

Work, Leisure and Social Participation

Community-Driven Perspectives on Research Participation and Technology Engagement Among Rural Older Adults in Northern Canada S. Otalvaro Zapata, E. Rossnagel, L. Chambers, S. Freeman. *Gerontechnology* 25(s)

Purpose Rural and northern older adults face distinct environmental, infrastructural, and social barriers that limit their participation in research and engagement with technology, resulting in their persistent underrepresentation in gerontological and gerontechnology research [1]. The purpose of this study was to gather community-driven perspectives from rural-living older adults in northern British Columbia (BC) to identify barriers and facilitators to meaningful research participation and technology engagement, and to use these insights to inform the co-design of a Northern BC Older Adult Research Advisory Group (NOR-AG). **Methods** A community-based, mixed-methods approach was used to support the development of the Northern BC Older Adult Research Advisory Group (NOR-AG) [2]. A workshop roadshow was conducted in 7 communities of Northern BC, engaging 69 older adults through in-person workshops. Data collection methods included facilitated small- and large-group discussions, structured priority-setting activities using weighted voting, and brief paper-based surveys addressing research participation, recruitment preferences, and technology engagement. Quantitative survey data were analyzed descriptively, while qualitative data from discussions and open-ended responses were synthesized through descriptive thematic analysis. Data was triangulated to identify cross-community and context-specific patterns. **Results and Discussion** Open-ended survey responses identified transportation (28.2%) and lack of awareness of research opportunities (19.2%) as the most frequently cited barriers to older adult engagement, together accounting for nearly half of all barrier responses. Additional barriers included mobility limitations (9.0%), scheduling constraints (7.7%), weather, accessibility, and limited electronic literacy (each 6.4%), indicating that structural and environmental factors predominated over individual-level barriers. Qualitative workshop discussions reinforced these findings, with participants describing long travel distances, seasonal conditions, and limited local infrastructure as key deterrents to participation, even when interest in research and technology was high. Priority-setting activities using weighted voting showed that healthcare access and quality determinants received the highest share of weighted priority (46.5%), followed by social and community context determinants (24.6%) and neighbourhood and built environment determinants (19.2%). Together, these domains accounted for over 90% of the total weighted votes, demonstrating that participants primarily framed the most pressing issues facing older adults through health, social, and environmental lenses. Survey agreement results (Figure 1) showed strong endorsement of inclusive advisory structures, with 91.5% agreeing that diverse perspectives are important and 74.5% agreeing that an advisory group would promote participation. Participants also discussed their interest in telehealth, but emphasized the need for hands-on training, trusted local support, and non-digital alternatives to prevent exclusion of less digitally confident older adults. These findings informed early co-design priorities for NOR-AG, including the use of community-based recruitment, local meeting hubs, travel-supported participation, simplified consent and communication materials, and blended in-person/telephone engagement models to reduce geographic, transportation, and digital barriers.

References

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Figure 1. Attitudes toward research participation of older adults (n=42).

