



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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What Makes a Rural Community Age-Friendly?

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Rural communities across the U.S. are aging rapidly, reshaping the social and economic landscape of small towns.¹ As younger people move away for work and opportunity, older adults are left to navigate shrinking services, limited transportation, and declining local resources, often with fewer supports than their urban counterparts. This shift is more than a demographic trend; it threatens the resilience of entire communities. Aging residents are vital contributors to local economies, volunteerism, and civic life², yet without the means to live safely and meaningfully where they call home, the social fabric of rural America may begin to fray. For state and local policymakers, the questions are urgent: How can small rural towns remain viable as their populations grow older? What makes a rural community age-friendly? Addressing this challenge is essential not only for older residents, but for the sustainability and vitality of rural life itself.

This brief draws on findings from 2022 study of four small rural towns in Iowa, based on in-depth interviews with 25 older adults over the age 65; and 36 local stakeholders, including community leaders and service providers. It examines how physical and social environments in the community, as well as local services, shape the ability of older adults to age in place. The goal is to highlight the key factors that influence rural livability for aging populations, and to inform public policies in terms of strategies to strengthen age-friendly rural communities.

Rethinking “Age-Friendly” for Rural Realities

Although the World Health Organization’s age-friendly community framework was designed as a holistic model, it remains largely urban-focused, emphasizing infrastructure and formal services such as transportation, housing, and healthcare. However, this approach often

KEY FINDINGS

- The age-friendly community framework must be adapted to rural contexts and baby boomers’ expectations.
- Local services support aging in place, but strong social networks often compensate when those services are limited.
- Social connection is central to rural livability, enabling older adults to remain independent, engaged, and valued in their communities.
- Effective policy should build on local strengths investing in volunteer networks, gathering spaces and informal support.

overlooks what sustains livability in small rural towns: the strength of local relationships, informal support, and a shared “culture of caring”.³ In rural Iowa towns, where resources are limited, age-friendliness emerges less from new facilities and more from everyday acts of connection. Examples of this include neighbors checking in on seniors, churches organizing shared meals, and local leaders going beyond formal roles to help older residents.

“... you know, people kind of notice if you’re not around. [Senior couple]”

“... you get a sense of security ... you know that you can trust your neighbor... everyone’s got an eye out and everyone looks in, and if there is a problem, it’s a phone call ... [Stakeholder couple, community development]”

Yet, baby boomers bring changing expectations to these communities, seeking more diverse and active forms of engagement than earlier generations.

“Most of those [older] folks, their social life growing up was getting together with church, family, and playing cards and bingo, those types of things, whereas in my era we didn’t really get into that as much. [Stakeholder, senior center]”

Adapting age-friendly policies to recognize both traditional informal networks and these emerging generational preferences can make rural communities more inclusive and resilient without large-scale investments.

When Services Fall Short, Social Ties Step In

Access to healthcare, housing, and transportation is vital for aging in place, but rural residents often find that gaps in these services are bridged through informal help. In the four Iowa towns studied, senior housing and in-home care were available only in some locations, while public transportation operated only on limited routes and schedules. Medical facilities ranged from small local clinics to a single community hospital; and only a few towns had senior centers or regular social programs. In this context, neighbors and volunteers routinely filled unmet needs, and some were met within peer networks.

“... there is always a neighbor or somebody who will bring you. ...if somebody needs a drive you just call someone to pick you up, help you out of the car or whatever. [Senior]”

“My neighbor, he is 92 and she’s like 88 or 89. ... she’d call me when she got groceries and I’d help her carry them in her house and put stuff away, and my husband shovels her snow and mows for them. [Stakeholder, education]”

These everyday acts of support demonstrate that social ties are powerful resource. Strengthening such local initiatives without overburdening informal support providers can help maintain independence among older adults even when formal services are limited.

The Power of Connection in Small-Town Life

For many older residents, social belonging, rather than physical amenities, often determines their ability and desire to remain in their communities as they age.⁴ In the Iowa towns studied, the local “social atmosphere” proved as significant as service availability. Routine visits to locally staffed clinics, grocery stores, or gas stations reinforce a sense of belonging and care. As one older woman explained:

“... [They] take care of the patients like they’re your family, because you know the people ... Because it’s a small community. [Senior]”

In one town, staff at a locally owned gas station assist older clients with fueling, window washing, and vehicle maintenance. The small scale of rural towns further enhances safety and convenience, enabling older adults to continue driving and parking easily, allowing

them to remain socially engaged.

“... for an older person, it’s easier to get around in a small town, you can still drive, while in the city... just forget it. [Senior]”

Local peer friendships often provide more meaningful and sustainable support than family ties in distant cities, sometimes even motivating older adults to return to their rural hometowns after a family-related migration.

“... My sister, she moved away 12 years ago, her and her husband ... to be near their children and grandchildren, and her husband died three years ago, and she actually rented an apartment here in town two months ago. ... her grandkids are getting older now. ... they don’t need her like they did initially. [Stakeholder, senior center]”

Now she is a part of a social group of older widows in town, who often socialize but also help each other, if needed.

Building on Rural Community Strengths: Policy Recommendations

In small rural towns, the foundation of age-friendliness lies not in costly infrastructure projects, but in the everyday relationships and local institutions that connect people. Community places such as cafés, libraries, community centers, and churches serve as vital “third places” where residents gather.⁵ Local leaders, volunteers, and organizations already play a central role in maintaining these networks, often stepping beyond formal duties to ensure that older residents feel included and safe. To strengthen these existing forms of social capital, policymakers can take practical steps to reinforce the already existing community bonds.

- Support community gathering spaces by providing small grants or partnerships to sustain local libraries, cafés, community centers, and church-based programs that foster connections.
- Strengthen volunteer networks by offering training, recognition, and minor reimbursements (e.g., for fuel or meals) to sustain informal support and peer companionship. These could be modeled on the existing Senior Companion program by AmeriCorps Seniors.
- Engage older residents in planning by including them in local advisory boards or needs assessments, particularly to understand the evolving expectations of baby boomers.

Data and Methods

This brief draws on qualitative research conducted in 2022 in four purposively selected small rural towns in Iowa, including in-depth interviews with 25 older adults aged 65+ and 36 local stakeholders. Interview data were analyzed to identify common themes and differences across communities, highlighting key factors that make rural towns age-friendly. For more information refer to: “What Makes a Rural Community Age-Friendly? Insights into Aging in Place in Small Iowa Towns.” *Journal of Aging and Social Policy* 37(6). <https://doi.org/10.1080/08959420.2025.2478341>

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