



# Quality of life in cities – Empirical evidence in comparative European perspective

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigated aspects of urban quality of life in European cities. To this end, the Flash Eurobarometer 366: Quality of life in European cities was used. The survey provides opinions of 41 thousands inhabitants from 79 European cities, which enables analysis of interrelation between citizen characteristics, neighbourhood and city contexts and satisfaction with life in a city. The study analysed the following dimensions potentially related to satisfaction with life in a city: (1) availability of services, environment and social aspects in cities and neighbourhood; (2) socio-demographic factors; and (3) city characteristics such as economic development, labour market pressures, size, location, quality of institutions and safety.

Findings indicated that satisfaction with life in a city varied considerably both inside cities and across Europe. Dissatisfaction with public transport, cultural facilities, availability of retail outlets, green space, air quality, trustworthiness of people, public administration and administrative efficiency, contributed significantly to dissatisfaction with life in a city. However, when citizens felt secure and satisfied with their place of living, they were also more likely to be satisfied with life in a city. Finally, cities with high percentage of people satisfied with safety in a city tended to be those in which citizens were also more satisfied with life in a city.

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## 1. Introduction

Current focus of urban, social and even economic policy is on cities. Cities, seeking to attract capital and investors to develop large-scale urban projects, are believed to be becoming not only entrepreneurs, (Hartley, Potts, MacDonald, Erkunt, & Kufleitner, 2012; Vivant, 2013) but also smart living places, attracting creative individuals to become new citizens (Florida, 2005; Institute for Urban Strategies, 2014; Zenker, Eggers, & Farsky, 2013). Due to the constant emphasis on growth, the aim is not only to attract new but also to encourage existing residents to stay. This requires action to ensure citizens' adequate satisfaction with city life. One mean to achieve this end is proper urban planning, meeting citizens' needs and desires and ensuring quality of community (Smith, Nelischer, & Perkins, 1997).

Urban and community quality of life has become central to policy in most European Union (EU) countries, as reflected by numerous European and governmental papers on policy, as well as scientific publications presenting conceptual visions towards developing conditions for life in cities (Banai & Rapino, 2009; Insch & Florek, 2008; Sirgy & Cornwell, 2002; Smith et al., 1997; van Kamp, Leidelmeijer, Marsman, & de Hollander, 2003). These visions are mainly theoretical, seldom supported by empirical analysis due to the obvious limitations to a

visionary, forward-looking landscape or urban planning perspective (van Kamp et al., 2003). Therefore, this article was written to heed the call of scholars for more evidence on various aspects of city life and city features contributing to urban quality of life (Ballas & Dorling, 2013; Insch, 2010; Insch & Florek, 2008, 2010; Zenker & Rütter, 2014). This article makes distinctions between city, neighbourhood and citizen specific factors. A comparative European perspective is adopted to limit case-specificity of results. The following research questions were posed:

- Q1. Does general perception of a city contribute to urban quality of life reported by citizens?
- Q2. Do city specific features related to availability of services, environment, social factors and institutions contribute to urban quality of life reported by citizens?
- Q3. Is citizens' focus neighbourhood oriented or general in their assessment of urban quality of life?

Evidence to address these questions was from the Flash Eurobarometer 366: Quality of life in European cities (European Union, 2013). This represented the opinion of about 41 thousands citizens from 79 European cities about a city, neighbourhood as well as the personal situation of citizens. This type of data allow us to accommodate the hierarchical nature of city life, which simultaneously applies to individuals (living in households), households (residing in

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communities), neighbourhoods and communities (nested in cities) and cities (nested in regions, countries, etc.) (Ballas & Tranmer, 2012; Marans, 2015). Consequently, influence of both individual and household level characteristics, and also neighbourhood and city contexts were investigated together.

The paragraphs below describe the concept of urban quality of life. Next follows a description of methods with emphasis on data sources, choice of variables and model specification. The findings presented form the base for discussion and conclusions covering limitations of the study.

## 2. Urban quality of life

Of the various geographically defined spaces, this study concentrated on cities. To identify factors associated with the quality of life in a city, literature was reviewed covering studies on urban design, urban quality of life and neighbourhood/place/residential/city satisfaction and preference. The focus was on both satisfaction with the place and urban quality of life, since both these measures have been established as positively associated with satisfaction and quality of life (Ge & Hokao, 2006; Marans, 2015) and found to attract people to live in certain places (Kahrik, Temelova, Kadarik, & Kubes, 2015). Additionally, community quality has been accepted as a precondition for typical economic and cultural activities and contribution to quality of life in general (Ge & Hokao, 2006). Furthermore, it has been shown that place or residential satisfaction are prerequisites for commitment to a place (Zenker, Petersen, & Aholt, 2013), place or city attachment (Florek, 2011; Insch & Florek, 2008), place identity (Hernández, Carmen Hidalgo, Salazar-Laplace, & Hess, 2007) or city loyalty (Florek, 2011). Such affective bonds not only reduce intention to leave a place (Zenker & Rütter, 2014) but also encourage investment in neighbourhood relations and community life (Jacobs & Appleyard, 1987; Kahrik et al., 2015). A comprehensive review of theoretical approaches to research on life satisfaction or quality of life and associations with place and, in particular, city life can be found in Ge and Hokao (2006); Insch and Florek (2008) and Smith et al. (1997), while a comprehensive review of empirical studies addressing the association between place, space and well-being can be found in Ballas and Tranmer (2012).

Cities are often regarded as bundles of services provided to citizens (Gory, Ward, & Sherman, 1985; Insch & Florek, 2010). The needs and wants of citizens correspond to both social and economic city operation. The former focuses on cooperation and interaction between citizens and their satisfaction (Zenker & Rütter, 2014). The latter emphasises the industrial and functional dimensions of economic specialisation (Brunelle, 2013), which, from the citizen's perspective, implies the availability of work (Verstock, 1996). These needs are reflected by vision in city planning and urban design manifestos, designed to improve people's life quality. Following major theoretical approaches to urban design and planning, quality of urban community and urban quality of life, there are several distinct aspects arising at multiple scales (e.g., regional, metropolitan, sub-metropolitan, neighbourhood) that should be addressed by urban planners to render a city liveable (Ballas & Dorling, 2013; Banai & Rapino, 2009; Clifton, Ewing, Knaap, & Song, 2008; Jacobs & Appleyard, 1987; Lynch & Rodwin, 1958; Smith et al., 1997). These are:

1. Physical features such as size and location of urban block, buildings, streets, pedestrian ways, open space vegetation and featured areas (Clifton et al., 2008; Smith et al., 1997);
2. Accessibility understood as convenient access to retail shops, parking spaces, schools, sport facilities, cultural facilities and labour market (Banai & Rapino, 2009; Clifton et al., 2008; Smith et al., 1997);
3. Liveability perceived in terms of survival, i.e., related to access to healthcare, personal health and health of the environment and to safety understood as lack of danger and sense of assurance (Smith et al., 1997);

4. Communication comprising telecommunication technologies and transportation (Banai & Rapino, 2009);
5. Character reflected by sense of place and time, stability, warmth and aesthetics (Smith et al., 1997);
6. Personal freedom comprising freedom of expression, privacy and affordability but also allowing control (Smith et al., 1997).

These belong to physical, social, environmental and economic features of a city (Sirgy & Cornwell, 2002) and their presence should contribute to better urban quality of life. Examples of city features/facilities associated with urban quality of life used in research are presented in Table 1.

In this study the physical, social, environmental and economic features of a city were complemented by institutional factors reflecting quality and efficiency of local government. This choice is justified by numerous recent political and scientific debates (Holmberg et al., 2009), in addition to empirical studies that reveal quality of governmental services and the rule of law as important determinants for quality of life (Bénger & Verdier-Chouchane, 2007; Hagerty et al., 2001), well-being (Charron et al., 2014) and happiness (Frey & Stutzer, 2000).

**Table 1**

City features associated with urban quality of life used in research.

Type	Examples
Physical features	Parks and gardens, historic buildings and museums (Insch & Florek, 2010; Türksever & Atalik, 2001; Zenker, Petersen, et al., 2013) Culture, the arts and creative scenes (Ge & Hokao, 2006; Insch & Florek, 2010; Zenker, Petersen, et al., 2013) Public transport efficiency and availability (Insch & Florek, 2010; McCrea, Stimson, & Western, 2005; Türksever & Atalik, 2001) Access to services such as education and health care provision (Baum, Arthurson, & Rickson, 2010; McCrea et al., 2005; Türksever & Atalik, 2001; Zenker, Petersen, et al., 2013) Sports grounds and facilities (Insch & Florek, 2010; Türksever & Atalik, 2001) Shopping facilities (Banai & Rapino, 2009; Clifton et al., 2008; Lynch & Rodwin, 1958; Zenker & Rütter, 2014) Density of population (Lee & Guest, 1983; Parkes, Kearns, & Atkinson, 2002) Public spaces such as squares, streets and pedestrian areas (Jacobs & Appleyard, 1987; Lynch & Rodwin, 1958; Smith et al., 1997)
Features of a social nature	Openness and tolerance (Zenker, Petersen, et al., 2013) Perception of neighbourhood problems (Baum et al., 2010) Neighbourhood interactions (Baum et al., 2010; Kahrik et al., 2015; McCrea et al., 2005) Existence of private and social networks (e.g. family and friends) (Dimitris Ballas & Dorling, 2013; Parkes et al., 2002; Zenker & Rütter, 2014) Personal and public safety (Clifton et al., 2008; Insch & Florek, 2010; Parkes et al., 2002; Smith et al., 1997)
Environmental features	Natural environment (Ge & Hokao, 2006; Insch & Florek, 2010; Türksever & Atalik, 2001) Panorama and landscape (Insch & Florek, 2010) Low pollution (Türksever & Atalik, 2001; Zenker, Petersen, et al., 2013) Tranquillity/noise (Baum et al., 2010; Türksever & Atalik, 2001; Zenker, Petersen, et al., 2013) Cleanliness (Zenker, Petersen, et al., 2013)
Economic features	Housing market and housing conditions (Sirgy & Cornwell, 2002; Türksever & Atalik, 2001; Zenker, Petersen, et al., 2013) Labour market opportunities (Zenker, Petersen, et al., 2013) Cost of living (McCrea et al., 2005; Türksever & Atalik, 2001; Zenker, Petersen, et al., 2013) Local taxes (Türksever & Atalik, 2001)
Institutional features	Quality of governmental services and the rule of law (Charron, Dijkstra, & Lapuente, 2014; Frey & Stutzer, 2000; Holmberg, Rothstein, & Nasiritousi, 2009)

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