

# Exploring the Experiences of Community-Dwelling Japanese-Speaking Seniors in Metro Vancouver Research Report Executive Summary

Tonari Gumi - Japanese Community Volunteers Association

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During the COVID-19 Pandemic, *Tonari Gumi - Japanese Community Volunteers Association* has become increasingly aware of the isolation and disconnect experienced by the Japanese Canadian seniors\* living in Metro Vancouver. This awareness led to growing concerns about the potentially heightened needs of Japanese-speaking community-dwelling seniors living alone, who did not seem to be well connected to existing social or health services. In 2021, in cooperation with researchers from the University of Toronto and Simon Fraser University, and funded by the Vancouver Foundation, a community-led qualitative research study was conducted to explore Japanese-speaking seniors' life experiences, perceptions towards community involvement and aging, and service needs. Researchers conducted fifteen semi-structured interviews with Japanese-speaking seniors focused on their narratives and life stories.

The interviews revealed research participants' diverse community involvement and use of services and the difficulties and struggles of their daily lives before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, research participants' narratives revealed four key findings (see full report for more details):

## **1. Relationships matter: The importance of personal connections to access services.**

The importance of the relationship between people and Tonari Gumi is identified, which goes beyond just the relationship between the organization and service users.

## **2. Fear of overburdening staff and misunderstandings about how social services operate in Canada create a disconnect between the organization and seniors.**

Seniors' close relationships and care for Tonari Gumi resulted in their hesitation to ask for help. Also, a gap in understanding how social service organizations work in Canada—with mutual support through community involvement—compared to Japan existed.

## **3. Learning from “I wish...”: Seniors wish for support preparing for aging earlier in life.**

Many research participants mentioned how it was difficult for them to think about or prepare for life after their retirement due to challenging life circumstances and disadvantages experienced over the life course.

## **4. Systemic discrimination, traumatic experiences, and shame hinder involvement in the Japanese Canadian community.**

Some research participants indicated that they keep some distance from the Japanese Canadian community or Japanese social service organizations. The reasons may be explained as follows: 1) the complex identity and sense of (non) belonging to Japan and the Japanese community in Canada, 2) traumatic experiences and rejection from Canadian society and the community, and 3) internalization of shame and a strong sense of self-responsibility.

The research illustrates the need for Tonari Gumi to engage Japanese-speaking individuals as early as possible before they begin needing significant support services. This will enable a smooth transition and support when changes occur over the life course. The research also indicated the possibility of community organizations such as Tonari Gumi becoming hubs in their community where people can connect not only to use services, but also to participate in diverse ways according to their preferences. These connections will make it easier for people to maintain physical and mental wellness and to access services when support is needed in later life. In addition, by getting to know Tonari Gumi and participating in its activities, the spirit of mutual aid practiced by non-profit organizations can be more easily understood by Japanese Canadians, leading to the building and sustaining of a mutually supportive community.

\*The Japanese Canadian population is diverse and since the incarceration and dispersal of Japanese Canadians during WWII there have been no obvious geographical hubs in which community services and businesses are concentrated. Generally speaking, the Japanese Canadian community consists of two demographic groups: 1) Japanese Canadians whose ancestors immigrated from Japan to Canada from the 1880s to early 1900s and who speak English as their native language and 2) Japanese-speaking individuals who immigrated to Canada after the 1960s. This study focused on the latter population.