

The Small City Quality of Place Reporting System Project: Guiding Principles and Implementation Guidelines

GILLES VIAUD PH. D.
Thompson Rivers University

Urban Canada is overwhelmingly understood – by the media, by much of the public, and by policy makers – as comprised of a tier of large cities. As a result, the instruments for measuring quality of life in urban areas are calibrated to assess metropolitan factors, not those arising in cities with populations of fewer than 100,000. The objective of this paper is to propose the first generation of a quality of life indicator system and toolkit responding to the distinctive needs, limitations, and varied realities of small towns and small cities.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this brief article is to introduce readers to the key justifications for the creation of a standardized indicator system intended to assist small Canadian municipalities with less than 100,000 in population in the evaluation of the state of the quality of place they offer to their residents. Quality of place indicators are designed to provide aggregate, objective measures of the factors in a location that either play a part in the preservation and the enhancement of the quality of life in a population, or that may contribute to its deterioration. While such a system already exists in Canada for larger urban centered regions (see the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) Quality of Life Reporting System (QOLRS; FCM 1999, 2009a), none has so far been conceived to monitor the demographic, social, economic and cultural trends and conditions unique to small towns and cities. The main objective of this research project is to create the first generation of a standardized quality of place reporting system and toolkit specifically adapted to the needs and to the reality of smaller communities.

The article begins with a general overview of the concepts of quality of life and of quality of place in the context of small city studies. Following a brief review of the FCM QOLRS, the many reasons why this system cannot be used to study small cities are enumerated. This discussion leads to the introduction of the purpose and objectives that are at the core of this research project. The article concludes with a review of the guiding principles and

implementation guidelines that will guide the development phase of the Small City Quality of Place Reporting System (SC-QOPRS).

QUALITY OF LIFE, QUALITY OF PLACE AND SMALL CITIES

Quality of life indicators are “measurements [that are meant] to summarize important characteristics of life conditions.” (Janzen 2003, p.3). They are designed to simplify complex phenomena into easily understandable indices. Wish (1986) defines quality of life “as an individual’s happiness or satisfaction with life and environment including needs and desires, aspirations, lifestyle preferences, and other tangible and intangible factors which determine overall well-being” (p.1). The concept of quality of life is thus comprised of two main attributes: a subjective or perceptual component and an objective or environmental element. One evaluates the subjective or perceptual dimension of quality of life by using qualitative methodologies such as attitudinal surveys or personal interviews with residents. Indicators that are derived using this approach are said to address specific aspects of the well-being of individuals in a location. An example of this type of research is the study conducted by Michalos and Kahlke (2007) on the impact of arts-related activities on the perceived quality of life of residents in the small cities of Kamloops, Nanaimo, Port Moody, Prince George, and the Comox Valley of British Columbia.

A second way to assess quality of life is to gauge the objective quality of the physical and human characteristics a place has to offer. Instead than asking residents what they think or how they feel, census data or other types secondary data are used to assess the objective quality of a place. Andrews (2001) defines quality of place “as an aggregate measure of the factors in the external environment that contribute to quality-of-life” (p.201). The assumption made is that the quality of life of residents is generally enhanced and reinforced in locations which, for instance, provide access to well paying jobs, to a wide variety of educational opportunities, and to good quality health care and social services. The research conducted by the FCM on the quality of life of Canadians fall into this second category. This is also this type of objective, quality of place indicators that will be generated in the development of the SC-QOPRS.

Over the last 20 to 30 years, the development and use of quality of life indicator systems has gained much popularity. Results derived from such research have played an increasingly influential role in the planning of our urban and rural communities. Good sets of indicators help towns and cities track the evolution of key demographic, economic, social, cultural and environmental trends which are understood to affect the well being of residents. Results from such studies often inspire city planners to draft more socially minded plans and policies, or help in the review of existing ones (Dissart and Deller 2000). They may also facilitate the assessment of the quality of the services and infrastructures supported by a municipality. A city that has a reputation for its great quality of life “might find it easier to promote its economic development” (p.136). In a spirit of competitiveness where jobs, public and private investments and, in the case of small towns and cities, new residents are in short supply, quality of life indicators are also often used to help cities and regional municipalities rank their performance against that of others, help attract public and private investments, and foster intergovernmental co-operation.

An abundance of quality of life indicator systems already exist: some are very focused and target only a limited number of factors while others are very comprehensive. However, the majority of the reporting systems currently available seems to be suffering from the same fatal flaw. In an article published in 2003, Pacione observes that due to the considerable challenges posed by the significant economic, social, and ethnic polarization generally found in large urban centered regions, special attention has traditionally been afforded to large cities in quality of life research (p.20). This certainly has been the case in Canada. Considering the apparent influence of results from the FCM QOLRS on the drafting of national urban priorities in the recent past, it seems that large and medium city concerns have taken hold of the country's quality of life agenda. The invisibility of small cities in quality of life research has left them on the outside looking in during urban policy debates of national importance. They are not really part of the debate; they have little or no influence on the national stage and on setting national urban policies.

THE CURRENT STANDARD: THE FCM QOLRS

The FCM is the national voice of municipal government in Canada. The organization represents the interests of over 1,600 municipalities, whether they be northern, rural or urban communities (FCM 2007). Its mandate is to lobby the federal government to make sure that municipal governments remain vital partners in public-policy debates in the country. In the mid 1990s, the FCM developed a highly sophisticated QOLRS which is now widely recognized as the standard for the evaluation of urban quality of life in the country. This initiative "was born out of a desire to bring a community based perspective to the development of public policy and to monitor the consequences of changing demographics, as well as shifting responsibilities and fiscal arrangements" (FCM 1999, p.i).

The set of objective, quantitative measures which the FCM produced follows trends on 11 key quality of life domains, which are indexed by 72 constructs and altogether includes hundreds of variables (FCM 2009a, p.45). What must be acknowledged is the great importance results from this research has in supplying the FCM with the factual background necessary for the organization to lobby the federal government in its attempt to influence urban policy. But as indicated earlier, the FCM QOLRS was designed with Canada's largest cities in mind. Indeed, the smallest city included in the five quality of life research so far conducted by the FCM is Kingston with a population 114,000 (FCM 2005). The use of the organization's QOLRS is now officially limited to cities and regional municipalities of 200,000 or more (FCM 2009b). In light of this, the relevance of the urban agenda and of the urban priorities promoted by FCM for smaller towns and cities must be questioned.

THE FCM QOLRS AND SMALL CITIES

The current project's original goal was simply to reproduce the FCM set of indicators for small cities and test how results from a small city analysis would compare to those already known about larger urban-centered regions. However, after much effort and time trying to generate a comparable set of indicators for small cities, the task had to be abandoned due to insurmountable theoretical and empirical challenges. First, it became evident that a large number of key variables

used by the FCM are simply not available for municipalities with population less than 10,000 (in many cases they are not even available for cities up to 100,000). The system is also found to be impractical and too complex for most potential small city users to administer. In addition, because of its heavy reliance on specially ordered, costly custom tabulations from Statistics Canada, the QOLRS is too expensive for most small municipalities to reproduce. Finally, it is evident that the interpretation derived from the analysis of indicators is scale specific, and that all the indicators tracked by the FCM are not necessary relevant in a small city, small town context. These and other problems of a more technical nature certainly helped to strengthen our perception and our resolve around the need to create for small cities a tool specifically adapted and designed around their particular needs, context and unique set of information availability constraints.

SC-QOLRS PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

This research project proposes to address these issues by creating the first generation of a quality of life indicator system entirely designed and adapted to respond to the distinctive but generally overlooked needs, limitations and diverse range of experiences distinguishing small cities and small towns from larger types of communities.

The system proposed takes the form of a toolkit. The principal objective of this toolkit is to provide researchers and community leaders with a scale dependent, context specific, extensive and harmonized set of benchmark indicators. It is believed that the use of a common set of indicators designed from a standardized methodology and data gathering strategy will lead to two significant outcomes: first, it will help guide and structure the assessment of the state of the quality of life in individual communities; and second, when conducted at the system wide level (using a large sample of small cities), the analysis may allow for the identification of common challenges and common priorities which in turn may lead to the drafting of relevant small city policies. At this moment, no standardized tool exists that permits for such system wide analyses to be performed.

In the planning of the toolkit, 9 guiding principles and 6 implementation guidelines are followed. These have been drafted prior to the development of the reporting system and constitute the core values of this research project. Many are inspired from informal conversations with municipal employees from various small cities (see Stacey et al, 2009).

GUIDING PRINCIPLES: THE SC-QOPRS HAS TO...

- Broadly follow the structure and methodology used in the QOLRS, and developed and repeatedly tested by the FCM.
- Be flexible enough to meet the dual outcomes sought by the project, that is: to allow for single-city as well as system-wide analyses to be performed.
- Be sensitive and relevant to the particular contexts and wide range of conditions in which small cities and towns exist.
- Be theoretically and empirically sound.

- Seek simplicity of use over complexity.
- Provide an extensive coverage of all factors (demographic, economic, social, political, cultural, and environmental) that affect the quality of life of the residents in a community.
- Identify small city (scale-specific) indicators.
- Follow key trends over time.
- Provide a clear pathway to policy and the establishment of community priorities.
- Implementation Guidelines: The SC-QOPRS has to...
- Use quality of place variables as proxy to the analysis of quality of life as the FCM QOLRS does.
- Solely rely on publically available data and, when necessary, on additional information collected from a city administrator survey, thus making the often expensive data-gathering phase of such projects cost-neutral for municipalities. (Few small towns and small cities have vast amount of disposable revenues to spend on quality of life research. By eliminating the cost associated with the purchase of the information necessary to run the studies, it takes away one major objection elected officials often raise for not getting their communities involved in quality of life research.)
- Develop guides on how to access relevant statistical information and on how to analyse and transform variables.
- Develop a sample questionnaire for city administrators.
- Provide suggestions on how to expand the list of proposed indicators to better adapt to local conditions.
- Be accessible to professionals and non-professionals alike.

CONCLUSION

Just as the FCM QOLRS research serves to establish national standards for the study of quality of place in large and medium sized Canadian cities, there is a real need for a similar tool to be developed to study small cities. Failure to do so may not only deprive more than a quarter of the Canadian population and the large majority of Canadian towns and cities from having a voice on the national stage, but it may also prevent small-city problems from finding small-city solutions. If broadly embraced as a suitable standard, the SC-QOPRS could play a role similar for small cities to what the FCM's QOLRS does in helping large and medium cities and regional municipalities impact urban and social policies of national magnitude. The potential emergence of a unified small-city national agenda may possibly hinge on the development of such country-wide indicator standard.

Works Cited

- Andrews, C.J. "Analyzing quality-of-place." *Environment and Planning B: Planning and Design* 28 (2001): 201-217. Print.
- Dissart, J.C. and Deller, S.C. "Quality of life in the planning literature." *Journal of Planning Literature*, 15.1 (2000): 135-161. Print.
- FCM (1999) *Quality of Life in Canadian Communities. The FCM Quality of Life Reporting System*, Ottawa, Ontario.
- FCM (2005) *Dynamic Societies and Social Change. Theme Report #2. The FCM Quality of Life Reporting System*, Ottawa, Ontario.
- FCM (2007) *Working Together For Change: Federation of Canadian Municipalities Annual Report 2006-2007*. Federation of Canadian Municipalities, Ottawa, Ontario.
- FCM (2009a) *Quality of Life in Canadian Communities: Immigration and Diversity in Canadian Cities and Communities – Theme Report #5. The FCM Quality of Life Reporting System*, Ottawa, Ontario.
- FCM (2009b) *QOLRS – Frequently asked questions*. Federation of Canadian Municipalities, Ottawa, Ontario. www.fcm.ca/english/View.asp?mp=477&cx=1046 (accessed March 23, 2009).
- Janzen, B. "An Evaluation of the Federation of Canadian Municipalities Quality of Life Reporting System." *Community-University Institute for Social Research, University of Saskatchewan: Saskatoon*. (2003). Print.
- Michalos, A.C., and Kahlke, P.M. "Impact of Arts Related Activities on the Perceived Quality of Life." *Institute for Social Research and Evaluation. University of Northern British Columbia: Prince George*. (2007). Print.
- Pacione, M. "Urban environmental quality of human wellbeing – a social geographical perspective." *Landscape and Urban Planning* 65 (2003): 19-30. Print.
- Stacey, P., G. Viaud, D. Worts, A. Michalos, N. Duxbury, R. McColl, A. Tucker, and M. Seasons. "Roundtable on Defining Quality of Life & Cultural Indicators For Small Cities." In Anne Gagnon, WF Garrett-Petts, James Hoffman, Henry Hubert, Terry Kading, Kelly-Anne Maddox and Ginny Ratsoy (eds): *The Last Best West": An Exploration of Myth, Identity, and Quality of Life in Western Canada*. Vancouver: New Star Books (2009): 127-159. Print.
- Wish, N.B. "Are we really measuring quality of life? Well-being has subjective dimensions, as well as objective ones." *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 45.1 (1986): 93-99. Print.

Acknowledgements

This research is funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada through a Community-University Research Alliance grant (CURA) awarded to a research team based at Thompson Rivers University (TRU), Kamloops, Canada. The theme of TRU's CURA is "Mapping the Quality of Life and the Culture of Small Cities" (www.smallcities.ca). The main partners involved in the SC-QOPRS are the FCM and urban and social planners from a number of municipalities in British Columbia and Alberta.

About the Author

Dr. Gilles Viaud is Chair of the Department of Geography at Thompson Rivers University, British Columbia, Canada. Dr. Viaud specializes in urban and social geography, and is currently working at the development of a quality of life reporting system and toolkit for small cities.