

# The Urban-Rural Happiness Gradient: Growing up in a City Will Make You Unhappy Later in Your Life.

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## outline

urban-rural happiness gradient

Growing up in a City Will Make You Unhappy Later in Your Life

towards urban unhappiness theory

bonus: brfss study

bonus: No Urban Malaise for Millennials

bonus: city misery in pictures

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## **Happiness/Life Satisfaction, SWB**

- Scholars and common people have always been into it
  - Aristotle, Bentham, and others
- in 70s we started to measure it with svy
  - just asking people about their overall life satisfaction
  - such measure is reasonably reliable/valid
  - correlate with reports of others, brain activity, etc
- Now the field is way beyond social psychology
  - Sen and Stiglitz advocate happiness in addition to GDP
  - Sarkozy and O'Donnell followed
  - governments now collect happiness data:
  - OECD, Bhutan, UK, UAE, the US, etc

## three happiness theories

### ◇ adaptation (Brickman et al., 1978)

- ▶ adjustment to external circumstances
- ▶ 'hedonic treadmill'
- ▶ *the more one has the more one wants, since satisfactions received only stimulate instead of filling needs* (Durkheim, [1895] 1950)
- ▶ CITY: more stuff, but we get used to it

### ◇ multiple discrepancies (Michalos, 1985)

- ▶ social comparison
- ▶ comparison to various standards
- ▶ *it is better to be a big frog in a small pond than a small frog in a big pond* (Davis, 1966)
- ▶ CITY: comparison/visual recognition

### ◇ needs/livability (Veenhoven and Ehrhardt, 1995) CITY: unnatural to life

## most miserable and happiest US counties

county	density	happiness
St. Louis city MO	5.7k	3.18
Bronx NY	>30k	3.18
• Kings NY (Brooklyn)	>30k	3.2
Johnson KS (close to Kansas city)	1.1k	3.51
Shelby TN (some of Memphis)	1.2k	3.54
Douglas CO (borders Denver)	.3k	3.56

## What we know so far: the Urb-Rur SWB Gradient

- [my signature argument: cities are bad:  
theaok.github.io]
- [i take this to extreme to push understanding]
- we know that humans are least happy in largest places
- (assuming that a country is not very poor)
- most complete literature review my book: “Happiness and Place: Why Life Is Better Outside of the City”
- compare to: “Triumph of the City: How Our Greatest Invention Makes Us Richer, Smarter, Greener, Healthier, and Happier” by Ed Glaeser
- he got it already upside down in the title!

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## What we don't know

- don't know the effect of size of a place in childhood/adolescence on SWB later in life
- studies about migration, incl urban-rural or rural-urban are not exactly about a place where one grew up
- nor they focus on current urbanicity or control for it
- this study is inspired by Lederbogen et al 2011:  
“City living and urban upbringing affect neural social stress processing in humans.” *Nature*
- it found (like Simmel!) city unhealthy for human brain
- and added that urban upbringing damages brain

## my study

- US GSS
- “Which of the categories on this card comes closest to the type of place you were living in when you were 16 years old?” and it is farm, and steps of urbanicity
- a caveat:
  - assume 16yo urbanicity is a place where a person grew up
  - actually i'd say not that likely that urbanicity will be very different at 16 from that in most of childhood/adolescence
  - others assume the same! and publish in ASR
  - sure, noisy, but not useless: should have some signal!

## OLS of SWB: fully standardized coeff

	1	2	3
place 16yo (base: country)			
farm		0.027***	0.017**
-50k		0.004	-0.012+
50k-250k		0.006	-0.008
city sub		0.014*	-0.009
250k-		-0.013*	-0.020**
xnorcsiz (base: country):			
lt 2.5k	0.007	0.007	0.008
2.5-10k	-0.009+	-0.007	-0.002
10-50k	-0.011*	-0.008	0.000
uninc med	0.004	0.006	-0.001
uninc lrg	-0.005	-0.001	-0.011*
med sub	-0.014*	-0.010+	-0.011+
lrg sub	-0.025***	-0.017*	-0.018*
50-250k	-0.038***	-0.033***	-0.012+
gt 250k	-0.078***	-0.067***	-0.024***
usual controls	no	no	yes
N	57709	57613	51687

\*\*\* p<0.001 \*\* p<0.01, \* p<0.05, +  
p<0.1; robust std err

## conclusion

- people who grew up in cities are less happy later in their lives above and beyond unhappiness associated with currently living in a city
- the negative effect of urbanicity in one's youth is about as strong statistically and practically (effect size) as effect of urbanicity of current place
- there may be a happiness benefit to growing up at a farm

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## why city is bad? what is the mechanism?

- unnatural to almost any life!
- bet even pigeons and rats must be city unhappy
- (can study happiness in animals, Weiss et al. (eg 2012))
- life does not belong with concrete, asphalt and glass
- yes, largest cities must be crowded by definition!
- and crowding is bad for all mammals including humans and rats (Calhoun, 1962)
- ok, bees and ants thrive in crowding, but we're different!
- city is unhealthy to human brain (Simmel, 1903, Milgram, 1970, Lederbogen et al., 2011)

## why? what is the mechanism?

- some of happiness killers:
  - commodification, inequality, and social comparison (eg Radcliff, 2001, Lane, 2000)
  - overwork, rat race, consumerism, and conspicuous consumption (Leonard, 2010, Kasser, 2003, Frank, 2012)
  - also light, air, and noise pollutions
  - and information pollution (advertising!)
- and they are all centered and exemplified in cities!

## my problem with economics

- it's economists like Glaeser who push urbanism most
- to them humans are rational
- and whatever humans do is good for them by definition!
- and so cities must be good, because they grow
- and since to them  $\text{utility} \approx \$$ , cities must be good, too:  
most \$ made and spent in cities
- SWB lowest in cities? no problem! just assume that SWB is part of utility function just like pair of socks:  
“happiness is a commodity in the utility function in the same way that owning a car and being healthy are”  
(Becker and Rayo, 2008, p. 89).



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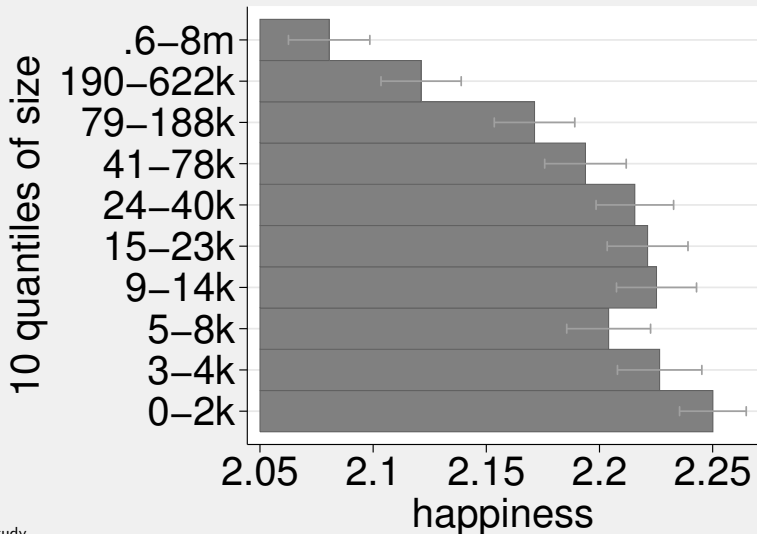
towards urban unhappiness theory

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## happiness gradient smooth except 3rd decile



## most miserable and happiest counties from BRFSS

county	density	happiness
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## most succesful cities less happy that non city avg!

- avg for counties that are nonmetropolitan areas: 3.41
- Economist's Quality of Living; Mercer's Best cities
- Boston; Suffolk County MA: 3.29
- NYC; NY County (Manhattan): 3.31
- Chicago; Cook County IL: 3.39

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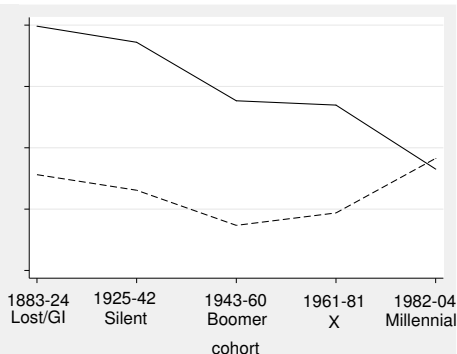
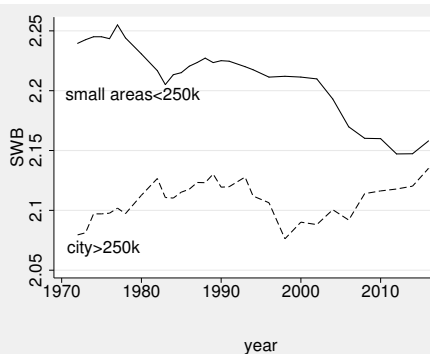
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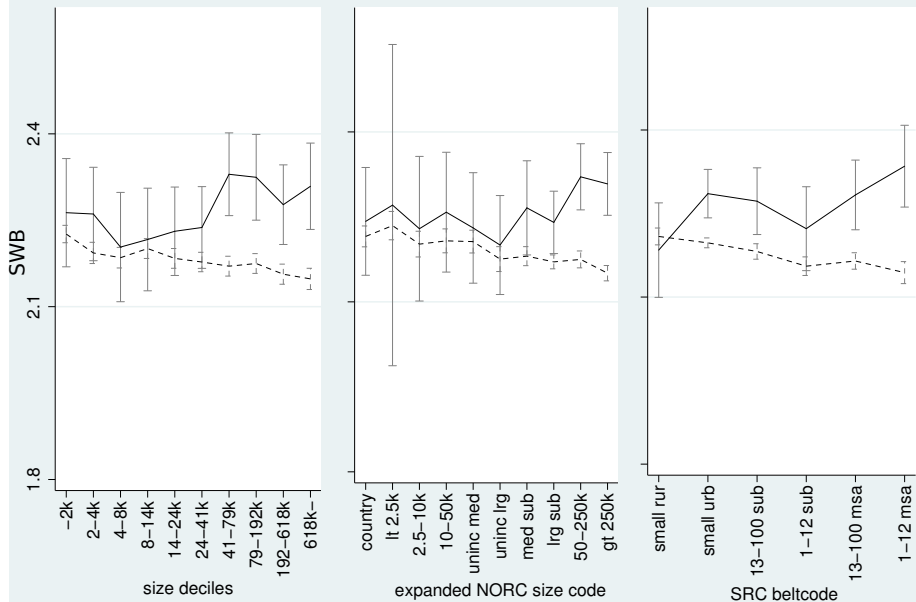
## this study

- US GSS
- Millennial/genY: 1982-2004

## avg SWB: cities (dashed) v smaller areas (solid)



predicted SWB genY (solid) v older (dashed)





## conclusion

- Millennials (1982-2004) happiest in large cities
- SWB gap of genY v others in largest cities is as big as \$100k in family income!
- something wrong with Millennials! :)
- everyone else happiest in small towns and rural areas
- yet the advantage of rural living is declining:
- rural Americans are becoming less happy relative to urbanites
- again, for this and more:
- [theaok.github.io](https://theaok.github.io)

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## pictures

- `https://theaok.github.io/junk/extracted_figures.pdf`

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