

Retirement Village or the General Community? Downsizing Choices of Older Australians

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Abstract: Of the 18% of Australians 50 years of age and older who moved between 2006 and 2011, it is estimated that around half had downsized by number of bedrooms. The majority downsized into private housing in the general community and around one fifth into retirement villages. This paper compares the demographic characteristics of these two groups, circumstances leading to moving, considerations made in their choice of accommodation, difficulty of the moving process and their satisfaction with the outcomes. It draws on AHURI funded research on Downsizing Amongst Older Australians published in 2014. Distinct differences are observed in the age profile and employment/retirement characteristics of the two groups and to a lesser extent in relationship status and household size. Those remaining in the general community were less likely to have previously been outright owners and much less likely to be living in multi-unit attached and apartment housing. Retirement village downsizers were more likely to cite home maintenance, illness or disability of self or partner and/or death of partner as circumstances leading to moving, but much less so retirement, children leaving home and relationship breakdown. Important considerations in housing choices of retirement village downsizers were again more likely to be low maintenance, desire for a smaller dwelling and proximity to shops, health and aged care services, whereas those remaining in the general community were more consumption orientated in their preferences. Retirement village downsizers found the moving process a little easier and more affordable. The vast majority of both groups were satisfied with their downsizing outcomes, but for those who were dissatisfied, building/village maintenance issues, dislike of cohort living and unexpected costs were more important reasons for retirement village residents than for those in the general community who were more concerned about affordability, neighbourhood/social issues, poor design, construction quality and inadequate space.

Introduction

The rapid ageing of the Australian population and the emphasis on ageing in place has focused attention on the importance of appropriate housing. However much of the existing housing stock is limited in its ability to support ageing in place. Where this is the case, older people are faced with important decisions as to whether to modify their existing home or move to more suitable accommodation, be this in a more appropriately designed dwelling in the general community or to a retirement village. As this paper will demonstrate, the majority of older people will age in place in the general community and only around 5% will move to retirement villages. However, retirement villages are an important option for those wishing to downsize. Understanding why older people make such choices is therefore important for considering the future housing needs of an ageing population.

This paper is an extension of research previously presented to the 2013 SOAC conferences on downsizing amongst older Australians by the authors based on an AHURI Funded project completed in early 2014 (Judd et al 2014). Whereas that paper looked more generally at circumstances leading to downsizing, considerations made in choices of accommodation, difficulties encountered in the moving process and satisfaction with outcomes, this paper compares two important groups of downsizers: those who moved to retirement villages and those who moved to other accommodation within the general community. While the majority of older people who downsized between 2006 and 2011 did so within the general community, one in five downsized into retirement villages (Judd et al 2014). This paper attempts to understand what factors lead to these two different choices and how the outcomes compare.

The Downsizing Amongst Older Australians study analysed data from three sources: 2006 and 2011 ABS Census data on older Australians and their housing; a national survey of 2,767 older Australians who had moved at least once since turning 50 years of age; and 60 in-depth interviews with survey respondents, 20 in each of three states (NSW, Victoria and South Australia) selected by purposive sampling to ensure representation by state, urban/rural location, age cohort and single/couple households. This paper

focusses on the quantitative findings from the national survey (presented in Tables 1-10) supplemented with selected quotations from the in-depth interviews.

Although it is recognized that the term downsizing can be used to refer to a broader range of housing adjustments (e.g. reductions in land size, housing value, decluttering and simply moving) for the purposes of this study downsizing is defined as moving to a smaller dwelling according to number of bedrooms. This is the only indicator of downsizing available from national ABS census data. Older Australians are regarded as those 50 years of age and older in order to include the important pre-retirement years when future housing needs may be being considered. Retirement villages are those age-restricted developments that operate under state government Retirement Village legislation and are typically occupied on a loan/lease basis involving an up-front payment and monthly fees for maintenance and other services. This excludes so called 'Seniors Living' private developments in NSW which are age restricted but without the management infrastructure of a retirement village and are occupied on a regular freehold basis.

Previous Studies

The majority of older Australians prefer to (and do) age in place in the general community. Olsberg and Winter's (2005) national survey of 6,789 Australians 50 years of age and over found that 64.6% preferred to age in place in their current home rather than move. Their main reasons were that it suited them in location (83.1%), comfort (75.2%) and financially (63.2%) or they wanted to stay near friends (34.7%), were emotionally attached (20.9%) or couldn't afford to move (17.2%). Thirty-five percent indicated that they may consider moving in the future, the most common reasons being moving to a smaller house (22.0%), to move location (16.9%), because of health or disability (15.1%) or downsizing to release money to live on (10.9%). In that study some anxiety was expressed regarding retirement villages with concern about the cost of housing and maintenance fees (Olsberg & Winters 2005). Earlier research by the lead author of this paper found that in the event of developing a disability or need for assistance, 91% of older people (55+) preferred to age in place in their current home with professional care services and 63% would consider moving to a self-care retirement village (Judd et al 2010).

Our analysis of 2006 and 2011 ABS Census data found that just 18% of Australians 50 years of age and over had moved within that five year period, and estimates (based on our survey findings) that around half (or 9% of all Australians 50+) were likely to have downsized (i.e. moved to a dwelling with fewer bedrooms) (Judd et al 2014). A recent study on downsizing by the National Seniors Productive Ageing Centre found that while 30% of people 50 and over were considering moving to a smaller dwelling, only 10% had done so within a five-year period. The most common reasons given for downsizing for those who had moved in the last five years were: not being able to physically maintain the home and/or yard (28.6%), the cost of maintaining the home and/or yard (27.1%), lifestyle (23.9%), needing a single-level house (16.9%), children moving out (13.8%) and death of spouse or partner (10.2%). (Adair et al 2014).

Contrary to public perceptions, the percentage of older Australians living in retirement villages is also small. According to data provided by the Retirement Village Association (RVA) to the Productivity Commission Inquiry on Caring for Older Australians (2011) only 5.3% of the population 65 and over lived in retirement villages though this varies somewhat between states. This was projected by the RVA to increase to 6.0% by 2016 and 7.2% by 2026. They also estimated that there were 1,870 retirement villages in Australia in 2011 containing 114,514 dwellings and housing over 160,000 residents (Productivity Commission 2011). A more recent investigation by Towart (2013) based on a range of data sources correlated with Census data identified over 2,000 Deferred Management Fee (DMF) villages in 2011, which did not include rental villages, with an average age of 78.7 years.

Stimson and McRrea had earlier noted that "...the takeup rate by retirees voluntarily deciding to relocate to a retirement village is very low" and that "...it is not until retirees reach their mid-70s that the takeup rate increases to approximately 5%, peaking at 7.6% for those aged 85- 94 years". (Stimson & Mc Crea, 2004:1453). Their study of the push and pull factors for moving to a retirement village identified four push factors:

1. “change in lifestyle: ...wanting more free time, more time to spend with other people...and wanting a lifestyle change.
2. maintenance: ...difficulty and cost of maintaining a home and garden, wanting a smaller home, wanting more free time, and having others move out of the home.
3. social isolation: ...the death of a spouse or partner, being lonely, and wanting to spend more time with people;
4. health and mobility: ...deteriorating health, the need for assistance, and no longer being able to drive a car.” (Stimson and McCrea 2004:1458-9)

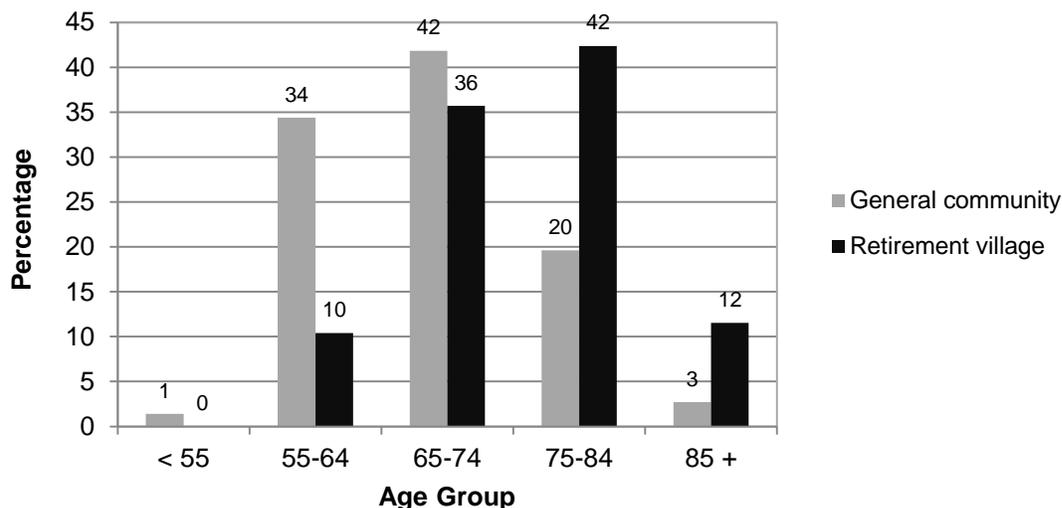
Three pull factors were also identified:

1. “built environment and affordability: ... a range of village attributes, including design and layout, site and size, services and facilities provided, staff and management, and affordability;
2. Location: ...access to public transport, proximity to social activities and recreational facilities, proximity to the coast or water, climate, and familiarity with the area from holidaying there;
3. Maintenance of existing lifestyle, and familiarity: ...the village being located close to friends and family, close to services being used before relocating, and familiarity with the area from having lived there.” (Stimson & McCrea 2004:1462)

Demographic Characteristics

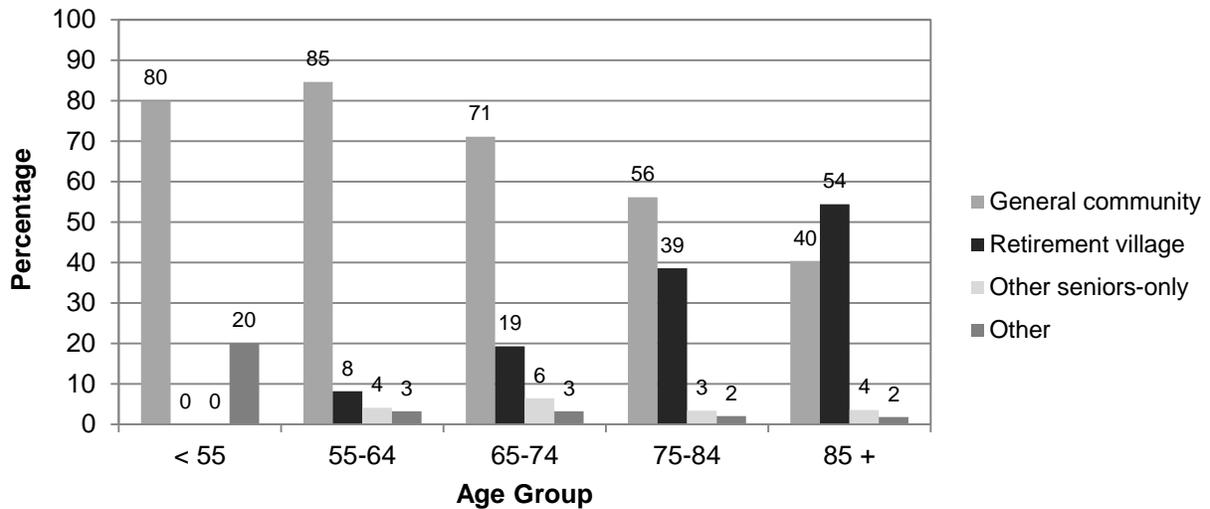
Of the 2,819 older Australians responding to our survey a total of 1,214 (43%) had downsized into a dwelling with fewer bedrooms. Of these, 71% had downsized within the general community and 21% had moved into a retirement village. Women (64%) were only slightly more likely to have moved to a retirement village than male respondents (61%). Single women (57%) were also only slightly more likely to have moved to a retirement village than those who had relocated within the general community (50%). However, there were marked differences in age characteristics. As Figure 1 illustrates, survey findings revealed that those living in the general community were comparatively younger than those in retirement villages, particularly in the two older cohorts. Only 10% of retirement village downsizers were aged 55-64 but this grew to 36% for those aged 65-74 and 42% for those aged 75-84% then declines to 12% for those aged 85 or over. For those who downsized into the general community the trend is the reverse with 34% aged 55-64, 42% aged 65-74 and only 20% aged 75-84. In other words a little over three quarters (77%) of those in the general community were younger than 75, and a little over half (54%) of those in retirement villages were aged 75 or older.

Figure 1: Age Characteristics



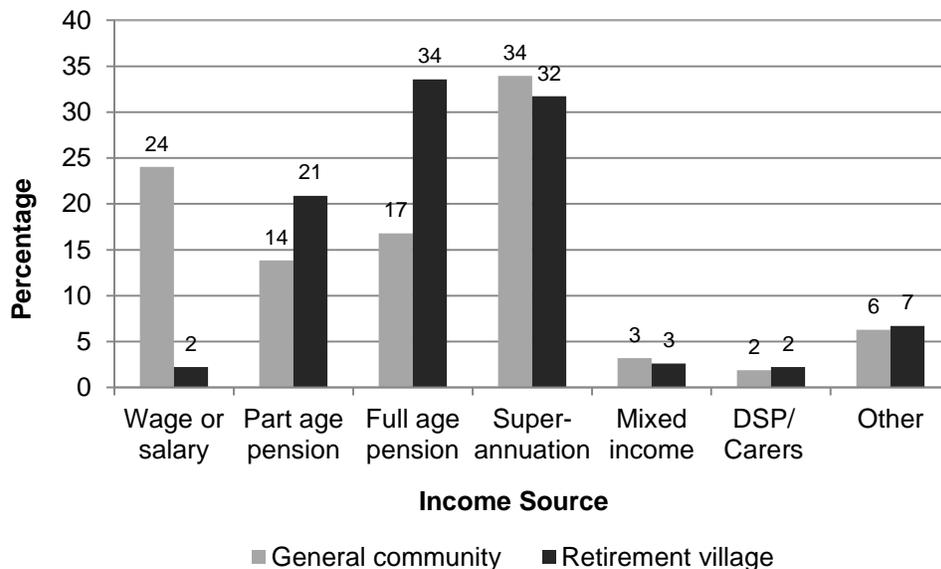
Another way of visualising the age characteristics of both groups of downsizers is to look at the percentage breakdown in each age cohort, as shown in Figure 2. The percentage who had downsized into retirement villages grows dramatically from a low 8% of 55-64 year olds to over half (54%) those aged 85 and over, with corresponding reductions of those who downsized within the general community.

Figure 2: Accommodation Type by Age Group



As would be expected therefore, the percentage of fully retired amongst those who moved to retirement villages (95%) was much higher than those in the general community (66%) of whom 16% were working part-time and 12% full-time. Likewise, as Figure 3 illustrates, a higher percentage of retirement village downsizers were on full or part age pensions. While wage or salary earners were much more prominent amongst those who had moved within the general community, around one third of both groups were self-funded retirees.

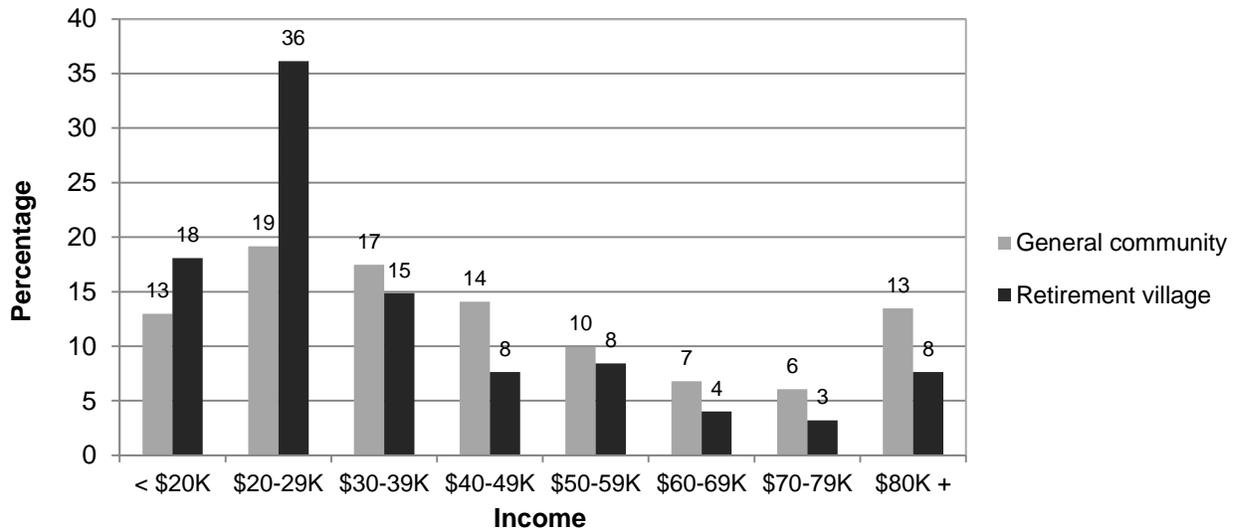
Figure 3: Source of Income



The age difference between the two groups is also reflected in household income (Figure 4), where there are substantially more retirement village downsizers in the lowest two income groups which correspond

with the single and couple age pension. It is also evident in the higher percentage of those in all \$30K and over age groups living in the general community who are more likely to be still working.

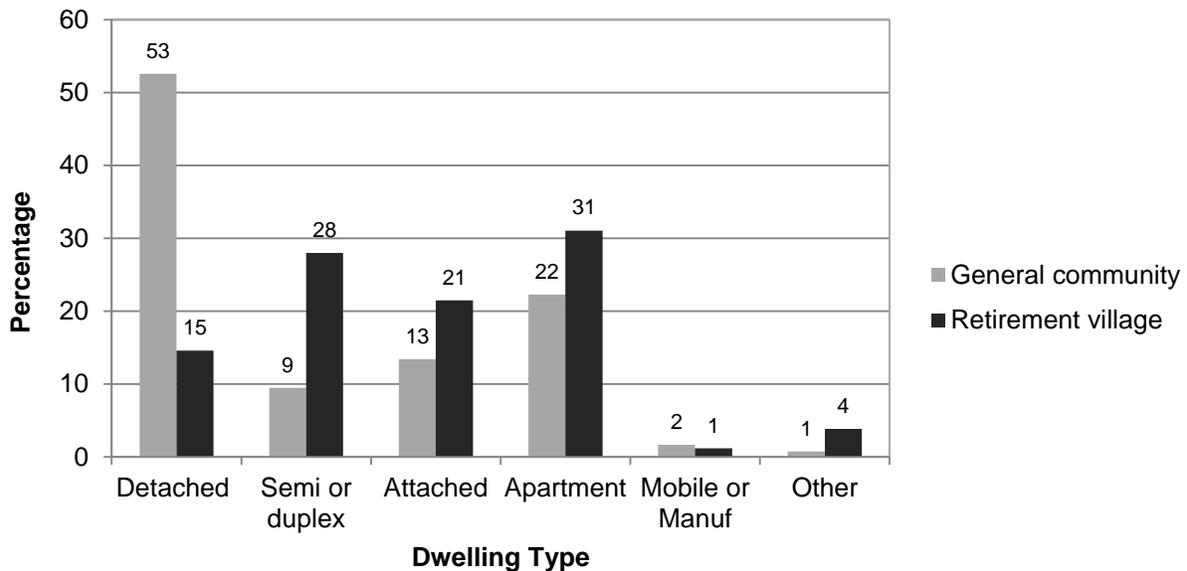
Figure 4: Household Income



Dwelling Characteristics

Figure 5 illustrates our survey findings regarding the differences in dwelling types between the two groups of downsizers. While for both groups detached housing was the dominant previous dwelling type (92% for general community dwellers and 87% for retirement villages), detached housing continued to account for around half of those who downsized within the general community, and medium density and apartment forms dominated more amongst those in retirement villages.

Figure 5: Dwelling Type

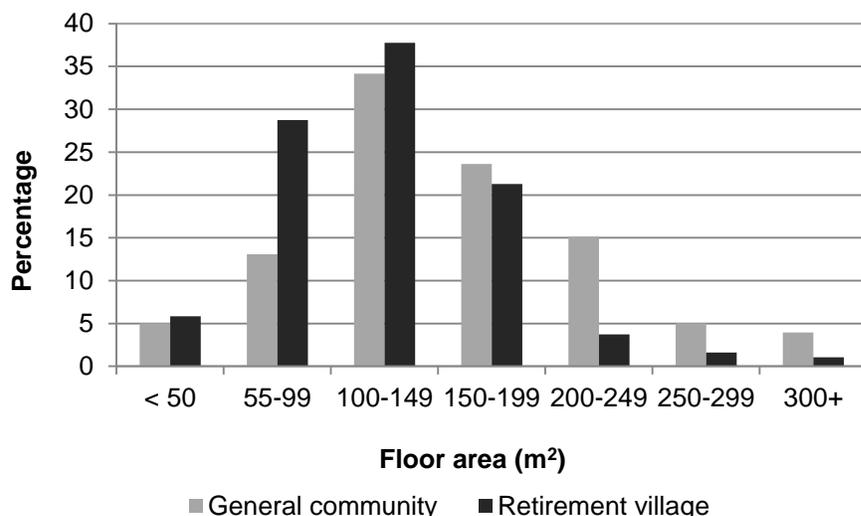


Tenure also differed markedly between the two groups, with the majority (76%) of those who downsized within the general community being outright owners, and an additional 12% were owners with a mortgage. The dominant tenure for retirement village residents was the loan/lease model common

amongst Australian villages (67%) with 26% stating their tenure as outright owners; however the latter may be a perception held by some on loan/lease tenure.

When comparing the size of dwellings in terms of number of bedrooms, the survey found that around three quarters of retirement village respondents lived in dwellings with two or fewer bedrooms and only a quarter with three or more bedrooms, over half of those in the general community were in dwellings with three or more bedrooms and a little less than half in dwellings of two bedrooms or less. This was also reflected in the estimates of floor area provided by respondents (Figure 6) with retirement village residents represented much more in dwellings between 55 and 99 m², slightly more than their community dwelling counterparts in 100-149 m² dwellings, but noticeably less in the larger dwelling categories.

Figure 6: Estimated Floor Area



Circumstances Leading to Downsizing

When asked in the survey what the circumstances were that led to them downsizing, a number of differences between the two groups were found, as indicated in Figure 7. Amongst those in retirement villages, inability to maintain the house and/or garden and a desire for a change in lifestyle stood out as the two almost equally most common motivations. One retirement village resident's comments represent well the views about the burden of maintenance as a reason for moving.

I think probably it's getting rid of a whole lot of burdens first of all I guess. I hate gardening. I'm getting to the point where I'm not a good handy[man] - I'm not all that, I suppose I can do some handyman, but yeah, getting rid of the burden of home ownership in the full sense of the word. Having to repair, having to paint, having to do the garden...but the downsizing is in terms of the property and the burden (RV couple 65-69, urban NSW)

An important lifestyle change following retirement could be the ability to travel which can influence the choice of dwelling type, as for this couple who had downsized from a detached dwelling to an apartment in the general community.

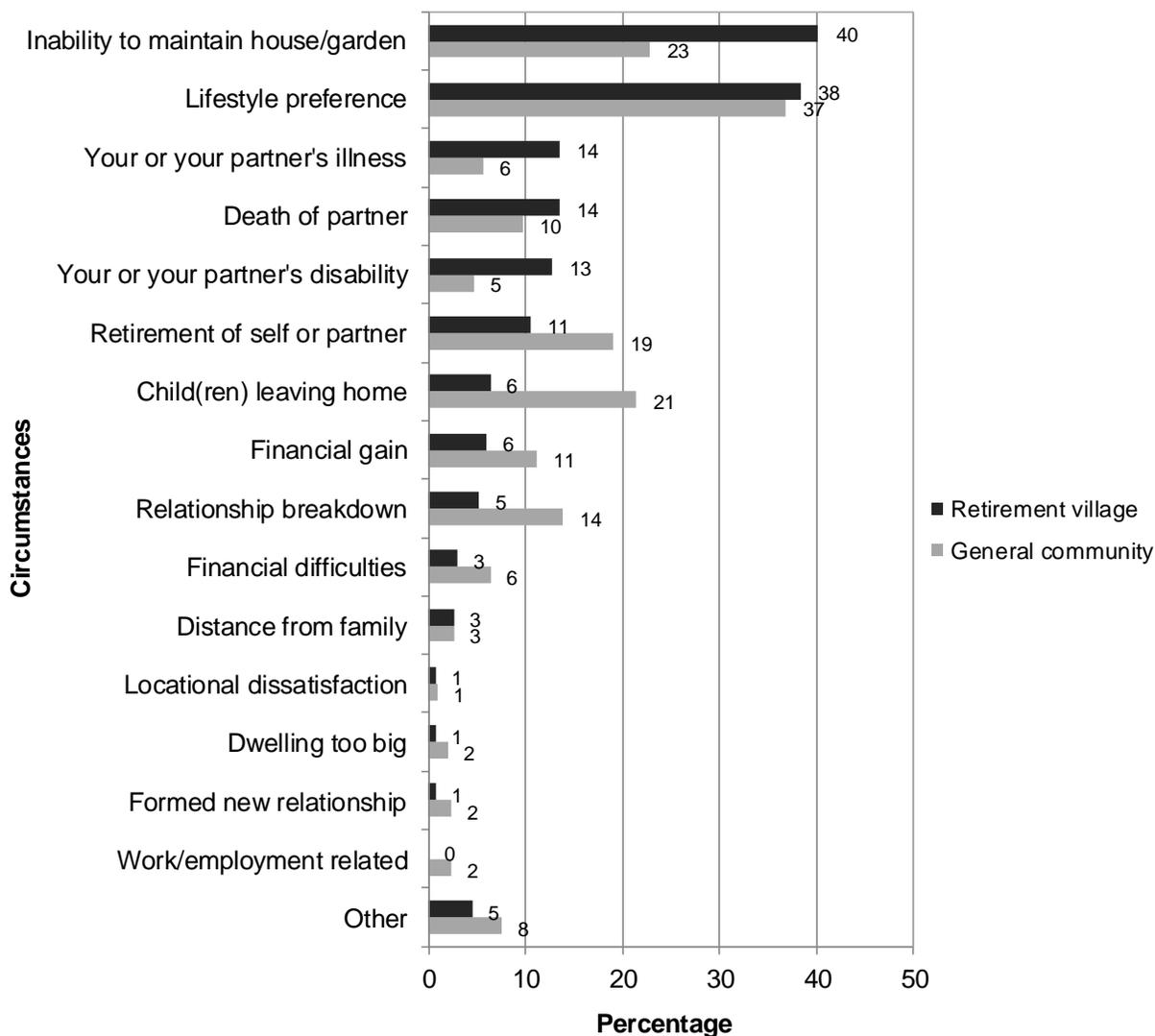
It was eight years ago that we moved and we didn't need such a big house and when we're travelling a lot you've got a responsibility of a house whereas in an apartment you just close your front door and go.(GC couple 65-69, urban NSW)

It was evident from the interviews that these two motivations (maintenance burden and lifestyle change) can be closely related since an important component of lifestyle change can be reducing the maintenance burden to enable more time for other post-retirement activities, as illustrated in the comments of this retirement village downsizer.

It was a job to cope with all of the things you had to do towards the end. The lawn mowing and the gardening, getting gutters clean,...painting forever. All of those things, and there just wasn't time to do the things you really wanted to do. Getting away from the place was a bit of a problem at times. You'd come back feeling a bit sad that you've got to spend two or three weeks to sort things out. (RV couple 65-69, urban NSW)

For those in the general community, however, as also shown in Figure 7, lifestyle preference stood out as the singularly most prominent reason for moving and maintenance was much less important than for those in retirement villages. Children leaving home, retirement and relationship breakdown were also much more prominent motivations for those in the general community than in retirement villages.

Figure 7: Circumstances Leading to Downsizing



These circumstances were explored in more depth in the interviews. One respondent explained how children leaving home had prompted downsizing within the general community.

[Our son] came back a year after quite unexpectedly and kick-started a uni course that he'd put his name down for, which meant he had to stay in the old family home for another three years. So

rather than move and have him unsettled even more so, we thought, well it might be best for us to stay around so that he can complete his uni degree and then things will work out differently. So that's what we did. We waited until he finished his university degree and then his lady friend came along. He's married now so he left only about a year or two after the uni degree was completed. Then there was absolutely no real reason for us to stay there. (#30, DS, Male, 60–64, couple, owner, urban, SA)

Retirement was a key factor for this couple.

So when [my] business was closed and I retired, there was no real reason to keep me in that area from a business perspective. (GC couple 60–64, urban, SA)

Another couple, living in the general community, explained how relationship breakdown had been an important reason for downsizing.

My marriage broke up shortly after I retired...I thought it's just too big for one person and...I didn't want to see it through a third marriage. (GC couple 75–79, regional, SA)

Amongst the less prominent reasons given in the survey there were also some marked differences between the two groups. Negative shocks such as illness, death of a partner and disability were more likely to precipitate downsizing for those who moved to retirement villages than those in the general community. The following interviewees explained how a sudden injury and illness precipitated downsizing into a retirement village for them.

...I had a fall which broke a few bones in my back, so 100 acres was a bit much, although we had greatly enjoyed that 14 years, both of us. ...[my wife] had been ill and basically we had stairs and she was immobile up the stairs at one stage because she was ill. I'd also fallen on the stairs twice, so I thought, no, we've actually got to get - we've got to look after ourselves better and basically be in a place that's flat. So that was another important issue for us. (RV couple 65-69, urban, NSW)

What is interesting in the survey findings is that financial difficulties were not a significant driver of downsizing for either group - though somewhat more so for those in the general community than in retirement villages. In fact, financial gain was more of a motivator, particularly for those who downsized within the general community.

These findings to a large extent reflect the different age profiles of the two groups. Clearly, difficulties with maintenance are likely to increase with age as is the likelihood of illness, the death of a partner and disability, and the focus of the younger and generally more able cohort is more likely to be on issues such as leaving home, retirement and relationship breakdown. There may also be a generational factor here given that the younger cohort were of the baby boomer generation whose expectations regarding lifestyle and housing may be quite different from the older generation (Quine & Carter 2006).

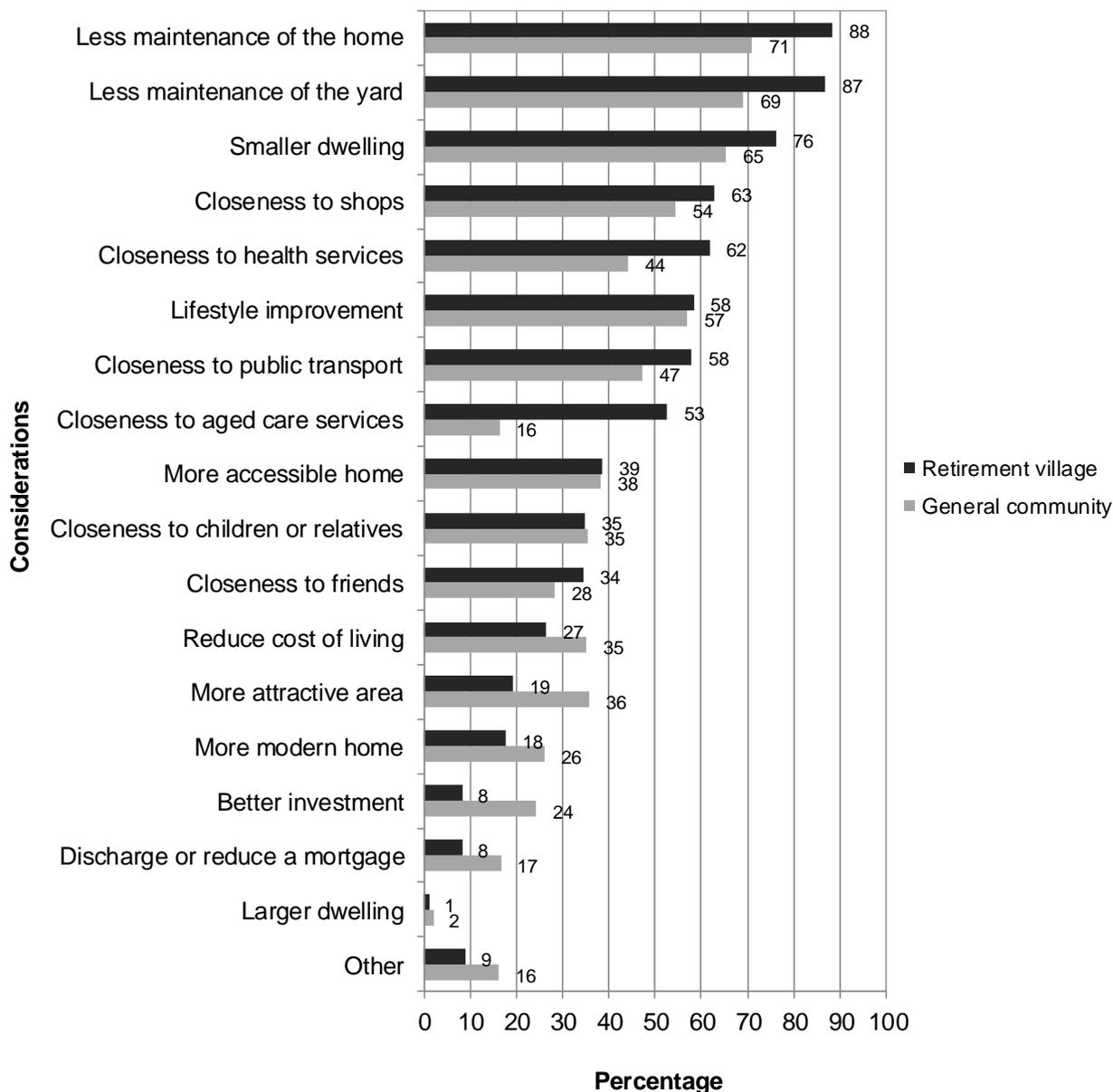
The Downsizing Process

Survey respondents were asked to rate the importance of a range of considerations in searching for the dwelling they had downsized into. The results shown in Figure 8 are an aggregate of those indicating 'important' or 'very important' for each item, and reveal some differences between the two groups. Although the order of importance was similar for both general community and retirement village dwellers, retirement village downsizers emphasised more the importance of less maintenance of both home and the yard, having a smaller dwelling and closeness to shops, health services, public transport, family and friends. The importance of location was emphasized by the following retirement village interviewee.

We decided to come nearer to - yes, we were having quite a few hospital appointments then. We were coming from [regional town] to [the city] which would be about 80 km each way. So we decided to come up nearer to town. ...[T]here was a bus outside the door. Now there's about two a week. There's Woolworths just straight down the road that's not, as you know, is not too difficult

to walk to. ...There are other shopping centres in close proximity. All right - yes, facilities are available. Hospitals are not too far away. (RV couple 80-84 urban SA)

Figure 8: Important Considerations in Downsizing

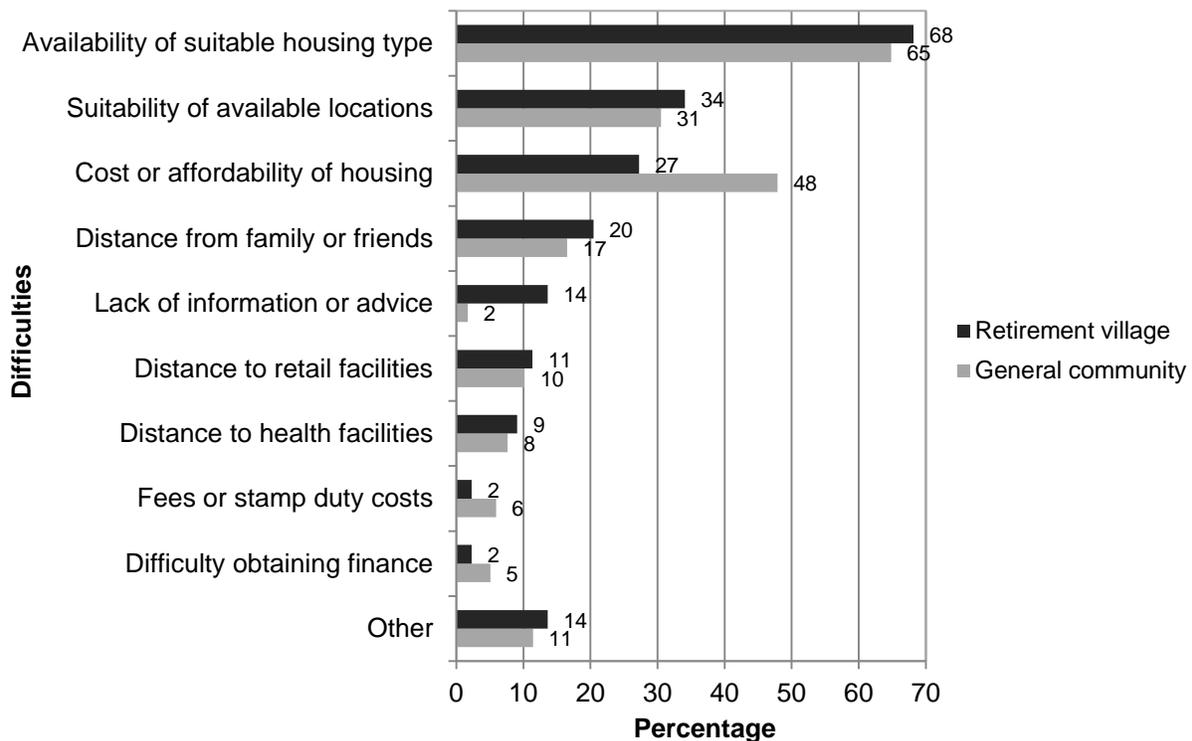


For those who had moved within the general community, the survey found there was a greater importance placed on consumption considerations - whether in terms of reducing the cost of living and/or discharging or reducing a mortgage or moving to a more attractive area, a more modern home or representing a better investment. This was also explained by the following interviewee.

That's another reason we moved here, because we could see that there was some very good potential for capital gains. Whereas all the other suburbs in the same area—we're in the Inner West here but if you went say to the Inner South or the Inner East—very expensive areas. The land would have cost us probably another \$100 000—this house would have been another \$80,000 to \$100,000 more... (GC couple 60-64 urban SA)

In terms of how easy or difficult survey respondents found the downsizing process, those who had moved to retirement villages found it somewhat easier with a higher 83% finding it 'easy' or 'very easy' compared to 72% of those in the general community. As indicated in Figure 9, the difficulties encountered by the remainder were generally similar in both groups, with a few exceptions.

Figure 9: Difficulties Encountered in the Downsizing Process



For both groups in the survey 'availability of suitable housing type' was by far the most common difficulty encountered along with 'suitability of available locations'. For the following interviewees, difficulty finding an appropriate dwelling and location went hand in hand, and a retirement village was not their first choice.

Well we'd been looking for about 10 years, hadn't we, prior to [unclear]. What we were looking for was a block about this size, a dwelling rather like this that we could buy. Our own. We couldn't find such a thing. Doesn't exist. We looked as far up the central coast. So that what this retirement village offers was the next best thing. We'd have gone on - as I mentioned before, you can't find anything like this out there (RV Couple 75-79, Sydney)

Some in the general community also had found it difficult to find a suitable dwelling.

It took us two years to find this apartment...we looked at lots of properties. (GC Couple 65-69) couple, owner, urban, NSW)

Survey respondents who had downsized within the general community found 'cost or affordability of housing' much more of a difficulty than their retirement village counterparts. For the following interviewed couple, selling up and moving involved unforeseen costs.

Selling the house was a difficult one, because it was right at the trough of the real estate market ...So we didn't get the price that we expected to get, and also, we had to wait four months to make the sale. (GC, Female, 85+ urban, VIC)

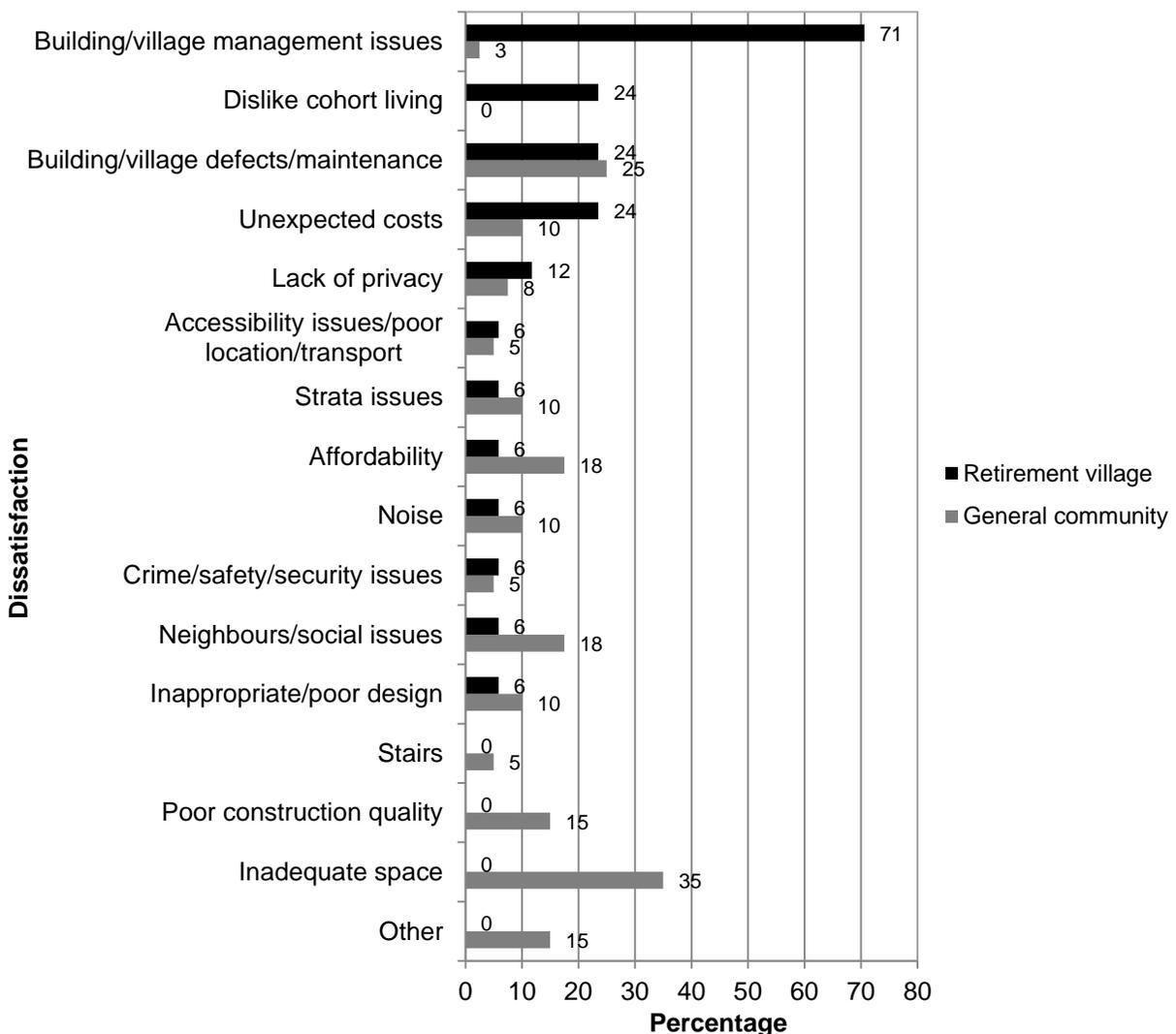
'Distance from family and friends' was another difficulty faced by a similar number from both groups in the survey. Of the less common difficulties, 'lack of information or advice' was much more of a problem for retirement village downsizers, while fees and stamp duties and difficulty obtaining finance were more problematic for a small percentage of those in the general community. As one interviewee explained:

There are other expenses in selling houses—[Stamp] Duty, Agent's fees and so on—and then removal fees. It's all part of that whole process. ...I paid a monthly fee in storage while the furniture was in storage. So, that was another cost. Actually, that was a cost I wasn't really prepared for. I was hoping it wouldn't be there as long, but there's nothing you can do about that.
(GC Single Male 60–64, regional NSW)

Outcomes of Downsizing

The survey found that the level of satisfaction with housing outcomes was high for both groups with 92% either 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' for general community downsizers and 90% for those in retirement villages. For the small number who were 'dissatisfied' or 'very dissatisfied' reasons for their dissatisfaction differed considerably for the two groups as shown in Figure 10.

Figure 10: Reasons for Dissatisfaction



For those in retirement villages the primary cause of dissatisfaction was 'village management issues' followed by a dislike of cohort living, issues around village defects and maintenance, unexpected costs and to a lesser extent lack of privacy. A somewhat extreme example of poor management-resident relations was cited by one couple who were interviewed.

[The management] opposed the formation of the residents' committee right from the start, quite vigorously, but we went ahead anyway and over the last three years the achievements we've been able to get would not have occurred unless we had a...a residents' committee. Basically we had to force [management] to make some significant improvements to the place and we also took them to the tribunal about one issue as well, which of course was the first time in their whole history anyone's taken them to a tribunal, and they were extremely, extremely upset because we besmirched their name. So we're actually quite - we were quite assertive in basically looking after the interests of residents. [RV couple 65-69 urban NSW]

For another couple a poorly considered kitchen design for older people required considerable modification and expense.

Well the kitchen - we've actually had the kitchen substantially modified. The kitchen's not a well-designed kitchen. Basically the ovens are below the desk. ...All the cupboards here were open... cupboards. But we put the drawers in. On top, yeah, firstly for elderly people can't get to the top cupboards. We can, we've got a ladder. The oven point here, ...there's no power point on the bench...so this is pretty awful...and we've had, we along with many others have had them modified, at our own expense. (RV Couple 65-69 urban NSW)

Figure 10 also shows that the most common concern of those who had downsized in the general community was 'inadequate space' which at first sight seems surprising, given the typically larger size of their dwellings as indicated in Figure 6. However this was a small number of respondents and possibly represented those who for affordability reasons had moved to a dwelling considered too small for their needs. They were also similar to those in retirement villages in terms of their concerns about 'building defects and maintenance', but more concerned about affordability, 'neighbours and social issues' in their neighbourhood, 'poor construction quality', 'strata title issues' and 'inappropriate or poor design'. Some of these concerns were clearly related to multi-unit, strata title developments.

Discussion and Conclusions

This comparison of retirement village and general community downsizers has found that retirement village downsizers are much more likely to be aged 75 or older, marginally more likely to be female and single, more likely to be recipients of a full- or part-pension, and hence have lower household incomes. Those who moved to retirement villages were more likely to live in medium density and apartment housing types, in loan/lease tenure and more likely to live in smaller dwellings of two bedrooms or less.

Motivations for downsizing into a retirement village are much more likely to be a combination of the maintenance burden of the existing dwelling and lifestyle preference - factors which can be closely intertwined. For those who downsized within the general community lifestyle reasons were by far the most important. Downsizing into a retirement village is also more likely to be precipitated by the onset of illness or disability, or by the death of a partner than for those downsizing in the general community whose motivations are more likely to be prompted by children leaving home, retirement or relationship breakdown. Financial difficulties are not a major driver for either group, but more so for those in the general community than retirement villages. Many of these differences can be explained by the different age profiles of the two groups consistent with Stimson & McCrea's (2004) observations. The importance of maintenance and lifestyle factors also confirms similar emphases in the work of Stimson & McCrae (2004), Olsberg & Winters (2005).

The major differences in the process of moving for the two groups were the greater importance those downsizing into retirement villages placed on low maintenance, a smaller dwelling and proximity to services, especially aged care services, and the greater emphasis on consumption factors amongst those who moved within the general community. Again, such differences can largely be explained by the age

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characteristics of the two groups and the implications for health and ability levels. Retirement village residents also generally found the downsizing process easier.

Availability of a suitable housing type and location were two of the most common difficulties similarly encountered by both groups in the downsizing process, though affordability and associated housing costs were more of a problem for those in the general community, whereas lack of information and advice was more of a problem for retirement village downsizers. This has implications for housing and planning policy and for the housing industry given that the older population is a growing market sector. It also suggests a need for better housing information and advice services for older people, as has been implemented through the collaboration between COTA and the Department of Commerce - Consumer Protection in Western Australia (Airey 2013, COTAWA 2015).

For those few who were dissatisfied with their choice, there were some sharp differences between the two groups with retirement village downsizers emphasising village management issues and unexpected costs, while those who had downsized in the general community noted inadequate space, poor construction quality, neighbourhood social issues and, to a less extent noise and strata title issues - much of which relates to multi-unit living. Both groups were equally dissatisfied with building defects and maintenance.

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