rural volunteerism?

2. How to account for the complexity of volunteerism in support of aging in place?

3. How to ensure the sustainability of volunteerism in aging in rural communities?
...emergent research approaches

1. How to account for the diversity of older people’s experiences of rural volunteerism? [ENGAGE WITH OLDER PEOPLE!]

2. How to account for the complexity of volunteerism in support of aging in place? [ENGAGE WITH PROVIDERS, VOLUNTEERS AND CARERS!]

3. How to ensure the sustainability of volunteerism in aging in rural communities? [ENGAGE WITH COMMUNITY LEADERS!]
5. Concluding comments
...implications for Peterborough region?
...brings us back to the ‘big picture’

“Volunteering is all we have, but it may not be enough...”
...further information

Mark Skinner, Ph.D.
Professor and Canada Research Chair
Director, Trent Centre for Aging & Society
Trent University, Canada

(705) 748 1011 ext. 7946
markskinner@trentu.ca
www.trentu.ca/aging
Facebook/Twitter: @trentaging
...thank you!