

My home, my neighbourhood

Exploring the links between density, unit size, and wellbeing in Metro Vancouver

November 2023

 Happy Cities



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Executive summary

Abstract

Metro Vancouver is facing an acute housing shortage and affordability crisis. To address this challenge, many municipalities in the region are seeking to build more homes and allow greater density near transit and in urban centres. This project set out to understand the links between density and residents' wellbeing, to help inform policy on denser housing forms and unit sizes. We surveyed 1,886 residents in 15 municipalities across the region. Overall, we found no evidence that density—the number of people living in an area—corresponds with lower health, happiness, or social connection. We also did not observe any significant differences in wellbeing between people living in single detached homes, duplexes, townhouses, laneway houses, and apartment buildings. However, basement suites and units smaller than 300 square feet were associated with lower health and happiness, even when controlling for income. To achieve positive outcomes, density likely needs to be combined with best-practice design. For example, we found that access to shared amenity spaces in apartment buildings is linked with stronger social ties among residents, and that access to park space is linked with greater neighbourhood trust. Taken together, our findings suggest that amenity-rich, affordable, dense urban environments with rapid transit can support a high quality of life for residents in the Lower Mainland—particularly when designed intentionally to support wellbeing.

Wellbeing variables assessed through this study

General wellbeing

- Happiness
- Physical health
- Mental health

Social wellbeing

- General connections
- Neighbourly connections

Neighbourhood wellbeing

- Trust
- Belonging

Who is this report for?

- Planners and policymakers
- Municipalities
- Health authorities
- Housing providers and developers
- Architects and designers
- Researchers and academics
- Community members and advocacy groups

Recommendations and next steps

- Conduct further research on the specific qualities of dense housing and neighbourhoods that achieve positive wellbeing outcomes versus dense housing that does not
- Conduct more in-depth research and engagement with diverse residents and people living in very small units
- Encourage intentional design for wellbeing and social connection
- Plan for future surveys that track how wellbeing changes in different density zones and housing types over time

Snapshot of findings

Our research findings are categorized into three key learnings, which can help inform policy and planning decisions around housing density and design in communities across the Lower Mainland.

Neighbourhoods

- High-density areas are not correlated with lower or higher wellbeing than low-density areas.
- Lower commute times are positively linked to mental health, happiness, and social wellbeing.
- The aspects that people said most influence where they live are transit, affordability, nearby shops and restaurants, and outdoor spaces.
- The top aspects that people feel are missing from their neighbourhoods are affordability, proximity to family and friends, and a sense of community.
- People who have lived for longer in their home reported higher social wellbeing.
- People with a higher sense of belonging and trust in their neighbourhood were more likely to report higher general and social wellbeing.
- People living near to a greater amount of park space reported a greater sense of social trust.

Housing

- Basement suites are associated with lower wellbeing for residents, even when controlling for income.
- Denser housing forms (i.e. duplexes, townhouses, laneway houses and apartment buildings—regardless of height) are no worse for wellbeing than living in a single detached home. Differences in residents' wellbeing are more likely to be explained by income and ownership status.
- Those with higher housing costs (i.e. renters or people with mortgages, compared to owners without mortgages) reported lower general and social wellbeing.
- Access to amenities in multi-unit housing is positively associated with having social connections with friends, family, and neighbours.
- Renters and some multi-unit housing residents are more likely to be dissatisfied with their housing quality and condition than homeowners.

Unit sizes

- Unit sizes of under 300 square feet are linked with lower general wellbeing, even when controlling for income and other factors.
- Residents living in very small units (less than 300 square feet) are more likely to have lower household incomes, and a higher proportion report having a disability.

Project team

This project was led by Happy Cities, with support from Licker Geospatial Consulting and David Borkenhagen, PhD candidate in the Department of Psychology at the University of Waterloo. This report provides a summary of research and a public survey conducted on the connections between density and wellbeing in Metro Vancouver in 2023. Vancouver Coastal Health commissioned this project to inform future planning and policy around housing density, design, wellbeing, and unit size in the Metro Vancouver region.

About Happy Cities

Happy Cities is an urban planning, design, and research firm that uses an evidence-based approach to create happier, healthier, more inclusive communities. We harness the science of wellbeing to advise housing providers, municipalities, developers, and organizations around the world on how to design buildings and urban spaces that support people's health and happiness.

About Licker Geospatial

LGeo is a Vancouver-based, owner-operated consultancy that specializes in the use of geospatial technology to support urban planning work in innovative ways that improve the quality of life in communities. LGeo's mission is to utilize and unlock the value of geospatial technology by transforming spatial data into functional information. LGeo's team of 11 analysts provides a wide range of value-added GIS services to public, non-profit, and private sector clients.

Project team

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**Licker
 Geospatial
 Consulting**

Land acknowledgment

The Metro Vancouver region is situated on the shared territories of many Indigenous Peoples, including 10 local First Nations: qíćáy (Katzie), qʷa:níłəń (Kwantlen), kʷíkʷəłəm (Kwikwetlem), máthxwi (Matsqui), xʷməθkʷəýəm (Musqueam), qíqéyt (Qayqayt), se'mya'me (Semiahmoo), Sḵwḵwú7mesh Úxwumíxw (Squamish), scə́waθən məsteyəxʷ (Tsawwassen), and sə́lilwətał (Tsleil-Waututh).

Happy Cities recognizes that many housing policies and community planning practices have intentionally harmed Indigenous communities and continue to reinforce colonialism. We recognize these historic and ongoing inequities and systemic barriers, and strive to be part of movements to correct them.

1 | Introduction

1 | Introduction

Metro Vancouver communities are facing an urgent housing crisis, with British Columbia ranked as the least affordable province to live in Canada.¹ The design of the homes and neighbourhoods we live in can build or break our wellbeing. This study offers evidence on how municipalities across the region can build more homes and increase density in a healthy, resilient, and equitable manner.

The Metro Vancouver region is growing, expecting to welcome around 35,000 new residents each year.² This growth brings many benefits, strengthening both the local economy and the social fabric of our communities. However, our cities need more homes to keep up with the growing population—and to address our long-term housing crisis. Local, provincial, and federal levels of government recognize this need. In May 2023, the B.C. government announced new housing targets for 10 municipalities, including five in the Lower Mainland. In November 2023, the Province announced further legislation to allow multi-unit housing province-wide, with greater density expected in areas near rapid transit stations. The Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation estimates that B.C. alone will need to build an extra 570,000 units by 2030 in order to achieve housing affordability for its residents.³



Downtown Vancouver. (Ruth Hartnup / Flickr)

1 | Introduction

The challenge: Density can provide many benefits, but we have to get it right.

The easiest, most sustainable, cost-effective way to increase housing supply is to build more homes in the neighbourhoods where people already live—in other words, adding density. Density brings many benefits: When more people live in a neighbourhood, that neighbourhood can support a more diverse and robust mix of local shops, businesses, jobs, transit, and social spaces. In turn, close proximity to jobs and services can reduce costs for everyone—while increasing upward mobility for low-income people.⁴ It also allows for a wider range of housing options that meet the needs of a diverse population and are more attainable than the expensive single detached home. However, density can pose challenges, particularly when poorly designed or located.

This study sought to understand how the density, size, location, and design of housing may impact residents' wellbeing in the Lower Mainland. To meet this objective, we reviewed research and policy from across North America and beyond, and conducted a public survey of nearly 1,900 residents living in 15 different municipalities across the region. Our research finds that density, in and of itself, is not positively or negatively associated with wellbeing. Rather, what matters is how we build it. Our research suggests that to support wellbeing, municipalities should combine density with walkable, transit-oriented design; build high-quality multi-unit housing with useful amenities that foster social connection; and ensure that small unit sizes do not hinder wellbeing.

This report equips Vancouver Coastal Health and local governments with data and evidence that can help guide the growth of our municipalities in a healthy, socially connected, resilient way.

Who is this report for?

- Planners and policymakers
- Municipalities
- Health authorities
- Housing providers and developers
- Architects and designers
- Researchers and academics
- Community members and advocacy groups



2 | About this study

2 | About this study

Project goals

This study sought to answer two main research questions:

1. **How does neighbourhood density impact wellbeing in the Lower Mainland?**
2. **How does unit size impact wellbeing in the Lower Mainland?**

We began this project by reviewing research on the relationships between density, unit size, and wellbeing, including academic literature and municipal policy. This exercise informed the survey design, identifying important categories of data to collect and analyze. To better understand the relationship between different neighbourhood densities and wellbeing, we classified the Metro Vancouver region into five density zones, seeking to reach people living in all five zones. Map 2 (p. 13) shows the spread and concentration of density across the region. While the highest density zone is in Downtown Vancouver, there are a number of high-density clusters dispersed throughout other municipalities. These dense urban centres are concentrated along the rapid transit corridors that reach municipalities surrounding the City of Vancouver, many of which have seen large-scale development in the past decade. For the detailed methodology and full list of survey questions, please [contact Happy Cities](#).

Interpreting the findings

This study is the most comprehensive survey to date on the connections between density, unit size, and wellbeing among residents in the Lower Mainland. While the survey responses are not demographically representative, we heard from a wide range of people representing different household sizes, compositions, and incomes. The majority of respondents answered optional demographic questions regarding age, gender, ability, race and ethnicity, and more. The survey design and data analysis were informed by and strengthened by research and findings from contexts across Canada.

We chose this survey method to allow us to efficiently collect a comprehensive sample of the population that provides a snapshot of community wellbeing. Self-reported responses rely on individual perceptions, so are prone to subjectivity bias and have limited insight into the underlying causes of an individual's wellbeing responses. Correlations found in the data may not be due to causal links. Because our survey does not provide longitudinal data, the responses can be influenced by the person's individual mood or circumstances, or recent events, which may lead to fluctuations in responses.

Timeline and process:

Winter 2023

Research and policy brief;
preliminary GIS analysis

March 15 to April 5, 2023

Public online survey

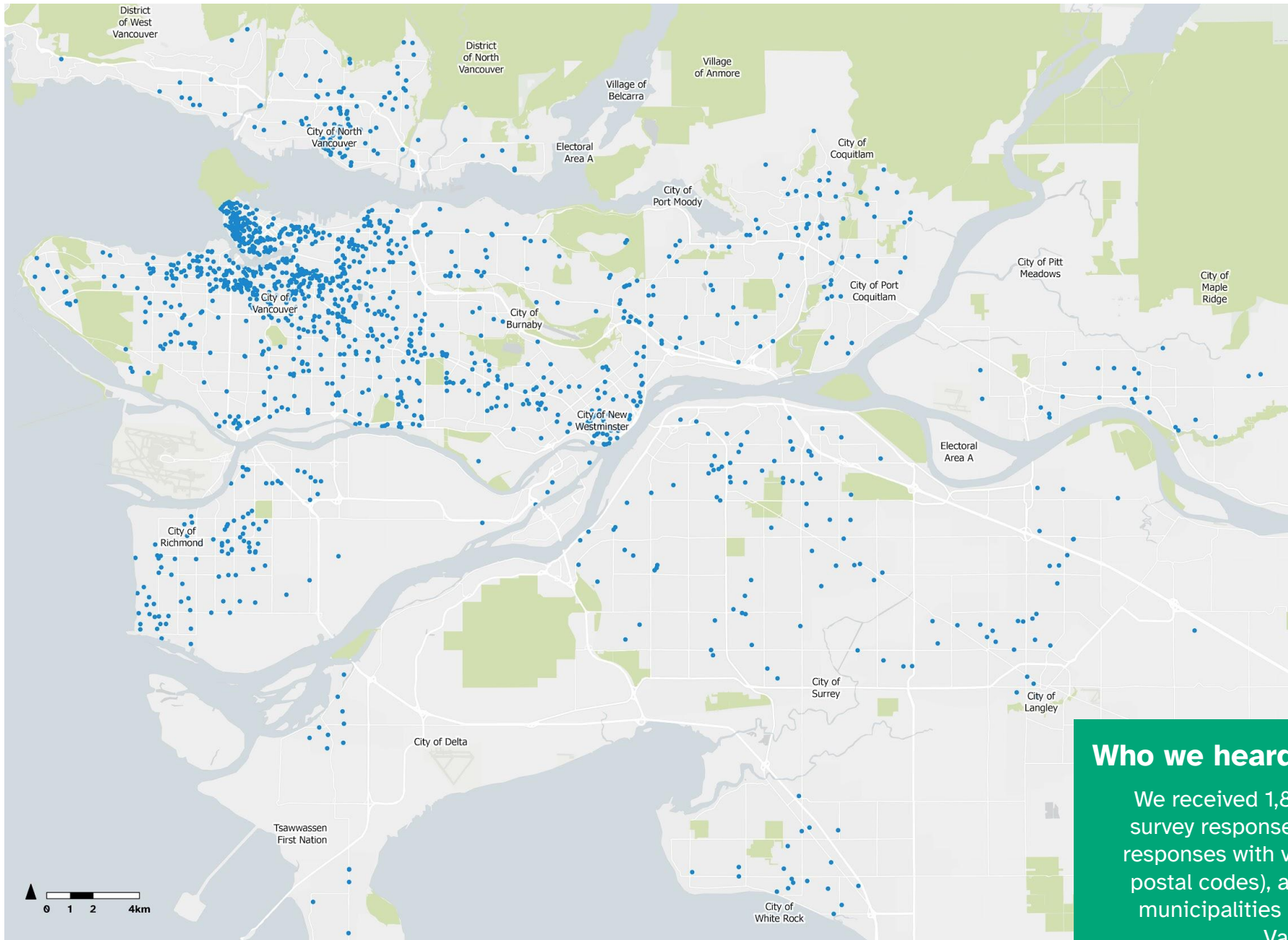
Spring 2023

In-depth data and GIS
analysis

Summer to Fall 2023

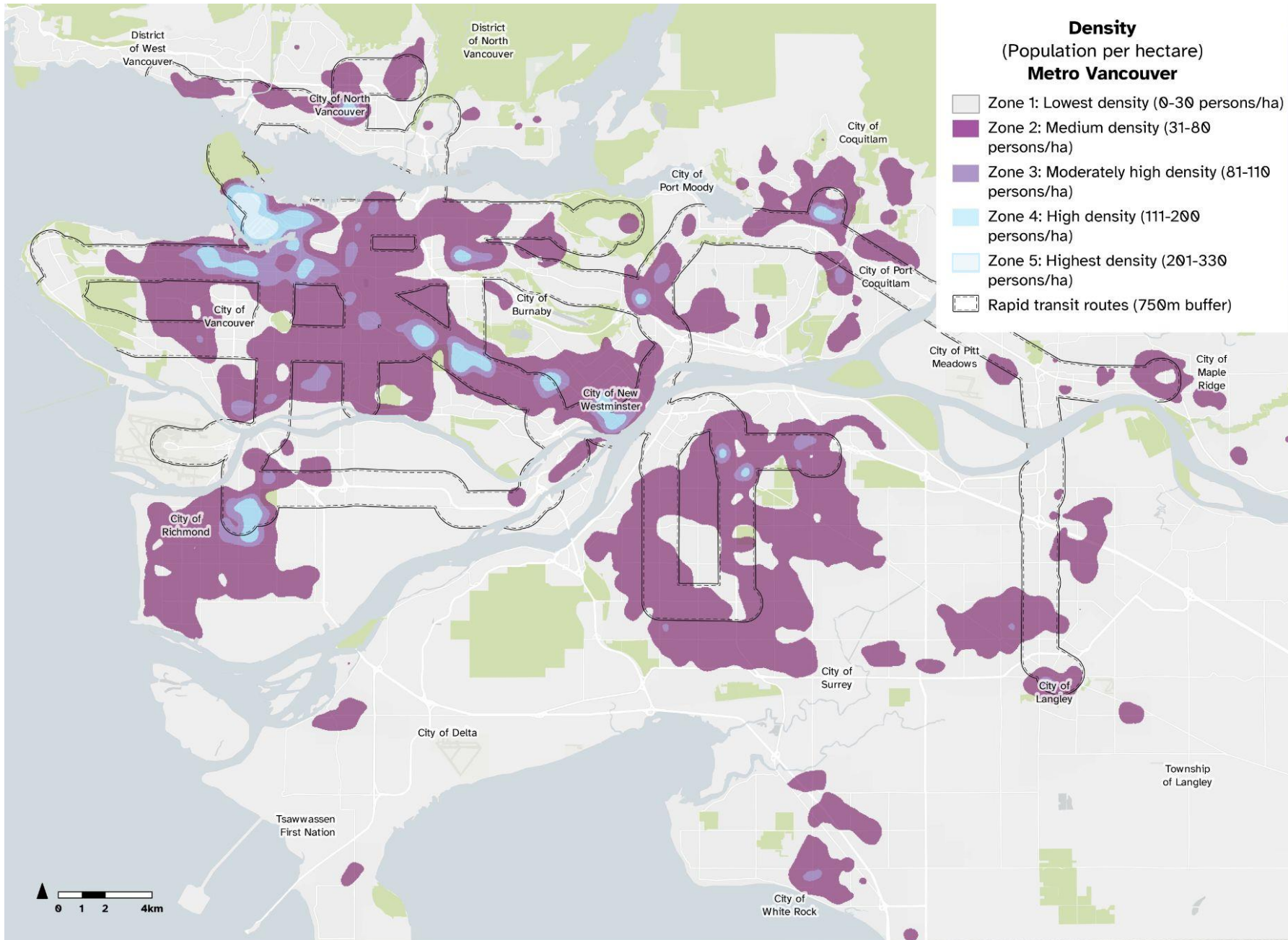
Final report and
recommendations

2 | About this study



Map 1. All survey responses

2 | About this study



Map 2. Density zones across Metro Vancouver

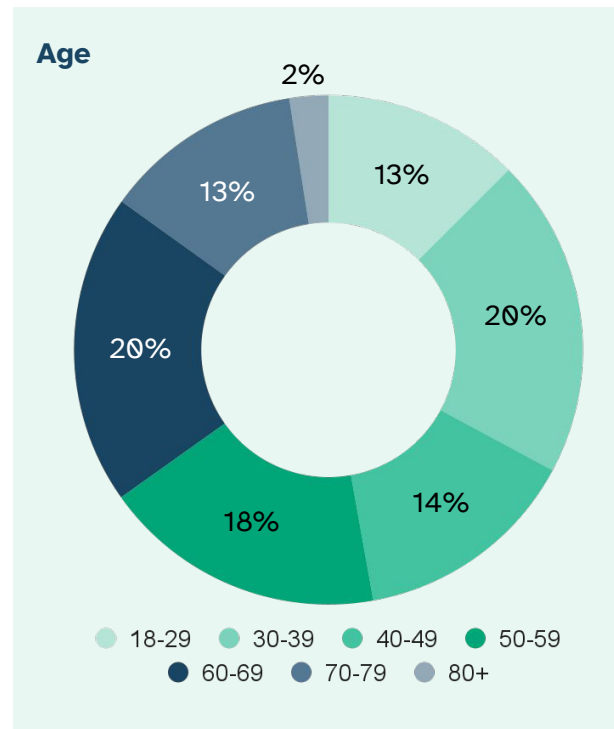
2 | About this study

Demographics

We heard from 1,886 people, representing a range of demographics. Over half of respondents live in the City of Vancouver, despite Vancouver’s population representing only around a quarter of Metro Vancouver’s in the 2021 Statistics Canada count. Our sample also included an overrepresentation of female respondents (72%) and older adults (53% over age 50).

Gender	Count	Percent
Woman	1,274	72%
Man	389	22%
Transgender	12	1%
Non-binary	47	3%
Two-spirit	4	0%
Prefer to self-describe	5	0%
Prefer not to answer	33	2%

72%
of respondents identified as female.

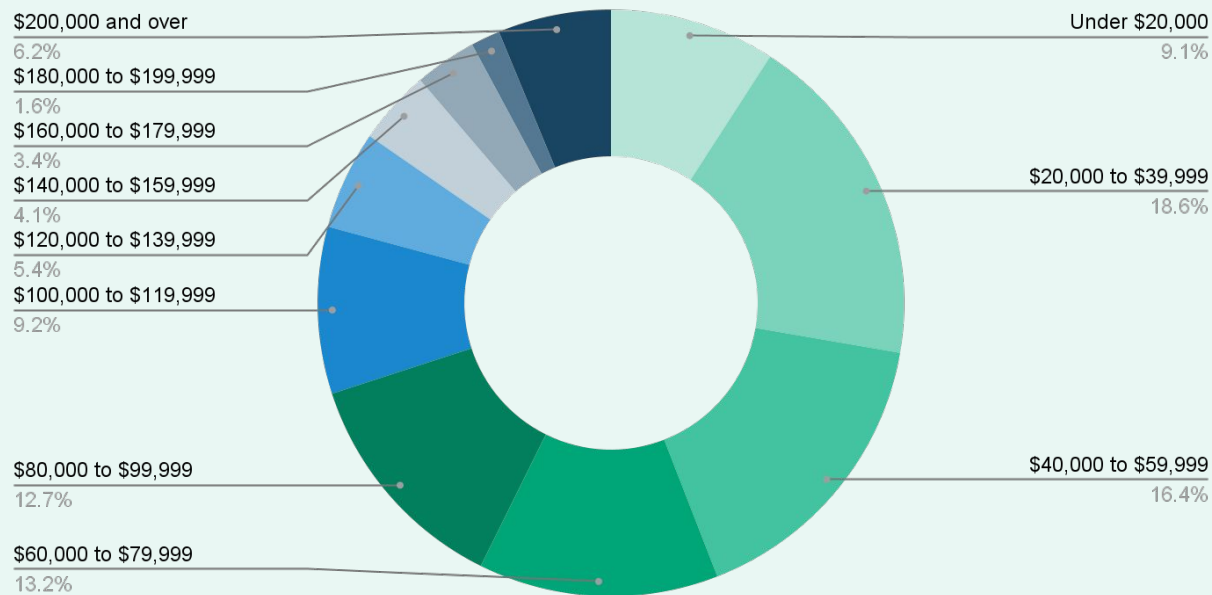


Municipality	Count	Percent
Vancouver	1,022	54%
Burnaby	151	8%
North Vancouver	130	7%
Richmond	123	7%
Surrey	121	6%
Coquitlam	86	5%
New Westminister	74	4%
Langley	33	2%
Delta	32	2%
Maple Ridge	28	1%
Port Coquitlam	23	1%
West Vancouver	21	1%
UBC Endowment Lands	14	1%
Port Moody	13	1%
White Rock	11	1%
Pitt Meadows	4	0%

2 | About this study

Demographics

Household income



Racialized groups were underrepresented in this survey compared to in census data for Metro Vancouver (49% in the 2021 census).

Ethnicity	Count	Percent
White	1,114	59%
Chinese	249	13%
Filipino	77	4%
Prefer not to answer	68	4%
First Nations	53	3%
South Asian	65	3%
Latin American/Hispanic	39	2%
Southeast Asian	42	2%
Japanese	30	2%
Métis	28	1%
Black	27	1%
West Asian	13	1%
Korean	13	1%
Arab	9	0%
Inuit	1	0%

Household size	Count	Percent
1 person	500	30%
2 persons	684	40%
3 persons	246	15%
4 persons	173	10%
5 persons	62	4%
6 persons	17	1%
7 persons	13	1%

Household composition

42% live with a spouse

19% live with a child/parent

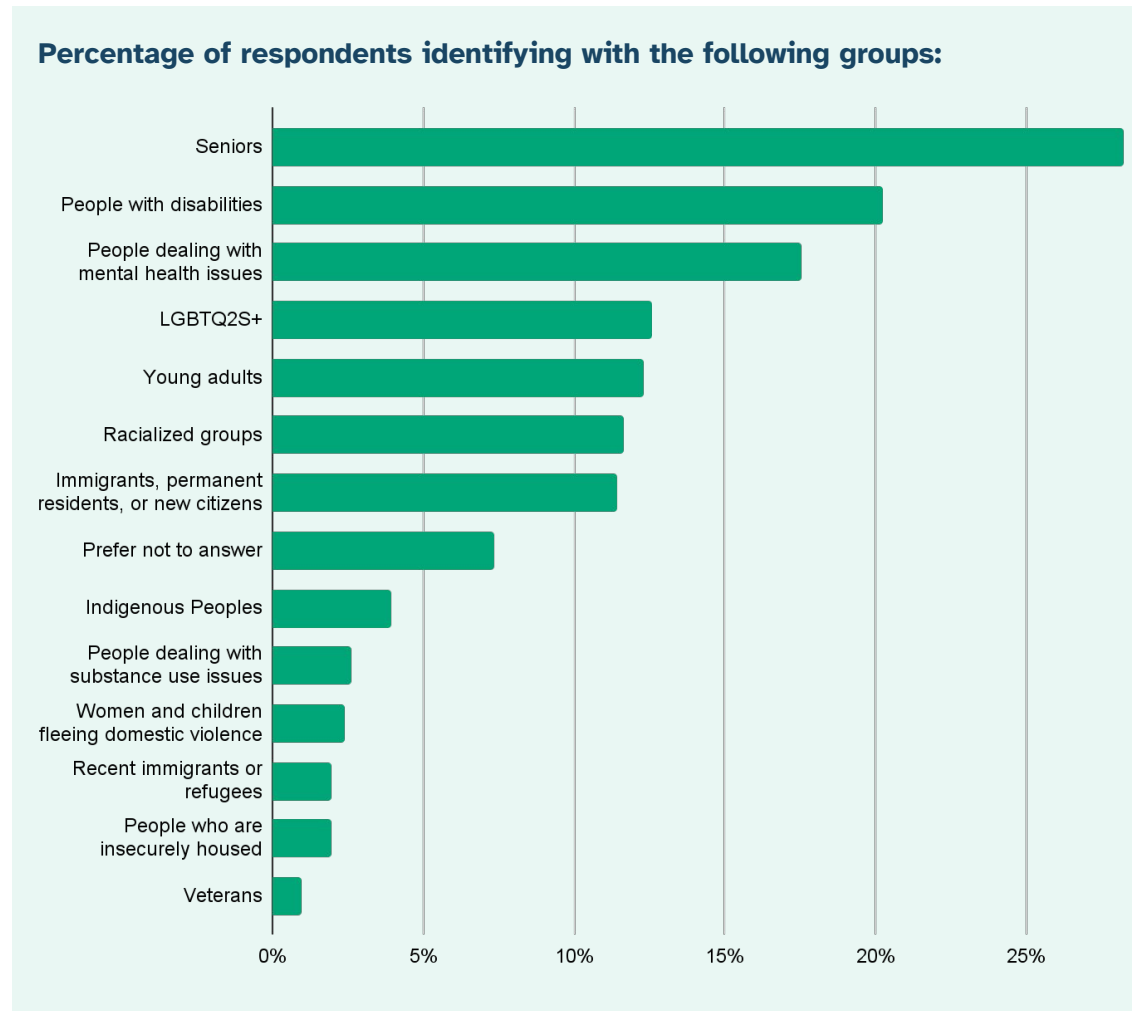
9% live with a roommate or lodger

2% live with a grandparent/grandchild

2% live with extended family

2 | About this study

Demographics (continued)



Disabilities

One fifth (20%) of respondents indicated that they identified as someone with a disability. When asked to identify what type of disability, 58% of those who indicated that they have a disability reported that they had two or more types of disability. The reported disabilities identified by respondents are summarized in the table below.

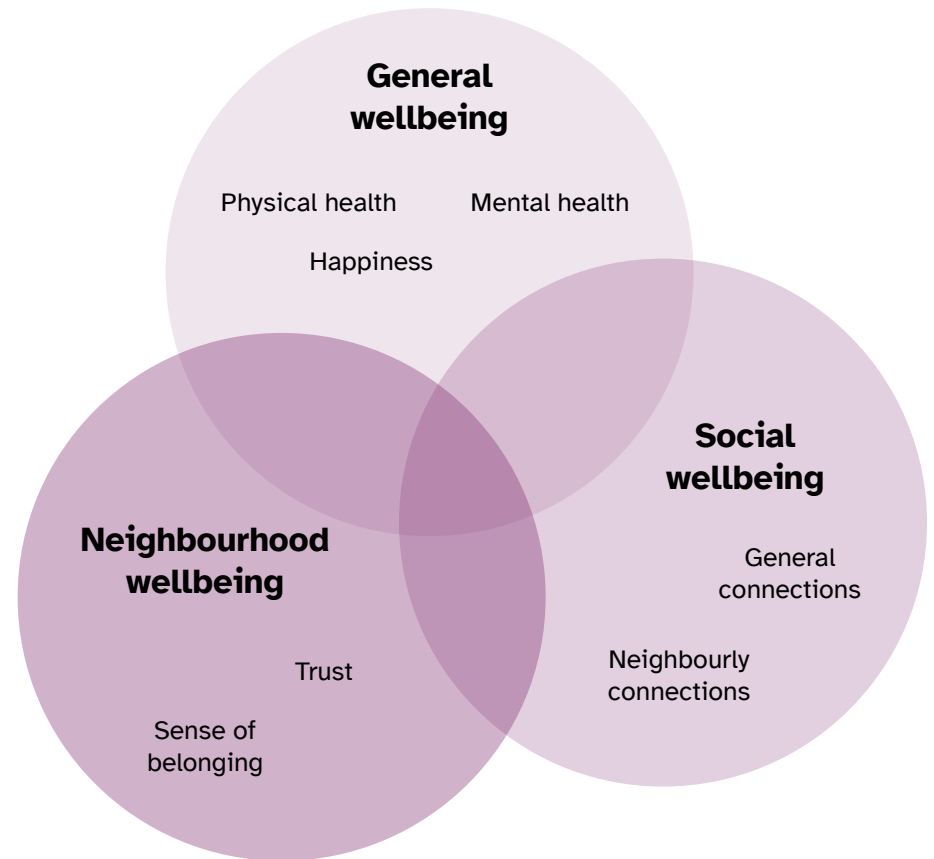
Types of disabilities	Count
Mental health-related (e.g. anxiety disorder)	278
Pain-related	220
Mobility (e.g. difficulty walking)	205
Prefer not to answer	184
Flexibility (e.g. difficulty bending down and picking up an object)	135
Learning (e.g. attention difficulties)	100
Vision	82
Hearing	77
Dexterity (e.g. difficulty in using hands or fingers)	65
Developmental (e.g. autism)	52
Long-term or chronic illness (e.g. respiratory, cancer, HIV, chronic fatigue, digestive, long Covid, diabetes, Parkinson's)	41
Memory (e.g. frequent episodes of confusion)	41

2 | About this study

Wellbeing variables

This study measured subjective wellbeing through the survey. Subjective wellbeing is the sum of people's assessments about their own state of happiness and health. In the survey, we measured subjective wellbeing as a snapshot in time, asking people to reflect on their current state. The survey measured seven different aspects of wellbeing: physical health, mental health, happiness, general connections, neighbourly connections, trust, and sense of belonging. We further organized these seven variables into three composite measures, which we refer to as general, social, and neighbourhood wellbeing.

We have used these variables to analyze differences in wellbeing between different demographic groups, housing types, and neighbourhood densities. This subjective and self-reported data allows us to directly measure individual experiences of wellbeing, by asking people to report perceptions and feelings of their own life. These variables reflect common aspects of wellbeing that are measured through this type of research, including My Health, My Community (MHMC), a local population health survey run by Vancouver Coastal Health and Fraser Health.



Data analysis

We conducted multiple regression analysis, GIS analysis, and a series of other statistical tests to examine wellbeing patterns across different respondent groups, controlling for demographic factors and analyzing differences among these groups. Multiple regression is a statistical technique where the effect of two or more predictor variables on one outcome variable is calculated. For further details about this and other statistical methods employed, please [contact Happy Cities](#).

3 | Community wellbeing profile

3 | Community wellbeing profile

General wellbeing

We measured general wellbeing by asking individuals to rate their relative physical health, mental health, and happiness on a five-point scale. Because these three aspects of health strongly influence each other, we have used a composite general wellbeing score for data comparisons.

General wellbeing includes:

- **Physical health:** The condition of an individual's body, considering physical activity and fitness, nutrition, and illnesses
- **Mental health:** An individual's emotional and psychological wellbeing. It involves how the person perceives and experiences stress, emotions, and challenges.
- **Happiness:** A subjective state of wellbeing and contentment. Happiness reflects a person's overall level of satisfaction and joy, and can be formed by experiences such as meaningful relationships, financial stability, job satisfaction, and sense of purpose.

Social wellbeing

We measured social wellbeing by asking individuals to report their social interactions and habits with family, friends, and neighbours. We asked respondents to report how often they feel lonely, how many people they have to confide in or call for help, how often they see friends and family for socializing purposes, and how many neighbours they are acquainted with and or can ask for support from.

Social wellbeing includes:

- **General connections:** The relationships and interactions an individual has with others in their community. These connections play a crucial role in providing emotional support, reducing feelings of isolation, and fostering a sense of belonging.
- **Neighbourly connections:** The relationships that individuals have with their immediate neighbours. Strong neighbourly connections contribute to a sense of community, safety, and mutual support.

Neighbourhood wellbeing

We measured how people perceive their neighbourhood, using trust and sense of belonging as key indicators. We asked people how strong of a sense of belonging they felt and—to measure trust—how likely people thought it was that they would have their wallet returned to them with money still inside it if they lost it in their neighbourhood.

Neighbourhood wellbeing includes:

- **Trust:** Belief in the reliability, honesty, and goodwill of others. High levels of trust contribute to a positive social environment, where individuals feel secure, valued, and less vulnerable to physical or psychological safety threats.
- **Sense of belonging:** Belief that our relationships with other people are positive and impactful and that we are welcome and safe in our neighbourhood. People who feel a sense of belonging generally report better health, productivity, and longevity. Belonging also creates a sense of loyalty and attachment our one's neighbourhood, encouraging longer tenure and stronger social relationships.

3 | Community wellbeing profile

General wellbeing

The study captured a broad range of responses about people’s physical health, mental health, and happiness. The majority of people responded positively on all three measures.

- **Physical health:** Overall, a third reported being in excellent or very good physical health (34%), a third in good health (33%), and another third in fair or poor health (34%).
- **Mental health:** Mental health followed a similar pattern as physical health. Overall, close to one third reported excellent or very good mental health (30%), one third reported good mental health (33%), and just over one third reported fair or poor mental health (37%).
- **Happiness:** Nearly two thirds (61%) reported being very happy or happy, close to a quarter (23%) reported feeling neither happy nor unhappy, and 15% reported feeling unhappy or very unhappy.

No geographic area was significantly associated lower or higher wellbeing (Map 3). We observed a diverse range of wellbeing scores across all neighbourhoods, housing types, and density zones. We also observed that some groups were more likely to report better health and happiness than others, with general wellbeing tending to increase with income and age.

More likely to report lower general wellbeing compared to the general population:

- Those who reported having a disability, particularly:
 - Those with mobility impairments
 - Those with pain issues
- Those who reported struggling with mental health issues
- Those who are insecurely housed
- Those who identify as First Nations
- Those with long commute times
- Renters or those with a mortgage (compared to owners without a mortgage)

More likely to report greater wellbeing compared to the general population:

- Those who are older
- Those with increased financial stability and incomes
- Those who identify as LGBTQ+

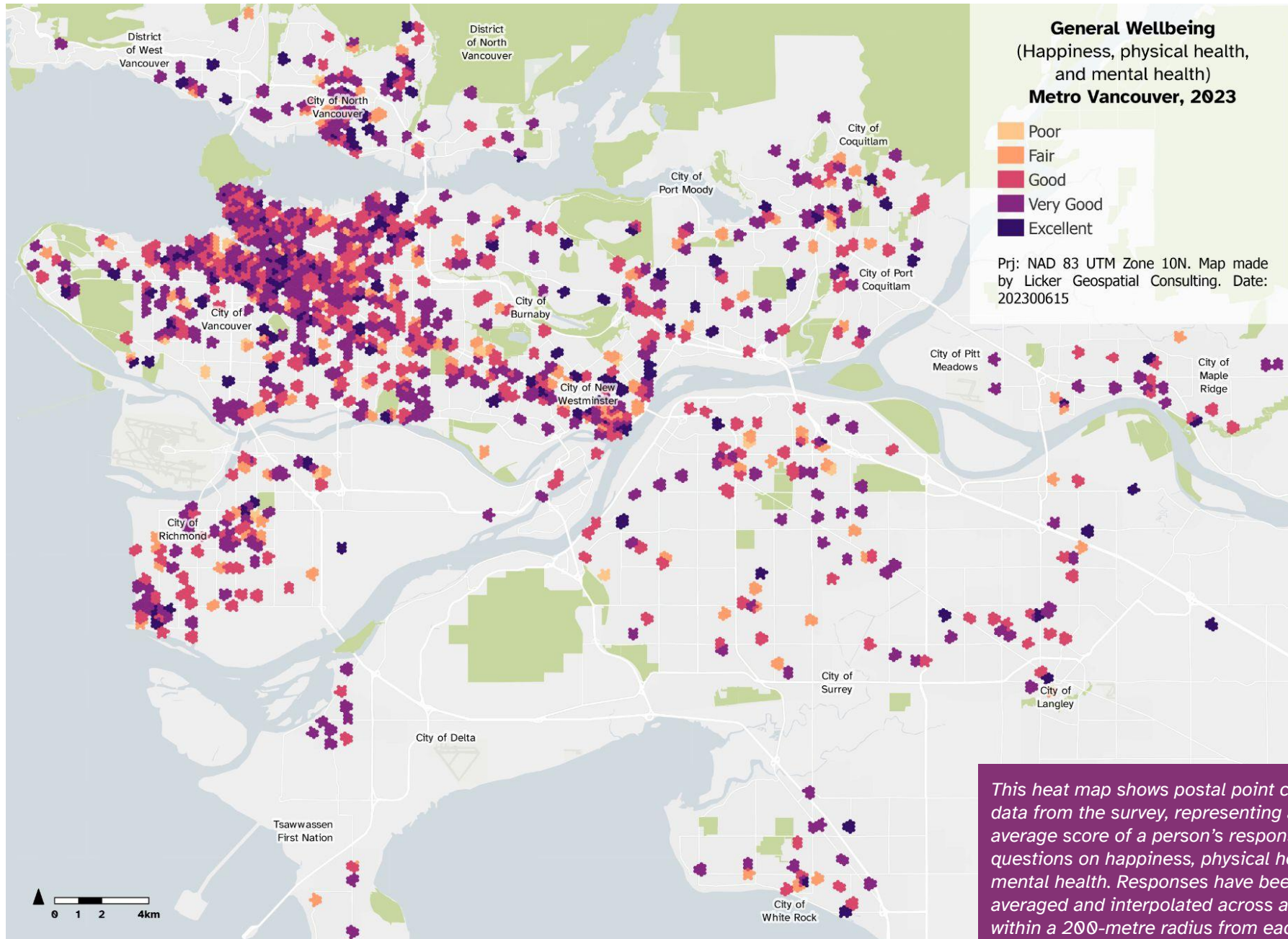
67%
reported good, very good, or excellent physical health.

63%
reported good, very good, or excellent mental health.

61%
reported being happy or very happy.

We analyzed the correlations between wellbeing and various demographic characteristics through multiple regression analysis. These results are based on our survey sample. Our research did not include any investigation into causation.

3 | Community wellbeing profile



This heat map shows postal point composite data from the survey, representing an average score of a person's responses to questions on happiness, physical health, and mental health. Responses have been averaged and interpolated across areas within a 200-metre radius from each individual response.

Map 3. General wellbeing across Metro Vancouver

3 | Community wellbeing profile

Social wellbeing

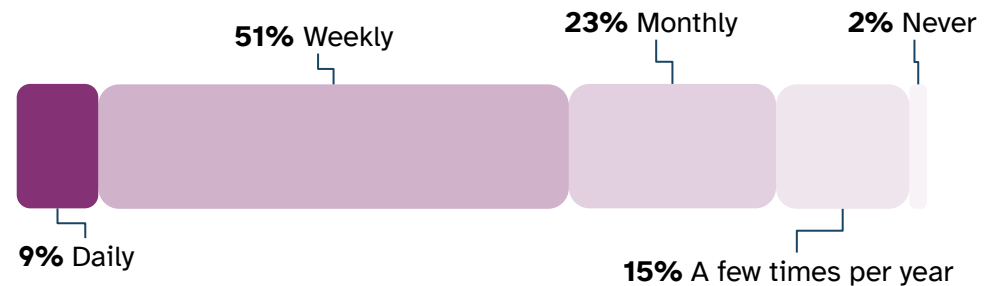
Social wellbeing—measured as a composite of general connections and neighbourly connections—is distributed across the region (Map 4), with no significant correlation observed between density and social connections. In general, people reported having a greater number of connections with family and friends than with neighbours. Almost all respondents (95%) reported having one or more friends or family members they can confide in or call on for help, with the majority (51%) indicating one to three people. However, only 31% said they have four to six, and just 14% said over six people. In contrast, over one third (35%) said they had zero neighbours they could call on for help. Our analysis also revealed that social wellbeing varies across different demographic groups.

More likely to report lower social wellbeing compared to the general population:	More likely to report greater social wellbeing compared to the general population:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Those with long commutes • Those who identify as young adults • Those who reported having mental health challenges • Those who identify as LGBTQ+ • Those who identify as racialized • Those who are insecurely housed • Those who identify as Chinese or Latin • Renters or those with a mortgage (compared to owners without a mortgage) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Those with higher financial stability and incomes • Those who identify as seniors • Those who identify as white • Those who identify as female • Those with greater length of tenure in their home

Number of general and neighbourly connections reported by survey respondents:

	None	1-3	4-6	6 +
Friends or family to confide in or call for help	5%	51%	31%	14%
Familiar neighbours	19%	41%	19%	21%
Neighbours to call for help	35%	51%	9%	5%

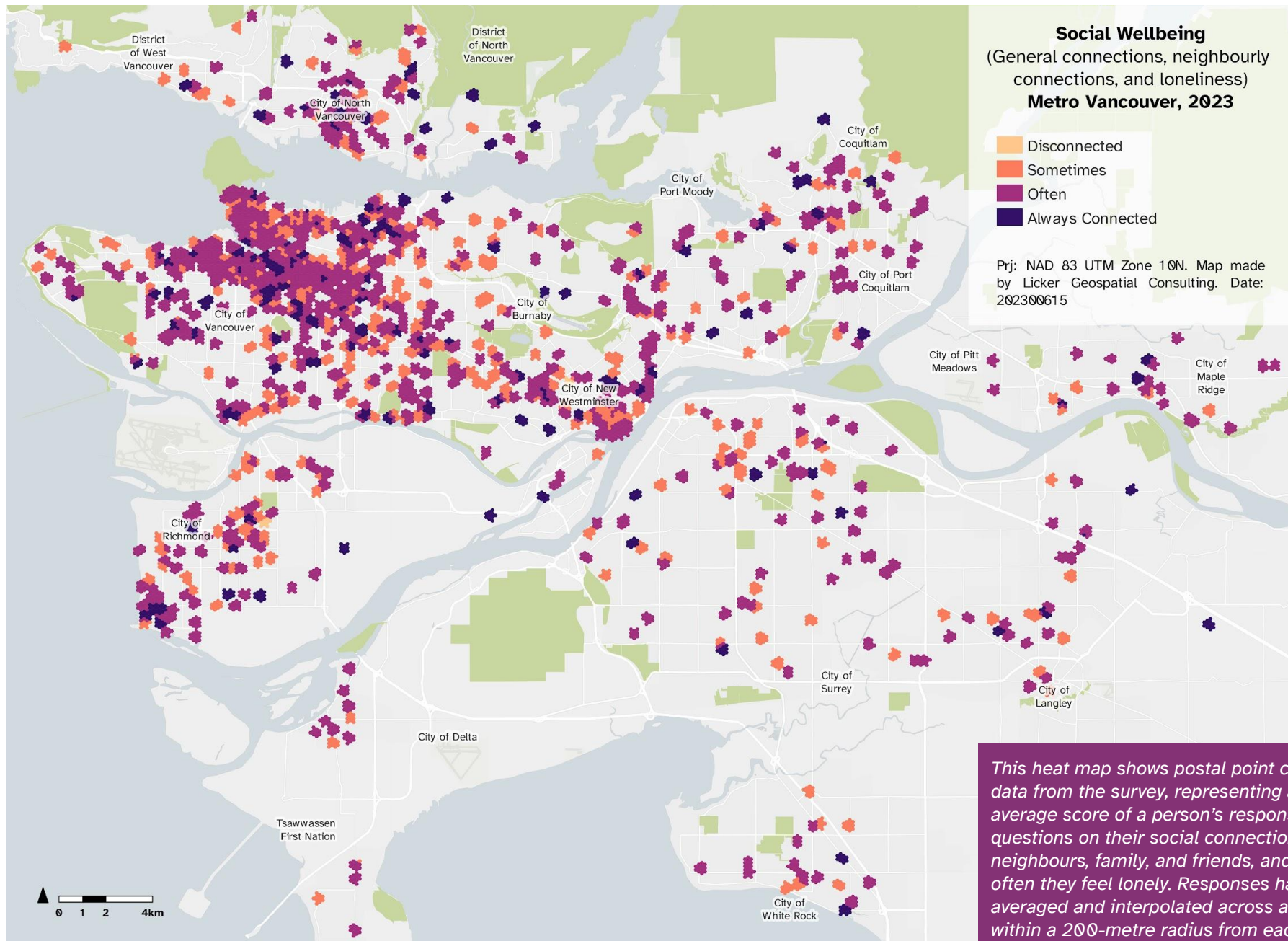
Frequency of social interaction with friends and family



Frequency that people feel lonely



3 | Community wellbeing profile



This heat map shows postal point composite data from the survey, representing an average score of a person's responses to questions on their social connections with neighbours, family, and friends, and how often they feel lonely. Responses have been averaged and interpolated across areas within a 200-metre radius from each individual response.

Map 4. Social wellbeing across Metro Vancouver

3 | Community wellbeing profile

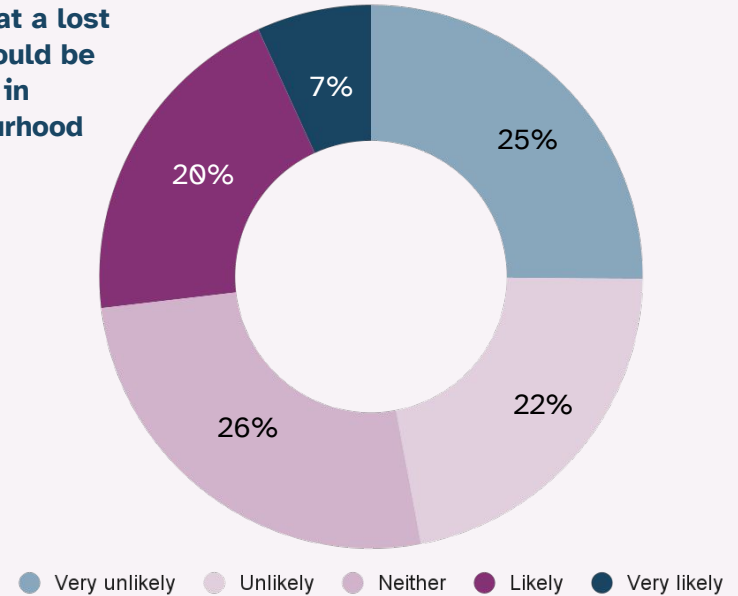
Neighbourhood wellbeing

People’s trust and sense of belonging in their neighbourhood are linked with social connectedness and, correspondingly, wellbeing. We found a positive correlation between social connectedness and having both a higher sense of belonging and trust in one’s neighbourhood. This link is supported by the 2014 MHMC survey, which found a relationship between people’s sense of belonging and perceived health.

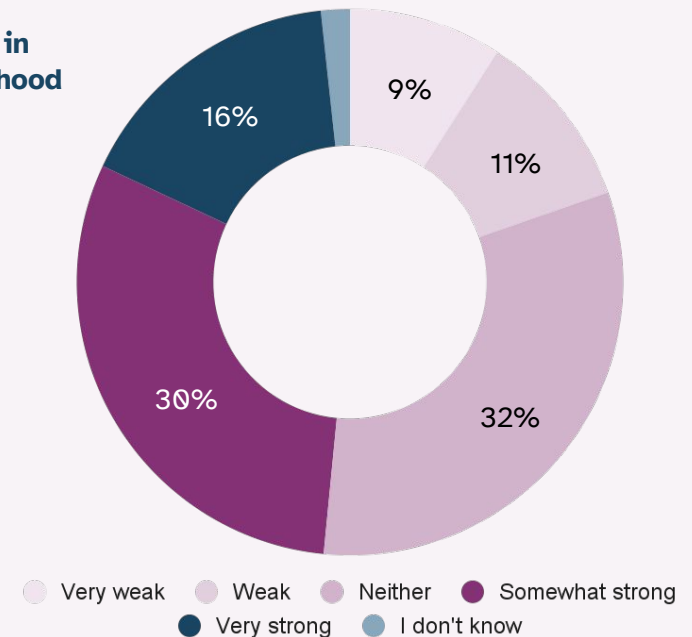
- **Trust:** A little over a quarter (27%) of respondents felt that their wallet was very likely or likely to be returned to them with money inside if they lost it in their neighbourhood. Another quarter (26%) were neutral, and a little less than half (47%) thought it unlikely that their wallet would be returned to them.
- **Sense of belonging:** Overall, a little less than half reported a somewhat strong or strong sense of belonging (46%). One third reported neither a strong or weak sense of belonging, and 18% reported a weak or very weak sense of belonging.

Map 5 on the following page shows the distribution of people’s responses to the lost wallet question across Metro Vancouver. There are visible concentrations of “very unlikely” and “unlikely” responses in Vancouver’s Downtown and Downtown Eastside areas; however, there are also several “very unlikely” and “unlikely” responses in lower density areas in other municipalities, such as Surrey. Overall, there is variation in responses across neighbourhoods, with no significant association between density and sense of belonging or trust.

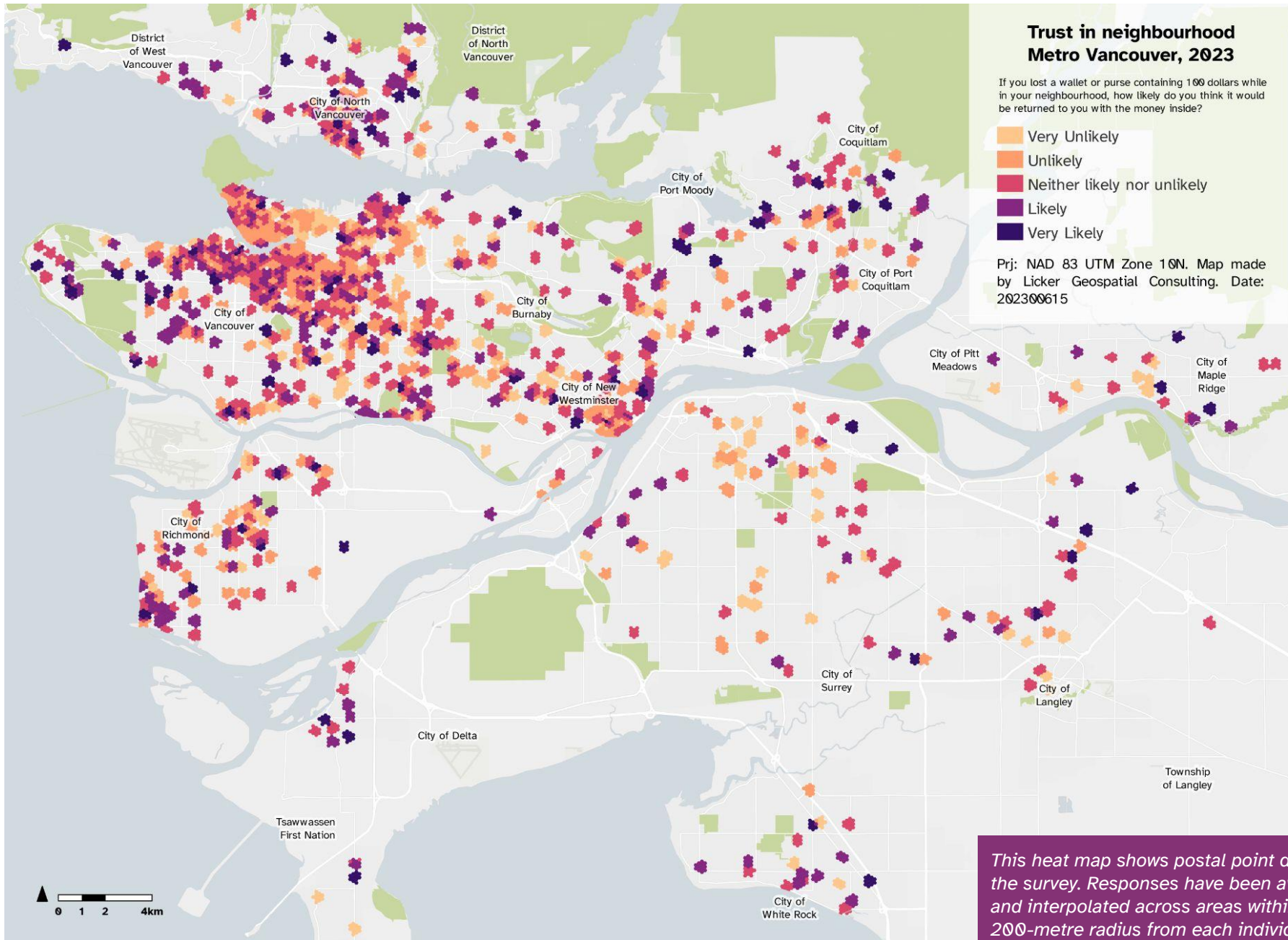
Belief that a lost wallet would be returned in neighbourhood



Sense of belonging in neighbourhood



3 | Community wellbeing profile



This heat map shows postal point data from the survey. Responses have been averaged and interpolated across areas within a 200-metre radius from each individual response.

Map 5. Trust in one's neighbourhood across Metro Vancouver

4 | Key learnings

4 | Key learnings

This section presents key findings from the survey.

Our findings are organized into three key learnings:

1. Density, in and of itself, is not linked to higher or lower wellbeing.
2. Multi-unit housing design is linked with resident satisfaction, wellbeing, and social connection.
3. Very small unit sizes are associated with challenges for wellbeing.

These three learnings address findings around the design of neighbourhoods, housing, and unit sizes, respectively.

Key survey findings

These boxes highlight key trends and data from our survey.

Research snapshot

These boxes highlight key points from our background research scan of academic literature and municipal policy around density and wellbeing.



4 | Key learnings

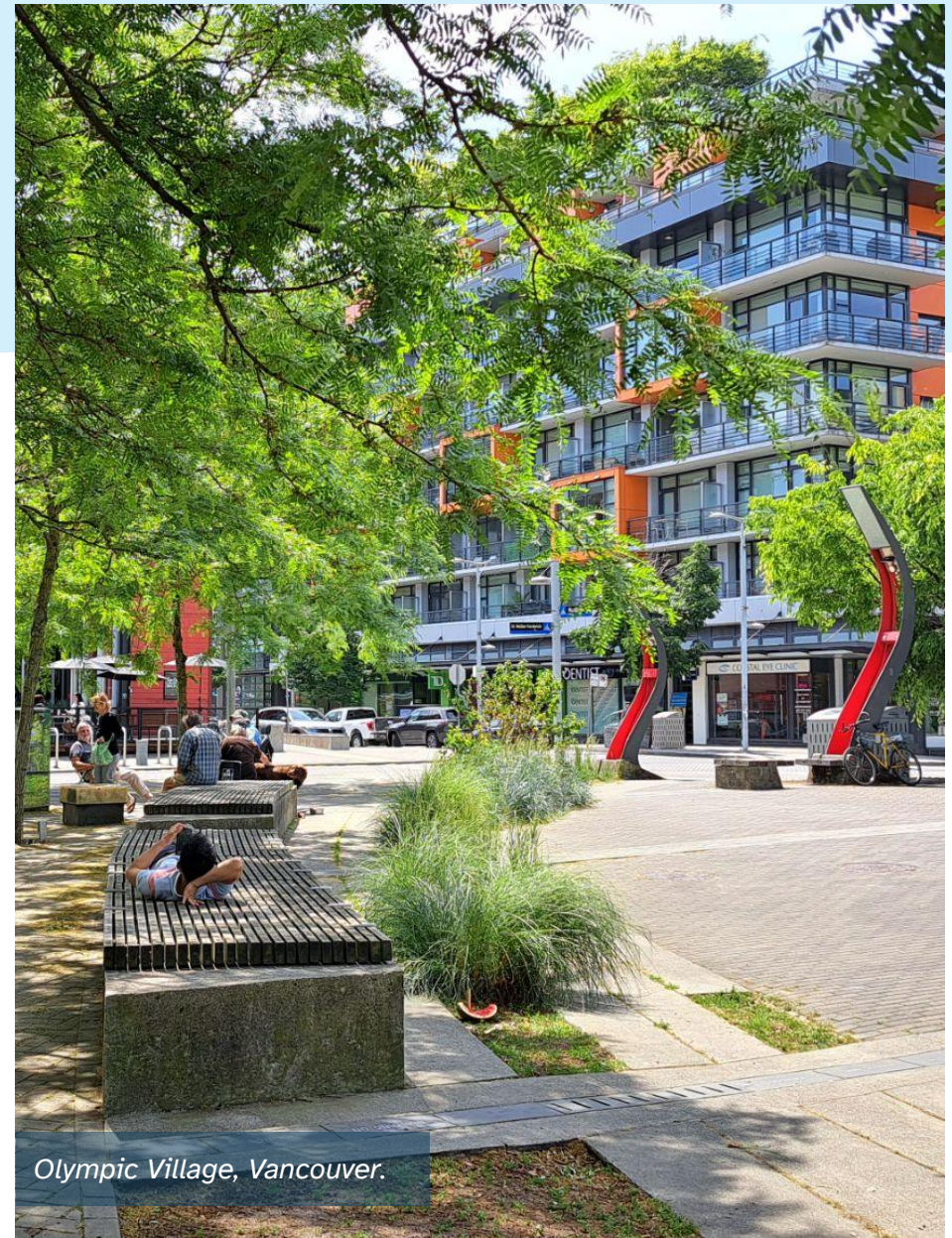
Learning 1:

Density, in and of itself, is not linked to higher or lower wellbeing.

In our study, higher-density areas in Metro Vancouver were not correlated with lower or higher levels of wellbeing. There were no significant relationships between the five density zones and reported levels of general, social, or neighbourhood wellbeing.

In general, our findings around the connection between neighbourhood density and wellbeing align with research: Our results suggest that density—the number of people living in an area—is not a determining factor in residents' overall wellbeing. Rather, it is the design of the neighbourhood—such as how close a person lives to transit, amenities, green space, shops, restaurants, and more—that is more closely linked with people's wellbeing and where they choose to live. Social connection and affordability are the top challenges that survey participants identified in relation to the neighbourhoods they live in.

Below, we explore five factors related to neighbourhood planning and design that our research and data suggest are more closely tied to wellbeing than density alone. Previous research tells us that, depending on its design, density can support or hinder many of these elements, such as access to transit and green space, commute times, and affordability.

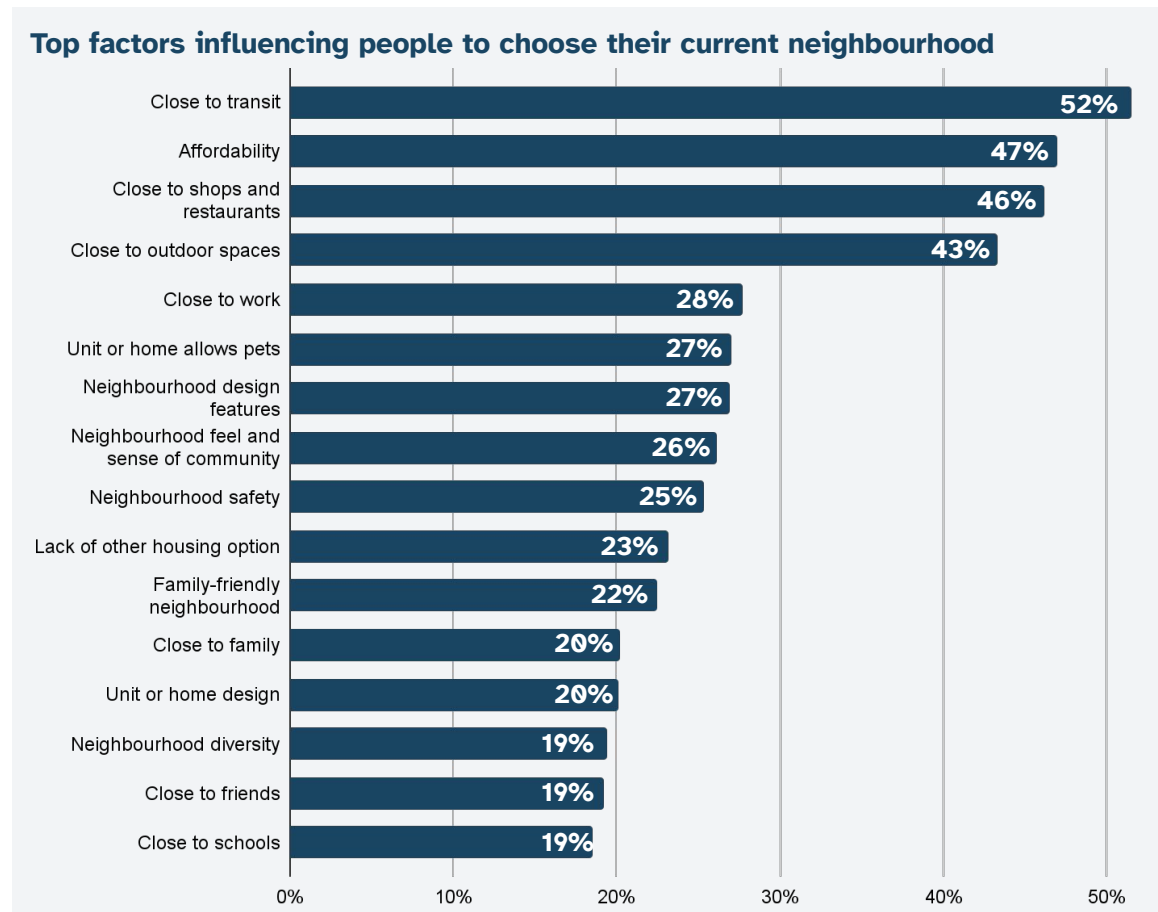


Olympic Village, Vancouver.

4 | Key learnings

Complete neighbourhoods

We asked survey respondents about the factors that influenced their decision to live in their neighbourhood. Three of the top four answers all related to nearby services and amenities: The most common reason that we heard was proximity to transit (cited by 52%), followed closely by proximity to shops and restaurants (46%), and proximity to outdoor spaces, such as parks, beaches, or gardens (43%). Previous research finds that density plays a central role in supporting these popular neighbourhood elements.



52%

responded that proximity to transit influenced their decision to live in their neighbourhood.

Key survey findings

- High-density environments showed no significant association with either higher or lower wellbeing.
- People who lived in areas with a greater amount of park space reported higher levels of trust.
- The top factors that survey respondents said influenced their decision to live in their neighbourhood are transit, affordability, shops and restaurants, and outdoor spaces.

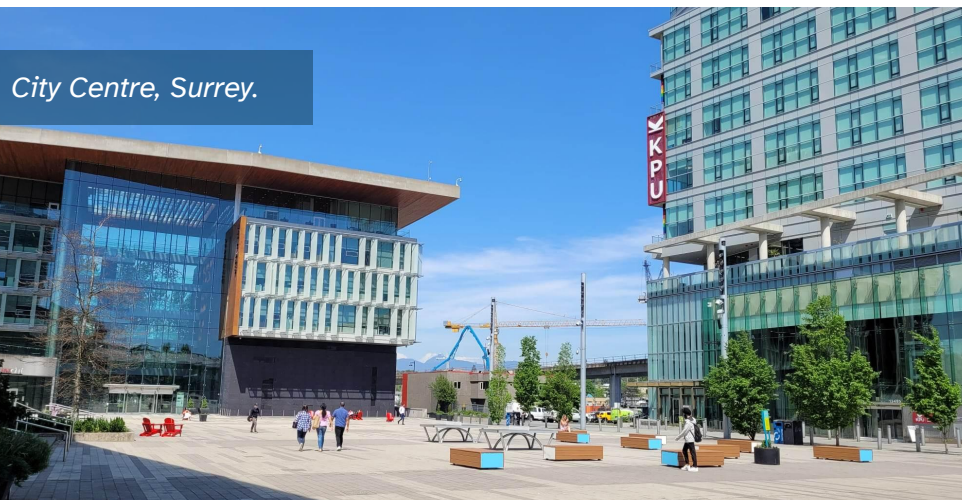
Less than 5% selected: Close to place of worship, Close to childcare facilities; Prefer not to answer; Availability of housing type (e.g. co-op, seniors housing); Close to health facilities (e.g. hospital, clinic); Close to community facilities (e.g. library)

4 | Key learnings

Complete neighbourhoods (continued)

Research snapshot

Density can support assets that are crucial for wellbeing, including local shops, services, transit, and vibrant parks. For example, density ensures that high-frequency transit and local shops and restaurants are viable, because it provides sufficient riders and customers.⁵ These elements encourage people to spend time on the street and walk to work, school, meet friends, run errands, and more. Over time, residents in walkable neighbourhoods benefit from greater physical health, mental wellbeing, employment rates, social connection with neighbours, and community resilience.⁶ Complete communities require specific design and planning considerations, including mixed-use zoning, safe streets, and small blocks.⁷ Our findings support the idea that density per se does not necessarily support or undermine wellbeing, but it can play a valuable role if incorporated into pedestrian-friendly design.



4 | Key learnings

Affordability

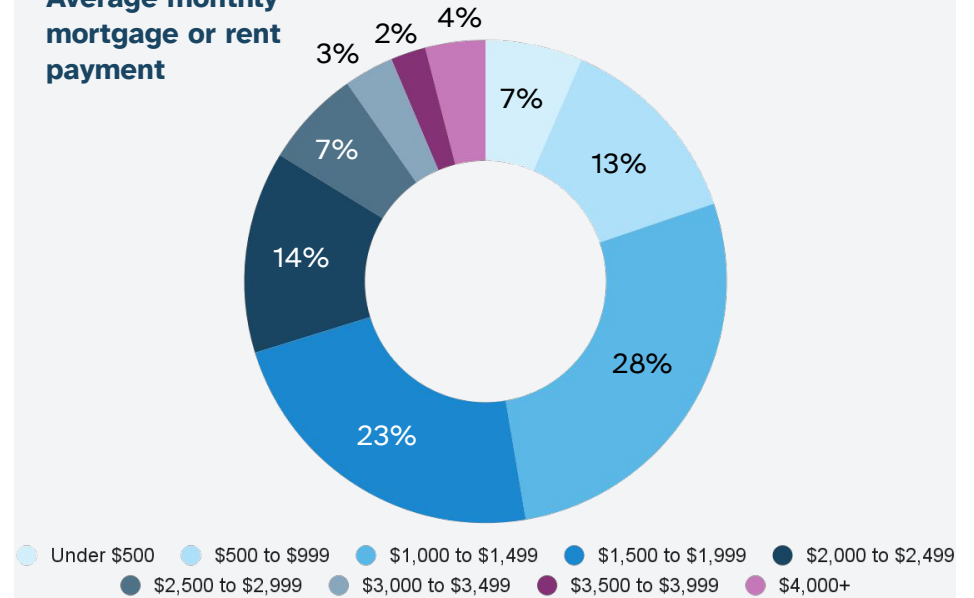
Affordability is the second major factor that respondents reported as influencing their decision to live in their neighbourhood (cited by 47% of respondents). A further 23% said they live in their neighbourhood because they have no other housing options. Correspondingly, one third (32%) of respondents said that their neighbourhoods lacked affordability, making affordability the top aspect that people identified as missing from their neighbourhoods.

Most respondents (90%) do not receive any housing subsidies. Yet, around four in 10 respondents (41%) said it is difficult to meet their households financial needs in terms of transportation, housing, food, clothing, and other necessary expenses. Those with higher housing costs (i.e. people renting or paying mortgage payments, compared to owners with no mortgages) were more likely to report lower general and social wellbeing. While owners with a mortgage were only slightly worse off than owners without a mortgage, renters scored almost half a point lower on five-point scales for both social and general wellbeing. This has significant implications for the wellbeing of the Lower Mainland community as a whole, as around half of respondents were renters.

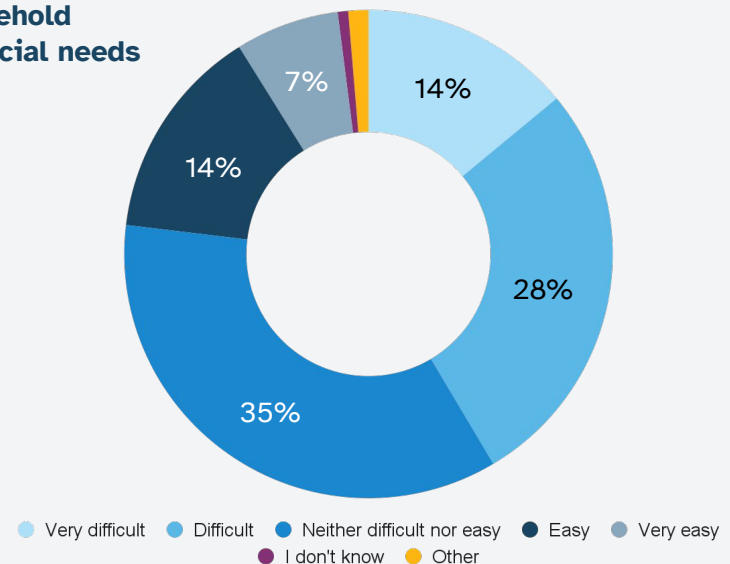
Key survey findings

- Nearly half of respondents (47%) indicated that they chose to live in their neighbourhood due to affordability.
- Four in 10 respondents (41%) reported that it is difficult to meet their household's basic needs financially.
- Owning one's home without a mortgage was positively associated with greater general and social wellbeing.

Average monthly mortgage or rent payment



Ease of meeting household financial needs



4 | Key learnings

Tenure

Tenure refers to the length of time that someone lives in their home and neighbourhood for. It is closely linked to both wellbeing and affordability, particularly for renters, who may have to move more frequently if their rents are raised or housing costs become unmanageable. When people are secure in their homes and able to stay there for a long time, they develop deeper roots and are more likely to maintain social relationships due to proximity. In this way, stable, long-term tenure supports wellbeing and a sense of community. Consistent with this, our study found a significant positive association between length of tenure and social wellbeing. People with longer tenancy were also more likely to respond that their home had a positive impact on their wellbeing during the pandemic.

Key survey findings

- People who had lived for longer in their home were more likely to have greater social wellbeing.
- People with longer tenancy were more likely to say that their home had a positive impact on their wellbeing during the pandemic.

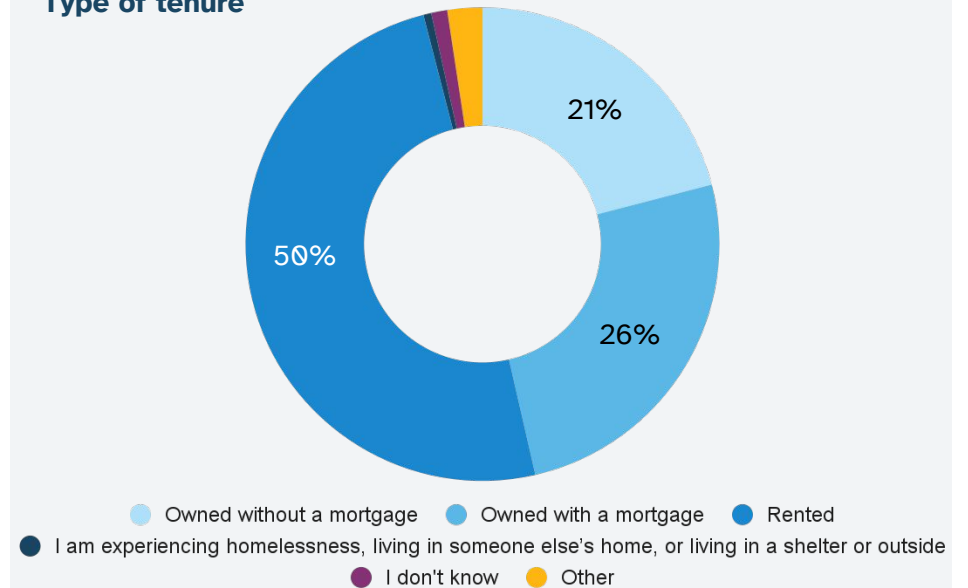
50%

of respondents are renters.

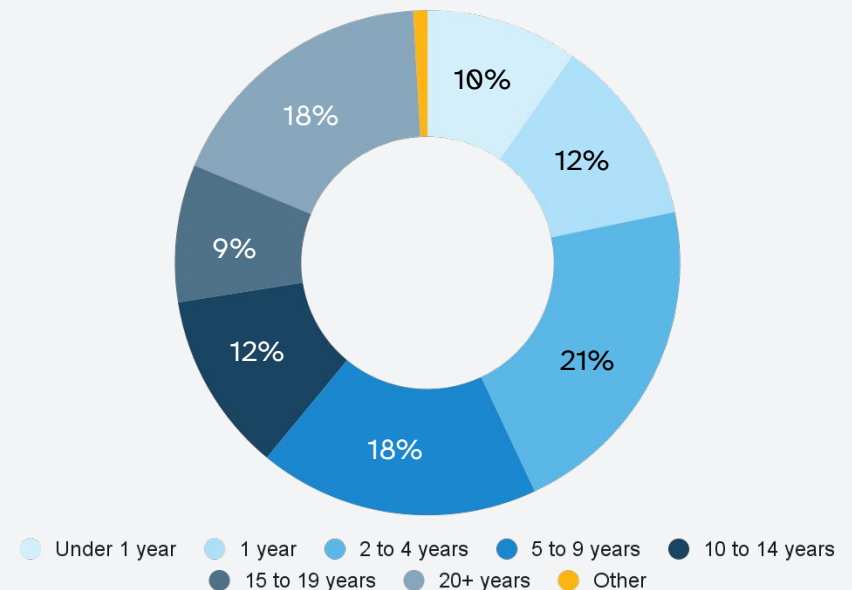
43%

have lived in their home for less than five years.

Type of tenure



Length of tenure



4 | Key learnings

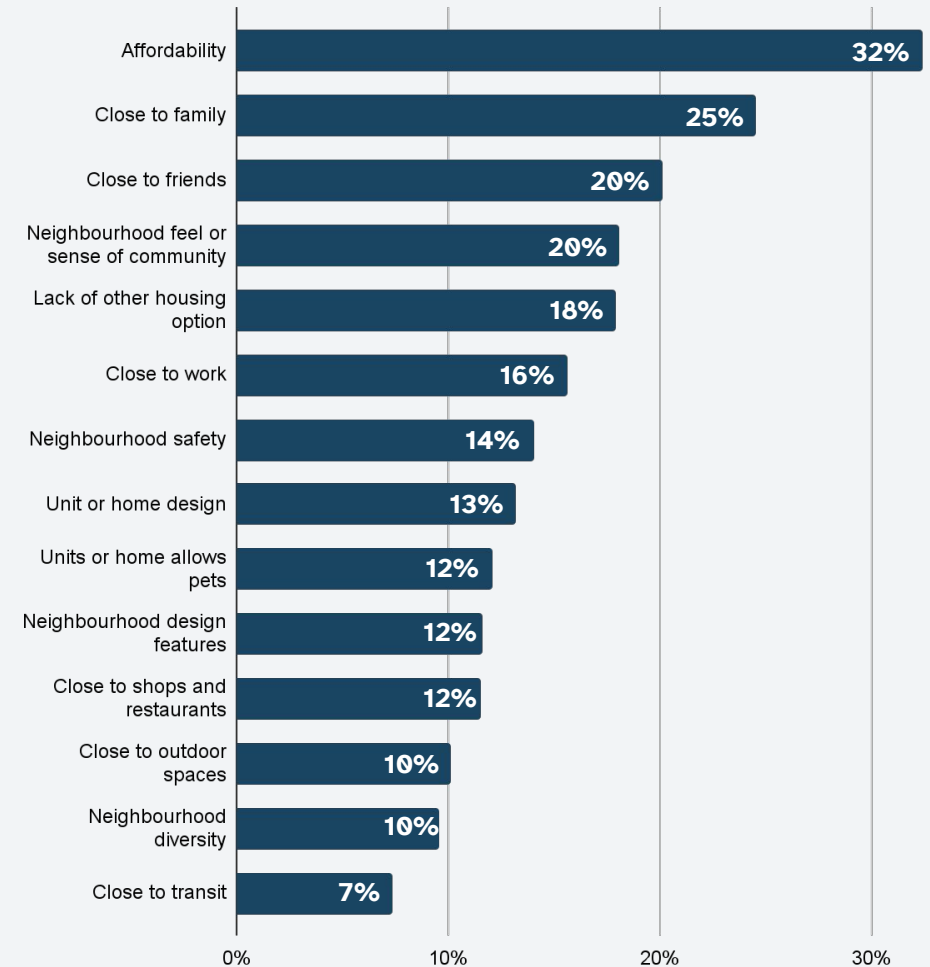
Social connection

We asked respondents about what elements they felt are missing from their neighbourhoods. After affordability, the top answers were proximity to family (selected by 25%), proximity to friends (20%), and neighbourhood feel and sense of community (18%). Challenges with affordability and social connection can go hand in hand. Neighbourhoods where people have many social connections may over time become less affordable. This can force people to move to a different area, which may be farther away from their friends and family, and where they do not yet have a strong sense of community.

Key survey findings

- People with a higher sense of belonging and trust in their neighbourhood were more likely to report higher general and social wellbeing than those who do not.
- Social wellbeing was neither correlated with density (the number of residents living in an area) nor the number of units in a respondent's building.
- In the demographic analysis, greater social wellbeing (including general and neighbourly connections) was associated with greater income, financial stability, length of tenure, and age. However, social wellbeing was negatively associated with longer commute times, young adults, people identifying as LGBTQ+, people identifying as racialized, people with mental health challenges, and insecure housing.

Top elements people feel are missing from their current neighbourhood



Less than 5% selected: Family-friendly neighbourhood; None of the above; Close to childcare facilities; Close to schools; Close to place of worship; Neighbourhood features (i.e. parking); Long-term security of tenure; and Close to grocery store. 7% said they prefer not to say.

4 | Key learnings

Commute patterns

Neighbourhood design can impact commute times and modes, through elements such as density, transit access, and proximity to jobs, schools, and services.

Commute times

In our sample, average commute times followed a downward trend as density increases across Zones 1, 2, and 3 (Map 6). However, commute times increased in the high and highest density areas (Zones 4 and 5). Census Canada data for Metro Vancouver shows a similar trend.⁸ Significantly, we found that people with longer commute times were more likely to report lower general and social wellbeing.

Overall, we found no statistically significant relationship between commute times and density (Maps 6 and 7). Two factors may help to explain this outcome. First, the SkyTrain network reaches many suburban communities across the region. Second, Metro Vancouver has multiple centres of high-density development outside of Downtown Vancouver, surrounded by lower-density, car-oriented areas. The location and dispersal of these high-density centres along transit corridors may be reducing commute times not only for residents in higher-density areas, but for nearby low-density areas as well. Further research into the links between specific elements of neighbourhood design and commute times can help clarify this relationship further.

Research snapshot

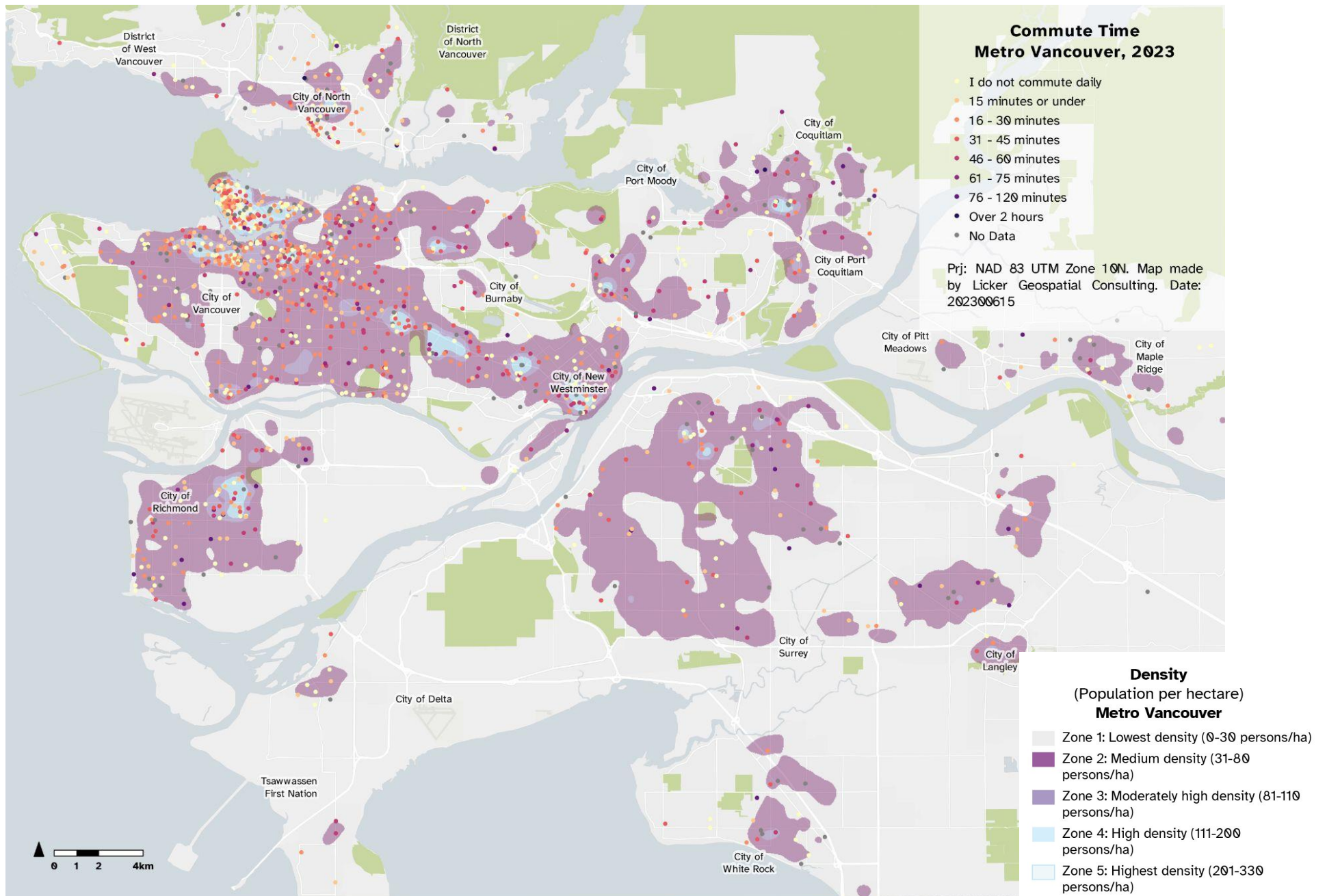
Extensive research shows a strong connection between commutes—both the length of commute and travel mode—and wellbeing. There is some evidence that long commutes are associated with higher rates of divorce, likely due to a lack of time with family.⁹ In contrast, people walking and biking tend to spend less time commuting, which allows more time with friends and family, and is associated with higher rates of participation in community groups and activities.¹⁰

Key survey findings

- Lower commute times are positively associated with greater happiness, health, and social connection.
- 15% said one aspect that is missing from their neighbourhood is proximity to work.
- Over half of survey respondents (52%) indicated that they live in their neighbourhood because it is close to transit.

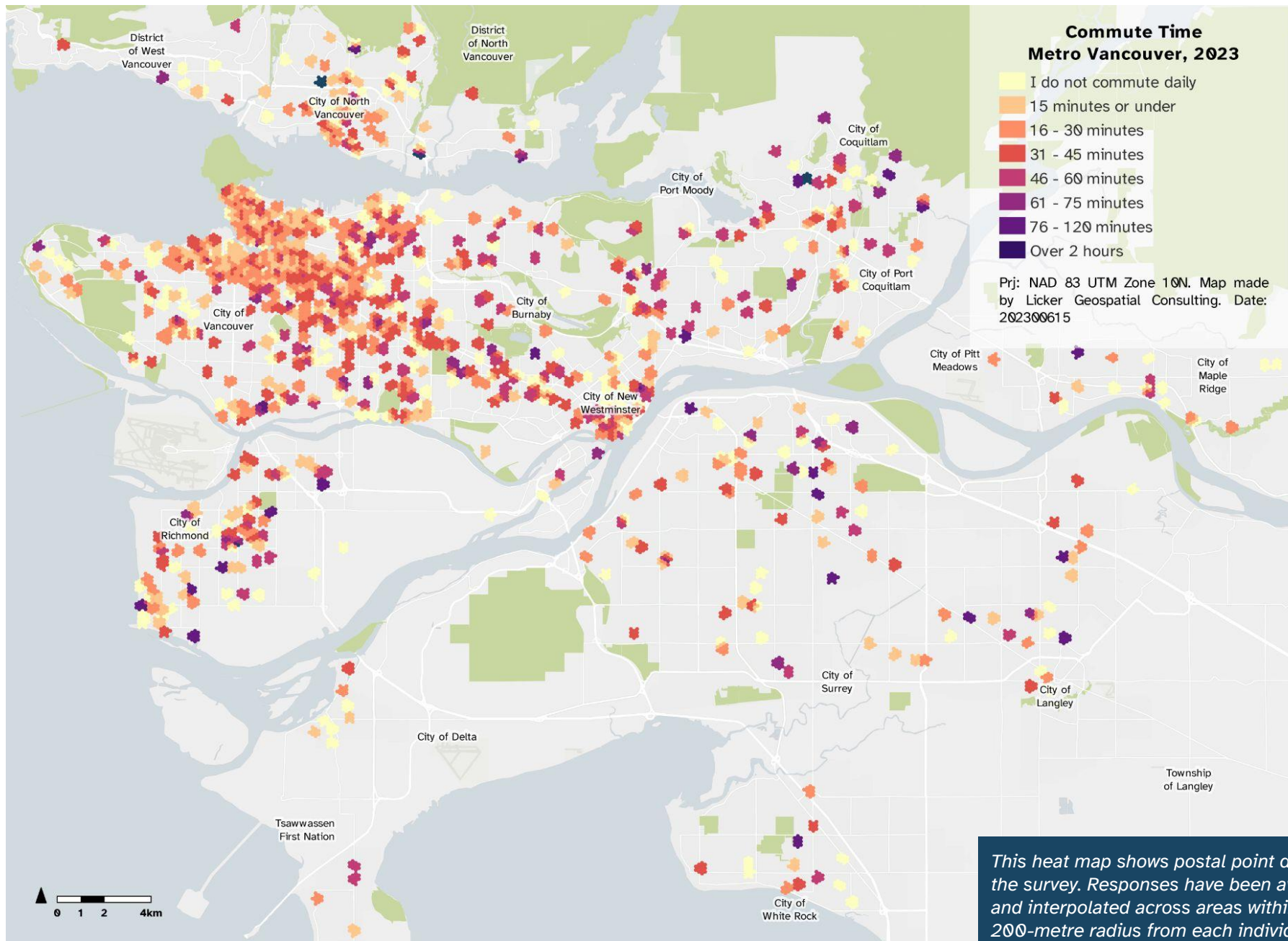
Interestingly, social and recreational amenities—such as restaurants and shops, and parks and other outdoor spaces—ranked higher than proximity to work and school when respondents were asked to indicate why they live in their particular neighbourhoods. Over 40% of respondents selected those amenities, compared to the 28% who selected proximity to work, and just 19% who selected close to schools. One explanation is that people are willing to commute longer if it means they can live in a social neighbourhood with successful community spaces and businesses. This willingness may be linked to transit access, as 52% of respondents reported that proximity to transit influenced their decision to live in their neighbourhood. Affordability may be another factor at play: It's possible that the central areas closest to workplaces and schools may be too expensive for many to afford.

4 | Key learnings



Map 6. Commute times in different density zones across Metro Vancouver

4 | Key learnings



This heat map shows postal point data from the survey. Responses have been averaged and interpolated across areas within a 200-metre radius from each individual response.

Map 7. Heat map of commute times across Metro Vancouver

4 | Key learnings

Commute patterns (continued)

Commute modes

We asked respondents to indicate all of their primary means of travel to and from work, school, or other daily activities. The survey results are generally consistent with the idea that, as density increases, the share of active transportation increases and car use decreases.¹¹ On average, rates of public transit ridership and walking in each zone increase as density increases. Conversely, the proportion of people who drive appears to decrease as density increases (with the exception of Density Zone 4, which has a lower average rate of driving than Zone 5). More people bike in the middle density zones, with the greatest mode share (20%) occurring in Density Zone 3.

While we observed differences in average commute modes across the five density zones, these differences were not statistically significant in our study. This is consistent with previous research that finds that while density is a minimum requirement for walking, biking, and transit ridership, it is not itself sufficient to achieve high active mode share, and other factors—such as job concentration and destinations—are better correlated with active travel.¹² The lack of correlation may also be explained by the fact that respondents were able to select multiple modes of commuting. Further analysis can explore the relationship between commute modes and other urban design elements that support active travel, such as street connectivity, street design, and land use mix.

Research snapshot

There are many other elements that are important for supporting active modes of travel. Previous research on the Metro Vancouver region suggests that density can play a central role in supporting high rates of active transportation, but only when combined with street connectivity, land use mix, and pedestrian-oriented retail destinations.¹³ Without these qualifying factors, measuring density alone may be insufficient to predict commute mode share. These findings underline that the benefits of density for active travel are contingent on safe, pedestrian-oriented streets and mixed-use design.

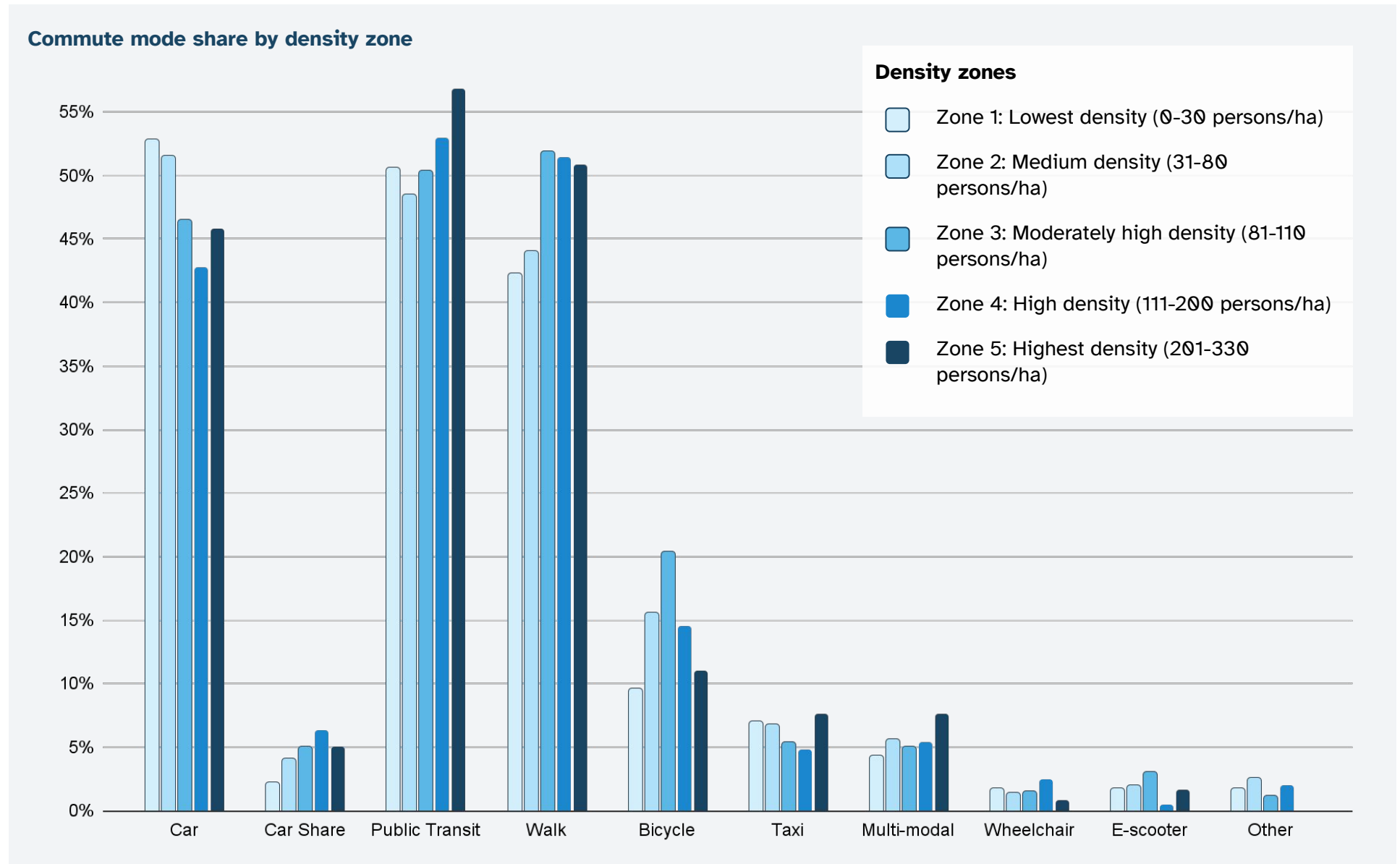
The relationship between density and commute modes is worth investigating because these different modes have significant impacts on people's wellbeing. Research consistently finds that driving is the most stressful mode of commuting, particularly when drivers end up stuck in unpredictable traffic. In contrast, people who walk and bike to work report higher rates of wellbeing, in part because they are exposed less to the stresses of traffic, because walking and biking are themselves enjoyable, and because physical activity promotes positive affect.¹⁴

Key survey findings

- 10% more people drive in the lowest density zone compared to the high density zone.
- More people bike in the middle density zones, with the greatest mode share (20%) occurring in Density Zone 3.
- Driving, public transit, and walking are each around three times more common as a commute mode than biking.

4 | Key learnings

Commute patterns (continued)



4 | Key learnings

Learning 2:

Multi-unit housing design and quality matter more than density for social connection and wellbeing.

With the exception of basement suites, living in multi-unit housing is not a predictor of higher or lower wellbeing compared to single detached homes. Rather, our findings suggest that the design and quality of multi-unit housing—including access to amenities—are more significant factors for social connection and housing satisfaction among residents.

This research asked people about the qualities and types of buildings and units that they live in, including single detached homes, duplexes, townhouses, basements or other fully contained suites, apartments, and more. When controlling for income and ownership, people in all the above types of housing reported comparable wellbeing scores—with the exception of basement suites, which are associated with a lower number of social connections. To understand what housing elements are positively or negatively linked to residents' wellbeing, we analyzed the number of units and storeys, access to shared spaces, and quality and design of the buildings people live in.

Our findings build on existing literature and best practices to help inform future policy and guidelines around designing for wellbeing in multi-unit housing.



Driftwood Village Cohousing, North Vancouver.

4 | Key learnings

Housing type

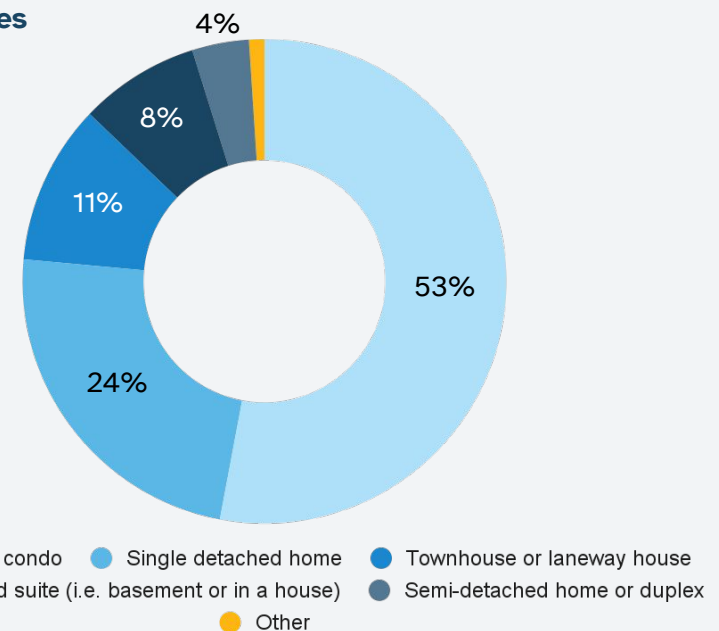
The most significant finding is that people living in basement suites (or other fully contained suites within a house) reported lower rates of social wellbeing than all other housing types. With the exception of basement suites, we did not find any evidence that living in any other housing or unit type is associated with health and wellbeing. When controlling for income and ownership status, people living in semi-detached homes, townhouses, and apartment buildings had comparable general and social wellbeing scores to those living in single detached homes. In other words, different wellbeing scores among these respondents were more likely to be explained by income and ownership status—rather than the type of unit people live in.



Key survey findings

- Basements and other fully contained suites are significantly associated with lower rates of social wellbeing (including general social connections and connections with neighbours) compared to all other housing types.
- When controlling for income and ownership status, people living in semi-detached homes, townhouses, and apartment buildings had comparable general and social wellbeing scores to those living in single detached homes. We did not find any evidence to indicate that these higher-density housing types are any worse for wellbeing than single detached houses.

Dwelling types



4 | Key learnings

Building height and number of units

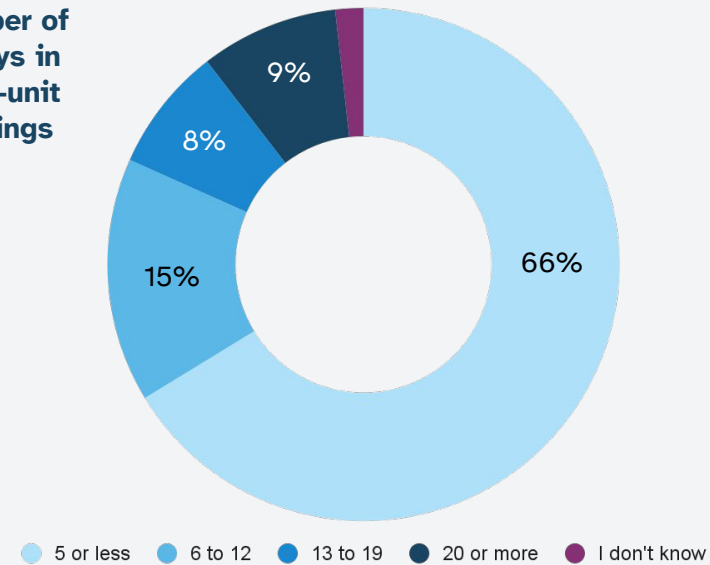
We asked respondents who indicated they live in multi-unit housing various questions about the design and size of their buildings. We did not find any evidence to suggest that living in a taller building is harmful to people’s wellbeing, irrespective of respondents’ age and income. Our study found a slight positive correlation between physical health and living in taller buildings; however, this finding is likely explained by the fact that our sample was highly Vancouver-centric, where taller buildings are generally located in walkable neighbourhoods (such as in and near to Downtown Vancouver). Greater investigation into this finding is required to draw conclusive results.

Rather than building height, the number of units—both within a building and on a floor—may matter more for people’s sense of belonging and community. Our survey found that those living in multi-unit buildings with under 51 units tended to have a greater sense of belonging than those in buildings with 51 units or more.

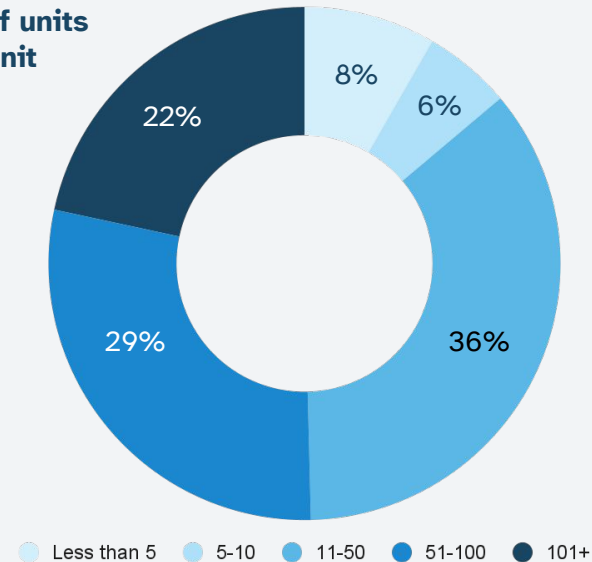
Social group size

Social group size is an important consideration for designing multi-unit housing. Larger developments with more residents and units can offer more community amenities, whereas smaller buildings may allow closer knit communities to form. Studies of cohousing communities often cite the ideal group size as being between 25 and 35 households.¹⁵ Large buildings can create opportunities to form these close community bonds by managing the number of residents sharing entrances and amenity spaces, and creating smaller groups within the larger community.¹⁶ Some research finds that a smaller number of units per floor can increase the frequency and quality of interactions between neighbours.¹⁷

Number of storeys in multi-unit buildings



Number of units in multi-unit buildings



Close to one third (30%) of respondents do not live in multi-unit housing.

4 | Key learnings

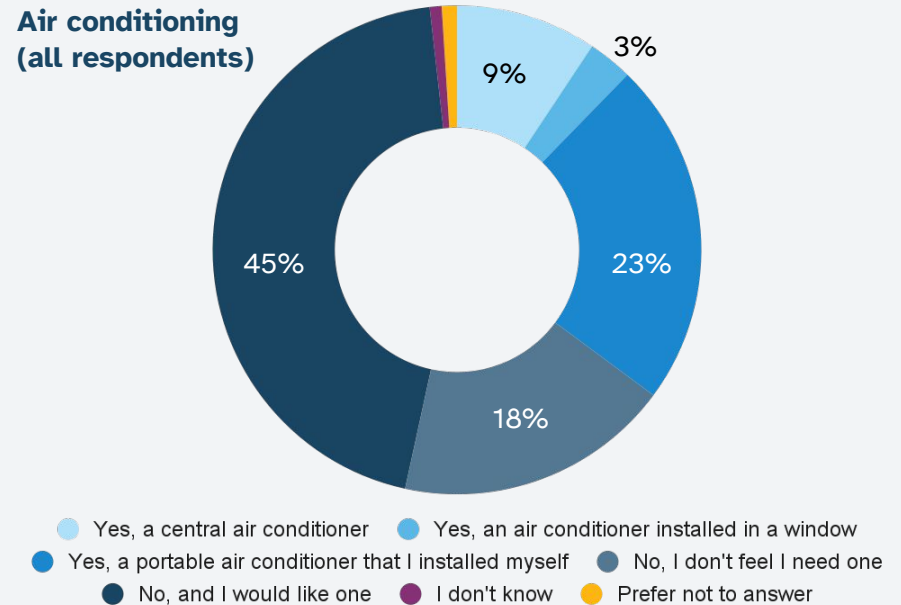
Building design and quality

We asked several survey questions about the quality and comfort of people’s housing and unit, and examined differences in answers by respondents’ age and income. We found that higher-income respondents were more likely to have air conditioning installed, whereas people with lower incomes were more likely to say they did not have air conditioning but need it. As extreme heat increases in the Lower Mainland, it will be important to consider how climate change and extreme weather may be felt more acutely by lower-income residents, and how policy can help mitigate these inequities—including through grants for retrofitting and adding air conditioning units to older buildings, and design guidelines for new buildings that promote air circulation and temperature regulation.

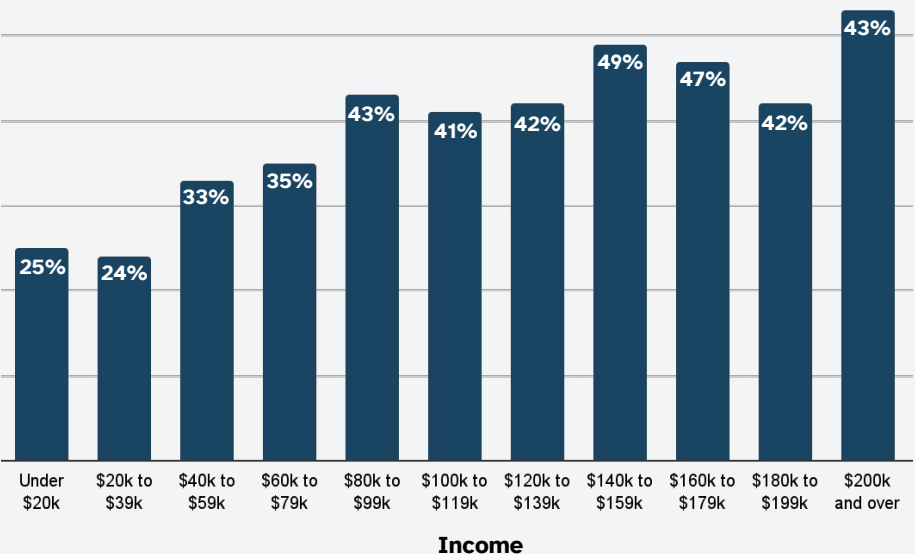
Key survey findings

- Nearly half of respondents (45%) indicated that they do not have air conditioning but would like it. People living in apartments or contained suites were more likely to report needing air conditioning than people living in single and semi-detached houses and townhouses.
- People living in semi-detached houses, contained suites, and apartment units reported lower satisfaction with temperature control, noise levels, and privacy.
- People living in townhouses and fully contained suites reported lower satisfaction with natural light, housing condition, common spaces, and air quality.
- Renters were less likely than owners to be satisfied with temperature control, noise levels, privacy, natural light, housing condition, common spaces, and air quality.

Air conditioning (all respondents)



Percentage that have any kind of air conditioning, by household income



4 | Key learnings

Building design and quality (continued)

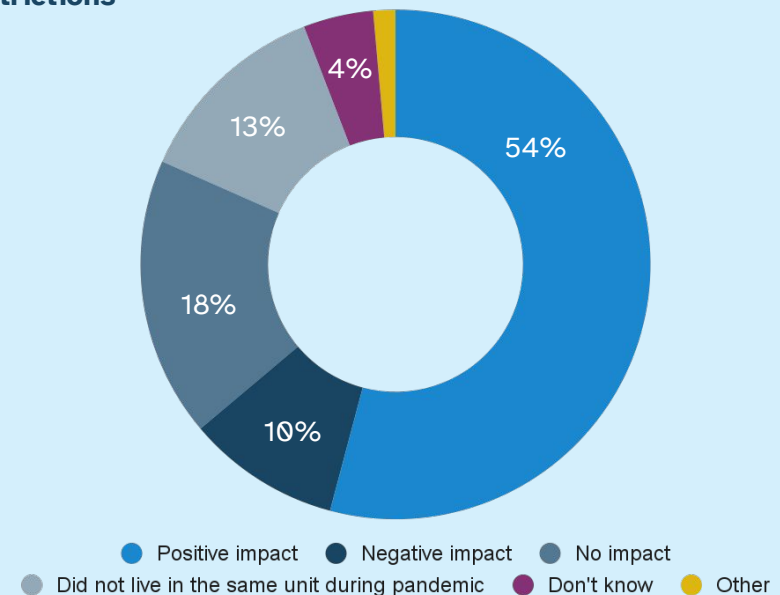
While living in multi-unit housing is not linked with any negative wellbeing outcomes, we did find that some multi-unit housing residents are less satisfied with their housing quality compared to those living in single detached homes. Specifically, living in semi-detached homes, fully contained suites, and apartment units was correlated with lower satisfaction with temperature control, noise levels, and privacy. Further, people living in townhouses and fully contained suites reported lower satisfaction with natural light, housing condition, common spaces, and air quality. Renters were linked with lower satisfaction on all of the aforementioned housing aspects (temperature control, noise levels, privacy, natural light, housing condition, common spaces, and air quality). Finally, people living in apartments or contained suites were more likely to report needing air conditioning than people living in single and semi-detached houses and townhouses.

These are important challenges for municipalities to address. Housing satisfaction should not just be reserved for those who can afford to purchase or live in a single detached home. As municipalities increasingly legalize denser housing forms across the Lower Mainland, they should consider how to ensure that everyone—including renters and people living in multi-unit housing—can live in a home or unit that they are satisfied with and that meets their needs for health and wellbeing. Multi-unit housing quality and satisfaction in can be improved through better design standards for new buildings and incentives for landlords to retrofit older buildings.

Housing and COVID-19

- Over half of respondents (54%) reported that their home had a positive impact on their wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- People who reported having good temperature control in the summer, longer tenancy, and larger unit sizes tended to report more positive impacts from their homes during the pandemic.
- The survey did not find any significant relationships between density and COVID-19 outcomes.

Self-reported impact of respondents' home or unit on their wellbeing during pandemic-related health restrictions



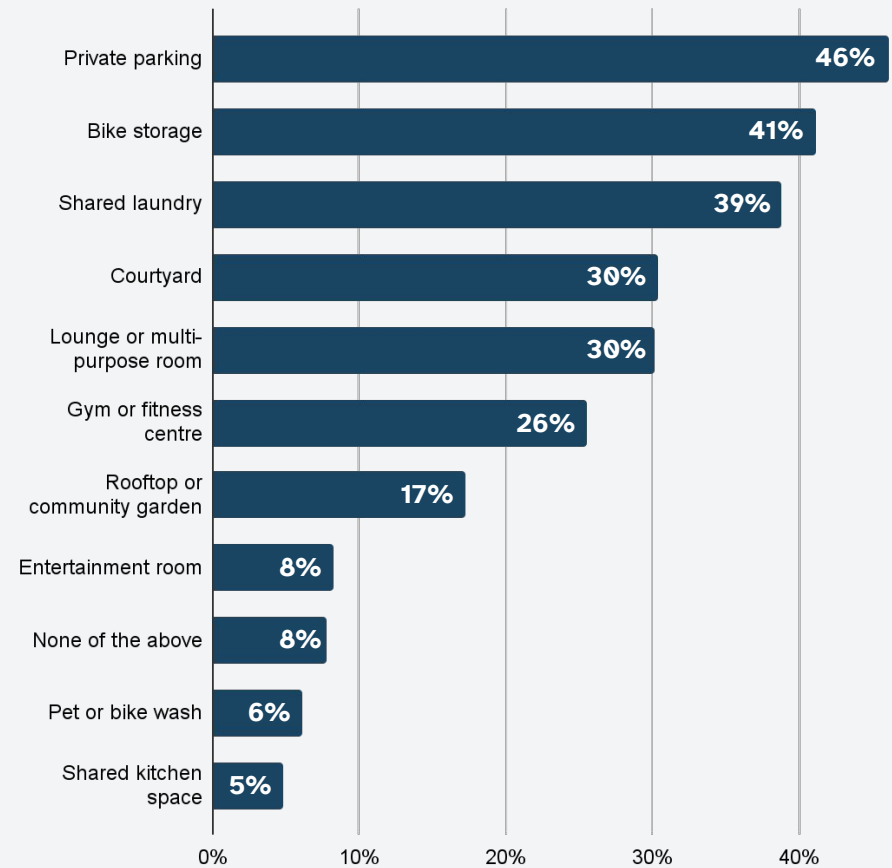
4 | Key learnings

Common spaces in multi-unit housing

We asked respondents who live in multi-unit housing about the types of shared amenities they have access to in their buildings. Our analysis found a small positive correlation between access to amenities in multi-unit housing and a person's social wellbeing. Both general connections and connections with neighbours increased with each increase in the number of amenities a respondent indicated they have access to. Specifically, people with access to more amenities were more likely to know their neighbours or be willing to ask them for help when they need it. People with greater access to shared amenities were also less likely to feel lonely, and more likely to feel that they have people they can confide in when they need help.

Most multi-unit housing respondents (over 90%) said they have access to one or more shared amenities. The top three shared spaces that multi-unit housing residents reported access to are private parking (46%), bike storage (41%), and shared laundry (39%). These were followed by a courtyard (30%), lounge or multi-purpose room (30%), gym or fitness centre (26%), and rooftop or community garden (17%). Only a small number indicated access to a shared kitchen, workspace, workshop, music room, entertainment room, kids room, pet or bike wash, swimming pool, or shared yard. Around one in 10 (8%) said they do not have access to any shared amenities.

Access to shared amenities in multi-unit housing



Less than 5% selected: Shared workspace, workshop, swimming, kids room, shared yard, or music room.

Key findings

- Over 90% of multi-unit housing respondents have access to at least one shared amenity.
- Access to shared amenities in multi-unit housing is significantly associated with greater social connections.
- Multi-unit housing residents with access to more shared amenities were more likely to know their neighbours, be willing to ask them for help when they need it, and feel that they have people they can confide in. They were also less likely to feel lonely.

4 | Key learnings

Common spaces in multi-unit housing (continued)

Taken together, these findings suggest that municipalities can consider access to shared amenities in multi-unit housing as a key strategy to provide more opportunities for social connections with neighbours and help reduce feelings of loneliness. It is significant that the three most common amenities in multi-unit housing are highly practical: parking, bike storage, and laundry. There is significant opportunity and evidence that activating these practical, shared spaces—which most residents use or pass through on a daily or weekly basis—can help neighbours make the jump from seeing one another in the laundry room to building stronger connections and relationships.

Shared amenities and common spaces should consider how to accommodate a diverse range of residents, considering the needs and interests of people of different ages, abilities, backgrounds, and cultures.

For example, Lu'ma Native Housing Society invited residents to help install a teepee in the building's courtyard and community garden space. The teepee helps foster a sense of community in the building, providing a space where Indigenous residents can (re)connect with their culture and with their neighbours.

Designing shared spaces for wellbeing

Access to shared amenities and spaces can support wellbeing for multi-unit housing residents. On lower floors, semi-private spaces such as courtyards, gardens, and entrances can help facilitate connection with the street.¹⁸ On upper floors, shared spaces—such as amenity rooms, decks, and social nooks in corridors—can help establish connections with neighbours in the building and on the same floor.¹⁹

The design of these spaces matter. The [Happy Homes](#) toolkit offers distinct strategies and evidence on how to design multi-unit housing to foster wellbeing and social connection, drawn from years of research and engagement with housing providers and residents.²⁰ A key strategy to promote social interaction among multi-unit housing residents is to co-locate different shared spaces and uses with one another, and along pathways that are part of people's daily routines.



New Beginnings Modular Housing, Vancouver.

4 | Key learnings

Learning 3:

Very small unit sizes are linked with challenges for wellbeing.

The impact of unit size on wellbeing is an important research question that will impact future policy in the Lower Mainland. Our survey found that people living in units of under 300 square feet had lower average incomes than the general population—and were more likely to report lower levels of happiness and health.

The housing affordability crisis in the Lower Mainland has prompted developers and municipalities to consider the construction of smaller apartment units, sometimes referred to as micro-suites. Notably, the City of Vancouver, the City of Surrey, and the City of Victoria have created policies allowing for micro-suites as small as 29 square metres (312 square feet). The reasoning behind these policies is that small units can provide more affordable housing in central, walkable areas. However, the wellbeing impacts of living in small spaces have not been studied in depth.

Through the survey, we sought to understand whether small units—particularly those under 300 square feet (28 square metres)—were associated with differences in wellbeing. Our analysis found that living in these small units was associated with lower general wellbeing scores and incomes, suggesting that people are living in these units due to affordability.

Additional considerations

The findings in this section need to be considered carefully, as there are many intersecting factors that can influence people’s wellbeing beyond unit size, including:

- Health, income, and other demographic factors
- Sense of community, belonging, and social connections with neighbours
- Building and unit condition and quality (for example, many single-room occupancy units in Vancouver have poor living conditions with pests, limited maintenance, and cleanliness, and safety issues)
- Building design, including access to shared spaces
- Unit design, including built-in storage space, finishes, daylight, and temperature control
- Neighbourhood walkability and access to transit, jobs, green spaces, and public amenities
- Building rules and regulations (particularly in supportive housing that is operated as a “program” rather than a tenancy)

4 | Key learnings

Unit sizes in the Lower Mainland

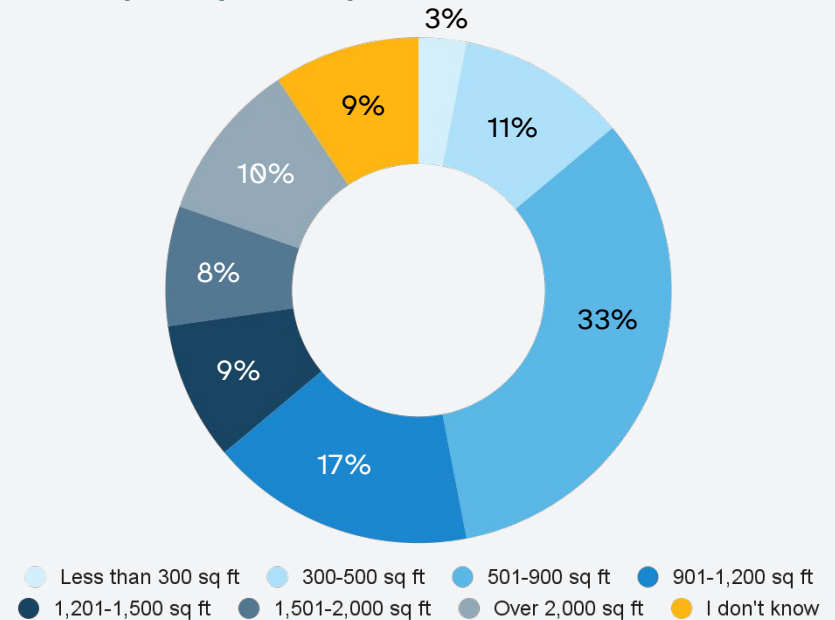
We reached 57 respondents who live in units that are under 300 square feet. The majority of our survey sample of people living in small units live in the City of Vancouver (61%), with the remainder spread across UBC, Richmond, New Westminster, Surrey, Burnaby, Maple Ridge, Port Coquitlam, West Vancouver, and North Vancouver. Through the study, we sought to distinguish between those living in small units primarily for affordability reasons, and those who chose to live in a small unit in order to decrease their commute time and have better access to transit, jobs, and services.

Commute times

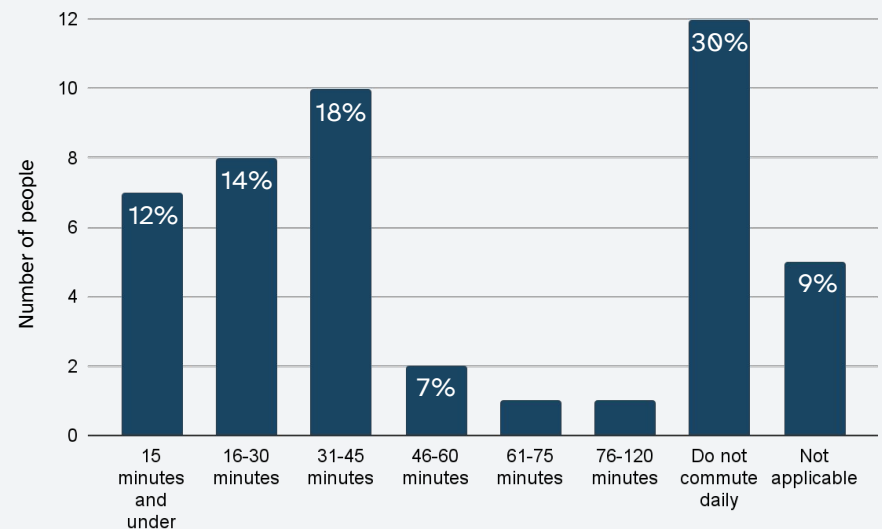
Commute times varied for respondents living in units less than 300 square feet. Around one third (30%) do not commute daily, 12% have commute times under 15 minutes, 14% have commute times between 16-30 minutes, and 18% have commute times between 31-45 minutes. A small number (7%) reported commuting more than 46 minutes daily.

Small units are often justified in terms of their ability to provide more affordable access and close proximity to jobs, shops, and amenities.²¹ However, in our sample, a quarter of people living in units under 300 square feet commute more than 30 minutes daily, showing that these small unit sizes are not offering the benefit of easy job access for a significant portion of residents.

Unit sizes (all respondents)



Commute times of people living in units under 300 sq ft



4 | Key learnings

Household income and affordability

In our sample, people with higher incomes tended to live in larger units. In contrast, people living in units less than 300 square feet reported lower average incomes than the general population. Nearly all respondents living in these small units reported household incomes under \$60,000, with the median income for this group falling within the \$20,000 to \$39,999 bracket (compared to a median household income of \$90,000 across Metro Vancouver²²). None of the respondents living in units less than 300 square feet reported a household income of \$80,000 or higher.

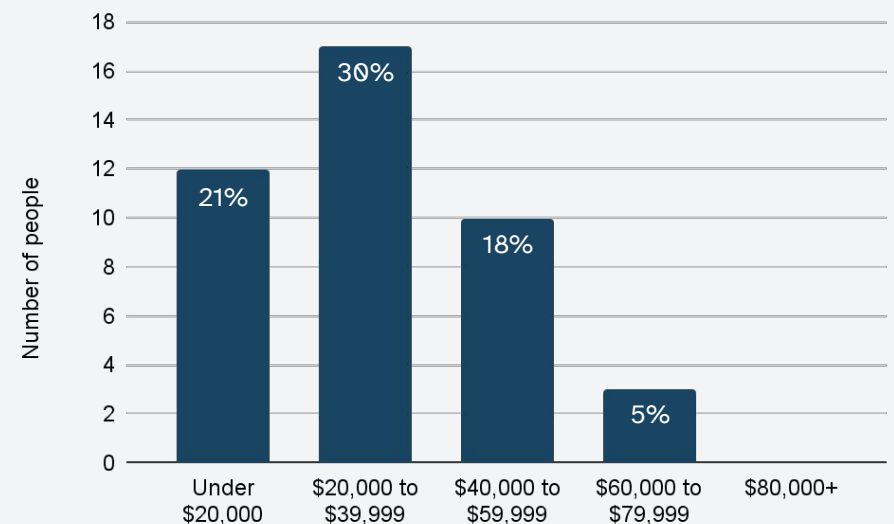
Unit sizes and wellbeing

Our analysis found that living in a unit that is less than 300 square feet is a significant negative predictor of general wellbeing (encompassing physical health, mental health, and happiness), even when controlling for income and other factors (including financial stability, ownership, tenancy length, sense of belonging, sense of trust, commute times, satisfaction with air conditioning, home impact during COVID-19, number of amenities, age, income, gender, and whether the respondent is a member of a vulnerable group). This analysis lends support to the claim that it is the housing condition itself, as opposed to a confounding variable, that is responsible for the lower general wellbeing scores among people living in very small units.

Key findings

- Even when controlling for income and other factors, living in a unit of less than 300 square feet is negatively associated with general wellbeing. In other words, this demographic is significantly more likely to report lower health and happiness than people living in units larger than 300 square feet.
- Without controlling for other factors, living in a unit of under 300 square feet is associated with lower social and neighbourhood wellbeing. However, these correlations disappear when controlling for income.
- People living in units smaller than 300 square feet reported lower incomes than the general population.

Income distribution of people living in units under 300 sq ft



4 | Key learnings

Unit sizes and wellbeing (continued)

The survey revealed that two thirds of those living in units less than 300 square feet live alone. However, six of the respondents in small units also reported living with two or more people, and a small minority reported living with children who are between five and 17 years old. Small units may pose particular challenges for certain demographic groups, such as those with disabilities or those living with children.

Accessibility considerations

People living in units under 300 square feet were almost twice as likely to report having a disability. One challenge is that smaller units are more difficult to adapt to include enhanced accessibility features. For example, Vancouver’s Building Code requires new units to be adaptable, but this excludes units less than 40 square metres.²³ A recent study by the Urban Land Institute found that very small units can meet accessibility requirements, but only if they utilize custom furniture. This study found that, without custom furniture, a unit needs to be at least 35 to 37 square metres to be accessible.²⁴

The wellbeing impacts of living in a small unit merit further investigation, particularly since living in a small unit may be the only housing choice for some low-income residents. In some other cities, developers market micro units at higher-income earners who may live in them to live closer to jobs, shops, and amenities. However, in the current Vancouver market, the smallest units appear to be primarily occupied by people on low incomes who lack other affordable options. In our analysis, these units are not positively associated with wellbeing. More investigation and deeper engagement are required to further understand the wellbeing challenges of living in small units.

Research snapshot

A recent knowledge synthesis by Simon Fraser University found that smaller units were associated with fewer social connections in other studies.²⁵ Other research has found that if families live in small units for lack of other affordable housing options, this can lead to overcrowding, which can negatively affect children in particular.²⁶

Some jurisdictions—including Seattle, U.S. and Sydney, Australia—have experimented with enabling “micro-units”—very small apartment units located in high-amenity downtown areas. These units are intended for knowledge-economy workers, and are often designed with only minimum kitchen facilities, under the assumption that this demographic will spend relatively little time at home, preferring to spend time at restaurants, work, and in other destinations.²⁷

1.7x

People living in units under 300 square feet are 1.7 times more likely to report having a disability

5 | Conclusion

5 | Conclusion

Overall, this study suggests that it is possible to design dense housing and neighbourhoods that support wellbeing. To achieve these benefits, it is important to integrate density into complete, walkable, affordable communities with good parks; avoid excessively small units; and design high-quality multi-unit housing with useful, social common spaces for diverse residents.

According to this study, density, in and of itself, is not directly associated with greater or lower wellbeing. Residents in dense neighbourhoods were as likely as those in low-density areas to be healthy, enjoy strong social ties, and have high overall happiness. We similarly found that people living in duplexes, townhouses, laneway houses, and apartment buildings reported similar rates of wellbeing as those in single detached homes. This does not mean that density is irrelevant to wellbeing. Rather, our findings suggest that the impact of density depends on its design.

At a neighbourhood scale, research shows that density needs to be integrated with other elements of pedestrian-friendly, transit-oriented design—including safe streets, small blocks, and mixed-use zoning—to help reduce commute times and promote active transport and wellbeing. We also found that proximity to transit, affordability, shops and restaurants, and outdoor spaces are the key factors behind people's decisions to live in their neighbourhood. Density can play an important role in making these amenities possible, by providing a larger customer base for transit and local businesses, and offering a more diverse range of housing options.



5 | Conclusion

The two housing types that are associated with decreased wellbeing are basement suites and units smaller than 300 square feet. Very small units are a negative predictor of wellbeing—even after controlling for income, financial stability, ownership, commute times, number of amenities, and other factors. The region should therefore approach these smaller units with caution, and consider them only in places where their potential benefits are greatest in terms of enabling access to amenities and jobs.

Finally, two of the top factors that people feel are missing from their neighbourhoods are proximity to family and friends and a sense of community. The study identifies two factors that are linked to such connections. We found that residents in multi-unit buildings with access to useful amenities have greater social connections, and that communities with more park space report greater social trust. Correspondingly, a greater sense of trust and belonging in one's neighbourhood is linked with having more social connections.

Recommendations and next steps

Vancouver Coastal Health, municipalities, and other housing and research partners can explore the following next steps and directions for future research to guide policy and actions around supporting wellbeing in dense, urban environments:

- Connect with municipalities across the Lower Mainland to share the results of the survey. These findings can be particularly impactful for municipalities that had high participation rates in the survey and that are currently developing liveability and minimum unit size guidelines.
- Conduct in-depth qualitative and quantitative research with residents in multi-unit housing on the links between specific building designs, amenities, sizes, and wellbeing. Deeper engagement and interviews with those living in small units can help uncover the factors behind the lower wellbeing scores among these residents, including how small unit sizes may intersect with other challenges, such as lower incomes and disabilities.
- Conduct more research with people of diverse races, cultures, genders, ages, and abilities to gain a more comprehensive understanding of preferences and experiences of housing across and within different demographic groups.
- Conduct further research on how specific elements of pedestrian-friendly, transit-oriented design intersect with density and wellbeing in the region. This data can help tease out the distinct impacts of high-density housing within areas that offer jobs, shops, and transit, versus density in places that lack amenities.
- Encourage intentional design for wellbeing in elements of the built environment that are linked to resident wellbeing and social connection, through conversations and education with municipalities and developers.
- Plan for future surveys that track how wellbeing changes in different density zones over time.

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