



Aging and Age-Friendly Policy in Ontario's Mid-Sized Cities

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Introduction

In September 2015, officials from Statistics Canada reported that Canadians aged 65 and older officially outnumbered those under 15 (Statistics Canada, 2015). This is, in part, due to the myriad of societal advances that have allowed life expectancy to rise dramatically over the past century. It is also the result of declining birth rates, which have fallen across the country, and remained predominantly below the replacement rate. Alongside changes to birth and death tendencies, the increase of personal mobility has resulted in the select migration of younger educated adults away from smaller, peripheral towns (Townshend & Walker, 2015). Together these changes have left many of Canada's cities and towns with a significantly higher proportion of older adults, which in turn can lead to even lower birth rates and an even older population.

An aging population challenges the viability of economic systems, as older citizens are dependent on a smaller working population (Nefs et al., 2013). Those in retirement tend to pay lower income taxes as they are not working, thereby decreasing overall tax revenue. At the same time, government spending on health care and pensions will have to rise to meet the needs of the aging population. The combination of increased spending obligations and decreased tax revenue is a major source for concern. It could result in higher income, sales and corporate taxes. The transition of the baby boom generation from producers to consumers, and ultimately, to dependents will also lead to a shortage of workers, slower labour force growth and, inevitably, much slower economic growth. Beyond the economic uncertainties, an aging population faces social challenges such as increased inequality as well as increased physical challenges in the built environment.

The importance of the local community is reflected in the overwhelming desire of older adults to maintain their independence as they age, often expressed as the desire to 'age-in-place' (Hodge, 2008). As people age, they are increasingly likely to experience some kind of

impairment (physical, sensory or cognitive) or reduced mobility. Researchers note that an aging individual's conceptual world shrinks due to limited mobility, decreasing physical and cognitive abilities, and perceived psychological factors (Myers, Cyarto, & Blanchard, 2005). Theoretically, this reduced ability means that an individual is more likely to be impacted by barriers in their local environment (Lawton, 1982). For example, an older adult losing their driver's license in a car-dependent suburb would have a much greater impact on their independence than in a walkable neighbourhood. Other barriers could include aspects related to mobility, access to quality services and continued social involvement. Further research has confirmed that impacts affecting older adults' independence, sense of dignity and overall quality of life often are shown to be a result of factors at the community level like quality housing, transportation, access to services and social connections (Plouffe & Kalache, 2010; Thomas & Blanchard, 2009). Therefore, it follows that the local community becomes an ideal space for intervention. This has been reflected in the World Health Organization's (WHO) policy push for "age-friendly cities" (AFC). The eight domains determined by the WHO as integral to building an AFC are: transportation; housing; social participation; respect and social inclusion; civic participation and employment; communication and information; community support and health services; and outdoor spaces and buildings. The WHO recognizes that, as we grow older, our physical and relational environment plays an even more significant role in our quality of life.

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The international recognition and commitment to age-friendly cities and the aging of the Canadian population has called into question how prepared the national, provincial and local governments are to support the

needs of such a heterogeneous population. While national and provincial level planning on macro level issues like pensions and healthcare are commonplace, these debates neglect how policies play out on the ground in an uneven urban landscape such as Canada (Hodge, 2008). Large growing Canadian cities with populations over 500,000 attract younger, mobile Canadians as well as the majority of immigrants. As a result, they are not experiencing the same aging phenomenon as many other Canadian communities. The most significant demographic shifts towards an aging population are occurring in small (population 10,000-50,000) and mid-sized (population 50,000-500,000) cities. These cities often have fewer resources to examine, evaluate and respond to local challenges than their big city counterparts. Small cities are most affected by aging, but may lack the resources to respond. Large cities may be more likely to have the fiscal resources for policies and programming for older adults, however the needs of an aging population may not be as prominent an issue, considering that the growth rate of older adults in those communities is relatively lower than for small to mid-sized cities.

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Mid-sized cities, on the other hand, are aging and while they may not have the resources of large cities, they do have more capacity than small cities to develop and implement comprehensive policy measures. In addition, mid-sized cities have the advantage of being small enough to implement truly local, contextualized policies that respond to unique needs of individual neighbourhoods. In contrast, large cities might face greater difficulty implementing local solutions and are more likely to adopt a one-size fits all approach. With that in mind, we believe that mid-sized Canadian cities are in a unique position to advance the state of knowledge

of age-friendly policy, shape places that offer a high quality of life to all citizens and help build a prosperous economic market for goods and services related to older people. In this paper, we add to the discourse by evaluating the extent of the aging phenomenon in Ontario's mid-sized cities and discussing the opportunities and challenges of current and future policy.

Making the case

Before anything else, it is important to gauge whether mid-sized cities in Ontario are in fact aging and to what extent they are expected to age. In Canada, population projections are produced and published regularly at the federal, provincial and territorial level by Statistics Canada and at the census division level by some provincial ministries of finance. However, once the jurisdictional scale moves to the local level, there is no single organization that produces population projections. This means that municipalities are left to their own devices to calculate these figures. This has resulted in a wide range of methods, assumptions and levels of accuracy in forecasting populations. The lack of methodological consistency across cities makes municipal comparison ineffectual and has implications for a regional understanding of development, competition, collaboration, and infrastructure and social service needs.

In order to examine and compare prospective aging in Ontario's municipalities, we calculated projections for 159 municipalities, with a population above 10,000, using the share-capture model¹. Using 2013 population estimates as a base, five-year age cohort projections were calculated up to the year 2036.

1. The share-capture approach, which assumes that the local municipal share of a surrounding region's population will remain consistently proportional into the future, has consistently been found to be the best alternative at the local scale (Hartt & Woudsma, 2014; Smith & Shahidullah, 1995; Wilson, 2014). As this method is only possible with available projections for the surrounding region, the analysis relied upon existing population projections acquired from the Ontario Ministry of Finance (2013).

Table 1: Average proportion of adults aged 65+ (2013, 2036) in small, mid and large Ontario cities

| City Size | Average Portion of 65+ | | Percent Change |
|-----------|------------------------|------|----------------|
| | 2013 | 2036 | |
| Small | 18 | 31 | 67 |
| Mid | 15 | 25 | 67 |
| Large | 13 | 21 | 63 |

Comparing Ontario cities by size, Table 1 shows that the average proportion of adults aged 65 and over in small cities is expected to grow 67% from a proportion of 18% to 31%. In mid-sized cities, the change in older adults is also expected to increase by 67% from 15% to 25%. This means that, on average, one quarter of the entire population of a mid-size city in Ontario is expected to be over 65 years of age in 2036. The change in large cities is almost as high as the proportion of older adults is expected to change from 13% to 21%.

Table 2: List of Ontario mid-sized cities with highest and lowest proportion of adults 65+

| Oldest | | | |
|------------------|------|------|----------------|
| City | 2013 | 2036 | Percent Change |
| Kawartha Lakes | 22 | 36 | 64 |
| Norfolk County | 20 | 36 | 79 |
| Sault Ste. Marie | 20 | 33 | 61 |
| Thunder Bay | 18 | 33 | 79 |
| Sarnia | 20 | 32 | 60 |
| Newest | | | |
| City | 2013 | 2036 | Percent Change |
| Milton | 8 | 12 | 47 |
| Ajax | 9 | 16 | 77 |
| Halton Hills | 12 | 18 | 49 |
| Whitby | 11 | 19 | 80 |
| Aurora | 11 | 20 | 78 |

Table 2 takes a closer look at the projections for Ontario's mid-sized cities and details the expected oldest and youngest communities. In 2036, our results show that Kawartha Lakes and Norfolk County are both expected to have 36% of their population made up of adults over 65 years of age. Sault Ste. Marie, Thunder Bay and Sarnia are all also expected to have proportions of older adults of over 30%. In all five cases, this represents at least a 60% change from 2013 estimates. In 2036, the projected youngest cities in Ontario include Milton (12%), Ajax (16%), Halton Hills (18%), Whitby (19%) and Aurora (20%). Although older adults are expected to make up a smaller proportion of the population, these communities will still experience a significant change in the makeup of their population. The change in proportion of older adults in these communities will range from almost 50% to 80%, and therefore, they need to plan accordingly.

As our results show, it is not a question of whether municipalities in Ontario are aging, but *how much* and *how fast*. As we outlined in the introduction, an aging population can lead to a number of economic, socioeconomic and social challenges. The potential mismatch of needs and services not only threatens municipal fiscal health, but also the quality of life of municipalities' residents. It is well documented that these trends are happening across the Western world and many communities are unsure of how to react and how to prepare. Although there is a significant amount of literature and research on the aging phenomenon, little to no work has been done regarding the monitoring and evaluation of policy. There is a unique opportunity for Canada's mid-sized cities to become world leaders in age-friendly policy, while making their own communities a better, and more age-friendly, place to live. Before our concluding recommendations, we will first examine the challenges and opportunities in existing age-friendly policy in Ontario.

Policy implications

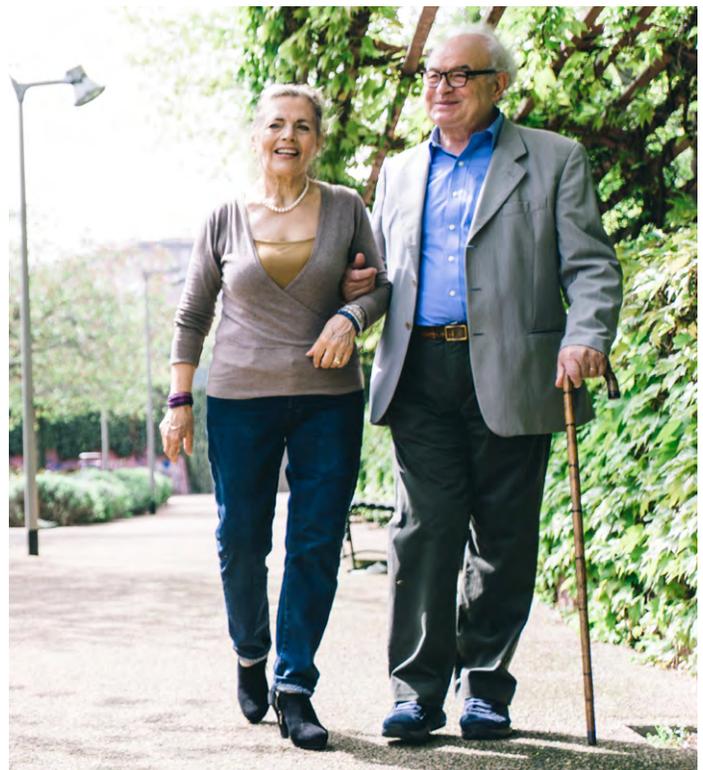
The Province of Ontario has been crucial in funding and advancing age-friendly city (AFC) policy. In 2015, the Government of Ontario invested \$1.5 million in age-friendly community planning projects. Grants ranged from up to \$25,000 for municipalities with populations under 20,000; up to \$35,000 for those with 20,000-99,999 residents; and up to \$50,000 for those with over 100,000 residents (Ontario Seniors Secretariat, 2013). The provincial grants allowed local and regional municipalities to undertake the non-statutory age-friendly policy exercise without having to spend a significant portion of their own municipal budget. However, an AFC plan is a non-statutory requirement, unlike an Official Plan for example, which is required through the Provincial Planning Act. Without changes to the existing process, AFC plans will most likely continue to be restricted by available funds and personnel. It is also currently unclear whether the Province will reinstitute the age-friendly grant program. With the release of the Provincial Budget in May 2017, there are no additional commitments to funding municipal AFC projects.

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While the Province of Ontario is currently offering a new grant program called the Seniors Community Grant Program, the program only offers funding to NGOs and is focused on small-scale programming initiatives to support social inclusion (Ministry of Senior Affairs, 2016b). While this initiative is important, it does not fund municipal level planning and strategic policy initiatives for older adults. The Province also lists the Ontario Trillium Foundation as a potential funding source for seniors' organizations (Ministry of Senior Affairs, 2016a). However, these grants are not targeted at the

majority of municipalities. The eligibility requirements for this grant are restricted to small municipalities (less than 20,000) and NGOs. The only way for a municipality larger than 20,000 to receive funds for an AFC project is if they partner with at least two other NGOs for a project. Further, the Trillium Foundation grants are available for a wide range of initiatives and are not focused on age-friendly community planning – ultimately making them more competitive and less accessible.

As part of 'Ontario's Action Plan for Seniors', the Province did promise to "support [age-friendly community planning] initiatives by showcasing best practices around the province, and introducing a recognition program that promotes and salutes those cities and towns that have developed age-friendly communities initiatives" (Ontario Seniors Secretariat, 2013, p. 12). To date, the Province has produced an Age-Friendly Cities Planning Guide, *Finding the Right Fit: Age-Friendly Community Planning*, but no recognition program has been created.



Tools for practitioners

Moving forward, it is critical for the Ontario government to expand its role in order to address the policy gap in small vulnerable communities that have not taken advantage or been successful accessing funds. The experience in British Columbia (BC) offers a potential model to overcoming the barrier of reaching the smaller and mid-sized cities, Ontario's more vulnerable communities. Specific initiatives include:

- Since 2005, the BC government has been offering grants to municipalities for age-friendly initiatives.
- They created their own AFC recognition program, much like the WHO.
- They recently launched a program requiring municipalities to plan for older adults and those with disabilities through their statutory planning policies.

The Ontario government should follow the example of British Columbia by requiring and supporting municipalities to plan for older adults. Not only would it enable individual municipalities to plan for a high quality of life for its older residents, a provincial mandate could also foster relationships and collaborations among policymakers across Ontario. This would advance the development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of age-friendly policies and models.

The Province of Ontario recently published a guide to building AFCs, *Finding the Right Fit: Age-Friendly Community Planning*. This guide offers detailed strategies for municipalities on assessing their local needs, working with older adults and data, developing the plan, as well as implementing and evaluating plans. While the document exists, the pertinent policy questions become: who is using it, how are they using it, what are the experiences of using it, and are these age-friendly plans making a difference in the lives of older adults? Perhaps the most important question is:

without funding from the Province, are municipalities engaging in AFC planning at all? To answer these questions, there may be an opportunity for the Province to partner with an arm's length research organization, in order to gather evidence on the efficacy of age-friendly planning AFC interventions.

Age-friendly policies should be integrated into the municipality's strategic plan – preferably with responsible departments delineated, evaluation indicators, and money allocated from the municipality's budget.

At the local level, it is important that practitioners plan for an age-friendly city collaboratively over multiple municipal departments. Age-friendly principles and policies should be coordinated and integrated across department specific plans (such as the Official Plan, Parks and Recreation Master Plan, Public Health Strategic Plan, etc.). To begin, mid-sized cities should engage with the WHO process of assessing local needs to build a strategic plan with measurable indicators. Ideally, age-friendly policies should be integrated into the municipality's strategic plan - preferably with responsible departments delineated, evaluation indicators, and money allocated from the municipality's budget. Furthermore, mid-sized cities should seek out political/community champions and make a point to consult with more vulnerable older adults who may not be able to attend typical public meetings.

Conclusions

Cities across Ontario are aging and it is unclear whether municipal governments are prepared to respond to the forthcoming challenges or to take advantage of the associated opportunities. In mid-sized cities, the proportion of older adults is expected to increase by

67% by 2036. According to our projections, one quarter of the population of mid-sized cities is expected to be over 65 years of age. Such a drastic change will challenge the fiscal stability of health care and pensions, and potentially lead to increased social challenges for seniors. As the majority of older adults desire to age-in-place, in mid-sized cities there is a lot of consultation, planning and implementation to be done in order to ensure that for their residents. It remains unclear whether the Ontario government will fund AFC projects again. The small scale grants currently being offered by the Province do not encourage strategic planning, rather they represent one time funding opportunities for programs that may not continue to run once the funding is completed. Strategic planning allows for a municipality to plan for future service and infrastructure costs, which is arguably more important in the long run if the desire is to truly build age-friendly communities, rather than singular programs. This is not to say that small, context specific projects are not vitally needed, but they should be done in tandem with strategic, long term planning efforts to ensure success.

However, while funding may not be as readily available, there is still an opportunity for individual municipalities to take the lead in planning for their aging population. Mid-sized cities are ideal incubators, as they are not only more likely to be affected by an aging population than larger cities, but also because they are at a size where they have the personnel capacity to become leaders in context-specific age-friendly policy planning, implementation and evaluation.

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