

The Role of the Built Environment in Community Participation for Adults Aging with Physical Disability: A Scoping Review

Aspects of the places where people spend their time can affect their quality of life and well-being. The term “built environment” refers to the human-made features of spaces where people live and work. It includes things like buildings, sidewalks, roads and traffic safety, and transportation. Despite improved accessibility standards following the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, barriers in the built environment still exist. These barriers can hinder participation in community activities, such as volunteering and dining out with friends, for adults aging with long-term physical disability. To learn more about how the built environment affects community participation for this population, we did a scoping review of the literature.

The Review

We searched for peer-reviewed studies of adults aging with long-term physical disability that addressed community participation and built environments. We found 21 studies that fit our criteria. Studies used a variety of approaches, including self-report surveys, qualitative surveys, GPS data, photo journals, and formal accessibility audits. Studies used varying definitions of participation and the built environment.

Synthesis of the data from these studies showed that the built environment had a clear impact on participants’ ability to participate in their communities. Building accessibility, street and sidewalk accessibility, and transportation access were the most frequently studied features of the built environment.

Common themes included:

- The built environment as a barrier to participation in meaningful community activities
- Effects of the built environment on mobility and one’s ability to travel to various activities
- Unwelcoming/negative messages sent by inaccessible environments

Studies also described beneficial aspects of the built environment, such as:

- Smooth travel surfaces
- Curb cuts
- Well-maintained sidewalks
- Safe street crossings
- Pleasing neighborhood appearances

Conclusion

Findings from this review show that barriers in the built environment affect community participation for people aging with disability. Studies we reviewed used varying definitions and ways of measuring both “community participation” and “built environment.” Researchers should use consistent measures and definitions of these concepts. Results of this review may inform

future research on how built environments can promote community participation for people aging with disability.

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