

Article

Residents' Satisfaction with Green Spaces and Daily Life in Small Urban Settings: Romanian Perspectives

Mariana Cernicova-Buca ^{1,*}, Vasile Gherheș ¹ and Ciprian Obrad ²

¹ Department of Communication and Foreign Languages, Interdisciplinary Research Center for Communication and Sustainability (PoliCom), Politehnica University of Timisoara, 300006 Timisoara, Romania

² Department of Sociology, West University of Timișoara, 300223 Timisoara, Romania

* Correspondence: mariana.cernicova@upt.ro

Abstract: The availability and accessibility of green spaces in urban settings are important factors in determining the sustainability of cities and the quality of urban life. However, the literature indicates a need for evidence-based data correlating green areas and perceived well-being in the city. This study focuses on a vignette study of the satisfaction with green spaces in a Romanian small urban setting that meets the standards of green space availability and accessibility proposed by the World Health Organization. The data obtained by applying a questionnaire to a sample of 600 residents highlight the appreciation of the local people for the characteristics, functions, and availability of urban green spaces. The study establishes statistically significant correlations between the general satisfaction with life and the distance in meters to the nearest park, between the general satisfaction with life and the distance in time to the nearest park, and between the distance in meters and the time spent in parks and green spaces. The results can be used to establish a participatory agenda for local authorities interested in gaining insight from residents for the future actions needed to develop green spaces and to provide them with the opportunity to reflect upon the correlations between outdoor activities in such spaces and people's well-being in urban settings.



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1. Introduction

The debates over the future of urban life increasingly highlight the idea that without green spaces, cities cease to be sustainable. Nature deprivation has been shown to have devastating consequences on human health, and appeals have been launched asking green cities to make natural or landscaped green spaces larger and more accessible to residents and to encourage a lifestyle involving time spent in such areas. For example, the World Health Organization (WHO) recommends that the resident population should reach a green space in 300 m (or within a 5-minute walk) [1]. The interest in the availability and accessibility of urban green spaces is growing, as shown by reports, calls for green action, and directives [1–3] and by scientists alike, who investigate the importance of urban green spaces for human well-being [4–9], the perceived comfort of such areas [10], the importance of greenery for maintenance of biodiversity, climate control, improvement of air pollution, fire protection [11], and the possibility to influence environmentally friendly green leadership behavior [12]. Climate studies have emphasized the direct impact of green spaces in urban settings, where the average air temperature for summer days is approximately 3.5 degrees lower when compared to areas where there are no green spaces [2]. The United Nations, in its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), calls for action to protect the planet and improve the lives and prospects of everyone, articulating in Sustainable Goal number 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) the need for “creating of green public spaces” [13]. This goal cannot be achieved without significantly transforming the way urban spaces are managed and developed. A practical guide developed by the UN proposes that while

the creation, rehabilitation, protection, and management of public space is predominantly the responsibility of local governments [14], active collaboration between citizens, the civil society, and the private sector can improve the community's success in ensuring the sustainability of urban development. These tools clarify that the purpose of monitoring progress against SDG 11 Target 11.7 (Indicator 11.7.1) is to provide necessary and timely information to decision makers and stakeholders so that they can make informed decisions and accelerate progress toward providing universal access to safe, inclusive, and accessible green and public spaces [14] (p.7). The availability and accessibility of green spaces are recognized as significant components determining the quality of urban life [14–16]. Additionally, the type of surface and distance to residences can be measured and compared in the process of determining the sustainability of a city and the level of well-being enjoyed by the residents. Furthermore, among the well-being indicators identified through collaborative processes engaging citizens, the quality of the natural environment has been found to have an important role [17,18].

Numerous studies on urban green spaces indicate that “perceived green space quality, even without any judging criteria, can predict health benefits” [19], opening the path towards a more in-depth line of investigation as the city dwellers' perceptions are an important indicator of their appraisal of their well-being and satisfaction with everyday life [4]. Research shows that while international recommendations indicate the importance of green spaces for the sustainability and livability of cities, the used terminology varies from region to region and indicators for measurements are still debated upon [1]. Kabisch et al., in a study consisting of over 299 municipalities across the European Union (EU), found that “some cities provide per-capita threshold values for urban green space (UGS); some have recommendations regarding the minimum distance to green space while others have no recommendations at all” [20]. Furthermore, the literature on urban green spaces recommends that the role of urban green spaces for human well-being should be analyzed “according to their potential and required optimal ratio under different communities' urban specific environments and social behaviors” [4], but the analyses are carried out mainly on the case of one or a corpus of several big cities, leaving small urban areas as “an underresearched” and neglected domain [21]. The aim of the present study is to investigate the link, from a residents' perspective, between urban green spaces and satisfaction with daily life in a small urban setting that meets the WHO recommendations on the availability of green spaces. The remainder of the article presented in the following order: Literature Review and Research Hypotheses—Section 2, Materials and Methods—Section 3, Results—Section 4, Discussion—Section 5, Conclusions—Section 6, and Limitations and Future Research Directions—Section 7.

2. Literature Review and Research Hypotheses

2.1. Urban Green and Well-Being

The literature on the history and typology of green spaces makes the distinction between parks, gardens, and other greenery; discusses size, ownership, and accessibility (in terms of public/private dichotomy); designs policies for community parks vs. neighborhood parks, etc. [22]. WHO also draws attention to the fact that terminology matters and that nuanced and context-specific definitions for urban green spaces are in use, varying by continent (Europe vs. USA) but also by country (UK vs. Italy) [1]. This research does intend to delve into such refined distinctions and in-depth debates, but rather targets urban green spaces (parks, riverbanks, and greenery alongside roads) in a generic manner. Furthermore, given the potential of urban green spaces to positively influence human well-being in the city [1], this study intends to contribute to the understanding of the subjective perceptions of city dwellers concerning their usage of available parks in a selected urban setting. The World Health Organization reports [1] have insisted that access to green spaces may produce health benefits through various mechanisms, “some of which may have a synergistic effect”. Among the most significant contributions towards the topic linking the visitation of green spaces and well-being, Hartig et al. [23] provided a “review of reviews”

on three decades of research on the influence of nature and green spaces on human health, determining that the methods for ensuring green space-related human well-being include air quality, physical activity, social cohesion, and stress reduction. Other overviews have investigated the wide spectrum of human dimensions and needs expressed with respect to nature contact in urban life [24].

The benefits from contact with nature depend on residents' engagement with the green spaces, as discussed by Lachowycz and Jones [25]. While understanding that the natural environment can foster well-being in many ways [26], a variety of factors need to be accounted for. Among the most frequently analyzed factors are availability, accessibility, amount of the green space [27,28], quality of the green spaces [29,30], frequency of visitation [1,27,28], and the time that visitors spend in them [31]. Some of the studies have focused on one dimension only, and others have proposed models for interpreting the data and integrating the natural environment in a systemic understanding of subjective well-being [32]. Thus, Prashanti Rao discussed the importance of green environments in residential communities and proposed a model of the benefits of urban green spaces, placing perceived park accessibility in direct connection with the level of well-being declared by the residential community [5]. Viebrantz and Fernandes-Jesus [33] also investigated the connection between perceived well-being and the accessibility and availability of green spaces, formulating questions that measure the degree of satisfaction that the respondents declared to have with respect to green urban spaces in the proximity of their places of residence. Laan and Piersma [6] made a point in defining the quality or attractiveness of a green space in relation to motivating factors for visits, drawing attention to the fact that the physical distance to a green space and the size of the space "may not be the only determining factor for residents to visit. People mostly relax in the closest green urban space". Their study, however, is based on a mathematical model of the researched topic, whereas the authors of the present study focus on the subjective dimension of green space assessment and self-reported green space use formulated by the residents of the selected area. Therefore, in addition to the accessibility of green spaces, the present research aims to highlight the perceived uses of existing green spaces in terms of frequency, time spent, and reasons that residents provide for traveling to such areas.

2.2. *The Case for Small Cities*

Small cities account for a significant fraction of the total population in many regions of the world; in Europe, such urban settlements are home to one-fifth of the population [34]. In Romania, small cities (having less than 20,000 inhabitants) represent 70% of the urban system [35]. In terms of size, 60% of small cities in Romania have a population of less than 10,000 inhabitants. Typically, such urban settings represent a neglected, though relevant, research subject [21,35,36]. In addition, they seem to also receive less attention in terms of policies and coordinated help on a continental level [36], with the European Union remaining hesitant to adopt a dedicated policy framework, despite the awareness of the necessity to create one [35]. In 2015, the European Union launched a project aimed at rewarding small cities that work towards reducing their environmental footprint under the symbolic title of the "Green Leaf Award"; however, the competition is open to all towns and cities of EU member states with a population of 20,000 and up to 99,999 inhabitants [37]. The organizers of the competition seek to encourage cities to actively develop citizens' environmental awareness and involvement, aiming to identify cities that can act as "green ambassadors" in promoting commitment to generation of green growth and fostering sustainable outcomes. For Romania, competition such as this can be entered by medium or large cities, according to the national typology. Therefore, the question of "how small is a small town" [36] is not to be ignored, and historical, geographic, and national regulations must be taken into consideration when discussing the typology of urban settings, even if only the variable size is taken into account. Arguably, small cities can contribute significantly in ensuring sustainable and satisfying development and can present innovative solutions to the challenges of modern life [34,36]. Researchers have

made a compelling plea for small towns to receive “more systematic scientific attention from a multitude of disciplines, theoretical approaches, and regional perspectives” [21], even with the large diversity in the structure, function, experience, and viability of these urban settlements [34–36].

2.3. Romanian Realities and Research Hypotheses

In a country such as Romania with a temperate climate and an urban culture that involves the presence of green infrastructure in the form of parks, lawns, public gardens, green river banks, and forests, the topic of greening is relatively new in public discourse, on the one hand due to the pressure on green infrastructure caused by the development of cities, and on the other hand because environmental concerns increase in gravity [38–40]. The Romanian government set a target for urban green space at 26 sqm/person, to be met by all Romanian cities by 31 December 2013 (Government Ordinance No. 114/2007) [15,40]. Statistics show that no large cities in Romania meet the WHO recommendation of 50 sqm/inhabitant, with the average being 21.3 sqm/inhabitant. However, smaller cities present a better image. Among the top Romanian urban settings with more than 50 sqm per inhabitant, there are Cavnic (674.1 sqm), Borsec (166.7), Slănic (160.4), Sovata (154.4), Băile Olănești (140.9), Sărmașu (124.2), Lipova (122.7), Baia Mare (119.2), Băile Herculane (117.8), Pâncota (91.6), Covasna (84.9), Amara (83.4), Piatra-Olt (78.5), Videle (77.7), Băile Govora (74.1), Mangalia (73.0), Ocna Sibiului (71.9), Solca (69.0), Câmpina (68.0), Tâlmăciu (67.1), Nucet (65.6), Buziaș (64.4), Simeria (60.1) Ineu (59.8), Călimănești (55.6), and Bufta (51.0) [41]. Most of these localities are health resorts and fulfill not only the criterion of the green space availability, but also the one regarding accessibility, i.e., making the green space accessible from walking distances [15,16,33].

With consideration of this background, the research team selected one of the Romanian small cities on the list of green cities, i.e., Ineu, Arad County, in the western part of the country, as a vignette study [42]. The aim of the study is to identify the local people’s perception of the existing green spaces and their willingness to contribute to the maintenance of such spaces in the vicinity of their place of residence. The local administration shows interest in the maintenance and development of green spaces by recognizing the untapped potential of landscaping the riverbank in the city and extending the green area by planting vegetation along the roads and sidewalks [43], but these plans partially depend on residents’ wish to support and participate in such initiatives [17]. The city itself is proud to be able to attract investment in the economic area, but the creation of new industrial facilities can also endanger urban greenery, as highlighted by Jin. et al. [44]. The intended green development of the city must maintain and, if possible, extend the green urban area, especially because the administration’s own assessment is that infrastructure required to preserve biodiversity is one of the current weak points of the city [43]. To discuss features and time spent outdoors in nature without leaving the city of residence, the research team refers to parks as distinctive forms of green spaces in Ineu.

Researchers interested in the topic cite the need to study the relationship between nature and human mental well-being in a more systematic way [45]. Based on the responses collected from the residents of Ineu, inspired by the findings presented in studies focused on the correlation between the availability and accessibility of green spaces and human well-being, and in response to the identified need to narrow the gap in data-based knowledge of such correlations, the research team also aimed to test the following set of hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1 (H1). *The shorter the distance to the nearest green space, the greater the overall satisfaction in the daily life of the inhabitants.*

Hypothesis 2 (H2). *The shorter the distance to the nearest green space, the higher the frequency of visiting green spaces and the longer the physical time spent in these spaces.*

Hypothesis 3 (H3). *There is a direct association between the time spent in green spaces and satisfaction with the aspects of daily life.*

Hypothesis 4 (H4). *There is a significant correlation between the education, age, gender, and occupation of the inhabitants (respondents) and their satisfaction with the green spaces of the city.*

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Study Area

Ineu is a small urban setting located 57 km from the county capital, Arad. It has a population of 9078 inhabitants (as per the 2011 census) and occupies a surface of 116.6 sq km at the contact point of the Crișul Alb Basin and the Crișurile Plateau, which is the main entrance gate into the Zărand Land (Figure 1) [46]. It has a population density of 82.16/sq km and a negative population growth, features that are taken into account by the local administration, which makes efforts to improve the residents' positive perceptions regarding the quality of life in the city and to counterbalance the attraction of the “big magnet”, which is the county administrative capital, Arad [43].

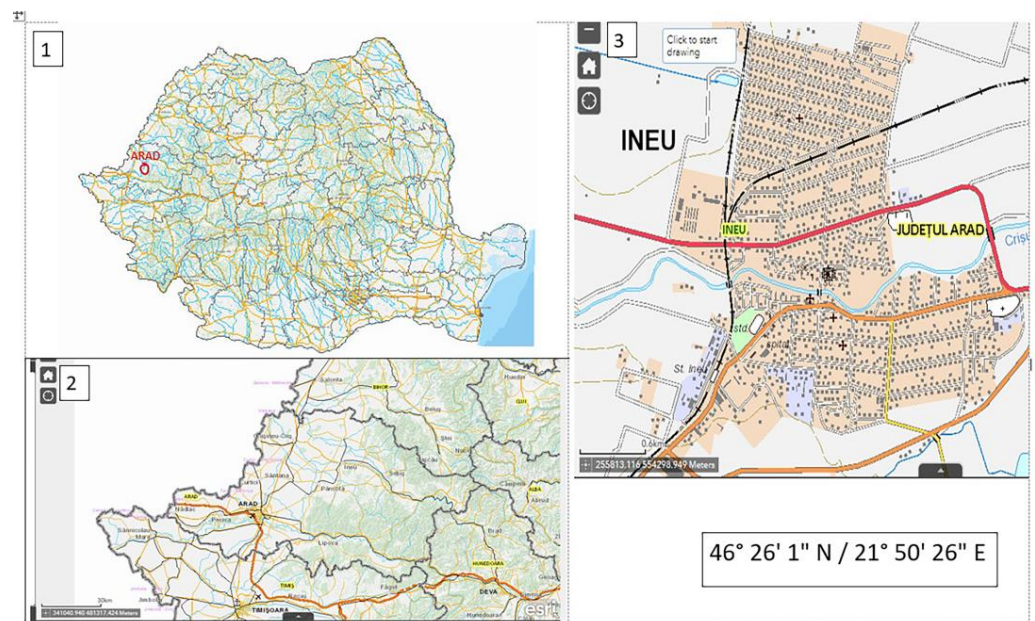


Figure 1. Geographic localization of the study area in Romania (1), in the county (2), and city view (3).

In the second half of 2022, the local administration invited the research team to investigate the perceptions of the existing green infrastructure in order to support future budget allocations for investments in landscaping works. These data are necessary to shape an informed public agenda, expressing both the needs of the local community and the actions set out by the authorities [47]. Therefore, some of the questions included in the investigation were determined by the needs of the local administration. However, the refining of the data and the above-mentioned hypotheses were developed independently by the research team as part of the academic inquiry.

Large urban settings display a wide diversity of green spaces: natural, semi-natural or planted, accompanied or not by built objects, managed publicly or privately, and designed for multiple purposes [22]. In small communities such as Ineu, green infrastructure consists of parks, landscaped riverbanks, playgrounds, and grassy areas in the streets. Local authorities are in charge of planning, developing, and maintaining this infrastructure. Private gardens adjacent to houses are not included in this study, although they also contribute to the overall greenery of the city.

3.2. Method

The research carried out was quantitative and used a survey method. The concrete approach consisted of applying a semi-structured questionnaire to a sample of 600 people, all residents of Ineu, Arad County. The sample was designed to be representative of the adult population under the conditions of a representativeness error of $\pm 4\%$ and a probability threshold of 95%. The sample was projected based on the age and gender ratio of the population and included people over 18 years of age. The distribution of the questionnaires by gender and age is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Sample structure by gender and age.

Gender	Male				Female	
	50%				50%	
Age	18–29 Years	30–39 Years	40–49 Years	50–59 Years	60–69 Years	Over 70 Years
	15%	18%	20%	16%	17%	13%

The questionnaire used for data collection was not standardized and its content was validated and pre-tested by experts in sociology. The pilot survey (pre-test) was carried out on a sample of 30 subjects, and based on the feedback received, the final version of the data collection tool was finalized in agreement with a representative of the city hall interested in specific issues to support a future administrative decision regarding the landscaping of Ineu's urban green spaces. The questionnaire included closed questions (multichoice and scale based), open questions, and factual questions. The introductory questions investigated the respondents' satisfaction with their daily life and their assessment of the green spaces in the city. The degree of satisfaction expressed by the respondents was measured on a five-point Likert scale, where 1 represents "very dissatisfied" and 5 represents "very satisfied" [48,49]. The main questions inquired the respondents with respect to the perceived quality of the green spaces, the chrono-spatial proximity of these spaces (time and distance to green space access), time, frequency, reasons to use these spaces, expected amenities, and projected intentions regarding possible extensions of green spaces in the city. Regarding the degree of satisfaction with the green spaces in Ineu, Cronbach's alpha was calculated to measure the internal consistency between items. The result, presented in the table below, shows a high internal consistency [50] with a value of 0.76 (Table 2).

Table 2. Reliability Statistics.

Cronbach's Alpha Value	N of Items	Internal Consistency
$\alpha = 0.76$	10	High

The concluding questions elicited the sociodemographic data of the respondents: gender, age, education, occupation, and place of residence. The list of questions is presented in Appendix A.

The data collection was conducted with the help of nine field operators who were trained on how to apply the questionnaire and on how to select the people participating in the study, ensuring the correspondence between the established methodological framework and the field work. The average time taken to complete the questionnaire was about 15 min. No financial incentives were used with the respondents and no information was collected that could lead to their identification. The questionnaire was applied door to door between November 1 and 15, 2022. The research flow is presented in Figure 2.

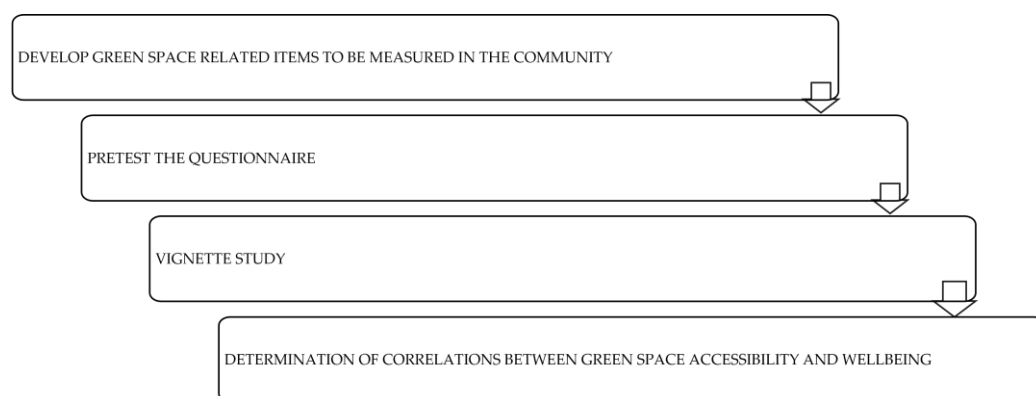


Figure 2. The approach adopted in the study.

To ensure the best possible representativeness of the sample, the selection of respondents was made from all districts of the city, based on the distribution of the population at the polling stations. Of the 600 questionnaires collected, 545 were validated, considering the observance of proportions in the total population, depending on criteria such as the district of residence and the distribution by age and gender. For the calibration of the sample, the official statistical data from the National Institute of Statistics were used [51]. Table 3 provides an overall image of the research data used for this study.

Table 3. Research data sheet.

Study Area	Geographic Scope	Data Collection Method	Sample	Representativeness Error	Confidence Level
9600 Adults	Ineu, Arad County, Romania	Semi-structured questionnaire applied door-to-door	600	4%	95%; $z = 1.96$; $p = 0.5$

Source: Authors.

The collected data were analyzed using IBM SPSS version 25 software. In the literature, there are studies that use questionnaires applied on site in the green spaces or distributed on such premises and studies that request respondents to send their opinions by mail [45]. The authors of this study preferred to use a door-to-door questioning to ensure the representativeness of the sample relative to the surveyed population.

4. Results

The results are presented in two groups. The first contains comments on the field data asking about the perceived accessibility of green spaces in Ineu. Further details are determined regarding the amenities available or expected in green spaces as well as the reasons for using green spaces and the time spent outdoors. The second group of results establishes correlations between green spaces and human well-being in the selected urban setting.

4.1. Accessibility, Features, and Uses of Green Spaces

A first objective pursued in the study was to identify the perception of the inhabitants about certain characteristics of the green spaces found in the city of Ineu, Arad County (their number, the degree of satisfaction with the existing green spaces in the vicinity, and the distance from them). As shown by the responses provided, approximately 72% of residents considered the green spaces in the city to be sufficient. A total of 76.9% said that they were satisfied or very satisfied (cumulative percentage) with the green spaces in the neighborhood where they live, while 21.7% were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with this aspect (cumulative percentages for the two answer variants). Satisfaction with the green spaces in the setting was measured using a five-point Likert scale (1—very dissatisfied,

2—somewhat dissatisfied, 3—neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, 4—somewhat satisfied, 5—very satisfied).

The study also captured the residents' perception of the distance to the nearest landscaped green space. Because this is a subjective interpretation of the distances, chrono-spatial parameters were used to elicit information. Respondents were required to estimate both the distance in meters and the average time necessary to reach the nearest landscaped green space.

Regarding the distance to be traveled to the closest landscaped green space, about 64% of the respondents estimated that the parks are less than 1 km walk away. More precisely, for 12.3% of them the distance was less than 100 m; for almost a quarter of the Ineu's inhabitants (23.5%), the nearest landscaped green space was located 100–500 m from the place of residence; and for 27.9% of them, the estimated distance ranged between 500 and 1000 m. There was also a share of those who estimated a distance greater than 1 km: 28.1% of respondents stated that they live this distance from the closest park or green space. These distances fall under those presented as acceptable in documents that describe the physical accessibility of green spaces to the population [14–16].

Compared to the distance in minutes that respondents need to reach the closest landscaped green space, as shown by the obtained data, almost a quarter of Ineu's citizens (26.6%) estimated that they take 5 min, and 22.2% estimated a time of 10 min. To these variants, the 20.7% of the respondents that estimated a necessary time of 20 min to reach the nearest landscaped green space were added. Almost a quarter of the respondents (24%) considered this distance to be of 30 min (24%), with the rest requiring more than half an hour for this trip, as seen in Figure 3.

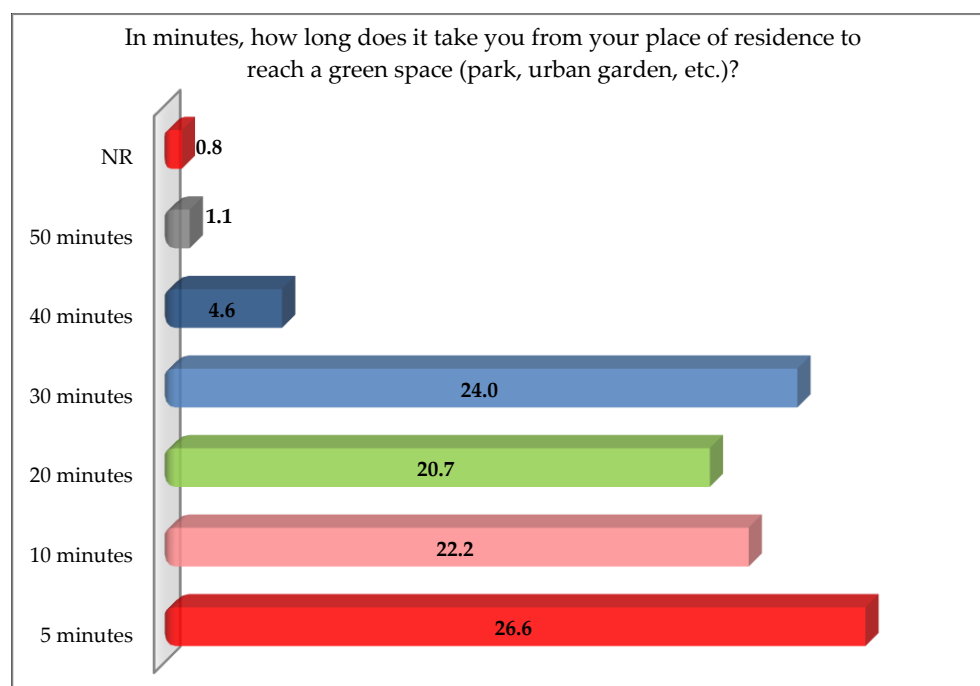


Figure 3. Estimated distance (in minutes) from the place of residence to the nearest landscaped green space.

The longer the time, the less likely that residents perceive it as a walking or pedestrian distance, as also emphasized by Morar et al. for Romanian cases [15]. In designing the study variables, the research team drew inspiration from studies concerning parks and other urban green spaces, the accessibility and features of such green spaces, the dwellers' perceptions and uses of the green spaces, and correlations between their overall satisfaction with life and the use of green spaces in the proximity of their place of residence.

In terms of frequency, most of the respondents (38.9%) state that they spend time only *occasionally* in green spaces in the city. The question mentioned the fact that only intentional visits are to be reported, excluding transit from/to home/school/workplace. This category is followed, in order of the recorded percentages, by those who visit these places *1 time per week* (18.5%), those who visit them *2–3 times/week* (16.3%), and those who visit them *1–3 times/month* (12.3%) as presented in Figure 4.

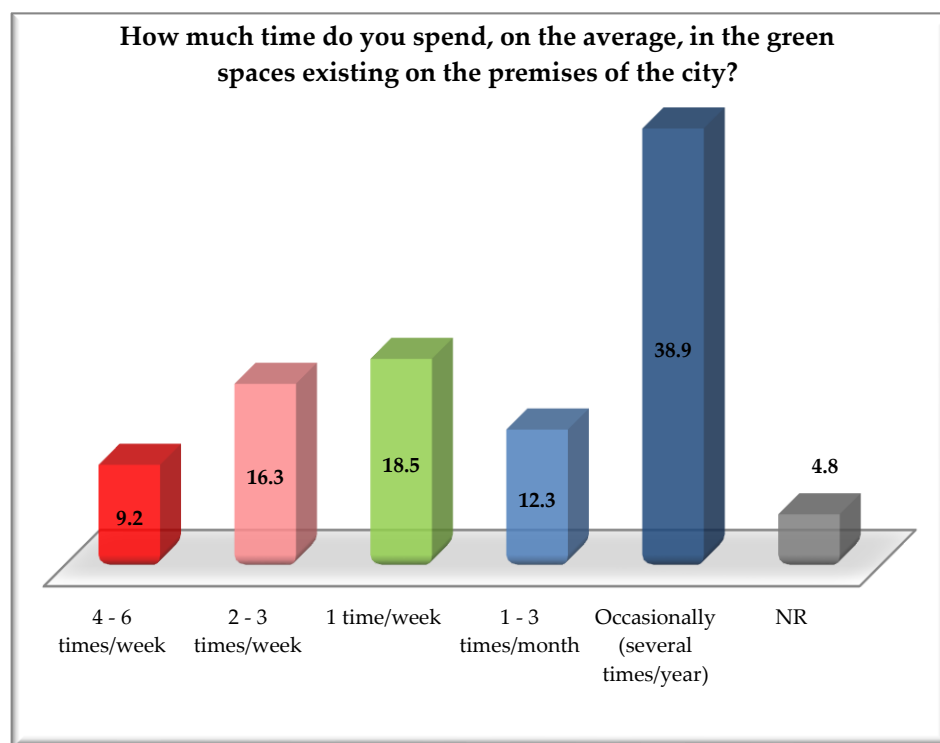


Figure 4. The frequency of spending leisure time in the green spaces of the city.

During the week, regarding the actual time spent in landscaped parks of the city (for relaxation, playground, and sports), most of them declared that they spend *on average less than an hour* (63.7%), with this category being followed by those who spend *1–2 h* (13.1%) and *2–3 h* (6.2%). Different percentages were recorded for the answer option of *in front of the house or in the courtyard of the block*, in which case most of the respondents stated that they spend *1–2 h* (30.1%) followed by those who chose the answer option for *more than 3 h* (27.7%) and those who declared that they spend *less than 1 h* (22.6%). Therefore, this seems to be the preferred option for spending leisure time, with spatial proximity likely being the main reason for the adoption of this behavior [6].

The main reasons why the respondents indicated that they spend their leisure time in the green spaces of the city are, in order of importance: *walking and relaxing* (25.8%), *for fresh air* (19.6%), and *socializing* (19.3%), followed at a greater distance by *movement and sports* (10.2%), *landscape gazing* (6.2%), and *pet walking* (5.5%) (Figure 5).

When spending free time in a park, most respondents do so together with friends or colleagues (33.8%) or with children or grandchildren (33.2%), whereas about 22.4% prefer to spend their free time alone.

The local administration was interested in measuring the level of satisfaction of residents with the existing amenities available in the green spaces, starting with benches, trash bins, and toilets, and including Wi-Fi connections. To capture these details, two questions were included in the questionnaire.

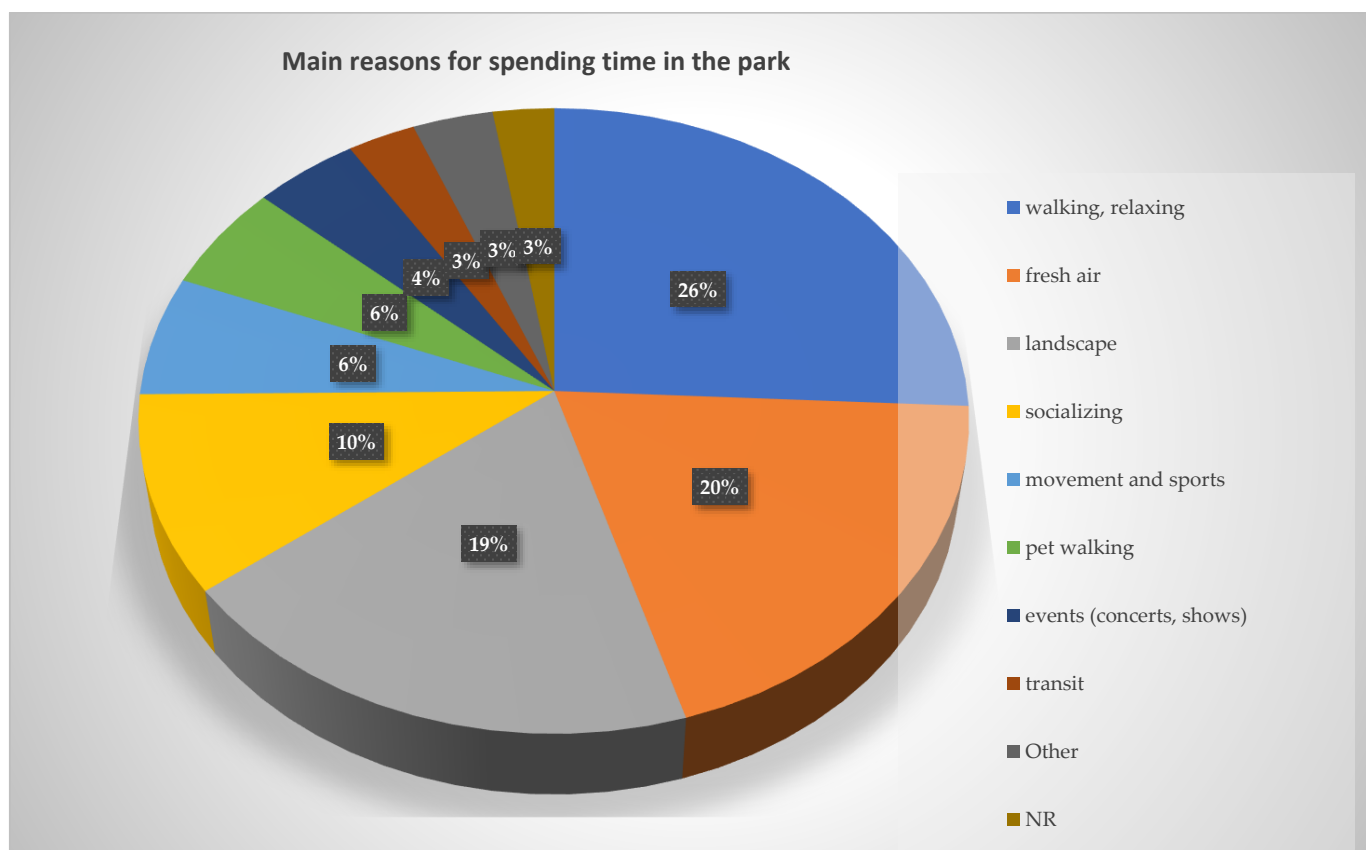


Figure 5. Preferred leisure activities.

The first question asked the respondents to express their degree of satisfaction with 10 aspects related to the arrangement and maintenance of green spaces in the city. A five-point Likert scale was also used for this purpose.

Most dissatisfaction (very dissatisfied and somewhat dissatisfied) was recorded with respect to the state of urban amenities (benches, gazebos, bicycle racks, fountains, trash bins, etc.), with 31.7% of obtained responses. In this case, the highest percentage was recorded for the category of those who said they were satisfied (8.3%). Similarly in the negative area, 18.9% of the respondents declared dissatisfaction with the maintenance of alleys and pavements in parks and public green spaces. The third source of dissatisfaction was related to the existing irrigation systems (18.2%) and the general cleanliness in parks and green spaces (18% of the responses).

The most positive responses (somewhat satisfied and very satisfied) were recorded with care for plants and flowers in parks, where 83.7% of the responses were accumulated. In this case, the highest percentage was recorded for the category of those who said they were very satisfied (22.9%). Fence maintenance also ranked highly (82.9%), followed at a small distance by satisfaction with the vegetation density in parks (82.8%). Finally, in this group of positive reactions, 81.1% of the respondents mentioned satisfaction regarding the height of existing trees and shrubs.

As can be seen, the satisfaction was directed toward the vegetation, whereas the dissatisfaction was more directed toward the amenities. To rank the ten aspects related to the quality and maintenance of green spaces in the city, the research team awarded five points for each *very satisfied* answer variant, four points for each *somewhat satisfied*, three points for each *neither satisfied nor dissatisfied* variant, two points for each *somewhat dissatisfied* version, and one point for each *very dissatisfied* answer. The results are presented in the table below (Table 4).

Table 4. The degree of satisfaction with the amenities in the green spaces.

Aesthetic Aspect	Index Values	Rank
Grooming plants and flowers in the parks	299.3	I
Vegetation density in parks	297.4	II
Height of existing trees and shrubs	293.6	III
Maintenance of the hedge (lawn) where appropriate	292.5	IV
Grooming and cleaning of trees in green spaces	292.5	V
Existing irrigation systems	286.8	VI
General cleanliness of parks and green spaces	286.6	VII
Maintenance of alleys and pavements in parks and public green spaces	285.5	VII
The state of urban furniture (benches, gazebos, bicycle racks, fountains, trash cans, etc.)	273.9	IX
Phyto-sanitary treatments for plants and flowers in green spaces	238.0	X

The second question asked the respondents to choose desired amenities for green spaces in the city from a list of 16 options. In addition, there also existed the possibility to name amenities other than those in the proposed list. The highest average values were obtained for toilets (47.6%), followed by benches (47%), lighting of green spaces at night (37.6%), trash cans (36.2%), video surveillance systems (29.7%), bicycle racks (27.3%), gazebos (26.8%), Wi-Fi access (23.7%), and playgrounds for children (21%). For the remaining response variants, the average values were below 20% for each proposed amenity.

After obtaining a snapshot of the citizens' perceptions of the green spaces in their neighborhood, the research team tested the attitudes and willingness of the local people to care for and maintain green spaces in the proximity of their residence. A large percentage of Ineu's residents (85.7%) showed to a large to very large extent of willingness to manage such spaces through their own resources if these spaces were to be replanted with vegetation (trees, grass, fruit trees, etc.), thus displaying a proactive attitude regarding their participation in the care of these green spaces. Only 9.9% of the inhabitants believed that it is not a problem that requires their personal involvement, even though these green spaces are in front of their home.

4.2. The Use and Satisfaction with Green Spaces Are Correlated with the Perceived Well-Being

The next step in the research design was to identify the correlations between green spaces and human well-being, thus pointing to the sustainability component of green spaces for urban living, a correlation present in various studies carried out in similar settings or in national and international comparisons [4,7,8,33]. For the present vignette study, after conducting the univariate analysis presented in the previous subsection, a bivariate secondary analysis of the data was performed to test the formulated hypotheses. The results for each hypothesis are discussed in what follows.

Our first Hypothesis 1 (H1) proposed that the shorter the distance to the nearest green space, the greater the overall satisfaction in the daily life of the inhabitants.

The results show that there is a negative correlation between the distance to the nearest green space and the overall level of satisfaction with daily life. Therefore, the shorter the distance to the nearest green space, the greater the level of satisfaction with daily life. Kendall's tau correlation coefficient (536) has a value of -60 . This correlation is statistically significant ($p < 0.001$), as seen in Table 5. It follows that greater satisfaction comes from being in the vicinity of the living space of a green space or a landscaped park, a result that resonates with the findings of research carried out in other countries as well [4,8,9,33].

Table 5. Values of correlation coefficients resulting from testing associations between variables.

Variables	General Satisfaction with Life	Distance in Meters to the Nearest Park from Home	Distance in Time to the Nearest Park from Home	How Often Do People Frequent Green Spaces	Time Spent in Green Spaces
General satisfaction with life	---	Kendall's $\tau_b = -0.604^{**}$ $p = 0.000$ $N = 536$	Spearman's $\rho = -0.493^{**}$ $p = 0.000$ $N = 536$		Spearman's $\rho = 0.655^{**}$ $p = 0.000$ $N = 536$
Distance in meters to the nearest park from home	Kendall's $\tau_b = -0.604^{**}$ $p = 0.000$ $N = 536$	---		Kendall's $\tau_b = -0.206^{**}$ $p = 0.000$ $N = 519$	Spearman's $\rho = -0.670^{**}$ $p = 0.000$ $N = 545$
Distance in time to the nearest park from home	Spearman's $\rho = -0.493^{**}$ $p = 0.000$ $N = 536$		---		
How often do people frequent green spaces		Kendall's $\tau_b = -0.206^{**}$ $p = 0.000$ $N = 519$		---	
Time spent in green spaces	Spearman's $\rho = 0.655^{**}$ $p = 0.000$ $N = 536$	Spearman's $\rho = -0.670^{**}$ $p = 0.000$ $N = 545$			---

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed test).

The same result is confirmed by the correlation between another indicator used in the study (the distance traveled in time to the nearest green space) and the overall level of satisfaction with daily life. In other words, the longer it takes to reach the closest green space in relation to the place of residence, the lower the satisfaction values, as observed in Table 5. When testing this association, the results showed a Spearman correlation coefficient of value $r(536) = -49$, which is again a moderate correlation, and in this case, it is a statistically significant correlation ($p < 0.001$).

The small differences in the power of the r coefficients resulting from the existing association between the distance in meters to the nearest park and the satisfaction in relation to life and between the distance required to be covered in minutes and the same indicator of satisfaction are generated by the fact that the travel time of a distance can be subjective and dependent on several factors.

In verifying the hypothesis correlating the distance to the nearest green space with the frequency of visiting green spaces and the physical time spent in them (H2), the correlational bivariate analysis of the data revealed that the proximity of the green spaces determines that the people who live in the area visit these spaces with a higher frequency, as presented in Table 5. The association is statistically significant but of low intensity. Thus, $r(519) = 0.20$, $p < 0.001$.

The shorter the distance to the nearest park, the more time a person spends in a green space, as per Table 5. In the context of this association, the statistical indices show great relevance: Spearman correlation coefficient $r(545) = -67$, $p < 0.001$. In this respect, Romanians do not differ from other Europeans, whose outdoor time in a park is correlated with distance from the home [16].

Table 5 presents the correlation between life satisfaction and responses to time spent outdoors in parks and existing green spaces in Ineu, proposed by the research Hypothesis 3 (H3).

From the association between the time spent in green spaces and the general satisfaction with daily life, we observe a statistically significant correlation, with a strong bond intensity of Spearman $r(536) = 0.655$, $p < 0.001$. In other words, the more time someone spends outdoors in a green space, the more satisfaction they express regarding their

daily life, a correlation highlighted by other researchers and also confirmed to be true for Romanians [16].

Numerous studies have presented associations between socio-demographic variables and respondents' satisfaction with green areas [9,31,52–54]. This literature inspired our Hypothesis 4 (H4), which was not validated by the findings. There were no significant relationships between education and the degree of satisfaction in relation to green spaces: χ^2 (N = 507) = 23.50, $p > 0.05$. The data show that there is no correlation between the age of the respondents and the expressed degree of satisfaction with the green spaces: χ^2 (N = 537) = 21.82, $p > 0.05$. Gender was not a significant indicator of satisfaction with green spaces: χ^2 (N = 530) = 2.32, $p > 0.05$. According to the occupation variable, small differences were encountered, but they were not statistically significant; χ^2 (N = 469) = 87.87, $p = 0.07$, $p > 0.05$. These differences were recorded in the case of pupils, students, and pensioners, who expressed slightly higher degrees of satisfaction with the green spaces compared to other occupational categories.

However, there is a significant relationship between the level of education and their need for green spaces: χ^2 (N = 505) = 49.58, $p < 0.01$. The structure of the sample based on the education variable had the following distribution: no schooling—1.4%, primary school—3%, secondary school—15.2%, high school—50.3%, post-secondary school—11.8%, higher education—18.3%.

5. Discussion

Urban green spaces are critical for the sustainability of the cities, and they correlate positively with the life satisfaction expressed by residents. The relationship between the availability of nearby accessible nature and well-being documented in research [26] was tested in the presented vignette study. In Ineu, which is a privileged small city in Romania with a relatively well-developed economy [43] and can afford to dedicate time, effort, and resources to taking care of and developing urban green spaces (parks, river banks, city gardens, and green spaces by the sidewalks), residents declared that they have a relatively high appreciation of these spaces, which fulfill important immaterial human needs, such as satisfaction and well-being. These results resonate with Chiesura's findings [45] concerning the reasons for visiting parks; for large cities, visitors seek to escape from the buzz of the city, whereas in small cities, such as Ineu, the same idea is expressed more simply as the need for walking and relaxing. The green spaces are physically accessible, with most respondents have some sort of green space in the proximity of their place of residence. The study has gathered all the existing parks, city gardens, and riverbanks under the generic description of "green space", excluding cemeteries, the gardens adjacent to residential homes, and the agricultural area owned by the city [46]. The results show that green spaces are positively connected with subjective well-being for Ineu's residents in the sense that respondents who are frequent visitors of urban parks express satisfaction with their daily lives, a correlation found in the series of articles reviewed by Jabbar [4]. Because physical access to green spaces is considered to be an essential determinant of environmental quality [15], which, in turn, should be one of the main concerns of public policy [15], (local) authorities need to monitor and develop such spaces in order to meet residents' increasing expectations regarding the features and amenities in urban green spaces [40]. Research posits that people who live near green spaces or keep in touch with green landscapes are comparatively more satisfied with their lives [4,16,31], and green spaces are more likely to be encountered in proximity to residences in small urban settings. However, the mere size of the city is not enough to be considered as a parameter in order to determine the physical use of the parks, as shown by Roemmich et al. [55]. Environmental targets should consider a larger range of parameters, as Badiu et al. [40] or Zhang et al. [28] presented. In terms of the residents' socio-demographic characteristics, the results point to the fact that age, gender, and occupation do not decisively influence the respondents' appreciation of the green spaces, unlike the findings of Zhao et al. [9], who consider age to be an important modeling

factor. However, such differences may also occur because of the difference in the size of the urban settings subjected to analysis.

In the case of Ineu, the results emphasize the fact that green policies are possible and would be welcomed by a population that uses and is satisfied with its relationship with nature due to the availability and accessibility of green spaces in the city. The expectations expressed by the respondents regarding the amenities to be found in parks are not sophisticated in comparison to the populations of large cities that have been studied in a similar manner [30,32], but improving the existing infrastructure should be part of the local authorities' concern. Another interesting issue is that a large percentage of Ineu's residents (85.7%) anticipate a willingness to contribute voluntarily to caring for and maintaining new proximal green spaces, should the local authority decide to replant spaces along roads and sidewalks with vegetation (trees, grass, fruit trees, etc.), a result also discussed by Zhao et al. [9].

6. Conclusions

The distance to the nearest green space can be an important factor in determining the accessibility and use of green spaces by residents of a community. Studies have shown that people are more likely to use green spaces if they are easily accessible and within walking distance of their homes [2–4]. Easy access to green spaces has been observed to have many benefits for individuals and communities, such as improving physical and mental health, increasing social interaction and sense of community, and reducing stress and anxiety [5–9,14,56]. Additionally, green spaces can offer a variety of environmental benefits, including conservation of biodiversity, local climate regulation, and improved air quality.

The data generated by this research can be used to study relevant aspects of urban habitability aspects such as walkability assessment, physical activity, green space use, and environment-related volunteering potential. The primary data collected through the door-to-door questionnaires applied in Ineu are consistent with the findings presented in the cited literature. This study contributes to a better understanding of how local people perceive green infrastructure in a small urban setting, which meets the WHO recommendation of 50 sqm/person and with relatively short distances from residences to green spaces (parks, parklets, landscaped riverbanks). Additionally, the characteristics considered as attractive or important suggest that, at least for the time being, the residents are appreciative of the amount and quality of the physical/natural elements but expect more from the public authorities in the maintenance and provision of additional amenities, though the expectations are not very sophisticated in this respect. The correlations between the use of green spaces and life satisfaction were tested by a secondary analysis of the data, which was conducted to capture whether there existed relationships between the studied variables (the connection between proximity and access to green spaces).

To benefit from green spaces, they should be close to the place of residence of the inhabitants. Although there are no precise regulations on the minimum distance required to green spaces, there are studies and recommendations that specify 300 m or five minutes of travel as benchmarks [1]. The findings of this study show that the need for more green spaces is manifested more by residents with higher levels of education than by those of other educational categories. This shows that time spent outdoors in green spaces, nature, etc., is moderately cultural, and the option of urban ecology is the prerogative of population categories that are aware of its importance for long-term health [6,9,27].

Green spaces in cities can offer several benefits to the health and well-being of residents, such as better air quality, opportunities for leisure and relaxation, opportunities to exercise and preserve biodiversity and reduce the effects of climate change. The data presented in this study can serve as a basis for local initiatives to further develop and expand green areas in the analyzed city, but also in other urban settings, as the benefits of green spaces are numerous [10]. The research team agrees with the opinions formulated by other scientists that “democratic and deliberative processes must be nurtured where socially shared values

and needs can be articulated and serve as reference criteria for sustainable development goals" [45,47], taking into account the fact that sustainable cities need to care for their green infrastructure in addition to other infrastructures relevant to modern life.

The results presented in this study can serve as a basis for mobilizing Ineu's residents to develop and voluntarily maintain new green spaces in the proximity of their places of residence. Additionally, investment in the nourishing and enhancement of new green spaces would be supported by the local population. As for the citizens, they can benchmark the status of Ineu as one of the privileged few Romanian cities to enjoy a "green" status, encouraging them to initiate and unfold local environment-related initiatives. This study also has merit in its contribution to the scientific literature on small cities, which is an utterly "under researched", but fascinating topic [21].

Detailed information about different quality dimensions and items relevant for urban green spaces will also allow urban planners and policymakers to better understand the features and characteristics of outdoor life in small urban areas. They will be able to use these findings to fine-tune the environment-related objectives and the target population's needs. Local authorities can focus on specific quality aspects of the green spaces on their territory, identify unique features of their city, expand, or limit their scope of intervention, along the presented methodology, rooted in the analysis of population's perceptions. However, to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the topic, readers should keep in mind that the presented results require a contextual framing. As Seaman and others stressed in their research [56], the level of social cohesion perceived within a community needs to be considered, as the lack of physical security in the parks may lead to the self-removal of individuals from community greenspace resources [56].

7. Limitations and Future Directions

The authors acknowledge a series of limitations concerning the presented study. While the results are interesting, the analyzed case should be treated as a pilot study and further analyses should be carried out in other small (green) cities of Romania to extract information that allow for the generalization of conclusions.

At the same time, while understanding that "one size does not fit all", comparative analyses with other cities in Romania or other countries might capture differences in citizens' satisfaction with the aspects related to the green spaces in the proximity of their homes. As the prior research has shown, the diverse setting of Romania's urban landscapes, in addition to the diversity of city typologies, demonstrates that a unique target is not realistic for all cities [40]. Therefore, more complex longitudinal analyses are required to capture the attitudinal changes of the citizens with relation to the green spaces near their homes. Last but not least, quantitative analyses such as the one presented in this study can benefit from additional data provided via qualitative methods, aimed at highlighting other aspects required to produce a complex and accurate "X-ray" of the attitudes and behaviors of the citizens regarding the subject under investigation.

Although the study showed that green spaces are an important part of urban life and determine the residents' well-being, future studies should seek to expand the corpus of analyzed communities and clarify the link between green spaces, human health, and well-being by considering additional moderating factors such as personal decisions for using green spaces and choosing to self-remove from social places, among which green spaces take on a prominent place [56]. The authors are also aware that the presented vignette study can be used as a pilot study for analyzing similar small cities located in the eastern European Union, in the plain, and which do not specialize in health and well-being. As studies show, biophysical preconditions are very different according to the location. Cultural and socio-political factors need to be considered when planning comparative research between cities even within the same state borders [20], yet alone larger areas or even continents.

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Appendix A

List of questions to determine residents' satisfaction with green spaces in Ineu, Arad County, Romania

1. How satisfied are you in general with your present life? 1—Very dissatisfied, 2—Somewhat dissatisfied, 3—Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, 4—Somewhat satisfied, 5—Very satisfied
2. Do you think there are enough green spaces in the city (Ineu)? 1. Yes 2. No 99. NR
3. What is the approximate distance (in meters) between your home and the nearest landscaped green space (park, urban garden, etc.) in your city of residence? 1. Less than 100 m 2. 100–500 m 3. 500–1.000 m 4. 1.000–2.000 m 5. Over 2.000 m 99. NR
4. (In minutes), what is the approximate time you need from your home to reach the nearest landscaped green space (park, urban garden, etc.) in your city of residence? (One option only) 1. 5 min 2. 10 min 3. 20 min 4. 30 min 5. 40 min 6. 50 min 7. 60 min 8. over an hour
5. How many times do you spend your time, on average, in a green space in the city where you live? (Not taking into consideration the situation in which you only transit the area on the way to your home/school/workplace.) (One option only)
6. How much time have you spent in the nearest green areas, on average per week, lately? 1. 4–6 times per week 2. 2–3 times per week 3. 1 time per week 4. 1–3 times per month 5. Occasionally (several times during a year) 99. NR
7. Please mention the main 3 reasons why you spent time in the most frequented park/green space. 1. walking, relaxing 2. fresh air 3. landscape gazing 4. socialization 5. exercising, sports 6. pet walking 7. playing chess/darts 8. events (concerts, shows) 9. terraces 10. Transit 99. NR
8. When going to a park, you usually go with/are accompanied by ... 1. Children, grandchildren 2. Parents 3. Grandparents 4. Friends, colleagues 5. I walk alone 6. Somebody else_____
9. To what extent are you satisfied with the green spaces in your neighborhood/area or residence? 1—Very dissatisfied, 2—Somewhat dissatisfied, 3—Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, 4—Somewhat satisfied, 5—Very satisfied
10. To what extent are you satisfied with the features of the green spaces in Ineu? (1—Very dissatisfied, 2—Somewhat dissatisfied, 3—Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, 4—Somewhat satisfied, 5—Very satisfied)
 1. General cleanliness of parks and green spaces
 2. How to do the grooming and cleaning of trees in green spaces
 3. Maintenance of the hedge (lawn where appropriate)
 4. Care of plants and flowers in parks
 5. Phyto-sanitary treatments for plants and flowers in green spaces
 6. Maintenance of alleys and pavements in parks and public green spaces
 7. Existing irrigation systems
 8. Vegetation density in parks
 9. Height of existing trees and shrubs

10. The state of urban furniture (benches, gazebos, bicycle racks, fountains, trash cans, etc.)
11. In case new landscaping works are to be carried out in the existing green spaces in Ineu, what facilities would you like to encounter?
 1. Playgrounds for children
 2. Benches
 3. Gazebos
 4. Sports field
 5. Ping-pong tables
 6. Fitness equipment
 7. Toilets
 8. Bike Racks
 9. Trash cans
 10. Fountains
 11. Artesian fountains
 12. Squares with lawn, flowers
 13. Wifi access
 14. Lighting of green spaces for access at night
 15. Other arrangements (e.g., decorative pots)
 16. Video surveillance systems
12. Please tell us what is most important to you: the richness of the vegetation of a green space, facilities, or both (Option to be signaled only if the respondent names both possibilities)
 1. the richness of the vegetation of a green space
 2. facilities
 3. both (option to be signalled only if the respondent names both possibilities)
13. To what extent do you feel safe upon crossing the parks of Ineu at night? 1. To a very small extent 2. To a small extent 3. Somewhat 4. To a large extent 5. To a very large extent 99. NR
How satisfied are you with the spaces between the road and the sidewalk in the city of Ineu?
1—Very dissatisfied, 2—Somewhat dissatisfied, 3—Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, 4—Somewhat satisfied, 5—Very satisfied
14. If, in Ineu, the authorities propose landscaping the area between the roads and the sidewalk, by adding vegetation (trees, fruit trees, grass, etc.), to what extent would you agree to take care of those spaces in front of your home (house, apartment building)? 1. To a very small extent 2. To a small extent 3. Somewhat 4. To a large extent 5. To a very large extent 99. NR
15. Do you think it would be appropriate to create a new green space/park/urban garden in Ineu? 1. Yes 2. No 99. NA
16. Socio-demographic data.

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