Defining Quality of Life

Quality of Life can mean many things to different people. One of the most critical challenges is how to correctly and efficiently measure the concept. Many academics and planners maintain that in order for a community to enjoy a high level of quality of life, residents should feel safe from crime, live in affordable and safe housing, and should have access to good quality education and employment. Indeed, these are basic expectations for a livable community. They transcend economic status, age, race, or ethnicity, household composition, or any other demographic marker.

Beyond the basic factors there are many more subjective ideas, often framed by local or regional constructs, about what makes a neighborhood a good place to live. These ideas often revolve around the structure of a neighborhood or the lifestyle of the residents. Urban, suburban, or rural settings may translate into different scales or different ideas about what constitutes quality of life.

Despite the challenges, many cities and regions throughout North America and Europe are developing locally-based measures to assess quality of life. Studies such as the *Providence Neighborhood Fact Book*, *Jacksonville Quality-of-Life Report*, *Sustainable Indicators in Seattle*, *Oregon Benchmarks*, and the *Charlotte Neighborhood Quality of Life Study* are commonly cited prototypes. The Washington, DC-based Urban Institute has been working with a select group of U.S. cities on a "National Neighborhood Indicators Project" which compiles and documents the use of additional neighborhood-level evaluation systems around the U.S. Taken together, over 200 American communities have examined or implemented quality of life studies. Some have collected measures of quality of life incorporating local, environmental, social, and economic conditions. But most communities have relied on published data from the U.S. Census to measure quality of life.

The framework of quality of life used in this project is multi-faceted and complex. It employs a wide variety of local-based information that is integrated to a unified framework. The choice of quality of life measures is centered on factors that are important to Chesapeake residents. Thus, the Chesapeake Neighborhood Quality of Life research model defines neighborhood quality of life as the intersection between social well-being, community design or layout, crime, and economic vitality. In all, 23 analytical variables comprise this quality of life measure. In addition, six observational variables were collected. These are variables requested by cooperating government departments in order to help them meet unit goals and missions. These variables are listed on Table 1. A detailed description of each variable is also presented in Appendix A.

Table 1
Chesapeake Neighborhood Quality of Life Variables

Social Dimension

Percent of Persons over Age 64

Percent of Persons 5-19

Infant Wellness Index*

Percent of Child Welfare Cases

Percent of Persons Receiving TANF

Percent of Persons Receiving Food Stamps

Youth Opportunity Index

Crime Dimension

Category A Victim Crime Index

Category A Non-Victim Crime Index

Category B Crime Index

Physical Dimension

Percent Home Ownership

Percent Neighborhood Residential*

Percent Residential Apartment Units

Percent of Single Family Dwelling Older than 50 Years

Percent Code Enforcement

Sidewalk Index

Percent of Persons with Access to Public Transportation

Percent of Persons with Access to Basic Retail

Percent of Persons with Access to Park and Recreation

Percent of Persons near Noxious Facilities

Drainage Index

Percent of Residential Units with Private Well Failures*

Percent of Residential Units with Septic System Failures*

*Observational Variable

Economic Dimension

Percent Affordable Housing

Percent Housing Reinvestment

Change in Housing Values*

Percent Change in Income

Percent of Tax Delinquent Parcels

Population Growth*