

Social problems dominate concerns in neighborhoods with unsatisfied residents

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A new study reveals that the general appearance of a neighborhood is the single most important factor affecting how satisfied residents are about the area where they live.

But beyond general appearance, people living in different neighborhoods may be looking at distinct factors when making their overall evaluations.

The study, which is the first of its kind to examine the differences between neighborhoods that are rated satisfactory and unsatisfactory, found that residents living in highly-rated neighborhoods tended to focus on local city services and distance to work, family and friends.

Meanwhile, those who were less satisfied with their neighborhoods focused on the safety and social problems there such as proximity to problem areas and crime levels in and around their area.

"People actually use different criteria when they rate their neighborhood depending on where they live. One resident will look at the good things about their neighborhood like naturalness, and another will look at the bad things in their neighborhood like crime. And people need to think differently about how to improve neighborhoods because there are not general guidelines for everything," said Misun Hur, co-author of the study and doctoral student in city and regional planning at Ohio State University.

The study, which was published recently in the journal *Environment and*

Behavior, was based on a survey of 2,060 homeowners in Franklin County, Ohio. The survey was conducted by the Ohio State University Survey Research Center in the summer and fall of 2001 to determine how satisfied residents were with their neighborhoods and their intentions to move or remodel.

Respondents were asked to rate their satisfaction with a variety of neighborhood characteristics such as level of crime, traffic, general appearance, and other positive and negative attributes of their neighborhood. They were then asked to rate their satisfaction with neighborhood characteristics and their overall satisfaction on a scale from 1 to 7, with 1 being very dissatisfied and 7 being very satisfied. People were surveyed before and after the terrorist attacks of September 11 to test for any potential effects of the terrorist attacks, but no significant differences in the attitudes of residents towards their neighborhoods were found.

Neighborhoods were mapped according to census tracts, which are determined by the U.S. Census Bureau by grouping about 4,000 households into each tract.

The researchers then separated neighborhoods into two groups, unsatisfactory and satisfactory, to discover what aspects of the neighborhoods might be affecting satisfaction overall. Satisfactory neighborhoods were those with average ratings from 5 to 7, while unsatisfactory neighborhoods were those with average ratings less than 5. There were 193 satisfactory neighborhoods and 50 unsatisfactory areas total.

Overall, people living throughout Franklin County were generally satisfied with their neighborhoods, with 82 percent of respondents giving a rating of 5 or higher on the seven-point scale. But different neighborhoods yielded different results, said Hazel Morrow-Jones, co-

author of the study and professor of city and regional planning at Ohio State.

People living downtown reported the highest levels of satisfaction in the county, rating their neighborhoods between a 6 and 7 on average.

"A lot of people may want to live downtown because there are a lot of new condominiums there and the downtown area has lots of amenities. We may have some crime problems downtown but there are lots of exciting events and cultural aspects there," Hur said.

But at the same time, some areas within about a 5-mile radius of downtown were also considered to be some of the worst neighborhoods, she said. These areas, along with areas to the east and southeast, were rated the lowest and people in these neighborhoods reported that safety from crime was 3.7 times more important to their overall satisfaction than people living in satisfactory areas.

Proximity to known problem areas and the amount of traffic were also major concerns for these residents, aspects that were not statistically important to those in more highly rated neighborhoods.

On the other hand, areas in the western and northwestern half of the county were rated as very satisfactory on average. While general appearance of the neighborhood was important to people living in both types of neighborhoods, only residents in satisfactory neighborhoods were significantly interested in access to recreational opportunities and to governmental services such as police and fire.

People in these areas were also twice as concerned with the density of housing as were their counterparts in less satisfactory neighborhoods.

The other major difference between the two types of neighborhoods

involves how people value social interaction. Only people living in higher-rated neighborhoods reported that interaction was an important factor in how satisfied they were overall in their neighborhood. People in these areas valued spending time with neighbors and participating in neighborhood activities.

"There will be certain kinds of neighborhoods and groups of people that encourage interaction and others that discourage interaction. It all depends on who you are and what you want," Morrow-Jones said.

Although previous research has shown that school quality can be important to many residents with children, it was not a focus of this study. In addition, other factors such as the decision to rent or buy a home can also impact satisfaction in the long term, she said.

Overall, this new research provides clear evidence that focusing on different factors in different neighborhoods may be the key to making residents in all neighborhoods happier, Hur said.

Source: Ohio State University

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