

A NEW MEASURE OF AGE- FRIENDLINESS

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As the year 2015 came to a close, AARP celebrated the enrollment of three new members to its Network of Age-Friendly Communities (AFCs). These additions brought the network total to 72 jurisdictions, both large and small, that encompass a combined population of more than 35 million people. While these are laudable numbers for a nearly 4-year-old program, success will be measured not by the number of communities enrolled but by whether local leaders are able to create positive change in the lives of residents who span the age

spectrum. The AARP Livability Index is one tool that leaders can use to assess their performance.

AARP built the Livability Index to catalyze community conversations around what action is needed for America's communities to become more livable for people of all ages. Its audience includes local elected officials and other leadership from the public, private, and nonprofit sectors, as well as individual residents.

The Livability Index is a groundbreaking tool that scores every neighborhood and community in the United States for the services and amenities that affect people's lives the most. Using more than 50 national sources of data, the index provides the clearest picture yet of how well a community meets the current and future needs of people of all ages.

The Livability Index was designed by experts at the AARP Public Policy Institute (PPI), with guidance from a 30-member technical advisory committee, which boasts expertise in both policy and data analysis across the range of subject areas evaluated by the index. PPI and its contractor, ICF International, worked with this committee first to identify the attributes of community livability and then to determine the specific metrics, policies, and supporting data that could measure those attributes. The selection of attributes was also informed by a national survey of more than 4,500 Americans ages 50 and older about the aspects of their communities most important to them.

The Livability Index measures 60 indicators (40 quantitative metrics and 20 policies) spread across 7 categories of livability: housing, neighborhood,

**CONNECTING THE AARP LIVABILITY INDEX AND THE
AARP NETWORK OF AGE-FRIENDLY COMMUNITIES**



HOUSING

Affordability and access

AGE-FRIENDLY NETWORK DOMAIN:
Housing



TRANSPORTATION

Safe and convenient options

AGE-FRIENDLY NETWORK DOMAIN:
Transportation



HEALTH

Prevention, access, and quality

AGE-FRIENDLY NETWORK DOMAIN:
Community and health services



OPPORTUNITY

Inclusion and possibilities

AGE-FRIENDLY NETWORK DOMAIN:
Respect and inclusion
Civic participation and
employment



NEIGHBORHOOD

Access to life, work, and play

AGE-FRIENDLY NETWORK DOMAIN:
Outdoor spaces and buildings



ENVIRONMENT

Clean air and water



ENGAGEMENT

Civic and social involvement

AGE-FRIENDLY NETWORK DOMAIN:
Social participation
Respect and social inclusion
Civic participation and
employment
Communication and information

transportation, environment, health, engagement, and opportunity. These categories of livability closely align with the 8 domains of age-friendliness used by the World Health Organization as shown in the figure to the left.

The Livability Index is most powerful when used in combination with other local data and experience. For example, the index can identify which neighborhoods in the community have the highest incidence of fatal traffic crashes. Additional data are required to identify the exact location of those crashes and contributing factors. Similarly, users can map household walk trips and visually see how walk rates vary from one neighborhood to the next, but only residents can paint an accurate narrative of their experience as they try to navigate local streets and crosswalks.

The Livability Index can be used to draw attention to both local and national policy issues. County-level map layers can help people better understand the shocking geographic-based inequities across the United States today. Simply pan the map from north to south—from Minneapolis, Minnesota, to Baton Rouge, Louisiana—using any number of indicators, and it's clear very quickly just how much location matters: as you move the map changes color from predominantly green (to show locations with good performance) to predominantly red (poor performance). Poor performance on such measures such as access to exercise opportunities and healthy foods, smoking rates, and crime rates tend to correlate with perhaps the most significant quality-of-life indicator yet—life expectancy.

There are several challenges to measuring age-friendliness or livability. One is definition. In an acknowledgment of personal preferences, we designed a “Customize Your Score” feature, which allows users to adjust the weights applied to the seven categories of livability. For example, my father—who was raised on a farm and still resides just outside a small town in the Midwest—tells me, “As long as I can safely drive and have my health, I don't want to be able to look in my neighbors' windows.” He enjoys lowering the weight given to the “neighborhood” and “transportation” categories and watching his personalized score rise. Because we know access to public transportation and proximity to other services will matter when it's time for him to hang up the car keys, the “official AARP score” that he could print to share with his city council does not change.

A second challenge is that data are not always available at the most meaningful geographic scale. For instance, many of the nationwide health data in the United States are, at best, at the county level. With more localized data on such indicators as smoking, obesity, voting, and social engagement, we could more effectively target investments to those neighborhoods that need them most.

USING THE LIVABILITY INDEX IN WASHINGTON, DC

“The AARP Livability Index offers residents access to well-researched, easily understood scores to compare their own neighborhoods with other locations. Like DC, any Age-Friendly Community aspirant can use AARP's Livability Index to augment its data baselines and further engage residents in making changes in their own lives and neighborhoods. With an overall score of 58 out of 100 for all of DC, the AARP Livability Index verified issues needing improvement, which were addressed in the 2014 Age-Friendly DC strategic plan. The AARP Livability Index underscored that some DC neighborhoods fare better than others. More and more residents, Mayor Muriel Bowser's entire administration, and numerous academic and stakeholder organizations are making changes expected to elevate AARP Livability Index scores across the city by 2017. Improving Livability Index scores in neighborhoods and DC's overall score are expected to be among the outcome measures DC presents in 2017 to show that it should be welcomed among the world's age-friendly cities.”

-Gail Kohn, Washington, DC,
Age-Friendly City Coordinator



- 1 The sun shines on an AARP sponsored active living workshop in Macon-Bibb, Georgia
- 2 Puerto Rico volunteers put their heads together to solve community walkability

A third challenge is how to incorporate complex data analysis into an interactive Web design platform that welcomes the most casual visitor yet is powerful enough to stimulate action that will result in community change. To address this issue, we designed the Livability Index like an onion, where users first see a snapshot of their total and category scores and then are able to open layers of additional detail, such as metric and policy definitions, links to original data sources, and links to how-to resources and research.

The AARP Livability Index offers those engaged in age-friendly communities work a performance snapshot for 60 indicators of livability. The index can be an educational tool for community dialog, and it can be used to help inform a community's baseline assessment as well as track progress over

time. Because of the index's ability to dive down to the neighborhood level for a majority of metrics, it can serve as a reality check that helps ensure that those who are most vulnerable benefit from planned and executed interventions.

But the Livability Index should be only one of several inputs to this evaluation process. Through public engagement, AFC leaders may identify valued metrics not available through the Livability Index, or they may have access to better local data on a given metric. Most importantly, local residents should be tapped to help interpret the data and prioritize future direction. ●

To visit the AARP Livability Index: Great Neighborhoods for All Ages, go to livabilityindex.aarp.org

Share your thoughts on the Livability Index on twitter @AARPPolicy@JanaLynott #LivIndex