Elder Voices on Ferguson

Background

Ferguson, Missouri became the center of the nation’s attention in August 2014, when Michael Brown, an African American teenager, was shot and killed by a White police officer. Civil unrest continued for weeks. Images and voices in the news were largely of younger adults; the involvement of older adults in the events surrounding the incident and the months that followed was not evident. Gerontologists and aging network service providers in the St. Louis area began to ask about older residents in the Ferguson community and nearby neighborhood—how had older adults experienced the community protests and on-going civic engagement? The project Elder Voices on Ferguson developed from these concerns and the belief that older adults have experience and wisdom to offer their communities. The aim of Elder Voices on Ferguson is to hear how older adults experienced the social unrest, how they are currently engaged in their communities, and how they might become more involved. Also, the project aims to gather ideas about how the community can better support people as they age.

Methods

Ten focus groups were conducted between September 2015 and February 2016. Flyers, newsletters, and announcements were used to recruit 73 participants; groups were held at three churches, two community centers, and one organizational office. Human subject approval for the project was obtained from Washington University in St. Louis and University of Missouri-St. Louis.

Focus group participants ranged in age from 64-93 years, with the average age at 75. Most were female (74%). Fifty-two percent were African American, 42% White, and 1% Asian American. Most currently lived in Ferguson or nearby communities; several lived elsewhere now, but had long-standing connections to Ferguson.

All focus groups were recorded and transcribed. Three coders discussed the content until agreement was reached on themes. Quotes were identified to illustrate the themes. Eight major themes, subthemes, and quotes are presented on the following pages. A list of suggestions offered by participants was also culled from the transcripts. The findings were presented at a meeting with 30 participants to determine if the findings were credible and comprehensive. At this event, participants were also invited to extend the list of suggestions with other ideas.

Findings

Issues related to safety were most commonly discussed in the focus groups. Some focus group participants reported participating in the protests, but went home before nightfall because they felt vulnerable. Concerns about going out after dark continued to remain strong. Participants felt there was a breakdown in intergenerational communications and desired more exchange. One participant highlighted the fact that in Ferguson, the older population is disproportionately white and the younger population is disproportionately African American; the intersection of race and age is an important dynamic.

Participants expressed high commitment to the community and some had lived in the area for long periods of time. Some participants reported feeling intimidated to attend community meetings because of the angry nature...
The meetings occurred at night. There were expressions of concern and understanding toward the situations faced by today’s youth—the lack of opportunity in education and employment, the lack of strong parental and community support. There was recognition of on-going racism and discrimination in the community. It was pointed out that the death of Michael Brown brought to light long-standing problems in the community and what happened in Ferguson was just a flashpoint for what is going on in many communities. Focus group participants only talked briefly about community services that older adults need to age in place. This topic seemed less compelling to them as the other topics of discussion.

Eight major themes, subthemes, and supporting quotes are presented in the remainder of this report, as well as suggestions for moving forward.

**Theme 1: Safety**
- Many older adults are afraid to speak up. There is fear of reprisal for expressing opinions; and fear of being yelled out or insulted in a public setting.
- Many older adults fear the police while at the same time fear the lack of police intervention.
- Many older adults have anxiety about going out—especially after dark—since the protests.

**Theme 2: Intergenerational Communications**
- Older adults should listen to younger people.
- Older adults should share their experience with younger people.
- We should create opportunities for generations to talk together.
- There is a tension between younger and older adults because youth do not respect older adults’ opinions and historical knowledge.

**Theme 3: Personal Investment of Older Adults**
- Older adults are committed to the community and youth; they want to help.
- Older adults are not sure how to be involved when the public meetings and gatherings are loud and tense.
- Many older adults volunteer and participate in meetings, but not at night.
- Many older adults participated in the protests, during the daylight.

**Theme 4: Youth Identity**
- Youth are struggling with purpose and identity.
- Youth are angrier today.
- Youth are disrespectful to others.
- Older adults understand that young people have legitimate concerns and problems.
- Youth are disillusioned with older leadership.
Theme 5: Race Relations, Perceptions and Realities
- There is still racism, disrespect for African Americans, and prejudice.
- The struggle for equality, for survival, still goes on; there is still a need for organizing and protesting.
- African Americans still need to give kids “the talk” about not talking up or talking back, especially to police.
- Segregation and racial tension have been highlighted by recent events.

Theme 6: Times Have Changed
- There are fewer strong positive forces in children’s lives through parents, neighborhoods, and church.
- There are fewer good jobs and less help from government.
- How youth organize and protest are different than before (e.g., importance of social media, no clear leaders).
- Social media is taking the place of parental and family conversations.

Theme 7: The Role of Media
- The media contributed to confusion around the death of Michael Brown and the following unrest.
- The media focused on the negative.
- The media did not recognize the outside “criminal” element.
- Youth get news quicker from social media, often before their parents.

Theme 8: Services for Aging in Place
- There is a lack of awareness of services.
- There is a need for transportation, home repair, financial assistance with medications, and in-home care.
- There is a need for trusted providers.
- Some older adults don’t take advantage of existing opportunities.
- Services are hard to access.

Participant Suggestions
These specific ideas were generated by focus group members.

Safety
- Set up an anonymous hotline for police.
- Improve police visibility and relationships; build trust with police.
- Organize and strengthen neighborhood associations; encourage neighborhood activities and interaction.
- Take personal responsibility when you see problems; look out for yourself.
- Improve community policing, including better training of police, police background checks, and better police accountability.
Intergenerational Communications
- Talk with the youth; embrace youth.
- Show love and brotherhood, especially in the home.
- Celebrate and elaborate on Grandparent’s Day at school.
- Share heritage and experience with young adults and youth for greater intergenerational understanding.

Personal Investment of Older Adults
- Get involved in volunteer activities, especially intergenerational programs.
- Go to City Hall and voice opinion (e.g., speaking up to keep the Jolly Trolley free).
- Organize service events (e.g., neighborhood clean-up).
- Take it upon yourself to volunteer: Okay, I will do it!

Youth Identity
- Reach kids early and improve childhood education.
- Teach respect.
- Look to the Church and religion for support.
- Train and support young parents.
- Support and encourage activity programs, in and outside of school.
- Get teachers back to teaching vs. administration.

Race Relations
- Expand participation in diversity-training, restorative justice workshops, etc.

Services for Aging in Place
- Explore “Senior Resource Teams” that exist in other communities.
- Have another health fair for older residents.

Going Forward
These findings will be shared with relevant organizations and public officials. Many of the suggestions made by focus group participants overlap with efforts of existing initiatives in Ferguson. We will target these efforts to advocate for including older adults as valued stakeholders. To date we have connected with three organizations: Ferguson Youth Initiative, OASIS Institute, and For the Sake of All. With Ferguson Youth Initiative, we have organized two intergenerational discussion groups and hope to develop more opportunities for dialogue between younger and older adults. With OASIS, an educational and service organization engaging people over 50 years old, we will work to increase the number of older adults participating as volunteers in their intergenerational literacy and health programs in North St. Louis County. Team members from For the Sake of All project at Washington University organize health and social organizations, businesses, and government officials to identify strategies aimed at improving the health and well-being of African Americans in St. Louis. We will work with them to incorporate older adults into these strategies.

In sum, older adults expressed an interest in being more involved with youth, with their neighborhoods, and with the wider community. The Elder Voices on Ferguson team hopes this initial effort will be the beginning of wider engagement of older adults.