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[Wellness](#)

Perspective

A lot of us have been thinking about where we live. Here's what research into neighborhoods shows.



Lynette Fisher-Charles and her dog, Gracie, go for a hike in Saint Edward State Park in Kenmore, Wash. Living near a park can have beneficial effects on health. (Karen Ducey/Getty Images)

By Galadriel Watson

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During the pandemic, I've often thought how lucky I am to live where I do: in a small Canadian lakeside town, with plenty of space to practice social distancing, far from heavily stricken centers. Even before the pandemic, I greatly appreciated this quaint spot tucked in an awe-inspiring landscape, which I've called home for a decade. I was surprised whenever I heard

fellow residents complain how much they hated the place and wanted to escape. Was it the town? Or was it them?

A recent [meta-analysis of 27 studies](#) about neighborhood satisfaction suggests it's mostly the latter.

The aspects that count

Excellent schools, reliable snow plowing and well-kept homes with high curb appeal: These are the kinds of things that truly satisfy residents, right?

“What I found is that, for the most part, they don't,” says Zachary Neal, associate professor of psychology and global urban studies at Michigan State University. The studies he looked at were published between 1981 and 2018 and involved more than 250,000 adults in 11 countries, including the United States.

“If we look at how much people say they're satisfied with their neighborhoods, we can estimate that about 16 percent of that is due to the neighborhood,” he says. “And the rest, 84 percent, is due to the individual person” — their personalities and their perceptions, which could also be colored by how much they have invested in the neighborhood.

For example, satisfaction could be influenced by personality or other characteristics. “It could be as simple as, for instance, whether a person is generally optimistic and agreeable and is satisfied with everything,” Neal says. “It could be things like if the person is extroverted — they get out in their neighborhood, they meet their neighbors, they have strong ties. It could be the reverse, if they tend to be pessimistic and they tend to be dissatisfied.”

Another factor could be whether you own or rent. A [2015 study](#) of nearly 1,900 adults who participated in a Los Angeles survey, along with results from the 2000 Census, found that homeownership makes residents more sensitive to the desirability of local features. Homeowners in advantaged communities were more satisfied than renters, and those in disadvantaged communities were less satisfied.

Or it could be because of residents' perceptions of the neighborhood. If a resident *thinks* a school is good, even if it isn't, they'll be happier. Also, Neal says it “could have to do with how long they've been in the neighborhood, perhaps changes they've seen in the neighborhood, specific personal experiences they've had there.”

Colorful, close-by benefits

Of course, this doesn't mean we should discount objective features entirely — after all, even in Neal's study, they count for 16 percent of a resident's level of satisfaction.

Lawrence Frank is a professor of sustainable transport and the director of the Health and Community Design Lab at the University of British Columbia. On one hand, he's not surprised by Neal's findings. If two neighborhoods have similar amenities and you see differences in

satisfaction, he says, “those differences are going to be explained through the perception of the quality.”

On the other hand, his work over several decades has highlighted how nearby services make a neighborhood more desirable. He says: “A complete community, or neighborhood, supports both recreation and utilitarian needs within a walkable distance, in my definition. It meets your needs. You don’t have to travel across the region or elsewhere — to get on a train or bus, or take a long drive — to get food.”

He notes that green spaces such as parks help create a sense of community. Other research has shown that greenery also improves physical health. For example, a [2018 paper](#) that looked at over 140 studies found that exposure to green spaces was associated with reduced risk of preterm birth, Type II diabetes, stroke, asthma and coronary heart disease, plus other health benefits.

Touches of nature affect mental health, too. A [study](#) out of Spain looked at blue spaces: those near oceans, lakes, rivers or even fountains. Compared with walking on a city street or resting at home, a short walk along a beach improved well-being and mood among the 59 participants.

From 2011 to 2014, a [study in Philadelphia](#) involved converting hundreds of vacant lots into green spaces. The researchers then surveyed 342 city residents. The result: On average, residents who lived near these green spaces felt significantly less depressed than before the improvements, which wasn’t true for those who lived near still-vacant lots.

An interesting side note was that “this happened even when residents were unaware of the actual change,” says Aaron Reuben, a clinical psychology doctoral candidate at Duke University who wasn’t involved in the study. Perhaps the greenery “can buffer other things that might be causing you stress: things like heat, noise and air pollution,” he says. Or neighbors who use the new parks are in better moods, which reflect onto you.

Overall, Reuben says this study suggests that if city planners “change the underlying aspects of the neighborhood, your sense of self and your happiness could change, too.”

Loads of time for discovery

The pandemic is also probably swaying how we feel about where we live. “Our awareness of what our neighborhood has or doesn’t have becomes a lot more acute when we’re stuck in it,” Frank says.

Neal says: “I could imagine, on one hand, spending more time in our neighborhoods might lead us to come to appreciate them a little more, see things that we like about them that we didn’t realize were there. But we could also see a reverse effect, a sort-of ‘familiarity breeds contempt.’ We’re stuck in our neighborhoods. Surely the grass is greener elsewhere.” To discover what the actual effects are, he has already collected data from Michigan and is starting to analyze it.

Reuben agrees that residents' attitudes could go either way. "It could be that they get tired of seeing the same dilapidated structure that no one's cleaned up. It could be that they see new things in the environment that bring them whimsy and wonder."

He finds that chats with neighbors are becoming increasingly important, as are the places, such as parks, that give us these opportunities. "Particularly in covid times, I wouldn't underestimate the influence of social interactions that can happen in outdoor spaces."

Ways to boost satisfaction

If you're not satisfied with your neighborhood — now or pre-pandemic — how do you turn the dial?

"We might sometimes imagine a group of dissatisfied residents getting together and, say, cleaning up the park," Neal says. "And if that improves their perception of the park, then it might have an impact on satisfaction." However, his research suggests that "it would have more to do with their personal experience than with the neighborhood itself."

Reuben also mentions becoming a steward of the neighborhood, individually or with others. "By being engaged and active in the community, you're going to feel better," he says. As a bonus, "You're also making the neighborhood space better. That's going to make other people feel better."

Happily, though, Neal remarks that most people are already satisfied with their neighborhoods (at least before the pandemic), averaging at about a seven on a scale of zero (least satisfied) to 10 (most satisfied). So, although some of my neighbors may gripe about my town, they're probably in the minority. They just need to perceive it like I do, as a gorgeous, welcoming place.

Galadriel Watson is a freelance writer, comics artist and author of many books for children, including "[Running Wild](#)" and "[Extreme Abilities](#)."