Ageing in a purpose-built retirement community: towards a longitudinal study

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The LARC study
The 13-year Longitudinal study of Ageing in a Retirement Community (LARC) began in 2006 with the aim of exploring the development of a new purpose-built retirement community at Denham Garden Village, England. The mixed methods study addresses topics such as residents’ physical and mental health, well-being, social relationships, and activities, interests and expectations. Over time, LARC will examine changes within the village and provide insights into new forms of care and accommodation for ageing populations.

Mixed methods
Mixed methods research is sometimes criticised for the superficial use of many data sources to supplement analysis of data from one ‘core’ method. LARC’s research questions and methods are grounded in ideas drawn from a critical gerontology perspective. Tools are being selected to allow comparison with other datasets and to produce coherent, multi-layered findings over time of relevance to policy and practice.

Denham Garden Village
In 2009, the village is home to almost 300 people aged 55 and over. When complete, it will comprise 326 mixed-tenure apartments, bungalows and houses. Facilities include a shop, café-bar, GP surgery, library, village hall, health spa and extensive grounds.

Achieving/maintaining high response rates
122 (73%) of 168 eligible residents were recruited for the Wave 1 survey in 2007. Given the relatively small number of potential participants, it is important to maintain a high response rate over time, especially in the quantitative elements of the study. The team administers questionnaires in face-to-face interviews to reduce losses over time. Periods of less intensive fieldwork reduce the potential for residents to feel overburdened by, or disengaged from, the research.

Storage and retrieval of data
Managing such a large and varied data set over 13 years required careful consideration by the LARC team from an early stage. Strategies have been developed to address key issues such as anonymisation, archiving and future-proofing.

Village staff
The research team has sought to establish strong working relationships with village staff from the start. Their views and experiences can yield useful insights in relation to the study’s research questions. Equally, staff have the potential to facilitate or impede data collection within the village, and to encourage or discourage residents from engaging with the research.

Methods and tools
Data collection for LARC involves:
- Biennial surveys including standard measures, such as:
  - CASP-19 quality of life measure
  - SF12 health status measure
  - De Jong Gierveld loneliness scale
  - Ethnographic methods
  - Diary-keeping and ‘directed writing’ exercises
  - In-depth interviews and focus groups
  - Collation of contextual documentation
  - Photographic/audiovisual work

The future
Longitudinal mixed-method studies like LARC remain rare in gerontology. LARC presents a unique opportunity to assess the extent to which purpose-built retirement communities can address the challenge of providing housing and care to a diverse and changing population of older people over time. Through combining longitudinal and cross-sectional analyses, LARC will also inform evolving theory, policy and practice at local, national and international levels.

Research focus
Over time, the foci and priorities of the funding organisation, and of the research team, may change. The LARC programme aims to provide sufficient flexibility to allow the team to accommodate some of these changes, whether they arise at organisational, national or international levels.

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