

HAPPINESS IN URBAN ENVIRONMENTS: WHAT WE KNOW AND DON'T KNOW YET

A research synthesis using an on-line findings-archive

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ABSTRACT

Background: There is no consensus on what makes for a livable urban environment

Approach: Empirical assessment of the relationship between urban characteristics and the happiness of residents.

Method: We took stock of the available research findings, using the World Database of Happiness; 407 findings are considered, from 20 nations over the years 1975-2022. We considered 3 aspects of the urban environment, 1) objectively assessed characteristics, 2) subjective perception of urban characteristics and 3) satisfaction with urban characteristics.

Results: Urbanites tend to be happier in places characterized by the following *objectively* assessed features: a) access to local green/nature, b) access to cultural facilities and leisure amenities, c) access to healthcare, d) access to public goods such as access to sewage and water supply and e) access to public spaces. On the other hand, residents tend to be *less* happy the closer they live to f) shops, g) public transportation hubs and h) the city center. Subjectively *perceived* environmental characteristics that go with greater happiness are: i) amenities, j) public goods in vicinity k) playground and sport facilities, while l) perceived air pollution is negatively linked to happiness. Residents were found to be happier the more *satisfied* they are with m) connectivity and local transport, n) local recreation o) water quality and the, p) environment as-a-whole.

Correlations with *objectively* assessed characteristics. with the urban environment are smaller than with *subjective perceptions* of the same and differ in direction for living close to q) shops and r) public transportation hubs. While *objective* closeness to these amenities relates negatively to happiness, *subjectively* perceived availability and satisfaction with these amenities relates positively to happiness.

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Limitations

Most of the available findings are of a cross-sectional nature and do not inform us about cause and effect.

Conclusion: This strand of research is still in its infancy. By lack of a sound evidence base, claims about livability of urban settings will remain a matter of subjective hunches and sales-talk.

Keywords: *urban environment, built environment, happiness, research synthesis*