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## Living environments of polish seniors - needs and challenges

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### Abstract

Demographic changes in Polish population cause an increase in interest of senior citizens. The environment of living of older people is a particularly important issue. It is important to provide seniors with living space that is a comfortable, safe, adequate to the needs and allows for the longest independent functioning of an elderly person. It is a challenge both for public health and for housing policy.

**Keywords:** older people, household, housing, housing policy, living environment

### Introduction and aim

Contemporary polish society is aging rapidly. At the end of 2014 polish population was 38.5 million, including more than 8.5 million people over 60 years old. [1] Aging is inseparably included with reduced physical capacity, reduced mobility and an increase in insecurity. This situation is reflected in the fact that older people each year spend more and more time at the apartment. It is therefore important that living environment of seniors allow for, as long as possible, free and independent life.

**The main objective** of this article is analysis of the current housing situation of the elderly and to define the needs of the elderly related to housing. Secondary objective is to provide solutions for the living environment to meet the needs of seniors.

The article is divided into three parts. The first part presents contemporary households of the elderly. The second part focuses on the role and importance of the dwelling not only in terms of functionality but also emotional and socio-cultural. The third part presents a model in support of seniors living environment suited to their needs.

Literature review was made in the period March-June 2018 on the basis of materials from the years 2008-2018. Included only studies of people over 60 years of age, Poles. Posted combination of the following keywords: housing, older people, living environment, senior housing needs, household, architectural barriers, housing policy.

## **Description of knowledge**

### **Demographic of seniors' households**

As numerous studies of the life situation and activity in the elderly largely determined by family status. Households with persons aged 65 years and older in 2011 accounted for 30.5% of all households. In about 30% of single-person households, they are persons aged 65 years and older. They are usually single people, predominantly women. [2] On the other hand, according to a survey by CBOS half of the households of people over 65 years of age it consists of two people (24% of single-person households). In contrast, the number of single-person households progresses with age. Among people over the age of 75 single-person households account for 31%. This is primarily due to the death of a spouse. [3] The modern model of the family is transformed. The characteristics of the changes include: reduction of small family (by reducing the fertility rate), reduction in the size of households (reducing the number of people living together) and a sharp reduction in the amount of three-generation families who live together. Changed family structure affects, among others, to maintain the independence of older people. The above-mentioned changes in the trend of living separately but close to each other. [4,5] This is particularly important at a time when an older person loses mobility or there are other health problems. Then it is necessary to organize assistance to such person or transform housing in such a way to allow functioning in it. Among people over 70 years who have had restrictions on self-service only 3% had a house specially adapted to the needs. [6, 7] Undoubtedly an important issue related to housing the elderly is a financial zone. The main source of income for older people in Poland are pensions, which is associated with a decrease in revenue compared with income before retirement. The material conditions of their household as poor estimates 14% of people in the age group 60-65 years, 13% in the group of 66-74 years and 11% with 75 years or more. [3,8]

### **The needs of seniors housing-related**

Elderly people are mostly not ready to change their place of residence. It can be noticed that with age, their willingness to move are even smaller. [9] According to the research 96% of Polish seniors declare willingness to stay in his own apartment, noting the possibility to enlist the help of relatives or caregivers of older people. Other housing preferences are: private apartment in the Nursing Home (DPS) (2%), living with other elderly people on the basis of common support (1.5%), housing in the state DPS (0.5%). [10] Presented results have to do with basic needs to be met by house - to ensure the safety and intimacy. Desire to remain in their own home is also linked to emotional attachment to the place, the environment and the local community. Space which operates an older person is associated with numerous experiences, memories, allows the realization of needs by which identity is reinforced and supported an elderly person a sense of independence. In addition, home furnishing in personal items (souvenirs, photographs) give it specific nature, are associated with numerous experiences and emotions, thereby enhancing attachment to the place of residence. [11]

For the elderly is of great importance advantageous location in the availability of facilities eg. healthcare facilities and good neighborhood (it is important that it was not too noisy). [11,12]

According to research if older the seniors are, the more hours a day they spend at home. [13] For this state of affairs are responsible, among others, architectural barriers and disadvantages associated with infrastructure. These include busy roads, the lack of public toilets, high, steep stairs, high curbs, holes in sidewalks and pedestrian crossings, no railing holding out or inadequate labeling streets. Another problem is the availability of public space objects the most visited by seniors (too long distances, lack of good transport connections, the need for transfers, the lack of benches at bus stops or too small print on timetables). [14]

Due to the fact that the time spent by seniors in their apartments is getting longer, it is important to adapt it to the needs of older people so that it is both functional and safe. Basic steps to improve safety in the home are: removal of unnecessary items and carpets, clear indication of thresholds or use of non-slip material. In the living space special attention should be paid to the adaptation of rooms such as the kitchen and bathroom. [15]

In the kitchen, for example, it is worth ensuring that all cabinets were low so that there was no need to step on chairs to get the equipment. Lower cabinet drawers should be equipped with mechanisms to facilitate "opening/closing". Attention should also be paid to household appliances : refrigerator with signaling ajar, auto-defrost and small in size; induction hob with clear markers and an oven located at such height that there is no need to bend down.

In the bathroom, it is important that the floor was covered with non-slip material. Instead of a bath there should be shower, preferably without the shower tray. Place holding hygienic utensils should be within reach. In the bathing area, it is important that there are handles to aid in movement and support against falling. Height of the basin and toilet should be adjusted to the needs of a specific person, and free access should be provided around them .

In addition to the equipment of key areas, it is worth to pay attention to additional elements . Lighting in the apartment is very important - it should be even in every place. In addition, it is worth lighten the worktop in the kitchen, dining table or desk. An interesting solution is the automatic lighting when motion is detected - especially on the way from the bedroom to the toilet. In addition to the installation of proper lighting communication routes can be equipped with handrails / holders to support. [16]

### **Solutions support the elderly in living environment**

Peter Błędowski, Barbara Szatur-Jaworska, Zofia Szweda-Lewandowska and Maria Zrałek created a model of support the elderly in living environment.

It presents proposals for specific actions that can be applied as part of a housing policy aimed at older people.

Due to the form of housing preferred by seniors, which is to remain in their own apartment, one should focus on adapting the houses to the needs of older people . Help in the adaptation of traditional housing should include: renovation to seniors friendly architectural changes, the use of technical facilities to ease the use, providing nursing care and assistance in converting housing or financial support in the form of housing allowance.

Another form of residence is an service flat (rented). Seniors who use this option would be provided with services related to everyday functioning, such as cleaning, washing, shopping, nursing care or rehabilitation care.

Sharing an apartment or house with other elderly tenants - co-housing. This is another model of housing, in which a key role is played by helping each other both in meeting their living needs and in socio-cultural activation.

Sheltered housing, or premises replacing stay in specialist centers providing full-time care for persons in need of care and assistance with activities of daily life. They enable independent functioning in the local environment and the local community.

The use of innovative IT and technology solutions, including telecare, a system informing about falls, a navigation system in the space of a flat, and on-line education for seniors . [17]

## **Summary**

Studies and observations clearly show that the living environment of elderly people in Poland are affected by many factors. Seniors are often surrounded by his family and closest neighbors. They count on their help and support, even though they often do not live with them in one place. Older people are not willing to change the place in which they live for many years, despite the fact that housing and the environment are often not adapted to the psychophysical changes that occur during aging. Sometimes even small changes can lead to more independent and comfortable, but above all, safer life for the elderly. Adaptation of living quarters and public certainly has a positive effect on the sense of independence of persons over 60 years of age.

The aging of the population should be a factor in shaping housing policy implemented by both the public and the private. Solutions in the field of residence forms and housing conditions are necessary so as to provide the elderly with a safe and functional living space adapted to their needs and expectations.

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