

Mining the Gems: Findings from the SGS Priorities Survey Report on Research Priorities



Executive Summary

In 2018, the Survey Subcommittee of the SGS Development Committee disseminated a survey to current and previous membership. The goal was to obtain a consensus on what respondents felt were the most important issues faced by older adults in the South, to help establish a regional agenda for SGS with particular focus on research and service priorities. This report details findings from the research priorities component of the survey. A copy of the survey is provided in Appendix A of the full report. It is important to note that

the survey participants included only individuals who are or were associated with SGS, and their responses must be interpreted within the context of their background, experiences, and understanding of the needs of older adults in the South.

Respondent Details

Surveys were emailed to approximately 850 individuals, and a total of 108 individuals responded (13% response rate). Most respondents were current SGS members (65.4%). The vast majority of member respondents self-identified as academics/researchers (37.9%), followed by retired individuals (20.3%), practitioners (16.6%), other (14.8%), and students (6.4%).

Survey Details and Methodology

Survey questions 1 through 4 were broken into domains of topics related to older adults, identified by the Survey Subcommittee with feedback and approvals from the SGS Development Committee. Within each domain, respondents ranked what they felt were important issues for potential research topics, specifically as they relate to older adults in the South. At the end of each question, there was also an option to add topics that respondents felt were important. Table 1 lists the topics respondents were asked to rank within each domain.

Table 1: Survey Domains and Topics

Domain 1: Health-Related	Domain 3: Societal/Equality
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chronic Illness • Food Insufficiency • Oral Health • Opioid Epidemic • End of Life Care • Health Disparities • Alzheimer's Disease & Related Dementias 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minority Aging • Poverty/Income Inequality • Issues of Faith, Religion, & Spirituality • Health Disparities
Domain 2: Environmental/Location	Domain 4: Current Concerns
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rural Aging • Housing Security/Sufficiency • Disaster Recovery • Safety and Security • Food Deserts • Transportation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Caregiving • Grandparents as Caregivers • Social Isolation • Technology & Aging • Elder Abuse/ Neglect / Exploitation

Survey Details and Methodology (cont.)

In order to gain a more global perspective on overall priorities for research, respondents were asked to review their responses to questions #1 through #4 (including any topics they had added) and to list what they considered to be the **Top 5 issues** regarding older adults in the **South**. Respondents were also asked to identify what they considered to be “currently the **MOST** important issue regarding older adults in the South.” The large amount of data resulting from responses to this question enabled the Survey Subcommittee to gain a clear picture of overall respondent priorities.

Many respondents expressed a sense of the complexity and interrelatedness of the issues facing older adults in the South. To develop a sense of overall priorities, two indices were developed. The indices were based on responses of the 89 individuals who ranked what they felt were the Top 5 issues. The first index was a count of the number of respondents identifying a particular priority. The second index was calculated as a composite summed weighted score of all the rankings for each priority where rank 1 =5, rank 2 =4, rank 3 =3, rank 4=2, and rank 5=1.

Employing the two indices, and using a cut off score of at least 5 mentions and a score of at least 15 on our composite index, **17 top priority areas** were identified (Table 2). These were consolidated and reclassified into five domains: health, social support, socio-economic status, environment and contemporary social issues. Contemporary social issues included critical concerns that did not rank among the top survey responses, but were considered to be of special relevance to aging in the South.

Table 2. Top Research Priority Areas
(Index 1 score over 5 and index 2 score over 15)

Priority Area	Index 1	Index 2
Health		
Health Disparities	29	105
Chronic Illness	24	83
Alzheimer’s Disease	22	82
Other Health Issues	4	18
Social Support		
Social Isolation	33	88
Caregiving	28	79
Socio-Economic Status		
Poverty/Economic Concerns	24	83
Transportation	23	64
Food Insufficiency	8	24
Safety/Security	8	20
Environment		
Housing/Accommodation	27	86
Rural Aging	12	43
Technology Assistance	7	19
Contemporary Social Issues		
Elder Abuse/Neglect	15	41
End of Life Care	12	32
Minority Aging	8	20
Opioid Crisis	5	17

Synthesis

Table 3 represents the respondents' Top 10 issues faced by older adults in the South, noting the domain represented for each. An overwhelming conclusion to be drawn is that respondents consider research needs with respect to aging in the South to be both complex and overlapping. Moreover, many of the priorities identified as important in our survey have been incorporated in state plans throughout the region as issues of critical importance to address at the state level.

Table 3. Top 10 Concerns for Older Adults in the South

Overall Ranking	Topic	Index 1 ¹	Index 2 ²	Domain
1	Health Disparities	29	105	Health
2	Social Isolation	33	88	Social Support
3	Housing/Accommodation	27	86	Environment
4 (tie)	Poverty Economic Concerns	24	83	Socio-Economic Status
4 (tie)	Chronic Illness	24	83	Health
6	Alzheimer's / Dementia	22	82	Health
7	Caregiving	28	79	Social Support
8	Transportation	23	64	Socio-Economic Status
9	Rural Aging	12	43	Environment
10	Elder Abuse / Neglect	15	41	Contemp. Social Issues

¹ Number of respondents identifying a particular priority. ² Composite summed weighted score of rankings for each priority where rank 1 =5, rank 2 =4, rank 3 =3, rank 4 =2, and rank 5 =1.

Recommendations

On the basis of the priorities identified from the survey and our considered deliberations, the Survey Subcommittee makes the following recommendations with regard to the research priorities of SGS. We recommend that SGS address these priorities through the most appropriate means, including research funding, policy initiatives, advocacy, and education.

- 1. The highest priority for research to be endorsed and supported by SGS should be studies concerned with addressing health disparities among older adults in the South.** Within this rubric, the focus should be on reducing the prevalence of *chronic illness* and increasing the support of caregiving initiatives that help to alleviate chronic illness and its effects. Special efforts should be made to address the array of health issues associated with *Alzheimer's disease* and the health and wellbeing of persons caring for a person with a dementing illness.
- 2. SGS should prioritize research and the support of interventions to address social isolation and loneliness.** While this is a national problem of immense proportion, this is of particular concern in the South and especially in rural areas.
- 3. SGS should support research on the immediate and community environments in which older adults reside.** Concern should be with environments ranging from the *residence/dwelling/housing* of older adults to the larger scale environment of the community. Particular emphasis should be placed on *rural settings*. Within this priority, a particular concern should be with research on addressing the problem of *food deserts* which occur in many areas of the rural South.

4. **A major focus of SGS research should be studies of an interrelated array of socioeconomic concerns that limit the wellbeing of older adults in the South.** Within this priority, emphasis should be placed on studies of poverty, the economic challenges of minority status, and issues of transportation cost and availability that limit access to services.
5. **Priority should be placed on supporting research and interventions on focused contemporary issues including (a) the opioid crisis, (b) elder abuse and neglect, (c) food deserts and (d) disaster recovery.** We suggest that SGS *maintain a current list of specific crisis issues* pertinent to the South (for example, disaster recovery from specific hurricanes). This list of current critical issues should be updated on no less than an annual basis so that the Society can become the catalyst for efforts to research and address critical issues concerning the older adult population as and when they arise.
6. **SGS should conduct a survey of research priorities with respect to aging in the South at least every three years.** The current survey provides a baseline for the future. We suggest that subsequent surveys build on the structure and findings of this survey. Findings from the surveys should be used in formulating specific priorities for research to be supported by the Society through both advocacy and funding (for example through the funding of pilot research supported by the Endowment or the sponsorship of regional summit meetings on specific topics).

