

Executive Summary

Introduction

Canada's population is aging faster than ever before and as a result, there is a growing concern over how to support the needs of an aging population. While there are various urban planning interventions targeted toward older adults, the role of play has been largely overlooked. This report aims to fill this research gap by exploring the use of play-based interventions to support the physical and mental wellbeing of older adults. This research used practitioner insights to formulate recommendations to (1) improve the design of public spaces that facilitate older adult play, and (2) assess the efficacy of older adult play as an age-friendly planning initiative.

The research was guided by three main research questions:

1. Have practitioners previously considered the importance of older adult play? If so, in what form did they perceive older adult play? What potential do they see for using play interventions as an age-friendly planning initiative?
2. How does the built environment enable or inhibit older adult play? How can we design public spaces that encourage play among older adults?
3. How can we measure the efficacy of older adult play as an age-friendly initiative?

Literature Review

As the population continues to age, there is a growing concern over the risk of social isolation and loneliness among older adults. Loneliness has been known to have adverse effects on physical and mental health and when coupled with feelings of depression, can be a predictor of premature mortality. Urban planners can play a critical role in reducing the prevalence of social

isolation and loneliness by creating environments and initiatives that foster social interaction and support the needs of older adults.

This report focuses on play as a novel age-friendly planning initiative and means of supporting the health and wellbeing of older adults. While play is considered essential for children due to the myriad of physical, cognitive, and psychosocial benefits it generates, it is rarely discussed outside of the younger demographic. As such, older populations are often excluded from many of the play-based interventions that are commonly considered in urban planning discourse. This is unfortunate as research shows that play can assist in difficult times of transition like retirement, enhance both mental and physical health, and alleviate loneliness among older adults.

Methodology

This research focuses on Victoria, British Columbia as it is one of Canada's demographically oldest cities. To gain insights about perceptions of older adult play, five semi-structured interviews were conducted with urban planning practitioners and age-friendly specialists currently working in the City of Victoria. Participants were identified through an online search and contacted by email or over the phone. All interviews, with the exception of one that was held virtually, were conducted in person in Victoria between August 16-18th, 2022. The interviews lasted between thirty minutes to an hour and were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed. Once the interview transcripts were complete, they were subject to a thematic analysis using NVivo software.

Findings

The study found that practitioners predominately associated play with the younger generation and had limited insight about what play might look like for adolescents and adults. Practitioners perceived older adult play to be more sedate and less physically strenuous than play for children. Throughout the study, there were instances where generalizations and inadvertently ageist comments were made by practitioners about the older adult population.

Practitioners identified two main areas where urban planning and older adult play intersect: the policy framework and urban design. They determined that municipal authorities are responsible for creating the guidelines that establish the importance of older adult play in municipal policy. Practitioners explained that accessibility features and social programming play a key role in enabling older adult play, while certain environmental, accessibility, and social conditions may hinder it.

Practitioners cited the importance of government buy-in, community outreach, and non-profit and grassroots organizations in promoting older adult play. It was determined that planners have a critical role in championing these initiatives and elevating the importance of older adult play to elected officials. It was seen to be the local government's responsibility to be actively involved in the process and provide non-profit and grassroots organizations with the political and financial tools necessary for projects' success.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study found that while practitioners initially did not consider the importance of older adult play, they recognize its relevance to age-friendly planning and believe it fits within the age-friendly planning model. It was evident that the practitioners included in the study understood the critical

role that the built environment has in both enabling and inhibiting older adult play. The insight from the key informant interviews was used to inform the following recommendations:

1. Adopt a participatory planning approach to directly involve older adults in the urban planning process.
2. Establish the importance of older adult play in municipal policy documents.
3. Design accessible play spaces that accommodate people of all ages and abilities.
4. Ensure local governments have an active role in organizing and promoting older adult play initiatives.
5. Develop a tool to evaluate the efficacy of older adult play initiatives.