

Retirement communities: Ageism exists even among the elderly – new research

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

"We don't want to be tripping over Zimmer frames all the time," said John*, 73. He clearly felt frustrated and had a strong objection to the older, more frail residents in his retirement village. John and his wife, Jean, had moved to the retirement village about a year ago. They were clearly not expecting to encounter really elderly people when they moved

in. "It's depressing," he continued, "to see these people, who really ought to be in a nursing home, or in care."

In our research—published in [The Gerontologist](#)—we carried out 80 in-depth interviews with older [people](#) about their experiences of living in [retirement](#) villages across the UK and Australia. We were particularly interested in why people sought out retirement living and how their needs matched or contradicted those of other residents. We did not expect to find such high levels of resentment among residents—but we did.

Retirement living is big business. [It is estimated](#) that around 5% of Australians, 6% of Americans, and 1% of UK citizens over 65 live in a retirement [village](#). [Researchers](#) have argued that one of the problems with retirement villages is that they tend to treat "older people" as a homogeneous category, as more or less "the same" simply because they are over 60. The reality is that residents have extremely diverse needs and span up to three decades—from 60 to over 90.

Contrasting and conflicting needs

Some of the people we talked to (we called them the "Peter Pans") clearly chose retirement living to keep the perils of old age at bay and prolong midlife for as long as they could. David, 76, and his wife, Pam, 73, had moved to a retirement village in the midlands because they wanted to maintain a sense of being active, fit, healthy and independent. David told us: "We are still reasonably fit, you see. We've got a strong stable background of family and friends. We hope this is a place which will be easy to live in and where we can do the things we want to and feel fit and healthy."

In contrast, others chose the same retirement village because they were concerned about increasing frailty and deteriorating health and sought a

community that they felt could support them in these challenges.

Peter, 78, and his wife Sue, 76, had moved to the village to cope with Sue's increasing dependency due to a dementia-related illness. Peter told us: "Well, it all stems really from Sue's illness... and the problems that have occurred, and we thought this would be the answer... I was under the impression that's what we would find by moving here."

Ageism in the 'old'

These contrasting sets of needs were often in conflict. People who had moved to retirement villages to prolong midlife and to feel part of an active, independent community, were not always accepting of frailer residents.

Jane, 72, from a UK retirement village, suggested that "the older people make you feel older. They can't do as much... we do help them, but we can't be living our life around them."

Paul, 74, called for a more selective sales process. He told us: "I don't think the people [here] are vetted enough. I think the main criteria is you've got the money. I don't necessarily think there ought to be more support—I think there ought to be less people who require support here."

Some people who had moved to feel more supported in their vulnerability and frailty sometimes felt marginalised and unsupported. Peter told us, tearfully, that it hadn't turned out as he and his wife had hoped. "In some ways, now, I just feel she's a bit like a leper really—because no one actually wants to get close to her here," he said.

But there were others who demonstrated a more accepting attitude towards [older residents](#). Ralph, 72, recognised that he might be more frail himself in the future and welcomed support from fellow residents:

"We are currently the people to whom the neighbours say, 'can you help with this or do that?' 'Take me somewhere or do that?' But I think one day it will work the other way round. I think maybe when we get older, we will become dependent on others here too."

Cultural geographer, Kevin McHugh [has argued](#) that retirement communities reflect and sell compelling narratives about successful ageing. These narratives, he argued, are "defined as much by the absent image (old, poor folks) as by the image presented: handsome, healthy, comfortably middle-class 'seniors', busily filling sun-filled days".

A lot of these retirement communities are often so vaguely defined that they appear to offer all things to all people. But they can only be a desirable model if they recognise and accommodate the diverse needs of that community.

As Swedish gerontologist, Håkan Jönson, [has argued](#), it makes little sense to resent more frail, vulnerable [older people](#)—why should we resent a percentage of the population that we will probably be part of in the future?

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