

Planning Across Generations: Are We Making Progress?

Healthy communities incorporate the needs of older adults and children. A recent national survey highlights a need for more partnerships with local professional groups and planners.

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Healthy communities incorporate the needs of older adults and children. A recent national survey highlights a need for more partnerships with local professional groups and planners.

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Few would argue that more age-friendly communities are needed across America. The authors compare results from the 2013 and 2019 national Planning Across Generations Surveys of all cities and counties in the U.S. to see how well the country is meeting this goal. This collaborative project between Cornell University and the International City County Management Association shows that age-friendly planning is stalled and division within communities is increasing. Solutions require increased engagement of older adults and families with children, cross-agency partnerships to address their needs, and professional planning.

The aging population in the U.S. requires local governments to shift the framework from a primary focus on working-age adults to a multigenerational planning approach, which builds a livable community for all ages. The World Health Organization (2007) has articulated a set of domains for age-friendly cities, and these overlap substantially with the features of a child-friendly city, articulated by UNICEF (2018).

AARP (2018) has consolidated these into a set of domains that comprise a livable community.

Features to Appeal to All Ages

Both generations need safe streets and outdoor spaces, access to an array of local services, opportunity for civic engagement, and social inclusion. An age-friendly community provides supportive services and age-friendly built environment features. These features include: complete streets (where car speed is slowed and pedestrians and bicyclists can safely travel), mixed-used neighborhoods (where retail, services and parks are available alongside housing), and a range of housing options to accommodate changing needs across the life cycle. These options include housing for families, senior housing, transit-oriented housing, supportive housing, and affordable and accessible options (including universal design: zero-step entry, bathroom on the first floor, etc.). These built environment features support more equal functionality for all ages across the life cycle (Warner et al. 2017a).



Are We Making Progress?

Multigenerational planning is an approach to build livable communities for all ages. By implementing inclusive design, which meets the needs of all ages, and shared services to promote intergenerational interaction among children and older adults, communities can build a common vision for change (Warner, 2017). (See figure 1). For example, Richmond, Virginia promoted an intergenerational walk-to-school program that led to improved crosswalks and curb cuts, and promoted more exercise among both children and older adults (Greenhouse et al., 2010).

In 2013, we conducted the first national survey of local government actions to build age-friendly communities. The Planning Across Generations survey measured planning, zoning, and built environment features as well as service delivery, barriers, motivations, and attitudes toward planning for all ages. The survey was conducted with the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) and sent to all 3,100 counties and over 5,000 municipalities in the country. Six years later, in 2019, we conducted

a second round of the survey to assess progress across the same metrics. Almost 1,500 communities responded to each survey for a response rate of 19 percent in the 2013 survey and 16 percent in 2019. These representative national surveys are comparable, which

FIGURE 1: A FRAMEWORK FOR MULTI-GENERATIONAL PLANNING



allows us to examine local government actions over time. The older population in the U.S. increased by nearly 2 percentage points over this time period, according to the American Community Survey, but are local governments making progress in response to an aging society?

Age-Friendly Planning At a Standstill

The comparison between the two rounds of the survey reveals a primary concern. Communities did not move forward on age-friendly features. Instead, both our measures of the built environment and age-friendly zoning codes are stalled. The survey asked what percent of the community was covered by age-friendly zoning codes and age-friendly built environment features at the street, neighborhood, and housing levels. The built environment at the level of streets and neighborhoods is measured by the level of community coverage. We grouped responses into three groups: low - less than 25 percent of the community was covered, middle - 26 to 75 percent was covered, and high - more than 75 percent coverage. Housing is measured by whether or not the community has an adequate supply. Figure 2 compares and details built environment features from 2013 and 2019, and finds little to no improvement. It is hard to make changes in the built environment in the short term. One approach is to slow the traffic speeds in the neighborhood so that pedestrians can walk safely in the streets, despite the lack of sidewalks (Bronfin et al., 2017).

Our street level measures assess walkability (pedestrian and bike access) and find no change from 2013 to 2019. The majority of communities report a low level of coverage of bike lanes and complete streets, while sidewalk systems have a middle level of community coverage. Despite policy emphasis on complete streets, bike lanes, and walkability, survey results show no progress from 2013 to 2019.

At the neighborhood level we measure access to parks, schools, fresh food markets, and mixed use where services are located near residences. We see a significant drop, as fewer communities report a middle or high level of coverage and more fall into the low coverage group. (See figure 2). The significant drop is mainly due to a drop in access to fresh food markets, possibly due to consolidation in the grocery industry. Most other built environment elements were reported at a middle level of community coverage in 2019, including having a neighborhood school, parks, or playgrounds within a half mile of every resident, public gathering spaces, and a mix of services, retail, and housing in the same neighborhood.

We also see a drop in communities reporting an adequate supply of housing and childcare from 2013 to 2019. (See figure 2). In 2019, a lower percent of communities reported having an adequate supply of each element. Affordable housing dropped the most, from 55 percent of communities reporting having an adequate supply in 2013 to just 34 percent in 2019. This reflects the continued impact of the Great Recession on housing supply. The percent of communities reporting an adequate supply of family-sized housing, rental housing, senior housing, and childcare also decreased in 2019. Intergenerational housing and subsidized housing were new elements measured in the 2019 survey, and about a third of communities indicated they had an adequate supply.

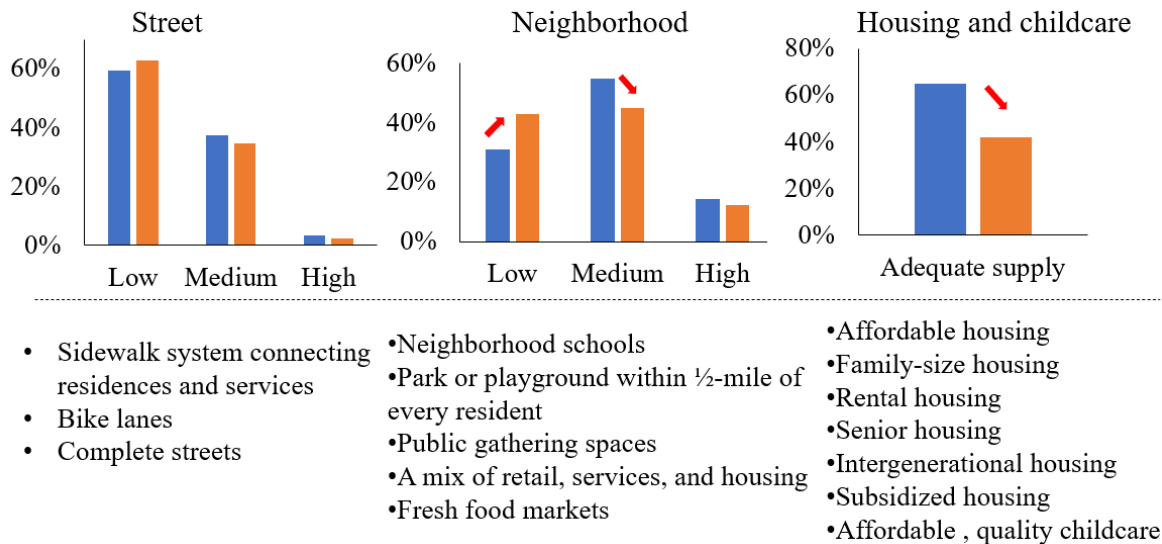
What has caused improvements in the built environment to stall? We found the drop is primarily a suburban and rural effect. Both types of communities lag in age-friendly built environments, despite having greater need: rural areas have a higher percentage of older adults, and suburbs have a higher percentage of families with children. Most age-friendly design recommendations are urban biased, so suburbs and rural areas face more challenges in building age-friendly communities (Zhang et al. 2019, 2020). New paradigms of “best practices” need to be developed to better respond to the needs of rural and suburban communities.

Zoning codes are also stalled. Zoning codes set the framework for future development. Our surveys show a bifurcation in zoning — with more communities reporting zoning codes at the low level (less than 25 percent of their community covered) and at the high level (more than 75 percent of their community covered). (See figure 3). While some communities are improving, more are falling behind. The middle is being lost, primarily at the street level. The percent of communities reporting they require street connections and complete streets in most of their community decreased, as did those mandating sidewalk systems. By contrast, we do not see any significant change in neighborhood-level zoning codes (allowing mixed use, density bonuses, and child care by right). Regarding housing, there is an increase in communities reporting a high level of zoning coverage. The increase is mainly from more communities allowing accessory dwelling units (ADUs), which doubled from 2013 (12 percent) to 2019 (24 percent). Portland, Oregon is a leader in ADU zoning regulation designed to increase housing options for older adults, promote intergenerational living, and increase neighborhood density, all of which can help build demand for neighborhood-based services.

FIGURE 2: LITTLE TO NO IMPROVEMENT IN AGE-FRIENDLY BUILT ENVIRONMENT

% community coverage: Low: <25%, Medium: 25-75%, High: >75%

■ 2013 ■ 2019



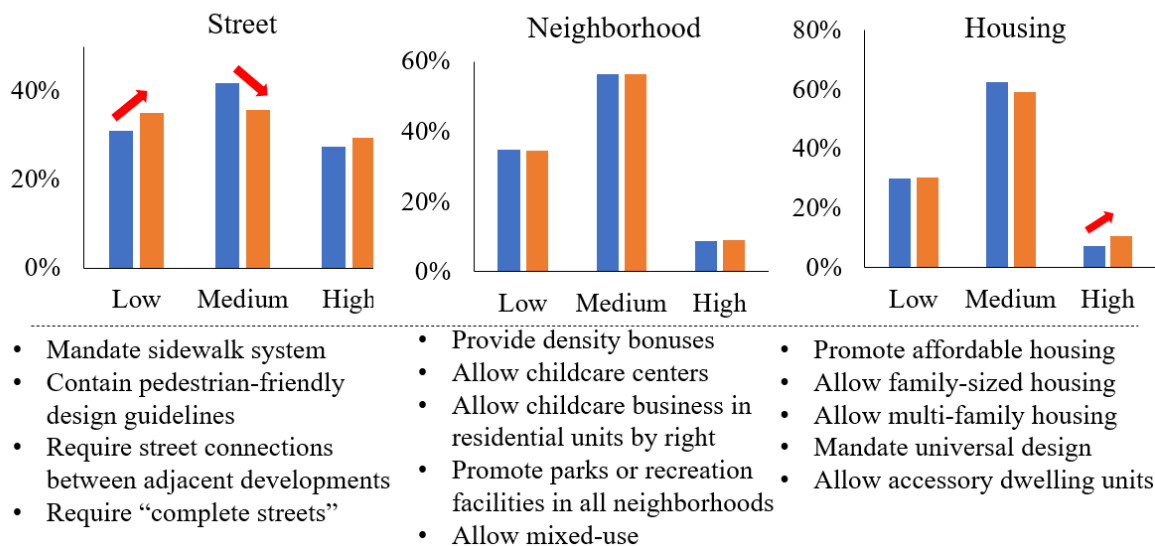
Planning for All Generations Survey, 2013 (N=1474), 2019 (N=1312) US cities and counties.

Note: red arrow means statistically significant difference between 2013 and 2019 ($p < 0.05$)

FIGURE 3: LITTLE TO NO IMPROVEMENT IN AGE-FRIENDLY ZONING CODE COVERAGE

% community coverage: Low: <25%, Medium: 25-75%, High: >75%

■ 2013 ■ 2019



Planning for All Generations Survey, 2013 (N=1474), 2019 (N=1312) US cities and counties

Note: red arrow means statistically significance between 2013 and 2019 ($p < 0.05$)

Planning and engagement

Planning plays a fundamental role in building age-friendly communities. The survey asked if the community has a plan, and if the plan addresses the needs of children, older adults, and women. We found that most communities have an emergency plan (91 percent) and a comprehensive plan (81 percent), but only half of reporting communities have a transportation plan (58 percent) or an economic development plan (52 percent). (See table 1). For communities with plans, the transportation plan is more likely to pay attention to the needs of seniors (69 percent), and families with children (51 percent), while the economic development plan is least likely to address the needs of all ages. Emergency plans are more likely to address the needs of children and older adults (57 percent). However, women, as the main caregivers of both children and older adults, are less likely to be considered in any plan. The survey results show that planning has a long way to go, but communities with female managers show more progress (Warner and Zhang, 2020a).

Both WHO and UNICEF indicate the importance of engagement to help communities become more age-friendly (UNICEF, 2018; WHO, 2007). Our survey asked about the level of engagement of different age groups in planning for their needs. Older adults are the most active group. In 2019, 87 percent of communities indicated that seniors are at least somewhat engaged in the planning process, compared to families with children (79 percent), and youth (54 percent). Older adults are, in fact, more

likely to be very engaged, and the percent of communities reporting high levels of senior engagement increased from 17 percent in 2013 to 24 percent in 2019. The engagement of families with children decreased slightly, and the engagement of youth remained the same. There is a strong relationship between senior and youth engagement and planning for their needs (Warner et al., 2017a; 2017b; Warner & Zhang 2019). Because older adults have a higher level of engagement, more community plans address their needs, as compared to women or children. Multigenerational planning requires leadership, professionalism, and an inclusive planning and governance structure that encourages cross-agency collaboration, civic engagement, and helps to build common vision. (See figure 4).

Cross-Agency Partnerships are Key

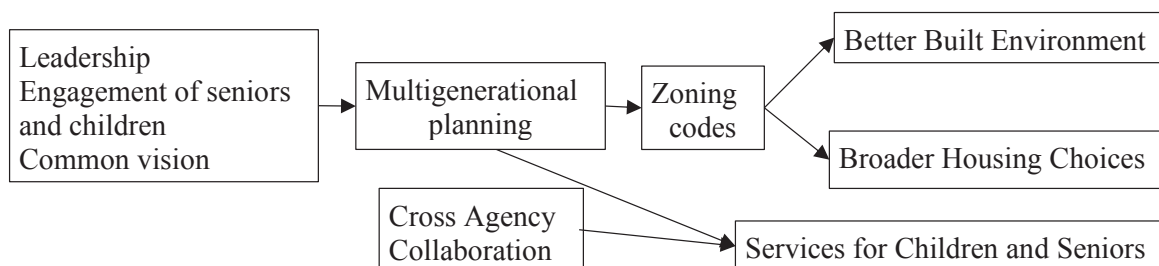
Partnerships between local government agencies are crucial to deliver services for older adults and children (Warner & Zhang, 2020b). This is the missing domain in both the WHO and UNICEF frameworks. Our survey asked local governments which agencies engage in cross-agency partnerships to serve children or older adults. The survey measured partnerships between fourteen agencies. The agencies which topped the list, with the largest percent of communities reporting cross-agency partnerships, were libraries (73 percent), schools (66 percent), parks and recreation departments (65 percent), police departments (55 percent), and public health departments (52 percent). Schools can serve as a community hub where

TABLE 1: MULTIGENERATIONAL PLANNING

	Comprehensive Plan	Economic Development plan	Emergency Plan	Transportation Plan
Community Has a Plan	81%	52%	91%	58%
Of those with plans, the plan addresses the need of:				
Families with children	50%	32%	47%	51%
Seniors	53%	32%	57%	69%
Women	12%	13%	30%	26%
Schools or school siting	39%			
Childcare		21%		

Planning for All Generations Survey, 2013 (N=1474), 2019 (N=1312) US cities and counties

FIGURE 4 WHAT LEADS TO CHANGE?



Based on research by Warner and Zhang

education, full-support services, and diverse programs are provided. The 2019 survey shows that schools have become more important in delivering services for both children and older adults. For example, in New York City, school buses are used to take seniors from neighborhoods where there is no local store to do their grocery shopping elsewhere during the middle of the day, when children are in school and the buses would otherwise be sitting idle.

Ironically, transportation and highway departments (25 percent) rank near the bottom — they are less likely to engage in cross-agency partnerships. Transportation is critical to build more age-friendly communities, but until these agencies get out of their silos and work with other agencies, such as Offices for the Aging, communities will not see much progress. Planning agencies also rank low, but we saw improvement, with planning agencies more likely to engage in cross-agency partnerships in 2019 (39 percent) as compared to 2013 (31 percent). Research finds professional planning can help communities craft more age-friendly zoning codes to build a better environment for seniors and children (Warner & Zhang, 2019; Zhang et al, 2019).

COVID-19 has raised attention to the need for cross-agency collaboration, especially in health and aging services. Our 2019 survey finds only half of communities report cross-agency partnerships to serve children and older adults through their public health department (52 percent), Area Agency on Aging (50 percent), hospital or healthcare providers (45 percent), and fire department (45 percent). Most of these are down slightly from 2013. COVID-19 has raised attention to the needs of children and older adults. For example, in Tompkins County, New York a multiagency collaboration of the Office for the Aging, the local schools, the food bank, the Meals on Wheels program, and the paratransit (transportation service

for people with disabilities) agency came together to deliver meals and baby supplies to families across the community (Xu, 2020).

Representation and Common Vision Needed

Community leadership is essential for age-friendly planning, design, and services (Warner & Zhang 2019, 2020). The survey asked about the representativeness of the community's governing board and found the majority of communities report their governing board is dominated by longtime (72 percent) or older residents (52 percent). A lower percent report their community's governing board is evenly mixed between longtime residents and newcomers, older residents and younger residents, or conservative and liberal interests. Communities with less representative governing boards engage in less age-friendly planning or services. Representation matters, and active engagement of older adults and families with children in the planning process can help ensure community planning and services are more responsive to local needs and result in better community health (Zhang et al., 2020; Zhang, Warner, & Firestone, 2019; Warner & Zhang, 2019; Warner et al., 2017a; 2017b).

Building age-friendly communities requires social cohesion and inclusivity. However, the 2019 survey shows that division within communities is increasing. While about half of the respondents agreed that "participation of seniors/families with children has led to a common vision regarding planning for all ages" in 2013 (44 percent for older adults and 50 percent for families with children), that dropped to under 40 percent in 2019 (seniors: 32 percent, families with children: 37 percent). Division also increased. Forty-six percent of respondents agreed with the statement: *My community is not divided by race, class, or old-timer/*

newcomer divisions in 2013, compared to 35 percent in 2013. While 43 percent of respondents agreed with the statement: *Ethnic or cultural diversity has led to new approaches to planning or programming for all ages* in 2013, this dropped to 37 percent in 2019. A divided community is less able to meet the needs of its residents.

What leads to change?

Compared to 2013, our 2019 survey shows a troubling picture. Progress in developing an age-friendly built environment and zoning codes is stalled. The needs of older adults, children, and women still are not given attention in most community plans. Division within communities is increasing; governing boards are less likely to be representative. But the survey shows some good news. A higher level of engagement of older adults in multigenerational planning can help promote age-friendly zoning, built environments, and services.

We have a long way to go to build age-friendly communities. Change takes time. But our research shows the important role of multigenerational planning and age-friendly design in creating a better built environment, broader housing choices, and more services for children and seniors (Warner & Zhang, 2019). •CSA

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Her current research focuses on local governments' actions to build age-friendly communities and rural development. Her research links planning, built environment, services, and public health to explore community development strategies.

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