

Chapter 12

How Age-Friendly Are Cities? Measuring Age-Friendliness with a Composite Index

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ABSTRACT

The chapter introduces the Age-friendly City Index as a way of measuring the age-friendliness of urban environments. The proposed index assesses the dimensions of outdoor spaces and transportation as they are perceived and evaluated by older people, residents of the fourteen biggest towns in the Czech Republic. The dimensions and items included in the index are constructed upon the theoretical framework proposed by the World Health Organisation Global Age-friendly Cities Project. Validation of the results of the index is based on experimental open-ended question analysis. The resulting categories confirm the importance of greenery and aesthetics for the age-friendly concept, and confirm the rankings of cities obtained via the composite index. In addition, comparison with similar measures tested in Canada and Hong Kong are discussed, and the necessity of backing up index measures with policy analysis and general structural support is argued for.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades there has been a “senior friendly boom” (Lui et al., 2009, p. 116): an increase in interest in the strategies, practices, services, products, and processes that reflect the specific needs of ageing people and which should help to increase their quality of life. The environment, a factor mediating the experience of aging and a key component of a positive approach to managing the challenges of population aging at the aggregate level, is also a prominent feature in such a list. Various sources talk about towns and communities friendly to every age (age-friendly cities / communities), liveable communities, elder-friendly communities, a lifetime house or lifetime housing, lifetime neighbourhoods (Lui et al., 2009; Harding 2007; Pynoos, Caraviello, & Cicero, 2009), and even an age-friendly world (see www.agefriendlyworld.org). These concepts serve as umbrella terms for building a favourable environment (especially, but not only) for older people (Lindenberg, & Westendorp, 2015; Moulaert, & Garon, 2015).

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They are built on a consensus on the need to support aging individuals so that they can remain (age) in their natural communities as long as they want to, or for as long as it is possible (Scharlach, 2009), providing that such support has positive effects, both economic and social, on the individual and societal levels. The idea of “age friendliness” is at the same time an expression of socially inclusive policies which not only provide a place of care and support services, but also guarantee a space in which positive public opinion is constructed and non-discriminatory attitudes affecting the well-being of seniors are strengthened. Its characteristic feature is its multidimensionality, which includes the physical and social environment, ideally integrated with each other by means of appropriate policies, services, and structures. At least within Western (or Global Northern) societies there is a reasonable consensus on what features constitute the age-friendliness of a particular place (Levasseur et al. 2015; Lui, Everingham, Warburton, Cuthill, & Bartlett, 2009; Lindenberg & Westendorp, 2015). The World Health Organisation Guide “Global Age-friendly Cities” (2002) sorts these essential features into eight dimensions: housing, social participation, respect and social inclusion, civic participation, communication, community support and health services, outdoor spaces and buildings, and transportation.

However a more critical perspective on what has been termed ‘age-friendly cities and communities’ has recently been adopted by academia (Buffel, Phillipson, & Scharf, 2012) along with other important bodies and platforms, such as the International Federation on Ageing (2015). They call for increasing awareness of the profound changes in population and the need to increase the quality of life of individuals by shifting the focus from questions such as ‘What is an ideal city/community for older people?’ to the question of ‘How age-friendly are cities and communities?’. Research into the environmental determinants of quality of life in later life is abundant (Menec, & Novicki 2014; Burton, Mitchell, & Stride, 2011; Bowling, & Stafford, 2007; Bramson, Pretty, & Chipuer, 2002; Wight, Ko, & Aneshensel 2011; Beard et. al., 2009; cf. recent overview by Levasseur et al. 2015), but studies assessing the actual physical environment as a subject are much rarer (cf. Moulaert, & Garon, 2015), especially those using a quantitative approach (Wong, Chau, Cheung, Phillips, & Woo, 2015; “*Age-friendly Cities*”, 2009), and those within the context of environmental gerontology (Wahl, & Weisman, 2003; Kendig, 2003). In this chapter, we propose using a composite index measure to answer the question “How age-friendly are cities?” in a comparative manner, using a nation-wide and representative survey of older residents of the fourteen biggest cities in the Czech Republic.

BACKGROUND

Age-Friendliness as a Behind-Policy Concept

Everything that happens, happens somewhere, in some place (Gieryn, 2000), and as about half of the world’s population lives in urban areas, the “somewhere” for many is a city. In Europe, this trend is even more pronounced, as, in 2030, about 80% of Europeans will live in cities (“State of World”, 2007). With the co-occurring unprecedented ageing of the world’s population, it could be said without much exaggeration that the future belongs to older people in cities (Phillipson, 2010). Since the preference of older people tends to be for ageing in place (Lansperly, 2002), the nature of the immediate social and physical environment is of increasing importance (Wahl, & Lang, 2003; Wiles, Leibling, Guberman, Reeve, & Allen, 2011; Bowling, & Dieppe, 2005; Fernández-Carro, & Evandrou, 2014), both for empirical study and the praxis of policymakers and care providers (Kendig, 2003). The concept of age-friendliness has

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