

Coronavirus reminds us how livable neighborhoods matter for our well-being

April 22 2020, by Melanie Davern, Billie Giles-Corti, Hannah Badland and Lucy Gunn



Credit: Chanan Greenblatt/Unsplash

We are witnessing changes in the ways we use our cities in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The livability of our local neighborhoods has never been more important.

Right now, we are working together to flatten the curve by staying home to control the spread of COVID-19 and reduce demand on [health](#)

[services](#). This means spending a lot more time at home and in our local neighborhoods. We are all finding out about the strengths and weaknesses in the livability of our neighborhoods.

This experience can teach us some lessons about how to live and plan our communities in the future. A livable neighborhood promotes [good health](#) and social cohesion, both now and after this pandemic passes.

Heavy use of local open space

Anybody who has left their home in the past few weeks will have noticed more people are using local streets and public open spaces. Parks and other [public spaces](#) are more popular than ever. Some are becoming [too crowded for comfort](#).

Accessible public space is a key ingredient of healthy and livable places. Public [green spaces provide multiple benefits](#) for mental and physical health, urban cooling, biodiversity, air pollution and stormwater runoff as identified in a previous review for the Heart Foundation.

Access to local public open spaces has become even more important as the current need to stay home adds to the impacts of increased density in the form of smaller houses, lot sizes and apartment living. Yet not everyone has access to local parks.

We looked at neighborhood access to public open space using our livability indicators included in the [Australian Urban Observatory](#). Not all neighborhoods have access to public open space within 400 metres. We see this in neighborhoods just north of the beach in North Bondi, Sydney, as the livability map below shows.

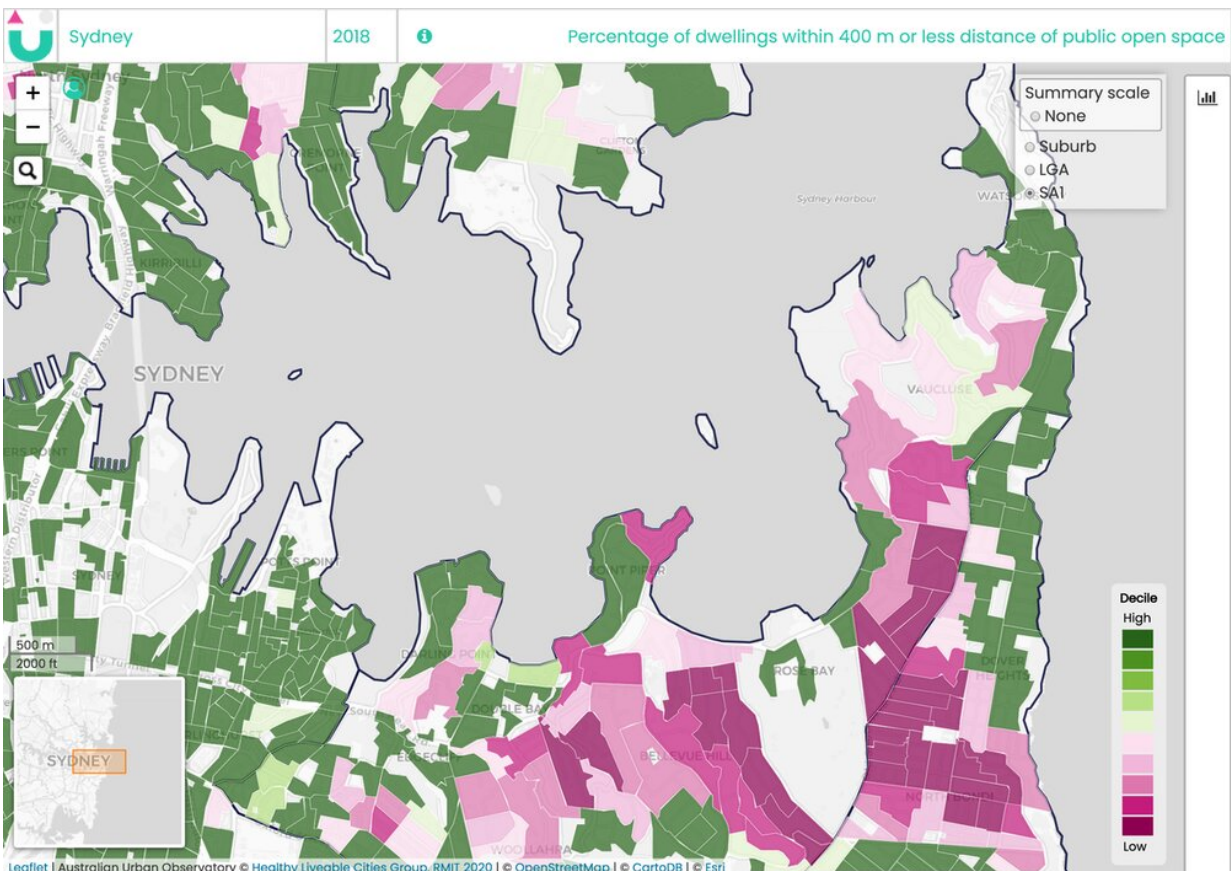
We found a similar pattern in neighborhoods of St Kilda East in Melbourne. It's a pattern repeated in many neighborhoods across cities in

Australia.

Private green spaces and backyards are also being appreciated more than ever. Many people are rushing to [plant fruits and vegetables at home](#).

The private green spaces and biodiversity found in backyards are [important influences on subjective well-being](#). Connecting with nature in the garden is a [great way to support mental health](#).

Dogs are also enjoying more time with their owners in local green spaces and [pet ownership is increasing](#). Office video conferences often [feature furry friends at home](#). Let's hope the increase in pet adoptions helps people cope with social distancing but also provides the animals with good long-term homes.



Residents of neighbourhoods north of Bondi Beach in Sydney lack good access to nearby public open space. Credit: [Australian Urban Observatory](#), Author provided

Fewer cars, more cycling and walking

One of the noticeable differences in our cities right now is the reduced car traffic in typically busy neighborhoods where more people (including children) are out on bicycles and walking. Walkable environments with paths and cycleways are providing supportive and safe spaces for both recreational physical activity and for getting to places such as [local shops](#) and [supermarkets](#) and offices without unnecessary exposure to other people.

The benefits are greatest for people living in [high-amenity walkable areas with access to such places within 800 metres](#). Having services and facilities close by has been [shown to support walking for transport to shops and services](#), promote health and [reduce non-communicable diseases such as heart attacks and strokes](#).

However, our new lives during this pandemic also highlight inequities in local access to health, community and social services. [Research](#) shows access to these services is poorer in the low-density outer suburbs that are [common across Australian cities](#).

Better air quality

Reduced car traffic and industrial emissions are undoubtedly [improving air quality in our cities](#). In 2018, the [World Health Organisation declared](#)

[air quality was the "new smoking"](#) as it increases respiratory problems and cardiovascular disease. The transport sector also contributes [about 25% of global carbon dioxide emissions](#) .

Homes, schools and care facilities located within 300 metres of major roads are more exposed to air pollution and risk of disease. Those risks are likely to have decreased during the COVID-19 crisis.

At the moment, many of us are living and shopping locally and enjoying the co-benefits of the "slow walkable city": less traffic, more active modes of transport, better air quality and less noise.

Valuing social cohesion

Loneliness is a [serious public health problem](#). It causes premature deaths on a scale similar to that of smoking or obesity.

Pre-pandemic lifestyles involved time-poor people travelling widely to destinations for employment, education, recreation, socialising and extracurricular activities. The suburbs were places of much social isolation.

With these activities now reined in, are we seeing a rise in neighborhood social connections due to people staying at home? Anecdotal, yes. It's emerging through new or reinvigorated conversations with neighbors, support and sharing of goods (toilet paper anyone?), and coordinated neighborhood support systems, such as WhatsApp groups and neighborhood happy hours. Across the world, we can see this sense of neighborhood belonging in the form of [bear hunts](#) and [rainbow chalk drawings](#).

It is well documented that [feeling part of the community is good for your mental health](#). Local support networks become even more important and

valued during crises such as COVID-19.

These are just some of the more obvious reflections about the livability of our neighborhoods as we stay home to help contain the spread of COVID-19. No doubt there will be many more lessons to come that we need to remember and act on after the pandemic passes.

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