



# Stay or go: Growing old in Detroit isn't easy, but does moving make sense?



Beatrice Ford picks weeds from around the light pole in the front yard of her Chalmers Street home, June 10, 2014. The home next door is abandoned and houses a squatter, as do some others on the street. Beatrice Ford and her husband, Hugh, said they remember when the neighborhood was diverse, full and thriving when they moved in and raised their family. Even as they've watched it empty and decay, they've never thought of leaving. "I'm not moving," she said. "When I move from here, I'll be going up to be with the

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Thelma Brown poses for a photo with her granddaughters Heaven and Nevaeh in the living of Brown's northwest Detroit home. Brown watches over her block and its six abandoned homes from her 1928 house on the corner of Sorrento and Fenkell streets. "Here, in the whole neighborhood, I'm considered granny," she said.

*(Khalil AlHajal | MLive)*

DETROIT, MI -- Growing old isn't easy anywhere.

Living among high rates of poverty, crime, addiction and abandonment doesn't make it any easier.

Neither do shortages of buses and primary care doctors, nor the scarcity of retail and amenities outside of Detroit's central neighborhoods.

But ask 85-year-old Detroiters Harry Anderson if he thinks growing old in his city is harder than it might be elsewhere, and it's not quite that simple.

"I imagine it's about the same everywhere," Anderson said.

It's a common answer to the question. Detroit has its unique problems, but aging is aging, said senior after senior across the city.

Anderson is a no-nonsense Army veteran who once worked on Desoto and Chrysler factory lines, and owned his own janitorial service.

Today he relies on oxygen tanks to breathe, weekly Meals on Wheels deliveries to eat, and an overcrowded, unreliable bus system to get around.

"Just being able to move around, that's been the hardest," he said. "It's hard ... So much violence going on, can't walk down the street -- I guess it's everywhere, though."

The objective truth is: It's not the same everywhere, gerontology experts said.

Detroiters have it harder and die younger, research shows.

But to many residents, Detroit is home, and nowhere else will do.

"Like I say, when I move, I'll be going up to be with the Lord," said Beatrice Hugh, 69, who's lived in her east-side Detroit home for 38 years and has no intention of budging.

She spends her days caring for her 78-year-old husband Hugh Ford, who's going blind and experiencing the onset of dementia, but was quick to point out that they've paid off the loan on their Chalmers Street house, and that a move is neither a desire, nor a practical possibility for the couple.

"If she did (want to relocate), we'd have to buy a new one," Hugh Ford said.

The roof on their 73-year-old home is starting to leak. Many of their neighbors have abandoned their homes. They have to watch for squatters looking to hook into their water and power sources. Their utility bills are high, as is the grass on the vacant

properties around them.

But they aren't going anywhere.

**(More on Beatrice and Hugh: A peek into the life of an aging Detroit couple)**

"Despite these objective problems, the subjective experience of growing old in Detroit is not a bad one," said Peter Lichtenberg, director of Wayne State University's Institute of Gerontology.

"I think that's because they have good relationships, friends, family. Meaningful relationships and memories --those things kind of overshadow the challenges. Although people are worried about the vacant housing and so forth, when you give them kind of neighborhood cohesion instruments, there's a fairly high level of comfort in their neighborhoods."

One recent study by Wayne State researchers showed Detroiters age 60-74 were dying at a rate 48 percent higher than their peers in the rest of the state.

That's attributed partly to middle-aged Detroiters missing out on the kind of medical care and healthy lifestyle development they need in the years before they enter old age.

Renetta Major, 53, moved her family to Southfield several years ago, after having enough of her declining west-side neighborhood.

And Major is not a person who is easily overwhelmed.

She's raised seven children, undergone brain surgery and, while still healing from the operation, took custody of a granddaughter whose mother suffered from drug addiction.

But conditions surrounding her Chapel Street home eventually become more burdensome than she could endure.

"The block had gotten immersed with drugs and thugs. It got to the point where I couldn't let her outside to play," she said, referring to her granddaughter, now 13.

"That's when I had enough. It was just time."

She moved to a safer neighborhood and enrolled the child, who battles attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, in a small suburban charter school.

Overall, she said, things are easier.

"It was a tremendous turn," Major said.

But not everyone views suburban living as the easier, healthier or safer option.

Thelma Brown stands in the doorway of her 1928 house on the corner of Sorrento and Fenkell streets in northwest Detroit. Brown is a sort of neighborhood cornerstone, watching over her block and its six abandoned homes. "Here, in the whole neighborhood, I'm considered granny," she said.

*(Khalil Al-Hajal | MLive)*

"People think they're getting something better in the suburbs. People need to stay

where they are, do the little cosmetic repairs on their house and stay where they are," said Thelma Brown, 66.

"They think that Southfield and Westland is better, but I choose to stay here in my little ghetto... I don't want to live in one of those matchboxes that blow over with the wind... Here, in the whole neighborhood, I'm considered granny."

Brown, a northwest Detroit resident, watches over her block and its six abandoned homes from her 1928 house on the corner of Sorrento and Fenkell streets.

She insists that everything a senior needs can be found right inside the city.

"There's always been some kind of provisions out there for me," she said.

"You can seek out things. People will tell you things to help yourself out. Fans, food, carbon monoxide detectors. It's just a matter of asking."

For Brown and many others who choose to stay put, there's a connection to their neighborhood, going back decades, that will not fade, no matter how many neighbors jump ship.

"Although there are these tremendous challenges that we see, somehow these older folks kind of find a way to cope, and often become kind of the backbone of their neighborhoods," said Lichtenberg,

Brown is one of those backbones.

"I know everything and everybody around me," she said as two of her grandchildren gathered around her in the living room of her brick duplex, colorfully cluttered with toys and plastic bins.

She reminisced about leading a neighborhood girl scout troupe when the neighborhood was more active.

"I was the one that was girl scout leader and my house was the safe house," Brown said. "If any kids were in trouble, they could come here... We used to have a lot of fun on this street. We used to play together, have water balloon fights."

Her and a group of remaining neighbors keep an eye on things at the vacant houses on their block.

It was too much for one recent deserter, who left his home without trying to it.

"They just up and moved to Livonia, got them a new big house," Brown said.

"They just got tired and gave up, I guess."

The effect of crime, she said, as did Anderson and Ford, can be kept to a minimum by watchful eyes and limited exposure.

It's a problem, each of them believe, that every community faces.

"We had crime before the abandonment. We're going to have crime after," Brown said. "I don't go out after 9 or 10 at night anyway..."

"We all try to keep the neighborhood clean. I can live here. I can maintain it. I've been here 41 years. I don't think I'll be around another 41."

*What aging issues are you or loved ones dealing with? **Share your input and experiences** with the "Aging Together" team and help bring attention to aging-related issues in Detroit, Metro Detroit, and across Michigan.*



*Aging Together is a summer-long project between **MLive Detroit**, **WDET 101.9FM Detroit** and **Model D Media** that explores the issues of older adults in Detroit, Southeast Michigan and the state.*

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@islandification Thanks. Fixed the typo.

Indeed, I can't imagine walking away from a home with no mortgage payment, especially now that home values finally have a shot at rising.

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