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Ageing in Place in Rural Areas of Western Australia: Actions, Choices and Preferences

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Abstract

The objective of the study was to explore the moving and staying actions and intentions of older people (50+) living in rural areas of Western Australia (WA) and to compare results with those living in metropolitan Perth/Fremantle. The design involved a cross-sectional postal survey of a sample of WA members of National Seniors Australia, living in their own homes in the community, followed by in-depth interviews with a subset of survey respondents (n=39). Most survey respondents lived in metropolitan Perth/ Fremantle (1630), followed by country towns (1092) and more rural locations (291). Interviews were conducted with 39 participants, 19 of whom lived outside the metropolitan area. The main outcome measures consisted of the proportions of respondents by location and age group who had moved, were thinking of moving or were intending to stay put; also the main reasons for such actions and intentions. Rural respondents were 1.3 times more likely to be thinking of moving in the short term compared to metropolitan respondents. A key reason given for moving from rural areas was 'thinking about where wanted to live for rest of lives', this tending to be associated with

‘employment’ or ‘retirement’ for those under 65; with ‘retirement’, ‘closer to family/friends’ and ‘upkeep/maintenance difficulties’ being particularly important for those 65+. ‘Wanting a lifestyle change’ was a key reason for moving to a rural location for those aged under 65. The study concluded that there are a number of issues faced by older people living in rural areas of WA which limit the extent to which ‘ageing in place’ is a viable choice for them as they age.

Keywords: moving, staying, housing, location, support, modifications

1.0 Introduction

In recent decades, ‘ageing in place’ has become a primary theme of Australian ageing policy (Department of Health and Ageing, 2008). Within the community, this notion is generally associated with strategies aimed at enabling older people to remain living in their longstanding place of residence (e.g. family home) ‘for as long as possible’. Hence, ageing in place is often equated with ‘staying put’ (Heumann & Boldy, 1993; Davison et al., 1993). A broader interpretation of such a concept would take into account people’s changing needs and preferences as they age. From this perspective, ageing in place is concerned with enabling people to live in a ‘place’ that maximises their sense of self fulfilment and preferred lifestyle: familiar surroundings (supported living environment, own home, neighbourhood, community, etc.), an entirely new ‘place’, or even different ‘places’ at different life stages.

As for older Australians in general, remaining ‘independent’ is an important aspiration for many rural dwellers who represent approximately one third [36%] of all Australians aged 65+ (Davis & Bartlett, 2008). However, despite strong social connectedness in rural communities, issues such as the availability of appropriate housing and support infrastructure, along with access to services and transport, pose significant challenges (Davis & Bartlett, 2008).

1.1 A Western Australian (WA) Case Study

This article discusses ageing in place in rural areas, and draws upon data and results from a WA based study carried out for National Seniors Australia (NSA) (Skladzien & O’Dwyer, 2009; Boldy, Grenade et al, 2011). NSA members are aged 50 years and over. The overall study explored the nature of ‘place’ for older people in terms of three key dimensions: housing, locality, and support. Of particular interest were the factors that influenced people’s decisions to either move or stay in their current living environment; when these decisions were made; and views about their future housing needs. For the purpose of this study, ‘rural’ was identified as anywhere outside the wider Perth metropolitan area. Within this rural category, ‘country towns’ were differentiated from ‘other rural’ (i.e. more rural areas). Typically, results were compared between these three locations, although in some cases (for reasons of simplicity and space) only the ‘extreme’ rural location (‘other rural’) was considered.

2.0 Methods

The study involved a large postal survey of WA members, followed by in-depth interviews with a subset of respondents. Survey questionnaires were sent to 6859 (24%) of WA NSA members, covering 155 WA postcodes and reflecting a range of locations and socio-economic strata.

The questionnaire, specifically developed for the study (Skladzien & O'Dwyer, 2009), comprised a number of sections related to moving (e.g. last move, moving intentions in the short and longer term), staying, current place of residence, and general socio-demographic information. Questions were developed in order to explore in detail the issues related to each of the three dimensions of place identified above. These can be essentially described as either 'push' or 'pull' factors (Stimson & McCrea, 2004). Other key references consulted, which provided a wider practical and conceptual understanding of the key dimensions of housing, locality, and support in the context of ageing-in-place, included Byles et al. (2006), Olsberg and Winters (2005), and Erickson et al. (2006). Draft questionnaires were piloted with a range of older individuals (n=8), and the statistical package SPSS was used to perform a range of analyses.

Interviewees (n=40) were selected from willing survey respondents, based on a number of criteria (age group, moving intentions, location - metro/rural), to ensure a range of representation. The interview questions explored in greater depth various issues covered in the survey:

- *Recent movers*
 - What were the main reasons you chose this home (where you now live)?
 - Could anything have been done or changed in regard to where you were living that might have persuaded you to stay? (E.g. related to built environment/ services/ neighbourhood, etc.)
 - How do you feel now about having moved – e.g. best thing about move? Anything that has not been so good/ any regrets/ whether has met expectations?
- *Planning to move – within next year or so*
 - What are you particularly looking for?
 - Which of these are you prepared to compromise on?
 - Is there anything that could be done or changed in regard to where you are now living that might make you change your mind about moving? (E.g. related to built environment/ services/ neighbourhood, etc.)

All data were content analysed manually, and ethical approval to conduct the study was granted by the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee.

3.0 Research Question

The specific research question explored in this research is as follows: What are the key determinants influencing ageing in place (i.e. 'moving' or 'staying') related to older people living in rural areas, and to what extent do they differ from those related to older people living in more urban areas?

4.0 Results and Discussion

The survey response rate was 44.5% (n=3050 'useable' questionnaires). The final interview sample achieved was 39.

Given the likely relationship between people's moving intentions and age, survey results were analysed according to four age groups: 50-54, 55-64, 65-74, and 75+. Results were weighted by location (metropolitan, country town, and 'other rural') so as to represent the total WA membership.

Over half (54%) of respondents lived in the Perth/Fremantle metropolitan area, whilst 36% lived in country towns (ranging from large regional centres to small towns), and 10% in ‘other rural’ areas.

4.1 Location by Age Group

Age groups for metro and rural respondents are presented in Table 1. While the proportions of people living in the metropolitan area increased with age, those living in country towns increased with age up to 65-74 years, and then decreased. Proportions for those living in ‘other rural’ areas steadily decreased with increasing age, dropping markedly after age 75. This suggested that for people living in rural areas, reaching 75 years may be a critical point at which decisions about moving are made.

Table 1. *Location by age group*

Current Location	Age group (%)			
	50-54	55-64	65-74	75+
Metropolitan	41.9	47.0	49.8	65.6
Country town	31.7	33.5	35.3	25.9
Other rural	26.4	19.5	14.9	8.5
Total %	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Total N	276	1532	808	362

4.2 Movers

4.2.1 Already Moved

Over a quarter (27%) of survey respondents had moved house in the previous four years. Most metropolitan respondents (69%) had moved within the metropolitan area. Similarly, 68% of country town dwellers had moved to another (or within the same) country town. By contrast, a smaller proportion (55%) of ‘other rural’ movers remained in an ‘other rural’ location, while almost one third (32%) had moved into a country town.

Although numbers were relatively low, the results suggested the likelihood of a person moving from a country town to an ‘other rural’ location decreased with age; on the other hand, the likelihood of a person moving from a country town to the metropolitan area generally increased with age. Numbers were too small to enable the ‘other rural’ category to be considered separately.

Conversely, the likelihood of people aged 75+ moving out of the metropolitan area to a rural location was noticeably less than younger age groups. Also evident was the greater likelihood of those in the age group 65-74 moving to country towns; whereas, those moving to ‘other rural’ areas were predominantly under 55 years old. Once again, age seems to be an important factor related to decisions concerning moving, and where people move to.

4.2.2 Thinking of Moving Soon

A further 17.4% of survey respondents were considering moving within the next year or so, versus a slightly higher proportion for both rural areas (country town 20.0%, ‘other rural’ 18.3%). Those aged 65+ were generally less likely to be thinking of moving, except for ‘other rural’ respondents in the youngest age category (Table 2). Logistic regression analysis revealed that people living in rural areas were 1.3 times more likely to be thinking of moving in the short term, as compared to those living in the metropolitan area.

4.2.3 Reasons for Moving

In the rural interviews, those who had already moved or intended to move within the next year or so identified a variety of reasons. Issues related to the upkeep of the home and/or property were frequently cited, often in association with a desire for a lifestyle change (“we’d prefer a lock-up-and-leave type residence”; “we don’t want to do the work, we want to put our energies into other things”) and/or deteriorating health (“I’m not as able to cope with strenuous tasks”). Some had moved, or wanted to move, in order to be closer to services and facilities (e.g. shops, restaurants, medical services).

Table 2. *Thinking of moving in next year or so*

Current Location	Age group (%)			Average (%)
	50-54	55-64	65+	
Metropolitan area	18.3	16.0	13.9	15.6
Country town	21.8	23.3	14.9	19.9
Other rural	9.5	21.4	16.3	18.3
Average %	17.9	19.3	14.6	17.5

Reasons were similar for those who believed they would likely move in the longer term, and included house/garden maintenance; concerns over deteriorating health; need for access to services and amenities (as well as to family); and/or to live in more ‘age friendly’ housing (e.g. smaller, with amenities more suitable for older people). In generally, a combination of reasons was identified by respondents.

For people living in the most rural of locations (‘other rural’) and who had moved elsewhere, ‘thinking about where they wanted to live the rest of their lives’ was particularly important for those under 65, as was (but to a lesser extent) ‘wanting a lifestyle change’. Employment reasons and ‘wanting more free time’ also featured prominently within this age group. Whilst ‘thinking about where they wanted to live for the rest of their lives’ was also ranked highest for those aged 65+, other particularly important reasons included ‘retirement’, ‘to be closer to family/friends’, and ‘upkeep/maintenance difficulties’ (Table 3).

Table 3. *Main reasons for moving from ‘other rural’ locations**

Reason**	Very Important (%)		
	50-64	65+	Average
Where wanted to live rest of life	43.2	25.0	36.0
Retirement	21.6	27.6	24.0
Closer to family/friends	18.0	22.1	19.6
Wanted lifestyle change	22.1	11.9	18.1
Employment related	23.9	7.1	17.3
Cost/financial reasons	14.7	14.4	14.6
Closer to services	14.5	14.4	14.5
Wanted more free time	16.8	7.1	13.0
Upkeep/maintenance difficulties	6.8	18.9	11.6

*includes those moving to another ‘other rural’ location

** Ranked by average ‘Very important (VI) %’; includes reasons with at least an average VI value of 10%

Reasons for moving, provided by respondents who had moved *into* ‘other rural’ areas, varied considerably by age group. These reasons were strongly related to

‘wanting a lifestyle change’; ‘thinking about where they wanted to live for the rest of their lives’; ‘employment’ for those aged under 65; and ‘retirement’ for those aged 65+. As for the latter, ‘being closer to family/friends’ and ‘cost/financial reasons’ also featured prominently (see Table 4).

Table 4. *Main reasons for moving to ‘other rural’ locations**

Reason**	Very Important (%)		
	50-64	65+	Average
Wanted lifestyle change	42.3	12.7	30.7
Where wanted to live rest of life	36.1	26.4	32.3
Employment related	34.7	6.3	23.5
Retirement	16.9	40.1	26.0
Cost/financial reasons	15.3	26.6	19.7
Wanted more free time	16.7	6.4	12.7
Closer to family/friends	8.3	29.4	16.4

*includes those moving to another ‘other rural’ location

** Ranked by average ‘Very important (VI) %’; includes reasons with at least an average VI value of 10%

Several people interviewed were adamant that they wanted to stay in the country (“we are not considering moving to Perth, definitely not!”). A few also suggested that it was more financially viable to move somewhere else in the country, rather than to Perth.

4.3 *Stayers*

Approximately half of all survey respondents indicated that they intended to remain in their current place of residence into their older age; although, those living in metropolitan areas were on average more likely to stay than those living in country towns, who were in turn more likely to stay than those living in ‘other’ rural locations. The likelihood of staying increased with age for each location (Table 5).

Table 5. *Intending to stay as age*

Current Location	Age group (%)			Average %
	50-54	55-64	65+	
Metropolitan area	39.2	46.5	58.6	50.6
Country town	38.5	42.1	53.4	46.2
Other rural	32.6	38.1	46.8	41.0
Average %	37.8	43.6	54.8	47.5

Similar to ‘movers’, the interviews revealed that the intention to stay (among country dwellers) was often influenced by a combination of factors. As one long term resident of a small country town said: “I think they’re [different factors] all as important as each other. We like the neighbourhood very much; it is our family home where our four kids grew up, three still live in and around this area Services are down the street, we are close – handy to the shops, I can walk up the street to the bowling club. We feel safe and secure here and hope to live here as long as we can.” Such comments also reflected the survey responses; for example, among those living in ‘other rural’ areas, each of the six factors listed in Table 6 had an average ‘Very Important’ rating in excess of 50%. ‘Liking the neighbourhood’ tended to be more strongly valued for

those under 65, while ‘feeling safe and secure’ and ‘thinking about where they wanted to live for the rest of their lives’ were more strongly valued by those aged 65+.

Table 6. *Main reasons for staying in current ‘other rural’ residence*

Reason*	Very Important (%)		
	50-64	65+	Average
It is comfortable	67.4	65.9	66.8
Financially viable to stay	63.0	68.9	65.3
Like the neighbourhood	69.7	49.9	61.9
Good location	61.4	63.5	62.2
Feel safe and secure	59.1	67.5	62.4
Live in current residence for life	51.1	61.8	55.3

* Ranked by average ‘Very important (VI)’; includes reasons with at least an average VI value of 50%

4.4 Home Modifications and Moving

Whether or not respondents made modifications to their home also emerged as an important factor related to moving (both in the short and longer term); in fact, those who had *not* carried out modifications were 1.4 times more likely to move in the short term than those who had, and 1.3 times more likely to move in the longer term. People living in rural areas, particularly those in the younger (50-54) and oldest (75 +) age groups, were less likely to have carried out home modifications than people living in metropolitan areas. The combination of these two findings is consistent with earlier results related to the moving intentions of people living in country areas; that is, they seem to be more likely than people living in the metropolitan area to move, in both the short and longer term.

5.0 Conclusion

This study highlighted marked differences in the actions, choices, and preferences of older people related to ‘ageing in place’, and the meaning of ‘place’ according to age group and location (metro, country town and ‘other rural’).

The disadvantages associated with rural living have been well documented, including limited access to health care (Strong et al., 1998) and isolation due to poor services (Alston, 2002). Attachment to place (de la Rue & Coulson, 2003) remains strong in rural areas with an increased sense of belonging related to social capital (Young et al., 2004); however, for older people this can be harder to access due to limited resources (Ziersch et al., 2009) and/or dependency (Dempsey, 1990).

Davis and Bartlett (2008, p59) posed the following question: “Is ‘ageing in place’ a viable choice for rural older people?” They noted that “rural living presents a range of challenges for optimising healthy ageing”. This study generally supported the notion that older people living in rural areas of Australia may indeed find it increasingly difficult to continue living independently in the community, particularly from the age of 75 onwards.

6.0 Acknowledgements

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