# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: SGS PRIORITIES SURVEY 2.0

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Bridging Aging Research & Practice

## OVERVIEW

Recommendations from the 2018 inaugural Southern Gerontological Society (SGS) priorities survey report led to substantive outputs including the development of conference tracks, a peer-reviewed publication and subsequent presentations, a webinar series, and two new standing committees (Gerontological Education and Advocacy). The survey subcommittee also recommended that SGS conduct a survey of priorities with respect to aging in the South at least every three years. To honor that recommendation, the second SGS priorities survey (Survey 2.0) was sent to members and stakeholders in April and May of 2021. This report explains the methodology and content of the survey, describes respondent demographics, presents the findings, includes a discussion of evolving SGS priorities, and offers recommendations resulting from the project. Additional information can be found in the full report.

## METHODOLOGY

The survey was created in Qualtrics, with a link sent via the Constant Contact email platform to SGS members and stakeholders. There was an average of 1,953 successful deliveries from four emails sent, meaning the email made it to inboxes without bouncing. Seventy completed survey responses were received. The survey response rate was 3.5%. Though this was lower than the 2018 SGS survey (13%), the large amount of qualitative data collected made for rich, in-depth insights regarding what respondents considered the most pressing issues faced by older adults in the South, as well as SGS priorities.

The survey had a total of 10 questions. In questions 1 through 5, respondents were asked to rank the top five most important topics from 1-5 with 1 being the most important. Topics were listed alphabetically within the following five categories related to aging in the South: Health and Well Being (15 topics), Environment (17 topics), Society (10 topics), Technology (13 topics), and Emerging Concerns (13 topics). In addition to the topics within each category, there was an "Other" option, allowing respondents to write in and rank a topic of personal/professional interest related to each of the five categories.

At the end of each category section were two open-ended questions. The first asked respondents to share personal or professional reasons for their answers. The second asked for information about how they felt the COVID-19 pandemic may have influenced the priorities they selected. Question 6 was open-ended, and respondents were asked to consider all the topics, including any they might have added, and rank what they thought were the top five topics in overall importance faced by older adults in the South. Question 7, also open-ended, asked respondents to comment on the highest priority for SGS to consider over the next three years, given their previous answers. Three demographic questions asked about respondents' SGS membership status, profession, and in which state they resided. A copy of the survey is included as an appendix in the full report.

## RESPONDENT DESCRIPTION

Thirty-seven respondents (52.8 %) were individual SGS members; 13 (18.6 %) had an organizational membership; and 20 (28.6 %) indicated that they were not members. Respondents were able to select multiple options for professions. Thirty indicated they were educators, 20 practitioners, 20 researchers, 10 retired, nine students, nine other, and four policy makers/influencers. Respondents used the "Other" option to self-identify as advocates, ADRC counselor, disability and aging counselor, Alzheimer's and dementia specialist, and care partner.

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## DATA ANALYSIS

To analyze the topic rankings by respondents, the weighted means were calculated for questions 1-5 of the completed surveys (N= 70). A topic ranked number one (most important) was given a weight of five, while a topic ranked number five (least important) was weighted as one. In a comparative analysis of responses from questions 1-5, we identified 10 topics with the highest means. We then used this data to inform our descriptive analysis of questions 6 and 7. The findings are summarized in Tables 1 and 2. Written responses (N=70) were uploaded into ATLAS.ti 9 and received systematically assigned codes and added comments (i.e., code definitions) to capture emerging themes. The coding process through ATLAS.ti made it possible to identify significant quotes from participants, which were extracted to enrich an understanding of each priority discussed in the following sections of this report.

## FINDINGS

Aggregating the responses from questions 1 through 5 into a Top 10 list from all categories and compiling a second Top 10 list from the open-ended responses to question 6, five topics made both lists: Internet Access, Aging Services Workforce, Poverty and Income Inequality, Health Disparities, and Informal/Family Caregiving (see Table 1). The full report provides details about each topic, with qualitative responses added for further context.

**Table 1.** Topics on both Top 10 lists (Top 10 topics overall from Questions 1-5 and Question 6)

| TOPICS | NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS | MEAN | CATEGORY |
|---|---|---|---|
| Internet access (#1 on Q1-5 list) | 60 | 4.10 | Technology |
| Internet access (#10 on Q6 list) | 11 | 2.55 | |
| Aging services workforce (#3 on Q1-5 list) | 46 | 3.76 | Emerging Concerns |
| Aging Services Workforce (#8 on Q6 list) | 9 | 3.22 | |
| Poverty & income inequality (#5 on Q1-5 list) | 63 | 3.62 | Society |
| Poverty & income inequality (#5 on Q6 list) | 10 | 3.30 | |
| Health disparities (#6 on Q1-5 list) | 45 | 3.60 | Health & Well Being |
| Health disparities (#3 on Q6 list) | 9 | 3.56 | |
| Informal/family caregiving (#9 on Q1-5 list) | 60 | 3.42 | Society |
| Informal/family caregiving (#7 on Q6 list)* | 13 | 3.23 | |

\* In some cases, we assumed that a response was informal/family caregiving based on context or when it was not obvious that paid caregivers were the subject.

## PRIORITY ISSUES FOR SGS

Question 7, an open-ended question pertaining to the priorities of SGS as an organization, was answered by 63 of the 70 respondents (90%). This question was not required for completion of the survey. Responses are organized by topics and related categories and are noted in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Question 7: Highest Priority for SGS

| TOPIC | # OF RESPONDENTS | CATEGORY |
|---|---|---|
| Health Disparities | 8 | Health & Well Being |
| Minority Aging* | 8 | Society |
| Quality Of Care** | 7 | Multiple Categories |
| Informal/family caregiving*** | 6 | Society |
| Isolation & Loneliness | 5 | Environment |
| Poverty & Income Inequality | 5 | Society |
| Virtual Communication/Telehealth | 5 | Technology |
| Aging Services Workforce | 4 | Emerging Concerns |
| Mental Health/Depression | 4 | Health & Well Being |
| Aging in Place | 4 | Environment |
| Training/Education | 4 | Multiple Categories |

*Minority Aging combined topics of minority aging, social justice, and racism
**Quality of Care included responses mentioning access to healthcare, access to resources, and the general term of access to care.
***In some cases, we assumed that a response was informal/family caregiving based on context or when it was not obvious that paid caregivers were the subject.

We observed considerable overlap in this list and the top 10 topics from questions 1-5. For instance, six of the topics appeared in the top 10 list from questions 1-5, and seven of the topics also appeared in the top 10 list for question 6. In addition, four of the five topics appeared on all three lists. Given these findings, the subcommittee feels that SGS should be confident in prioritizing these areas of focus moving forward. Additionally, respondents recommended that SGS continue offering education and training to expand organizational commitment to addressing the many regional issues faced by older adults and their support networks.

Responses to question 7 crossed many topics such as training/education and research and provide more descriptive information of ways SGS might address these issues. Upon analysis of the priorities noted by respondents, further discussion, learning, and education is needed on the most pertinent issues identified to develop a plan for areas where SGS can potentially make the strongest impact (e.g., providing expertise, funding, etc.).

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Conducting a survey of SGS members and stakeholders every three years represents our commitment to empowerment evaluation as a conceptual framework of action that addresses the discrepancy between intention and attainment in research (Schwartz et al., 2021). A strength of empowerment evaluation is that it embraces and values the perspectives and representation of all constituents, including minority stakeholders (Fetterman & Wandersman, 2005). Additionally, the principles of empowerment evaluation reflect the underlying philosophy and culture of SGS (see Schwartz et al., 2021). Within this framework, SGS stakeholders (i.e., SGS members, aging network community partners, educators, and others with an interest in aging in the southern United States) can incorporate organizational learning experiences into program development and implementation to create optimal outcomes.

Based on the priorities identified from SGS Survey 2.0, the survey subcommittee makes the following recommendations which can be encapsulated within three interwoven empowerment evaluation principles (noted in italics):

- **Continue with efforts to base** *organizational improvement on evidence-informed strategies that emphasize community ownership through self-determination and accountability.*
  - Share the SGS Survey 2.0 results with SGS committees so they may plan initiatives that emphasize collaboration.
  - Prioritize networking with organizational and community partners who can assist in identifying sponsorships and work toward a mission of bridging the gap between research and practice.

- **Place a priority on** *inclusion that encourages mutual responsibility (an ethos of social justice and an ethic of care)* **among stakeholders.**
  - Make special efforts to address priorities of particular interest to stakeholders, while also maintaining inclusion across all constituencies and acknowledging the significance of all priorities and not only those expressed by the majority.
  - Raise awareness around the identified topics to improve representation in subsequent versions of the survey.
  - Prioritize a regional focus as we learned from the survey that certain issues remain especially important in the South.

- **Remain steadfast in building** *capacity for rapid adaptation as a means of promoting sustainability.*
  - Repeat and elaborate upon the topics from Survey 2.0 in Survey 3.0, scheduled to be disseminated in 2024.
  - Consider avenues that increase diverse stakeholder representation from all states in our region.
  - Transform SGS into a more engaged organization by increasing SGS representation in other types of meetings and/or forums working on issues identified in the priorities established by Survey 2.0.
  - Identify resources to enhance dissemination of current and future findings.

The three broad recommendations noted above are operationalized by specific recommendations and action items in the full report. These recommendations build on those provided in the 2018 survey report recommendations, creating a longitudinal approach to ensuring that SGS member and stakeholder input is infused into priority setting for organizational activities.

REFERENCES:

Fetterman, D.M., & Wandersman, A. (Eds.). (2005). *Empowerment evaluation principles in practice.* New York, NY: Guilford Press.

Schwartz, A.J., Bower., K.L., Rowles, G.D., Appert, K., & Ferguson, L.S. (2021). Toward a Gerontological Agenda: The Use of Empowerment Evaluation. *Journal of Applied Gerontology, 41*(1),36-45. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0733464820966477

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