

# Study on the Issues of Home-based Elderly Care for Urban Empty-nest Elderly

Luo Zhan

China Jiliang University, Hangzhou, Zhejiang, 310000, China

## ABSTRACT

Mainland China accounts for 19.27% of the world's population. By the end of 2017, its population aged 60 and above constituted 25% of the world's elderly population, making it the country with the largest elderly population globally. The family planning policy has led to changes in the social and family structure, shifting from the widespread pursuit of four-generation households to a "4-2-1" family structure (four grandparents, two parents, one child). This has exacerbated the phenomenon of "empty nest" elderly. For these seniors, the optimal and most affordable way of aging is to stay in a familiar environment, and home-based elderly care best meets these requirements. Currently, China's urbanization process is advancing rapidly both economically and in terms of social welfare development. However, this process has simultaneously triggered social issues of empty nesting and population aging. The following conclusions are drawn: (1) The contradiction between the supply and demand of urban home-based elderly care services is becoming increasingly prominent, and government institutional policies are inadequate. These problems exist due to difficulties in raising funds for elderly care services; weak infrastructure of community service facilities; slow development of market operation mechanisms; and inadequate transformation of government functions. (2) This paper analyzes and summarizes case studies and experiences of community-based elderly care from the United States, the United Kingdom, and Japan, thereby proposing countermeasures and suggestions for improving home-based care for urban empty nest elderly in China.

## KEYWORDS

Urban; Empty nest elderly; Home-based elderly care

## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Research Background

As early as the 1970s, developed countries entered an era of population aging. By the 1980s, population aging gradually became a widespread issue confronting the majority of countries globally.

With the advancement of China's economy and medical technology, the quality of life for its citizens has continuously improved, and life expectancy has steadily increased. Consequently, the problem of population aging has gradually reached a point where it can no longer be ignored.

Population aging brings challenges such as increased social burden, diminished social vitality, labor and resource shortages, and rising service costs. Regardless of our level of education, social status, or economic condition, aging is an inevitable process we all face. Therefore, these are issues every individual should participate in, contemplate, prevent, and address <sup>[1]</sup>. The trend of increasing aging is exceptionally rapid. Between 2010 and 2015, the proportion of the elderly population increased by 3.18% in just five years—roughly one-third higher than the increases of 2.05% and 1.99% seen in the previous two decades (1990-2000 and 2000-2010 respectively) <sup>[2]</sup>.

In 2010, for every 100 urban workers, 19 elderly persons needed support. By 2015, this number had risen to 25. The growth rate of the elderly population is steadily accelerating, while the growth rate of the working-age population (15-59 years old) has stagnated. The working-age population increased by 75.91 million between 1990 and 2000, but this growth rate did not change significantly over the subsequent decades. The rapid increase in the number of elderly people places enormous and growing pressure on the workforce.

The '4-2-1' family structure (four grandparents, two parents, one child) represents one of the most severe structural challenges. One young couple must support four elderly parents and one child. This depletes the human resources available for family-based elderly care, creates conflicts in family resource allocation, and will generate many new problems, such as the growing issues of urban 'empty nest' and 'left-behind' elderly households.

According to relevant statistics from 2015, among 1.25 million elderly people surveyed in a certain region, 620,000 were strictly defined as 'empty nest' elderly, and within this group, 125,000 were living completely alone. Faced with this vast elderly population, the oldest, functionally impaired, and semi-impaired elderly require not only large-scale economic support but also varying levels of elderly care services. Therefore, developing convenient, effective, adaptable, and affordable home-based elderly care models has become essential.

### 1.2 Research Significance

China's population age structure has evolved from "high mortality, high birth rate, and high growth rate" to "low birth

rate, low mortality, and low growth rate" [3]. The trend of population aging is intensifying, and the consequent challenges of elderly care are becoming increasingly pressing. Currently, the state of community-based home care in China does not yet meet public expectations nor satisfy the demands of contemporary society. There is a need for the government and society to innovate and reform elderly care policies and models, and to refine and develop the existing community-based elderly care system.

Community-based home care offers a solution that avoids excessive costs while effectively utilizing community resources, establishing support within the familiar living environments of the elderly. This model enjoys the highest acceptance rate among many empty-nest seniors when compared to other care options. Cities, in particular, must give high priority to developing their local home care models, driven by regional elderly care centers.

This paper will comprehensively analyze the advantages and disadvantages of community-based home care models for urban empty-nest elderly by comparing elderly care service models domestically and internationally. It will explore whether the community-based home care model for empty-nest elderly is suitable for Chinese cities, propose corresponding development strategies, and thereby provide reference for addressing future elderly care challenges in China.

## **2 Current Status of Home-Based Elderly Care in Urban Areas**

### **2.1 Increasing Disparity Between Supply and Demand for Community-Based Home Care Services**

Community services predominantly consist of essential traditional offerings such as healthcare, transportation, and safety services. However, demands for cultural/recreational activities and environmental security services remain relatively low, indicating a need for transformation in service delivery models and supply mechanisms. Most existing grassroots communities are still in their nascent stages, with underdeveloped systems and institutions. The services provided by these communities often fail to align with residents' actual needs. Crucial services either suffer from shortages or subpar quality, making it difficult to meet the diverse demands of elderly community residents. The needs of the elderly extend beyond basic subsistence and health; they increasingly seek psychological well-being and spiritual comfort. There is a pressing need to enhance the provision of daily companionship, hospice care, and similar services while simultaneously improving community infrastructure and healthcare environments. Elevating service content is essential to satisfy the growing multifaceted demands of the elderly and support them in enjoying a comfortable twilight years.

### **2.2 Inadequate Government Systems and Policies for Community-Based Home Care Services**

While urban community-based home care initiatives have been underway for some time—aligned with national directives that define service scope and promote smart communities—dedicated planning for these services remains insufficient. Operational mechanisms are flawed, and there is a lack of coordination among relevant government departments:

The Municipal Civil Affairs Department oversees basic infrastructure.

The Municipal Social Security Bureau manages pension and medical insurance.

The Municipal Health Bureau is responsible for healthcare services.

This fragmented approach, characterized by duplicated leadership with overlapping responsibilities, leads to inefficiency. Furthermore, operational tasks fall under the purview of municipal governments, potentially resulting in lagging strategic planning, unclear governmental responsibilities, and inadequate internal/external oversight. These systemic shortcomings pose significant obstacles to the development of community-based home care services.

### **2.3 Difficulty in Raising Funds for Community-Based Home Care Services**

Financial investment is the foundation and crucial guarantee for the development of community-based home care services. Urban governments stipulate that funding for public welfare services primarily comes from fiscal allocations. These funds are mainly allocated for the construction, maintenance of community service centers, and personnel salaries/expenses, with community volunteer services supported by performance-based subsidies. Beyond specific government grants, community funding relies solely on self-generated income and social donations. The overall financial resources available to the community are insufficient, and funds specifically designated for home care services are far from adequate.

Furthermore, much of the funding raised from various sources often fails to be used effectively for its intended purposes. Many communities suffer from a waste of resources and the misapplication of funds. In some cases, there are even instances of community staff misappropriating funds. This situation dissuades unpaid volunteers, who feel disappointed and unwilling to invest their time and effort into community service work.

### 3 Analysis of the Causes of Problems in Community-Based Home Care for Urban empty-nest elderly

#### 3.1 Weak Foundation of Community Service Facilities

The total number of urban community-based home care service centers is continuously increasing, but the community's infrastructure is insufficient in quantity and limited in configuration. In developed countries like Japan and the UK, community commerce serves as a vital vehicle for residents' comprehensive consumption, with per capita commercial facility area reaching 15-18 sq m. In contrast, the per capita community commercial facility area in [Chinese] cities is only about 0.6 sq m, with a community service facility construction gap rate of 47.50%, indicating an overall shortage of community service facilities<sup>[3]</sup>.

Furthermore, some communities in developed countries are equipped with service facilities such as daycare centers, long-term residences, and rehabilitation care. In contrast, many urban communities in China lack these facilities entirely or have them only on a very small scale.

#### 3.2 Slow Development of Market-Oriented Mechanisms

Currently, urban community-based home care services are primarily operated by the government, with limited participation from social organizations and personnel. The development of market-oriented mechanisms is relatively slow. Although community service enterprises are gradually entering urban communities, the market lacks large-scale, established, and reputable community elderly care enterprises.

Moreover, the thrifty nature of the elderly leads most to be unwilling to pay out-of-pocket for community home care services. This makes it difficult for some community home care services with higher operating costs to sustain themselves. Additionally, most young people are reluctant to participate in community home care work. Consequently, the workforce often consists mainly of laid-off workers with high turnover rates. Combined with a lack of professional training and insufficient knowledge of elderly care services, this results in a poor experience for the elderly. There is a current need to introduce market-based operational mechanisms to develop community home care services.

#### 3.3 Inadequate Transformation of Government Functions

Community-based home care cannot thrive without government guidance and support. The government issues policy documents defining the concept and developmental positioning of community-based home care, identifies existing problems, and provides recommendations. While the government plays a dominant role in the initial stage by taking on most of the work to put community-based home care on the right track, it should gradually transform its functions as development reaches an appropriate stage. This entails devolving some authority to the market and the community, allowing the market to play its fundamental role in resource allocation and stimulating societal vitality.

However, the governments in [Chinese] cities have not adequately devolved authority. Many communities are still primarily governed by administrative control, which can easily lead to adverse situations such as decision-making errors and ambiguous responsibilities.

## 4 Analysis of Foreign Successful Cases

### 4.1 Elderly Care Communities in the United States

The elderly care service industry in the United States is highly developed and has a very mature operation and management model, with a large number of elderly care communities, diverse forms, wide distribution, and a variety of service contents. Some are naturally formed elderly communities where the elderly stay behind as young people go to big cities to seek opportunities, while others are specially developed and built by businessmen<sup>[4]</sup>.

In response to the increasingly serious problems of population aging and empty nests, the U.S. government has formulated relevant laws for elderly services, established an aging work agency in Congress to be responsible for elderly care services, and actively encourages social enterprises or organizations to strengthen their participation in the elderly care service industry. Most elderly care communities in the United States are located in beautiful canyons or by rivers and lakes far from cities. This is because Americans traditionally do not have the habit of living with their children, and land prices in the suburbs are relatively low, so housing prices are lower, which can reduce a lot of economic burdens. However, elderly people living in these communities will gradually separate from their original social networks and lack social contact, leading to psychological loneliness.

Elderly care communities in the United States offer a variety of entertainment activities, cultural education, physical exercise and other services, as well as a dazzling array of entertainment venues such as bars, senior universities, beauty salons, fishing ponds, and woodworking workshops to enrich the lives of the elderly and alleviate loneliness. These

communities have standardized and normalized rules and regulations: they generally have access control, do not allow children to accompany them in the residences, are all no more than three floors high, implement strict separation of pedestrians and vehicles, and are equipped with various practical barrier-free facilities, professional health care personnel, and emergency call systems. These well ensure the elderly person's life safety and daily convenience, creating a comfortable community atmosphere where living in an elderly care community is not a reluctant and passive wait for the end of life, but an active way to live their old age.

## 4.2 Community Care in the United Kingdom

Community care in the United Kingdom is divided into two types: "care by the community" and "care in the community"<sup>[5]</sup>.

The former is generally provided by the elderly person's children, relatives, friends, or charitable organizations, while the latter is generally provided by government public welfare organizations and other entities. Community care in the UK offers a wide range of services, divided into four major categories: material support, life care, psychological support, and overall care, which include many sub-items. Elderly people with different needs can find suitable elderly care service programs. A personal case management system has also been established, so that such diversified elderly care services can improve the utilization rate of community resources and better serve the elderly in the community.

The UK government plays a leading role in this regard, adopting a government-run and civil-assisted model. In the White Paper on Community Care issued in 1989, it formulated relevant laws and specific operational measures, provided stable financial support, and conducted macro-control and management of the social welfare service system.

## 4.3 Community Elderly Services in Japan

Influenced by Confucian culture, Japan pays more attention to the family. Family-based elderly care remains people's first choice for elderly care. However, Japan has the fastest aging process in the world, and modern people find it difficult to bear the responsibility of elderly care alone. Thus, a social life system dominated by families and supplemented by neighbors and communities has been formed. As early as the 1950s, the Japanese government legislated to protect the elderly person's old-age life, and solved issues such as the elderly person's economic sources, medical care, and community elderly care services through different laws.

Japan's community elderly services include home help services, where the government assigns professional service personnel to take care of elderly people who cannot take care of themselves at home; day services, which send elderly people who are alone at home during the day and need care to community elderly facilities to spend the day safely; and elderly clubs. To facilitate the elderly to participate in social activities and enhance their physical fitness, millions of elderly clubs have been set up.

## 5 Conclusions and Recommendations

### 5.1 The Government is a Strong Guarantee for Community Home-Based Elderly Care Services

Through in-depth analysis and summary of cases and experiences of community elderly care in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Japan, we can clearly see that: the government is a strong guarantee for building and operating a high-quality community home-based elderly care service system; promoting the development of a professional team for elderly care services is the core of improving service quality; and improving the legal system related to elderly care services is the cornerstone of safeguarding rights and interests and regulating development. These elements support each other and together constitute the key pillars of a successful model for community home-based elderly care.

Practice in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Japan fully demonstrates that the government occupies a core leading position in the community home-based elderly care service system. This is not only reflected in its leading role in macro-level construction, such as formulating national-level home-based elderly care strategies and policy frameworks, but more importantly, in strengthening the top-level design of work plans for home-based elderly care services for empty-nest elderly, coordinating and guiding the improvement of the management of community staff, and establishing and improving a full-chain quality supervision and evaluation mechanism. The government's key role lies in fully leveraging and optimally allocating resources: on the one hand, guiding and supporting communities to fully revitalize and utilize existing material facilities (such as community centers and health stations) and human resources (such as volunteers and neighborhood mutual assistance) in the region; on the other hand, directly enhancing the supply capacity and quality of aging services through strong financial investment and policy inclination. For example, Japan has clarified the multiple responsibilities and financing mechanisms of the government, insurance institutions, service providers, and individuals through the Long-Term Care Insurance Act while the United Kingdom supports community care through the integration

of the National Health Service (NHS) and social service systems. To fundamentally safeguard the legitimate rights and interests and service stability of home-based elderly individuals, the government must lead and continuously improve the relevant policy and regulatory support system, clarifying the registration, operation, supervision systems, and medium- and long-term development plans for various community service organizations<sup>[6]</sup>.

Increasing financial input is a prerequisite and material foundation for the government to fulfill its responsibility of guaranteeing home-based elderly care services. Strong and sustained public financial support is indispensable. In China's current practice, the funding sources for home-based elderly care services are characterized by diversification but strong local dependence, mainly including local fiscal appropriations, corresponding allocations from individual business taxes, charitable donations from society (residents and enterprises), and limited special subsidies from the central or provincial governments. This structure often leads to imbalanced service development and sustainability challenges. Therefore, the government needs to demonstrate greater intensity and better strategies in financial input: first, increase the intensity of transfer payments and special subsidies from central and provincial finances to balance regional development gaps and ensure coverage of basic services; second, optimize the allocation of land resources by clearly prioritizing the land demand for home-based elderly care service facilities in territorial spatial planning and urban construction projects, and considering providing land transfer fee reductions or allocations for eligible projects; third, implement precision economic incentives by providing sustained operating subsidies to home-based elderly care service organizations with standardized operations and high-quality services to reduce their survival pressure; fourth, build a more attractive policy environment, such as offering greater tax reductions (e.g., income tax and value-added tax incentives), low-interest or interest-free credit support, and simplified approval procedures for individuals and enterprises investing in the construction of elderly care facilities and providing professional elderly care services, to fully stimulate the enthusiasm of market entities and social forces to participate. Only by establishing stable, diversified, and efficient investment and incentive mechanisms can we provide solid material guarantee for the sustainable development of China's community home-based elderly care services.

## 5.2 Promoting the Development of a Professional Team for Community Home-Based Elderly Care Services

The construction of community services in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Japan all features professionalism, which is reflected in the establishment of institutions and the services provided by elderly care service personnel<sup>[7]</sup>.

To strengthen the professional training of staff engaged in community home-based elderly care services, efforts should be made to enhance the development of higher education in social work. Relevant majors or courses related to social welfare should be offered in colleges and universities, and postgraduates and doctoral students in social work should be vigorously cultivated. For practitioners of community home-based elderly care services, relevant pre-employment training should be provided to effectively improve their professional quality. Additionally, the qualification certification system for home-based elderly care services should be increased and improved. Screening out talents suitable for participating in community home-based elderly care services by obtaining qualification certificates and formulating evaluation standards for home-based elderly care services are also necessary means to promote the prosperity and development of home-based elderly care in China. By formulating a detailed and reasonable indicator system for the level of home-based elderly care services from various aspects, China's home-based elderly care services can be led onto a more scientific, professional, and standardized path.

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