

Review: Sites break down neighborhood traits

July 2 2011, By ALEX VEIGA , AP Real Estate Writer



This screen shot shows the home page of NeighborhoodScout.com, a website that can be used to help people buying a home. The homebuying decision often hinges upon the neighborhood as much as the house. Is it safe? Is it in a good school district? Is it walking distance to parks, shopping or public transportation?(AP Photo/NeighborHoodScout.com)

(AP) -- If you find a home on the market that has the right look, amenities and price, you're still only halfway there.

That's because a neighborhood is often as big a consideration as the house itself. Before you buy, you need to know if it's safe. Are the schools nearby any good? Are there parks, shopping centers or public transportation within walking distance?

Fortunately, there are more than a few websites that can help answer these questions and more.

SAFE NEIGHBORHOOD?

What makes a neighborhood livable is entirely subjective. It depends on the lifestyle you're seeking. But, crime is one concern just about everyone shares.

As a test, I selected a neighborhood in Los Angeles called Los Feliz, which is about 5 miles from downtown, and ran it through PolicyMap.com, NeighborhoodScout.com, CriminalSearches.com and newcomer Trulia.com, which recently launched its Crime Maps feature.

Overall, I found Trulia's approach most compelling. The site's maps allow you to visualize where -and to what degree- crime may be happening, down to the street level. The service is free, unlike NeighborhoodScout, which requires a paid subscription to access neighborhood-level crime stats. Those plans run between \$39.99 a month and six payments of \$19.99 for a half-year subscription.

Trulia uses data from the [FBI](#) and local [law enforcement agencies](#) on reported crimes, such as burglaries, assaults, shootings and [vandalism](#). It then illustrates the concentration of crimes per block over a 12-month period on a color-coded map. The site also shows any individual crimes that have been reported within a span of just over a week, although the incidents I saw represented a snapshot that was more than a month old.

At present, Trulia only has crime maps for 50 U.S. counties, Los Angeles being one of them.

One drawback is that the site doesn't let you search by address or ZIP code, which means you have to know where to look on the map to find

the neighborhood you're interested in. It's easy to see how this would be a hassle for anyone planning to move to an unfamiliar city.

The company says it plans to add a better search function, along with the ability to view the crime data across a wider time frame.

Trulia also lets users comment on the incidents of reported crime to add the perspective of residents in the area. The idea is for residents to provide context that might get lost in a trove of crime report figures. For example, in some [neighborhoods](#), a concentration of alcohol-related arrests may be due to there being several night clubs on a given block, and not necessarily indicative of an area being unsafe.

I like the visual feel of Trulia's Crime Maps. And seeing a square block area cast in crime-riddled red makes it easy enough to avoid.

Similarly sobering is CriminalSearches' Neighborhood Watch section, which lets users enter a ZIP code or address and whips up a street map dotted with locations for registered sex offenders. The site also provides details about the individuals, including their full name, last known address and what type of crime they committed.

The portal also collects data from traffic and other minor offenses, and warns not all of the people listed may actually be criminals.

GOOD SCHOOLS?

Another factor that can make or break someone's view of a neighborhood is the strength of its schools

Several websites offer an assortment of school and neighborhood data. Their school profiles are generally assembled by mining public school and demographic data. As a result, details on private schools are harder

to come by.

I tried out five sites: Zillow.com, GreatSchools.com, NeighborhoodScout, SchoolMatters.com and Education.com. Although they all hit on major data points, such as test scores and teacher-to-student ratios, Zillow was better at placing the school results in the context of a home buying decision.

Zillow lets users search a map for neighborhoods and shows where schools are located. The real estate site also lists school profiles from the National Center for Education Statistics and Education.com.

Users can find testing data, teacher information and a demographic overview of the school's student population.

But I liked GreatSchools best. It also provides details on spending per student, teacher experience and extracurricular programs.

The site grades schools on a five-star system derived, in part, by comparing scores on state standardized tests. And it features parent feedback and online forums, where visitors can pose questions and discuss their concerns.

CONVENIENT LIFESTYLE?

If you're like me, you look for neighborhoods where you can get to a restaurant, bar or the drugstore and supermarket without having to drive - what is known as the walkability factor.

It's easy to dial up the location of nearby restaurants on real estate and mapping websites, as well as many smartphone apps. But Walkscore.com takes a different approach, using an algorithm that promises to determine a property's overall walkability.

The site's formula discerns how close a home is to retail shops, public transportation and other conveniences. It then generates a walkability score between 0-100. The higher the score, the more likely the property is within a walking distance of neighborhood businesses.

Homes that score 70 or above represent a very walkable neighborhood. Many properties in dense urban metros, like Manhattan, score very high. The more walkable the particular neighborhood, the higher the score. For instance, the Upper West Side scores a perfect 100.

Los Feliz comes in at a respectable 78.

Now, having been there many times, I didn't need Walkscore to tell me that Los Feliz is a walkable neighborhood, but if I was moving out here and researching where to live, I'd check out the site early on.

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For those in need of a comprehensive, dossier-like report on a neighborhood, there's little you can't find on PolicyMap.

The site pulls together U.S. Census data, which is particularly useful in sizing up population traits such as age, ethnicity, education level and even voting patterns.

The site is free, but offers subscription plans for expanded information. Sign up for the week-long free trial and you can get a report on the neighborhood, or even state, surrounding a specific address.

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