

## City Environment – Challenges and Opportunities for Social Work with Seniors

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### Abstract

*Social work with seniors is a specific area in which unexpected factors may play a role. Space and things that surrounds senior are a source of relationship to him. They are examples of what, thinking about older people, is usually not taken into consideration. Possibilities of social work in keeping the elderly in their home environment are extended in this article to spatial criteria. Social work is identified here as one of the important sources of information for future urban development.*

**Keywords:** physical environment, old aged people, social work, Ostrava, gerontology, development psychology

### Introduction

Seniors housing in cities had undergone many significant changes during the life of older people. On average they moved into the city probably in their 20s or 30s - at a time when they founded family, or were looking for work. It could be 40 or more years ago and the city where they came was different. Character of individual neighbourhoods has changed. Probably there was a change of homeowner or neighbours. Housing that seemed ideal for young people, started to reveal its barriers as they grew old. Inappropriate apartment for seniors with mobility difficulties can become a trap. Yet usually even then the older people do not want to move. They are usually very attached to the place, which they knew for many years and where they have spent their youth. Modern trends in the provision of social services support the older people in staying in their own home for as long as possible. How can social work help other specialist to develop such a cities, where older people can stay in their home, living as independently as possible, will be discussed in the following article.

### 1. The Theoretical Basis

For the purposes of this article we will draw primarily from the research project SGS1/FSS/2010 Social Services in post-industrial society. The case of the Ostrava city, Section Space and Keller, J., Hruška-Tvrđý, L. "Industrial city in post-industrial times" (GA, reg. No. GA403 / 09/1720 Time Solutions 2009-2011).

While writing this article, the author held a paradigm of social constructivism. It concludes that space is not perceived by the people as an objective physical quantity, but is constructed in everybody's mind. Therefore for different people, one and the same place can be different and yet each of them will be truth.

With regard to social work we will also keep the socio-ecological model, as described already in the 60s authors Germain and Gitterman or newly by Compton and Galaway. According to this socio-ecological model of social work in relation to the environment, seniors must deal with three types of tasks:

1. tasks occurring at specific life stages (specifically on seniors great demands are put with regard to the challenges that must be faced, such as the "empty nest," retirement, with the associated significant reduction in income and more frequent medical complications)
2. The tasks based on the use of environmental factors (not necessarily if elderly people do not have health limitations in mobility)
3. interpersonal challenges when people can solve both previous types of tasks (again typical for seniors)

We can say, that from the perspective of social constructivism the household of senior can be perceived as private place, public place (in a case of a visit), work (eg. in the workshop), etc. Senior in their home environment may even become the subject of social work, its theories and methods.

However, with regard to social - ecological model seniors are those who help to create their own environment influence and are influenced by it. This relates to space of their own household as well as a space, for example, in residential social care.

Theoretical definition of senior is more complicated. We all probably feel that it is something that is common for older people, but we have difficulties expressing what it is. There are many definitions of seniors, but a certain ambiguity is common to them, about on what basis of criteria should "senior" be defined. They agree generally only on the fact that these persons are subject to higher vulnerability to physical and mental illness. Most definitions, eg. : WHO (2007), and Pacovský Heřmanová (1981) or Haškovcová (1990) agree on the definition of senior age from 60 to 75 years. Since we are for the purposes of this article taking the example of the city of Ostrava, where, according to the Czech Statistical Office, life expectancy for a newly born men is 72.6 and for women 79.6 years, we consider it appropriate to determine the age limit for defining the elderly in this article by the age of 65 years.

## ***2. City Friendly to seniors***

As noted above, older people are often bound with certain fragility and susceptibility to disease. Typical is so called polymorbidity - the presence of more diseases simultaneously. According to the geriatric literature (e.g. Kalvach 2008), this status is relatively frequent with the older people, where these diseases mutually interact and affect each other prognosis. For this reason, the elderly people are usually seen in society and in social services as people with higher morbidity and reduced mobility. This concludes in an idea of space friendly to the needs of older people as a place with such modifications that emphasises safety and is barrier-free. Overall we can say, the place is actually similar with the place friendly to persons with disabilities. These measures, however, do not concern only the elderly households, and social services for the elderly. The World Health Organization prepares regularly overview "senior-friendly cities." Those are cities where is the external environment tailored to the needs of older people and these people can thus move around town in easier and safer way. This environment of the city contributes to the possibility of the elderly to remain in their households for as long as possible and to be more involved in social activities. According to text by the World Health Organization (WHO 2007) lives in urban areas 80% of the current world population of seniors over 60 years. WHO stated that environmental characteristics have a major impact on other components of quality of life, such as mobility, independence and the ability to "age in place" (WHO 2007, p. 12). City as a friendly place to aging is also one that provides sufficient conditions for health, participation and security as the social, personal and economic characteristics of individuals and their interaction with the environment physical (Plouffe, Kalash, 2010).

## ***3. Seniors Living in the City - An Example of Ostrava***

In the future, especially in developing countries, we can expect further growth in the number of older people in cities. In the Czech environment, we can probably expect the same development. With regard to the criteria established by the World Health Organization, we focus on one of the Czech cities and specifically in the city of Ostrava, which lies in the Moravian-Silesian region in the north-eastern part of Czech republic. According to the Czech Statistical Office (ČSÚ), the average age of the population of Ostrava (41.2 years in 2013) is only slightly higher than the average in the Czech Republic (40.6 years in 2013). But Ostrava and its surroundings grow old very quickly. According to the ČSÚ projection, in 2013 Moravian-Silesian Region had 1 226.6 thousand inhabitants, of which 16.4% were older than 65 years. However, if current trends remain preserved, this region will have in year 2050 only 978 thousand population and 33.1% will be in age 65 and more. The average age in the Moravian region will thus increase to 49.6 years. These numbers correspond to the loss of nearly 7,000 residents each year. Ostrava itself as the municipality seat, had in 2013 a total of 296 507 inhabitants and the total population in the region thus accounted for 24%, but the population of Ostrava rapidly decreases. According to information from the Ostrava Municipality just the city itself lost between 2013 and 2014 a total of 1,854 inhabitants. It is not only by the death of the elderly. Greater extent on this issue involved the migration of the population to work in other cities.

	Moravian-Silesian Region 2013	Moravian-Silesian Region 2050
Citizens	1 226 600	978 000
Percent of citizens above 65 years	16,4%	33,1%
Average age	41,2 let	49,6 let

Tab. 1: Average age of the Czech Republic, Ostrava (source ČSÚ)

In Ostrava, the trend of population aging pronounced since 1991 (see Chart 1). It started to accelerate with the end of coal mining and dismissal of employees of the industry.

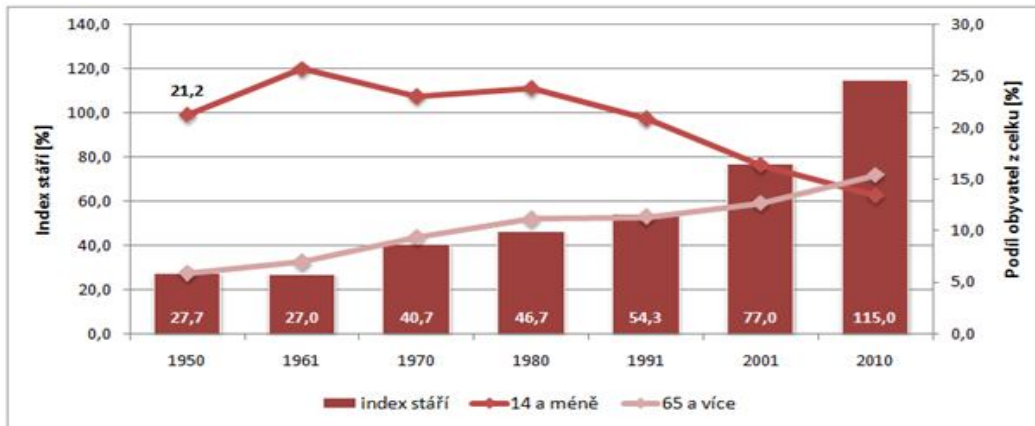


Chart 1; Population aging in Ostrava after 1950 (Source: ČSÚ, SLDB (1950, 1961, 1970, 1980, 1991, 2001)) This decreased the motivation for labor migration to Ostrava. Even within the city, however, there is no uniform age population (see Figure 1). Visitors can find here places significantly younger than the average of Ostrava (especially Ostrava-south), while other parts of the city have a significantly older population (western part of Ostrava). This phenomenon will be discussed in the context of research in the field of housing for seniors.

POČET OBYVATEL A INDEX STÁŘÍ V ČÁSTECH OSTRAVY K 1. 1. 2010

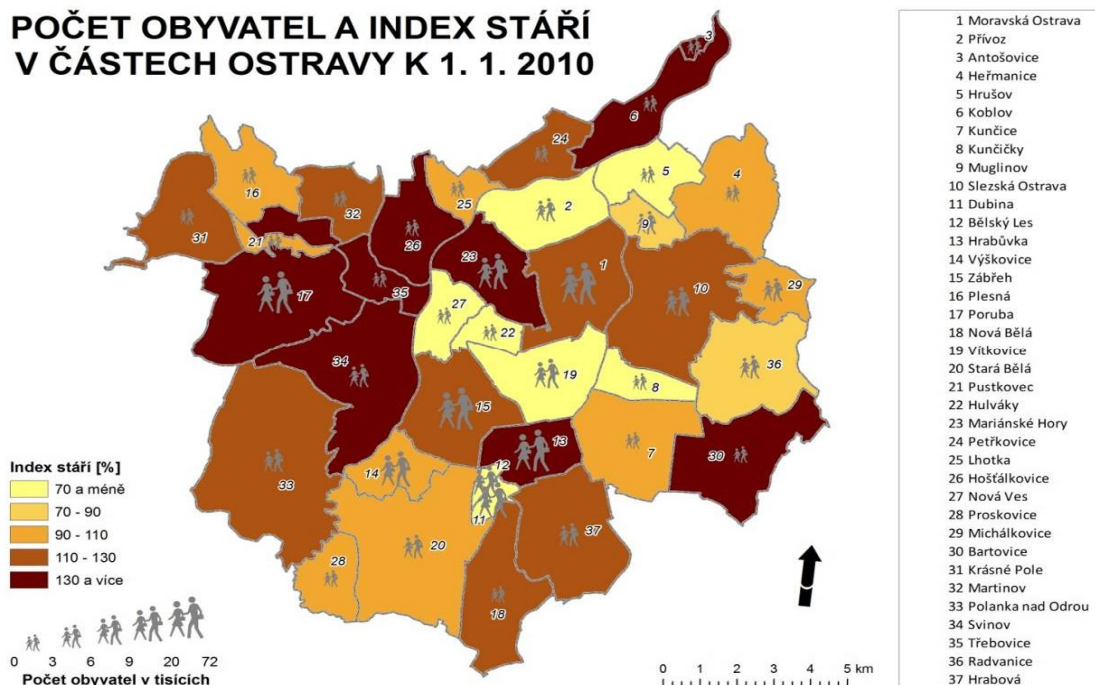


Figure 1: (source: Hruška-Tvrđý 2010, s11)

City of Ostrava still bears the legacy of socialism, where industry interests were superordinated to all other functions of the city as a place to live for people of all ages. Culture was limited as well as other forms of social activities. In the education system human sciences were marginalized. During housing construction, the emphasis was on accommodating as many people as possible and to connect them by public transport network to places of employment - primarily to the mines and factories. First big housing development started in the 50s after the World War 2, by construction of Poruba on the west side of Ostrava. Then Zábřeh and Hrabuvka were built on the south of Ostrava (60s to 70s) and at the end Dubina in the southeast of Ostrava in the 90s. All these residential quarters were at the time of its completion populated mostly by people of a similar age. As can be seen from Figure 1, several neighbourhoods with the highest average age in the entire city are today located in the western part of Ostrava. Therefore, we can say that housing construction impact on the age distribution of the local population is very strong, especially in the sense that a large proportion of the elderly population still lives in those locations, or even the same houses, where they moved as a youth. These young people have aged here together with their neighbours of a similar age cohort. It can be assumed that the trend mentioned above will be kept also in the future.

#### ***4. Attachment of seniors to Their Environment - Places and Things***

It is known that older people tend to have a very strong attachment to the place where they live and to personal things, they have. There are many different opinions, where this attachment comes from.

First are the theories based on decreased adaptability of older people. According to findings of developmental psychology (Langmeier, Krejčířová, 1998) up to 90% of people over 60 years of age can be determined to worsening of visual perception and in 30% deteriorates of hearing. These changes do not affect only the working efficiency of seniors, which is often referred to, but also make it difficult to communicate with other people, orientation in space, especially in an unfamiliar environment and it increases the risk of accidents. Partly these changes can be compensated by appropriate medical devices, however, the role of the environment in improving the orientation of the elderly and reduce potential risks may be non-negligible.

In connection with the senior age the psychology knows the term "relocation syndrome." This is a "*defect and adjustment disorders at some major life events, such as. A change of work, change a flat, divorce, widowhood, especially in the elderly.*" (Withers, 2014)

Geriatrics also recognizes similar syndrome in the elderly. It is described under the title "maladaptive syndrome" as "*one of the basic elements of involution, potential deterioration of health, the etiology and pathogenesis of geriatric deterioration and fragility ... (decrease) in resistance to stress - the somatic, psychological, social and environmental stressors.*" (Kalvach, 2008 s 293)

In relation to these theories, older people preferred their familiar environment mostly out of fear they can lose orientation in an unfamiliar places and are under the risk of injury.

But there are also other theories. According to PBSP theory, one of the basic psychological needs of man is a need for space, which belongs only to this man. Such a space is purely personal and no other person without the permission may enter this space, or manipulate with things that are located here. As an example, you can imagine personal desk, or own bed. Own household can also be considered as this type of space. It is up to the senior to decide, who and when can come into his house and also which part of the space will be made available. For example, the visit will be invited into the living room, but they will not be allowed to see the office, or bedroom of the host.

Things that older people have accumulated in their lifetime, are also a part of home environment. These are objects to which seniors binds certain relationship, or memory and then is not easy to break away from these things. Especially in the case of moving seniors into a smaller apartment, whether in an effort to reduce spending money on housing or moving into residential care, where older people cannot take some of their stuff and are to determine what to keep and what to throw away, senior can undergo a considerable stress. This can be often misinterpreted by younger people, whether among family or social services staff, who cannot understand, how important some things may be for the senior. Unnecessarily so there could be conflict between them and the elderly, when an older person is unable to explain why is it so hard to throw out certain items, even if they are broken and they feel frustrated by this lack of understanding.

Not all people perceive their home as "the world of things," but for most, things are very important. It is therefore good practice that social services today often allow seniors to take personal things when moving and to equip their room with their own furniture. This leads to a relative decrease (but not elimination) of the degree of stress that is connected with moving of a senior.

Despite all the modern trends in residential social services it is evident that most older people wish to live in their home. In the research "Quality of life of seniors in cities (2011)" to the question "What do you do when you're not at home?" Said the 30% of people aged 60 years, but 46% of people aged 70 years and 65% of those aged 80 and older "I usually spend most of the time in the area (near home)".

According to the results of the research team of prof. Keller and Dr. Hrušky-Tvrdeho (2010) over 50% of seniors in the age 65-74, currently living in Ostrava, were born in this city, and less than 46% immigrated here. Even in a group of elderly people over 75 years of age, this ratio is maintained. From Table 2 can be read how loyalty to the place of residence increases with age. A substantial jump occurs mainly between 45 and 55 years of age, where the willingness to move begins to decline rapidly and in a group of seniors older than 65 years is willing to change his residence just totally negligible percentage of people. (less than 2% of respondents)

**Tab. 2: Respondents' Answers from Ostrava to the Question: "Do you Want to Remain Permanently in Ostrava?"**

	Age				
	Less than 35	35-44	45-54	55-64	Above 65 let
<b>Surely no</b>	5,4%	3,8%	3,9%	2,2%	0,9%
<b>Probably no</b>	13,7%	10,1%	6,5%	4,4%	0,5%
<b>Probably yes</b>	44,6%	40,3%	39,6%	21,5%	18,2%
<b>Surely yes</b>	36,3%	45,9%	50%	71,8%	80,5%

(Source: OSU, SCAC- IMPIS, Ostrava 2010; L. Hruška-Tvrký, 2010, s52)

### **5. How the State Supports the Needs of seniors in Relation to Space**

The state currently takes into account the possible adverse health status of the population, including the elderly and the impending social isolation. Therefore, it provides social benefits in these situations - mobility allowance and a special aid allowance to which are entitled persons with impaired movement and the possibility of further care allowance - probably the most common benefit received by older people in households and in social services, to help cover the costs of care for these people when they are not able to take care for themselves. These allowances are, as mentioned above, targeted not only on the elderly. These can be given to all people, who because of their adverse health condition, are dependent on the care of others.

In recent years Czech state has become more focused on housing issues of citizens with lower income, which includes also the elderly. Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, in its document "National Action Plan to support positive aging for the period 2013 to 2017" defines as one of the areas of interest good living environment for seniors. Older people are in this document identified as group at risk of social exclusion, especially because of "a combination of various negative barriers, especially poorer health, lower income, lower education levels, lack of accessibility, labored access to services, the incidence of age discrimination and persistent social stereotypes of old age." (National Action Plan to support positive aging for the period from 2013 to 2017, p. 30).

According to the studies upon which the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs created the National Action Plan for positive aging in the years 2013 to 2017 (p. 33) "using of the environment and public space can be primarily understood as the possibility of realization of basic human rights as the basis of civic identity and integration into society." Thus, if the state identifies access to use the environment as a basic civil right, it is likely to be interested in resources that will help to identify shortcomings in this area. Especially among groups such as the elderly, where the risk of social exclusion is higher.

### **6. How can Social Work contribute to the Creation of an City more Friendly to Seniors**

One possible source of inspiration for solving upcoming difficult situation is the practice of social work abroad. In the foreign literature it is possible to bump into the environment as one of the sources used by social workers to work with older people. It is not a new phenomenon in the Czech Republic, although different approaches (eg. a task based approach) are preferred in our country.

However, the approach involving the reciprocal influence of social work and client environment, got into many, now classic monographies by Czech authors, such as Matousek (2007). Since then, Czech Social Work is moving in a different direction and the environment was in relation to clients rather neglected. Especially, if the environment is not a source of acute danger for users of social services. Therefore, it is now possible to find in foreign publications an environment as integrated part of the interest of the social worker about a particular client. Czech practice remains primarily by providing financial and material assistance to seniors. The space is engaged mostly in terms of senior households, where possible injury may occur. According to this, there is already a number of publications on the Czech market (for example Glossová 2006).

Foreign authors, particularly in English-speaking countries, are working with the environment as with one of the elements that must be viewed any time you need social assistance. Phillips, Ray and Marshall (2006) highlight the stage scheduling agreement with the elderly, among others, the environment and the community in which seniors live in the following points:

- older people have access to their home and their surroundings
- coping with everyday situations
- environment (emphasis on housing, community and transport)
- finance
- family
- relationships with other people (friends, ...)
- support network

These points largely correspond with the questions that were asked during the research SGS1 / FSS / 2010 Social Services in post-industrial society. The case of the city of Ostrava, Section Space. This research project aimed to find out how does social workers and other professionals evaluate Ostrava, as a place to live for the elderly. The project showed that social workers clearly identify barriers in space, which can cause the social isolation of older people. Especially social workers who work in the direct care and are home visiting seniors, pointed out many shortcomings which could lead to lesser participation of older persons in public life. Their elimination may result into reduction of the consumption of social services by the seniors.

Social workers have identified the need for improvement especially in the areas of:

1. barrier-free movement in the city
2. orientation in unfamiliar spaces such as offices
3. adaptation of services to the needs of seniors
4. increase the number of barrier-free public transport vehicles
5. the increase security of seniors housing, especially in socially excluded area

It is obvious that social workers who are meeting with older people in such situations, when the seniors need social assistance, perceive very clearly what improvements can be made to help older people live better in their home environment and are able to give valuable suggestions.

Local municipality, because of its immediate impact on the social and physical environment in the community, plays an unmistakable role in building space friendly to seniors. And this environment opens up many opportunities for the implementation of intergenerational projects, creating opportunities for meeting and sharing between individuals of different generations and different ages. In addition, local governments, whether at the regional or local, municipal level, is usually the founder and/or the one who co-finances and supervises various social services for the elderly. But we should not just leave the initiative with the authorities. Despite the existence of numerous clubs and associations, which defends the interests of older people, social workers have a significant role. Their work is in fact brought into contact with the neediest of the needy - the seniors, who often due to health restrictions are not fully able to enforce their rights. These social service users, often partially or completely immobile, are usually not involved in any activities that would help raise the profile of their needs. The social workers are therefore here to give them a voice in front of those, who can alter the living conditions of older people.

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