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Urban Aspirations and Sustainable Mobility Transitions: Proximity-Based Urban Imaginaries in Ibero-America

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic triggered an unprecedented collective reflection on everyday urban life, reshaping how citizens perceived proximity, mobility patterns, and the sustainability of everyday transport systems. This article examines whether these pandemic-induced reflections resonated with the core principles of the 15-Minute City, understood not as a policy blueprint but as an emergent social imaginary. Drawing on a large-scale comparative survey conducted during the strictest lockdown phase in April–May 2020 (n = 9575), the study analyses survey respondents' desires and expectations regarding post-pandemic urban change across nine Ibero-American countries: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru, Portugal, and Spain. Using one-way ANOVA and Tukey post hoc tests, the results reveal a strong and widely shared normative orientation toward greener, more walkable, and more localized urban environments, all of which are key dimensions of sustainable urban mobility transitions, including reduced car dependence and a greater reliance on active transport modes such as walking and cycling. However, these aspirations are consistently accompanied by significantly lower expectations of implementation, resulting in a pronounced desire–expectation gap across all countries. This gap displays clear geographical variation and appears closely associated with perceived governance capacity and institutional trust, with European countries showing greater alignment between aspiration and expectation than their Latin American counterparts. The findings suggest that, even in the absence of explicit policy discourse, respondents expressed aspirational urban imaginaries displaying affinities with principles commonly associated with the 15-Minute City framework. By empirically capturing these bottom-up imaginaries, the study contributes to debates on sustainable urban transport and mobility transitions by highlighting the social foundations and governance constraints of proximity-based planning across diverse institutional contexts.

Keywords: 15-Minute City; sustainable mobility; urban transport; walkability; accessibility; urban imaginaries; COVID-19; Ibero-America

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

The COVID-19 pandemic radically altered everyday life, transforming the ways in which people inhabit, perceive, and imagine cities. For several months in 2020, the experience of confinement and restricted mobility confronted citizens with unprecedented questions about the structure of urban life: How close should essential services be? How much space do we need to move safely? What constitutes a liveable neighbourhood in times of uncertainty? These questions were deeply intertwined with everyday mobility practices, exposing the extent to which urban systems depend on motorized, car-dependent transport systems and highlighting the importance of proximity-based and low-carbon mobility alternatives, particularly active modes such as walking and cycling. Beyond its immediate health consequences, the pandemic functioned as a large-scale shift in spatial awareness, revealing both the fragility and the adaptability of contemporary urban systems. It exposed the inequalities embedded in housing, mobility, and access to public space [1,2], and it revealed that the capacity to endure crisis was unevenly distributed across urban territories [3–5].

Urban scholars and policymakers rapidly mobilized to interpret these changes [6,7]. Commentators suggested that the pandemic might become a catalyst for rethinking the city, reviving long-standing debates on sustainability, resilience, equity, and the role of transport systems in shaping environmental impacts, accessibility, and social inclusion [8–10]. These debates also renewed attention to questions of urban governance, metropolitan planning, and sustainable mobility transitions [11–14]. Yet, the rapid proliferation of concepts—healthy city, resilient city, caring city, smart city, tactical urbanism—illustrated a certain fragmentation in post-pandemic urban thought [15]. Each framework captured part of the phenomenon, but few offered a comprehensive synthesis capable of bridging design, policy, and public perception. At the same time, the public experience of lockdown and the revalorization of local environments triggered a renewed appreciation for proximity, walkability, and neighbourhood life [16,17]. This renewed turn toward the local opened a conceptual space in which the principles of the 15-Minute City could gain cultural resonance, even before being formally adopted in policy discourse.

The idea of the 15-Minute City, proposed by Carlos Moreno, centres on reorganizing urban life so that essential functions—work, education, commerce, leisure, and health—can be accessed within a short walking or cycling distance. Though the model originated in European debates on sustainability, its underlying principles of accessibility, mixed use, and human scale have broader relevance across diverse urban contexts. During the pandemic, they gained new urgency as cities worldwide grappled with mobility restrictions and the need to ensure local resilience. The rapid diffusion of the 15-Minute City in policy, media, and academic circles reflects its rhetorical and conceptual power. However, most of the literature has focused on normative or design-oriented interpretations, leaving unexplored how ordinary citizens perceive, interpret, or desire proximity-based urban futures. In this sense, the 15-Minute City can be understood not only as a spatial planning model but also as a framework for reconfiguring urban mobility systems, prioritizing active transport modes, reducing car dependency, and promoting more sustainable, low-carbon, and equitable patterns of movement.

1.2. Research Gap

This gap between sustainable mobility policy discourse and respondents' perceptions of feasible transport transformations forms the empirical and theoretical motivation for the present study. While the 15-Minute City has become a central reference in post-pandemic planning, there is limited evidence on whether its principles resonate with respondents'

own urban imaginaries. Addressing this gap is essential for understanding the social foundations of urban change. Without social resonance and perceived institutional feasibility, even the most visionary urban paradigms may struggle to generate broad public legitimacy.

Despite the rapid expansion of research on the 15-Minute City after COVID-19, existing studies have focused predominantly on planning models, urban design, and policy implementation. Comparatively little attention has been paid to whether citizens themselves desired proximity-based urban futures during the pandemic or whether they considered such transformations feasible. This article addresses that gap by analysing urban aspirations and expectations across nine Ibero-American countries.

1.3. Research Objectives

This study examines whether urban aspirations that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic displayed affinities with the principles commonly associated with the 15-Minute City. Rather than assessing the real-world implementation of the 15-Minute City as an urban planning model, the article analyses citizens' perceptions during the strict lockdown period across nine Ibero-American countries.

Importantly, this study does not assume that respondents explicitly identified with, or were directly influenced by, the 15-Minute City model as a formal planning paradigm. Rather, the concept is used retrospectively as an interpretative framework for analysing whether respondents' aspirations and expectations during the pandemic displayed affinities with broader principles of proximity-based urbanism, including walkability, localization, accessibility, and reduced dependence on long-distance mobility systems.

More specifically, the study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1. To what extent did respondents' desires regarding post-pandemic urban change reflect principles associated with proximity-based urbanism?

RQ2. To what extent did respondents expect these transformations to occur in their respective countries?

RQ3. Do significant cross-national differences emerge between aspirations and expectations, and what do they reveal about perceived governance capacity and institutional trust?

1.4. Contributions of the Study

This study makes four main contributions to the literature on proximity-based urbanism and sustainable mobility transitions.

First, it provides large-scale empirical evidence on how respondents from nine Ibero-American countries imagined post-pandemic urban futures, identifying both common patterns and significant cross-national differences.

Second, it broadens the geographical scope of research on the 15-Minute City by incorporating Latin American perspectives, where urban transformation is strongly conditioned by socio-spatial inequality, informality, and uneven governance capacities.

Third, it proposes an analytical distinction between aspirational urban imaginaries (what respondents would like to happen) and perceived structural feasibility (what respondents believe will actually happen), offering a framework for interpreting the gap between desire and expectation.

Finally, it operationalizes urban imaginaries through measurable survey indicators, demonstrating how these symbolic constructs can be analysed empirically and related to debates on sustainable mobility, governance, and proximity-based planning.

Together, these contributions advance current debates on sustainable mobility transitions by incorporating the perspectives of citizens rather than focusing exclusively on planning and policy frameworks.

1.5. Structure of the Paper

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews the principal theoretical debates surrounding post-pandemic urbanism and the 15-Minute City. Section 3 presents the research design, survey, and analytical strategy. Section 4 reports the empirical findings. Section 5 discusses the results in relation to previous research, while the final section summarizes the main conclusions, limitations, and avenues for future research.

2. Rethinking the City After COVID-19: From Fragmented Paradigms to Proximity-Based Urbanism

Urban planning has historically evolved in response to moments of crisis. The cholera epidemics of the nineteenth century gave rise to sanitary reforms, while the 1918 influenza pandemic prompted major innovations in public infrastructure and urban hygiene [18]. Similarly, the COVID-19 pandemic functioned as a profound stress test for contemporary urban systems, exposing vulnerabilities in mobility, housing, and governance [19–21] and magnifying structural inequalities that made low-income and marginalized groups the most severely affected [22]. Beyond a public health emergency, the pandemic acted as a mirror reflecting the contradictions of modern urban life: overreliance on automobile-based mobility, functional segregation, and the erosion of community ties. In this context, urban mobility systems emerged as a central dimension of urban resilience and sustainability, as restrictions on movement exposed both the limitations of car-dependent models and the potential of more localized, low-carbon mobility patterns.

In this context, scholars and practitioners across disciplines mobilized diverse frameworks to reinterpret how cities might adapt to systemic uncertainty [23]. While many of these approaches share normative aspirations for healthier, more inclusive, and resilient cities, they differ in conceptual emphasis and scale of intervention [24]. Taken together, these paradigms point toward a broader shift in urban thinking, in which mobility, accessibility, and proximity become central to the transition toward more sustainable and equitable urban systems.

Table 1 summarizes the principal urban paradigms that gained renewed prominence during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although these approaches differ in their theoretical foundations and policy priorities, they converge around several common themes, including healthier urban environments, enhanced accessibility, greater resilience, active mobility, and more sustainable forms of urban development. Collectively, they provide the broader conceptual context from which the 15-Minute City emerged as one of the most influential integrative frameworks in post-pandemic urban planning.

Table 1. Main urban paradigms emerging after the COVID-19 pandemic and their relationship with proximity-based urbanism.

Urban Paradigm	Main Objective	Representative References	Relationship with the 15-Minute City
Healthy City	Improve public health through healthier urban environments, active mobility and environmental quality.	[25,26]	Shares the emphasis on walkability, accessible public spaces and healthier daily mobility.
Caring City	Prioritize social inclusion, care networks and equitable access to everyday services.	[27,28]	Supports proximity to essential services and neighbourhood-based daily life.
Resilient City	Increase cities' capacity to adapt to crises and future disruptions.	[29–31]	Reinforces local accessibility and diversified urban functions as mechanisms of resilience.
Smart City	Use digital technologies to improve urban management, accessibility and service provision.	[32–36]	Digital services complement—but do not replace—physical proximity and sustainable mobility.
Tactical Urbanism	Introduce rapid, low-cost interventions to improve public space and active mobility.	[37]	Demonstrates practical strategies for expanding walkability, cycling and neighbourhood accessibility.

Table 1. *Cont.*

Urban Paradigm	Main Objective	Representative References	Relationship with the 15-Minute City
Polycentric/Regional Approaches	Coordinate urban development across metropolitan and regional scales.	[38,39]	Extends proximity principles beyond individual neighbourhoods by integrating local accessibility with wider mobility systems.
The 15-Minute City	Integrate accessibility, mixed land use, proximity and sustainable mobility into a comprehensive urban model.	[40]	Integrates many of the objectives shared by previous paradigms into a coherent framework for proximity-based urban planning.

Source: Authors' elaboration based on the literature reviewed.

Despite their variety, these paradigms converge on several shared insights. They reject the functional separation that underpinned car-dependent urban models [41] and instead promote compact, mixed-use, and accessible environments. They also share a normative orientation toward sustainability, equity, and well-being, although this convergence remains largely theoretical. Some authors warn of the risk of "paranoid urbanism" [42], characterized by increased surveillance and spatial fragmentation under the guise of crisis management.

Despite these important contributions, the existing literature still lacks a widely accepted integrative framework capable of bringing together proximity, accessibility, and sustainability within a coherent approach to urban transformation. In this context, the 15-Minute City has emerged as one of the most influential attempts to provide such an integrative framework, offering a practical approach to reorganizing urban life around accessibility in time while supporting the transition toward more sustainable urban mobility systems.

The 15-Minute City: Principles and Critical Perspectives

The 15-Minute City, first conceptualized by Carlos Moreno in 2016 and subsequently popularized through Anne Hidalgo's urban policies in Paris, has become one of the most influential frameworks in contemporary urban planning [40]. At its core, it proposes that essential urban functions—work, education, commerce, healthcare, and leisure—should be accessible within a 15 min walk or bicycle ride from one's home, implying a profound reorganization of urban space, time, and everyday mobility patterns.

Building on four key principles—proximity, diversity, density, and digitalization—the model advances an integrated approach to urban sustainability. By prioritizing accessibility in time, it promotes reduced travel distances, encourages active transport modes, and supports a shift away from car-dependent mobility systems. In this sense, chrono-urbanism reframes accessibility as both a social right and a key dimension of urban equity, closely linked to quality of life and inclusive mobility.

The implementation of the 15-Minute City varies across contexts. Paris's "Ville du quart d'heure" is its most visible example, combining pedestrianization, tactical urbanism, and decentralized services. Similar approaches have been adopted elsewhere, including Melbourne's "20-min neighbourhoods" [43,44], Portland's "Complete Communities" [45], and Milan's "2020 Adaptation Plan" [46], all of which adapt the model to local conditions while addressing mobility, accessibility, and equity challenges. These experiences highlight both the flexibility and the context-dependence of proximity-based planning.

Despite its growing influence, the model faces several critiques. Scholars point to challenges in defining and measuring accessibility, as well as to the risk of "rhetorical inflation" in policy discourse [42,47–49]. Without redistributive mechanisms, proximity-based interventions may reinforce existing inequalities and contribute to processes of gentrification [50,51]. In this sense, improving local accessibility without addressing broader

structural disparities may risk transforming the 15-Minute City into a privileged urban condition rather than a universally accessible model.

These critiques have become increasingly connected to broader debates on spatial justice and the uneven socio-spatial consequences of sustainability-oriented urban interventions. Research on green gentrification has shown that investments in walkability, green infrastructure, and public space improvement may unintentionally contribute to rising property values, residential displacement, and the exclusion of vulnerable populations if not accompanied by redistributive housing and social policies [52–54]. From this perspective, the benefits of proximity-based urbanism are not automatically distributed equally across urban populations. Critical scholarship has therefore emphasized that accessibility, mobility, and environmental quality must be understood as questions of spatial justice rather than merely technical planning objectives [55,56]. In parallel, perspectives from the Global South have questioned the universal applicability of proximity-based planning models developed primarily in European contexts. Authors working on Southern urbanism argue that informality, fragmented infrastructures, socio-spatial inequality, and uneven state capacities fundamentally shape how accessibility and urban proximity are experienced in many Latin American cities [57,58]. These critiques do not necessarily reject the principles of the 15-Minute City, but they highlight the need for context-sensitive and socially inclusive approaches capable of addressing structural inequalities alongside sustainability goals.

Beyond its normative and planning dimensions, the growing relevance of the 15-Minute City also invites reflection on how urban futures are collectively imagined and socially constructed. In urban studies, imaginaries have often been understood as shared representations through which societies envision desirable forms of urban life and spatial organization. However, imaginaries are not merely symbolic or rhetorical constructions; they also shape perceptions regarding what forms of urban transformation are considered politically, institutionally, and materially feasible. From this perspective, urban imaginaries can be approached as analytical categories that mediate between normative aspirations and perceived structural constraints. The distinction between aspirational imaginaries and perceived structural feasibility becomes particularly relevant in post-pandemic contexts, where support for sustainable and proximity-based urbanism may coexist with scepticism regarding the capacity of institutions to implement such transformations.

Scale represents another key challenge. While the model focuses on neighbourhood-level accessibility, urban mobility operates across multiple scales. Research on polycentric and regional systems highlights the need to balance local proximity with metropolitan connectivity and labour mobility [59,60], calling for multi-scalar governance approaches that integrate neighbourhood accessibility with wider transport networks.

Contextual variability further complicates implementation. Urban form, density, and institutional capacity shape the feasibility of proximity-based planning, with significant differences between compact European cities, sprawling urban regions, and rapidly growing metropolitan areas [61]. In this regard, the pandemic also reignited debates around density. While often perceived as a risk factor, evidence suggests that infection patterns are more closely related to inequality, housing conditions, and governance capacity than to density itself [62]. Consequently, rather than rejecting density, current approaches emphasize adaptive, context-sensitive strategies that leverage its benefits while supporting more sustainable mobility systems.

Taken together, these debates suggest that the 15-Minute City should be understood not simply as a normative planning model, but as an analytical framework through which citizens' aspirations, expectations, and perceptions of urban transformation can be in-

terpreted. This conceptual perspective provides the foundation for the methodological approach adopted in the following section.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design and Objectives

This study adopts a quantitative, exploratory, descriptive, non-representative, and cross-national comparative design aimed at analysing how respondents in nine Ibero-American countries envisioned the post-pandemic city. Specifically, the study sought to answer two main questions:

- To what extent did respondents' desires and expectations during the COVID-19 pandemic reflect principles associated with proximity-based urbanism?
- Are there cross-national differences in these imaginaries, and what do they reveal about regional urban governance and public trust?

To address these aims, a large-scale online survey was conducted during the strictest phase of lockdowns (April–May 2020). The study therefore captures perceptions situated within a specific historical moment rather than longitudinal urban change processes. The questionnaire was distributed simultaneously in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru, Portugal, and Spain, enabling a comparative perspective across both European and Latin American contexts.

3.2. Data Collection and Sampling Strategy

Data were gathered using a snowball sampling technique, common in exploratory cross-national research under mobility restrictions. Academic and professional networks circulated the questionnaire through digital channels (email, WhatsApp, and social media). Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Participants completed a self-administered online questionnaire covering aspects of daily life such as housing conditions, consumption habits, access to essential services, neighbourhood interactions, employment situations, and engagement with public spaces.

This approach was selected because data collection took place during the strict COVID-19 lockdown period, when face-to-face recruitment and probability-based sampling were not feasible. Online snowball sampling through digital networks became a widely adopted strategy in COVID-19 research to rapidly recruit participants across geographically dispersed populations under severe mobility restrictions (e.g., [63–65]). Although this approach does not generate nationally representative samples, it has been extensively used in exploratory cross-national studies conducted during the pandemic.

A total of 9575 valid responses were obtained after cleaning and excluding under-represented age groups (<20 years and >65 years). Each country contributed approximately 1000 respondents, as summarized in Table 2:

The study was not designed to generate statistically proportional national samples but rather to enable comparative exploratory analysis across diverse Ibero-American urban contexts during a shared historical moment. Accordingly, similar sample sizes were prioritized across countries in order to facilitate cross-national comparison, even though participating countries differ substantially in population size, urban structure, governance capacity, pandemic management strategies, and levels of socioeconomic inequality. Rather than controlling for all contextual differences, the analytical objective was to examine whether broad attitudinal patterns regarding proximity-based urban futures emerged across heterogeneous urban settings under conditions of simultaneous crisis.

Table 2. Sample size by country.

Country	*n* (Approx.)	% of Sample
Argentina	1045	10.9
Brazil	1061	11.1
Chile	1034	10.8
Colombia	1070	11.2
Ecuador	1022	10.7
Mexico	1071	11.2
Peru	1069	11.2
Portugal	1067	11.1
Spain	1136	11.9
Total	9575	100

Note: Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.

While the sample is not statistically representative of national populations, it nevertheless provides substantial comparative insight given its size and geographic scope. The demographic profile revealed a predominance of respondents aged 20–65 years, with high educational attainment (96% completed secondary or higher education) and a relatively balanced gender distribution (52% women and 48% men). This reflects a common limitation of online self-selected samples, which tend to overrepresent middle-class and digitally connected participants—an acknowledged limitation discussed further below.

3.3. Questionnaire Structure and Thematic Dimensions

The online questionnaire consisted of nominal and Likert-type items (1 = "strongly disagree" to 5 = "strongly agree"). It explored daily life and perceptions of urban transformation through five thematic areas, including general urban transformation, green space provision, mobility and access restrictions, walkability and local accessibility, and control and surveillance.

Respondents evaluated each statement in two ways: first, according to their desire—how they would like the city to be after the pandemic—and second, according to their expectation—how they believe the city will actually develop. This dual structure enabled the measurement of gaps between normative aspirations and perceived feasibility.

Conceptually, this distinction reflects two complementary dimensions of urban imaginaries. On the one hand, "desire" items capture what may be described as aspirational imaginaries: normative preferences regarding how urban life should be organized after the pandemic. On the other hand, "expectation" items capture perceived structural feasibility, referring to respondents' beliefs about the institutional, economic, and territorial conditions that enable or constrain urban transformation. This analytical distinction makes it possible to examine not only the content of urban aspirations but also the perceived capacity of different societies to materialize them.

Thus, participants were asked to express their level of agreement with several statements concerning the post-pandemic city. These questions aimed to gauge their desires for urban changes and expectations for their realization. The specific statements included:

- "I would like the city to be to how it was before."
- "I believe the city will be to how it was before."
- "I would like more mobility restrictions over citizens."
- "I believe that mobility restrictions over citizens will increase."
- "I would like the city to have more green spaces."

- "I believe the city will become greener."
- "I would like a more pedestrian-friendly and localized urban environment."
- "I believe the city will become more pedestrian-friendly and localized."
- "I would like greater regulation of citizen activities."
- "I believe that there will be an increase in citizen control measures."

The questions examined several central dimensions of post-pandemic urban life, including the desire for a return to pre-pandemic urban conditions, attitudes toward mobility and access restrictions, expectations regarding urban greening, and perceptions of emerging walkable and increasingly localized environments. This structure allowed the questionnaire to capture both the aspirational and anticipatory orientations shaping respondents' views of future urban transformations. These thematic areas were interpreted as displaying varying degrees of correspondence with broader principles associated with proximity-based urbanism, rather than as direct operationalizations of the 15-Minute City concept. These include: proximity, understood as the ability to access essential services within walking distance; diversity, referring to mixed functions and balanced land use; density, associated with human-scale compactness that enhances accessibility; and governance and digitalization, encompassing the regulation, trust, and management of public life.

By linking these dimensions, the study operationalizes the 15-Minute City concept not as a fixed spatial plan but as a set of social imaginaries measurable through public attitudes. The approach thus connects theoretical discourse with empirical evidence derived from survey respondents' perceptions and expectations.

Figure 1 presents an overview of the overall methodological framework, providing a visual summary of the relationship between the survey design, the analytical dimensions of the 15-Minute City, and the statistical procedures employed throughout the study. To make this analytical correspondence explicit, Table 3 summarizes how each survey item relates to the conceptual dimensions of the 15-Minute City framework adopted in this study.

Table 3. Conceptual correspondence between survey items and the analytical framework adopted in this study.

Survey Item	Related Analytical Dimension of the 15-Minute City	Nature of Correspondence
Return to the pre-pandemic city	Orientation toward urban transformation	Contextual
Mobility restrictions	Governance and regulation of urban mobility	Indirect
More green spaces	Environmental quality and liveability	Indirect
More pedestrian-friendly and localized urban environment	Proximity, accessibility and walkability	Direct
Greater regulation of citizen activities	Governance and institutional capacity	Indirect
Desire vs. expectation	Aspirational imaginaries vs. perceived structural feasibility	Analytical dimension

3.4. Analytical Procedure

Data processing and statistical analysis were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, Version 26.0 (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA). The workflow comprised five main steps, which can be summarized as a conceptual flowchart:

1. Data preparation and cleaning—removal of incomplete cases and out-of-range responses.
2. Descriptive statistics—computation of means and standard deviations for each variable by country.

3. Inferential analysis—one-way ANOVA tests were used to examine differences between countries ($p < 0.001$), followed by Tukey's HSD post hoc comparisons.
4. Gap analysis—calculation of mean differences (Δ) between "desire" and "expectation" scores in order to quantify the magnitude of the aspiration–expectation gap across countries.

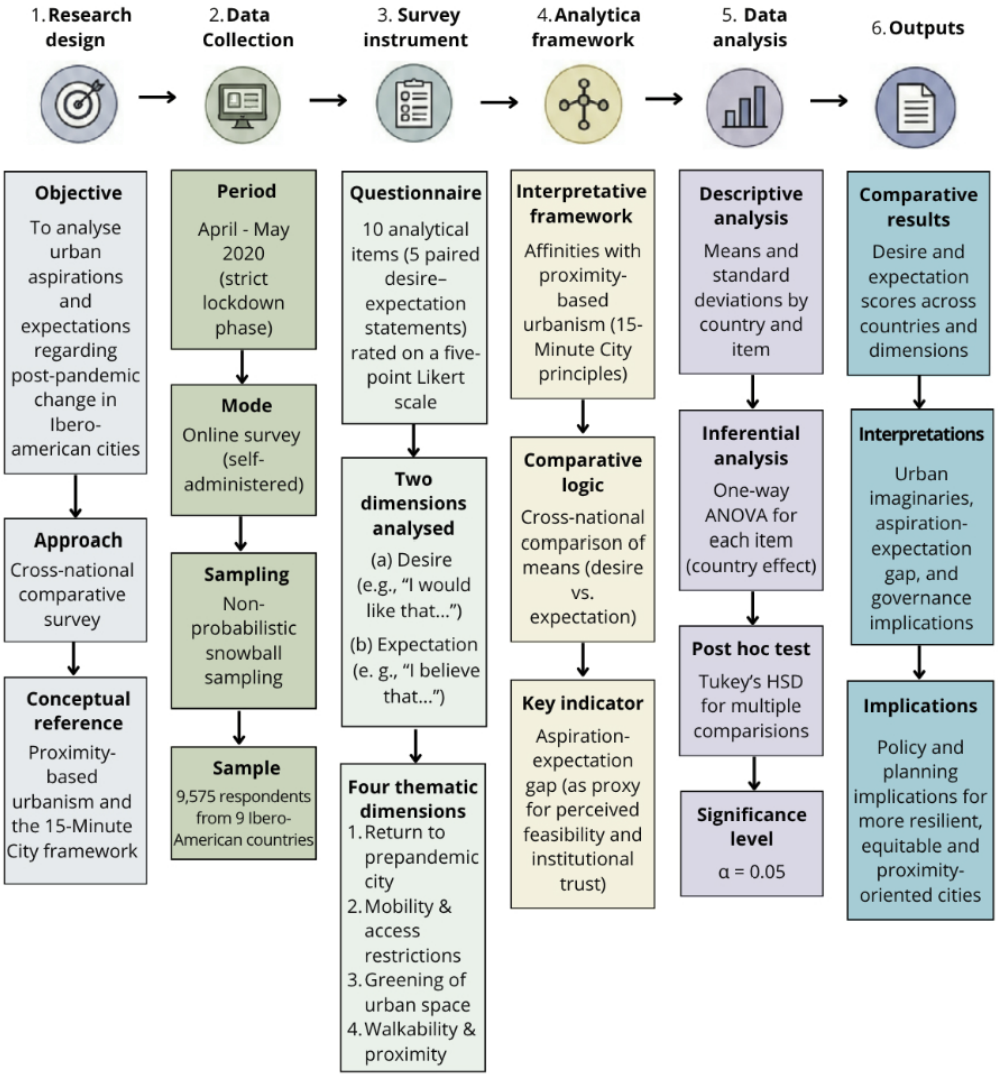


Figure 1. Methodological framework of the study. Source: Authors' elaboration.

This stepwise structure ensures transparency and replicability, allowing other researchers to reproduce the analysis with similar cross-national data.

Given the large and relatively balanced sample sizes across countries (approximately 1000 respondents per country), one-way ANOVA was considered an appropriate analytical technique and is generally regarded as robust to moderate departures from normality when applied to Likert-scale data in large samples. Nevertheless, the findings should be interpreted with appropriate caution given the ordinal nature of Likert-scale responses [66].

With respect to issues of validity and limitations, this section outlines the measures undertaken to strengthen the study's robustness and the constraints that must be acknowledged. To strengthen validity and reliability, the design of the questions adhered to established best practices in attitudinal research, with careful attention to ensuring semantic equivalence between the Spanish and Portuguese versions. In addition, cross-national consistency was examined by comparing response distributions across countries, and no extreme outliers were detected.

Despite these efforts, several important limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study relies on a non-probabilistic snowball sampling strategy conducted through online distribution channels during the strictest phase of the COVID-19 lockdowns. As a result, the sample overrepresents individuals with higher educational attainment, stable internet access, and greater levels of digital connectivity, while potentially underrepresenting more vulnerable or digitally excluded populations. Consequently, the findings should not be interpreted as statistically representative of national populations.

Second, the study does not aim to establish causal relationships between sociodemographic characteristics and urban perceptions. Variables such as age, gender, income level, educational background, or occupational status may significantly shape attitudes toward mobility, accessibility, and urban transformation. Although these dimensions were partially captured descriptively, the absence of multivariate modelling limits the capacity to isolate the independent effects of these factors on respondents' attitudes.

Future research based on representative samples should further examine how age, gender, educational attainment, income, and occupational status influence respondents' aspirations and expectations regarding proximity-based urban transformation across different national contexts.

Moreover, the analysis was conducted at the national level and does not differentiate systematically between specific metropolitan areas, city sizes, or intra-urban conditions. Given the significant territorial heterogeneity that characterizes Ibero-American urban systems, important variations related to metropolitan governance structures, urban density, mobility infrastructures, and socio-spatial segregation may remain obscured within national aggregates. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted as broad comparative tendencies rather than as precise representations of specific urban or metropolitan contexts.

Furthermore, the study does not incorporate objective urban mobility or metropolitan indicators—such as modal split, commuting times, transport accessibility, or spatial density measures—which could have allowed for a more systematic comparison between respondents' perceptions and the material conditions of different urban systems. Consequently, the article should not be interpreted as an evaluation of the actual degree of transition toward proximity-based urbanism across Latin American cities, but rather as an exploratory analysis of urban imaginaries emerging during the pandemic context.

Third, the research captures perceptions during a highly exceptional historical moment marked by uncertainty, mobility restrictions, and intensified public debate regarding urban life. The findings therefore reflect temporally situated perceptions rather than stable or long-term urban attitudes.

Nevertheless, despite these limitations, the study provides valuable comparative insight into the emergence of shared urban imaginaries during a transnational crisis context. Rather than seeking statistical representativeness, the objective is exploratory and analytical: to identify broad attitudinal patterns, aspiration–expectation gaps, and cross-national differences regarding proximity-based urban futures across Ibero-American contexts. In this sense, the large sample size, cross-national scope, and internal consistency of the responses offer a robust basis for comparative interpretation, while also opening avenues for future research using representative and longitudinal methodologies.

4. Results

The results are presented according to the four thematic dimensions examined in the methodology section, each of which relates to key components of sustainable urban mobility: the desire for a return to pre-pandemic urban conditions, mobility and access restrictions, greening of urban space, and the emergence of more walkable and proximity-based urban environments. For each pair of statements, both desire ("I would like. . .")

and expectation ("I believe. . .") were analysed comparatively using one-way ANOVA and Tukey post hoc tests. The findings reveal statistically significant cross-national differences across all dimensions ($p < 0.001$), alongside a consistent regional pattern that reflects shared normative aspirations despite contextual variation.

4.1. Desire for a Return to Pre-Pandemic Urban Conditions

The first item, "I would like the city to return to how it was before" (personal desire), focused on participants' yearning to restore urban conditions to their pre-pandemic state. ANOVA results revealed a significant difference between countries ($F(8, 9597) = 32.024$, $p < 0.001$), indicating considerable variation in preferences for urban restoration (Figure 2). Participants from Spain (2.98) and Portugal (2.94) expressed a stronger desire for cities to return to the pre-pandemic urban model.

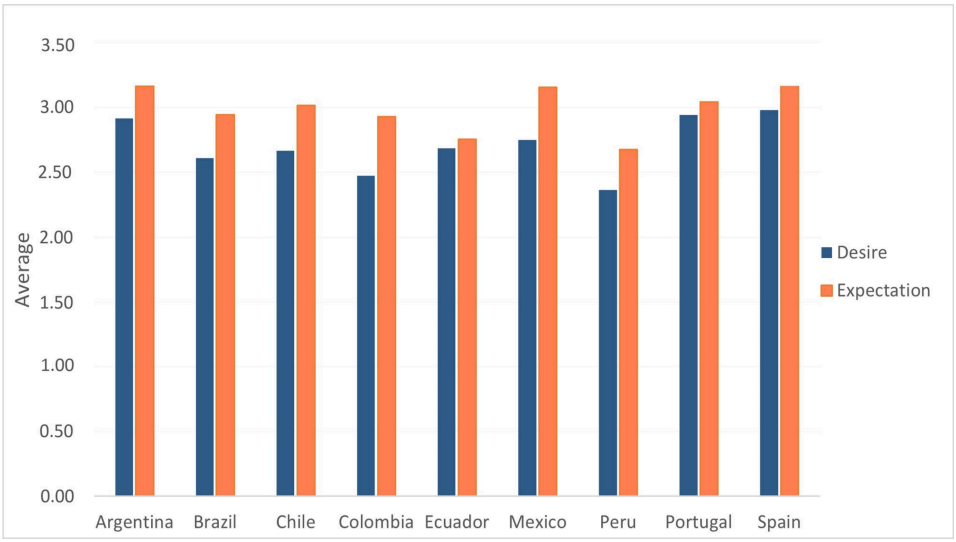


Figure 2. Mean desire and expectation scores for the statement: "The city will be as it was before".

Conversely, participants from Peru (2.36) and Colombia (2.48) showed significantly lower desires to return to pre-pandemic urban forms, suggesting a greater openness to structural transformations and a willingness to embrace changes in the urban model rather than revert to the past. The general tendency in Latin American countries points to a more critical stance toward pre-pandemic urban systems and a willingness to consider alternative structural changes.

Expectations, however, showed a slightly different configuration. The item "I believe the city will be to how it was before" (expectation), revealed a significant difference in responses between countries ($F(8, 9603) = 26.779$, $p < 0.001$). This analysis confirms that, in all the countries, expectations for a full return to the pre-pandemic urban state are higher than levels of desire. Countries such as Peru (2.68) and Ecuador (2.76) exhibited the lowest expectations. In contrast, Spain (3.19), and Argentina (3.17) maintained higher expectations. This could suggest that respondents in these countries hold a stronger belief in the possibility of urban restoration, likely due to greater pre-pandemic satisfaction with their cities. However, in the case of countries with a low level of desire but high expectations of returning to the pre-pandemic phase, such as Mexico, this pattern may suggest a degree of resignation among respondents in certain contexts. That is, respondents may not necessarily wish for a restoration of previous conditions but still anticipate that institutional inertia will lead to it. Tukey's post hoc analysis confirmed four distinct national clusters, suggesting important cross-national differences in perceived feasibility regarding post-pandemic urban transformation.

Tukey's HSD post hoc test for the statement "I would like the city to return to how it was before" reveals four statistically distinguishable subsets ($\alpha = 0.05$), indicating notable cross-national variation in levels of desire. Peru and Colombia occupy the lowest subsets, with mean scores of 2.36 and 2.48, respectively, reflecting the weakest desire to revert to pre-pandemic urban conditions. Brazil and Chile form an intermediate group, while Mexico, Argentina, Portugal, and Spain cluster in the highest subset, with Spain showing the highest mean (2.98).

For the belief statement "I believe the city will return to how it was before," the post hoc test also reveals four statistical subsets, though with slightly higher overall means. Peru and Ecuador again fall into the lowest subset (means = 2.68 and 2.76), indicating low levels of confidence in a full urban reversion. Countries such as Colombia, Brazil, and Chile populate the intermediate group, while Mexico, Argentina, and Spain form the highest subset, with Spain again reporting the highest belief score (3.18).

The pattern suggests that, while the desire to return may vary, expectations are also stratified geographically (Figure 3). Respondents from Europe and parts of the Southern Cone are more likely to believe that urban life will revert, whereas Andean countries exhibit more scepticism.

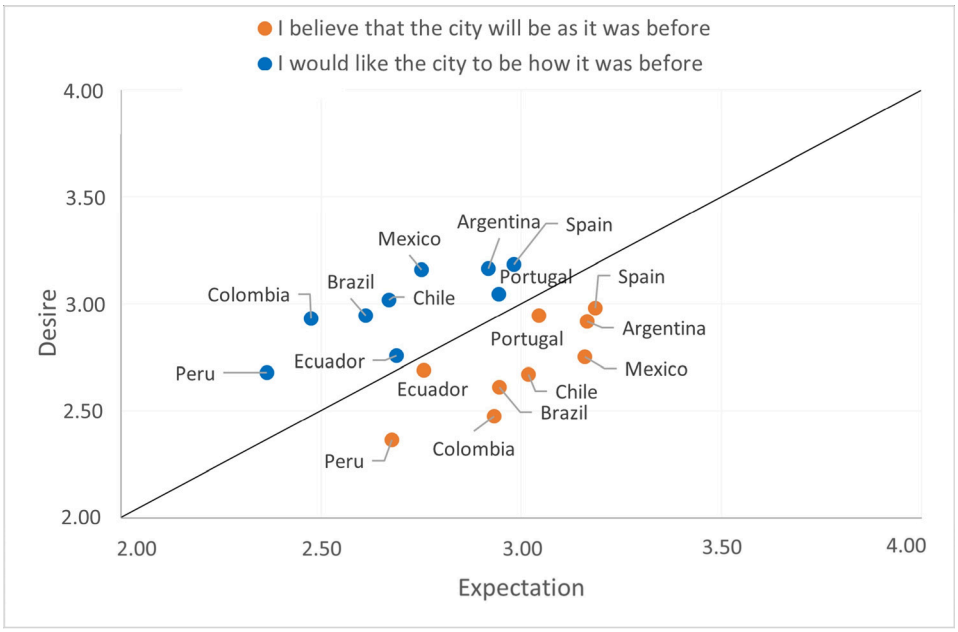


Figure 3. Dispersion of desire and expectation regarding the statement: "The city will be as it was before".

In general terms, the results show a general misalignment between desire and expectation in many countries. Notably, Peru consistently ranks lowest in both desire and belief, while Spain ranks highest in both, suggesting a close alignment between aspiration and perceived likelihood. Observing the gap between desire and expectation, Ecuador ($\Delta = 0.07$), Portugal ($\Delta = 0.10$), and Spain ($\Delta = 0.20$) exhibit the smallest gaps, indicating relatively high consistency between what individuals wish for and what they believe will occur. In contrast, Colombia ($\Delta = 0.46$) and Mexico ($\Delta = 0.41$) show the largest discrepancies, suggesting a more pronounced sense of disillusionment or scepticism regarding the realization of their urban preferences. These variations may reflect differences in institutional trust, broader societal attitudes toward urban resilience, or desired directions for post-pandemic transformation.

4.2. Mobility and Access Restrictions

The second set of items examined perceptions of post-pandemic mobility and regulatory control, directly addressing respondents' attitudes toward the governance and transformation of urban transport systems. Here, the question pair "I would like more mobility restrictions over citizens" and "I believe that mobility restrictions over citizens will increase" assessed both normative acceptance and perceived likelihood of enhanced regulation, particularly in relation to the regulation of mobility patterns and the potential shift toward more controlled and sustainable transport systems. The analysis again found strong cross-country differences ($F(8, 9566) = 49.98$, $p < 0.001$ for desire; $F(8, 9566) = 48.76$, $p < 0.001$ for expectation) confirming that post-pandemic expectations regarding urban mobility and spatial regulation vary significantly across Ibero-American countries (Figure 4).

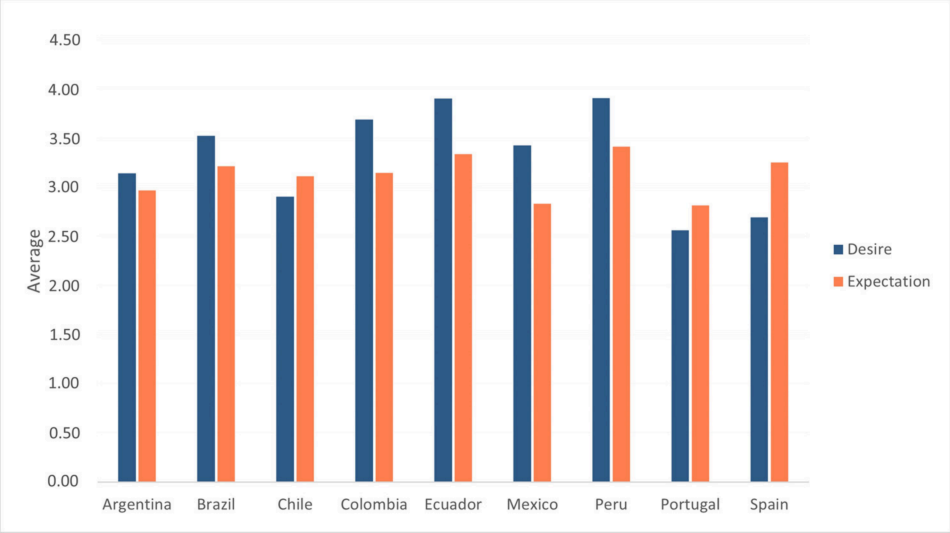


Figure 4. Mean desire and expectation scores regarding mobility restrictions.

Respondents from Peru ($M = 3.90$) and Ecuador ($M = 3.90$) showed the highest support for increased mobility control, possibly interpreting regulation as a necessary tool for managing future crises or improving urban order. By contrast, Portugal ($M = 2.56$) and Spain ($M = 2.69$) expressed minimal support, suggesting that residents in these countries value mobility freedom and associate restriction with social or economic disruption. The scatter plot (Figure 5) provides more conclusive visual evidence of this correlation.

Further statistical analysis ($F(8, 9566) = 48.76$, $p < 0.001$) confirmed significant variations in expectations of mobility regulation. Peru (3.41) and Ecuador (3.33) expressed the highest levels of expectation regarding mobility restrictions, while Portugal (2.82) and Mexico (2.83) displayed notably lower scores. These findings point to perceptions that COVID-19 may trigger long-term spatial controls.

Post hoc tests confirmed this regional divide, with Latin American nations—particularly in the Andean region—clustered in the high-desire subset and European cases in the low-desire subset. Thus, Portugal and Spain form the lowest subset (means = 2.56 and 2.69), reflecting the weakest endorsement of such measures. Chile and Argentina occupy intermediate positions, while Mexico, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru are positioned in progressively higher subsets. Peru and Ecuador exhibit the highest mean scores (both ≈ 3.90), suggesting a relatively strong support for more restrictive mobility policies.

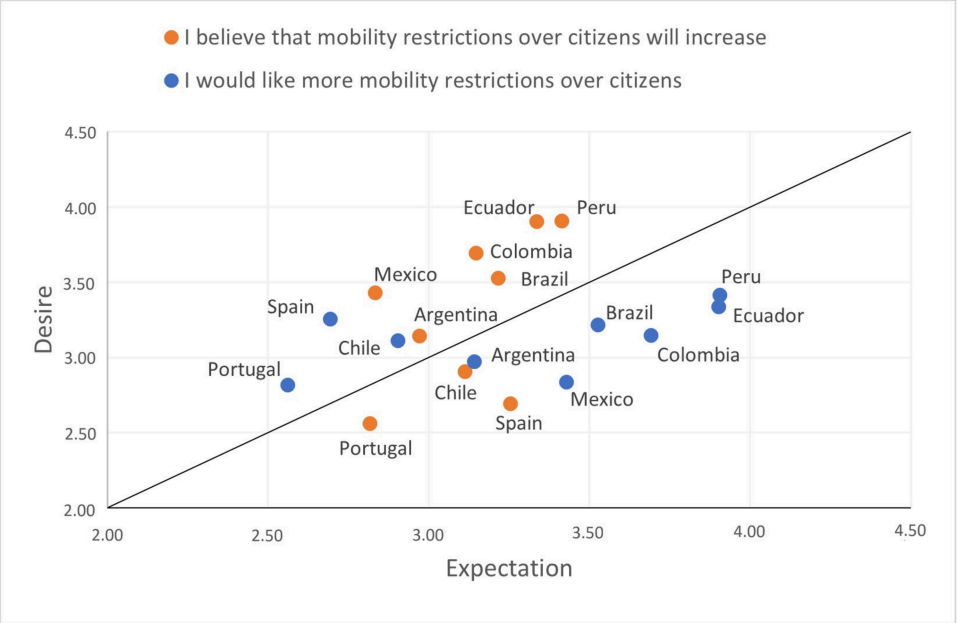


Figure 5. Relationship between desire and expectation regarding mobility restrictions.

With respect to expectations of change, the observed gradient indicates that respondents from Latin America—again, with particular relevance in the Andean region—display greater receptiveness to enhanced mobility controls, potentially reflecting perceptions of their necessity in crisis governance. In contrast, the belief that mobility restrictions will increase shows a similarly tiered structure, though with more moderate differences. Portugal and Mexico belong to the lowest subset (mean ≈ 2.82–2.83), while Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Brazil, and Spain form intermediary groups. As with desire, Ecuador and Peru register the highest mean scores (≈3.33 and 3.41, respectively), indicating a widespread expectation of more stringent controls in these contexts.

Overall, while the ranking broadly aligns with desire-based responses, belief scores are generally lower, and the statistical separation between groups is less pronounced, suggesting that, although many support stricter mobility measures, they are less confident these will materialize. This observation underscores the complex relationship between post-pandemic urban mobility expectations and the perceived role of government in shaping these changes.

A cross-reading of both post hoc tests reveals a consistent pattern: Andean countries (notably Peru and Ecuador) show both high desire and high expectation regarding future mobility restrictions, whereas European countries (Portugal and Spain) express lower desire and relatively moderate expectations. The wide divergence between desire and belief in some cases—as in México ($\Delta = 0.59$), prioritizing desire, or Spain ($\Delta = 0.56$), with stronger alignment to expectation—may point to a tension between normative preferences and perceived political realities. That is, while many respondents accepted the necessity of stronger regulation, they remained uncertain about the extent to which it would actually persist. Taken together, these findings suggest that attitudes toward mobility and control during the pandemic were shaped not only by national public health policies but also by pre-existing political cultures and levels of institutional trust.

4.3. Desire for Greener Urban Environments

The third dimension examined public aspirations for green space expansion, a key factor influencing the environmental sustainability of urban mobility systems and the quality of active transport environments. The statement "I would like the city to have

more green spaces" generated near-universal agreement, with overall means exceeding 4.4 across countries. Nevertheless, significant cross-national variation was observed ($F(8, 9597) = 41.587$, $p < 0.001$) (Figure 6). Respondents from Mexico ($M = 4.69$) and Peru ($M = 4.68$) recorded the highest desire for greener cities. In contrast, Argentina ($M = 4.33$), Portugal ($M = 4.43$), and Spain ($M = 4.50$) ranked slightly lower, though still within the "agreement" range. These results might indicate that Latin American respondents, particularly in contexts of rapid urbanization and environmental degradation, express a stronger collective yearning for ecological transformation.

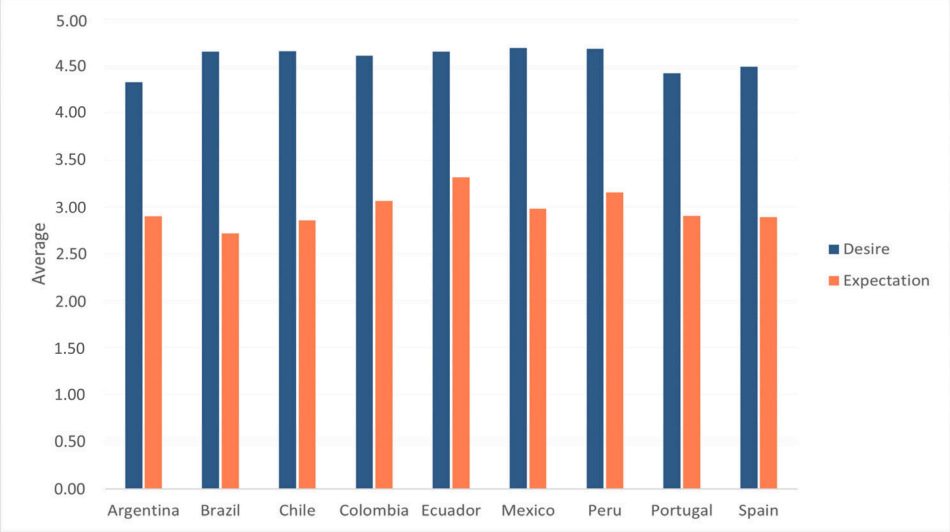


Figure 6. Mean desire and expectation scores for the statement: "The city will be greener".

The ANOVA results regarding expectations about whether these changes would occur were lower and more dispersed compared to those observed for the 'desire' variable ($F(8, 9597) = 31.519$, $p < 0.001$). Ecuador ($M = 3.31$) and Peru ($M = 3.16$) again stood out for their relative optimism, while Brazil ($M = 2.71$) and Chile ($M = 2.86$) were markedly sceptical.

Tukey's HSD post hoc test ($\alpha = 0.05$) reveals statistically significant differences in the intensity of desire for greener cities across the surveyed countries, forming three clearly differentiated subsets. Argentina stands alone in the lowest subset ($M = 4.33$), indicating relatively lower—though still high—agreement with the statement. Portugal and Spain constitute an intermediate group, with slightly higher means (4.43 and 4.50, respectively). The remaining countries—Colombia, Brazil, Ecuador, Chile, Peru, and Mexico—cluster in the highest subset (4.61–4.70), reflecting the strongest collective desire for increased urban greening in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis. Thus, these groupings suggest that while the desire for greener cities is consistently high, Latin American respondents—especially those in Mexico, Peru, and Chile—express a significantly stronger preference for urban greening than their European counterparts.

In contrast, belief in the likelihood that greener cities will materialize shows greater variation and substantially lower mean values. Brazil and Chile form the lowest subsets ($M = 2.72$ and 2.86), indicating pronounced scepticism regarding the feasibility of implementing greener urban infrastructure. European countries and Mexico occupy intermediate positions, whereas Peru and Ecuador exhibit the highest levels of belief ($M = 3.16$ and 3.32).

These patterns reveal a significant perception gap between desire and belief across countries: although support for greener post-COVID-19 cities is overwhelmingly high across countries, confidence in their realization is considerably weaker (Figure 7). The gap is especially large in Brazil ($\Delta = 1.94$) and Chile ($\Delta = 1.80$), suggesting a strong disconnection

between environmental aspirations and the perceived capacity of public institutions to deliver such transformations. Conversely, Ecuador (Δ = 1.34) and Argentina (Δ = 1.43) show the narrowest gaps, indicating comparatively greater alignment between personal ideals and perceived feasibility. Therefore, the results indicate a widespread aspiration for more sustainable urban environments, while also showing that this aspiration is moderated by differing levels of scepticism shaped by local political credibility and the perceived robustness of environmental governance.

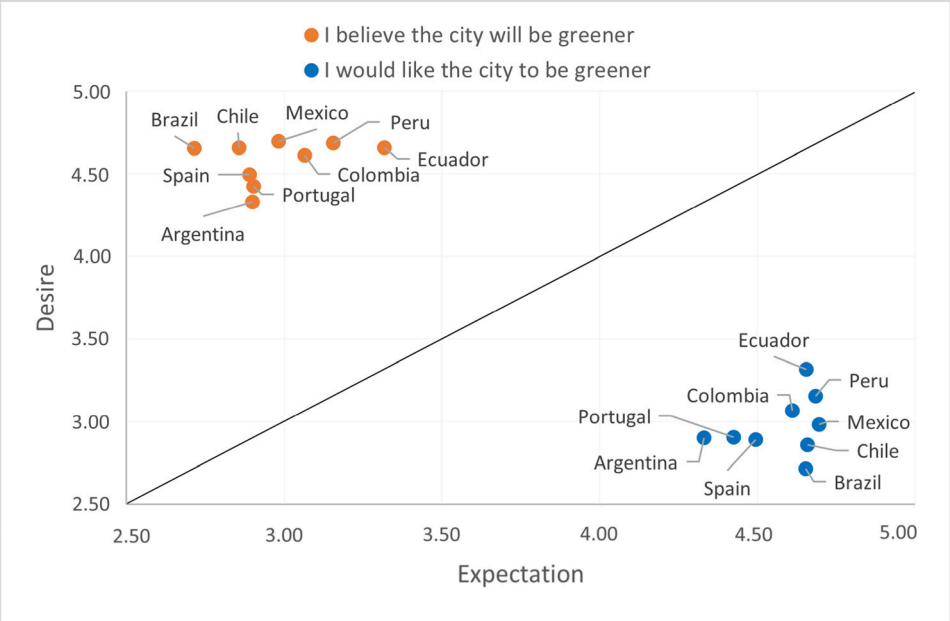


Figure 7. Relationship between desire and expectation for the statement: "The city will be greener".

4.4. Walkability and Localized Urban Environments

The final dimension explored preferences for pedestrian-friendly and proximity-based cities, reinforcing the central role of active mobility in respondents' imaginaries of post-pandemic urban transformation. The statement pair "I would like a more pedestrian-friendly and localized urban environment" and "I believe that the city will become more pedestrian-friendly and localized" captured the essence of the 15-Minute City's mobility logic within the survey framework. Statistical tests revealed clear cross-country variation ($F = 35.504$, $p < 0.001$), but also a notable regional consensus regarding the normative appeal of walkable and human-scaled urbanism (Figure 8). Across all participating countries, the desire for more walkable and proximity-based urban environments is overwhelmingly high. Yet the expectation that such transformations will actually materialize in a post-COVID context is considerably more moderate, pointing to a persistent gap between respondents' aspirations and their perceived likelihood of realization.

Desire scores were consistently high across the sample, ranging from 3.82 in Argentina to 4.36 in Peru. The Andean countries—together with Brazil ($M = 4.29$), Mexico ($M = 4.29$), and Chile ($M = 4.30$)—expressed the strongest enthusiasm for proximity-oriented urban transformation. By contrast, Argentina and Spain, although still reporting positive evaluations, recorded comparatively lower means, suggesting that enthusiasm for pedestrianization may be influenced by existing levels of satisfaction with local urban mobility systems.

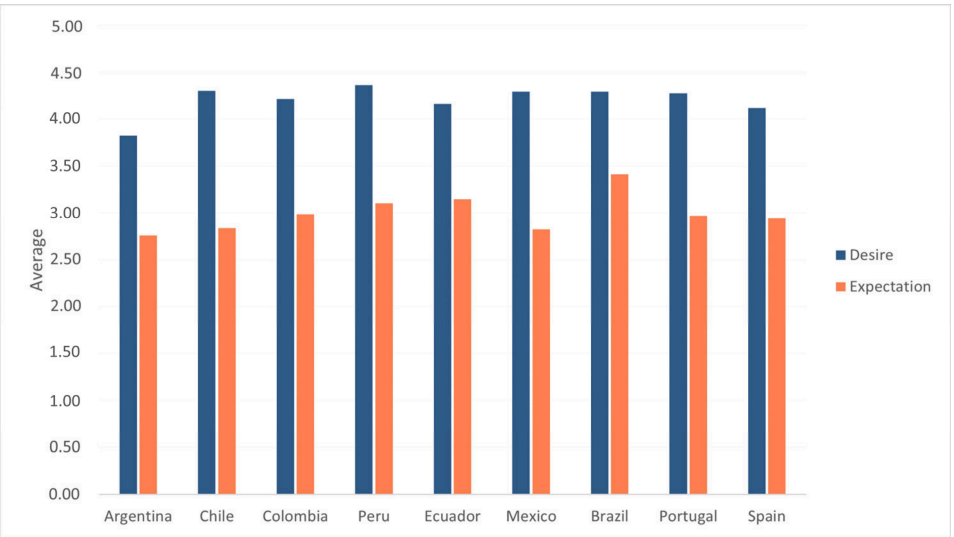


Figure 8. Mean desire and expectation scores for the statement: "The city will be more pedestrian and local".

In contrast, expectation scores are considerably lower in all cases, with values ranging from 2.75 (Argentina) to 3.41 (Brazil). This reveals a clear perception gap, wherein respondents express uncertainty regarding the realization of their preferred urban futures.

The Tukey post hoc test identifies several distinct clusters (Figure 9), highlighting significant cross-country differences in the preference for proximity-based, pedestrian-oriented urbanism. Argentina forms the lowest subset (M = 3.82), indicating comparatively weaker enthusiasm for localized urban transformations. Spain, Ecuador, and Colombia occupy an intermediate range (4.12–4.21), reflecting moderate but still positive levels of desire for walkable urban environments. Portugal, Brazil, Mexico, and Chile cluster in a higher subset (≈4.27–4.30), suggesting strong collective support for proximity-oriented urbanism. Peru exhibits the highest preference among all surveyed countries (M = 4.36), signalling particularly robust enthusiasm for pedestrian-centered urban design. These clusters reveal not only the variation in intensity of desire across countries but also a common normative orientation toward walkable, human-scaled cities throughout Ibero-America, with Argentina representing a relative outlier in terms of lower, though still affirmative, support.

Belief that such urban transformations will actually materialize shows significantly lower and more dispersed values. Argentina again appears at the bottom (M = 2.76), followed closely by Mexico and Chile. Spain, Portugal, and Colombia cluster in the mid-range (≈2.94–2.99), while Peru and Ecuador form a somewhat more optimistic subset (M = 3.10 and 3.15). Brazil stands out as the most optimistic case (M = 3.41), despite occupying only a mid-level position in the desire scores.

The largest gaps between desire and expectation emerge in Mexico (Δ = 1.47) and Chile (Δ = 1.47), suggesting a pronounced disconnect between aspirational support and perceived feasibility—likely linked to doubts regarding institutional capacity, political commitment, or implementation momentum. Brazil shows the smallest gap (Δ = 0.88) alongside the highest expectation mean, indicating comparatively greater optimism regarding feasibility. Ecuador and Peru also exhibit relatively small gaps, reflecting more aligned public outlooks.

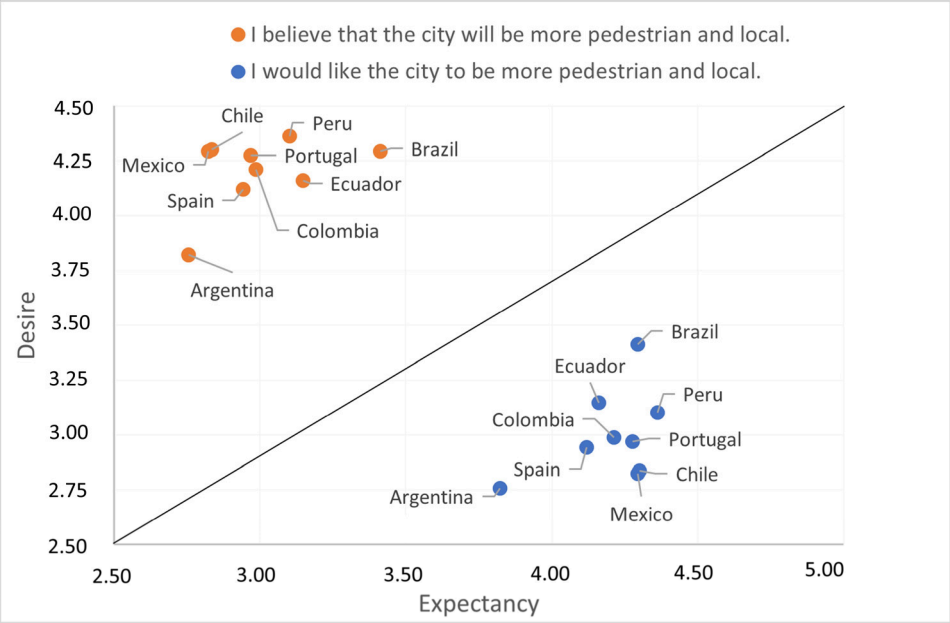


Figure 9. Relationship between desire and expectation regarding a more pedestrian and local city.

The overall pattern points to a clear and widespread preference for localized, pedestrian-oriented urbanism, contrasted with a more cautious expectation regarding its realization. "This disparity offers a valuable diagnostic for urban policymaking: while proximity-based urban models such as the 15-Minute City resonate strongly among respondents across Ibero-America, confidence in their implementation varies substantially depending on perceived governance strength, institutional credibility, and broader urban-contextual conditions.

Across all items, the most consistent pattern is the desire–expectation gap, which indicates a structural tension between aspirational urban ideals and confidence in implementation. This gap is smallest in countries where institutional trust is relatively higher (e.g., Spain, Portugal, Ecuador) and largest where governance systems are perceived as weaker or more politicized (e.g., Mexico, Colombia, Chile). The pattern also reveals that the principles underpinning the 15-Minute City (proximity, accessibility, and environmental quality) enjoy broad normative support even in regions where the concept itself was not widely discussed in 2020. This pattern suggests that the transition toward more sustainable urban mobility systems is not only a technical or infrastructural challenge but also a matter of public trust and perceived governance capacity.

The data suggest that the pandemic catalysed a shared reflection on the spatial organization of daily life. Respondents across the region expressed a strong preference for cities that are greener, more walkable, and more community-oriented, even as they doubted the likelihood of such outcomes. This disjunction between aspiration and expectation can be interpreted as a form of 'participatory dissonance': respondents express strong support for more humane and sustainable urban models while remaining sceptical about institutional capacity to implement them. The consistency of this pattern across diverse national contexts underscores its structural nature.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that, across Ibero-American contexts, the pandemic triggered a significant re-evaluation of urban life, particularly in relation to everyday mobility practices and the spatial organization of cities. Although the severity of the health

crisis varied among countries, the collective experience of confinement, mobility restriction, and exposure to inequality produced a convergent reflection on the future of the city.

This research contributes to scholarship on post-pandemic urbanism and sustainable urban mobility transitions in several key ways. Rather than examining transport systems directly, this study contributes by analysing the social imaginaries underpinning sustainable urban mobility transitions, focusing on respondents' aspirations and expectations regarding proximity, accessibility, and everyday mobility practices. More specifically, it provides empirical evidence of how respondents internalize and project proximity-based urban ideals, incorporates Latin American perspectives into debates traditionally centred on Europe and North America, and demonstrates the value of quantitative perception-based methods for capturing the cognitive and emotional dimensions of urban and mobility change.

Interpreted together, the empirical patterns highlight three interrelated dynamics that are discussed below: a strong normative preference for greener and more walkable urban models; a persistent gap between desire and expectation; and a clear differentiation between Latin American and European contexts in how these imaginaries are structured.

Survey respondents articulated aspirations for post-pandemic urban models characterized by greener, more walkable, and more accessible environments, all of which are closely associated with more sustainable and less car-dependent mobility patterns. They also expressed support for mobility regulation and human-scale urban design, both of which are central to the governance of more sustainable urban transport systems, aligning with the principles of the 15-Minute City and broader shifts toward sustainable urban mobility. Across all nine countries, desire scores for urban greening and walkability are consistently high, often approaching the upper bound of the Likert scale. For instance, the desire for more green spaces exceeds a mean value of 4.3 in every country and reaches its highest levels in Mexico (M = 4.69) and Peru (M = 4.68). Similarly, the desire for a more pedestrian-friendly and localized urban environment remains robust across the sample, ranging from 3.82 in Argentina to 4.36 in Peru. These results indicate that the pandemic intensified a shared valuation of environmental quality, proximity, and human-scale urbanism, regardless of national context.

The widespread desire for greener, walkable, and more accessible cities observed across the nine countries finds support in the previous research identifying heightened environmental awareness as a broadly shared outcome of the pandemic [67]. However, this normative orientation toward greener and more walkable urban environments is not articulated in isolation from concerns about governance, control, and inequality [68]. Thus, the pandemic intensified debates on urban resilience and sustainability while simultaneously exposing political ambivalence. At the same time, [22] argue that crisis narratives may foster innovation but also generate new governance and equity challenges, including heightened surveillance and uneven access to services.

One of the most interesting findings emerging from the analysis is what may be described as a governance paradox. In several countries, particularly in the Andean region, strong support for proximity and environmental improvements coexists with relatively high acceptance of increased mobility restrictions. Peru and Ecuador, for example, record the highest desire for greater mobility control (both M = 3.90), alongside some of the highest desire scores for walkable and greener urban environments. This combination suggests that respondents do not necessarily perceive mobility regulation as incompatible with urban quality. Instead, in contexts characterized by informality, congestion, and weak enforcement of existing rules, greater regulation may be seen as a prerequisite for achieving safer, more accessible, and more equitable urban spaces. This suggests that, in certain

contexts, regulatory approaches to mobility may be perceived as necessary instruments for enabling more sustainable and accessible urban transport systems.

This finding complicates normative assumptions within parts of the urban theory literature that equate proximity-based urbanism with deregulation or increased individual freedom. In practice, the preferences expressed by respondents point to a more pragmatic balance, with a willingness to accept certain forms of control when these are perceived as enabling collective benefits such as environmental quality, safety, and accessibility. However, this acceptance is uneven across contexts, as reflected in the much lower support for mobility restrictions in Spain (M = 2.69) and Portugal (M = 2.56), where regulation is more likely to be associated with constraint rather than protection. These differences underscore the importance of political culture and historical governance experiences in shaping how proximity and control are jointly imagined. Rather than representing a contradiction, this governance paradox suggests that, in contexts characterized by greater institutional fragility and socio-spatial inequality, respondents may perceive stronger public intervention as a necessary condition for achieving more sustainable, accessible, and equitable urban environments.

On this basis, the findings indicate that spatial proximity alone cannot guarantee equity. In the absence of redistributive mechanisms, improvements in accessibility risk reproducing existing inequalities. The findings thus resonate with critical scholarship stressing that the right to the city must encompass not only spatial proximity but also economic and political inclusion [69,70]. In Latin American cities in particular—where informal settlements, precarious labour conditions, and uneven infrastructure remain widespread—the 15-Minute City model can only be effective if translated into policies that explicitly address structural inequities. The data suggest that respondents intuitively grasp this complexity: strong aspirations for urban transformation coexist with doubts regarding institutional integrity and the equitable allocation of resources.

A second major axis of interpretation concerns the persistent gap between desire and expectation. Across all thematic dimensions and nearly all countries, respondents express significantly higher levels of desire for urban transformation than belief that such change will actually occur. This gap is not trivial: standardized differences frequently reach medium to large effect sizes, and, in some cases, are substantial. In the greening dimension, Brazil exhibits a desire mean of approximately 4.65 but an expectation mean of only 2.71, producing the largest observed gap ($\Delta \approx 1.94$). Chile shows a similarly pronounced discrepancy ($\Delta \approx 1.80$). Comparable gaps emerge in the walkability dimension in Mexico and Chile (both $\Delta \approx 1.47$), indicating a widespread perception that proximity-oriented urban ideals are unlikely to be realized despite their strong normative appeal. In the context of urban mobility, this gap reflects a tension between widespread support for more sustainable transport models and limited confidence in their actual implementation.

Cross-national differences in the desire–expectation gap highlight the role of political culture and institutional capacity in shaping urban imaginaries. Spain and Portugal—where municipal governance is characterised by stronger traditions of decentralisation and participatory planning—display smaller gaps between aspirations and expectations, suggesting higher levels of trust in local institutions and a belief in the responsiveness of public policy. By contrast, the wider gaps observed in Mexico, Colombia, and Chile point to more fragile relationships between civil society and government, particularly in the Global South.

In this sense, the aspiration–expectation gap functions as an indicator of institutional trust and perceived governance capacity: where respondents doubt the ability of public institutions to implement complex and redistributive urban policies, aspirations become detached from expectations. Rather than signalling apathy, this pattern reflects a critical awareness of structural constraints, as evidenced by persistently high desire scores

alongside low expectation scores. The 15-Minute City thus emerges as a useful analytical framework for understanding how respondents perceive and evaluate potential transitions toward more sustainable urban mobility systems across different institutional contexts.

Importantly, a preference for returning to pre-pandemic urban conditions should not be interpreted as incompatible with support for greener, more walkable, and proximity-oriented cities. Rather, these responses may reflect different dimensions of post-pandemic recovery. While the "return to normality" items capture aspirations regarding the restoration of everyday social and economic life, the remaining items refer to preferred characteristics of future urban development. In this sense, respondents may simultaneously favour the recovery of urban normality while supporting transformations that improve environmental quality, accessibility, and resilience.

The comparatively low expectations regarding the implementation of greener urban environments in several Latin American contexts may therefore reflect more than limited institutional trust alone. Respondents may also perceive that the benefits of urban greening are unlikely to be implemented equitably within contexts marked by socio-spatial inequality, fragmented governance, and uneven access to public services. Although the present survey did not examine perceptions of green gentrification or displacement directly, previous research has shown that environmental improvements may, under certain conditions, generate concerns regarding social exclusion and unequal access to urban benefits. Future research should therefore explore whether such perceptions contribute to the aspiration–expectation gap identified in this study.

The third axis emerging from the results is the clear differentiation between Latin American and European contexts (Spain and Portugal). Thus, for example, from the public's perspective, Latin American respondents supported stronger mobility regulation and social control, whereas Europeans favoured continuity and individual freedom, reflecting differences in governance traditions and institutional trust. Furthermore, while the overall normative orientation toward greener and more walkable cities is shared, the structure of expectations and trust differs markedly. European respondents tend to exhibit smaller gaps between desire and expectation across multiple dimensions, as illustrated by the difference between desire and expectation regarding a return to the pre-pandemic city. Although this is the only issue among the four examined in this study for which expectations consistently exceed desires across all countries, the gap is minimal—$\Delta = 0.10$ in Portugal and $\Delta = 0.20$ in Spain—placing both among the smallest observed in the sample. Similarly, expectations regarding greening and walkability, although lower than desires, remain comparatively higher and more consistent.

This relative alignment may reflect higher levels of satisfaction with pre-pandemic urban conditions and stronger confidence in planning institutions. In these contexts, the pre-pandemic city is not necessarily perceived as fundamentally dysfunctional, and incremental adaptation appears more plausible than radical transformation. In contrast, many Latin American respondents express both stronger desires for change and deeper scepticism about its realization. This contrast converges with critical scholarship that interprets the pandemic as a lens through which pre-existing inequalities and governance deficits become visible [71,72]. For many respondents in Latin American contexts, the health crisis did not represent a temporary interruption of urban normality but rather a continuation of systemic crises related, for example, to economic precarity, housing deficits, and environmental degradation. This combination points to a structural tension: proximity-based urbanism is perceived as a corrective project that would address longstanding deficits in accessibility, environmental quality, and social equity. In this regard, the 15-Minute City model resonates not only as a design principle but also as an imaginary of justice and repair.

Taken together, the findings reinforce the interpretation of the 15-Minute City as a social imaginary rather than a purely policy-driven model. Public support for proximity and accessibility is strong and widespread, indicating that its normative foundations resonate beyond its European origins. At the same time, the results reveal a pronounced gap between aspiration and expectation, pointing to the role of institutional trust and governance capacity in shaping the feasibility of proximity-based urban transformation. Differences between Latin American and European contexts further highlight the importance of local conditions, particularly where inequality and infrastructural deficits position proximity urbanism as a pathway toward urban justice rather than a lifestyle preference.

Overall, the evidence suggests that, during the most restrictive phase of the pandemic, respondents across Ibero-America articulated urban aspirations broadly aligned with principles associated with proximity-based urbanism and later consolidated within 15-Minute City debates. While these imaginaries reflect a shared aspiration for more equitable, accessible, and sustainable urban environments, their realization ultimately depends on strengthening governance capacity, addressing structural inequalities, and rebuilding public trust.

6. Conclusions and Limitations

Using a cross-national online survey of 9575 respondents from nine Ibero-American countries conducted during the first COVID-19 lockdown, this study examined how the COVID-19 pandemic reshaped respondents' perceptions and aspirations regarding urban life, particularly in relation to everyday mobility practices and access to essential services, across nine Ibero-American countries, based on a dataset of more than 9500 survey responses. The findings show that, in the midst of a global health crisis, individuals across different national and cultural contexts imagined urban futures that embody many of the principles later formalized in proximity urbanism, which is consistent with previous studies [8–10]. In this context, the data suggest that the principles of the 15-Minute City—proximity, accessibility, walkability, and reduced dependence on motorized transport—resonate widely among respondents across the surveyed countries, particularly as they align with more sustainable urban mobility patterns, even in contexts where the concept had not yet become part of public discourse. Respondents articulated aspirations broadly aligned with these principles, suggesting that proximity urbanism may also function as a culturally and emotionally grounded social imaginary linked to everyday mobility and accessibility.

Methodologically, the study demonstrates the value of large-scale cross-national surveys for capturing respondents' urban imaginaries during periods of crisis. Although the design does not allow causal inference, its comparative scope provides a useful framework for analysing aspirations and expectations regarding proximity-based urban transformation. Future longitudinal studies should examine how these perceptions evolve over time.

In addition, the study examines the gap between respondents' desires and expectations, highlighting how aspirations often diverge from perceived feasibility. Furthermore, it addresses the contrast between Latin American and European contexts regarding several of the analysed variables, thereby expanding the empirical focus beyond the traditional Euro-American framework and offering insights from a region that is often underrepresented in studies of proximity urbanism.

Despite its contributions, several limitations must be acknowledged. The first concerns sampling. The use of an online snowball survey during lockdown necessarily favoured educated, digitally connected participants, underrepresenting lower-income groups and those without reliable internet access. As a result, the findings primarily reflect the perceptions of middle-class urban residents. Future research should aim for more stratified

or mixed sampling strategies, including on-site or phone-based surveys once mobility restrictions are lifted. The second limitation relates to temporality. Data were collected during the most acute phase of the pandemic, when uncertainty and fear were at their peak. Perceptions captured in this context may not fully represent long-term attitudes; longitudinal follow-ups are therefore essential to trace whether aspirations for proximity and sustainability persisted or faded in the post-pandemic recovery period.

This sampling profile may also have influenced the substantive results. Respondents with higher educational attainment and greater digital connectivity are generally more likely to express support for environmental sustainability, active mobility, and other post-materialist urban values. Consequently, the high levels of support observed for greener, more walkable, and proximity-based urban environments may partly reflect the characteristics of the surveyed population rather than the preferences of the broader population. Although this does not invalidate the comparative patterns identified across countries, it suggests that the absolute levels of support should be interpreted with appropriate caution.

A third limitation is conceptual: the survey items were designed to approximate the principles of the 15-Minute City, but the concept itself was not explicitly presented to respondents. While this approach avoids priming bias, it also restricts direct comparability with later studies where the term has gained public recognition. Subsequent research could combine perception surveys with qualitative methods such as interviews, participatory mapping, or focus groups to capture more nuanced understandings of proximity and accessibility. A fourth limitation involves the diversity of national contexts. Although the study included nine countries with shared linguistic and cultural heritage, their urban systems differ markedly in scale, density, and governance. The comparative analysis highlights patterns at the regional level but cannot account for intra-urban heterogeneity within each country. City-level analyses could refine these results by incorporating variables such as population density, spatial morphology, and policy frameworks.

Furthermore, the survey did not distinguish between different types of mobility regulation, such as restrictions targeting private vehicle use, restrictions on individual mobility, or broader public health control measures. Consequently, the observed support for mobility restrictions should be interpreted as reflecting general attitudes toward regulatory intervention rather than preferences for specific mobility policies. Future research should differentiate these dimensions in order to better understand the relationship between support for sustainable mobility measures and broader attitudes toward state intervention.

Despite these constraints, the study's strengths outweigh its limitations. Its large sample, cross-national scope, and consistent measurement design provide a robust basis for interpreting emergent urban imaginaries in the aftermath of COVID-19. The data show that, even in times of crisis, respondents articulated urban aspirations centred on more humane, ecological, and inclusive forms of urban life. These aspirations display significant affinities with principles commonly associated with proximity urbanism, particularly regarding walkability, accessibility, and localized everyday environments.

The results also have practical implications for urban policy and planning. Municipal governments can use the evidence presented here to gauge public readiness for reforms aimed at improving accessibility, promoting active transport, and reducing dependence on motorized mobility. The strong desire for greener and more localized environments suggests broad public support for measures such as mixed-use zoning, expansion of pedestrian networks, and decentralization of services. However, the persistent expectation gap warns that such policies must be accompanied by transparent governance and participatory processes if they are to gain legitimacy. Building proximity cities therefore requires more than physical redesign; it demands rebuilding trust and strengthening civic engagement.

In light of this evidence, this research advances the understanding of how crises reshape urban imaginaries and how those imaginaries, in turn, can inform the construction of more equitable and resilient cities. By empirically linking public perceptions to the principles of the 15-Minute City, it provides both conceptual and methodological bridges between theory and practice. The study suggests that the pandemic, while devastating, created an opportunity for collective reflection on urban life. Across the surveyed countries, this reflection was associated with widespread aspirations for proximity, accessibility, and more sustainable forms of everyday mobility—a vision that not only reflects broader aspirations for quality of life but also points toward the social and perceptual foundations through which more sustainable forms of urban mobility may gain public legitimacy in the future.

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Informed Consent Statement: Electronic informed consent was obtained from all participants before they voluntarily completed the anonymous online questionnaire.

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