

Governance, Social Policy and Communication

Older-Adult-Led Innovation and Community Resilience During COVID-19 Y.-T. Chiu. *Gerontechnology* 25(s)

Purpose The Village Model—grassroots, membership-based organizations founded, governed, and largely operated by older adults—represents a distinctive community innovation that supports aging in place. This study examines how Villages mobilized during the COVID-19 pandemic and identifies the organizational, social, and technological factors associated with resilience. The objectives were: (1) to analyze how older-adult leadership, volunteerism, social capital, and community partnerships shaped adaptive capacity; and (2) to determine predictors of Village membership growth during the pandemic, with attention to digital and low-tech service adaptations. **Method** A mixed-methods design integrated: (1) a national survey of 120 Villages operating prior to January 1, 2020 (response rate: 37.9%); (2) contrasting case studies of Villages that experienced substantial growth versus temporary closure; and (3) a Washington, DC Metropolitan Area study including over 25 interviews with government agencies, nonprofits, faith-based groups, and Village members. Quantitative analyses assessed associations between membership change and factors such as pre-pandemic social capital, wealth inequality, volunteer engagement, collaborations, and COVID-related service adaptations—including virtual programming and telephone-based reassurance systems. **Results and Discussion** Villages enhanced older adults' safety, connectedness, and autonomy during the pandemic through peer leadership, volunteer mobilization, and rapid service adaptations. Many Villages transitioned to virtual events, implemented structured phone check-ins, and expanded partnerships with local agencies to provide reliable information and social support. Quantitative analyses revealed several unexpected findings. Communities with lower pre-pandemic social capital experienced greater membership growth, suggesting that Villages filled structural gaps where traditional support networks were weaker. Higher wealth inequality was also positively associated with membership growth. Among COVID-specific adaptations, virtual programming was the only significant predictor of growth. These findings underscore the potential of older-adult-led organizations to play a pivotal role in crisis response by generating user-driven innovations that strengthen both formal and informal support networks. Technology-enabled engagement—such as virtual events and remote communication—served as essential gerontechnology tools for sustaining connection and expanding reach during the pandemic. Case studies further highlight that strong cross-sector collaborations enhanced service continuity, while rural Villages faced operational challenges. Overall, the study demonstrates that community-based, older-adult-led, and technology-supported models can enhance resilience in aging societies and complement formal health and social care systems.

Keywords: Village model; older-adult leadership; community resilience; gerontechnology; COVID-19

Main affiliation and country of first author: School of Nursing, University of British Columbia, Canada

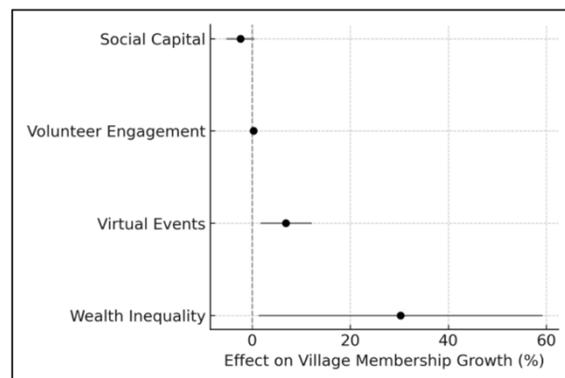


Figure 1. Predictors of Village Membership Growth During COVID-19.