Is This a Good Place to Live?
Measuring Community Quality of Life for All Ages

Rodney Harrell, Jana Lynott, and Shannon Guzman
AARP Public Policy Institute

What makes a community livable? How should we measure the qualities of a community? These are key questions with no universally accepted answers. This In Brief explores the meaning of livability, examines previous efforts to evaluate the livability of communities, and describes AARP’s current work to quantify and compare livability, with a special focus on the preferences of the older population and the needs of people as they age.

Why Measure Livability?
Measuring livability shows how prepared communities are to meet the challenges of an expanding older adult population. As people choose to remain in their homes, the communities we create should accommodate all residents, regardless of age, physical ability, income, or other factors.

Measuring livability helps local decision makers understand what is happening within their communities today, including the assets and the flaws of their communities. This information is vital for creating policies and programs that meet the diverse needs of residents in the future.

Factors Shaping Our Definition of Livable Communities
AARP defines a livable community as “one that is safe and secure, has affordable and appropriate housing and transportation options, and offers supportive community features and services.” This definition is derived from principles that guide AARP’s livable communities research and policies. AARP’s policies inform and assist local decision makers in creating communities that enhance people’s lives and are suitable for all residents.

Approaches to Measuring Livability
Several approaches exist for measuring livability, including preference surveys, original data collection, case studies, Census Bureau studies, and online databases. All are useful, but each has limitations. No one method can provide all the data necessary to comprehensively measure community livability. (For more information about AARP Public Policy Institute’s community preference research, see In Brief 216, “What Is Livable? Community Preferences of Older Adults.”)

AARP is in the process of developing a Livability Index that addresses the shortcomings of various existing approaches. Our research provides several lessons for the development of a livability index:

- Individual preferences for livability include some issues that can be
addressed by public policy and others that cannot.

- People and communities have differing perspectives: one type of community does not fit all.
- Perceptions of a livable community often are made when a person is choosing housing and may not adapt as a person ages, unless a major life change forces a new perspective.

**How to Develop an Index**

From our research, we determined that a livability index must achieve the following:

- Be relevant and useful to existing efforts to improve community livability.
- Incorporate the needs of older adults into a measure of general livability.
- Be useful for informing people about what they need as they age.
- Help policy makers, planners, and others better understand the needs of an aging population and the steps that can be taken to improve livability.
- Be relevant to all, no matter where they live, what their background may be, or what their income is.

- Acknowledge data limitations.

AARP Public Policy Institute’s development of a Livability Index began with a review of its previous livability surveys and other efforts to measure livability. It continued with focus groups and a nationwide community preference survey specifically designed to uncover the diverse needs and wants of the older adult population.

The index will accomplish the following:

- Take a wide range of individual preferences into account.
- Include objective indicators to measure what a community looks like and how well it meets the diverse needs of community residents.
- Take into account policy interventions as a key indicator of a community’s potential to improve over time.

These lessons will help us pursue further research in this area. The index will (a) show how well communities are prepared for aging, (b) help inform policy makers about how to improve their communities, and (c) let individuals answer the question: “Is this a good place to live?”

**Endnotes**


2. Ibid.