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Senior Citizen Access to and Utilization of the Farmers' Market: A Holland Michigan Study



Jennifer M. Kadrovich
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ABSTRACT

This research examines whether or not senior citizens in the Holland, Michigan area have access to and use of the local farmers' market. The intent is to determine any access issues the elderly population may have in the availability of fresh nutritious produce. It is assumed that many elderly people have poor health, are on a fixed income, have a lack of transportation, and suffer from decreased mobility and social isolation. Because of these limitations senior citizens may not be able to easily obtain fresh produce which may, in turn, impact the nutrition of this group.

Introduction

Senior citizens are the fastest growing segment of the population. People aged 60 years and older are currently 16.5% of the total U.S. population, and this figure is expected to rise to 25% by the year 2030 (Millen, Ohls, Ponza, & McCool, 2002). As the baby boom generation continues to age and health care improves, we begin to see the greatest increase in the numbers of the oldest old, those 85 and older (Longino, 1994; Shankar, 2000). According to Longino in 1990, one in 10 people were 85 years old or older, but by the year 2045, one in five people will be in this age group.

One problem is that as age increases so too does disability or the need for assistance in performing everyday activities. In addition, the elderly often have trouble accessing services such as healthcare facilities, grocery stores, banks, and restaurants due to issues such as poor health, decreased mobility, lack of transportation, low or fixed income, and social isolation (Shankar, 2000; Ervin & Kennedy-Stephenson, 2002). Demographics show that only 9% of people between ages 65 and 69 need assistance with personal care such as eating, bathing, and using the bathroom; however, 45% of people who are 85 years and older need this kind of assistance (Longino, 1994).

This research will explore the issue of senior citizens' accessibility to an excellent source of fresh nutritious produce, specifically the farmers' market in Holland, Michigan. It is my hypothesis that senior citizens in Holland, Michigan will have trouble accessing the local farmers' market due to issues such as poor health, decreased mobility, lack of transportation, low or fixed income, and/or social isolation.



Kimmarie Murphy, Ph.D.
Faculty Mentor

Background

Senior Citizens

Because of the issues of health, income, transportation, and mobility the ever increasing population of senior citizens face, there is a growing body of research concerning the elderly (Sikorska, 1999; Rosenthal, 2000; Litwin, 2001; Guthrie & Lin, 2002). The term senior citizen usually refers to someone who is considered elderly, past middle age, and most often retired (Miriam-Webster, 2002). According to Emrath (1999) "A traditional definition of senior citizen has been anyone who's at least 65, the age of eligibility for full Social Security benefits" (p. 8). Alternatively, Emrath (1999) explains, "based on the law governing age-restricted housing" (p. 9), a senior citizen could be defined as anyone 55 years and older. In addition, senior citizen discounts are often given in restaurants and stores to people who are 55 years old and older. Because age cutoffs vary, for the purpose of this study, I have defined a senior citizen to be anyone who has attained the age of 55 or older.

Until recently, much of the research regarding senior citizens has dealt with issues of access to healthcare and prescriptions, but more studies are starting to focus on the elderly and access to adequate nutrition. Seniors have been shown to be lacking in vitamins D, B₁₂ and B-G as well as protein, calcium, magnesium, and zinc while having an excess of total fat, saturated fat, sodium, and cholesterol (Weimer as cited in Shankar, 2000). Access to nutritious foods is important especially for the elderly because according to Ervin and Kennedy-Stephenson (2002), "proper nutrition plays a crucial role in helping them maintain good health and functioning" (p. 3423). Shankar states, "Adequate nutrition directly impacts the quality of life of the elderly, by promoting health and preventing disease and disability"

(p. 37). For example, it is estimated that 85% of seniors 65 and older with chronic medical conditions could see improvements with better diets (Schoenberg, 2000).

The idea of assisted living became popular during the mid-1980s as an alternative to the nursing home and as a way to increase senior access to various everyday necessities. (Raymond, 2000). Assisted living facilities are places where residents pay an entrance fee and monthly rent but live fairly independently in a home-like situation (Raymond, 2000; Roberts, 2003). By 1999, there were at least 46,131 of this type of "supportive" housing for the elderly in the U.S. (Raymond). In fact, Cummings (2002) says that in the United States, assisted living facilities are the fastest growing type of residential care for the elderly, with an annual growth rate of 15% to 20%.

Assisted care facilities vary widely but if it becomes increasingly difficult for a person to be independent, assisted care facilities often include paid services such as three meals a day in a common dining room and help coping with daily needs such as housekeeping, transportation, eating, bathing, and taking medications (Raymond, 2000; Roberts, 2003).

Farmers' Markets

There is a growing body of research on farmers' markets. According to Brown (2001), farmers' markets "are generally considered to be recurrent markets at fixed locations where farm products are sold by farmers themselves" (p. 656). Andreatta and Wickliffe (2002) have discussed the rise of farmers' markets and attribute it to "consumers seeking the lowest priced foods and farmers seeking the highest return on their labor investment" (p.168). They describe it as an alternative growing and marketing strategy for the small farmer having difficulties in the traditional wholesale

market. It is "a place of business as well as a location for building community, allowing consumers and farmers to become more closely connected" (Andreatta & Wickliffe, p. xx).

Farmers' markets are also seen as community-based efforts that are part of building local food systems which help to increase access to affordable, high-quality, fresh produce (Kantor, 2001). Because of federal grants, many states have implemented farmers' market coupon programs for low income families and senior citizens to improve their access to fresh local produce and improve their nutrition. For example, the Seniors Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP) in Iowa was established to promote better health for low-income senior citizens, 60 years and older, by making fresh local produce more accessible to them financially (Russell, 2002). Similar programs have gone into effect in Louisiana (Louisiana Dept. of Agriculture & Forestry, n.d.), Ohio (Area Office on Aging of Northwestern Ohio, Inc., n.d.), and Indiana (Purdue University Dept. of Foods & Nutrition and Cooperative Extension Service, April 19, 2004).

Study Area

Holland, Michigan was founded by Dutch settlers in 1847 (Hope College, 2004). Holland is located on Lake Michigan and is home to Hope College, a private institution. The city has around 35,048 residents, although with tourism and summer cottage residents, there are more people in Holland during summer months (U.S. Census, 2000). The Victorian-style downtown area has been renovated and is complete with art galleries, boutique shops, bookstores, and sidewalks that are heated during the winter months. The city of Holland has won the "Great American Main Street Award" and the "All-American City-Award" for the downtown area. It is also host to the internationally known,

annual "Tulip Festival" (Holland Convention & Visitor's Bureau, 2000). Because of the city's characteristics, there may be more affluence not just among the younger people but among the elderly as well.

Methodology 1

Holland Farmers' Market

The first part of the research was conducted through a six-week ethnographic field school at Grand Valley State University. The class developed and administered a questionnaire using the Andreatta and Wickliffe (2002) farmers' market study as a model to find out who goes to the Holland, Michigan farmers' market located on 8th and Pine streets and why they attend. Besides basic demographic information, participants were asked how often they attend the Holland farmers' market, days of the week they attend, and how long they have been coming to the Holland farmers' market. Other questions focused on how much people were willing to spend, items most often purchased, and reasons for attending the farmers' market.

The Holland farmers' market is held on Wednesdays and Saturdays from May to November. During the final four weeks of the ethnographic field school, the class attended both market days and put up two tables at the farmers' market in order to disseminate and collect questionnaires. For my research, I then analyzed a subset of questionnaires from people who were 55 years or older because I was interested in finding out which seniors in Holland have access to the local farmers' market and use it. Eight seniors volunteered to be interviewed, but I was only able to interview two people due to time constraints.

Results and Discussion 1

Farmers' Market Questionnaires N=123

Who attends the Holland farmers' market?
The farmers' market questionnaires

show that 50 individuals or 41% of respondents qualified as senior citizens, people 55 years or older. Mostly women filled out the questionnaire with 73% of the respondents being female and 27% male. Seven of the eight seniors who volunteered to be interviewed were women and both of the volunteers who were interviewed were women. Of the seniors who visit the farmers' market, 71.4% came from the city of Holland and immediate surrounding areas of Park Township, Holland Township, and the city of Zeeland. The other 28.6% of seniors came from other areas such as Hudsonville, Michigan, Chicago, Illinois, and St. Louis, Missouri (see Figure 1).

Within anthropology and other life sciences, race is not a biologically valid term as all human belong to the species *Homo sapiens*. Instead, race or ethnicity is a cultural construct. For this reason, our study asked, "Briefly identify your family's ethnic background." Some of the responses to this question included: American-Caucasian, Dutch, Irish-Viking, WASP, USA, Anglo Saxon, Dutch-Mexican, and German. People did not generally define themselves using the standard census racial categories. (See Figure 2.) The census data looks at whether people classify themselves as: White (non-Hispanic), Hispanic/Latino, Black or African American, American Indian, Asian, Native Hawaiian, Other, or Two or More. However, looking at the census data, it is possible to get a general idea of the makeup of the Holland population.

Education

Many of the people attending the Holland farmers' market have a college education. (See Figure 3.) Of the people under the age of 55, 60.3% had a college degree, with 31.5% having a bachelor's degree and 28.8% having post graduate degrees. Senior citizens also reported high levels of education with

55.1% reporting college degrees: 22.4% held bachelor degrees and 32.7% held post graduate degrees. These results are not surprising because Holland is a college town.

Income

Reported incomes for people attending the Holland farmers' market were also high. (see Figure 4) Of those respondents under age 55, 73.2% of people reported making \$46,000 or more annually. In this age group, the highest percentage, 22.5%, reported that their annual income was more than \$91,000. The data from senior citizens show that 68.3% of this population has an annual income of more than \$46,000. The largest percentage of seniors, 22%, make between \$76,000 and \$90,000 per year, and 17.1% reported making more than \$91,000 annually.

The incomes reported for people attending the Holland farmers' market do not correspond to the median annual income of the United States, \$41,994, as reported in the U.S. 2000 census data. The annual median income reported for the state of Michigan, \$45,047, is slightly higher than the U.S. median income. With a median annual income of \$50,316 (U.S. Census, 2000), people living in the city of Holland are on average much more affluent than most other U.S. and Michigan residents. Similarly, 12.4% of individuals in the U.S. live below poverty level; 9.9% of those are 65 years old or older. In Holland, Michigan 10.6% of the population lives below poverty with 6.5% of them being 65 years old or older (U.S. Census, 2000).

Amount Spent at the Farmers' Market

Both seniors, 20.8%, and the younger group, 21.9%, were likely to spend \$20 per visit to the farmers' market. Even though both groups were likely to spend about the same amount, the percentage

of produce from the market varied between groups. There were 35.4% of seniors who said they got less than 10% of their weekly produce from the farmers market and 16.7% got between 11-25% of their weekly produce from the farmers market. For the younger group, 25% said they got less than 10% of their weekly produce at the farmers' market, and 25% said the number was between 11-25% of their weekly produce purchase.

Both of the groups, 75% of seniors and 84.5% of the younger group, said they would be willing to pay \$1.00 - \$1.50 at the farmers' market for an item costing \$1.00 at the super market. This response is similar to the findings of the Andreatta and Wickliffe (2002) North Carolina farmers' market research in which 80% of respondents said they would be willing to spend \$1.00 - \$1.50 for an item at the farmers' market that cost \$1.00 at the super market.

Some of the reasons one interview volunteer, Joyce, gave for her willingness to spend more at the farmers' market was that the produce was fresher, higher quality, less blemished, and she felt that the farmers took better care of their produce than did the grocery stores. Another interview volunteer, Patricia, said that it was "worth it" to pay more for fresh local produce and she would be willing to spend even more than \$1.50 at the farmers' market for an item priced \$1.00 at the super market to support local farmers. She also tried to support local farmers because, "it's a hard life," and she has a family connection to farming.

Why go to the farmers' market?

Questionnaire participants were asked to rank the importance of the following reasons for attending the Holland farmers' market: to buy local food, fresh food, inexpensive food, organic food, or to socialize. Of the respondents who are seniors, 76.2% ranked "to buy local

food" as the most important reason for attending the farmers market; 91.3% ranked "to buy fresh food" as most important; 12% said "to buy inexpensive food"; 8% marked "to buy organic food"; and 6% said that socializing was a most important reason for going to the Holland farmers' market.

Participants were also asked to rank the following advantages to using the Holland farmers' market: product quality, product freshness, support of local economy, variety, and value/prices. Product quality and product freshness were both ranked most important by 100% of the seniors responding to the question. Support of the local economy was ranked most important by 64.1%, and variety was most important to 63.6% of seniors. Values/prices were ranked as a most important advantage by 43.8% of the senior citizens.

The two seniors who were interviewed agreed that a lower price was not among the reasons for attending the farmers' market. Interview volunteers, Patricia and Joyce, were more concerned with the freshness and quality of the produce as well as supporting the local farmers and local economy. For Joyce, the farmers' market is part of what "helps make the city work." She considers it to be as much an important part of the community as school and church. Patricia and Joyce both found socializing to be a somewhat important reason for attending the farmers' market. Patricia said it was easy to lose track of time and get lost in conversation at the market because there is always someone you know there.

Methodology 2

The Warm Friend

Most important to this discussion is to first define the term, *access*. What does it mean to have access to something? According to the Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary Tenth Edition (2002) *access* is a. "permission, liberty or

ability to enter, approach, communicate with or pass to and from." *Access* is also defined as b. "freedom or ability to obtain or make use of." It is also crucial to mention that for the purpose of this study, I have added to the definition that in order for something to be defined as accessible, it must also be easy to approach, obtain, or use.

The second part of the research was conducted at The Warm Friend on 8th Street in Holland, Michigan, located 0.37 miles from the local farmers' market. The Warm Friend is an assisted care facility located in downtown Holland. There are about 75 residents who, unlike nursing home residents, are fairly independent and free to come and go. Seniors at The Warm Friend have their own apartments, many with access to kitchen facilities, but meal plans are available to all residents. Residents pay a \$1,500 non-refundable entrance fee and monthly rent based on the size of their apartments from a 131 sq. ft. single unit without a kitchen renting for \$605 per month or a 310 sq. ft. efficiency with a counter and sink for \$891 per month to larger apartments equipped with a kitchen. For example, a 500 sq. ft. one bedroom apartment rents for \$1,456 per month and an 800 sq. ft. two bedroom for \$1,845.

I developed a questionnaire for The Warm Friend community based on the field school's farmers' market research. The survey included many of the same demographic questions as well as questions which asked respondents what items they purchased most frequently and reasons for attending the farmers' market. It also asked if residents attended the farmers' market, and those who responded "no" to the question were asked why. Residents responding "yes" to the question were asked how they got to the farmers' market. Questionnaire respondents were also asked if they accessed local grocery stores and/or local restaurants and how they accessed them.

Questionnaires along with two flyers asking volunteers to fill out the questionnaire were dropped off to the front desk of The Warm Friend. After one week, I called to check on the progress and found that no one had yet responded to the offer. For that reason, I set up an appointment for the next week to spend time at the facility to see if I could get people to respond to the survey. By the following week, one person had responded to the questionnaire. I then spent two hours sitting outside the common dining room and obtained one more response.

The week after, I decided on a new strategy and went to the facility's coffee room in the late afternoon. There I found more people were willing to fill out questionnaires. Some residents' eye sight prevented them from filling out the questionnaire which was remedied by my reading the questions and marking the responses. In total, eleven residents at The Warm Friend filled out the questionnaire and one resident agreed to be interviewed, although that interview has not yet occurred.

Results and Discussion 2

The Warm Friend Questionnaire

Who lives at The Warm Friend? (N=11)
Both men and women were equally likely to fill out questionnaires at The Warm Friend. There were five people who marked their gender as male; five people marked female; and one person did not respond to the question. Seniors at The Warm Friend tended to be older than the seniors at the farmers' market who were more likely to be between 55 and 64 years old. None of The Warm Friend's seniors were younger than 65 years old. Eight of the eleven respondents were over 84 years old, two seniors were in the 75-83 age range, and only one senior was recorded in the 65-74 age range.

The question of race or ethnicity identity was omitted from the questionnaire, and I did not ask for any additional information or materials regarding the racial/ethnic make-up of this group. This decision was based on the wide variety of responses on the farmers' market questionnaire, the fact that the responses did not coincide with the census data, and my primary purpose which was to look at the access issues of people 55 years and older.

Education

The educational background of the residents at The Warm Friend was varied. One senior left school in the eighth grade to help the family earn money, and another person marked that they had some high school training. Four senior citizens had high school diplomas, and two of the seniors had some college training. Three people in this group had post graduate degrees and there were no respondents with bachelor's degrees.

Income

As was expected, income was much more difficult to assess. A sample questionnaire was sent to the manager at The Warm Friend in order to get permission to distribute the questionnaires at the facility. He mentioned the only problem residents seemed to have with the questionnaire was the question regarding income levels. Many residents did not want to reveal their income and were informed that any question they felt uncomfortable with they could avoid answering. Three residents responded to the question on income. One resident made less than \$15,000 annually; one marked the \$31,000-\$45,000 income range; and another responded annual income of more than \$91,000. There were some residents who could not respond to the question because the children of the family had taken over the financial responsibilities.

Do residents of The Warm Friend use the local farmers' market?

When asked, "Do you attend the Holland farmers' market?" three seniors responded "yes." Two of the respondents accessed the market by walking, and the third had a daughter drive him to the market. In this group there were two males and the other senior omitted the question on gender. Two seniors were in the 75-83 age group and one was over 84 years old.

Seniors responding "yes" to attending the Holland farmers' market were also asked what they liked about the market. One senior wrote that it was reminiscent of the European open-air markets and that they liked the color and freshness of products. Another senior wrote they liked "that it is there." Other responses were that the Holland farmers' market is a nice place and an alternative to the grocery store.

When asked to rank reasons for attending the farmers' market, only two of the three seniors responded. One said "to buy local food" was most important; both ranked "to buy fresh food" and "to buy inexpensive food" as most important. Buying organic food had one mark for being somewhat important and one for being not important; however, one respondent did say he was starting to become more interested in organic products and knew of local places where organic bagels and coffee were sold. Socializing was also ranked as being either somewhat important or not important as a reason for attending the Holland farmers' market.

There were eight seniors from The Warm Friend who said they did not attend the Holland farmer' market. When asked why they did not go to the local farmers' market, the seniors' responses included: too far to walk, no transportation, no need, do not cook, get three meals a day at The Warm Friend. One resident was legally blind

and would not be able to see the products at the farmers' market even if there was transportation there.

Do The Warm Friends' seniors access other Holland locations?

The questionnaire also asked residents if they accessed local restaurants and/or grocery stores. Nine seniors said they did go to local restaurants usually by walking, although a few had a son or daughter who would pick them up and take them out. There are several local restaurants within one block of The Warm Friend. Seniors were also asked if they accessed local grocery stores which are not within walking distance of the assisted care facility. One senior responded "yes" to the question also stating that the local Family Fare grocery store and Wal Mart were accessed through having his daughter drive. There were six responses of "no," but one senior said her daughter shopped at Meijer and brought groceries to her. Four residents did not respond to the question. It is important to note that The Warm Friend has a van that alternates every week to take residents to either the Family Fare or Meijer grocery stores. There is no van that goes to the farmers' market.

Conclusions

There are many senior citizens in the Holland, Michigan area who have access to and use the local farmers' market. These senior citizens tend to be younger seniors between the ages of 55 and 64 years old. They also are more likely to live in the city of Holland, the immediate surrounding areas of Park Township, Holland Township, and the city of Zeeland. The seniors attending the farmers' market also have attained high levels of education; more people 55 years and older have post graduate degrees than the younger group. Along with higher educations, the seniors in Holland have high income levels, the

majority making between \$76,000 and \$90,000 annually. According to Emrath (1999), "the wealth of seniors relative to younger households have increased considerably over recent decades" (p. 8).

It is clear from the questionnaires and interviews that the seniors who go to the local Holland farmers' market place great importance on freshness and on buying local food that supports the local farmers and local economy. This is evidenced by the seniors' responses that price was not a reason or advantage for using the farmers' market and the fact that they are willing to spend more money for products at the farmers' market.

Even though many seniors do have access to and do utilize the local farmers' market, there are many other senior citizens in Holland, Michigan, who are having trouble accessing and using the local farmers' market. As an example, even though the Holland farmers' market is located only 0.37 miles from The Warm Friend, residents are having trouble accessing it and, therefore, do not utilize the facility. Many residents have poor eyesight and several thought the walk was too far. It is important to note that there is an incline and residents would have to walk uphill to get from the farmers' market back to The Warm Friend.

The factors contributing to residents not going to the local farmers' market include poor health, decreased mobility, lack of transportation, and one element I had not previously thought of – lack of need. Many seniors ate meals at The Warm Friend, which has a staff who shops and cooks for the residents. Whether or not a low or fixed income kept seniors from attending the Holland farmers' market was not clear because many residents at The Warm Friend felt uncomfortable disclosing this information, and a few residents were not sure what their income was because family members were overseeing

finances. It was also difficult to assess social isolation. Questionnaires were distributed in common areas where the seniors tended to socialize and no one stated that they did not go to the farmers' market because they felt socially isolated or did not leave the facility. Distributing questionnaires to residents' rooms at a later date may help give me a better indication of whether or not some seniors suffer from social isolation.

For seniors who live at The Warm Friend and do use the local farmers' market, the preliminary results of this study support the conclusions of other researchers (Andreatta & Wickliffe, 2002) as well as the field school study. The few seniors from The Warm Friend who attended the farmers' market seemed to be concerned with fresh local produce. Price does seem to be more of a concern for this group than in the other two studies, possibly because the seniors are on a fixed income.

Figure 1

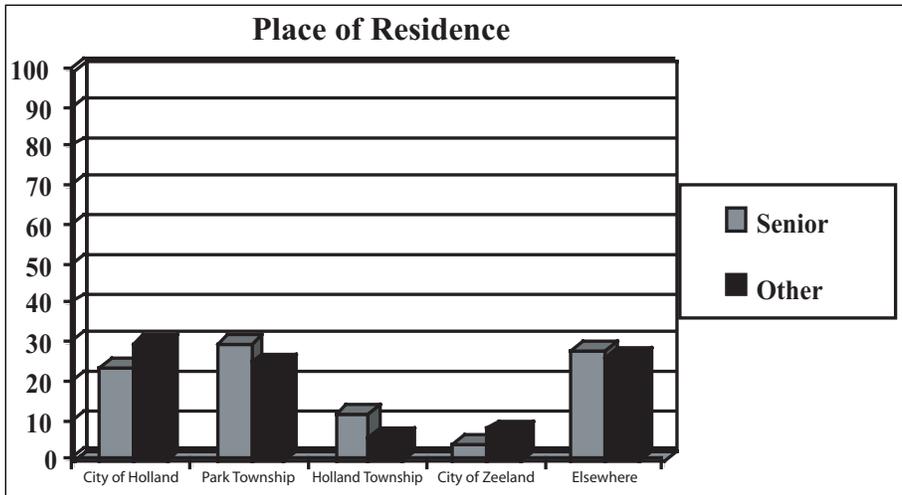


Figure 2

Racial Categories - United States	Racial Categories - Holland, Michigan
White (non-Hispanic) = 62.7%	White (non-Hispanic) = 55.9%
Hispanic/Latino = 12.5%	Hispanic/Latino = 22.2%
Black or African American = 12.3%	Black or African American = 2.5%
American Indian = 0.9%	American Indian = 0.6%
Asian = 3.6%	Asian = 3.6%
Native Hawaiian = 0.1%	Native Hawaiian = 0%
Other = 5.5%	Other = 12.4%
Two or More = 2.4%	Two or More = 2.7%
(U.S. Census, 2000)	(U.S. Census, 2000)

Figure 3

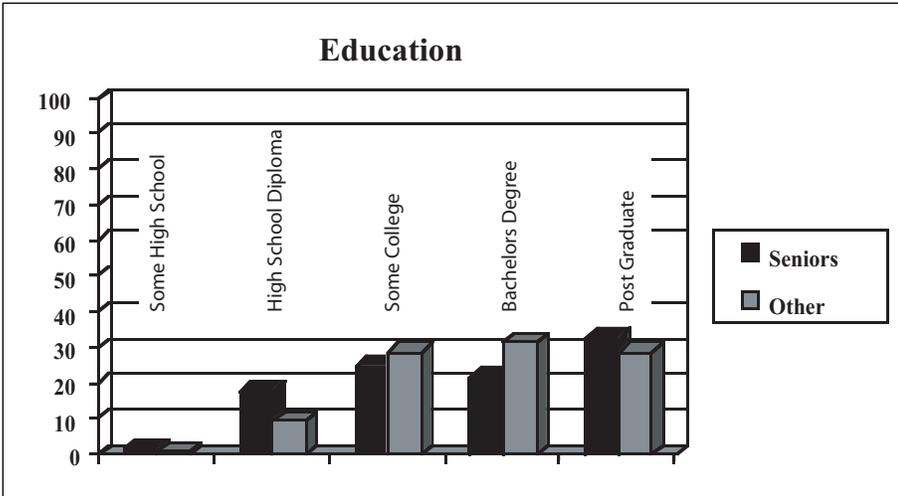
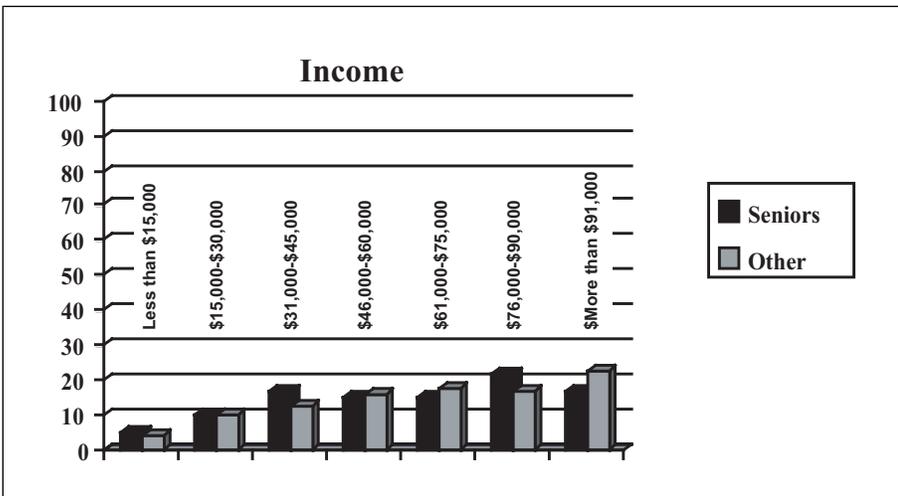


Figure 4



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