NEIGHBORHOOD EFFECTS ON RESIDENTIAL LIVING ARRANGEMENTS AMONG OLDER ADULTS

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In 2010, the population of older adults – those age 65 or older – numbered 40.4 million in United States, and was rapidly growing. By 2030, there will be about 72.1 million older adults in the U.S. The rapid aging of the American population brings up questions of how to provide housing for an aging society. Older adults can choose from a variety of senior- and non-senior specific housing options, but a substantial proportion report preferences to live independently in their own home for as long as they are able. Not every older adult has an equal chance of remaining in their own home, and some of these inequalities play out at the neighborhood level. However, most previous research of the determinants of living arrangements among older adults is limited to individual- and household-level predictors. Few studies have incorporated ecological variables even though there are theoretical reasons to believe that neighborhood characteristics are also important. This dissertation attempts to fill the gap in the research literature, while also contributing to policy discussions surrounding long-term housing options for older adults. I utilize quantitative methods that rely on approximately twenty years of longitudinal data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, combined with neighborhood-level data from the US Census Bureau, to explore questions of how neighborhood characteristics affect the likelihood of independent community-dwelling versus moving to age-segregated senior housing among older adults. Collectively, the findings indicate that the physical and social environment of the neighborhood exert important impacts on living arrangements among older adults, including a neighborhood's urban, suburban, or rural location; walkability; geographic access to health care; and proximity to family support. Currently, there are few effective policies to help older adults retain residential independence that focus on making neighborhood changes, but the findings suggest there may be several avenues for policy intervention, such as expanding older adults' access to services, and rethinking the structure and design of neighborhoods so that they are more viable living options through the life course and into old age.

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