

PROBLEMS OF THE ELDERLY IN RURAL AREAS

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Abstract

This paper deals with issues related to aiding elderly people who reside in rural areas and who used to do jobs associated with agriculture. The main aim is to present the situation of senior citizens and to show the problems and needs of this group within the society. The main assumption of the study is that the needs of the elderly people who live in rural areas are different than those of senior citizens who live in towns.

The study was carried out using data obtained by a questionnaire survey, a literature review and subjective observations of the authors on the situation of the elderly and care opportunities available to them.

The study has provided data which can be used mainly to propose solutions aimed at improving the situation of the elderly. To this end, two surveys were conducted: one targeting senior citizens who live in rural areas and the other – people who work as a carer for an elderly person. For each survey, a sample of 80 respondents was singled out, and the study area included the communes of the Voivodship of Warmia and Mazury, i.e. Dobre Miasto, Lubomino, Pasłek and Stawiguda.

The data obtained from the surveys has been used to determine the level of needs for long-term or supplementary care for elderly people and to identify the main forms and type of aid based on the needs felt by a specific group. The findings have shown that such care can be arranged by employing carers performing services to elderly people.

PROBLEMY OSÓB STARSZYCH NA OBSZARACH WIEJSKICH

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Słowa kluczowe: obszary wiejskie, ludzie starsi, starzenie się społeczeństwa, pomoc publiczna, usługi opiekuńcze.

Abstrakt

Artykuł jest poświęcony tematyce dotyczącej pomocy osobom starszym zamieszkującym obszary wiejskie i związanym w przeszłości z rolnictwem. Celem głównym jest przedstawienie sytuacji seniorów oraz zaprezentowanie problemów i potrzeb odczuwanych przez tę grupę społeczną. Podstawowym założeniem pracy jest odmienna specyfika potrzeb populacji osób starszych zamieszkujących obszary wiejskie w stosunku do seniorów zamieszkujących miasta.

Pracę wykonano z wykorzystaniem danych otrzymanych w wyniku przeprowadzonych badań ankietowych, przeglądu dostępnej literatury przedmiotu oraz subiektywnych spostrzeżeń autorów artykułu dotyczących sytuacji osób starszych oraz możliwości zorganizowania im opieki.

Przeprowadzane badania pozwoliły na uzyskanie danych, które przede wszystkim umożliwią zaproponowanie rozwiązań mogących poprawić sytuację osób starszych. W tym celu przeprowadzono dwa badania, z których jedno skierowano do seniorów zamieszkujących obszary wiejskie, a drugie do osób, które podjęłyby się pracy w charakterze opiekuna osoby starszej. Do każdego badania wyłoniono próbę liczącą 80 respondentów, a obszar badań obejmował gminy województwa warmińsko-mazurskiego, tj. Dobre Miasto, Lubomino, Pasłęk, Stawiguda.

Uzyskane informacje pozwoliły na określenie poziomu zapotrzebowania na opiekę długoterminową bądź uzupełniającą przez osoby starsze na obszarach wiejskich oraz na wskazanie głównych form oraz rodzajów pomocy na podstawie potrzeb odczuwanych przez daną zbiorowość. Wyniki badań własnych pozwalają stwierdzić, że istnieją możliwości zorganizowania takiej opieki przez zatrudnienie opiekunów świadczących usługi wobec osób starszych.

Introduction

An observation of the current demographic trends in Poland reveals an increasing percentage of people past working age. This phenomenon has consequences, first and foremost, of an economic and social nature. The growing share of senior citizens in the population is due to the falling birth rate and the emigration of young people. With the average life expectancy on the increase and the projected continuation of that trend, some action needs to be taken. Senior citizens should have a way to actively participate in public life and improve their health and financial situation. The progressively ageing society presents a challenge primarily in terms of the social and economic policy due to the growing costs of adapting services to the individual needs of the elderly (KIJAK, SZAROTA 2013, p. 6–12).

The increasing percentage of senior citizens covered by the agricultural social security system puts an extra burden on the state budget because the number of people entitled to social benefits continues to grow. In the eyes of former farmers, pensions are their major source of income following retirement. In the light of the demographic situation of Poland and the current economy, the role of the social security system will soon resemble that of social assistance institutions. The benefits provided often prove insufficient to satisfy the needs of senior citizens, e.g. due to the increasing costs of medication or living expenses (KISIEL et al., p. 26, 32).

The United Nations defines senior citizens as people over the age of 65. That widely accepted threshold frequently serves to determine the retirement age, recently changed due to increasing life expectancy (CYBULSKI 2016, p. 11).

The main objective of social policy aimed at the elderly is to provide social security. The living conditions of senior citizens inhabiting rural areas tend to be considered inferior. Their accommodation frequently lacks amenities such as a bathroom, running water, central heating, etc. Simultaneously, senior citizens represent important human capital since they contributed to increasing the importance of agriculture as a sector with considerable impact on the condition of the national economy. In addition, farming remains the main source of income in many Polish households.

In order to secure their financial situation, elderly farmers often resort to applying for structural pensions, a benefit which enables their farms to continue operation. Eligibility conditions for structural pensions include transferring land to a successor or the Treasury. However, in the agricultural sector, people who reach retirement age do not necessarily stop working. They remain active, sharing knowledge with their successors and providing them with assistance (TRYFAN 2004, p. 127–129).

Legal Aspects of Supporting the Elderly

Providing senior citizens with care is a duty of the state and local authorities. Regulations enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic of Poland constitute a legal basis for taking action aimed at improving the situation of the elderly. Articles 32.1 and 32.2 of the Constitution stipulate as follows: “All persons shall be equal before the law. All persons shall have the right to equal treatment by public authorities. No one shall be discriminated against in political, social or economic life for any reason whatsoever”. Article 67 grants all citizens the right to social security upon reaching retirement age, the scope and forms of such security being specified by separate regulations. Articles 68.1 and 68.3 set forth that special health care for persons of advanced age shall be ensured by public authorities. According to the Constitution, all citizens enjoy the right to use medical care facilities and to receive services which improve their security and health condition. Thanks to their financial resources and business ventures, the state and local authorities are capable of solving social problems of the citizens living in their country (Konstytucja Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej z 2 kwietnia 1997 r., DzU z 1997 r., nr 78, poz. 483).

In 1991, the United Nations drew up a document entitled “United Nations Principles for Older Persons”. Though not legally binding, this document offers recommendations for respecting the rights of senior citizens. The recommendations reflect five aspects of social life, covering the following issues: independence,

participation, care, self-fulfilment and dignity. Their aim is to emphasise the importance of senior citizens for the national economy and the entire population. The UN recognises the discrepancies in the situation of senior citizens on the regional, national and global scale. Thus, it acknowledges the necessity to take different measures to address the needs of specific communities (*Zasady działania ONZ na rzecz osób starszych z 1991 r.*, online).

Another legal document regulating the existence of senior citizens in Poland is the Social Assistance Act of 12 March 2004. Although it does not provide separate regulations referring specifically to senior citizens, the Act outlines the tasks and goals of social policy. Article 11 sets forth detailed provisions related to social assistance and healthcare which could significantly improve the situation of senior citizens by providing services adequate to their health condition (Ustawa z 12 marca 2004 r. o pomocy społecznej, DzU z 2004 r., nr 64, poz. 593).

Supporting the elderly entails not only providing services, but also ensuring financial security. Upon attaining the retirement age defined by the law, senior citizens have the right to claim financial support in the form of a pension. The Agricultural Social Insurance Act, Article 16, sets forth that people eligible for those benefits include those who live on a farm or used to work in the agricultural sector (Ustawa z 20 grudnia 1990 r. o ubezpieczeniu społecznym rolników, DzU z 1991 r., nr 7, poz. 24).

The Situation of Senior Citizens in Rural Areas

In 2016, the number of people past working age (over the age of 65) reached 6.3 million in total, including 2.2 million in rural areas, as indicated by the information from the local data bank of the Central Statistical Office of Poland. The situation of senior citizens in rural areas is becoming increasingly difficult, particularly in terms of finances, which is a consequence of factors such as the growing costs of accommodation, utilities and medication.

Demographic problems in rural areas are related to the negative birth rate. Providing care for the growing percentage of seniors proves difficult for family members, the neighbourhood and the local authorities. This situation may be resolved with the introduction of systemic changes aimed at adapting local and governmental measures to the varied needs of senior citizens. Stays in care facilities are often not a viable option due to the substantial financial expenses required (PAWLEWICZ et al. 2014, p. 60, 61).

The society's ageing demographics in rural areas particularly afflict the social insurance system, healthcare, social assistance and policies for employment and education. The problems most commonly cited by senior citizens include: failing health conditions, disabilities, a precarious financial situation, discrimination and marginalisation. Those are the issues around which the

policy for the elderly in rural areas should be oriented. Senior citizens primarily become recipients of medical and nursing care or other community services which provides employment to people inactive in the job market (PRZYWOJSKA, PODGÓRNIAK-KRZYKACZ 2012, p. 239).

The problems of the elderly are particularly manifest in daily life. They stem from a deterioration in mobility which hampers full participation in both social and professional environments. Even though senior citizens in rural areas represent important human capital, they are frequently overlooked by the state. A review of initiatives targeted at this age group reveals their scarcity. In rural areas, the situation is particularly alarming, aggravated further by limited access to healthcare or other types of social assistance.

The number of available forms of support for the elderly offered by local authorities fails to measure up to expectations. Poor accessibility of care services results from the insufficient level of income earned by senior citizens and the condition of public community care services offered by local authorities. In addition, measures taken under the social assistance system and the healthcare system lack coordination. This additional hindrance keeps both systems isolated and makes it impossible to obtain information on people who are leaving short-term care facilities and require further assistance.

The accessibility of medical facilities constitutes another issue which aggravates the elderly's dissatisfaction with healthcare standards. Since medical or social assistance centres are frequently non-existent in rural areas, patients are forced to travel to towns located far away from their place of residence. Due to the limited mobility of senior citizens from rural areas, they usually depend either on the assistance of their closest relatives or on the often underdeveloped public transport (KRZYSZKOWSKI 2013, p. 14).

The accessibility of healthcare is mostly determined by the financial situation of senior citizens. Insufficiency of resources frequently prevents them from staying in specialised facilities and receiving rehabilitation services or medication. In addition, an observation of their living conditions reveals that senior citizens frequently have fewer appliances and installations than people of working age (PANEK et al. 2014, p. 134–136).

Senior Citizens in Rural Areas According to the Current Research

The survey covered the population of senior citizens in four municipalities located in the province of Warmia-Mazury (Warmińsko-Mazurskie). The study was carried out primarily in order to identify the form and scope of assistance required by the elderly.

The main problem encountered by senior citizens is the deficient healthcare system. Since health condition constitutes one of the key factors affecting

the quality and length of life of the elderly, we asked the respondents to assess it during the survey (Fig. 1). The breakdown of answers indicates that healthcare services provided to the elderly fail to meet their needs. 51.72% of respondents are dissatisfied with their health condition, assessing it as 'bad' or 'very bad'. The progressive ageing of the population causes an increase in the percentage of senior citizens and, thus, in the percentage of medical care recipients. Limited access to hospitals and other medical facilities proves unfavourable to senior citizens, who are frequently in a more precarious health condition than other age groups. Since the elderly are more vulnerable to diseases and other health conditions, they require specialised medical care. Therefore, their increased share in the population forces the state and local authorities to take measures and implement programmes aimed at improving the quality of medical services targeted at that social group. Figure 1 presents information on the health condition of the respondents.

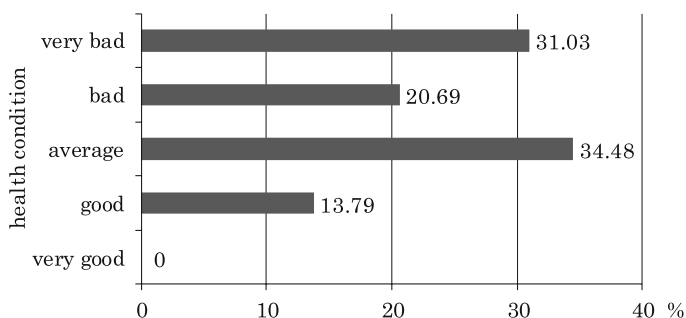


Fig. 1. Self-assessment of health condition by the respondents

Source: own research.

The subjective feelings of people past working age suggest that the support targeted at this social group is underdeveloped. This tendency seems particularly conspicuous in rural areas where the needs of senior citizens are frequently overlooked by local authorities. The authors' own research (Tab. 1) has identified the medical and nursing care system as an essential aspect that has to be improved, since up to 65.52% of the respondents expressed a willingness to receive that form of assistance. The respondents favourably view the prospect of being provided with support at home, considering it a less costly solution than staying in a specialised nursing home. A slightly smaller group (55.17%) expects support in the area of rehabilitation. Furthermore, some senior citizens (41.38%) feel the need to enjoy more human contact, e.g. in the form of a conversation. Information obtained in the study reveals that 41.38% of the respondents struggle to perform daily chores (cleaning, shopping, preparation of meals), primarily due to a deterioration in their physical condition.

Table 1

Types of assistance required (multiple answers allowed)

Type of assistance	Share (in %)
Medical and nursing care	65.52
Rehabilitation	55.17
Cleaning	44.83
Conversation	41.38
Shopping	41.38
Meal preparation	31.03
Nursing	20.69

Source: own research.

An overwhelming majority (as many as 95%) of the respondents are interested in home visits or long-term care provided in their place of residence. To receive such support, they need to employ people with adequate skills and predispositions for the job. Among potential caregivers, the largest group of respondents (24.14%) would prefer a person employed by the Agricultural Social Insurance Fund (KRUS). Employees of state-owned institutions inspire the greatest trust since they are considered to be highly qualified and experienced workers.

On the other hand, 20.69% of the respondents would employ a person supplied by an employment agency or 'another person', i.e. a family member, a friend, or a person recommended by the municipality. Another 18.97% would opt for care provided by people bearing recommendation letters, as references written by former employers constitute a source of information on the prospective employee. For fear of finding an incompetent person, only 15.52% of respondents would like to search for a caregiver on their own. The information regarding caregivers preferred by senior citizens is presented in Figure 2.

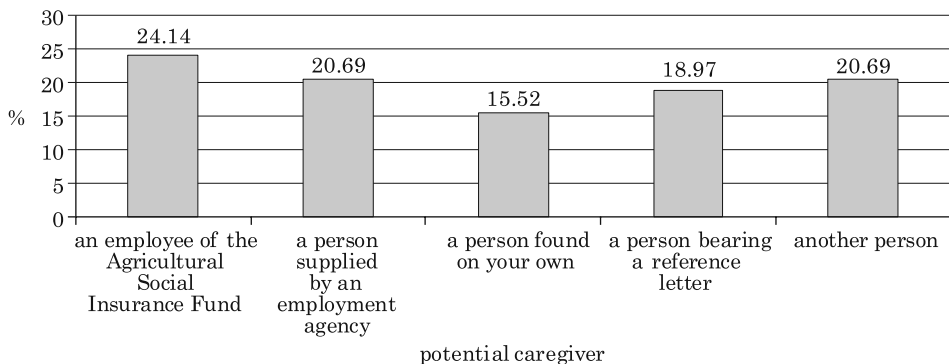


Fig. 2. Caregivers preferred by senior citizens

Source: own research.

Demand for Elderly Care and its Organisation in the Light of Own Research

To determine the viability of providing senior citizens with assistance, another survey questionnaire was designed aimed at people interested in becoming caregivers working with the elderly. The health condition of senior citizens continues to deteriorate with age, which causes difficulties in daily life. As life expectancy continues to grow, so does the number of the elderly in need of assistance and the demand for people able to provide them with care.

In the questionnaire, the respondents were asked if they would be prepared to acquire additional qualifications to become caregivers. The answers enabled us to gauge the interest in such a form of employment. Holding adequate qualifications is a prerequisite for becoming an elderly care worker. A majority of the respondents (66.67%) declared the willingness to participate in courses or training within the scope of providing care services. Consequently, arranging support at home would not only improve the situation of senior citizens, but also have a positive impact on the job market. The unemployed could complete necessary training and find jobs as caregivers.

In the eyes of prospective care workers, the best form of employment is a full-time employment contract, as indicated by up to 78.33% of the respondents. Its advantages include a stable, monthly salary and a sense of security. The fact that social insurance premiums are covered by the employer serves as an additional incentive. In addition, a full-time contract entitles workers to paid holiday leave and sick leave. The next preferred solution is self-employment, selected by 11.67% of the respondents. Running a private business allows more freedom in performing professional duties. In general, freelance workers make most decisions related to the manner of performing tasks themselves. Furthermore, 8.33% of the respondents opted for a so-called “contract of mandate” which essentially consists in defining the tasks and time limits for their completion. The respondents could also indicate a different form of providing the elderly with care services. The options included volunteering, selected by 1.67% of the respondents. Volunteering involves cooperation between a volunteer and an institution or a public organisation. Characteristically, the services provided by volunteers are unpaid. Volunteering is not a form of employment in accordance with the law. However, the tasks it entails fall within the scope of non-profit activity. In addition, upon meeting certain requirements, the volunteer and the organisation in question could conclude an employment contract. Volunteers can also gain protection against chance events by obliging the public institutions for which they work to provide them with insurance. The forms of employment preferred by prospective caregivers are presented in Figure 3.

The survey questionnaire targeted at prospective caregivers included a question on the expected pay (taxes included in all amounts). However, please note

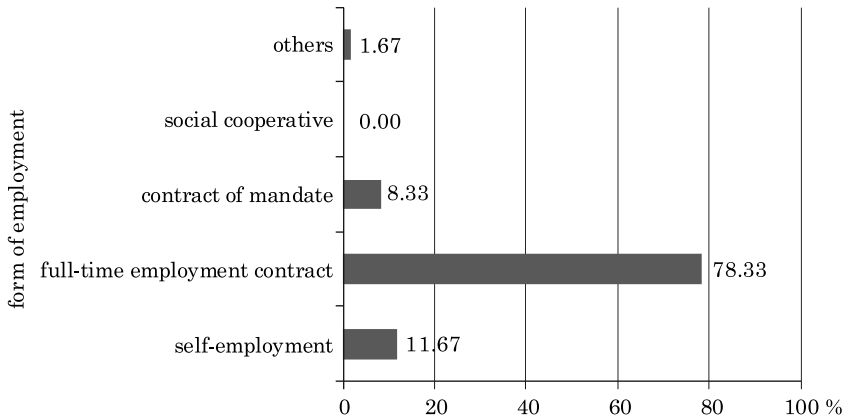


Fig. 3. Forms of employment preferred by prospective caregivers

Source: own research.

that the remuneration hinges on the form of employment, hours worked and the scope of duties. Up to 55% of the respondents would require a salary in the amount of PLN 2,000–3,000. The average remuneration of a caregiver working with an elderly citizen falls within this range, amounting to PLN 2,160. A slightly smaller group of respondents (38.33%) expected to be paid more than PLN 3,000. Only 6.67% of the respondents indicated PLN 1,000–2,000 as satisfactory remuneration.

Conclusions

The problems and needs of senior citizens living in rural areas are becoming increasingly conspicuous. Population growth projections show that the percentage of people past working age will continue to increase, which requires initiatives aimed at improving their situation. The demographic changes cannot be overlooked. The policy for the elderly needs to be adapted to their needs, and it needs to take into account criteria such as place of residence and former occupation.

The information obtained in the course of our research, a review of the available literature on the subject and subjective observations on the situation of the elderly in rural areas, indicate the following:

The system of medical care addressed to senior citizens is inefficient. The problem mostly affects patients living in rural areas, where the accessibility of healthcare is largely limited. The foregoing is confirmed by the statistics: as many as 51.52% of the respondents gave a negative assessment of their health condition. Consequently, there is a need for immediate intervention in the area of healthcare, particularly as patients who attained retirement age present

a higher vulnerability to diseases and other health conditions, thus requiring consultation with qualified medical practitioners.

Senior citizens feel the need to receive home visits or long-term care in their place of residence. This assistance should be focused on increasing their sense of autonomy, security and comfort in their own homes, often during daily chores. Its provision would decrease the demand for services rendered by nursing homes.

Senior citizens in rural areas frequently cannot benefit from medical and nursing services deemed necessary for their health condition. Considering the needs felt by 65.52% of the respondents, the introduction of preventive measures within the scope of medical and nursing care should become the focal point of future policies.

The growing percentage of senior citizens in need of assistance at home creates a demand for employees to provide the elderly with care. Up to 66.67% of the respondents showed an interest in working with senior citizens in the capacity of caregivers.

One of the hardships experienced by senior citizens in rural areas is the absence of the means to remain active. The elderly need specific measures to allow them to fully participate in the social and professional life of their regions.

Senior citizens who live in rural areas and were formerly involved in the agricultural sector represent human capital which has been instrumental in increasing the importance of agriculture for the national economy. By modernising farms and introducing agricultural products to new, distant markets, former farmers contributed to economic growth. Currently, we need measures to support them, satisfy their basic needs and improve their social life. While designing care programs targeted at the elderly, the emphasis should be placed on adapting the forms and types of assistance to the individual needs felt in individual cases.

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