



# Developing Quality of Life Indicators for Canadian Municipalities

## Introduction

The term “quality of life” is frequently used in reference to standards of living, and particularly for specific places or cities. Many omnibus surveys attempt to assess how residents perceive quality of life (QoL) in their city, and whether this has improved or declined over time. Yet, while many communities use the term “quality of life” either in official plans or economic development strategies, few systematically track their communities’ progress on this concept.

The objective of this study was to develop a framework of QoL and to assess the feasibility of measuring QoL in Canadian municipalities. Specifically, is it possible to develop a set of indicators, and is data readily available from secondary sources to provide a usable tool to Canadian municipalities?

### *The Centre for Future Studies in Housing and Living Environments*

The objective of the Centre for Future Studies in Housing and Living Environments is to develop a broad-based understanding of the issues that will affect future housing and living conditions. The research priorities for the Centre are:

- the implications for housing of changes in demographic, social, and economic factors;
- the future relationship between housing and social policy;
- changing urban and rural conditions; and
- the impact of new technologies on housing and living environments.

The Centre’s work focuses on anticipating and exploring factors and trends that will affect housing and its environment over the next decade. By raising awareness of these issues, the Centre for Future Studies contributes to the development of policy at international, national, provincial and local levels.

**Few communities systematically track their residents’ progress in perceived quality of life.**

**This model  
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## **Findings**

### ***Annotated Bibliography***

The first task undertaken was to review existing literature on the subject of QoL. The focus was on Canadian content, although seminal works from the U.K. and the U.S. were included. A total of 54 studies were reviewed, then organized in chronological order from 1972 to 1992. This order is valuable, as it demonstrates how QoL research has developed to identify the major definitional, methodological and measurability issues that must be addressed in attempts to conceptualize QoL indicators.

### ***Conceptual Framework of Quality of Life***

This model attempts to measure QoL from an objective perspective, while recognizing that an individual's QoL is mediated by life experiences. The model begins with the economic, political and social contexts of the municipality, and includes other quantitative and objective domains such as physical environment, public services, dwelling, health, safety, crime, education and recreation. While all of these factors may provide some indication of the state of a municipality, individual or group characteristics are important in the perception of value attached to any of these specific measures. Therefore, characteristics such as income, education, class, ethnicity, religion, gender and age must be taken into consideration. All of these characteristics are aspects of an individual's life experiences, attitudes and values, expectations and aspirations. The combination of the objective and subjective results in satisfaction ratings in the eight domains.

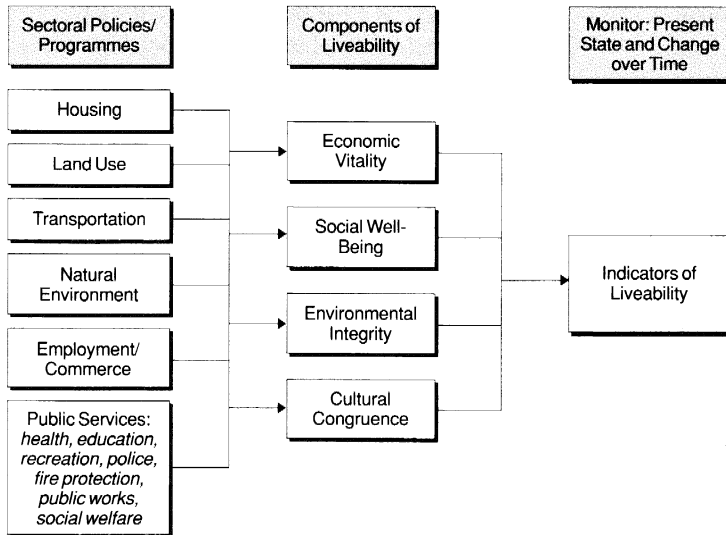
The Conceptual Framework is both comprehensive and complex. Thus it would be difficult to implement it as a policy development instrument, primarily because of the need to collect subjective measures of perceived QoL, and the associated cost.

### ***Community-Oriented Model of the Lived Environment (COMLE)***

As a more workable alternative, the COMLE was developed. The basic structure is derived from the Metropolitan Toronto Planning Department's discussion paper *Towards a Livable Metropolis*. This paper proposes an approach to planning which assures that socio-economic and environmental effects and outcomes are fundamentally related. The COMLE model looks at the way the sectoral policies and programmes interact. The list of policies and programmes are typical of what one would find in any city, either as separate departments or within the general realm of municipal government. This model incorporates all of the concepts included in the eight domains of the Conceptual Framework, but groups them in accordance with typical municipal structure, rather than at the conceptual level.

The liveable metropolis is defined by three interrelated components: economic vitality, social well-being, and environmental integrity. The model recognizes that cultural congruence, defined as the degree to which things match societal norms and expectations, moderates the effects of the other three components. These four items are identified in the model as Components of Liveability.

**Figure 1: A Community-Oriented Model of the Lived Environment**



**Socio-economic and environmental effects and outcomes are fundamentally related.**

The third segment of the model, identified in the right-hand column of Figure 1, involves the identification of indicators and specific measures of the components of liveability for each of the sectoral policies and programmes. Within the body of the report, a series of tables present those indicators and measures required to operationalize this model. In the tables, details for each sector (i.e., housing, transportation, land use, etc.) are described under the three headings of Components of Liveability, Indicators of Liveability, and Specific Measures. A listing of data sources for the indicators is included. For example, Figure 2 presents the indicators and measures for housing. For each of the three components, indicators as well as specific measures are identified. Indicators and measures are similarly recommended for each of the six sectors.

**Figure 2: Housing: Indicators and Specific Measures**

| COMPONENT               | INDICATORS         | SPECIFIC MEASURES   |
|-------------------------|--------------------|---|
| Economic Vitality       | Employment         | Housing units built per annum<br>Value of building permits  |
| Social Well-Being       | Affordability      | Percentage of tenants whose gross rent exceeds 30% of current income.<br>Percentage of owneroccupants whose housing expenditures exceed 30% of income<br>Average price of serviced residential lots |
|                         | Suitability        | Average number of persons per room  |
|                         | Adequacy           | Percentage of dwellings in need of major repair   |
|                         | Accessibility      | Waiting time for those in need  |
| Environmental Integrity | Density and Design | Population density<br>Density gradient<br>Average lot size  |

While this alternative model attempts a holistic approach in explicitly linking economic vitality, social well-being, environmental integrity, and cultural congruence, it does represent a compromise on the preferred conceptual framework. In providing a pragmatic framework that municipalities can implement, it recognizes that the cost of qualitative surveys of subjective indicators and resident perception may be prohibitive. In this sense, the COMLE provides a baseline which can and should be augmented by qualitative surveys.

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## **CONCLUSION**

Overall, the ability to quantify QoL remains somewhat elusive. This model, by being holistic, attempts to capture the subjective nature of this concept while also utilizing existing data sources which will enhance the operationalization of the model. While the focus of this study was the development of a practical tool for evaluation of QoL, the next step will be to test it.

This research highlight summarizes some of the findings in *Modelling Quality of Life Indicators in Canada. A Feasibility Analysis*, a study completed by The Institute for Social Research at York University for the Centre for Future Studies in Housing and Living Environments of Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation. For further information, contact:

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The Research and International Affairs Directorate of CMHC carries out and finances a broad range of research on the social, economic and technical aspects of housing. This CMHC Research and Development Highlight issue is one of a series intended to briefly inform you of the nature and scope of these activities.

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