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Sense of Safety and Exploring Accessibility with Aging People in Finland



Abstract

The article explores how accessibility from the perspective of aging people might influence their sense of safety. First, the definition of accessibility, sense of safety and other concepts related to this article were defined. Then, the case of the practical study carried out in Finland is introduced with the first level of results.

Keywords: accessibility, elderly people, sense of safety

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INTRODUCTION

This paper explores how accessibility from the perspective of aging people might influence their sense of safety. First, the definition of accessibility, sense of safety and other concepts related to this article are defined. Then, the case of the practical study carried out in Finland is introduced with the first level of results. This paper introduces how the authors have explored accessibility. In 2024 they will continue in Poland and Spain, and again in Finland.

Accessibility can be viewed from many perspectives. The most typical point of view is accessibility related to movement and the physical environment. However, accessibility is a broad concept. It is often divided into the following areas: accessibility related to movement, seeing, hearing, understanding, and communication (Esteettömyys 2023). Accessibility enables the participation of people with different abilities and capabilities (Naik 2016, 23). The examination of the concept is influenced, for example, by the cultural and professional background and the target group it represents (Persson, Åhman, Yngling & Gulliksen 2015, 2). In relation to accessibility, universal design is defined as designing services and the environment in such a way that they meet the needs of most target groups, regardless of abilities, age, health, or disability (Story, Mueller & Mace 1998:11).

Accessibility has become increasingly understood not only as a medical issue, but a social and political theme impacting the wider community (Barnes 2011, 55). Accessible services are available in an accessible society (City of Espoo 2020, 6). While looking at accessibility from the perspective of availability of services and universal design, it is important to understand that the law supports this in Finland. According to the Finnish Constitution (§6), everyone is equal. The Constitution emphasizes that gender, age, origin, language, religion, belief, opinion, state of health, disability, or any other reason must not cause inequality. The Constitution emphasizes equality, and at the same time, it also shows that it is essential to act to promote it. (Finnish Constitution § 6).

When areas and services are accessible, the different areas, as well as the physical, social, and psychological environment, services, and access to information are provided in such a way that every person, regardless of their characteristics, can act equally compared to other actors (City of Espoo 2020, 6). For some people, their disability is permanent. At the same time, it is a temporary and transient situation for some. Many people at some point in their lives may experience a disability, for example, after breaking their ankle due to heavy loads or due to poor lighting. These special situations can produce physical, sensory, and cognitive challenges. (Story, Mueller & Mace 1998, 12.) Challenges related to accessibility can repeatedly appear when conflicts arise between the product or service, its user, and the environment (Persson et al. 2015, 21).

Accessibility can be related to the functional and built environment. However, it is also linked to communication and, for example, the intelligibility of communication in a service situation (Ristolainen et al. 2021, 229). Accessibility increases the comprehensibility of information and the opportunity to participate in decision-making, which impacts the person herself (City of Espoo 2020, 6). Accessibility is the opportunity for individuals and communities to access safety and reliable services (Singru & Lindfield 2016, 20).

Accessibility refers to both the services and the built environment being accessible from every user's point of view; they are functional, safe, and pleasant to use (City of Espoo 2020, 6). However, it is challenging to design services and facilities that are suitable for everyone. Therefore, services are often designed as if the user were an average person. (Story, Mueller & Mace 1998, 11.)

Accessibility enables people to be independent and participate, and it supports equality. It is worth noting that it should not be an exception and a special arrangement but rather a way of thinking and an attitude. (Finnish institute for health and welfare 2023.) The accessibility directive of the European Union supports the idea of equality. According to the European Accessibility Act (EU Directive 2019/882), the European Accessibility Act aims to:

increase the availability and free movement of accessible products and services by harmonising relevant requirements in the Member States. . .

make products and services more accessible and, in this way, make society more inclusive and facilitate independent living for persons with disabilities.

In this article, the concept of accessibility refers to an environment that offers equal services and physical areas that take into consideration different disabilities and ages. The environment is viewed as inclusive and promotes the sense of safety.

On the other hand, one of the fundamental psychological needs for people is the sense of safety. It improves the quality of life when the sense of safety is at a level that satisfies the person. Collins and Guidry (2018) "define sense of safety as feelings of relative security that residents have about their communities. This relative security informs the ways in which individuals and communities respond to such feelings (Ferraro & Grange 1987)." The authors of this article agree with this definition but understand the sense of safety as experienced also by outsiders in different residential and urban areas, not limiting it to residents in these areas.

Furthermore, safety is an important issue in urban areas because these areas have more residents than before, bringing various problems and risks causing safety issues to the forefront. According to Collins and Guidry 2018, people feeling unsafe in their own residential areas tend to be less active outside, e.g., walking and can have also different mental problems, can become isolated, leading into loneliness and extraction from activities in the area to protect oneself. Väliniemi-Laurson and Rönnberg (2019) point out that the safety of a residential area in a city is the most important factor contributing to satisfaction of living. A risk in an urban area is fluid, meaning that for one person the risk can be very threatening and big, while for another the risk is minimal. Sense of safety is a subjective feeling a person experiences, and the feeling can change rapidly and in different situations. Collins and Guidry (2018) argue that researchers have pointed out how sense of safety is now a grave social problem.

To influence the sense of safety experienced by people and quality of life, it is important to take safety issues into consideration when developing city areas. Rastyapina and Korosteleva (2016, 2042) point out that it is essential to take safety issues into consideration when developing urban areas in a sustainable manner. Thus, they refer to urban safety as an area that has been constructed and enables safety in the lives of the residents based on different issues. However, Rastyapina and Korosteleva (2016) explain that urban safety is not a sense of safety of an individual or for the whole residential group only, because it is made up of different solutions that are required of various

issues and created in this residential area. In the studies the authors are carrying out in 2023 and 2024, attention is focused on both accessibility and sense of safety in urban areas.

The authors are working as experts in the project SAFE (Sustainable Accessible Future Environments), which is running during 2022-2025 and is funded by the European Union. The focus of SAFE is to increase the awareness of accessibility, diversity, and inclusion in selected urban areas, promoting the right to feel safe in cities, including people with fewer opportunities, disabilities, and different cultural and socio-economic backgrounds in the EU.

Next, this article discusses the methods used in the practical study carried out in 2023 with students at Laurea University of Applied Sciences.

METHODS EMPLOYED IN THE STUDY

A practical study was organized and carried out in collaboration with five student teams of the Sector social care work students. The students study at Laurea University of Applied Sciences, and they conducted the study in their Exerting Influence in the Social Care course where they conducted studied accessibility of services and environments with elderly people. The studies took place mainly outside in the following areas: Tapiola and Espoon Keskus in Espoo; the city center (especially the central station area), Pasila, Sörnäinen and Etu-Töölö in Helsinki; Lohja, Paimio, Parainen, Salo; Myyrmäki in Vantaa.

The student teams utilized customer participation walks with their participants in the study, the senior citizens, which followed the logic of Jane's walk (Jane's Walk). Jane's walk is an urban walking event that gathers people from the neighborhood together to get to know the local area or neighborhood on foot. In the walking events, you go around led by guides and get to know, e.g., to the nearby cultural sites, architecture, history and in general both the built and natural environment. Anyone interested can participate in Jane's walk. It's an easy and fun way to enable social and cultural activities. At the same time, it improves the interaction between different stakeholders and can improve the spirit of unity in the region. (Jane's walk 2023)

Involving citizens and consumers in city planning is a basic pillar of democracy. It also makes it possible to improve people's quality of life. Inclusion is based on two main reasons: to understand people's needs and to get feedback from both locals and visitors. (Kasala & Smatanova 2019, 1,7.) On the other hand, to carry out urban walks is a method where citizens and tourists collaborate together with experts. Experts can receive direct feedback from participants while walking around in the urban areas. It is seen that informal discussion encourages people to comment and share their opinions freely regarding planning and decision-making. (Husar, Ondrejicka & Scacchi 2020, 2.)

During the walks, the students and the elderly observed the areas carefully. Hirsjärvi, Remes and Sajavaara (2014, 214-215) categorize observation into two types, distinguished by the degree of regulation and the observer's involvement. In practical development work, it is crucial to acknowledge that the researcher's role typically oscillates between these two extremes. Systematic observation is a methodical process where observations are meticulously and systematically documented, with the observer acting as an external party who refrains from participating in the observed activities. Conversely, participatory observation is fully adaptable and aligns with natural activity, involving the observer in the activities.



Picture 1. Walking tour with seniors. Photo: Project SAFE.

RESULTS: FINDINGS FROM THE PARTICIPATORY WALK

This section introduces the results from the participatory walks that were carried out by five student teams together with senior citizens in 2023. The observations were documented in study reports by the student teams. Here the findings are summarized in different areas that need improvement, according to the elderly who participated in the walks of the study. The main findings were related to the following:

- adding signs
- safety
- services
- traffic arrangements
- comfort/usability
- lighting

Each of these needs and improvement areas is described in more detail below. The findings partly overlap for, as an example, one can note that improving the lighting also improves the feeling of safety.

Adding signs

Based on their observations, participants expressed the need to have more signposts outside. People can have difficulties when walking somewhere to reach a destination, and the elderly do not necessarily use mobile phone maps, for example, due to eyesight problems or possible lack of digital skills. Signs help people to orient themselves in surroundings where they might not find the right way otherwise. The destinations must also have clear signs. In addition, participants also wished that events and activities were visibly advertised. Services could be announced with a big poster in the window, which people would notice in an easy manner.

Safety

The participants pointed out that improving outdoor lighting would increase the sense of safety. They also wanted more guards, police, and CCTV cameras in areas to monitor and eliminate any drug trade. There were wishes that the metro ticket would be checked before entering the metro to strengthen the sense of safety. The participants wanted security guards to be present 24/7 in the subway corridor.

Services

Based on the results of the walks, participants hoped to centralize services and diversify the selection at joint service points. If services are in different areas and the elderly need to go to different places to have access to various (public) services, then it is harder for them to use the services. Therefore, providing services in one place close to each other would make them more accessible to their customers, who in this case are the elderly. Participants expressed wishes that services especially for seniors would be established within existing service centers. As the aging population grows, more low-threshold services are needed, from which service and social guidance, peer support, and meaningful activities for everyday life are available. The services used by seniors were generally wanted in accessible places.

Improving linguistic equality appeared as one theme. The benefits of centralizing services to get faster help and advice in one's native language should be explored.

Some of the services were experienced to be very age-friendly, and it was hoped that they would be organized in the future. The elderly were discouraged from using library services sometimes due to disruptive behavior in the area.

Traffic arrangements

The walks produced a lot of comments related to traffic arrangements, firstly related to footpaths and roads and secondly to driving.

Concerning the avenues, the wishes were for separate footpaths, with clear signs separating the dedicated lane for electric scooters, bicycles, etc. The safety of slow walkers increases when there are no fast-moving vehicles among them. For example, roads with separate lanes for pedestrians and cyclists were desired based on the results from the walks. This way, people could only go either way, and walking would be safer when cyclists cycled on their side. Urban planning should consider the different user groups of access routes in more detail. From the perspective of particular groups, for example, the observation was that white slippery paving should be removed from the streets and the high paving for pedestrians.

Based on the observations, some participants hoped that driving speeds would be sufficiently low and, for example, reasons for slowing down at service centers at pedestrian crossings, thus making crossing the roads safe. In particular, the elderly mentioned insecurity due to electric scooters, and they wished for lowering of speed limits.

As an observation, it was stated that there were many potholes in the footpaths, and the curbs were in poor condition and disproportionately high. These were particularly limiting for those traveling with a walker, wheelchair, or senior scooter. Participants also found that the placement of scaffolding for the renovation of facades of buildings should be done with pedestrians in mind. Pedestrians include also people walking with canes or a walker, for example.

As a unique Finnish feature, expressions related to snow plowing in winter came up in the observations, for example, plowing roads without moving the snow onto the path of pedestrians. Sandblasting of access roads should also be considered.

Usability/comfortability

The comfort of the premises increases the usability of the premises. According to the data, the elderly wish for more benches and clean toilets in the city center. Sufficient places to rest are needed to support the mobility of the elderly, for example, by increasing the number of benches. When placing the benches, the needs of everyone moving in the area should be considered. Many times, the lack of benches or their removal may be justified by the fact that, for example, there is a concern about people using substances to spend time in the area. However, possible problems can also be avoided with the versatile placement of the benches.

In addition, the participants wished for more seats along the walkways, which have previously been removed due to disruptive behavior. General comfort could be improved by, for example, adding plants to the area and taking care of general cleanliness.

Lighting

Lighting increases safety and accessibility. Based on the data from the walks, improved evening lighting on the side streets was wished. The means would be to go through the lampposts and renew the lights. However, the majority of elderly people who participated in joint walks mainly moved during daylight hours and avoided moving after dark.

Thoughts of the elderly related to safety

Here follow different thoughts that were expressed by the participants during the walks. Since the areas differ, the experiences of the people are also different. However, all of the thoughts are related to the sense of safety.

Some seniors felt that they were carefree in Helsinki and considered it a safe city. Others pointed out the threatening feeling caused by some people, and others the danger from means of transport, such as bicycles and scooters.

The age group that participated in the walks usually feels that they are in a more vulnerable position and an easy victim for robbers. Some of the respondents did not experience any threat in their environment while walking in the area. They said that they usually do not pay any attention to their environment or its possible or imagined threats, nor do they tend to interact with passers-by to avoid problems. Moreover, "if a robber happens to meet her in the dark, she takes a flashlight and blinds the evildoer with it," said a 77-year-old female respondent.

The implementation of the participatory walk revealed that the physical and mental condition and alertness of elderly people living at home vary greatly. Fitness and activity are affected by many different factors, e.g., lifestyle, diseases, genes, environment, education, and social relationships. People aged 80-90+ can still be physically and mentally active and want to move around and use various accessible services. Based on the discussions, active old people want to make their opinions heard and to influence either social issues or matters in their area of residence.

The participants also discussed exercising and fitness during the walks. The physical fitness and mental alertness of the elderly living at home and their social interactions could be maintained by organizing joint exercise, walking, and jogging sessions with the group in outdoor spaces led by some instructors. According to the discussions, the elderly would like to exercise together because only some have a "running buddy", and it is not always comfortable or safe to exercise alone due to the time of day, the environment, or their health.

ACCESSIBLE ENVIRONMENTS FOR DIVERSE NEEDS

Having carried out the small study described here, it is important to realize that the aging of society is related not only to the fact that the number of aging people is increasing but also to changes in the population's age structure as a whole, such as changes in the birth and death rate. Aging increases the challenges for which it is suitable for society to prepare and, thus, to enable the elderly to maintain their ability to function and modify the environment and services to meet their needs. (Ikäohjelman valmisteluryhmä 2020, 13).

From the perspective of professional competence, accessibility provided for the elderly is related to both everyday activities and socio-political values. Understanding the residential and living environment of the elderly is vital for optimizing accessibility. It is not just an assessment of functional capacity but considers the elderly's views, will, life situation, and resources (Salonen 2009, 81). The National Programme on Ageing 2030 for an age-competent Finland aims for preventive actions that enable the functional capacity of older adults. One of its important goals is to enable equal services for the elderly. (Ikäohjelman valmisteluryhmä 2020, 5.) As people get older, along with diseases, the limitations of their ability to function increase. Functional capacity is divided into physical, psychological, cognitive, and social dimensions, including the environment, health, and personal characteristics. Physical functioning refers to the ability to perform activities of daily living, including movement and sensory functions. Mental functioning is related to life management and mental health, and it covers functions related to feeling and thinking. Cognitive functioning refers to the cooperation of different information processing areas, enabling performance in everyday life. Social functioning is formed by interaction between an individual and a social network. (Ikäohjelman valmisteluryhmä 2020, 29-31.)

Accessibility and individual activity are related. The opportunity to move is a meaningful and refreshing factor. The social element related to the activity is more significant for the elderly than for other target groups. (Ruonakoski, Somerpalo, Kaakinen & Kinnunen 2005, 20.) As people age, their need for services increases. If they at that point receive bad service experiences, this may lead to a feeling of insecurity (Ristolainen et al. 2021, 235).

The social, cultural, and physical environments of the elderly are significant because they help keep them active. Accessibility is an essential enabling factor. The everyday life of old adults is based on daily activities, movement, services, and relationships. Homes and nearby environments are compelling resources, and their operation is essential. The elderly's desire and activity are decisive, and the environment supports this. (Salonen 2009, 82-83.) In addition to physical weakening, people's cognitive skills weaken when they age, and their ability to make independent decisions can deteriorate (Ristolainen et al. 2021, 242).

The Elderly Services Act Supports the activity and accessibility of the aging population. The Act states that public health and other services for the elderly need to, among others, be well available to them and allow the elderly to be part of developing the services. This case study has allowed the participants, the senior citizens, to voice their views on the accessibility and sense of safety experienced in the urban areas that were explored together with students.

BENEFITS OF ACCESSIBILITY

When planning services that meet the needs of particular groups, for example, the elderly, services and environments can be created that also meet the needs of other target groups (City of Espoo 2020, 6-7). Thus, accessibility benefits different levels of activity, from individuals to companies and society (Persson et al. 2015, 2). Accessibility increases the equality of different population groups (Ruonakoski et al. 2005, 10) and supports the idea of equality because it can be used to improve the accessibility of services and the environment for people with limited activity or movement ability (City of Espoo 2020, 7).

The senior citizens who participated in the walks of this study discussed the importance of accessibility of various services. Individuals benefit from accessibility because they get improved services, and at the same time, an accessible environment improves the user experience (Kuula, Kuula, Pöyliö & Alainen 2023, 6). On the other hand, accessibility allows people to participate in society in various ways, thus improving their quality of life (Persson et al. 2015, 3). In addition, accessibility enables studying, hobbies, or consuming culture (City of Espoo 2020, 6).

The elderly participants in this study also discussed the importance of physical exercise. Good physical functioning enables an old person to be active. The physical symptoms of aging include a decrease in physical strength, an increase in mobility impairment, and an increase in various diseases. In addition, many changes in the body and sensory functions are common. Physical ability enables a wide range of activities, for example, walking and general activities. In addition, time is important. It means that the weaker the elderly person's ability to function is, the more time the activity takes. (Salonen 2009, 83-84.)

In a hindered environment, even a slight deterioration in the ability to function increases the need for help for the person, leading to a decrease in daily movement and social relationships. As a result, the person's level of performance decreases. On the other hand, in a barrier-free environment, a slight deterioration in functional ability does not cause a growing need for assistance. However, functionality can be supported by everyday movement and social relationships. It, in turn, enables the ability to function to be maintained. Barrier-free spaces and services, on the other hand, enable an active and content-rich life. (Ruonakoski et al. 2005, 21.)

Accessibility offers opportunities for businesses and organizations to offer products and services to broad customer groups (Persson et al. 2015, 2). Thus, accessibility enables economic benefit (Ruonakoski et al. 2005, 10). The costs of implementing services are reduced because they are suitable for broad target groups. On the other hand, accessible services can provide a competitive advantage because a company can use them to differentiate itself from competitors and gain a reputational benefit. Barrier-free services are also an investment in the future because their consumption is believed to grow. (Kuula & al. 2023, 6.)

Society benefits from accessibility because employment increases and dependence on social security decreases (Persson et al. 2015, 2). With the help of the age policy, the aim is to combine the municipalities' housing, environmental, and community policies to make it possible to live at home for a long time. The planning and functionality of housing and living spaces are essential for everyone, especially the elderly. This enables everyday life, integration into the community, and accessibility of essential matters. (Salonen 2009, 72.) Regarding social decision-making, the functional capacity of persons with reduced mobility can be improved not only by investing more resources in society but also by changing the environment (Hännikäinen 2009, 59). Accessibility supports social sustainability (Persson et al., 2015, 2).

To conclude this article, one can note that various organizations, associations, businesses, various different groups with special needs, educational institutions, and public administration can benefit from the findings shared in this article. The future studies planned by the authors include case studies to be carried out in Finland, Poland, and Spain in 2024. These studies will explore accessibility and sense of safety with people representing different target groups, including senior citizens.

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