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 local household transportation costs (the lower the better), average speed limits (the lower the better), 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 small 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 10 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
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.

—Reid Ewing

Ewing is a professor of city and metropolitan planning at the University of Utah, an associate editor of the Journal of the American Planning Association, and an editorial board member of the Journal of Planning Education and Research. More than 40 past columns are available at www.plan.utah.edu/?page_id=509.