

EXPLORING THE SOCIAL DIMENSION OF URBAN NEIGHBOURHOODS WITHIN THE SERBIAN CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

Measuring citizens' satisfaction with social attributes in urban neighbourhoods is important for sustainable development, community resilience, as well as for improving the quality of urban life. In Serbia, no systematic place-based research has been conducted on this topic until now, and one of the reasons is that national law doesn't recognize the neighbourhood as a relevant spatial entity. The goal of this study is to research and potentially identify a common community stance regarding social aspects of urban neighbourhoods in cities across Serbia. The identification of a common ground would help researchers, stakeholders, and decision-makers to establish priorities in their actions towards neighbourhood development, and the achievement of sustainability and resilience.

The encompassed study area comprised three centrally positioned urban neighbourhoods in three medium-sized Serbian cities with a population between 50,000 and 100,000 inhabitants: Kraljevo, Valjevo, and Kruševac. Central neighbourhoods in medium-sized cities were intentionally selected, as these are the most developed socio-spatial units nested in the most common size-based type of urban environment in Serbia. The size of the neighbourhood adopted for the purpose of this research refers to a radial physical distance of 400 meters from the place of residence of the respondents.

The survey was conducted between November 2023 and March 2024, using a combination of online questionnaires and face-to-face interviews to ensure the inclusion of respondents without access to a computer and the Internet. The respondents from all three neighbourhoods were selected using a random sampling method, securing high internal validity. The size of the respondents' sample was determined based on the adopted number of variables, including the neighbourhood size, resulting in 50 respondents per neighbourhood.

The respondents from all three studied neighbourhoods and three cities provided similar answers, thus allowing for the definition of a common ground. Namely, the results reveal that the residents were the least satisfied, i.e., the most dissatisfied with their involvement in decision-making processes regarding interventions in infrastructure, and the design and planning of their neighbourhoods. Next, most respondents were also dissatisfied with the potential for involvement in joint activities within the neighbourhood. This was followed by the sense of belonging to the neighbourhood and the sense of security. On the other hand, relations with neighbours were evaluated as the greatest social strength in the studied neighbourhoods. Overall, the social component was perceived as important by most residents from the studied neighbourhoods, regardless of gender, age, work status, and level of education.

A particularly relevant finding from this research concerns the high observed contrast between measured satisfaction with interpersonal relationships and the sense of belonging to the community (which can be explained by the wider cultural context) on the one hand, and the dissatisfaction with possibilities for participation in neighbourhood planning and development processes on the other hand. Furthermore, the results indicate that citizens are aware of the shortcomings in their neighbourhoods. Bearing the aforementioned in mind, the course of future actions for researchers, stakeholders, and decision-makers should be straightforwardly directed towards exploring optimal models for citizen engagement in neighbourhood planning and design.

Keywords: urban neighbourhood, residents' satisfaction, social attributes, participation, planning and development

INTRODUCTION

Social indicators constitute a primary set of metrics for urban and global sustainable development, recognized alongside economic factors as drivers of overall progress (Milovanović & Lekić, 2018). Simultaneously, social aspects are crucial for resilience. While sustainability and resilience encompass different meanings (Stamenković & Vujičić, 2018), their social dimensions are often complementary (Kosanović et al., 2018). For instance, strong social relations enhance social capital, a sustainable development indicator, and concurrently bolster community resilience. Consequently, residents' satisfaction with social attributes is vital for achieving both sustainable urban development and community resilience. This paper aims to examine social attributes within Serbian urban neighbourhoods, addressing a gap in systematic research that currently hinders the development of policies grounded in actual community needs.

Given the complex, multi-layered nature of urban space, the neighbourhood emerges as a pertinent scale for analysis, measurement, monitoring, and the formulation of guidelines for potential interventions and future development. This is supported by numerous recent evaluation models, research, and publications focusing on neighbourhoods (Barton, Grant & Guise, 2021; Talen, 2019; Galster, 2019; Martí et al., 2022). Nevertheless, Serbian law does not officially recognize neighbourhoods as spatial units, which constrains strategic urban planning at the local level. This lack of formal recognition is not unique, as a universally accepted definition of neighbourhood remains elusive in scientific discourse (Galster, 2019). On the other hand, the neighbourhood, alongside the district and the corridor, is acknowledged as a fundamental organizational element of urban space (Duany & Plater-Zyberk, 1993), with its precise definition often tailored to the specific objectives of research or planned spatial interventions, as highlighted by Barton et al. (2010).

One of the central assumptions of this research, examining social attributes in Serbian urban neighbourhoods, concerns the limited participation of citizens in shaping their built environment. Residents often lack opportunities to influence decisions regarding their immediate surroundings, a situation exacerbated by insufficient institutional support and a degree of resident disengagement stemming from a perceived inability to affect decisions made by authorities. Furthermore, the involvement of stakeholders from other spheres (political, economic, etc.) in urban planning can lead to outcomes that do not fully align with residents' needs. Evaluating participation in planning presents an additional challenge, as Laurian and Shaw (2008) noted, citing the lack of clear definitions, authoritative criteria, and consistent methodologies.

While citizens' dissatisfaction with involvement in the planning process alone may not directly correlate with overall quality of life, the built environment's impact on residents' health and well-being (Lekić, Miletić & Fikfak, 2018) suggests an indirect link. Dissatisfaction with the built environment can have multifaceted negative effects on health, thus implying a connection between participation in planning and quality of life.

Anderson and Baldwin (2017) argue that local participation in urban design can positively influence residents' well-being and community empowerment. Similarly, Miltin (2008) emphasizes the necessity of citizen participation for equitable democratic citizenship and for developing effective interventions that best address residents' needs. In the context of resilience during emergency situations, Jakubowski (2013) noted that all urban planning participants, including citizens, must share both knowledge and creativity to optimally manage such events. From a social sustainability perspective, actions related to civic participation and the development of citizen governance, as well as processes at the neighbourhood, town, and city levels, directly impact the improvement of urban resilience (LopezDeAsiain & Díaz-García, 2020).

The preceding points underscore the necessity of finding a "balance between rights and responsibilities of the different actors in order to create resilient cities for the future" (Eraydin, 2013, p. 15). Compounding these challenges, the absence of a clear development strategy for urban sustainability and community resilience in Serbia further complicates efforts to improve long-term quality of life. This study, therefore, aims to contribute to neighbourhood development by identifying pathways to enhance sustainability and resilience, ultimately making a theoretical contribution to improving urban quality of life through the strengthening of social cohesion and participation.

STUDY CRITERIA

Reviewing models for evaluating the built environment at the neighbourhood level reveals that safety, inclusion, that is, social engagement, and sense of place are the most frequent social criteria. These criteria are represented by varying indicators depending on the model's focus. For the purposes of this research, five key, interdependent criteria shaping neighbourhood life are singled out.

The first is relations with neighbours, as strong social connections demonstrably improve both mental and physical well-being (Holt-Lunstad, 2021) and are key to feeling connected to a place (Lestari & Sumabrata, 2018). The second is safety concerns, since crime and vandalism can significantly impact residents' sense of safety and overall quality of life (Putrik et al., 2019). Participation in joint activities, the third criterion, reflects

community engagement. This is important for several reasons. For example, residents who participate in improving the place through various joint activities and volunteering are most connected to their neighbourhood (Li et al., 2023). Also, research has shown that joint activities have positive effects on health and social outcomes (Ide et al., 2023). The fourth is involvement in planning and decision-making, which measures whether residents feel they have a say in shaping their urban environment. This criterion also affects neighbourhood attachment, since engaged neighbourhood residents develop a sense of pride, trust, and ownership, further strengthening social relationships and improving well-being. Finally, the sense of belonging, i.e. neighbourhood attachment was examined, as strong neighbourhood identity can prevent social isolation and encourage long-term residence (Andersen, 2008).

All five mentioned interdependent criteria are vital for creating resilient neighbourhoods, or, as Larimian et al. (2020, p. 15) emphasized, "residents of a socially resilient neighbourhood recognise and present strong social networks and sense of belonging, which enable them to work together and support each other towards shared objectives to collectively improve the safety and well-being of their neighbourhood".

METHODOLOGY

This study employed the survey method as the most relevant approach for examining social aspects. Data collection involved a combination of online questionnaires and face-to-face interviews to ensure a diverse respondent pool, including individuals without internet access. The survey was conducted between November 2023 and March 2024. Study areas were selected based on the criteria that they were urban neighbourhoods located in at least three different cities. The chosen cities – Kraljevo, Valjevo, and Kruševac – are medium-sized (population 50,000–100,000) and were selected as representative of the most common urban size in Serbia. Given the absence of a definition for neighbourhoods in Serbia, a 400-meter radius around respondents' homes was used to define the study area. This distance was adopted based on walkability principles (Duany & Plater-Zyberk, 1993; Ekkel & de Vries, 2017).

The survey presented in this research is part of a larger questionnaire designed for the author's doctoral dissertation. The full questionnaire contains seven variables with multiple items: communal infrastructure, traffic infrastructure, functions and facilities, green and blue infrastructure, built structures, social aspects, and hazard/risks. For this study, items related to social aspects were relevant. The first section of the survey collects sociodemographic data of the respondents (gender, age, level of education, employment, housing unit), while the second part examines social aspects in the neighbourhood.

Consistent with the Study Criteria section, five items were used in this study to examine social attributes. The questions, presented as statements, were as follows: 1. "I am satisfied with the relations I have with my neighbours"; 2. "I feel safe from robberies and vandalism in my neighbourhood"; 3. "In my neighbourhood, people are involved in various communal activities"; 4. "In my neighbourhood, people are involved in making decisions about changes in infrastructure, design, and environmental planning"; 5. "I feel that I belong to this neighbourhood". An additional sixth question asks respondents to rate the importance of social aspects in their neighbourhood ("Please rate on a scale of 1 to 5 how important it is for you that your neighbourhood has good social aspects").

A five-point Likert scale (1 = 'completely disagree' to 5 = 'completely agree') was used to measure respondents' attitudes. Considering that the neighbourhoods in which the survey was conducted are located in different cities and have varying numbers of inhabitants, and because the exact number of inhabitants differs from neighbourhood to neighbourhood, the number of respondents was defined differently than in cases where the population size for which the survey is intended is known. In this case the sample size was determined based on the number of examined items, adhering to a minimum respondent-to-item ratio of 5:1 (Memon et al., 2020). For this research, a more conservative 10:1 ratio was employed, resulting in 50 respondents per neighbourhood, given the five examined items. Therefore, within each neighbourhood, 50 residents were randomly selected from a single residential block to ensure a balanced sample representing diverse demographic and social backgrounds. The selected residential blocks are located in central city zones, as these represent the most developed urban areas (Figure 1). For processing the comprehensive survey data, a multilevel linear regression statistical method was employed. However, for the specific objectives of this research, the results were analysed and presented using descriptive statistics and data comparisons.

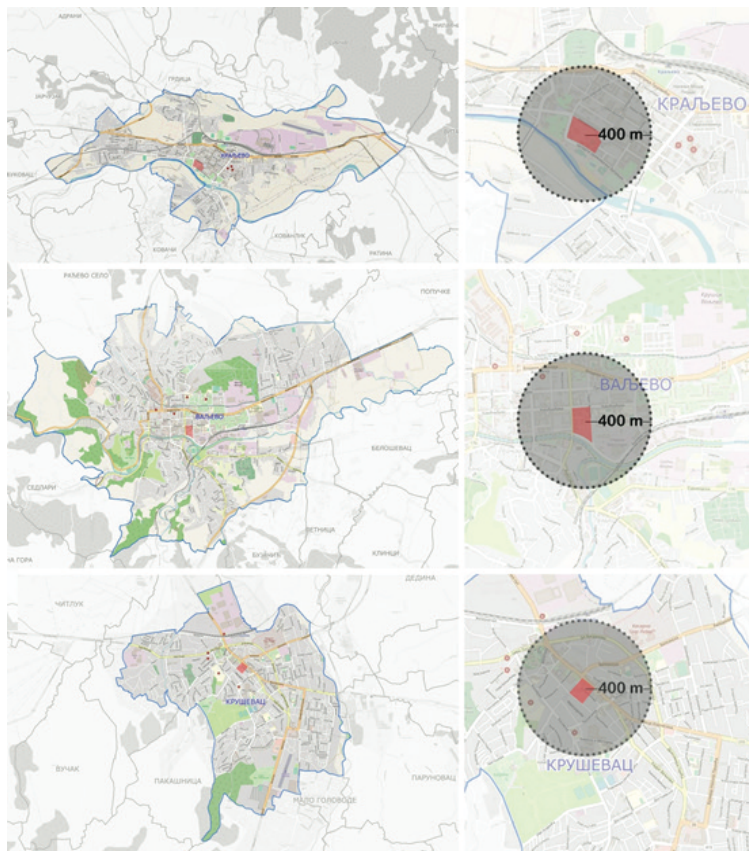


Figure 1: Study areas: 400-meter radius around selected residential blocks in the city centres of Valjevo, Kruševac, and Kraljevo

RESULTS

Of the 150 respondents across the three neighbourhoods, 62 were male and 88 were female. The majority of respondents were aged 36–55 and held a faculty degree. Regarding employment status, most respondents were employed, while retirees constituted the smallest group. Given the central urban location of the survey, a significant majority (74%) of respondents resided in apartments (Table 1).

	Number	Percent
Gender		
Male	62	41,33
Female	88	58,66
Age		
15-25	25	16,67
26-35	13	8,67
36-45	57	38
46-55	51	34
56-70	8	5,33
over 70	6	4
Level of education		
Elementary school	2	1,33
High school	54	36
Faculty	80	53,33
Master's degree	12	8
Ph.D.	2	1,33
Employment		
Employed	112	74,67
Unemployed	14	9,33
Pupil/student	18	12
Pensioner	6	4
Housing unit		
Apartment	111	74
House	39	26

Table 1: Sociodemographic characteristics of participants included in the study

The study revealed similar perceptions of neighbourhood social attributes across residents of all three cities (Figure 2). This consistency provides a robust foundation for establishing a common understanding of social aspects in Serbian urban neighbourhoods.

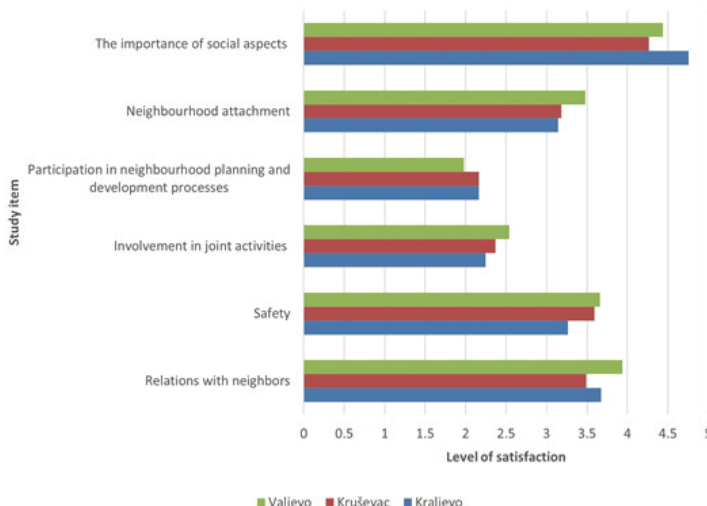


Figure 2: Survey results by cities

Comparing the results by study items (arithmetic mean and standard deviation, as shown in Table 2), neighbourly relations, identified as the most valued social attribute, received the highest rating in the city of Valjevo. Respondents in Kraljevo neighbourhood reported slightly lower satisfaction, while those in Kruševac were the least satisfied with neighbourly relations

Safety aspects also received the highest rating in Valjevo and the lowest in Kraljevo, with results from the neighbourhood in Kruševac falling between these two cities. Similarly, respondents in Valjevo's neighbourhood gave the highest rating to involvement in joint activities, followed by Kruševac, with Kraljevo having the lowest score for this aspect.

Regarding participation in neighbourhood planning and development processes, contrary to the previous three items, this attribute received the lowest rating in Valjevo. The mean results in Kraljevo and Kruševac for this item were identical. Neighbourhood attachment followed the same rating pattern as safety and involvement in joint activities: Valjevo had the highest rating, followed by Kruševac, and then Kraljevo.

While Kraljevo had the lowest rating for most study items (specifically 3 out of 5), the importance of social aspects was rated highest there compared to the other two cities. Following Kraljevo, Valjevo had the next highest rating for the importance of social aspects, and then Kruševac, where social aspects were considered the least important by respondents. It was observed that Valjevo had the highest scores for the largest number of items (4 out of 5), but simultaneously, participation in neighbourhood planning and development processes received the lowest rating in this city.

The average mean across all three neighbourhoods and for all examined aspects (excluding the importance of social aspects) was slightly below the neutral attitude value (2.99), with a standard deviation of 1.04, indicating a wide range of opinions, as illustrated in Figure 2.

	Mean	SD
Relations with neighbours		
Valjevo	3,94	0,75
Kruševac	3,49	0,87
Kraljevo	3,67	0,99
Safety		
Valjevo	3,66	0,95
Kruševac	3,59	1,08
Kraljevo	3,27	1,15
Involvement in joint activities		
Valjevo	2,54	1,33
Kruševac	2,37	1,01
Kraljevo	2,24	1,05
Participation in neighbourhood planning and development processes		
Valjevo	1,98	1,11
Kruševac	2,16	1,01
Kraljevo	2,16	1,14
Neighbourhood attachment		
Valjevo	3,48	1,14
Kruševac	3,18	0,95
Kraljevo	3,14	1,14
Average	2,99	1,04

Table 2. The arithmetic means and standard deviation results by study items

In summary, respondents expressed the least satisfaction with their involvement in neighbourhood planning and development decision-making processes (Figure 3). This is followed by involvement in joint activities. Next was the sense of belonging to the neighbourhood and sense of safety from crime and vandalism, while relations with neighbours were the most valued. Overall, the results indicate that social aspects are highly important to residents across all three neighbourhoods.

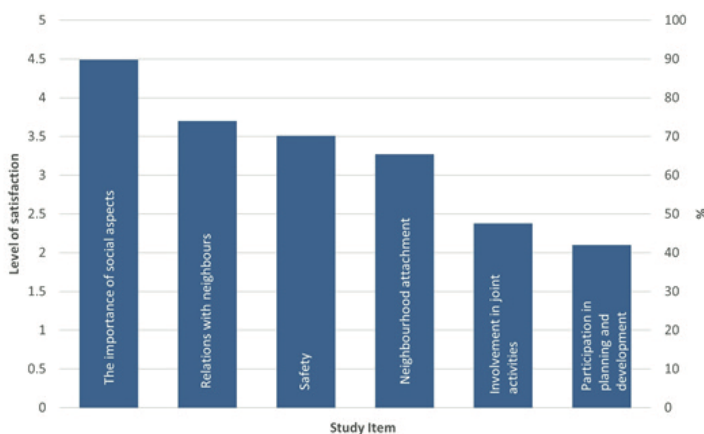


Figure 3: Residents' satisfaction with social attributes in three neighbourhoods

Our findings highlight a significant divergence between interpersonal relationships and institutional engagement within the studied neighbourhoods. On the one hand, residents reported positive relationships with their neighbours, suggesting that social bonds within neighbourhoods are strong. However, on the other hand, they expressed a high level of dissatisfaction with their role in urban planning. Most respondents felt excluded from decision-making processes, particularly in relation to infrastructure improvements, design interventions, and public space management. Another key finding was the relatively low participation rate in joint community activities. This resonates with a 2008 study conducted in Belgrade (Petrović, 2008), which, despite acknowledging the positive social fabric of neighbourhoods, identified widespread issues with building and environmental maintenance organization. That study also noted limited resident involvement in improving local living conditions, with a preference for paid services over civic activism, attributed to both inter-neighbour disagreements and ambiguous legal frameworks. These parallels suggest the persistence of similar challenges in Serbian urban neighbourhoods over a considerable period.

Furthermore, neighbourhood attachment and safety concerns were recurring themes among the surveyed residents. While a general sense of safety prevailed for most, a significant proportion expressed apprehension regarding crime and vandalism, largely influenced by past occurrences in their neighbourhoods. This aspect, coupled with dissatisfaction regarding participation in neighbourhood design and community activities, contributes to many respondents feeling disconnected from their neighbourhood.

Despite these challenges, the most robust social component identified in our study was neighbourly relations. Even while feeling disconnected from formal decision-making, residents maintain strong interpersonal connections within their immediate community. This contrast underscores the need to bridge the gap between social cohesion and institutional support.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings of this study, several key conclusions can be drawn. While residents of Serbian urban neighbourhoods demonstrate strong interpersonal connections within their localities, limited institutional involvement and a lack of comprehensive development strategies contribute significantly to low levels of satisfaction with planning participation. This dissatisfaction is further reflected in lower ratings for involvement in joint community activities and perceived safety. Collectively, these factors, exacerbated by the absence of a clear urban sustainability strategy, impede the sustainable development of Serbian urban areas and hinder the strengthening of community resilience.

This study suggests targeted improvements in three key areas, aiming to cultivate neighbourhood attachment: fostering greater citizen participation in urban planning, encouraging involvement in joint community activities, and enhancing safety within urban neighbourhoods. Achieving greater citizen engagement in Serbian urban neighbourhoods necessitates a concerted, systemic effort to actively involve residents in planning and decision-making processes. However, this is a complex undertaking given existing challenges. Petrović (2008) highlighted low levels of connection and trust between civic associations and institutions in Serbia, a situation exacerbated by underdeveloped institutional networks, citizen apathy, lack of information, and a prevailing sense of powerlessness regarding influencing decisions.

Giving an overview of the special edition of the journal *Environment and Urbanization* (Citizen Participation in Planning: From the Neighbourhood to the City), Mitlin (2021) concluded that institutionalization of citizen participation represents a considerable challenge. She emphasized the importance of continuous citizen effort in improving local opportunities, the necessity of focusing beyond just the neighbourhood to the city level, the near inevitability of conflict for collaboration, and the close link between increased citizen and political participation. Addressing these multifaceted issues requires developing effective, context-specific strategies for sustained citizen involvement.

Strengthening neighbourhood identity is crucial for fostering greater involvement in joint activities. This can be achieved by supporting community initiatives that promote social cohesion and shared responsibility. Beyond institutional and social engagement, urban planners play a vital role. Bottini (2018) emphasizes that spatial variables exert a greater influence on community participation than sociodemographic factors, while Ziersch, Osborne and Baum (2011) highlight the positive correlation between spatial attributes like local shops and recreational facilities and community participation. Consequently, planners should prioritize designing spatial attributes that inherently encourage neighbourly interaction and strengthen social cohesion, such as urban gardens, accessible recreational facilities, and versatile communal gathering spaces. Recognizing the unique local character and potentials of each neighbourhood is also essential for maximizing the effectiveness of these efforts. By creating more opportunities for joint activities, neighbourhood identity can be strengthened, which, in turn, will positively influence residents' willingness to participate in neighbourhood design and planning. Finally, there is a clear need to improve safety in public spaces. Addressing security concerns through better urban design can directly enhance the quality of life in urban neighbourhoods. As Ricklin and Shah (2017) note, an unsafe neighbourhood reduces the likelihood of residents spending time outdoors socializing, walking, or engaging in physical activity, negatively impacting their health and quality of life. Moreover, crime is a primary factor influencing decisions to leave a neighbourhood (Andersen, 2008). Given these security trade-offs, a growing body of research explores design approaches in accordance with security principles (e.g., Foster, Giles-Corti & Knuiman, 2010; De Donder et al., 2013; Zeng et al., 2023). In parallel, organizations like Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) advocate for design interventions aimed at preventing crime. Urban governance should therefore integrate core principles and design strategies to enhance perceived and actual safety, encouraging greater public space utilization.

To foster more sustainable and resilient cities, prioritizing community participation and inclusive urban development is essential. Therefore, further education for all stakeholders involved in planning and shaping the built environment is necessary. Considering these findings and conclusions, this research provides a foundation for

future studies and offers practical insights for policymakers, urban planners, and community leaders. Ultimately, it highlights the need to place people at the centre of planning, with the aim of achieving enhanced well-being and quality of life, which is key to realizing sustainable development and community resilience.

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