Housing Conditions of Elderly People in Poland

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Abstract. The aim of the study is to determine the actual housing conditions of retired persons in terms of their place of residence, households of the elderly, type of buildings where they live and their willingness to move to a different apartment, adapted to the needs connected with movement limitations of the elderly. Research was conducted on a group of people in post-working age who live in a region of Lower Silesia in Poland. The main tool used was public opinion survey. The conducted analyses revealed that in rural areas, retired persons live in multi-generation families, while in towns – with their spouses or alone. Country dwellers prefer to spend their old age where they have lived before, while city inhabitants are much more willing to move from their apartments to flats adapted to the special needs of the elderly. This applies to all age groups of respondents.

1. Introduction

It is an indisputable fact that Polish society is aging, which also corresponds to the European trends [1]. Currently, a number of studies are carried out on the population aging in Western Europe, Australia or the United States and also on the problems accompanying this phenomenon. The recently conducted analyses indicate that people prefer “aging-in-place”. This is defined as “remaining living in the community, with some level of independence, rather than in residential care” [2, 3]. It is related to allowing the elderly maintain their independence and autonomy Lawler [4]. There is also a widespread opinion that helping people continue living in their own households is desirable for economic reasons, since it is cheaper than such options as care in a nursing home (or other subsidized social housing) [5, 6, 7, 8, 9]. According to Wiles J.L et al. [10] there is a strong focus on housing and support or care in the aging-in-place research literature [11, 12, 13].

Senior citizens’ stay in a nursing home is expensive and often exceeds the amount of the received retirement pension. An additional barrier in Poland is the absence of vacancies in specialized centres as well as the long waiting period. The monthly cost of staying in such an establishment amounts to approx. PLN 3000 (EUR 700), at the exchange rate of February 21, 2020, but the residents pay no more than 70% of their income. Meanwhile, in the first half of 2019, the gross average pension in Poland was as low as PLN 2236,84 (EUR 522,15) [14], whereas the most frequently paid out pension equalled PLN 1065,60 before tax, i.e. PLN 906,00 after tax (EUR 248,75 gross, EUR 211,49 net). There is a significant difference between the amount of predominant retirement pension payable to men (PLN 2177,80 gross, EUR 508,37) and the respective one paid to women which, in the first half of 2019, amounted to PLN 1065,38 gross, EUR 248,70. These data confirm that not ever senior can afford staying in a specialized nursing institution. There is a possibility of covering additional care
costs by the spouse, however, if they are no longer alive or their income is insufficient, also by the children or grandchildren, but they have to agree to such a financial commitment. When the senior’s family income is very low, the municipality can cover additional costs of his/her stay in a nursing home.

Taking full-time care of older people in Poland results in many problems [15]. Not everyone can be provided with healthcare because, in this case, the senior citizen’s financial capacity is crucial. Older people in Poland represent the social group with significantly lower income and resources, reduced ability to meet the occurring needs and often subsisting on the edge of poverty [16, 17]. In the perspective of the aforementioned issues, the presented problem addressing the quality of life of the elderly and seeking the respective housing solutions is becoming highly important.

The reason for undertaking the presented research is the problem of housing conditions experienced by the elderly and the assessment of their readiness to change the current dwelling into a private apartment tailored specifically to their needs. The authors discuss the housing conditions of Polish pensioners and consider whether they are ready to change their place of residence? The subject of architectural and technical barriers’ liquidation for the retirement age population, or for people with disabilities, has already been addressed by the authors in previous publications [18, 19]. Additionally, the authors analysed the preferences expressed by senior citizens regarding the apartment’s area and the expected facilities to be offered the housing estate Przybyła et al. [13].

The purpose of the study is to determine the housing conditions of the elderly, to identify their place of residence and their housing situation. The research is focused on determining the living conditions of people receiving a retirement pension and their readiness for changes in terms of moving to a dwelling adapted to their needs.

2. Research methodology
The purpose of this study is to assess the housing conditions of the elderly, i.e. the persons receiving a retirement pension. In Poland, in justified cases, this benefit can be received from the age of 55. Earlier retirement may be applied for by: women over 55 years of age and men over 60, under certain conditions (it is related to documenting contributory and non-contributory periods as at January 1, 1999 – the contributory period for women is at least 20 years, and for men at least 25 years).

The research covered the region of Lower Silesia in Poland, within the administrative boundaries of Lower Silesia voivodship. The regional gender and age population structure shows the characteristics of a regressive (aging) society. As a result of the progressive decline in birth rate, currently a relatively small number of children up to the age of 14 are residing in Lower Silesia voivodship (in 2016 – 14.1% of the total population) and a relatively large number of older people – aged 65 and over (17.0%). The Statistics Poland forecasts show the advancing trend of these changes and in 2050 as few as 12 children and as many as 34 elderly people will fall per 100 inhabitants of Lower Silesia voivodship [20]. Population aging imposes changes in the system of provided services, i.e. paying more attention to geriatric care, developing certain mechanisms of conduct in the event of an older person’s inability to function independently.

The method of random purposive sampling was used to select the respondents. The purpose criterion was the respondent’s age and place of residence in Lower Silesia region. The source materials were collected by means of a survey method using a questionnaire [21, 22]. The survey covered random people, the total of 214 respondents, within the indicated age group. The authors did not define the guidelines regarding the the number of people by gender or place of residence. It was important to collect the adequate number of the respondents. The questions addressed to the respondents are presented below:
1. Do you have the facilities adapting the apartment/house to your needs?
2. Which of the indicated facilities in adapting the apartment/house to your needs are needed in your place of residence?
3. What is your place of residence (detached house, terraced house, apartment in a multi-family building, nursing home, other)?
4. What is your family situation (I live alone, I live with my husband/wife, I live with my children, I live with my parents, sister, brother, nursing home, other)?

5. Would you be willing to change your apartment/house and buy an apartment/house adopted to your needs (free from architectural or technical barriers)?

6. Do you think that a special offer of apartments/houses addressed to senior citizens should be developed?

In addition, the respondents were asked control questions regarding their age, gender and location of residence. Among the respondents there were 123 women and 93 men representing the selected age group. The seniors covered by the survey came from various locations: 60 people from rural areas, 60 from the cities of more than 250,000 residents, and the remaining part of seniors from the cities inhabited by 50,000 up to 250,000 residents. In each age group, covering 5-year periods starting from the age of 55, an interview was conducted with a comparable number of people (25-40 people in each age group). In the last age group – 85 years and over only 6 people were interviewed.

The authors encountered certain difficulties in carrying out the survey, because older people were reluctant to respond and the intended number of 300 pensioners could not be reached.

The readiness to change the place of residence into another one, adapted to the needs of senior citizens was presented in the form of qualitative cross-tabulation analysis using Pearson chi-square test ($\chi^2$ independence test). The maximum allowable type I error $\alpha = 0.05$ was adopted for the analysis, whereas $p \leq 0.05$ was considered statistically significant.

3. Housing situation of senior citizens

The respondents were asked a question about their housing situation, with a limited choice of answers (possible answers: I live alone, I live with my husband/wife, I live with my children, I live with my parents, sister, brother, nursing home, other). The conducted research showed that about 28% of the respondents live alone, and 26% share their dwelling with a husband or wife. It was recorded that over 54% of the respondents live in such households. Adding up the above results in relation to those of living in multi-generational families, i.e. the respondents living additionally with children, parents, siblings, it can be stated that such cases constitute 67 out of 214 people, approx. 31%) – Figure 1.

![Family situation of older people](chart.png)

**Figure 1.** Family situation of older people in Lower Silesia voivodship in the group of respondents.

Source: authors’ compilation
Living with family members, in a multi-generational family, more often secures the existence of elderly people who require specialist care and assistance in everyday activities. In turn, those living alone, depending on their age limitations, are more likely to take advantage of nursing homes. The number of people living alone is relatively high and amounts to 60 out of 214 respondents. Among the respondents 22 people live in nursing homes and 10 in health care centres.

As regards the form of the building in which the respondents live, the findings show that they usually reside in a single-family residential building (detached or terraced house) – the total of 95 out of 214 provided such responses, and in a multi-family housing – 84 people indicated this form of residence. Senior citizens from small towns live primarily in single-family houses (81 respondents came from rural areas and small towns), those from cities of 50,000 residents and over – mainly in apartments.

The respondents report various facilities in adapting an apartment or house to their needs. They usually take the form of different handholds, grip handles mainly in the bathroom or the general adaptation of bathrooms to the seniors’ mobility limitations (Figure 2). All these facilities are available both in nursing homes and in health care centres.

![The demand and available facilities in adapting an apartment/house](image)

**Figure 2.** The demand and available facilities in adapting an apartment/house or any other place of stay to the needs of older people in Lower Silesia voivodship in the group of respondents. Source: authors’ compilation

The research results showed that 114 out of 214 respondents do not have any facilities to move around the apartment, whereas, in fact, only 18 people do not need them. Among the respondents, 147 need to adapt bathrooms to their mobility needs, and only 58 seniors have such adjustments installed. The demand for each of the indicated facilities, including the elimination of thresholds, installation of additional handrails along the walls or widening door frames is higher than having the appropriate installations which reduce architectural or technical barriers faced by older people in their apartments. This does not apply only to the installation of lifting equipment.
4. Readiness to change the apartment

The question regarding the readiness to change an apartment/house into an apartment/house adapted to the needs arising from mobility limitations was answered “yes” by 84 respondents and “no” – 68 out of the total of 214 respondents. The remaining participants of the survey did not rule out the possibility of changing their apartment/house into a different one. In terms of a special apartment offer for senior citizens, the vast majority of respondents were in favour of dwellings ranging from 35 to 50 m² (91 people out of 214 respondents). The total of 58 seniors believe that the apartments adapted to their needs should have up to 35m², and 42 people claim that their area should present the range 50 m² – 80 m². Taking into account the respondents’ housing situation, the findings indicate that those living alone preferred the apartments of up to 50 m² (48 indications in total). Couples living alone showed the greatest interest in the area ranging from 35 up to 50 m² (28 indications) and also between 50 and 80 m² (16 indications). Spouses living with children were in favour of larger apartments. Residents of nursing homes and health care centres were interested in the smallest apartments (up to 35m²).

The research results regarding the respondents’ readiness to change their apartment/house into a different one – adapted to the needs of older people depending on the current place of residence were partly published by the authors in 2019 [13].

The research results presented in 2019 confirmed some of the authors' expectations, according to which it is easier to change or sell an apartment than a house, therefore such readiness was more often declared by the residents of large cities than village dwellers. The analyses using chi-square test of independence, carried out at that time, showed significant differences between the compared groups (χ²(4) = 38,90; p < 0,001; V = 0,43). Figure 3 illustrates the percentage comparison of the answers provided by the respondents.

![Figure 3](image-url)  
**Figure 3.** Readiness to change the place of residence into an apartment adapted to individual mobility needs depending on the current place of residence.

Senior citizens living in the cities inhabited by more than 250,000 residents are much more likely to change their place of residence into an apartment tailored to their needs. In Lower Silesia voivodship it refers to the city of Wroclaw, which is the only city in the region exceeding the
aforementioned number of residents. A senior housing estate would guarantee the 24-hour medical service on call – a button in the apartment or on-call duty at the housing estate, security services, or the option of hiring organized assistance in cleaning the apartment and the possibility of using the canteen on the housing estate premises.

Additionally, the conducted analyses showed that people living in rural areas and in a city of up to 100,000 residents are less likely to change their place of residence. The offer of new apartments, adapted to the needs of seniors, could mainly apply to a large city, i.e. Wroclaw in Lower Silesia region.

5. Conclusions
The conducted research revealed deficiencies in adapting an apartment/house to the dwelling needs of the elderly and also indicated a significant percentage of people living alone or only with their spouse (54% in total). These people are potentially more likely to be in need of assistance in carrying out their basic every day activities in the future. The efficiency in performing basic household tasks declines along with the advancing age, hence the problem of seniors’ self-sufficient existence does increase.

If seniors are supposed to age in their environment, we have to provide them with an opportunity of proper space organization by adapting it to their age needs. The reduction of architectural and technical barriers remains one of the policy elements aimed at improving the housing situation of senior citizens.

It was presented that the individual groups of respondents are significantly different in this respect and that people living in villages and in small towns are less likely to change their place of residence.

The following conclusions were formulated based on the conducted research:
1. Seniors inhabiting rural areas live predominantly in single-family residential buildings and do not express readiness to change their apartment/house into a different one, adapted to their mobility needs. Therefore, either new or strengthened current government programmes, offering opportunities to improve the housing conditions of seniors should be developed and allow them “aging-in-place”. Such programmes should be focused on eliminating the existing architectural and technical barriers and providing organized home assistance.

2. The state should develop a programme supporting the construction of senior housing estates in the form of subsidies, preferential loans or by creating an offer of cheap apartments “for rent” – intended for the elderly. Such a housing estate would provide the 24-hour medical care and other facilities required by the aging residents. Due to the greater readiness to change the place of residence by older people living in large cities, the housing estates for seniors should be established only in urban agglomerations inhabited by over 250 thousand residents.

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