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Quality of life in algerian medium-sized cities: a field study in Relizane city

ABSTRACT

This study examines the quality of life of residents in Relizane, an Algerian medium-sized city, from an urban-sociological perspective. The objective was to assess and analyze both the objective and subjective dimensions of urban quality of life and to identify spatial disparities among different urban neighborhoods. The research employed a descriptive-analytical design within a mixed-methods approach. Quantitative data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to a purposive stratified random sample of 100 residents equally distributed across four neighborhoods: the City Centre (Old Urban Area), Hay Al-Gueraba (Traditional Popular Quarter), the AADL Housing District (Modern Urban Area), and Beshmirik (Urban Fringe). Qualitative information was obtained through 12 semi-structured interviews with local officials and urban planners. The findings revealed significant spatial inequalities in quality-of-life conditions. Residents of the peripheral Beshmirik neighborhood reported lower levels of satisfaction with public services, infrastructure, and urban facilities compared with respondents from the City Centre and the AADL district. Subjective dimensions, particularly residential satisfaction, perceived security, and social belonging, emerged as the strongest predictors of overall quality of life. The study concludes that urban quality of life in Relizane is shaped by the interaction between material living conditions and residents' perceptions of their social and residential environment. Comprehensive urban policies aimed at reducing spatial inequalities and improving service provision in peripheral neighborhoods are essential for enhancing quality of life in Algerian medium-sized cities.

Keywords: Urban quality of life; medium-sized cities; Relizane; urban policies; spatial inequality; residential satisfaction; urban fringe.

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Calidad de vida en ciudades argelinas de tamaño medio: un estudio de campo en la ciudad de Relizane

RESUMEN

Este estudio analiza la calidad de vida de los habitantes de Relizane, una ciudad argelina de tamaño medio, desde una perspectiva urbano-sociológica. El objetivo fue evaluar y analizar

las dimensiones objetivas y subjetivas de la calidad de vida urbana, así como identificar las desigualdades espaciales existentes entre distintos barrios de la ciudad. La investigación utilizó un diseño descriptivo-analítico con enfoque de métodos mixtos. Los datos cuantitativos se recopilaban mediante un cuestionario estructurado aplicado a una muestra aleatoria estratificada e intencional de 100 residentes distribuidos equitativamente en cuatro sectores urbanos: Centro de la Ciudad (área urbana antigua), Hay Al-Gueraba (barrio popular tradicional), Distrito Habitacional AADL (área urbana moderna) y Beshmirik (periferia urbana). La información cualitativa se obtuvo mediante 12 entrevistas semiestructuradas realizadas a funcionarios locales y planificadores urbanos. Los resultados evidenciaron importantes desigualdades espaciales en las condiciones de calidad de vida. Los residentes de Beshmirik manifestaron menores niveles de satisfacción con los servicios públicos, la infraestructura y los equipamientos urbanos en comparación con los habitantes del Centro de la Ciudad y del distrito AADL. Entre los factores subjetivos, la satisfacción residencial, la percepción de seguridad y el sentido de pertenencia social fueron los principales determinantes de la calidad de vida. Se concluye que la calidad de vida urbana en Relizane depende de la interacción entre las condiciones materiales y las percepciones de los residentes, por lo que se requieren políticas urbanas integrales orientadas a reducir las desigualdades espaciales y fortalecer los servicios en las zonas periféricas.

Palabras clave: Calidad de vida urbana; ciudades de tamaño medio; Relizane; políticas urbanas; desigualdad espacial; satisfacción residencial; periferia urbana.

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Qualidade de vida em cidades argelinas de médio porte: um estudo de campo na cidade de Relizane

RESUMO

Este estudo analisa a qualidade de vida dos habitantes de Relizane, uma cidade argelina de médio porte, sob uma perspectiva urbano-sociológica. O objetivo foi avaliar e analisar as dimensões objetivas e subjetivas da qualidade de vida urbana, bem como identificar as desigualdades espaciais existentes entre diferentes bairros da cidade. A pesquisa adotou um delineamento descritivo-analítico com abordagem de métodos mistos. Os dados quantitativos foram coletados por meio de um questionário estruturado aplicado a uma amostra aleatória estratificada e intencional de 100 moradores distribuídos igualmente em quatro setores urbanos: Centro da Cidade (área urbana antiga), Hay Al-Gueraba (bairro popular tradicional), Distrito Habitacional AADL (área urbana moderna) e Beshmirik (franja urbana). As informações qualitativas foram obtidas por meio de 12 entrevistas semiestructuradas realizadas com autoridades locais e planejadores urbanos. Os resultados revelaram desigualdades espaciais significativas nas condições de qualidade de vida. Os moradores de Beshmirik apresentaram menores níveis de satisfação com os serviços públicos, a infraestrutura e os equipamentos urbanos em comparação aos residentes do Centro da Cidade e do distrito AADL. Entre os fatores subjetivos, a satisfação residencial, a percepção de segurança e o sentimento de pertencimento social destacaram-se como os principais determinantes da qualidade de vida. Conclui-se que a qualidade de vida urbana em Relizane resulta da interação entre as condições materiais de vida e as percepções dos moradores sobre seu ambiente social e residencial. Assim, são necessárias políticas urbanas integradas voltadas à redução das desigualdades espaciais e à melhoria dos serviços nas áreas periféricas.

Palavras-chave: Qualidade de vida urbana; cidades de médio porte; Relizane; políticas urbanas; desigualdade espacial; satisfação residencial; franja urbana.

INTRODUCTION

Quality of life has emerged as one of the most prominent concepts in social sciences and urban planning research since the early 1970s, driven by the global acceleration of urbanisation and its profound structural transformations of living conditions. Interest in this concept arose partly as a response to the recognised limitations of purely economic indicators such as GDP in reflecting the lived reality of populations; landmark studies on social welfare demonstrated that psychological, social, and environmental dimensions are no less significant than the economic dimension (Campbell et al., 1976, p. 11).

In the Algerian context, medium-sized cities have experienced mounting urban pressures over the past three decades as a result of rapid urban expansion and rural exodus, generating complex challenges at the intersection of housing crises, deteriorating public services, and declining civic participation. The city of Relizane (Ghilizane) represents a prominent example of such cities, with distinctive geographical and demographic characteristics that warrant deeper and more systematic scholarly investigation (Hadjiedj, 2004, p. 74). Of particular analytical interest is the emergence and proliferation of informal urban fringe areas — such as the Beshmirik neighbourhood — that develop on the periphery of the formal city largely outside planning frameworks.

The central research question of this study is: What is the level of quality of life in Relizane city, and what are its primary objective and subjective determinants across neighbourhoods of differing urban character?

Research Questions

The following sub-questions were formulated to operationalise the central research problem:

What is the level of residential satisfaction with basic public services — healthcare, education, and transport — across Relizane's different neighbourhoods?

Do quality of life levels differ significantly between central and peripheral neighbourhoods?

What is the relationship between demographic variables (gender, age, educational level) and perceived quality of life?

What are the main urban challenges constraining improvements to quality of life in the city?

Study Objectives

This study pursues both scientific and practical objectives. The scientific objectives include measuring quality of life in Relizane using standardised objective and subjective indicators, and uncovering the spatial inequalities in service distribution across the city's neighbourhoods. The practical objectives focus on providing diagnostic evidence to inform urban planning strategies and local development programmes in Relizane province, with particular attention to the structural challenges posed by unplanned peripheral growth.

Significance of the Study

This study carries significant value at both theoretical and applied levels. Theoretically, it enriches Arabic-language scholarship in urban quality of life research through an empirical application in the underexplored context of Algerian medium-sized cities. Applied value stems from the diagnostic indicators it provides for urban master plans and local development programming. The study also contributes to an emerging body of comparative research on quality of life in North African cities, and addresses a methodological gap by explicitly integrating the urban fringe as a fourth analytical unit alongside the traditional typology of old urban centres, popular quarters, and modern planned districts.

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The Concept of Quality of Life: Evolution and Debates

The concept of quality of life remains surrounded by considerable conceptual ambiguity despite the voluminous body of research it has generated. In its initial formulations, it was closely associated with material welfare and standard-of-living indicators, before progressively expanding to encompass psychological, social, and environmental dimensions (Diener & Suh, 1997, p. 192). Campbell, Converse, and Rodgers established an influential distinction between two analytical levels: objective quality — measurable through quantitative indicators such as mortality rates, income levels, and housing density — and subjective quality — reflecting individual perceptions of satisfaction and happiness (Campbell et al., 1976, p. 47).

Phillips identifies three principal approaches in quality of life research: the objective approach, which relies on social and economic indicators; the subjective approach, grounded in perceived satisfaction; and the integrative approach, which synthesises both (Phillips, 2006, p. 33). Within this framework, Pacione argues that the city, as an analytical unit of welfare, requires specifically urban indicators that account for the social dynamics distinctive to urban space (Pacione, 2003, p. 21).

Dimensions of Urban Quality of Life

The environmental dimension is widely regarded as the most influential factor in urban quality of life. Empirical studies consistently demonstrate a strong positive relationship between the quality of the physical environment — air quality, green spaces, cleanliness — and residents' sense of satisfaction (Pacione, 2003, p. 27). The social dimension encompasses levels of social solidarity, neighbourhood relations, and civic participation. Merlin and Choay argue that public services are the primary mechanism of social integration in the city (Merlin & Choay, 2000, p. 282).

The security dimension has been established by recent research as occupying a prominent position in the urban residents' hierarchy of needs, with perceived safety in public spaces being a precondition for meaningful use of those spaces (Dupont & Dureau, 1994, p. 808). The housing dimension also carries considerable weight, particularly in societies where personal identity is strongly tied to one's dwelling and neighbourhood (Boudahrain, 1998, p. 89).

Characteristics of Algerian Medium-Sized Cities and the Urban Fringe Phenomenon

Algerian medium-sized cities are characterised by a set of structural features that complicate urban development trajectories. Hadjiedj's study notes that these cities suffer from unplanned and rapid urban sprawl that has exceeded the carrying capacity of existing infrastructure (Hadjiedj, 2004, p. 78). Algeria's urbanisation rate rose from 31.4% in 1966 to over 73% in 2008 (ONS, 2008, p. 42).

The urban fringe phenomenon, as exemplified by Beshmirik in Relizane, is a product of this unplanned expansion. These peripheral zones are characterised by incomplete urban fabric, inadequate service provision, spatial disconnection from the urban core, and high vulnerability to environmental hazards such as flooding. Tabbagh argues that urban sprawl in Algerian medium-sized cities produces fragile urban environments lacking collective amenities, institutionalising functional dysfunction within the urban system (Tabbagh, 2010, p. 156).

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study belongs to the category of descriptive-analytical social research. A descriptive-analytical approach was adopted combining quantitative and qualitative methods within a Mixed Methods framework that accommodates the social complexity of quality of life and

transcends the limitations of either approach used in isolation (Creswell, 2014, p. 217).

Population and Sample

The study population comprises the total residents of Relizane city distributed across urban neighbourhoods that vary in their historical, social, and morphological characteristics. The primary research sample consisted of 100 individuals, selected through stratified random sampling to ensure adequate representation of the city's different neighbourhood types. Questionnaires were distributed equally across four principal neighbourhoods — 25 respondents per neighbourhood — selected to represent four distinct urban typologies:

Table 1.

Distribution of the research sample by neighbourhood and urban typology

Neighbourhood	Urban Typology	Location in City	n	%
City Centre (Hay Al-Nasr)	Old Urban Core	Historic city centre	25	25%
Hay Al-Gueraba	Traditional Popular Quarter	Old popular fabric	25	25%
AADL Housing District	Modern Planned Urban	New social housing zone	25	25%
Beshmirik	Urban Fringe	Southern city periphery	25	25%
Total			100	100%

Source: Field survey data, October–December 2024.

Table 2

Distribution of the Sample by Gender and Neighbourhood (n = 100)

Neighbourhood	Male (n)	Male (%)	Female (n)	Female (%)	Total (n)	Total (%)
City Centre	14	56.0	11	44.0	25	25%
Hay Al-Gueraba	15	60.0	10	40.0	25	25%
AADL District	13	52.0	12	48.0	25	25%
Beshmirik	12	48.0	13	52.0	25	25%
Total	54	54.0	46	46.0	100	100%

Source: Field survey data, 2024.

Table 3.

Distribution of the Sample by Educational Level (n = 100)

Educational Level	City Centre	Al-Gueraba	AADL	Beshmirik	Total (%)
Primary / Middle School	4	6	2	8	20%
Secondary / Baccalaureate	9	10	8	11	38%
University & Above	12	9	15	6	42%
Total	25	25	25	25	100%

Source: Field survey data, 2024.

Measurement Instrument

A multi-dimensional questionnaire was designed drawing from the culturally adapted and Arabised version of the WHO WHOQOL-BREF indicators. The questionnaire contains 48 items distributed across six dimensions: housing and built environment quality (9 items), public services level (11 items), natural environment quality (7 items), social and security satisfaction (9 items), access to employment and education (6 items), and general life satisfaction (6 items). Responses were measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = not at all satisfied; 5 = completely satisfied). Content validity was verified by a panel of seven specialists. Internal consistency reliability was assessed through Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha = 0.84$), a level considered acceptable by recognised standards (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994, p. 264). Twelve in-depth interviews were additionally conducted with municipal officials, planning directors, and neighbourhood association representatives.

Results and Analysis

Sample Characteristics

The study sample of 100 respondents comprised 54.0% male and 46.0% female participants, with a mean age of 34.7 years. University graduates and above represented 42% of the sample, secondary level respondents accounted for 38%, and those with primary or middle school education made up 20%. The distribution across the four study neighbourhoods was exactly equal at 25 respondents per neighbourhood.

Objective Indicators of Quality of Life

Housing and Built Environment Quality

Field data revealed a markedly uneven housing situation across the city's neighbourhoods. The AADL district recorded the highest housing satisfaction rate (72.4%), reflecting the relative newness of its built stock. This figure dropped sharply to 28.3% in Beshmirik, which suffers from high residential density, spontaneous construction, and visibly deteriorating facilities. At the sample level, 22.4% of households were found to lack adequate sanitary facilities, with these cases concentrated almost entirely in peripheral and traditional neighbourhoods. This spatial disparity aligns with Boudahrain's findings on housing inequalities in Algerian cities (Boudahrain, 1998, p. 112).

Public Services Level

The mean satisfaction score for healthcare services reached only 2.75 out of 5 — below the scale mid-point. The most frequent complaints concerned insufficient specialist physicians and excessive waiting times at Relizane Hospital. Educational services received somewhat higher scores (3.18/5), though severe classroom overcrowding was noted at the middle-school level in high-density neighbourhoods. Urban transport recorded the lowest satisfaction across all services (1.96/5), with Beshmirik residents citing the near-total absence of bus connections and the complete lack of night-time public transport.

Infrastructure and Environmental Services

61.3% of respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the stormwater drainage system — a finding that explains recurrent flooding in parts of the city, particularly Beshmirik, during periods of heavy rainfall. Urban cleanliness and waste collection received weak satisfaction scores (2.41/5), with a significant gap between central and peripheral neighbourhoods. Green spaces and recreational areas were reported as severely lacking by 76.8% of residents — a diagnosis convergent with Mancebo's characterisation of the systematic neglect of the environmental dimension in medium-sized developing cities (Mancebo, 2006, p. 94).

Table 4.

Mean QoL satisfaction scores by dimension and neighbourhood (Scale: 1–5)

Dimension	City Centre	Al-Gueraba	AADL	Beshmirik	Overall Mean
Housing & Built Environmen	3.12	2.87	3.68	2.21	2.97
Public Services	3.05	2.74	3.21	1.98	2.75
Natural Environment	2.89	2.63	3.14	1.87	2.63
Security & Social Belonging	3.41	3.62	2.93	2.54	3.13
Education & Employment	3.18	2.96	3.42	2.34	2.98
General Life Satisfaction	3.02	2.84	3.28	2.18	2.83
Neighbourhood Overall Mean	3.11	2.94	3.28	2.19	2.88

Note: Red-shaded cells = means below 2.5 (low satisfaction); green-shaded = means ≥ 3.5 (high satisfaction). Source: Field survey, 2024.

Figure 1

Mean QoL satisfaction scores by dimension and neighbourhood

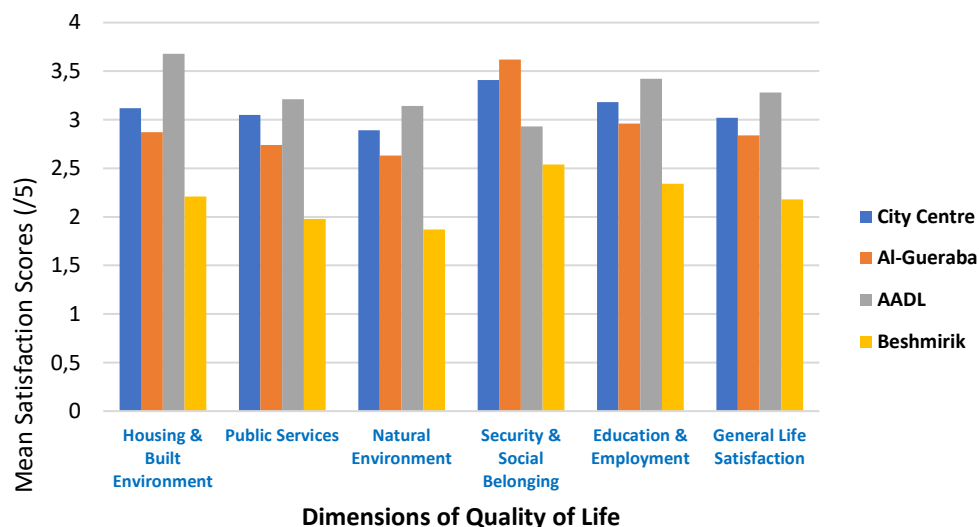
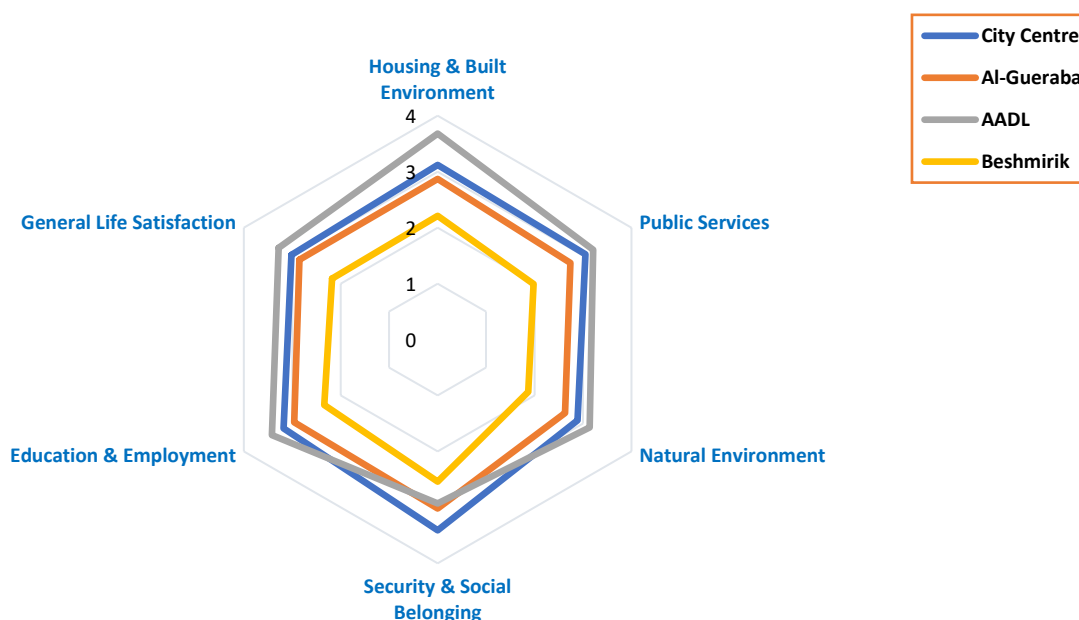


Figure 2

Radar plot of QoL dimensions across the four neighbourhoods



Subjective Indicators of Quality of Life

Social Satisfaction and Sense of Belonging

76.2% of respondents reported high satisfaction with their social relationships with neighbours and the immediate social environment. This social satisfaction was highest in Hay Al-Gueraba (3.62/5), where traditional solidarity and mutual aid cultures remain vigorous, while it fell notably in the AADL district to 2.93/5, where the more individualistic social fabric of new collective housing prevails. In-depth interviews suggest that the relocation of families from traditional neighbourhoods to new housing estates is frequently accompanied by a sense of social uprooting and weakened place attachment.

Perceived Security

The perceived security index registered a moderate level (3.07/5) across the full sample, with notable variation by neighbourhood and gender. 63.4% of female respondents reported avoiding public spaces in the evening, compared to only 19.1% of male respondents. In Beshmirik, this avoidance rate among women reached 79.2% — the highest in the sample. Residents associated feelings of insecurity primarily with inadequate street lighting and insufficient security presence in peripheral neighbourhoods, consistent with Dupont and Dureau's finding that perceived security constitutes the most decisive determinant of actual use of public urban spaces (Dupont & Dureau, 1994, p. 815).

Table 5.

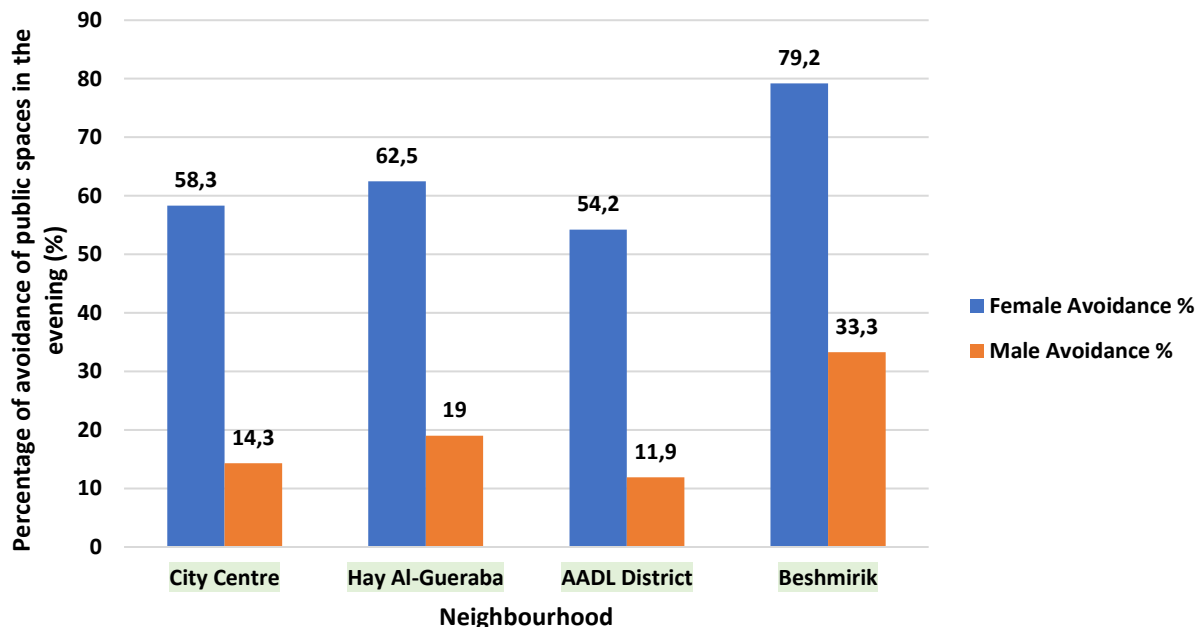
Perceived Security Index and Public Space Avoidance by Gender and Neighbourhood (%)

Neighbourhood	Female Avoidance %	Male Avoidance %	Gender Gap (pp)	Security Index /5	Lighting Rating /5
City Centre	58.3	14.3	44.0	3.34	3.12
Hay Al-Gueraba	62.5	19.0	43.5	3.18	2.84
AADL District	54.2	11.9	42.3	3.29	3.45
Beshmirik	79.2	33.3	45.9	2.47	1.93
Overall Mean	63.4	19.1	44.3	3.07	2.84

Note: pp = percentage points. Red-shaded = female avoidance rate $\geq 70\%$. Source: Field survey, 2024.

Figure 3.

Evening Public Space Avoidance Rates by Gender and Neighbourhood



General Life Satisfaction and Relocation Intention

The general life satisfaction index came in at a moderate level (2.83/5), indicating that the majority of residents hold a guarded assessment of their urban quality of life. Notably, 45.7% of respondents expressed a desire to relocate to another city or abroad if the opportunity presented itself — rising to 67.4% in Beshmirik — a highly significant indicator of urban disenchantment that warrants serious policy attention.

Table 6.

Summary of Key quantitative indicators by neighbourhood

Indicator	City Centre	Al-Gueraba	AADL	Beshmirik
Housing satisfaction rate (%)	61.8	54.2	72.4	28.3
Healthcare satisfaction (/5)	3.05	2.74	3.21	1.98
Urban transport satisfaction (/5)	2.37	2.12	2.86	1.49
Households lacking sanitary facilities (%)	12.0	18.7	4.2	54.3
Drainage dissatisfaction (%)	52.1	67.4	41.6	84.2
Report absence of green spaces (%)	68.3	73.6	61.2	88.5
Desire to relocate / emigrate (%)	38.2	42.6	35.1	67.4
Overall QoL Index (/5)	3.11	2.94	3.28	2.19

Source: Field survey, 2024.

Figure 4.

Overall QoL Score versus Desire to Relocate by Neighbourhood

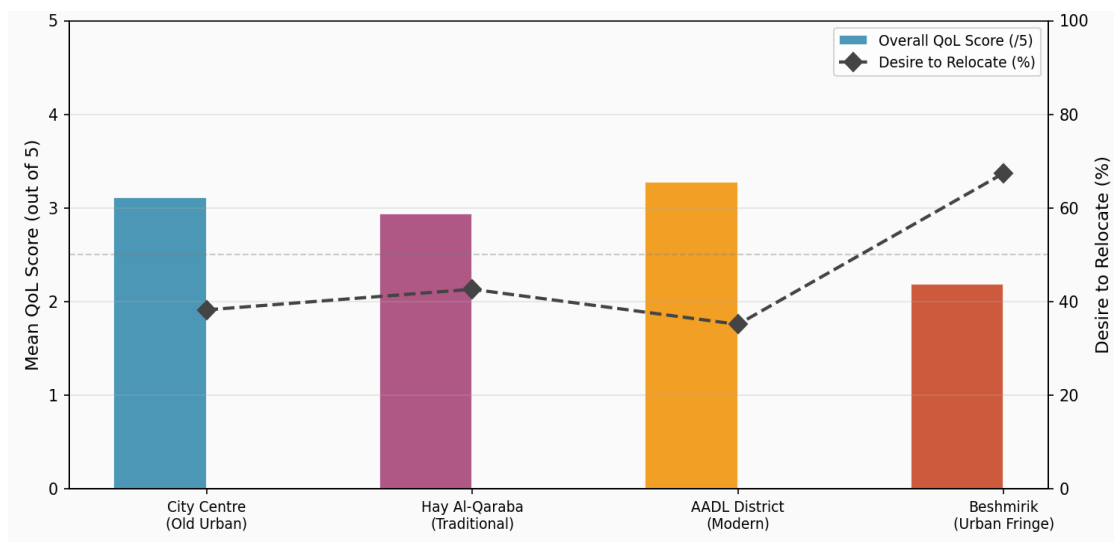
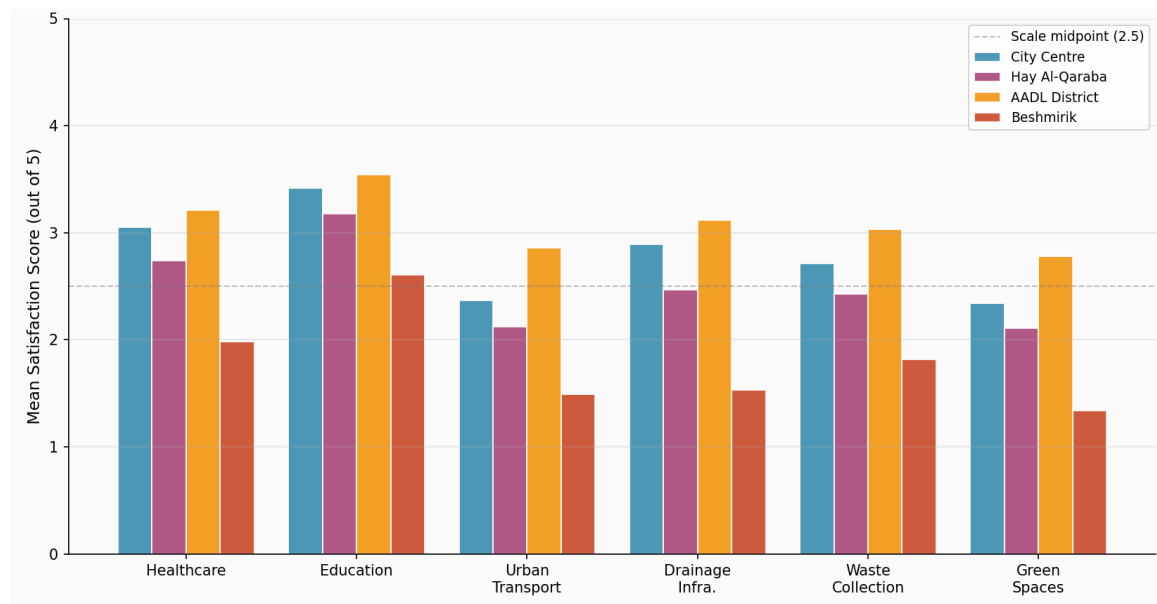


Figure 5.

Public Service Satisfaction by Neighbourhood and Service Type



DISCUSSION

The study findings reveal a complex and internally differentiated picture of quality of life in Relizane that resists simplistic characterisation. This section offers an extended interpretive analysis organised around six interrelated thematic dimensions: (1) the objective–subjective dissociation; (2) spatial inequality and centre–periphery dynamics; (3) the gender dimension of urban insecurity; (4) social capital and community resilience in traditional neighbourhoods; (5) the urban fringe as a structural deficit zone; and (6) governance failure and planning deficiency. These dimensions are then synthesised within a theoretical framework drawing on both classical and contemporary urban sociology.

The Objective–Subjective Dissociation in Quality of Life

Perhaps the most theoretically significant finding of this study is the systematic dissociation between objective and subjective quality of life indicators, a pattern that operates differently across the four neighbourhood types. This dissociation is most dramatically illustrated in Hay Al-Gueraba, where the lowest infrastructure ratings coexist with the highest social satisfaction scores (3.62/5) in the sample. The neighbourhood scores below the scale mid-point on physical services yet its residents exhibit the strongest sense of belonging and neighbourhood solidarity.

This pattern resonates strongly with the observations of Diener and Suh (1997, p. 200), who demonstrated that in developing societies, subjective wellbeing indicators frequently diverge from objective service conditions, as social and cultural factors mediate the individual's evaluation of their living environment. In the Algerian context, this mediation is amplified by the deep cultural embedding of *asabiyya* — the collective solidarity bond — which functions as a compensatory psychological resource, partially offsetting the adverse effects of material deprivation on residents' subjective assessment of their lives.

However, this compensatory mechanism has limits, as evidenced by Beshmirik's data. In this peripheral neighbourhood, both objective indicators and subjective satisfaction scores are simultaneously low (2.19/5 overall). When objective deprivation reaches a threshold — as reflected in the near-total absence of basic services — the subjective compensatory effect is overwhelmed. This suggests a non-linear relationship between objective conditions and subjective satisfaction, with a tipping point beyond which material deprivation becomes sufficient to erode even socially embedded forms of life satisfaction.

At a deeper sociological level, the elevated social satisfaction reported by many respondents despite objectively deficient services can be partially interpreted through the lens of Bourdieu's concept of symbolic domination (1979, p. 546), whereby individuals reframe their urban experience through a socially acquired framework of lowered expectations. In communities where generations have lived with chronic service deficits, inadequate infrastructure is gradually normalised and ceases to function as a source of active dissatisfaction. This process of adaptive preference formation — a concept developed in welfare economics by Sen (1992) and applied to urban contexts by Gough (2004) — represents a significant methodological challenge for quality of life research, as it may cause survey-based subjective measures systematically to understate the severity of objective deprivation in the most disadvantaged communities.

Spatial Inequality and Centre–Periphery Dynamics

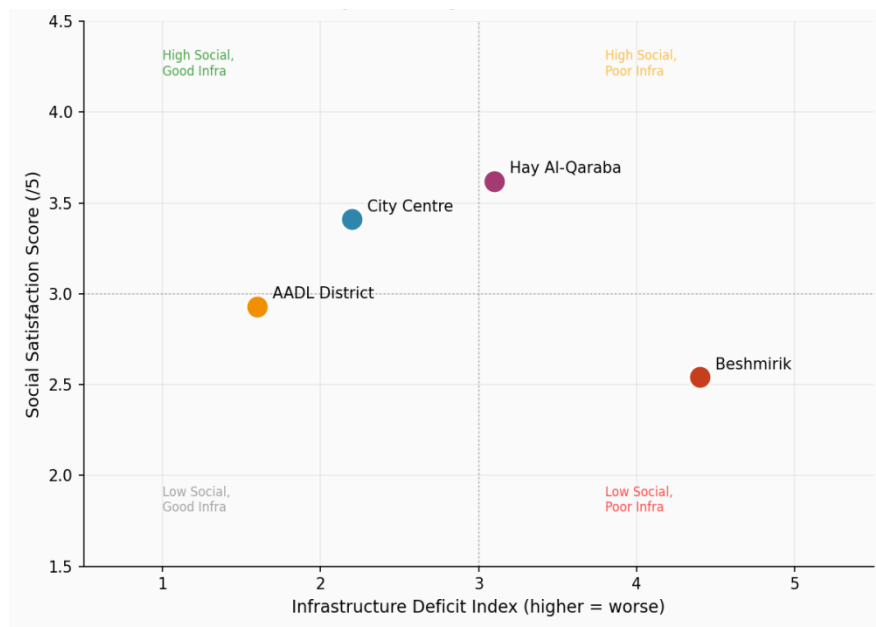
The study data provide compelling evidence of a pronounced spatial gradient in quality of life that follows the city's morphological structure: highest in the modern planned AADL district (3.28/5), declining progressively through the old urban centre (3.11/5) and traditional popular quarter (2.94/5), and reaching its nadir in the peripheral Beshmirik neighbourhood (2.19/5). This gradient of 1.09 scale points between the best-served and worst-served neighbourhoods — representing a 49.8% relative difference — is not merely a statistical artefact; it reflects deep-rooted structural inequalities in the allocation of urban resources, services, and planning attention.

This spatial logic aligns with the cumulative advantage theory developed in urban sociology, which holds that advantageous locations within the city tend to accumulate further advantages over time through investment, planning decisions, and the attraction of mobile resources, while disadvantaged peripheral locations experience cumulative disinvestment and neglect (Wilson, 1987; Massey & Denton, 1993). In the Relizane context, the concentration of administrative services, commercial functions, and formal infrastructure in the city centre creates a self-reinforcing spatial hierarchy that is replicated in virtually every quality of life dimension studied.

The spatial inequality revealed by this study also carries important implications for mobility and access. Residents of Beshmirik face a double spatial disadvantage: not only do they lack local services, but the inadequacy of urban transport (1.49/5 for transport satisfaction in Beshmirik versus 2.86/5 in the AADL district) severely constrains their ability to access services located elsewhere in the city. This transport poverty compounds the effects of spatial peripheralisation, effectively confining residents within a service-deprived local environment and limiting their participation in the broader urban life of Relizane (Lucas, 2004). The 67.4% relocation desire rate in Beshmirik — compared to 35.1% in the AADL district — is a rational response to these compounded disadvantages, reflecting not mere residential preference but a structural condition of spatial exclusion.

Figure 6.

Social capital versus infrastructure deficit: mapping the subjective–objective



Dissociation

The Gender Dimension of Urban Insecurity

The study's security data reveal a gendered urban experience that is both analytically important and practically consequential. The aggregate female avoidance rate of 63.4% for evening public spaces — more than three times the male rate of 19.1% — indicates that the city's public realm is experienced as effectively inaccessible to a majority of women after dark. This is not a trivial finding: access to public space is a constitutive element of urban citizenship and a prerequisite for full participation in the social, economic, and cultural life of the city (Fenster, 2005).

The intensity of this gendered insecurity is moreover spatially differentiated in revealing ways. In Beshmirik, 79.2% of female respondents report evening public space avoidance — a level that approaches near-total exclusion. The mechanisms underlying this pattern are multiply determined: inadequate street lighting (1.93/5 in Beshmirik), the incomplete and informal built fabric of the neighbourhood, low surveillance from surrounding buildings, and the social norms that accumulate in spaces perceived as lawless or ungoverned. These physical and social factors combine to produce what Fenster (2005) has termed a geography of fear that systematically constrains women's use of urban space far more than men's.

The gender security gap also has significant economic implications. When women are effectively excluded from the public realm in the evening, their access to evening employment, adult education, healthcare, and social activities is correspondingly restricted. This gendered mobility constraint therefore reproduces and deepens socioeconomic inequalities, transforming what might appear as a 'mere' planning deficit into a mechanism of gender-based exclusion with cascading effects across multiple life domains (Hanson & Pratt, 1995).

Social Capital and Community Resilience in Traditional Neighbourhoods

The data from Hay Al-Gueraba — the traditional popular quarter — present a sociologically nuanced picture that complicates any simple narrative of urban decline. Despite recording below-average scores on most objective service dimensions (2.74/5 for public services; 2.63/5 for natural environment), this neighbourhood exhibits the highest social satisfaction in the sample (3.62/5) and relatively moderate levels of relocation desire (42.6%). This apparent paradox is best understood through the lens of social capital theory.

Putnam's distinction between bonding social capital — dense, trust-based ties within a

community — and bridging social capital — horizontal ties connecting different social groups — is directly relevant here (Putnam, 2000). Hay Al-Gueraba exhibits exceptionally high levels of bonding social capital, rooted in long-standing residential stability, shared cultural and familial networks, and the spatial density that facilitates frequent informal social interaction. This bonding capital serves as a buffer against the adverse wellbeing effects of material deprivation, providing emotional support, mutual aid, and a shared sense of collective identity and dignity.

This finding has important implications for urban policy. Housing renewal and neighbourhood regeneration programmes that prioritise physical upgrading without attending to the social fabric risk destroying precisely the social capital that sustains the subjective wellbeing of residents in materially deprived but socially cohesive communities. The evidence from this study suggests that any intervention in Hay Al-Gueraba should be designed to complement rather than displace existing social networks — a principle that aligns with the participatory urban planning approaches advocated in contemporary literature (Healey, 1997; Arnstein, 1969).

The Urban Fringe as a Structural Deficit Zone

Beshmirik occupies a distinctive analytical position in this study as a representative of the urban fringe phenomenon that characterises the growth trajectory of many Algerian medium-sized cities. Its data profile — lowest scores on virtually every objective and subjective indicator, highest relocation desire, most pronounced gender security gap, greatest proportion of households lacking sanitary facilities — constitute a comprehensive portrait of urban marginalisation rather than a collection of isolated deficits.

This pattern of concentrated disadvantage reflects the structural logic of peripheral urban formation in contexts of rapid and unplanned urban growth. When a city expands faster than its planning and fiscal capacity to service new areas, the newest and most distant areas systematically receive the least attention, the worst services, and the most inadequate infrastructure. Over time, this initial disadvantage becomes self-reinforcing: the low status of the area discourages formal investment, attracts primarily households without the resources to locate elsewhere, and generates a downward spiral of disinvestment and social marginalisation (Wacquant, 2008).

The particularly dire transport situation in Beshmirik (1.49/5) is both a symptom and a mechanism of this marginalisation. Transport connectivity is, in the words of Kenyon, Lyons and Rafferty (2002), the meta-capability that determines the accessibility of all other urban resources and opportunities. Without adequate transport connection to the city centre, even services that nominally exist elsewhere in the city are effectively inaccessible to Beshmirik residents, particularly women and those without private vehicles. The neighbourhood's spatial disconnection thus functions as an access barrier that converts the city's aggregate service provision into a locally experienced service desert.

Critically, the residents of Beshmirik are not passive victims of this marginalisation. The in-depth interviews reveal evidence of informal coping strategies — shared transportation arrangements, informal markets, mutual aid networks — that partially substitute for absent formal services. However, these informal compensatory mechanisms are necessarily incomplete, costly in social energy, and systematically inferior to the formal services that central neighbourhoods enjoy as a matter of course. Their existence should not be used to justify the perpetuation of formal service deficits; rather, they represent the adaptive responses of resourceful communities to structural abandonment.

Governance Failure and Planning Deficiency

The cross-neighbourhood disparities revealed by this study are not the product of natural variation in resident preferences or neighbourhood characteristics. They are the cumulative result of decades of governance failure and planning deficiency — a failure to translate the

formal commitments of successive Algerian urban development plans into effective spatially equitable service delivery. Hadjiedj's analysis of Algerian medium-sized cities identifies the PDAU (Plan Directeur d'Aménagement et d'Urbanisme) as structurally unable to constrain informal urban growth in the absence of complementary enforcement mechanisms and fiscal resources (Hadjiedj, 2004, p. 82).

The AADL programme, represented by the district of the same name in this study, illustrates both the potential and the limitations of state-led housing provision. The AADL district records the highest overall QoL score (3.28/5), reflecting the value of planned construction, modern sanitary facilities, and better-resourced infrastructure. However, its relatively low social satisfaction score (2.93/5) — the lowest in the sample — reveals the programme's failure to attend to the social dimensions of housing. AADL estates were conceived as housing programmes rather than community-building programmes; they provided physical shelter but not the social infrastructure — communal spaces, local commercial facilities, cultural services, community associations — that sustains neighbourly relations and place attachment.

This finding resonates with a broader literature on the social limitations of public housing in developing country contexts (Tippie & Willis, 1991). The French Grands Ensembles experience, extensively documented by Lefebvre (1968) and more recently by Wacquant (2008), demonstrates that physical housing provision without social community planning tends to generate social atomisation, anonymity, and ultimately the deterioration of the very housing stock it created. The AADL data from Relizane suggest that Algeria is reproducing this trajectory, and that a corrective social urbanisme dimension must be built into future housing programmes if the AADL model is not to generate new forms of social deprivation in the medium term.

At the institutional level, the absence of a dedicated urban quality of life monitoring system represents a significant governance deficit. Without systematic, geographically disaggregated data on service satisfaction, perceived security, environmental quality, and residential wellbeing, local authorities are effectively operating without a dashboard. Evidence-based urban governance requires the regularised production of the kind of neighbourhood-level data that this study has assembled on a one-time basis; transforming this into a permanent monitoring infrastructure should be a priority recommendation from this research.

Theoretical Synthesis and Contribution

Taken together, the findings of this study make a number of contributions to the urban sociology of quality of life in developing country cities. First, they empirically confirm the explanatory primacy of the neighbourhood over individual demographic variables in determining urban life satisfaction — a finding consistent with Pacione's (2003) theoretical position and adding to the growing body of evidence for neighbourhood effects in the Global South literature. Second, they reveal the non-linearity of the objective-subjective relationship, showing that social capital can partially compensate for material deprivation up to a threshold, beyond which concentrated disadvantage overwhelms compensatory mechanisms. Third, they document the gendered production of urban insecurity, showing that the spatial configuration of peripheral neighbourhoods systematically constrains women's access to public space in ways that have cascading socioeconomic consequences. Fourth, they demonstrate that planned modern housing — while superior on objective infrastructure metrics — is not automatically superior on the full quality of life spectrum, and may in fact produce new forms of social deficit if implemented without attention to community building.

These findings collectively support the conclusion that quality of life in Algerian medium-sized cities cannot be adequately addressed through sectoral interventions targeting individual service deficits in isolation. What is required is an integrated, spatially targeted, and participatory approach to urban governance that treats the neighbourhood as the primary planning unit and quality of life as a multi-dimensional outcome requiring coherent policy attention across physical, social, environmental, and governance dimensions simultaneously.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

This study concludes that the level of quality of life in Relizane city falls below desirable standards, with a spatial gradient of deprivation running from the modern AADL district (3.28/5) through the city centre and traditional popular quarter to the deeply marginalised urban fringe of Beshmirik (2.19/5). The study established that subjective dimensions of quality of life — particularly social belonging and place attachment — exert compensatory effects in traditional and central neighbourhoods that partially offset objective service deficits, but that this compensatory mechanism is overwhelmed in conditions of concentrated peripheral deprivation. Key indicators identify urban transport, environmental quality, public space provision, and perceived security for women as the most critical dimensions requiring urgent policy intervention.

Recommendations

On the basis of the study's analytical findings, the following recommendations are advanced:

1. Immediate transport intervention in Beshmirik. Establish dedicated bus connections between the urban fringe and the city centre, with minimum service provision across all hours including evenings, as a priority measure to address the most acute form of spatial exclusion identified in the study.
2. PDAU review with QoL integration. Review and update Relizane's Urban Planning and Development Master Plan to explicitly incorporate quality of life criteria, neighbourhood-level service standards, and mandatory minimum provision benchmarks for all urban zones.
3. Establish a municipal QoL monitoring unit. Create a dedicated unit for periodically assessing quality of life indicators at the neighbourhood level, with results made publicly available to support evidence-based governance and civic accountability.
4. Gender-responsive urban design. Implement targeted street lighting improvements, spatial redesign of public spaces, and increased evening security presence in peripheral neighbourhoods to address the gendered access barrier to public space documented in this study.
5. Social community planning for AADL estates. Retrofit existing AADL estates with communal social infrastructure — neighbourhood centres, public squares, local commercial facilities — and integrate social community planning as a mandatory component of future public housing programmes.
6. Participatory neighbourhood planning. Strengthen residents' participation in local planning decision-making through participatory democracy mechanisms, beginning with formal consultation processes in Beshmirik and Hay Al-Gueraba where governance engagement is currently most limited.
7. Comparative research programme. Commission comparative studies across Algerian medium-sized cities to develop evidence-based urban planning models applicable beyond the single case of Relizane, establishing a national observatory of urban quality of life.

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