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Age-Friendly Cities and Communities: Research to Strengthen Policy and Practice

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ABSTRACT

Since the early 2000s, a global age-friendly movement has emerged with aspirations to make environments and systems within localities more supportive of long and healthy lives. Despite growth in the social movement over the past decade, research on how to work toward community change, especially in systematic and comprehensive ways across diverse geopolitical and sociocultural contexts, has been relatively slower to develop. This special issue of the *Journal of Aging & Social Policy* aims to accelerate this area. It features articles that advance knowledge on processes and contexts toward enhancing the age-friendliness of cities and communities. In this introductory essay, we provide background on the age-friendly cities and communities movement – including its accomplishments alongside key challenges. We then discuss the importance of research at the intersection of policy and practice to strengthen the movement into the 21st century. Next, we introduce the articles in this special issue, organized under four themes: implementation and sustainability processes; partnerships and multisectoral collaboration; theory-based program design; and policy and practice diffusion. A final article provides an overview of the career contributions of Dr. Frank Caro, an age-friendly champion and gerontologist to whom this special issue is dedicated.

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Introduction

The age-friendly cities and communities (AFCC) movement has inspired people worldwide to re-imagine ways in which localities can better support residents' health and well-being as they age in place. Approximately 15 years ago, the World Health Organization [WHO] (2007) described age-friendly cities as ones that advance “policies, services, settings, and structures” to promote “health, participation and security in order to enhance quality of life as people age” (p. 5). More recently, researchers have defined AFCC initiatives as “deliberate and distinct efforts across stakeholders from multiple sectors within a defined and typically local geographic area to make social and/or physical environments more conducive to older adults' health, well-being, and ability to age in place and in the

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community” (Greenfield et al., 2015, p. 192). From incremental to transformative changes, AFCC leaders are working to improve social, built, and service environments to address the challenges and opportunities of aging in community.

Despite tremendous growth in the AFCC movement over the past decade (WHO, 2018), systematic knowledge development on initiatives to promote AFCCs has been relatively slower to develop. There has been an expanding literature on questions related to the *what* (e.g., the different domains of an age-friendly community) and *why* (e.g., the importance for older people’s well-being). Nevertheless, significant gaps remain in knowledge with respect to questions of *how* to work toward environmental and systems change to better meet people’s needs as they grow older and to allow for flourishing in later life.

To help the AFCC movement take greater hold into the 21st century, this special issue features articles that advance understanding of processes and contexts that drive long-term and multi-faceted community change. The issue presents research on the practices of individuals and organizations in their work to translate goals, assessments, plans, tools, and pledges into action and impact. It also describes the contexts that present challenges and opportunities for these efforts, with an emphasis on social policy.

The issue is in honor of Dr. Frank Caro, a generative social gerontologist whose work entailed both rigorous academic scholarship and age-friendly leadership within his own communities of residence. Dr. Caro passed away on October 2, 2020, having dedicated most of his nearly 60 years of academic and professional activity to gerontology and services for older adults. From 1988 until his retirement in 2008, Dr. Caro served in a range of capacities at the University of Massachusetts Boston (UMB), including Director of the Gerontology Institute, Graduate Program Director, and Chairperson of the Gerontology Department. Dr. Caro was co-editor (1996–2005) and Editor-in-Chief (2005–2016) of the *Journal of Aging & Social Policy*.

Of particular relevance for this special issue, Dr. Caro served as co-editor of one of the first special issues of an academic journal on age-friendly communities (Fitzgerald & Caro, 2014), which also was published as an edited volume (Caro & Fitzgerald, 2016). He continued to review manuscripts on age friendly communities for the Journal up until his death. Dr. Caro also brought the aged-friendly ethos to his own community of residence. He was instrumental in creating the Brookline Community Aging Network, which he co-chaired until his passing. He was the driving force behind the movement to make Brookline the first municipality in New England, and the ninth in the U.S., to be designated as an “age-friendly community,” according to guidelines established by the WHO (BrooklineCAN, n.d.).

We introduce this special issue first by providing background on AFCCs as a growing area of engagement across the public, private, and academic sectors. We then describe key challenges for the AFCC movement, foregrounding the essential role of research on AFCC policy and practice. Next, we introduce the

eight articles in this special issue, organized under four themes: (a) implementation and sustainability processes, (b) partnerships and multisectoral collaboration, (c) theory-based program design, and (d) policy and practice diffusion. A final article provides an overview of the career contributions of Dr. Caro. We conclude by emphasizing how the articles in this special issue demonstrate the great promise of continued research on processes and implementation contexts for age-friendly efforts from hyperlocal to international scales.

Global AFCC progress

Since the mid-2000s, fostering AFCCs has attracted the interest of diverse sectors, including government at multiple levels, nongovernmental organizations, private philanthropy, academic researchers, grassroots groups, and for-profit businesses. The WHO has played a vital role in driving the age-friendly agenda. First, the WHO led a research project examining the experiences of older people living in urban environments (WHO, 2007) and later it established the Global Network of Age-Friendly Cities and Communities (Global Network; WHO, 2018). Beginning with only 12 communities in 2010, this network reached a membership of 1,114 cities and communities in 44 countries by 2022 (WHO, n.d.). The Global Network has connected cities and communities worldwide to facilitate the exchange of information, knowledge, practices, and experiences with the goal of improving physical infrastructure (e.g., housing, outdoor spaces, and buildings), social environments (e.g., opportunities for civic and social participation), and service provision (e.g., community and health services, transportation). Growth in the network has been spurred through the involvement of organizations across the world, particularly in the Global North, including the International Federation on Ageing [IFA] (2022), AARP (n.d.), and AGE Platform Europe (n.d.).

The United Nations (UN) Decade of Healthy Aging (2021–2030) initiative, a global collaboration aligned with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, further reinforces the goal of creating age-friendly environments to foster healthy aging. This initiative brings together international agencies, governments, civil society, academia, the media, and others in the private sector to improve the lives of older people, their families, and the communities in which they live. The Decade addresses four areas for action, one of which is to create “age-friendly environments.” This action area entails fostering physical, social, and economic environments that are good places to “grow, live, work, play and age” (WHO, 2020, p. 9). The framework highlights the importance of community-centered approaches to improve policy, systems, and environments in support of healthy aging and aging equity (Keating, 2022) – an issue that has been further accentuated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Phillipson et al., 2021).

Attention to AFCCs is also increasing within academic research, particularly in gerontology and other fields such as public health and urban affairs. Notably, since 2015, there have been several special issues of peer-reviewed

journals (Glicksman & Ring, 2017; Meeks, 2022; Scott, 2021; Van Hoof & Marston, 2021), as well as books (e.g., Buffel et al., 2018; Caro & Fitzgerald, 2016; Joy, 2020; Moulaert & Garon, 2016; Scharlach & Lehning, 2016; Stafford, 2019) on AFCCs. There also has been a growing number of integrative reviews of peer-reviewed articles and other publications on AFCC development, assessment, and implementation (Lehning & Greenfield, 2017; Menec & Brown, 2022; Sánchez-González et al., 2020; Steels, 2015; Torku et al., 2021). Among these, Torku and colleagues' (2021) systematic review of the AFCC literature through 2018 provides evidence of the extent of growth in the volume and breadth of research in this area. Their review found an accelerating trend in the number of AFCC publications each year, especially since 2014, and documented a collection of articles across four subareas: conceptual foundations; implementation and development approaches; assessment methods; and challenges and opportunities for facilitating age-friendly environments and AFCC implementation.

Taken together, academic and policy work on AFCCs has recorded a variety of achievements. Such achievements include greater recognition in urban and regional planning of the implications of population aging, especially with regard to (re)designing outdoor spaces, housing, and transportation (Hammond & Saunders, 2021). The AFCC movement also has inspired campaigns to change societal narratives around aging and to reduce ageism (Rémillard-Boilard et al. 2021) – the stereotypes, prejudices, and forms of discrimination that people experience based on their age. Moreover, AFCC efforts have spurred new models and community-based approaches to promote the central and active involvement of diverse groups of older people in co-producing age-friendly research, policy, and practice (Dabelko-Schoeny et al., 2020; Rémillard-Boilard et al., 2017). Finally, the AFCC movement has expanded the boundaries of the field of aging and bolstered support for interdisciplinary work (Greenfield et al., 2019), linking fields such as urban design, architecture, sociology, social policy, social gerontology, community development, public health, healthcare, and others.

Challenges for AFCC practice and policy

While the above-described developments indicate the vitality, prominence, and contributions of the AFCC movement, there also are key challenges that pose limitations to its impact, reach, and sustainability. These challenges are rooted within the broader systems that encompass AFCC initiatives, as well as in aspects of the AFCC framework itself. We describe such challenges below, including difficulties in garnering political support and public resources for AFCC change; advancing the work during times of economic austerity, public health crises, and accelerating social inequalities; managing the

comprehensiveness of AFCC work across complex organizational systems; and attending to differences across socio-political conditions and cultural contexts as part of a global movement.

First, a strategic approach involving different levels of government, as well as collaboration across the public, private, and voluntary sectors, is in many ways necessary to achieve the aspirations of the AFCC movement. However, changes in local leadership, political dynamics, and pressures on resources might cause age-friendly work to fall down priority lists, with the risk of losing “support, momentum, credibility, and enabled staff buy-in” (Rémillard-Boilard et al., 2021, p. 10). Securing long-term commitment and consistent support for AFCC initiatives is especially important to achieve “inclusive and equitable places that leave no one behind – especially the most vulnerable older people” (WHO, 2018, p. v).

Challenges concerning political and financial support, as well as leadership, are especially acute in times of economic austerity. While initial interest in developing AFCCs came during a period of global economic growth and expansions in public sector programs, the 2008 financial crises reversed support for this trend (Van Hoof et al., 2021). Thus, the emergence of formal AFCC initiatives following the establishment of the WHO Global Network in 2010 coincided with a period when communities were facing significant cuts in service provision, a loss of physical and community assets, financial pressures on community and voluntary sector organizations, and an acceleration of neoliberal policies and government devolution in many countries. These trends contributed to greater precarity in later life for vulnerable groups of older adults alongside widening inequalities.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further amplified the challenges of providing collective support to marginalized populations, given a combination of increasing inequality and austerity. Many of the organizations that developed or partnered on AFCC initiatives during the pandemic were already in a financially precarious position before the pandemic. Although some organizations received crisis funding, questions remain as to how much of this funding was allocated to age-friendly community work, especially work that centered on historically marginalized groups, and whether such funding will be sustained in years to come. Investing in, and securing long-term resources for, community-based services and organizations that support under-served groups of older people in geo-spatial areas of greatest need remains a key task for post-COVID-19 recovery (Buffel et al., 2021).

Furthermore, the aspirations of the AFCC movement are ambitious, encompassing a comprehensive set of aspects of community life spanning physical, social, and service environments. Progress across and within domains is, in many ways, outside the control of any one systems level, organization, sector, or discipline (Greenfield et al., 2022). While this scope is a defining strength of the AFCC movement, it also presents significant

challenges for organizing and tracking work across complex systems, as well as demonstrating impact. These challenges are especially difficult in the context of program monitoring and accountability structures that have traditionally oriented to single program elements, service units, and quantitative measures of change over short periods. Moreover, the broad focus of the AFCC movement raises both opportunities and questions as to how AFCC efforts fit with other place-based campaigns, such as those related to social determinants of health, environmental sustainability, smart cities, livability, and economic development (for an example, see Ahn et al., 2020). Strategically aligning AFCC efforts with these related-yet-distinct agendas – while not losing focus on aging, longevity, older adults, and later life – presents another key challenge.

Finally, the all-encompassing geographic scope of the AFCC movement presents simultaneous opportunities alongside challenges. Profound differences across sociopolitical landscapes – both between and within countries and continents– render difficult the development of a unified model on how to achieve AFCC change. Moreover, cultural notions about aging, older adults, and intersectional social positions add further complexity to conceptualizing AFCC initiatives, particularly in the context of oppressive social structures, such as ageism, classism, ableism, and racism (Yeh, 2022). The persistence and legacy of colonialism, in particular, contributes to challenges of AFCC efforts in many areas of the Global South, especially in lower-income countries (Adlakha et al., 2021).

The promise of AFCC research at the intersections of practice and policy

It is in these contexts of both opportunity and challenge for the AFCC movement that we introduce the articles in this special issue. Collectively, the articles demonstrate how research on the development and implementation of AFCCs can systematically advance practice and policy – working to overcome key challenges and seize critical opportunities for the AFCC movement moving forward. The articles demonstrate, in different ways, the value of community-based partnerships among academics, communities, organizations, policymakers, and practitioners in researching and implementing AFCC initiatives. In so doing, this special issue highlights the potential and promise of AFCC praxis (Moulaert & Garon, 2015).

Praxis has origins in the philosophy of Aristotle, with social theorists in the 19th and 20th centuries developing contemporary understandings of the concept (Seng, 1998). Today, scholars across many disciplines use the term, which emphasizes the “interdependence and integration – not separation – of theory and practice, research and development, thought and action . . . There is no learning/research without action to follow, and no action without a knowledge foundation based on prior learning/research” (Zuber-Skerritt, 2018, p. 15).

Critical theorists frame praxis as an essential aspect of working toward transformational social change (Freire, 1970). In this sense, research at the intersections of AFCC practice and policy – as featured in this special issue – is arguably a necessary component toward advancing structural change across communities, nations, and continents for more equitable and healthy long lives.

Below, we introduce each of the articles in this special issue according to four themes: (a) implementation and sustainability processes, (b) partnerships and multisectoral collaboration, (c) theory-based program design, and (d) policy and practice diffusion. The final article provides an overview of the career and contributions of Dr. Caro through his roles as scholar, mentor, collaborator, and community member.

Implementation and sustainability processes

The first two articles present research on implementation and sustainability processes of AFCC initiatives. Implementation refers to how initiatives mobilize resources to enact age-friendly community change, and sustainability addresses longer-term operations, institutionalization, and ongoing impact. Menec and Brown (2022) present an interpretive review of 13 documents that present empirical research on barriers and facilitators of implementing AFCC initiatives. Through an iterative coding process, the authors identify three overarching themes regarding enablers of implementation: multilevel leadership and common vision, effective governance and management, and diverse partnerships. They also report on key implementation processes, such as building on existing resources and raising awareness of age-friendliness, in addition to contextual influences, such as social, political, and economic characteristics of the geographic setting. Finally, the authors describe ways in which the framing of the initiative itself, such as how leaders define age-friendliness and what specific impacts they seek to achieve, as underlying influences on implementation. The authors discuss ways in which their findings support the importance of greater attention among researchers and policymakers on the effects of broader systems on local implementation.

The next article by Russell et al. (2022) orients specifically to issues of sustainability, emphasizing the importance of research on this topic in the context of initiatives beginning with short-term and small grant funding. Based on qualitative analysis of interviews with leaders of 11 age-friendly community initiatives in an eastern Canadian province, the researchers present the concept of the “implementation gap.” They define this gap as occurring between early stages of initiative development and long-term feasibility. Similar to themes from Menec and Brown’s (2022) review, the authors report community champions, municipal involvement, and partnerships as resources to overcome the implementation gap, whereas volunteer burnout and limited committee capacity prevent long-term sustainability. The researchers discuss

the importance of additional research and policy attention on adequately resourcing AFCC efforts – including financial, human, and social capital – especially in light of the resources that a community does, or does not, already have.

Partnerships and multisectoral collaboration

Building from the theme of partnerships and multisectoral collaboration as key components of AFCC implementation and sustainability, the next two articles offer a more in-depth exploration of this aspect of age-friendly community practice. First, analyzing in-depth interview data from age-friendly community leaders in New Jersey (US), Pestine-Stevens and Greenfield (2022) develop a framework to describe the main types of inter-organizational interactions within AFCC initiatives. They report two predominant categories of ties between age-friendly community core teams and their organizational partners: *assisting each other*, including linking, informational, and instrumental assistance, and *doing together*, such as implementing and planning events and programs together. The researchers describe how their findings support conceptualizing AFCC initiatives as network-level interventions and the implications of this insight for research, program monitoring, and policymaking.

Also based in the US, the article by Keyes et al. (2022) examines the process of planning age-friendly cities in municipal systems. They draw on evidence from a case study of a mapping project in San Antonio, Texas. The article discusses how municipal authorities are vital to implementing aging policies but identifies several barriers to age-friendly planning for local governments. Such barriers include the lack of cross-agency collaboration and the tendency for a focus on aging only within local senior services departments, fragmented from other departments focusing on neighborhood and infrastructure development. The article presents three strategies for enhancing internal municipal collaboration: *analytic planning*, which enables policymakers to visualize the captured value to aging in place for all public investments; *policy mapping* to assess how departments are reinforcing or contradicting age-friendly actions; and *effective advocacy* to build public will and guide municipal agenda setting. The article concludes with insights for forging connections across municipal departments, policymakers, community partners, and the public toward broader policy implementation.

Theory-based program design

The next two articles provide examples of theory-based program design for AFCC work. Theory-based program design serves to integrate components of an initiative within an overarching framework for change. First, Yarker and Buffel (2022) describe the use of a co-production approach alongside

a spatial lens to guide the development of the Ambition for Aging program in Greater Manchester, UK. As part of long-standing age-friendly community work in this region, the program supported a range of neighborhood-based projects designed to address social isolation in later life. The article presents a theoretical case description demonstrating ways in which co-production approaches to implementation must be accompanied by support and resources to avoid replicating inequalities. It also describes the value of a spatial lens for making visible different geographies of exclusion. The authors emphasize how a spatial justice perspective can help identify and overcome obstacles to achieving social inclusion in the context of diverse populations of older adults and oppressive social structures.

Dabelko-Schoeny et al. (2022) also present an example of theory-based program design by discussing the role of AFCC initiatives in responding to older residents' needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. More specifically, the authors present how age-friendly community initiatives can be strong partners in emergency response according to the US Center for Disease Control's (CDC) model for public health rapid response teams. The authors illustrate how Age-Friendly Columbus and Franklin County (AFCFC), an initiative in Ohio (US), applied the key tenets of the CDC model to meet the emergent needs of older residents at the outset of the pandemic. The article describes how the principles of mobility, timeliness, expertise, and coordination cut across the initiative's programmatic focus on social connection, food, personal protective equipment, and technology access. The article concludes by emphasizing the need for existing emergency response systems and officials to recognize and leverage the value of AFCC initiatives in collaboratively developing emergency response efforts.

Policy and practice diffusion

The final set of articles addresses issues concerning how age-friendly leaders in Korean cities and communities draw on concepts, tools, and frameworks developed outside of their national context for AFCC adoption. First, Woo and Choi (2022) draw on interviews with age-friendly leaders across six cities that were part of the WHO Global Network of Age-Friendly Cities and Communities in 2017. They aimed to understand the policy process behind membership and implementation as part of the Global Network. The findings demonstrate ways in which political conditions motivate cities to join the network as a policy accomplishment in its own right, with less political will and resources for long-term implementation and actual age-friendly progress. The researchers call for stronger investment of resources, especially at the national level, to ensure greater policy diffusion across a larger number of cities, as well as toward more comprehensive and sustainable change within cities.

Second, Brossoie et al. (2022) address considerations in the design of age-friendly community assessment tools, examining the transferability of a US-developed tool for two cities in South Korea. They present theory on key differences between the cultural milieus of the US and Korean societies, which foregrounds differences in response patterns to the survey questions in the Korean cities versus a mid-Atlantic city in the US. The authors interpret differential response patterns as reflective of social norms in Asian cultures that emphasize avoiding disagreement, maintaining social harmony, and orienting to the collective, in contrast to a greater focus on one's individual needs and experiences in the US. The researchers conclude by emphasizing the importance of attending not only to social, political, and economic differences among initiative contexts across the world, but also to cultural beliefs and systems of meaning as focal considerations for AFCC practice and policymaking.

In memoriam

The concluding article by Sánchez et al. (2022) is in memory of Dr. Frank Caro and his decades of work in social gerontology, social policy, and aging services. The authors review Caro's contributions in four key areas: the strengthening of long-term services and support through the integration of home care services with other domains; the expansion of how productive aging is socially understood and economically valued; the importance of rigorous program evaluation and ongoing methodological innovation; and the significance of AFCCs in the US and internationally. The article highlights Caro's vital role in advancing engaged scholarship in gerontology and calls for current researchers in aging to build from his legacy by combining scholarship with advocacy, alongside a commitment to community change that meaningfully improves the lives of older people.

Conclusion

The articles in this special issue orient to a relatively underdeveloped, yet critically important, area of research on AFCCs: processes toward age-friendly progress in cities and communities, as well as the contexts in which they are embedded. Inspired by the legacy of social gerontologist Dr. Frank Caro, the special issue highlights the value of dynamic partnerships among academics, policy actors, practitioners, communities, and older adults in generating and disseminating knowledge of how AFCC change happens (or not) across diverse community, organizational, and systems settings. In this sense, the issue demonstrates how research on AFCCs can contribute to understanding not just about what is or what has been in aging societies, but about what such societies might yet be (Baars et al., 2006).

Continued research on AFCCs at the intersections of policy and practice toward age-friendly praxis is essential for bolstering AFCC efforts at all levels – from initiatives within neighborhoods and small towns to megacities, nation-states, and the world.

Key points

- The age-friendly cities and communities movement has grown considerably since the early 2000s.
- Research on practice and policy is important for addressing challenges facing the movement.
- Articles in the special issue report findings and perspectives to optimize policy and practice for age-friendly progress.
- The articles examine four main areas: implementation and sustainability processes; partnerships and multisectoral collaboration; theory-based program design; and policy and practice diffusion.
- The final paper provides an overview of the career contributions of Dr. Frank Caro, who dedicated nearly 60 years of academic and professional activity to gerontology and aging services.

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