Housing for the elderly\(^2\) has become a pressing issue in America, and recently this topic has received attention in both the academic and popular press. According to the 2000 Census, nearly 35 million Americans, or approximately 12 percent of the population, are age 65 or older. Between 1990 and 2000, the number of persons age 65 and older in this nation grew at a rate of 18 percent, compared to a growth rate of 13 percent for persons of all ages. The next few decades will witness one of the most dramatic demographic shifts in the history of our nation as the elderly population is expected to more than double. The U.S. Bureau of the Census projects that the 65-and-older population will number nearly 70 million by 2030 (HUD 1999). Furthermore, the future elderly population will live longer due to an anticipated increase in average life expectancy to 81.2 years in this same time period (National Housing Coalition 1996). These population trends suggest that the housing needs of older Americans will continue to be a significant problem.

In general, areas with sparse populations tend to have larger proportions of elderly persons than more densely populated areas. While 23 percent of all U.S. householders are over the age of 65, in nonmetro\(^3\) areas, older householders represent 27 percent (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2001). The percentage of elderly persons is highest in villages and towns with fewer than 2,500 persons and lowest in large cities and population centers (Golant and La Greca 1994). This significant age discrepancy between metro and nonmetro populations can be attributed to the exodus of younger persons from rural areas for employment in more urbanized areas and the relative immobility of the aging population.

Rural America often holds unique challenges for seniors to maintain or find affordable, adequate housing. Mobile homes are becoming an increasingly popular housing option among seniors living in rural areas.

**The Mobile Home in America: A Brief Background.**
Mobile homes have had an interesting history in the U.S. housing market. In the 1920s and 1930s, their initial use was primarily for recreational purposes. Major events of the 20th century, such as the Great Depression and World War II, transformed the mobile home from a recreational to a permanent habitat, greatly precipitating its presence across the U.S. landscape. By the 1960s, mobile homes were almost exclusively used for permanent living and accounted for approximately one-quarter of new housing starts. Nationwide, there are 6.7 million occupied mobile homes, comprising approximately 7 percent of all occupied structures. In rural areas, the level of occupied mobile homes is double the national percentage, comprising nearly 15 percent of nonmetro housing units. While nonmetro areas contain less than one-quarter of the nation’s housing units, more than one-half of mobile homes are located there. Two primary factors contributing to the rapid growth of mobile homes are cost and affordability. Affordability is the reason most often cited for purchasing a mobile home (Foremost Insurance Group 1989; O’Hare and O’Hare 1993). In 1999, the median purchase price of a new site-built home was $173,000, whereas the median purchase price of a new mobile home was significantly lower at $33,000 (American Housing Survey 1999).
While mobile homes have proliferated, controversy over this unique form of housing has also grown. Much of the controversy stems from quality, design, and safety issues that have plagued mobile homes since their inception. In addition, socioeconomic characteristics of mobile home residents also have influenced community opposition to this type of housing. Because mobile homes have a much lower purchase price than more traditional homesites, they have been popular with lower-income households. Consequently, stigmas of poor quality as well as impoverishment have been associated with mobile homes. Through their focus group research, Parrott, Goss, Engelen-Eigles, and Lambur (1991) found that mobile homes were one of the most controversial housing issues among residents in portions of Appalachian Virginia. Their findings noted three community attitudes toward mobile homes: (1) a general prejudice against any form of lower cost housing, (2) a concern about the undesirable appearance (especially of older mobile homes), and (3) a perception that mobile home residents did not share the values of the community.

Mobile homes still constitute a small portion of the overall elderly occupied nonmetro housing stock (Figure 1). They have, however, increased dramatically in number during the past twenty years. Nationwide, householders age 65 and older occupy approximately 1.3 million mobile homes. These represent 6.4 percent of all elderly occupied units. In nonmetro areas, the proportion of elderly occupied mobile homes is 10 percent. While the total number of nonmetro senior-headed households is just over one-quarter of all senior-occupied households, they account for nearly 42 percent of all elderly occupied mobile homes. Perhaps as more persons go beyond the time of an expected home purchase, even more households will choose mobile homes (Morris and Winter 1978).

**Elderly Housing Preferences and Options in Rural America.** Most persons over the age of 65 live in single-family homes that they own. Typically, seniors prefer this housing arrangement. Bolstered by an attachment to home and community, these housing preferences are strongest in rural areas (Norris-Baker and Scheidt 1994). Unfortunately, many older adults remain in their homes, or “age in place,” long after they can physically, mentally, or financially manage a home. A lack of alternate housing options may contribute to the immobility of the rural elderly. A housing gap between single independent dwellings and institutional care facilities such as nursing homes has been left unfilled in most rural communities (Beall, Thompson, Goodwin, and Donahue 1981). Also, the rural elderly have less access to rental housing than do city or suburban residents. To some extent, this is a matter of preference; however, as people age, many want and need apartment living (Belden 1999). Although rental housing is an important component of the elderly housing continuum, its scarcity in rural areas greatly inhibits housing choices for rural seniors. Consequently, housing variety is severely constrained for many rural elders who are all too often caught between the choice of living in a deteriorating and substandard home or moving to a nursing home. These factors of elderly housing preference, provision, and options may well precipitate the use of more mobile homes by older rural populations in the coming decades.

![Figure 1. Mobile Home Growth: Elderly Occupied Mobile Homes, 1983-1999](source: 1999 American Housing Survey.)
Mobile Homes and the Midwestern Elderly: A Demographic Picture

General Population and Housing Characteristics. Proportionally, the Midwest region of the United States has one of the highest levels of both rural and elderly populations in the nation. Overall, 26 percent of Midwesterners live in nonmetro areas compared to a national average of 22 percent. Likewise, more than 14 percent of the population in nonmetro areas of the Midwest are age 65 or older compared with just 12 percent for the nation as a whole and 11 percent in metro areas of the Midwest (Figure 2).

Most seniors in the U.S. live in conventionally constructed single-family detached homes. Likewise, 80 percent of Midwestern rural elderly households live in single-family housing units that are almost exclusively owned by their inhabitants. Only 12 percent of Midwestern elders, about half the national average, live in structures with two or more units. A little over 100,000 or 6 percent of nonmetro seniors in the Midwest live in mobile homes. Approximately half of these elderly occupied mobile homes are in metro areas, and the other half are located in nonmetro parts of the region. This type of housing is less prevalent among rural Midwestern senior households than those of the nation as a whole; however, about 6 percent of nonmetro Midwestern elders live in mobile homes compared to 5 percent for all households in the Midwest. Moreover, in the rural Midwest, 98 percent of elderly inhabitants own their mobile homes.

Among all elderly occupied mobile homes in the Midwest, approximately half (51%) are located in “clusters” of two or more units, and the other half (49%) are placed by themselves. The proportion of seniors living in mobile home parks varies significantly based on rural/urban residence. While about two-thirds of metro elderly occupied mobile homes in the Midwest are located in parks, only one-third of Midwestern nonmetro elderly seniors live in a park (Figure 3). Mobile home communities dedicated solely to seniors are a popular housing option among the elderly, especially among retirees in the South. In fact, there are even exceptions to the age discrimination clause of federal fair housing laws that permit exclusion of non-seniors from parks and housing complexes delegated for senior use (Housing Assistance Council 2001).

Household Characteristics. Like elderly households nationwide, elderly mobile home households in the rural Midwest tend to shelter more single individuals or households without children than middle-aged households. Also, these homesteads are more likely to be occupied by female householders than are nonmetro mobile home households. Overall, half of the elderly mobile home households live alone, and over three-quarters of these individuals are women. Single female-headed households age 65 and over are much more likely to live in poverty and experience housing cost burdens than their married or single male counterparts. The “young elderly,” those age 65 to 74, make up a majority (53%) of nonmetro elderly mobile home occupants in the Midwest. In contrast, only 4 percent of nonmetro mobile homes were occupied by someone over the age of 85; however, this number is likely to grow as the elderly population grows and life expectancy increases. The median age for senior mobile home occupants is 73 in both metro and nonmetro areas of the region (Table 1).

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4 The American Housing Survey (AHS) uses the term mobile home when referring to a housing unit that was originally constructed to be towed on its chassis. A mobile home may also have permanent rooms attached onto it or other structural modifications. The term does not include prefabricated buildings, modular homes, travel campers, boats, or self-propelled vehicles like motor homes. Some people use the terms trailer or manufactured housing in the same sense as mobile homes. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the industry that produces these homes prefer the term manufactured housing; however, to remain consistent with the primary data source, this study uses the term mobile home when referring to this type of housing.

5 Unless otherwise stated, all data presented in this report are derived from tabulations using microdata from the 1999 American Housing Survey (AHS). The AHS is conducted every two years by the U.S. Bureau of the Census for HUD. In 1999, interviewers obtained information for a nationwide sample of almost 40,000 housing units occupied year-round. The AHS is the most comprehensive survey of U.S. housing between decennial censuses. The U.S. Bureau of the Census has been conducting this longitudinal survey for HUD since 1973.

Like any sample, the AHS is subject to errors from sampling and errors from other causes (such as incomplete data and wrong answers). For an extensive discussion of AHS methodology and possible errors, see the appendices to the published American Housing Survey published report. Because of the sampling errors and other possible errors inherent in the AHS, readers are cautioned not to rely on small differences in percentages or numbers presented in this report. The reliability of the data decreases as the sample size decreases.

6 The definition of Midwest for this report is the same as the U.S. Bureau of the Census’s regional definition which includes the 12 Midwestern states of Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin.
Like Midwestern households in general, elderly mobile home occupants in the nonmetro Midwest tend to be less racially diverse than those of the United States as a whole. Nationwide, about 85 percent of senior households are white. Among nonmetro seniors who live in mobile homes, the percent of white households is 98 percent.

**Income.** Availability of income or financial resources is essential for seniors to acquire and maintain quality housing. Households with persons 65 and older in nonmetro areas have traditionally had lower incomes than the average for all households. The median income among elderly occupied nonmetro households is $16,800, 44 percent less than the median income of $30,000 for all nonmetro households. In the Midwest, the median income of nonmetro mobile home occupants age 65 and older is even lower at $15,000.

Approximately 79 percent of nonmetro elderly mobile home households have incomes at or below 80 percent of...
their area median income. Furthermore, 17 percent of the Midwestern elderly in mobile homes have incomes below the poverty level.

Elderly mobile home occupants in the nonmetro Midwest have fewer diversified income sources than their younger counterparts. Almost all of the Midwestern nonmetro elderly mobile home occupants (91%) report income from Social Security or pension payments, but only 14 percent report wage or salary income. Only a small proportion of elderly mobile home occupants in the Midwest receive some type of public welfare assistance, and approximately 8 percent use food stamps.

Asset wealth and savings are often a crucial aspect of seniors’ income sources. While nearly half of the elderly mobile home occupants in the nonmetro Midwest have savings, only 30 percent, a much lower rate than all elderly households in the Midwest, report a savings of $25,000 or more.

**Housing Cost and Affordability.** Consumer costs tend to be lower in rural areas, and housing is typically not an exception, especially for seniors who live in mobile homes. The median monthly cost of housing for Midwestern nonmetro seniors living in a mobile home is significantly lower ($180) than the national median of $317 for homeowners over the age of 65. Most nonmetro seniors in the Midwest own their homes free and clear, with only 2 percent reporting a mortgage. The median monthly mortgage payment for these nonmetro homeowners is $277, while the median contract rent for the relatively small number of renters is $170. Nationally housing costs are significantly lower in nonmetro areas; however, this varies somewhat by location. Housing costs for nonmetro seniors living in mobile homes tend to be lowest in the southern United States where the median monthly housing cost is $183; it is highest in the northeast where the median cost is $261.

Land rental is a unique cost associated with living in a mobile home. Nationally, 38 percent of all mobile home residents rent the land for their homes but approximately 46 percent of Midwestern nonmetro seniors rent land at a median cost of $175 per month.

Table 1. Age of Mobile Home Residents, by Residence, 1999

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Nonmetro Number</th>
<th>Nonmetro %</th>
<th>Metro Number</th>
<th>Metro %</th>
<th>U.S. Number</th>
<th>U.S. %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>65 to 74</td>
<td>54,413</td>
<td>53.4</td>
<td>59,463</td>
<td>58.0</td>
<td>744,805</td>
<td>54.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75 to 84</td>
<td>43,220</td>
<td>42.5</td>
<td>32,053</td>
<td>31.3</td>
<td>500,634</td>
<td>36.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>85 and over</td>
<td>4,175</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>10,960</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>116,512</td>
<td>8.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>101,808</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>102,476</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>1,361,951</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Median Age

- Nonmetro: 73
- Metro: 73
- U.S.: 74

Source: 1999 American Housing Survey.

Despite the fact that housing costs are lower in nonmetro areas, many senior households living in mobile homes find it difficult to meet their housing costs. Of the elderly Midwestern nonmetro households who live in mobile homes, approximately 9 percent pay more than half of their monthly income in housing costs and are, therefore, considered extremely cost-burdened.

**Housing Quality.** Safety and quality issues have been among the greatest concerns for manufactured homes throughout their brief history. Unit age is a critical component of mobile home quality, especially if the mobile home was built before 1976 when the Manufactured Home Construction and Safety Standards or HUD Code was implemented (Wallis 1991). The HUD Code is federal legislation that mandates that there be universal regulations for the construction of mobile homes. While some debate still exists, most studies indicate that quality and safety have dramatically improved since the implementation of the code. Nationwide, approximately 31 percent of all mobile homes were built before implementation of the HUD Code; similarly, 30 percent of the Midwestern nonmetro elderly occupied mobile homes were built before 1977 (1999 American Housing Survey).

Among nonmetro elderly occupied mobile homes in the Midwest, 2.4 percent are considered severely inadequate structures. Of the nonmetro units that have severe inadequacies, almost all were built before 1977 (Table 2).

Table 2. Year Mobile Home Was Built

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1950 to 1959</td>
<td>1,787</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960 to 1969</td>
<td>11,166</td>
<td>11.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970 to 1976</td>
<td>17,182</td>
<td>16.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977 to 1979</td>
<td>9,338</td>
<td>9.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980 to 1984</td>
<td>14,621</td>
<td>14.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985 to 1989</td>
<td>14,910</td>
<td>14.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990 to 1994</td>
<td>16,846</td>
<td>16.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995 to 1999</td>
<td>15,957</td>
<td>15.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>101,807</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: 1999 American Housing Survey.

While manufactured housing quality and safety have generally improved since the implementation of the original 1976 Manufactured Home Construction and Safety Standards, problems still persist. Studies show manufactured housing residents consistently rank concerns with quality and safety among their primary housing complaints. A recent survey by AARP (1999) found that 77 percent of mobile home owners reported at least one problem with construction, installation, systems, or appliances in their homes. The most frequently mentioned problems were interior fit or finish, such as cracks or separation of walls (31%).

Table 3. Quality Problems Reported in Mobile Homes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
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<td>101,807</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Without question, a home is the largest asset most Americans, and especially low- and moderate-income households, will ever own. Many studies suggest a strong link between asset holding and economic security and well-being (Page-Adams and Sherraden 1996). Assets help reduce welfare use among low-income households and lessen psychological and economic strain during an economic crisis. When many rural seniors are out of the workforce and have limited income sources, the implications of asset accumulation from their homes are significant. The homeownership rate among elderly occupied mobile homes in the Midwest is significantly higher than the nation’s. While more of these seniors own their homes, the equity they accumulate is likely to be less than that for conventionally constructed homes because rural mobile homes as a whole cost less. Nationwide, the median value of a home is $100,000. The median value of units with householders who are age 65 and older is $75,000, and it is slightly less than $70,000 for elderly households in the Midwest. The median value of elderly occupied mobile homes in the nonmetro Midwest is only $8,000, however, which is 89 percent less than the median for all Midwestern elderly units.

The issue of mobile home life, use, and value appreciation has evoked a debate that has not resulted in a clear consensus. National housing groups have estimated the average life of a mobile home to be fifteen years (Spence 1987). On the other hand, a 1998 report sponsored by the Manufactured Housing Institute estimated the life expectancy of a mobile home at 57.5 years (Meeks 1998). A variety of different factors such as unit age, geographic location, and owner upkeep were considered by both of these sources, possibly accounting for the discrepancies in longevity estimates. It is clear, however, that mobile homes have a much lower life expectancy than conventional site-built homes. Likewise, the issues of mobile home appreciation and depreciation are also highly debated within the housing field. It is generally perceived that mobile homes, especially single-wide units, at best appreciate only slightly and, in most cases, depreciate in value. Recent research from the Consumers Union (publisher of Consumer Reports) found that, on average, manufactured homes depreciate at a rate of 1.5 percent compared to an appreciation rate of 4.5 percent for conventionally constructed single family homes. Furthermore, the research also shows that manufactured homes in rural areas appreciate less than those in more urbanized areas (Jewell 2002).

Housing Choice and Satisfaction

Housing Choices. Elderly households tend to be stable and move infrequently. Persons 65 and older represented only 4 percent of all movers within the United States between 1992 and 1993 (Hobbs and Damon 1996). Furthermore, only about 3 percent of all seniors moved far enough to change county residence, and most stayed in the same region. Several studies link seniors’ attachment to home with length of residence. Nationwide, more than half of all senior households have lived in their current residences for 20 or more years. In contrast, only 12 percent of Midwestern nonmetro seniors in mobile homes have resided in their units 20 or more years. This discrepancy is due to the fact that mobile homes have only been a viable housing option for the past 35 years.

Among mobile home occupants of all ages, financial reasons are the most predominant factor in choosing a mobile home. Cost is important for seniors, but other factors also seem to be considered by the older population. In particular, room and layout design are the most frequently cited reasons for choosing a mobile home. Mobility and activity issues are of special concern among seniors and may precipitate the choice of a mobile home that is easy to move around in and is conducive to physical ability level.

For seniors, and for rural seniors especially, the choice of a home is closely related to neighborhood and location factors. Substantial literature supports the notion that housing satisfaction is in part a function of macro-level factors (Zimmer and Chappell 1997). For example, rural and urban neighborhoods hold vastly different implications for seniors. Rural seniors are more isolated and also often lack transportation and accessibility to amenities. In fact, some experts argue that housing choice and satisfaction among seniors may be more a factor of environmental characteristics than the physical nature of the house itself.

The demographic factors that influence senior housing choice may be even more prevalent in rural areas. Rural seniors seek assistance with life activities from family and friends more often than their urban counterparts (Zimmer and Chappell 1997). Zimmer and Chappell also assert that rural relationships more often satisfy specific daily living functions rather than providing only emotional support.
Therefore, social relations have a fundamentally different role to play in day-to-day living for rural elders. Relative to housing, rural elders prefer to live closer to family. Given lax land use regulations and ownership of land in many rural areas, the placement of a mobile home close to family members can serve as an affordable avenue for addressing the need for social interaction and assistance from relatives and friends.

**Housing Satisfaction.** Most seniors over the age of 65 live in conventionally constructed single-family homes that they own, and they prefer this housing arrangement. Bolstered by an attachment to home and community, these housing preferences are often stronger in rural areas (Norris-Baker and Scheidt 1994). In general, rural seniors are very satisfied with their housing, and over 80 percent of nonmetro elderly householders—more than any other age group—express high housing satisfaction. Housing satisfaction levels are somewhat lower (74%) for nonmetro seniors who reside in mobile homes, however, and they drop even lower for seniors in the Midwest where fewer than two-thirds expressed high housing satisfaction. These satisfaction levels, while high, may also be somewhat inflated. That is, satisfaction may be in part a function of present achievement and future expectations. By this stage in their life, many seniors have achieved a high level of housing satisfaction. Those who have not often have limited recourse in improving their quality of housing. These limited expectations for improvement may well lead them to be “satisfied” with their present housing (Carp and Carp 1982).

**Conclusions**

Housing older populations is a growing concern, especially in rural areas that are less equipped to deal with the needs and services of an aging population. The lack of adequate, affordable housing is a major concern. Most seniors remain in their homes for as long as possible—many out of choice, but some out of necessity, since housing gaps have been left unfilled in many rural communities. Furthermore, recent research suggests that the housing choices of elders are greatly influenced by proximity to needed services and transportation (Vanderhart 1994). The well-documented lack of formal elderly services in rural areas often places increased importance on the role of family and friends as service providers. Thus, the placement of a mobile home near family or friends is a convenient and affordable housing option to meet this need for rural seniors. The confluence of all of these factors will without doubt precipitate the growth and continued occupancy of mobile homes by older households in rural America, especially in the absence of other viable and/or affordable housing alternatives.

While the proportion of elderly occupied mobile homes in the rural Midwest is relatively small, particularly when compared to other regions of the U.S., growth of this type of housing among older Midwesterners is emerging. Nearly one-third of all mobile home occupants in the Midwest are age 45 to 64 and will soon be joining the ranks of America’s burgeoning elderly population. Rural mobile home occupants over the age of 65 generally face more housing challenges as they typically have lower incomes and higher poverty levels than their counterparts who reside in single family homes. These factors combined with some of the unique characteristics of this type of housing, namely quality and investment concerns, should cause policymakers and local officials to start thinking about what a significant influx of elderly occupied mobile homes will mean to their communities. More importantly, consideration should also be given to quality of life and economic well-being for the growing number of seniors who will reside in this type of housing.

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