
PERCEPTIONS OF THE PRESENT AND EXPECTATIONS FROM THE FUTURE: QUALITY OF LIFE IN A LOCAL ENVIRONMENT AND LIFE SATISFACTION OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN VUKOVAR-SYRMIA COUNTY (CROATIA)

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Abstract: *In recent decades, the quality of life in the local environment has become a key issue in research focused on neighborhoods, cities, and smaller regions. The quality-of-life concept is used to determine positive and negative aspects of life in the local community, which makes it a complex and multidimensional concept. Having that in mind, this paper tries to evaluate the quality of life based on dimensions related to the socio-material aspects of life in a settlement but also to the social opportunities important for young people's transition to adulthood and planning their future. This paper is based on the data collected from a survey of third and fourth grade students of high schools in Vukovar-Syrmia County, on the eastern border of the Republic of Croatia, conducted in 2019.*

The goal was to answer the following research questions: 1) to what degree do certain dimensions of life quality impact general satisfaction of young people with their lives, 2) how relevant are certain assessments of the life quality dimensions for understanding the future of the local community. Since both individual lives and the lives of local communities are rooted in the temporal dimension, the quality of life

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research enables us to find the link between the present state and the perception of the future. The results of the research not only contribute to a better understanding of local living conditions on attitudes and satisfaction of young people, but they also motivate reflections of change and planning of local realities in the future.

Keywords: *quality of life, local community, youth, life satisfaction, expectations from the future*

1. Introduction

After the declaration of independence in 1991, the Republic of Croatia experienced a number of significant social, economic, and political changes. The 1990s were marked by war and transitional challenges, followed by the economic and migration crisis and the accession to the European Union in the 21st century. It is therefore interesting to analyze how the residents of Croatia think about the local and national future, but also how they evaluate satisfaction with their lives. According to the results of research conducted in 2016, it was shown that mild pessimism prevails among citizens when it comes to expectations for the future development of Croatia (Pilar's Barometer of Croatian Society, 2016). When asked whether the situation in Croatia will improve, remain the same, or worsen in two to three years, more people believed that the situation would worsen than that there would be positive changes. On the other hand, the majority of the respondents were satisfied with their lives, and slight optimism prevailed when it came to expectations for their personal future. The discrepancy between personal satisfaction and social pessimism is also noticeable in the results of research conducted in 2020 among residents of the Vukovar-Syrmia County. Again, there was a noticeable distinction between satisfaction with one's life and the prevailing attitude that in a few years, life in that county would be worse than today (Živić, 2022).

The question arises as to what affects life satisfaction and expectations of the local future, and to what extent the quality of life in the local environment affects these assessments. Establishing a relation between the quality of life in the local environment, satisfaction with one's own life and expectations for the future gains particular importance if one accounts for the demographic crisis as one of the most prominent challenges the Republic of Croatia is facing. From 2011 to 2021, the number of residents in Croatia decreased by 413,056 people, or by 9.64% (Živić, Šimunić, 2023). It is noticeable that the situation is particularly dramatic in the five

counties in Eastern Croatia, Vukovar-Syrmia County being one of them. All those counties have recorded a population decline of more than 15%. The question is, therefore, whether the negative migration balance can be stopped by increasing the quality of local life and which aspects of local life particularly influence the way the local future is imagined.

The aim of this paper is to determine the connection between satisfaction with the local life quality and personal life satisfaction and expectations of local future on the example of young people from Vukovar-Syrmia County. In order to better capture the way in which young people evaluate life in the local environment, satisfaction with the immediate socio-spatial aspects of life will be investigated by studying satisfaction with housing and satisfaction with the neighborhood, as well as the quality of life at the settlement level and social conditions in the county as a wider social space. This way, young people's view of the quality of life aspects important for the development of their daily life will be connected with their evaluation of the social environment dimensions relevant for the development of abilities and the transition to adulthood. Therefore, the analysis will take into account young people's assessment of employment opportunities, trust in institutions, and social tensions in the county.

It is through quality of life that we will try to understand the essential relationships that exist in local communities, those between the collective and the individual and between the present and the future. Therefore, an effort will be made to capture both the spatial and temporal aspects of social life and to determine to what extent the assessment of the current quality of life in the settlement and county affects expectations from the local future.

2. Quality of (local) life: research on the quality of life in the spatial and temporal context

Quality of life is a multidimensional, and multifactorial concept (Cantarero, Potter & Leach, 2007), but also a “complex and amorphous concept” (Estoque et al., 2019: 619), which enables determining positive and negative aspects of life in a local community. In literature, quality of life is often associated with the concept of well-being, life satisfaction, and community satisfaction when it comes to community research (Potter, Cantarero, 2014). According to Ferriss (2004:37) “Quality of life refers to well-being as indicated by either/or/and subjective indicators and

objective indicators”. Studies using objective indicators include a range of available statistical and other data related to indicators such as the size of housing facilities or the availability of certain services in an area. On the other hand, it is investigated how the residents themselves evaluate the area they live in, which makes it possible to determine how the residents' expectations and values affect their subjective assessment of the living environment (Marans, 2012). This raises the question of what is needed or necessary for the well-being of the people and communities. Quality of life research is often supported by approaches dealing with human needs, in which the idea is presented that people have quality lives when their needs are satisfied. Jankowska (2014:6) emphasizes that the quality of life is related to “the method of satisfying the needs”, more precisely:

- “The need for security (due to risks relating to, among others, the economic situation)”;
- “The need for self-realization (mainly satisfaction which comes from the work)”;
- “The need to maintain psychological balance”;
- “The need for social recognition (identifying to the group with which an individual can identify) (Gałęski, 1977)” (cited in Jankowska, 2014: 6).

Additionally, structural models investigating how satisfaction with certain domains of life affects the general feeling of well-being or general satisfaction with life are used. It is important to decide which domains concerning the local environment should be taken into account in the research. Also, it is necessary to consider different geographical scales at which satisfaction is assessed. Marans thus identifies satisfaction with housing, neighborhood, city, and region as different levels, each relevant in its own way for considering the quality of life (Marans, 2012). This way of linking different scales is very useful when analyzing the quality of life in the local environment, that is, conducting research covering both cities and rural areas. The most immediate spatial framework of individual and social life is that of housing and neighborhood. The fact that as many as eleven theories dealing with this topic were identified in one paper proves that various factors influence satisfaction with housing (Šiljeg et al., 2018). The neighborhood is also a complex socio-spatial context that remains important despite globalization trends, so the importance of different forms of neighborly relations is emphasized, as well as the specific

importance attributed to the built environment and public spaces in the neighborhood (Farahani, 2016).

To determine satisfaction with the quality of life in a settlement, it is necessary to consider a whole series of different dimensions, of which security, satisfaction with traffic and infrastructure, satisfaction with services and facilities, and satisfaction with the natural environment are particularly important (Slavuj, 2012a; Potter et al., 2012).

Finally, when analyzing the influences from the regional scale, it is necessary to take into account those concerning opinions about institutions, the perception of social divisions, and economic opportunities.

In addition to determining the spatial aspects and the level of research, it is also necessary to bear in mind how different groups of residents, according to gender, age, education, and other relevant characteristics, value certain spaces and elements of the local environment.

In this context, it is particularly interesting to study the youth population. Namely, recent research indicates that the life of young people is marked by significant changes, whereby they stay in the parental home longer and marry later, but there are also significant changes in accepted values. For example, interest in political processes is decreasing, but the importance of education and interest in environmental protection is increasing (Tvaronavičiene et al., 2020:1101-1102). The abovementioned changes are essential for understanding what young people expect from the local environment and to what extent the local community influences the well-being of young people and its various aspects (economic, social, health, psychological, etc.) (Barker et al., 2022). However, it should also be kept in mind that young people (Generation Z), as a significant part of the human capital of a country (and local communities) represent important “contributors to local well-being” (Brennan, Barnett and Baugh, 2007:2). In general, young people are seen as key factors for decision-making, maintenance, and future development of the local community (Tvaronavičiene et al., 2020). Magiera and Pac (2022:2) point out that when assessing the quality of life of young people (adolescents), the most important domains and problems for this population have to be covered. Research on the quality of life of young people, improvement of “problematic” areas and systematic planning and implementation of youth-friendly programs/projects/policies is essential for the future development and prosperity of the local community. It is crucial to give

voice to all local actors in a way that establishes, encourages, and maintains their mutual interactions and communication to identify the problems, needs, and aspirations specific to each group (Brennan, Barnett and Baugh, 2007). In this kind of relationality and engagement, a sense of place is strengthened and the local community maintained. All of the above suggests that in order to assess the quality of life of young people, in addition to the immediate socio-spatial aspects of life such as housing and neighborhood, it is necessary to take into account wider social conditions in which young people grow up and in which they assess their chances for personal development and transition to work.

In addition, when researching the quality of life in a certain local community or spatial context, one should certainly account for a simple but important fact – social actors who live in a geographically defined area of a certain local community perceive that community and the quality of life in it in a temporal context. Local social actors place their evaluations, projections, experiences, and expectations within a temporal continuum that includes the local past, present, and (imagined) future. The temporal dimension of the quality of local life depends on the subjective assessment and evaluation of the current state and personal expectations and aspirations for the local future. The quality of life enables us to find the link between the present and the future. Finally, it can be summarized that it is important to research how young people evaluate the current quality of life in their communities and settlements, but also what they expect from the future of the local community. If young people are satisfied with the local context, there is a good chance that they will plan their future within it, which is especially the case in peripheral areas that are experiencing a significant population decline.

3. Vukovar-Syrmia County – quality of life and a look to the future

Vukovar-Syrmia County is located on the eastern border of the Republic of Croatia. The Homeland War caused great destruction in this area, which slowed down its progress after Croatia became an independent country. According to several indicators, this county is one of the least developed Croatian counties, which causes dissatisfaction among its residents.

According to research conducted in 2009, 55% of residents thought that pessimism prevails among the residents of their settlement, while slightly less than 25% thought that optimism prevails (Mišetić et al., 2012). The respondents pointed out unemployment, bad economy, and economic problems as the biggest issues. The largest number of respondents were dissatisfied with the way the county takes care of young people and their future. When Croatia accessed the European Union in 2013, the question of young people, i.e. creating conditions in which young people would want to continue to live, gained importance. Namely, in addition to the previously detected migration of young people towards urban centers, the emigration of young people from Vukovar-Syrmia County to foreign countries also increased. All this had an impact on the severe population decline in this county, where the number dropped from 179,521 in 2011 to 143,113 in 2021.

Research conducted in 2020 showed that a degree of dissatisfaction and lack of optimism among the residents still remains. Namely, as many as 51.2% of the residents assessed the current situation in the county as mostly bad or very bad, while only 12.7% of respondents assessed the situation as mostly good or very good. Respondents pointed out unemployment, nepotism, corruption, and emigration (of young people) as key problems burdening the county. Considering the above findings, it is not surprising that the residents are not very optimistic about the future of their county. There are more of those who think that the situation will worsen (31.9%) than those who think that it will improve (22.5%). However, the largest number of respondents (42.9%) believe that the situation will remain mostly the same. However, despite the expressed dissatisfaction, the residents are quite happy with their lives. Thus, on a scale from 0 to 10, the largest number of respondents rated their satisfaction with life as 7 and 8, and the average rating of life satisfaction was $M=6.9$. When these results are compared with research conducted at the national scale, it can be concluded that the residents of this county show the same level of life satisfaction as those from other Croatian counties (Kaliterna Lipovčan and Brajša Žganec, 2022). Therefore, it is important to mention the aspects of life with which the residents of this county are very satisfied. The results showed that the respondents are satisfied with their family life ($M=8.3$), their relations with other people ($M=7.6$), the sense of security ($M=7.5$), and the sense of belonging to their community ($M=7.3$).

To summarize, the research showed that they are satisfied with informal social relations, i.e. only a small number of respondents feel alienated, and at the same time, they are dissatisfied with the political and economic processes that affect life in this area. This, of course, raises the question of how life satisfaction and expectations from the local future are related to the perception of the current situation in local communities.

4. Implementation, research objectives, and instruments used

The data used in this analysis was collected in a survey conducted in 2019. The target population were students of third and fourth grades of secondary schools from Vukovar-Syrmia County, and a total of 744 respondents participated in the research. The research was conducted using stratified probability sampling to ensure a proportional balance of the respondents, concerning their grade, education program (grammar school or vocational), and the location of their school. The sample included secondary schools in Vukovar, Vinkovci, Županja, and Ilok, and the survey was conducted in groups, during classes. Minor deviations of the realized sample from population values according to stratification criteria were subsequently corrected by applying weights. Earlier analyses have already determined the extent to which young people are satisfied with certain dimensions of the quality of life in the local environment, so the following two objectives were set in this paper (Žanić et al., 2019).

The first objective is to research the extent to which the quality of life in the local environment is related to the life satisfaction of young people. Considering that life satisfaction is affected by many factors, both individual and social, here we wanted to find out whether the perception of the situation in the local socio-spatial environment affects life satisfaction. The local environment is gradually determined by considering the immediate living environment represented by the residential building and the neighborhood, the quality of housing in the settlement, and the social conditions at the county level.

The second objective is to determine whether certain dimensions of the quality of life are related to young people's expectations of life in the local community in the future. A certain concern when thinking about the future is especially visible in the peripheral areas of the county. Therefore,

we considered it important to determine, regarding local development, which aspects of local environment increase optimism.

The following instruments were used in the research. Life satisfaction was measured with a simple instrument that is very often used for these purposes, where on a scale from 1 (completely dissatisfied) to 5 (completely satisfied) respondents answered the question "Taking everything into account, how satisfied are you with your life?" (Raboteg Šarić et al. 2009).

For the perception of the future situation in the place of residence, we used the question "Please give your opinion about life in your settlement in five years", and the respondents could answer on a scale from 1, significantly worse than today, to 5, significantly better than today.

Satisfaction with housing, the neighborhood, and the quality of life in the settlement was operationalized based on similar research conducted in Croatia (Slavuj, 2012a). The quality of housing was evaluated based on questions related to the equipment of the facility, the size of the facility, and expenses for an apartment or house, while satisfaction with the neighborhood was measured by the degree of satisfaction when socializing with neighbors, the willingness of neighbors to help, and daily behavior of neighbors. The quality of life in the settlement was measured through four dimensions, namely the quality of services and facilities, satisfaction with the natural environment, satisfaction with safety, and the quality of transport and infrastructure.

When it comes to the research of the assessment of social limitations and opportunities in the county, they were researched through three dimensions: employment opportunities, social relations among residents, and trust in institutions. To capture the Transition to Work dimension, which is often listed as one of the key dimensions for the quality of life of young people, the dimension of satisfaction with the possibility of employment in the county was researched in this paper. This dimension was operationalized based on qualitative research on the quality of life, conducted through interviews at the end of 2018 and the beginning of 2019 (Žanić et al., 2019). The formatted instrument consists of five parts in which the following was researched: respondents' satisfaction with the possibility of finding a job, the availability of well-paid jobs, the transparency of employment procedures, the availability of diverse jobs, and the availability of jobs that enable progress.

Moreover, the trust in the institutions that operate in the county area, i.e. the police, local authorities, judiciary, political parties, and the media, was also researched. A one-factor structure with 56.2% of the explained variance was determined on the researched items, and the average scale value was used in further analyses.

Finally, the research covered an assessment of social relations in the county, and the respondents were asked about the extent to which ethnic divisions and divisions between the rich and the poor negatively affect the development of the county. In addition, in the regression analysis, control variables were also used, namely gender and self-assessment of the standard of living.

Table 1: Normality test results (N=403)

Variable	Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test	p-Value (K-S Test)	Shapiro-Wilk Test	p-Value (S-W Test)
FSS				
Emosional Support	0.059	0.101	0.984	0.115
Informational Support	0.052	0.121	0.979	0.060
Practical Support	0.051	0.114	0.970	0.030
PAQ-A				
Physical Activity	0.058	0.210	0.987	0.080
Sports Participation	0.052	0.260	0.981	0.050
Recreational Activity	0.056	0.112	0.975	0.040
Physical Education	0.064	0.156	0.982	0.070
RBS				
Smoking	0.071	0.210	0.955	0.005
Alcohol Consumption	0.068	0.115	0.942	0.003
Drug use	0.064	0.112	0.960	0.008
Hazardous Activity	0.057	0.118	0.967	0.014
LTAS				
Constructice Activity	0.055	0.112	0.986	0.090
Non-Constructive Activity	0.069	0.175	0.974	0.042

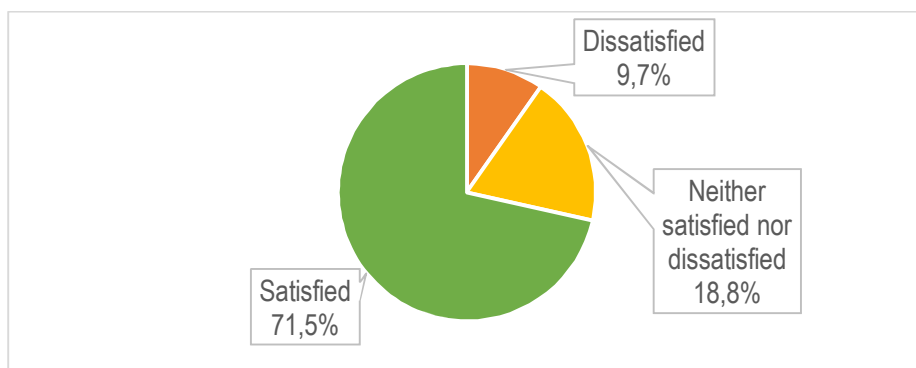
**FSS: Family Support; PAQ-A: Physical Activity Questionnaire for Adolescents; RBS: Risky Behavior Scale; Leisure Time Activity Scale (LTAS)*

Source: Primary Data (2023)

5. Results

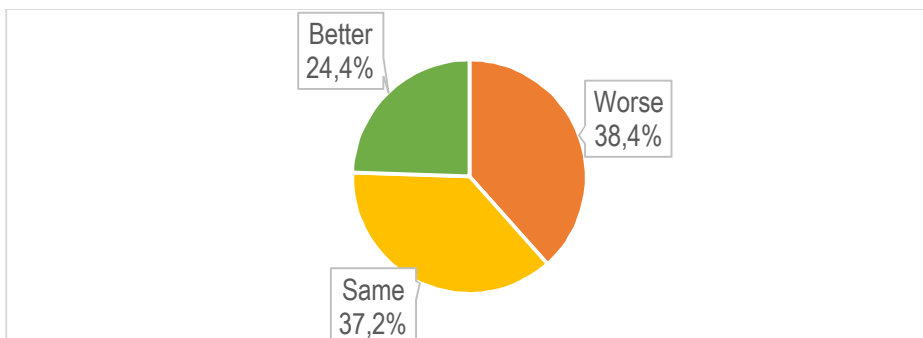
The results of the research showed that the majority of young people living in this county are satisfied with their lives. As shown in Figure 1, as many as 71.5% of the respondents stated that they are mostly or completely satisfied with their lives. On the other hand, only 9.7% of the respondents expressed dissatisfaction with their lives, while the remaining 18.8% stated that they were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied. Earlier research showed that most young people in Croatia express satisfaction with life, however, the results of this study show slightly higher numbers compared to previous findings. According to research conducted on a national sample, 59% of young people stated that they are satisfied with their life, while around 15% stated that they are dissatisfied (Raboteg Šarić et al. 2009).

Figure 1. Share of respondents according to their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with life



In contrast to the expressed high level of life satisfaction, the respondents are not very optimistic when it comes to the future of their settlement. Only about 24.4% of the respondents think that life in their settlement will be better in five years than it is now, while 38.4% think that life will be worse. The remaining 37.2% think that it will remain the same.

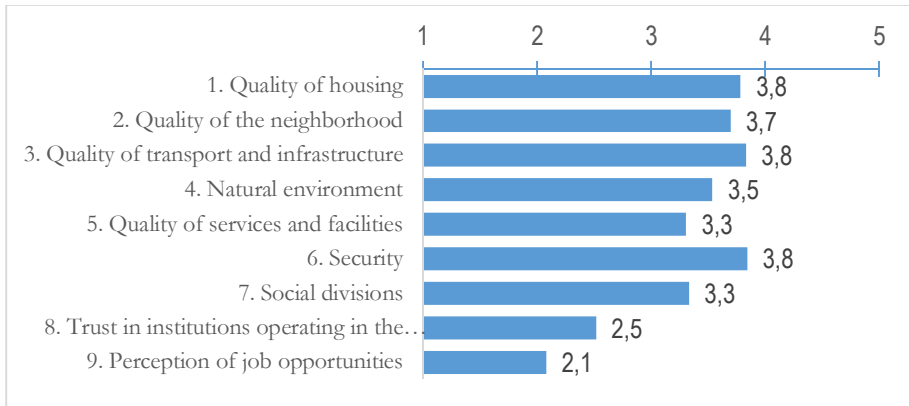
Figure 2. Share of respondents according to the assessment of what life will be like in their settlement in five years



As previously stated, each dimension used for measuring certain aspects of the quality of life and the perception of social limitations and opportunities was operationalized through several items, and Figure 3 shows the average scale values for the variables formed this way. If we use the theoretical mean value of 3 as a reference point, we see that more respondents have a positive experience of most of the measured dimensions than a negative one. The respondents were mostly satisfied with the level of security, followed by the quality of housing and the quality of transport infrastructure, while, when it comes to the trust in institutions and the perception of job opportunities in the county, more were dissatisfied than satisfied. Young people expressed dissatisfaction with all researched aspects of the perception of the possibility of employment. The results showed that 63% of young people are dissatisfied with the transparency of employment, while 78% are dissatisfied with the availability of well-paid jobs in the county (Žanić et al, 2019).

Comparing the results regarding the three levels of the living space, we see that the respondents are more satisfied with the dimensions of the quality of life that belong to the immediate social-spatial environment, as well as those that determine the quality of life at the settlement level, while they are significantly less satisfied with the factors related to the socio-economic characteristics of life in the county.

Figure 3. Comparison of satisfaction with certain aspects of the quality of life (arithmetic mean)



In the next step, we used regression analysis to examine the effect of the mentioned dimensions of the quality of life in the immediate living environment, followed by those at the community level and wider socio-economic determiners of life in the county on life satisfaction on one hand, and the assessment of living conditions in the community in five years on the other. Before developing the regression model, we analyzed the bivariate correlation of all variables included in the analyses. Table 1 shows that most of the predictor variables are not correlated or that there is a low level of correlation between them ($r < 0.36$). Nevertheless, a few predictor variables show a slightly higher but still moderate correlation ($0.36 \leq r < 0.67$). In particular, we detected a positive moderate correlation between the natural environment and the quality of housing as well as the quality of transport and infrastructure, between security and the quality of neighborhood, between security and natural environment, and the quality of services and facilities with the quality of transport and infrastructure as well as with the trust in institutions and perception of job opportunities. In the end, a moderate correlation between the perception of job opportunities and trust in institutions was established. Apart from the listed correlations, correlation analysis did not show that there is any stronger bivariate correlation between the predictor and criterion variables nor between the criterion variables themselves.

Table 1: Pearson’s correlation coefficient between the variables included in the regression analysis

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Life satisfaction	1											
2. Assessment of the living conditions in five years	.211**	1										
3. Gender	-.015	-.138**	1									
4. Assessment of standards of living	.275**	.165**	.031	1								
5. Quality of housing	.321**	.251**	-.045	.320**	1							
6. Quality of the neighborhood	.225**	.166**	-.061	.025	.269**	1						
7. Quality of transport and infrastructure	.289**	.233**	.056	.110**	.313**	.256**	1					
8. Natural environment	.228**	.226**	-.075**	.157**	.421**	.296**	.390**	1				
9. Quality of services and facilities	.213**	.243**	-.175**	.070	.330**	.237**	.411**	.308**	1			
10. Security	.286**	.302**	-.292**	.137**	.327**	.389**	.334**	.420**	.328**	1		
11. Social divisions	-.122**	-.167**	.110**	-.120**	-.184**	-.056	-.112**	-.148**	-.080**	-.221**	1	
12. Trust in institutions operating in the county	.255**	.280**	.030	.072	.314**	.233**	.359**	.297**	.370**	.238**	-.162**	1
13. Perception of job opportunities	.286**	.303**	-.135**	.159**	.253**	.159**	.291**	.289**	.365**	.226**	-.070	.456**

** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05

The following table shows the results of the regression analysis. Given that we were interested in measuring the effect of the listed living conditions on life satisfaction in general, as well as the assessment of the living conditions in the community in five years, we created two regression models with different criterion variables but the same predictor set. In both cases, the predictor set statistically significantly predicts the outcome of the criterion variable. The first model explains 22.4% of the variance with six variables having a statistically significant effect on the criterion variable “life satisfaction.” To be precise, life satisfaction was positively associated with the assessment of standards of living, quality of housing, quality of the neighborhood, quality of transport and infrastructure and the perception of security and job opportunities. The second model explains 17.1% of the variance but only three predictor variables had a statistically significant effect on the criterion variable. Respondents who think that the standards of living in their settlement would improve in five years are the same respondents who have a higher sense of security in their community, followed by those who have greater trust in institutions and those who have a more optimistic view of job opportunities in the county.

Table 2: Results of linear regression analysis for predicting life satisfaction and the assessment of living conditions in five years

	Life satisfaction	Assessment of living conditions in five years
	β	β
Gender	.035	-.054
Assessment of standards of living	.167**	.072
Quality of housing	.138**	.061
Quality of the neighborhood	.105**	-.007
Quality of transport and infrastructure	.128**	.034
Natural environment	-.039	.022
Quality of services and facilities	-.030	.030
Security	.115**	.136**
Social divisions	-.028	-.070
Trust in institutions operating in the county	.060	.111*
Perception of job opportunities	.148**	.168**
F	.18.289**	.12.870**
Adjusted R ²	0.224	0.171

** p < 0.01, * p < 0.05

6. Discussion

The research aimed to find out how the assessment of the quality of life in a settlement affects young people, i.e. their life satisfaction but also their assessment of future development of their settlements. It has been shown that the quality of life in the settlement and county is correlated with these two dimensions of personal and communal life in different ways.

When it comes to general life satisfaction of young people, it was shown that it is significantly affected by satisfaction with the immediate spatial framework. The quality of housing was proved to be a significant predictor of life satisfaction, just like in some previous studies (Potter et al., 2012).

Like in previous research, it was shown that the neighborhood is relevant for general life satisfaction. Previous research had already indicated that a higher level of satisfaction with the neighborhood has a positive effect on satisfaction with one's own life (O'Brien and Ayidiya, 1991). Although neighborhoods in Vukovar-Syrmia County are no longer as strong and cohesive as before according to some interpretations, the results of this study show that they still have a significant effect on life satisfaction of young people (Žanić et al., 2022a).

When it comes to dimensions related to the assessment of the quality of life in a settlement, it has been shown that security and quality of transport and infrastructure are correlated with life satisfaction of young people. As expected, young people who express a higher sense of security and who are more satisfied with transport connections and infrastructure are also more satisfied with their own lives. Regarding the control variables, the gender of the respondents had no statistically relevant effect on life satisfaction but the perception of the standards of living did. That result is also in line with some previous results according to which a better financial situation has a positive effect on life satisfaction of young people (Raboteg-Šarić et al., 2009).

Finally, the perception of job opportunities was significantly related to life satisfaction. This is an interesting finding given that young people from this county also showed high migration aspirations. It has been shown that just over a third of the respondents would like to live in their county after completing their education, a third would like to live somewhere else in Croatia, and a third would like to live abroad. However, the results concerning young people's attachment to their place of living show that they have a high level of emotional connection with it (Žanić et al., 2022b). Even though a lot of young people intend to leave, most of them have a strong emotional connection with this area, which can affect their personal dissatisfaction with the fact that is not economically developed enough to provide them with job opportunities.

The key result is that different factors affect the shown level of one's life satisfaction and the assessment of the development possibilities of places to live, i.e. the assessment of life in the settlement in five years. Generally speaking, in the case of the assessment of life in the local environment, the significance of the immediate environment decreases and the significance of broader social opportunities increases. That way, neither satisfaction with housing nor with the neighborhood is related to the assessment of the local future.

The assessment of security is the only dimension of the quality of life in a settlement that proved significant. That is an interesting finding, which is not easy to interpret. However, as mentioned in the introduction, the need for security is one of the basic human needs and it must be satisfied for a quality life. In addition, it is important to underline two contextual factors that could have affected this result. First, this area was struck by war thirty

years ago, which left a strong mark on its life today and could have influenced the fact that the sense of security is an important factor in the temporal understanding of local processes. Second, this area is on the very eastern border of the Republic of Croatia, which has been under particular pressure since the outbreak of the great migrant crisis in 2015. We believe that this also could have been a factor in the result, although, for a better understanding of this result, a comparison with similar research dealing with expectations of the local future of young people would certainly be necessary.

The assessment of the future situation in the county was also affected by the assessment of job opportunities and the trust in institutions operating in the county. Since economic issues are listed as key problems in this area, it is not surprising that the perception of job opportunities proved to have the most pronounced effect in this model. It is, therefore, obvious that the slim employment opportunities are not seen only as a temporary difficulty, but also as a structural problem that determines the way how the area is perceived in a temporal dimension. In short, if they believe that there are fewer opportunities for career development in the present, it significantly influences how they imagine the future.

Another aspect of broader social effects on the perception of the future is the (lack of) trust in institutions. According to earlier research, Croatia is one of the countries with a history of distrust in institutions (Žanić and Miletić, 2023; Nikodem and Črpić, 2014). It is obvious that this distrust also generates a certain type of pessimism toward the future, the impression that nothing will change for the better.

For a better understanding of how the quality of life in the local environment affects the two studied dimensions, we believe that it would be useful to conduct longitudinal research, but also to obtain more findings from other countries measured by the same or similar instruments.

Also, we believe that future research should investigate the effect of values on the correlation between the evaluation of the quality of life in the local environment and life satisfaction. Although it is noticeable that the environment is more important for young people, this study did not show that greater satisfaction with the environment affects greater life satisfaction. Thus, it would be useful to examine whether the differences between accepting materialistic and post-materialistic values play any role.

Environmental protection is considered to be a part of the post-materialistic world view which is, according to some claims, more pronounced in large cities and cities with better universities (Reckwitz, 2023). It would be useful to research whether post-materialistic value orientations, including preoccupation with environmental protection, are underrepresented in smaller settlements that are researched in this paper. So, we still have to discover whether the different sets of values influence the fact that young people pay special attention to different aspects of the quality of life in the local area.

This study and the obtained results open the door for new research but also for international comparisons of the results. One of the important topics for future research is how the local environment, as well as national and international circumstances affect life satisfaction. Including the dimensions of travel, maintaining social connections outside the place of residence, and some other dimensions related to broader social influences on everyday life would enable us to better understand the level of importance of the local community for life satisfaction of young people.

7. Conclusion

One of the important fields of research when studying quality of life is the way in which different dimensions of quality of life affect the inhabitants of an area and their general experience of the local environment. We thought it important to raise those questions with young people because they represent great capital for local communities but also because of the changes they are undergoing.

Previous research was focused on the impact of individual dimensions of the quality of life on general life satisfaction in a neighborhood, settlement, or city (Slavuj, 2012). This paper has somewhat different objectives and the research was set around the effect of the quality of life in a community on overall life satisfaction of the young on one hand, and their expectations of the local future on the other. Therefore, the goal was to get insights into elements of the quality of life which are crucial for the temporal dimension of the local environment and their lives.

The research has shown how different dimensions of the quality of life have different effects on satisfaction with the personal life and on the

assessment of the future in the place of residence. The only two dimensions with a significant effect in both cases were the sense of security in the community and the ability to get a job in the county. Still, looking at the overall personal life satisfaction, aspects of the direct socio-spatial surroundings, meaning the housing conditions and the neighborhood, have a significant effect, while there was no correlation between those two elements and the assessment of the future in the area.

When assessing the future of a settlement, the effect of broader social processes grows, so trust in institutions operating in the county becomes a significant predictor. Correlations can be found between these results and the results of research conducted in this county on the general population (Živić, 2022). It is again shown that a certain level of satisfaction with immediate social relationships also generates satisfaction with life, but also that assessing the development potential of the area as low is caused by institutional and economic instability. To raise optimism about the local future, it is necessary to ensure the security of young people, and along with that, to work on building trust in institutions as well as creating an economic environment in which young people would have better job opportunities. This means that local communities will find it hard to prevent young people from leaving unless they succeed in finding ways to improve the work of institutions and encourage economic development that would enable them to develop a career in the areas they live in now.

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