Building Connections in Multi-Unit Housing: Scoping Review of Factors Influencing Social Interaction that Foster Aging in the Right Place

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ABSTRACT

Canada's aging population brings rising concerns over social isolation and housing insecurity. While Aging in Place is idealized, it often fails to address the diverse needs of older adults. This scoping review, using a social justice lens and Levac et al.'s (2010) six-stage framework, examines how multi-unit housing can foster social connectedness. A total of 2,420 studies were screened for eligibility, with 21 meeting the final inclusion criteria.

The review finds that open, accessible layouts with mobility-friendly features promote informal interactions and independence. A balance of private and communal spaces supports both autonomy and social connection, while culturally inclusive programs and resident-led initiatives enhance engagement, despite persistent funding challenges.

INTRODUCTION

Canada's **aging population presents growing challenges for healthcare, policy, and urban planning**. In 2016, adults aged 65+ made up 16.9% of the population, projected to reach 24% by 2036 (Government of Canada, 2020). More older adults now live alone, driven by changing family structures, increasing the risk of social isolation and housing insecurity (Forsyth et al., 2019).

While Aging in Place (AIP) is often seen as ideal, it oversimplifies the diverse realities of older adults (Bigonesse & Chaudhury, 2022). **Aging in the Right Place (AIRP) offers a more inclusive lens, emphasizing secure, supportive housing,** especially for those facing precarity (Canham et al., 2022).

Social connection is key to healthy aging and is shaped by both **built (e.g., housing design) and social (e.g., programming, community ties) environments** (Leung & Famakin, 2019; Bigonesse & Chaudhury, 2022). Strong networks improve well-being, reduce isolation, and offer protection in times of crisis (Ottoni et al., 2022; Hirvonen & Lilius, 2019).

This scoping review examines **factors in multi-unit housing that influence social interaction and support aging in the right place**. It focuses on the built environment and social programming to identify elements that foster social connectedness and well-being for older adults, especially those facing vulnerabilities

METHODOLOGY

Design:
- Scoping review using Levac et al.'s (2010) six-stage framework, expanding on Arksey & O'Malley (2005).
- Followed PRISMA-ScR checklist for transparency and reproducibility (Tricco et al., 2018).

Screening Process:
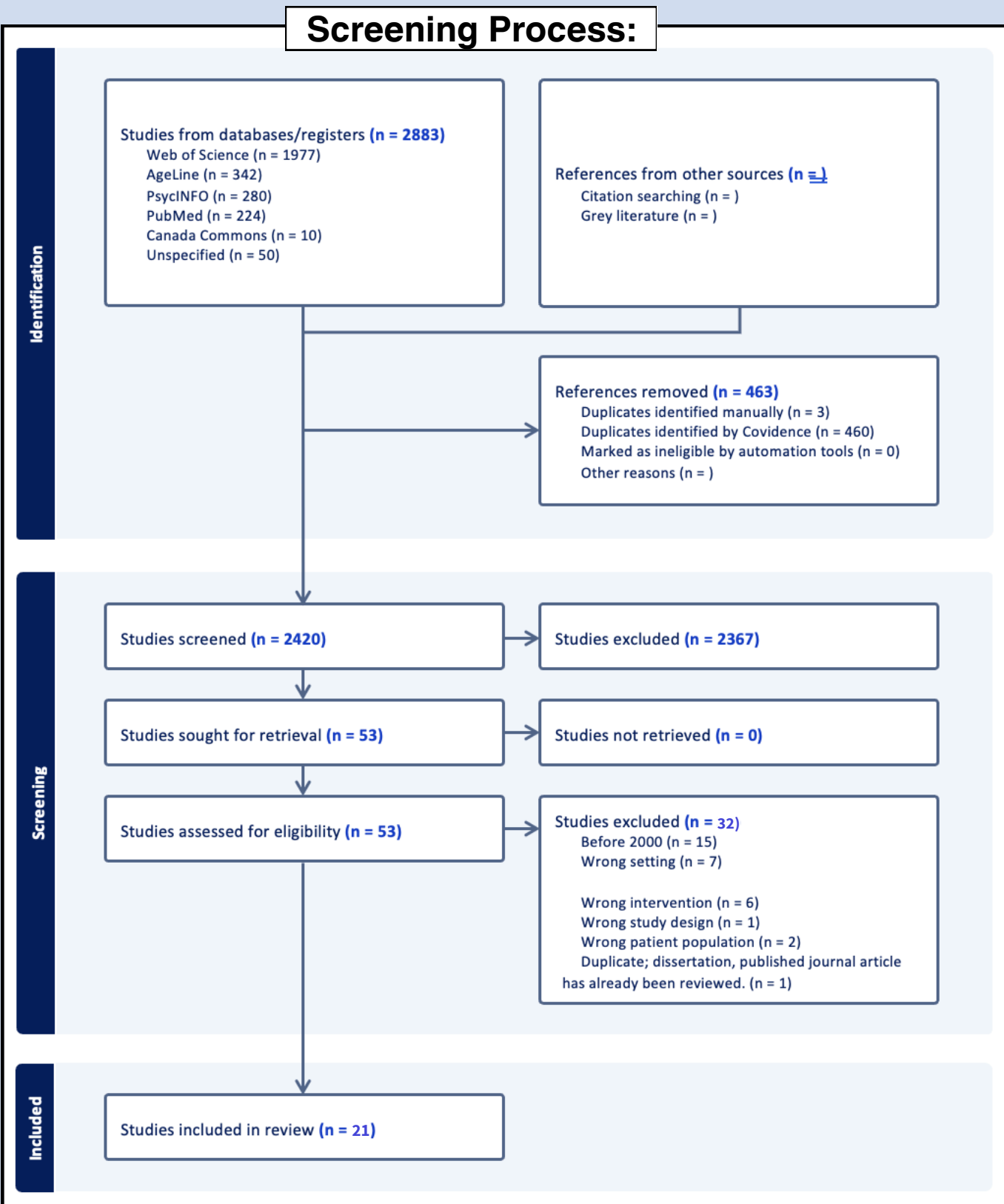
A **social justice lens** was applied to prioritize equity and inclusion in housing, especially for older adults facing structural vulnerabilities. This guided key research questions:
- How do multi-unit housing environments foster or hinder social connection?
- What roles do design, mobility, and programming play in equitable aging in place?
- How are resident voices and diverse needs reflected in housing policies?

By exploring how built and social environments support or limit aging in the right place, this review informs **more inclusive, community-rooted strategies.**

RESULTS

Design, Layout & Mobility: Open layouts and common areas (lounges, gardens, kitchens) enhance social interaction by improving visibility and accessibility. Mobility-friendly features like ramps, elevators, and clear signage ensure safe movement, supporting independence and social integration.

Private vs. Communal Spaces: A balance between private and communal spaces supports autonomy and a sense of belonging, crucial for aging in place.

Inclusive Social Programs: Culturally diverse on-site and off-site programs promote engagement and foster social bonds, but their sustainability depends on funding.

Resident-Led Committees: Empowering older adults through participation in governance structures boosts social interaction, satisfaction, and community ties.

Power of Social Engagement: Shared activities (e.g., gardening, potlucks) build trust, reduce loneliness, and enhance community cohesion and satisfaction.

CONCLUSION

This scoping review finds that the literature consistently highlights how **multi-unit housing design—particularly open, accessible layouts—can foster informal social interactions and reduce isolation.** A balance between communal and private spaces supports both engagement and autonomy. Culturally responsive programs and resident-led initiatives also enhance connection, though long-term sustainability depends on adequate funding. Together, these elements support aging in the right place by promoting social integration and well-being.
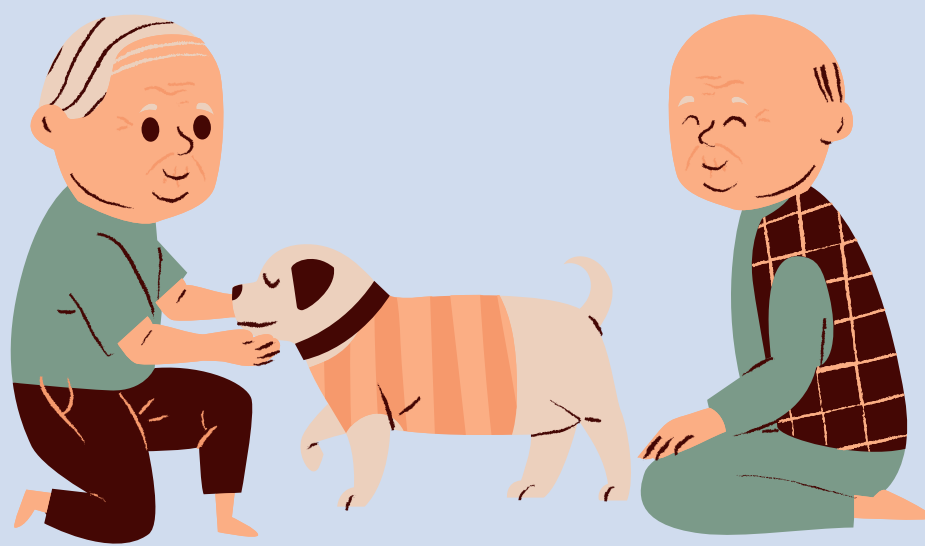
LOOKING FORWARD

Explore the balance between private and communal spaces for better socialization and autonomy.

Identify strategies for securing long-term funding for diverse social programs.

Investigate whether structured programs or spontaneous interactions have a greater impact on socialization.

Examine how social activities affect mental health, purpose, and aging in place, and how to optimize them for long-term integration.

Future collaborations could focus on **co-designing housing models** with older adults, non-profits, housing providers, and community groups like senior advocacy networks, cultural associations, and urban planners to create inclusive and responsive multi-unit housing

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