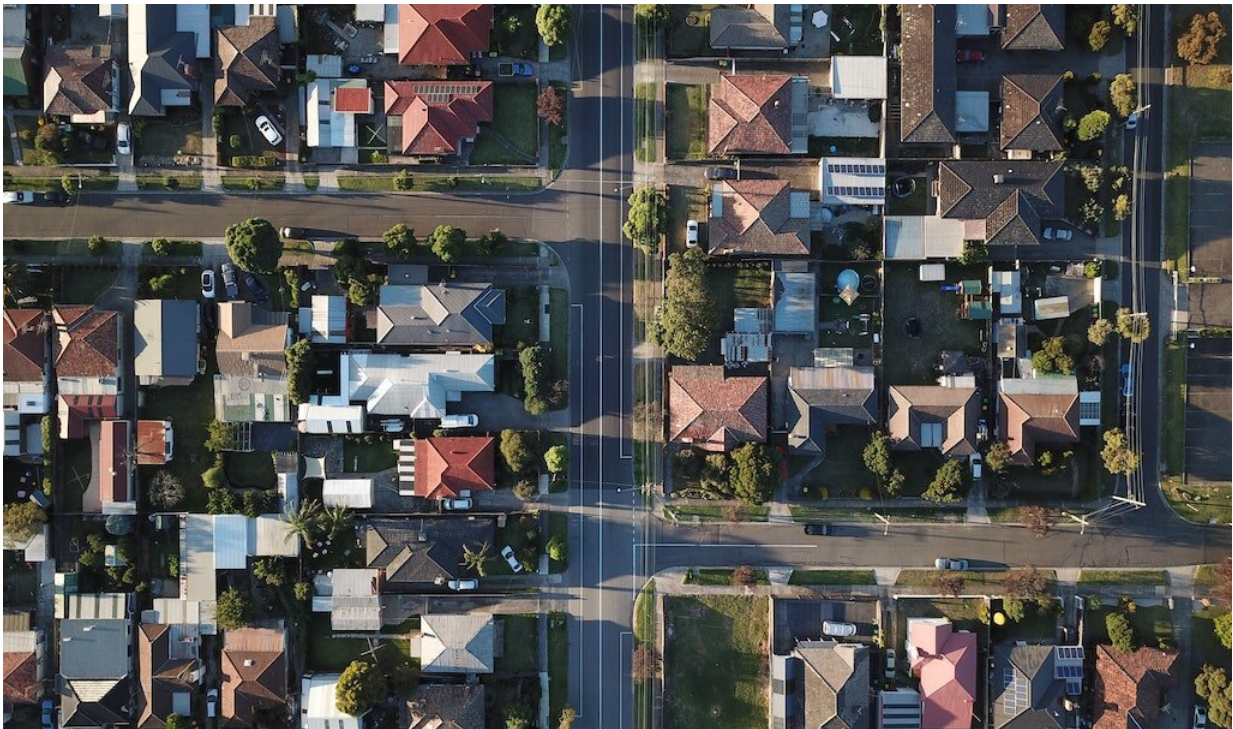


It's a beautiful day in the neighborhood... or is it?

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A Michigan State University researcher conducted a study to quantify what makes people happy with their neighborhoods and discovered that it has almost nothing to do with the neighborhood itself. Credit: Royalty free via Upsplash

How do you feel about your neighborhood now that you've been confined during a pandemic? A Michigan State University researcher conducted a study to quantify what makes people happy with their

neighborhoods and discovered that it has almost nothing to do with the neighborhood itself.

"It's all in our heads," said Zachary Neal, associate professor of psychology at MSU and author of the study. "Contrary to what many would think, characteristics of your neighborhood have little to do with how satisfied you are with it."

Published in the journal *Urban Studies*, Neal's research revisited findings from 27 earlier studies that spanned 11 countries in North America, Europe and Asia, and included a sample of more than 400,000 adults living in those neighborhoods. Each study estimated how much an individual's [satisfaction](#) with his or her neighborhood depended on the neighborhood itself.

"I was interested in what makes people satisfied with their neighborhoods and whether there's anything the residents or city planners could do to improve satisfaction," Neal said. "Previous research about what matters has been mixed, which made me wonder if this research is looking for something that doesn't exist and that maybe neighborhoods really don't have much to do with how satisfied people say they are."

By combining each study's estimate using meta-analysis, Neal computed a more precise estimate of the true impact of neighborhoods. He found that all the characteristics of a community neighborhood—from curb appeal to its services, like snow plowing—account for just about 16% of a person's satisfaction with the neighborhood.

"Each study included an ICC, or intraclass correlation coefficient, which indicates how similar satisfaction is among people in the same neighborhood," Neal said. "Across these studies, the ICC values were quite low, which means there is a lot of variation in satisfaction even

among people in the same neighborhood. That tells us something besides the neighborhood itself is responsible for how much satisfaction each person reports having."

Neal explained that having a clear understanding of what makes people satisfied with their communities is critical for people whose jobs are connected with building and maintaining neighborhoods, such as local officials, developers and city planners. Additionally, enormous amounts of money go into neighborhood maintenance; but, if people aren't so concerned with neighborhood characteristics, then these efforts may not translate into increased satisfaction.

So, what does satisfaction depend on? Neal shared two likely prospects.

"One possible explanation is that a person's satisfaction may depend more on the person than on the neighborhood," Neal said. "Agreeable people are likely to be satisfied with their neighborhood, but there will always be others who think that the grass is greener elsewhere."

The second possible determinant relates to a resident's perception of the neighborhood as opposed to what it actually is.

"Perhaps neighborhood satisfaction, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder," Neal said. "We might expect residents to be more satisfied with their neighborhood if its schools are good. But, in practice, they will be more satisfied if they merely think its schools are good, even if the schools aren't actually that great."

With millions of people staying home during the COVID-19 pandemic, Neal said there's a chance they might see their communities through a different lens.

"It's still early to tell, but the longer we are confined to our own

[neighborhoods](#), the more perceptions of them might change," Neal said. "I'm collecting new data about neighborhood satisfaction in Michigan during the stay-at-home order and hope to collect these data again after the order is lifted so we can understand how things are changing."

More information: Zachary Neal, Does the neighbourhood matter for neighbourhood satisfaction? A meta-analysis, *Urban Studies* (2020).

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