RESEARCH YOU CAN USE

Measuring Livability

A cool website has just gone live at the time of this writing (mid-April). By the time you read this column, you may have already discovered it and need no introduction. (Perhaps you even read the news story about it in *Planning* last month: "AARP Tool Quantifies Livability.") But just in case. . . .

AARP's Livability Index is the first tool of its kind to measure livability down to the neighborhood level for the entire country.

SCORING ESSENTIALS

The index draws from 50 unique data sources, and includes 40 metrics and 20 policies. Twenty-one of those metrics evaluate livability at the census block group level, while other data comes from higher levels of geography.

Cities, counties, and states receive a score based on the average scores of neighborhoods within their boundaries.

AARP (formerly known as the American Association of Retired Persons) is one of the nation's largest membership organizations, 37 million strong. Its Public Policy Institute has developed a Livability Index as a web-based tool to measure community livability for persons of all ages, incomes, and abilities—not just older Americans. You can access it at aarp.org/livabilityindex.

The Livability Index is a little like Walk Score, but much more comprehensive. It is the first tool of its kind to measure livability at the neighborhood level for the entire country. The tool and website got some development help from ICF International, with a small assist from our shop at the University of Utah.

The Livability Index rates places on a scale of 0 to 100. Using default weights for the individual dimensions of livability, I checked out my neighborhood in Salt Lake City, the Avenues. It gets a score of 61, which is above the national average and seems about right to me.

Users can search the index by address, ZIP code, or community to find an overall livability score, as well as a score for each of seven major dimensions: housing, neighborhood, transportation, environment, health, engagement, and opportunity. The total livability score is based on the average of all seven category scores.

All categories and the metrics within each are given equal weight. It scores communities by comparing them to one another, so the average community gets a score of 50, while above-average communities score higher and below-average communities score lower. With a slider bar, users also can customize the index to place greater emphasis on the livability features most important to them.

The tool draws on more than 50 unique sources of data. At the heart of the Livability Index are 40 metrics and 20 policies. While metrics measure how livable communities are at present, policies measure how they might become more livable over time. Metric values and policy points within each category are combined to create the category score. These category scores are then averaged to create a place's overall livability score.

For example, in transportation, the index bases total scores on six variables: frequency of local transit service (the higher the better), an estimate of walk trips (the higher the better), a measure of traffic congestion (the lower the better), an estimate of overall household transportation costs (the lower the better), average speed limits (the lower the better), and crash rates (the lower the better). Communities can earn brownie points for each of 20 policies that have been passed at the local and state level. For example, having a "complete streets" policy boosts a community's transportation score, and that in turn boosts the overall score.

The most livable neighborhood in the U.S. is West Mifflin in Madison, Wisconsin (score: 78), bordered by a university and state government, with diverse housing choices and minimal traffic congestion, within walking distance of parks, lakes, shopping, and performing arts centers. The most livable large city in the U.S.: San Francisco (66). The most livable small city: La Crosse, Wisconsin (70).

AARP has been working on the index since mid-2013. Why go to such effort? The website provides the following explanation:

> As the U.S. population ages, we face a serious challenge: our communities are not prepared for an aging society. Nine out of ten older adults (65+) wish to remain in their communities as they age, and the great majority do so. In an effort to address this urgent challenge, AARP sought to help consumers and policymakers decide whether their communities are places where residents can easily live as they get older. Taking a multifaceted approach to assessing livability at the neighborhood level, AARP developed this ground-breaking tool to jump-start community conversations about livability and encourage action by consumers and policymakers alike.

One concern that may surface as you explore the site is its urban bias. Most of the metrics favor the downtowns of big cities over smaller cities, urban living over suburban and exurban living, and metropolitan areas over rural areas. That is to say, the index seems to place a premium on accessibility at the expense of bucolic values. It will be interesting to see how the

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world reacts to this feature. It squares with my values, but I expect that there will be pushback.

Another concern may be the fact that most of the nation clusters around midpoint scores, so there isn't as much differentiation from place to place as one might expect (or hope for). But that actually makes sense when you think about it. Most of the U.S. is pretty darn livable in one dimension or another.

Finally, there is the issue of face validity. It was impossible to check scores against on-the-ground conditions for the entire U.S. On a trip to Madison recently, my cab driver expressed surprise at the West Mifflin designation as most livable. So we swung by and found it a little rundown, with nearly all homes converted into student apartments. Most single-family home owners wouldn't choose to live in this student ghetto. The numbers don't and can't tell the whole story.

I hope to see the Livability Index used by researchers in much the same way Walk Score has come to be used to explain variations in everything from property values to mode choices. It looks like AARP will be releasing the underlying data files to government, researchers, and others, so everyone can get into the game.

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