

# Creating multi-unit housing environments that are age-friendly, socially connected, resilient, affordable, and inclusive

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## WHAT DO WE MEAN BY “AGE-FRIENDLY?”

The fact is, we’re all aging. Age-friendly infrastructure and programming doesn’t just benefit older adults, it enhances accessibility, inclusion and well-being for people of all ages. Age-friendly housing is adaptable across the life course, featuring elements like wide, barrier-free hallways which ease mobility (from strollers to walkers), and universal design features which improve accessibility. Age-friendly housing should ideally be situated within neighbourhoods that are designed to meet diverse needs. By applying age-friendly design principles, like pedestrian-friendly streets and co-located amenities, and practices like social programs and services, communities can foster feelings of safety, security, and belonging.

Age-friendly communities are inherently intergenerational – they facilitate ever-shifting household dynamics and compositions like welcoming a child, children moving back into their family home, or older adults transitioning to living alone. Planning with the life course in mind fosters intergenerational solidarity, promotes resilience, and cultivates an environment that is vibrant, diverse, and connected.



“An age-friendly community is one that is a great place to grow up and grow old.” - Institute on Aging (USA)

## NAVIGATING A POLYCRISIS:

Currently, we are experiencing the interwoven challenges of housing unaffordability and homelessness, extreme climate events, an aging population, and increasing loneliness and social isolation. As we navigate intersecting crises, we often turn to those around us for support. Yet, as presented in the City of Vancouver’s Resilient Vancouver Strategy (2019), nearly 50% of Vancouverites are unable to identify four people they would call in an emergency. Communities that are more socially connected are more equipped to build collective resilience and withstand, adapt, and overcome stress, loss, and change.

## WHAT IS AGING IN THE *RIGHT* PLACE?

As we grow older, our social networks often grow smaller. Social engagement and access to social participation foster a sense of belonging, improve physical and mental wellbeing, and encourage aging in place. According to the Vancouver Senior Housing Strategy, older adults (age 55+) who rent face increasing housing precarity and unaffordability as they age. In fact, approximately 30% of older adult renters experience core housing need.

With older adults –across all income brackets but particularly lower-income– increasingly feeling challenged to remain in their homes, with few options for at-home support or ‘downsized’ homes, policies and practices which create stronger conditions for aging in the right place are critical.

The National Institute on Ageing calls Ageing in the Right Place: “**The process of enabling healthy ageing in the most appropriate setting based on an older person’s personal preferences, circumstances and care needs.**”

## WHY MULTI-UNIT BUILDINGS?

Multi-unit housing is the fastest growing form of housing in Canada, yet it sometimes gets a reputation for feeling impersonal and isolating. According to Vancouver’s Healthy City Strategy (2014), in Metro-Vancouver, the number of people who say they never speak to their neighbours is twice as high in multi-unit buildings as in single-family homes. But it doesn’t have to be that way; density isn’t inherently isolating. Age-friendly sociable design and community-building initiatives can help to enhance a sense of community, belonging, and social connectedness for residents of multi-unit housing.

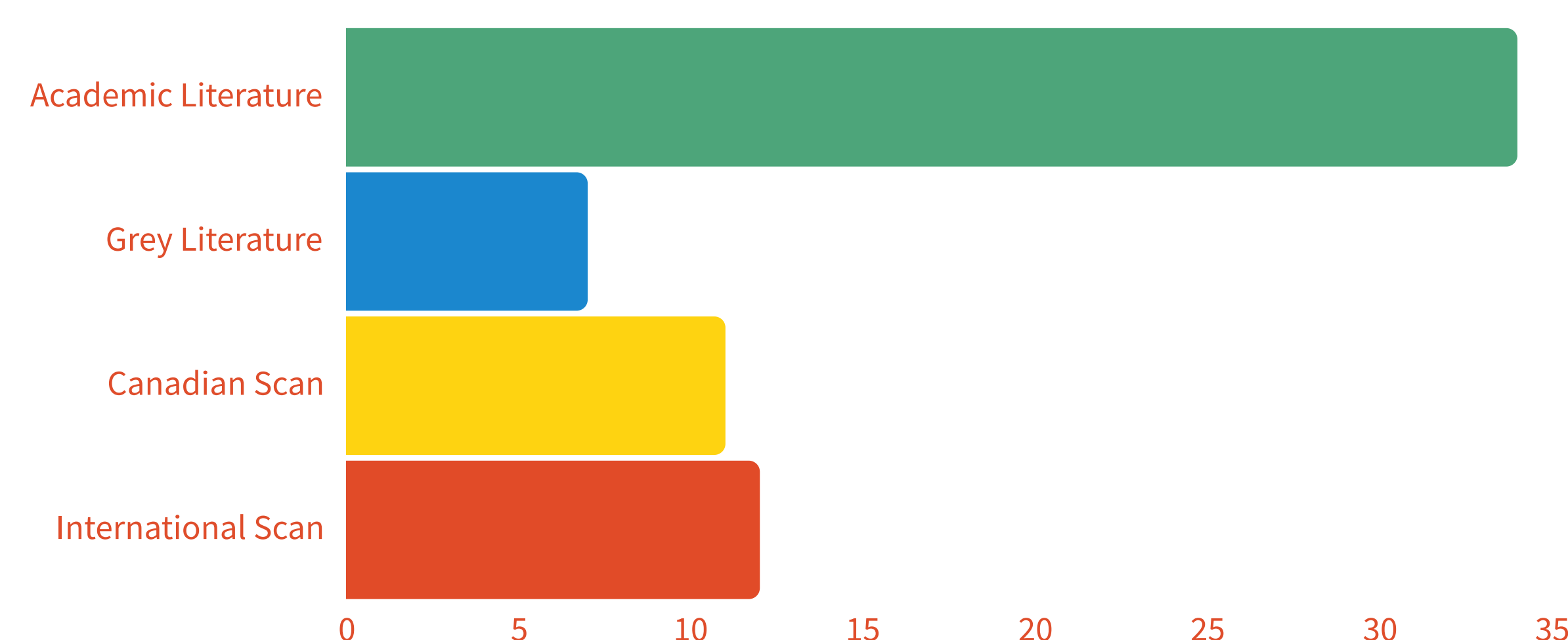
Our social connections, particularly with our neighbours, represent one of our most important forms of support. As denser house types rise in prevalence, we are presented with a unique opportunity to leverage multi-unit housing environments to foster social connectedness, build collective climate and health resilience, and support better conditions for aging in place.

## METHODS:

We began by asking ourselves: “How can we create multi-unit housing environments that are age-friendly, socially connected, resilient, affordable, and inclusive?”

To find some answers, we did a deep dive into relevant literature, policy, and practice. We conducted a literature scan, which included 34 academic and 7 grey literature publications. The search strategy for this included the terms: **older adults, multi-unit residential buildings, social connectedness, social capital, social programming, and community**

The jurisdictional scan looked into policy and frameworks spanning British Columbia, Canada, the United States, the UK, and Australia, which included 11 Canadian strategies, policies, and reports, and 12 international strategies, policies, and reports. The search strategy for this included the terms: **older adults, age-friendly, universal design, social connectedness, and housing.**



“After designing programming to increase building connections, residents began to take better care of the physical space and one another” - Barnes (2016)

## EMERGING DIRECTIONS

### Key policy-level emerging directions

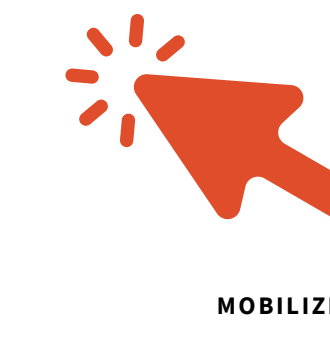
- Encourage funders to shift towards more robust and reliable multi-year support for social programming within multi-unit housing
- Foster collaboration between government and philanthropic funders to co-create larger, coordinated multi-year funding initiatives and streamline access to funding by developing centralized, user-friendly portals for grant opportunities (see UK’s Propel initiative)
- Leverage social programming in multi-unit housing to maximize the reach and uptake of existing government and non-profit programs, such as digital literacy cafes, home adaptation programs, wellness and rehabilitation supports, etc.
- Recognize upstream social programming in multi-unit housing as one of the proven approaches for building positive social, physical and mental health behaviours and embed this understanding into the public health sector’s understanding of preventative health interventions.
- Recognize upstream social programming in multi-unit housing as one of the proven approaches for building age-friendly communities, and integrate it into age-friendly community frameworks, policies and action plans across BC and Canada
- Implement standardized evaluation criteria for social programming in housing to improve scalability and track uptake



INVEST



COLLABORATE



MOBILIZE



RECOGNIZE



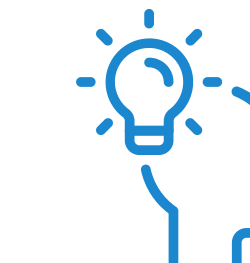
EVALUATE

### Key practice-level emerging directions

- Train building managers and other housing staff to understand how to support, how to host and/or partner on social programming initiatives
- Adapt social programs in multi-unit housing to align with the diverse needs and abilities of different resident groups (one size doesn’t fit all); consult with residents about their interests
- Build the capacity of residents to self-organize around social connection and wellbeing initiatives and decision-making



TRAIN



ADAPT



BUILD CAPACITY

## WHAT’S NEXT

Over the next few months, we will continue to sift through the literature and fine-tune the policy and practice recommendations. We look forward to engaging with professionals, academics, and experts in the housing, policy, gerontology, and health science fields to identify how best to communicate the knowledge and literature synthesized.

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