

Neighborhoods

Affect Our Health & Well-Being

MIDUS

Midlife in the United States

A National Study of Health & Well-Being

MIDLIFE IN THE UNITED STATES: A NATIONAL STUDY OF HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

FUNDED BY THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE ON AGING



What Makes a Good Neighborhood?

Neighborhood Quality:

In MIDUS, neighborhood quality was examined by asking participants if:

- they felt safe being outside alone during the day or night
- neighbors helped and trusted each other
 - buildings were in good repair
 - the neighborhood was clean.

Neighborhood Income:

MIDUS researchers also look at the average income of people within a neighborhood, which can affect the health of residents. For instance, people in poorer neighborhoods may:

- have limited access to grocery stores, medical clinics, or safe places to exercise
- experience chronic stress due to crime
- have increased exposure to hazards like pollution.

Who is More Likely to Live in a Good Neighborhood?

- Females, nonwhite residents, and renters report worse neighborhood quality.
- On the other hand, retirees report *better* neighborhood quality.
- Over a twenty year period, neighborhood quality among MIDUS participants:



- *declined* for African Americans
- *declined* for those with less than a high school education, especially if they had children
- *improved* for those who had more than a college education.

[Stokes 2019]

MIDUS Looks at the Importance of Neighborhoods

Do you like the neighborhood you live in? Is it clean, appealing, and safe? Does it have playgrounds, farmer's markets, and good public transportation? Do you have positive interactions with your neighbors? Research from MIDUS is showing that these types of neighborhood characteristics can influence our physical health and our emotional well-being as we age.

Unfortunately, people cannot always choose where they live. Income inequality and racial segregation prevents some people from moving into better neighborhoods where it's easier to trust your neighbors and where community resources that promote health and well-being are available to all residents.

Becoming aware of how neighborhoods can affect our health is the first step in improving neighborhood quality so its benefits can be made available to everyone. Your participation in MIDUS has helped us gather information about how important neighborhoods can be to our well-being. We send you this newsletter to share some of our findings and as a small thanks for your contributions to our study.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to be "Carol D. Ryff".

Carol D. Ryff, Director
MIDUS National Study of Health & Well-Being



Neighborhoods Influence Health

- Research shows that those living in poorer neighborhoods have worse health. But is this because of the neighborhood, or because they are poor, which is also known to contribute to bad health?
- Researchers can take into account individual differences and show, for instance, that someone in a poorer neighborhood has worse health than someone from a wealthier neighborhood, even if they are making the *same* amount of money.
- This indicates that neighborhood features themselves may influence the health of residents beyond the economic characteristics of individuals, thus underscoring the importance of neighborhoods for health.

How Neighborhoods Affect Our Health & Well-being

Americans live in many different types of neighborhoods.

MIDUS research shows that this can affect our health and well-being in many ways.



Higher Income Neighborhoods are Linked to Better Mental & Physical Health

When looking at residents who lived in the same neighborhood for at least 10 years:

- The odds of *having* two or more chronic health conditions, and of *developing* two or more *new* health conditions, was significantly *lower* for every additional \$10,000 of average neighborhood income.
- This included both physical health conditions (heart problems, autoimmune disorders) and mental health issues (depression, anxiety, sleep problems, alcohol related disorders).

[Robinette 2017]



Low Income Neighborhoods are Linked to Poor Health

- Allostatic load (AL) is a measure of wear and tear across several biological systems. Higher AL indicates risk for later health problems.
- Those living in *lower income* neighborhoods had *higher* AL, regardless of how much money they made.
- This was due in part to having anxious arousal (being startled more easily), which may be more common where people are afraid of their surroundings.
- Additionally, those who reported that their neighborhoods were unsafe had *higher* AL.
- These both suggest that living in a poor neighborhood may be chronically stressful enough to increase AL.
- Smoking, eating more fast food, and getting limited exercise also played a role in increasing AL, supporting theories that lack of access to healthy foods and safe outdoor spaces to exercise can be significant problems in poorer neighborhoods. [Robinette 2016]

Having Helpful Neighbors Can Combat Daily Stress

Neighborhood cohesion was measured by whether:

- people felt they could call on a neighbor for help
- neighbors trusted each other.

Over an eight-day period, those who reported higher neighborhood cohesion also had:

- fewer daily stressors (arguments, work problems)
- fewer physical symptoms (headaches, nausea)
- fewer negative feelings (loneliness, frustration)
- more positive emotions (peacefulness, happiness).

In addition, those in more cohesive neighborhoods who *did* experience daily stressors, had *fewer* negative emotions in response, especially younger adults. [Robinette 2013]



Neighborhood Quality is Linked to Well-Being

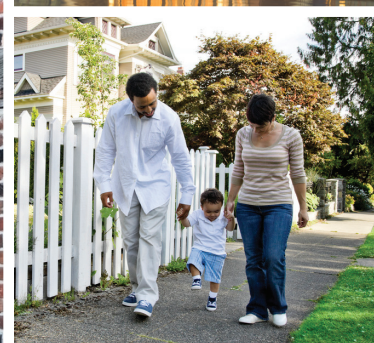
Living in a better quality neighborhood (where people felt safe and neighbors helped and trusted each other) was linked to:

- better social integration (feeling close to your community, seeing your community as a source of comfort), which was especially beneficial for those who were depressed
- having fewer negative emotions (being nervous, fidgety), but not among renters
- being more satisfied with life 20 years later.

Small but significant declines in neighborhood quality were reported by MIDUS participants who lived in the same home for almost 20 years. This decline was linked to worse psychological well-being. They had:

- less self-acceptance
- less personal growth
- less purpose in life.

[Stokes 2020, 2019; Carney 2017]



Neighborhood Safety is Important

Feeling that one is living in an unsafe neighborhood was associated with:

- having more chronic conditions 10 years later (digestive problems, pain, anxiety)
- having more physical symptoms (backaches, fatigue) and more negative emotions (restlessness, nervousness) on days when stressors occurred (arguments, problems at home, discrimination)
- having poorer performance on thinking tasks that require attention (working memory, spatial abilities, executive function). In the short term, this may be because one's attention is focused on assessing the surroundings for threats, rather than the task at hand. In the long term, unsafe neighborhoods may promote chronic stress that affects thinking skills.

How do neighborhood safety concerns affect emotional and physical health? If residents are afraid to go outside, they may not forge supportive ties with their neighbors or get enough exercise to stay healthy.

[Robinette 2016, 2021; Muñoz 2020]



How Neighborhood Quality Affects African Americans

MIDUS includes a sample of African Americans from the highly segregated city of Milwaukee, which provides an opportunity to look at how neighborhoods contribute to health inequalities for Black Americans. Participants rated their:

- neighborhood quality: whether they felt safe, if neighbors trusted and helped each other, whether the neighborhood was clean and in good repair.
- relationship quality: whether their partners appreciated and cared for them, or if they were critical and demanding.
- positive & negative emotions: feeling happy and calm vs. sad and hopeless.

Results showed that:

- *Higher* neighborhood quality was associated with having *fewer negative* and *more positive* emotions for African American men and women 10 years later.
- Men who had *better* relationships but lived in *lower* quality neighborhoods had *more* negative emotions 10 years later.
- It may be that men in better relationships want to provide the best for their partners, but feel they can't when they live in low quality neighborhoods.

[Jenkins 2023]





Neighborhoods & Aging

Older adults spend more time in their homes and neighborhoods than any other age group, especially retirees. They also socialize more with their neighbors and are more involved in community activities. This makes neighborhood quality even more important as we age.

Lower Community Status Affects Older Adults' Health More

- Data from MIDUS and another national study was used to look at whether self-reported physical health and number of chronic illnesses (heart disease, diabetes) varied by community socioeconomic status (SES) and age. Low SES neighborhoods had:
 - more unemployment
 - more households receiving public assistance
 - more families with an annual income under \$35,000.
- Results showed that the association between health and community SES got stronger as participants aged, was strongest at age 60 to 69, then got weaker again at age 70 and older.
- At ages 60 to 69, lower community SES was associated with worse physical health and more chronic illnesses, and this neighborhood effect was stronger than or comparable to the effects of individual SES (a person's education, income, assets), which is also known to have a significant effect on health.



Why Do Poor Communities Affect Older Adults More?

- Poorer communities may not have senior centers, senior meal sites, or good medical or social services.
- They may lack public transportation, so it's harder for older adults to access services or get to a grocery store.
- Safety concerns may keep older adults from getting outside to exercise or discourage contact with neighbors so they become more socially isolated.
- Older adults may have longer exposure to the hazards in their community like pollution, so their health may be more compromised.

[Robert 2001]

Neighborhoods Can Protect from Age Discrimination

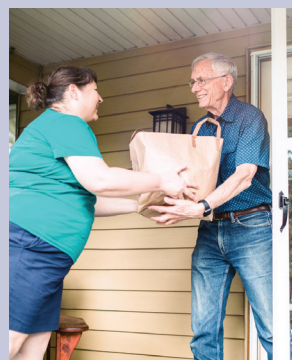
- Having more older adults living in the neighborhood was associated with reporting less age discrimination among adults in their 60s.
- When surrounded by people of the same age, they may be less likely to be in contact with younger people, who tend to be the main source of age discrimination.
- The association was weaker for adults in their 70s & 80s, whose likelihood of reporting age discrimination was low.



[Stokes 2016]

The Importance of Supportive Neighbors to Older Adults

- Older adults who felt they could call on their neighbors for help had fewer limitations in daily activities (they were still able to carry groceries and walk up stairs).
- This was especially true among those who had infrequent contact with their families.
 - Knowing they can get help from neighbors may give older adults a greater sense of security, which in turn may motivate them to be more active, which lowers chances of physical decline and increases their ability to age in their own homes.



[Shaw 2005]



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MIDUS.wisc.edu

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