Chapter 8. Urbanization and Happiness.

"[...] here is the great city! Here thou hast nothing to seek and everything to lose" (Nietzsche)

"Nature is not a place to visit, it is home" (Gary Snyder)

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Abstract

This chapter is an overview of research on urban-rural happiness gradient. The perspective here is also a tribute to Ruut, as much of the research in this area has been shaped by my conversations with Ruut. We both agree that needs satisfaction produces happiness. But I argue that one does not need to live in a metropolis or a city to satisfy her needs (the very poorest countries like Sub-Saharan Africa aside). Human needs can be easily satisfied in a village or even in an open country. The chapter ends with a future research agenda–what we want to know additionally on urban-rural happiness.

Keywords

happiness; life satisfaction, livability; urban-rural happiness gradient

8.1 Introduction

I agree with Ruut on the usefulness of *new utilitarianism*.[1] Let's pay attention to happiness empirical research–combine it with personal capabilities and values–and use it to make informed decisions and make our lives better. At the same time keep in mind that, just as with anything, too much of a good thing is a bad thing–too much focus on trying to be happy and preoccupation with pursuit of happiness may backfire.[2] Humans should use happiness research to make

[1] See useful summary earlier under "Conclusions Part 1" "Conclusions in support of Veenhoven's New Utilitarianism"

[2] See a number of papers by Iris Mauss:
https://scholar.google.com/citations?hl=en&user=_jL7NEAAAAAJ

better decisions, notably avoid current rampant materialism and consumerism (Okulicz-Kozaryn et al 2021a), but happiness should not be the only or maybe even the main pursuit.

Urbanization, like materialism and consumerism, is everywhere. If you live in a developed country, almost certainly you live in an urban area or close to it (sub-urban or ex-urban). Remote and completely city-free regions are mostly gone. Developing countries are not spared either–cities are mushrooming there, too. See figure 1.

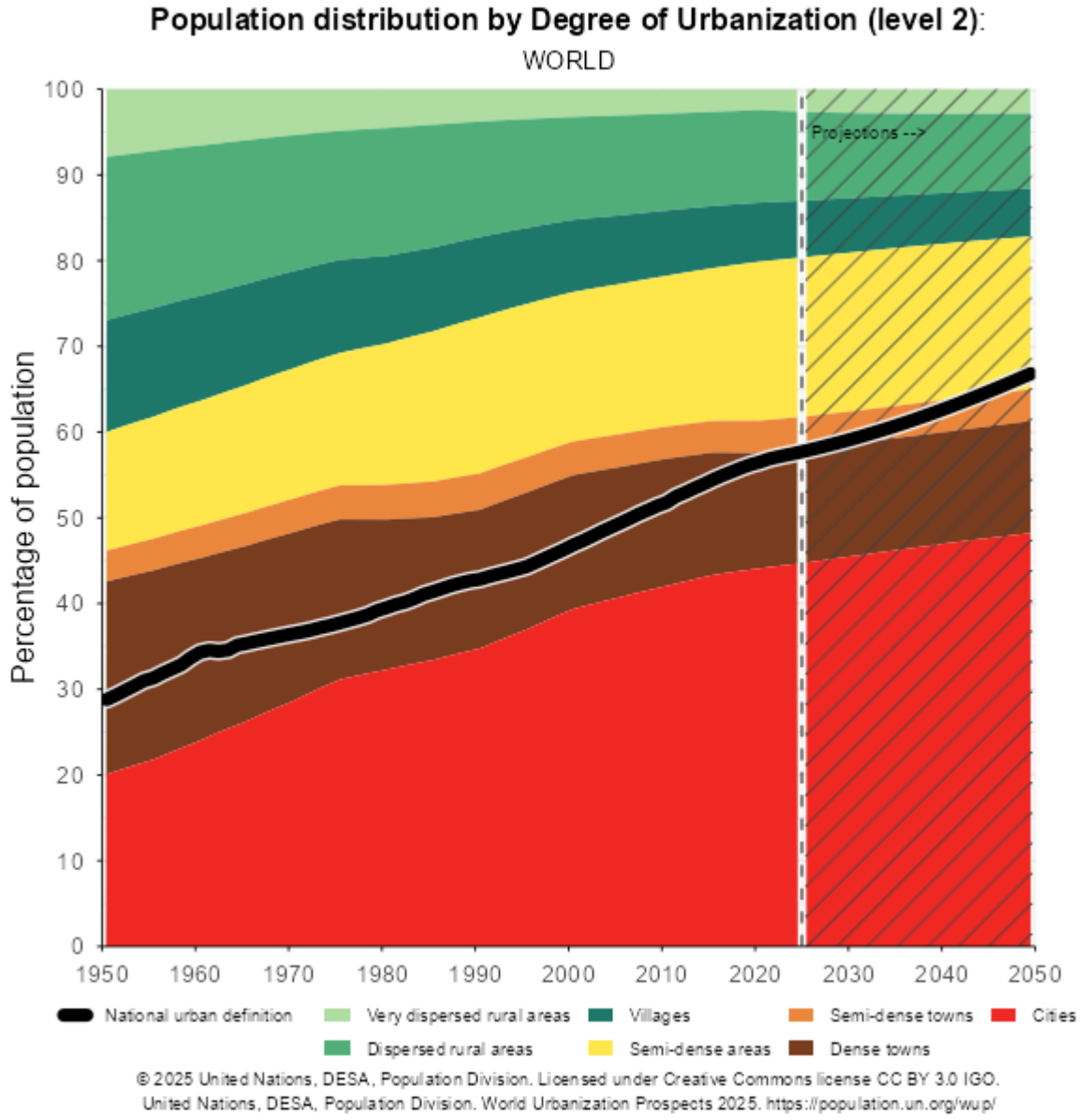

Figure 1. Source: https://population.un.org/wup/countryprofiles?country=World&mainCategory=Countries%20and%20Aggregates&subCategory=Urbanization%20-%20International%20definition

The rampant urbanization is generally cheered as a positive development in social science, for instance see best selling “Triumph of the City” (Glaeser, 2012). And while cities are swallowing new territories and inhabitants, and humans are flocking to cities in search of better life, happiness does not belong in the city, just like humans have not evolved for the city (Okulicz-Kozaryn 2015). A typical finding (outside of the very poorest societies such as those in Sub-Saharan Africa) is lower happiness in cities, and definitely not higher than in rural areas. A typical urban-rural happiness gradient is shown in figure 2.

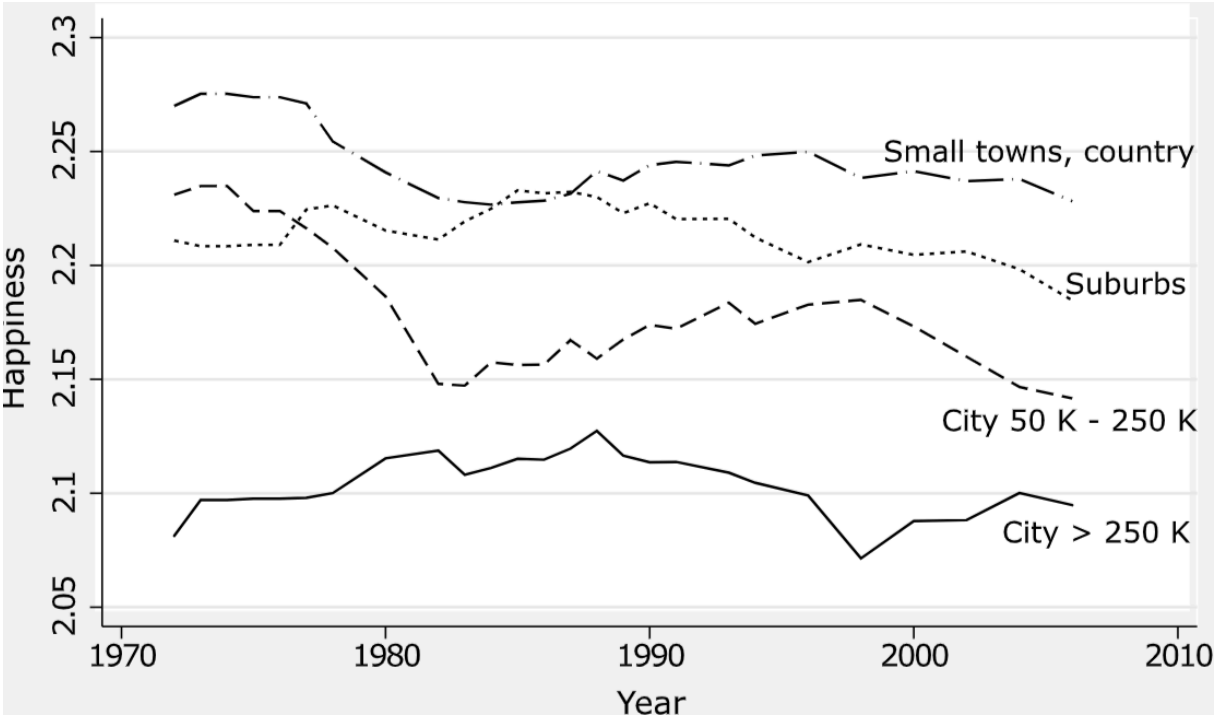

Figure 2 Urban-rural happiness gradient in the US. Source: Berry & Okulicz-Kozaryn (2011).

8.2 Objective Quality of Life (QOL) and Subjective Wellbeing (SWB)

The terms are not always defined this way, but I think it is useful to define them in the following way. QOL is objective quality of life, in urban-rural realm, an attribute of a settlement, livability of the environment, measured with environmental or ecological metrics like median income, GDP, poverty rate, physicians and bike lanes per capita. SWB is life satisfaction, subjective

self-reported evaluation of life as a whole, in urban-rural realm, by residents of a settlement.[3]

We can relate QOL and SWB in a familiar Ruut's 2x2 conceptualization in table 1 (Veenhoven 2009). The key dimensions to focus on here are the first cell, livability or QOL, and last cell, life satisfaction or SWB. If a place is livable and the quality of life is good, then its residents should appreciate life and be happy. That is, life chances as outer qualities (QOL) should produce life results as inner qualities (SWB).

What makes a place livable? By livability theory (Veenhoven 2009), it is about human needs satisfaction–humans like other organisms have certain needs and if those needs are satisfied then human life satisfaction follows. A popular set of needs is Maslow's hierarchy of needs, but one can also think of attributes of a place that make it livable. Both "pyramids," place and person, are shown in figure 2.

	outer qualities	inner qualities
life chances	QOL, livability of environment (gdp, income, poverty, etc)	person's life-ability
life results	utility of life	SWB, appreciation of life (place or life satisfaction etc)

Table 1. Veenhoven's four qualities of life (Veenhoven 2000 and recent Veenhoven 2009).

[3] Note, it is life (global) satisfaction, not just place (domain) satisfaction. For discussion see Okulicz-Kozaryn & Valente 2019. Also, I use terms life satisfaction, happiness and SWB interchangeably for simplicity. But technically I mean cognitive evaluative life satisfaction as opposed to affective happiness.

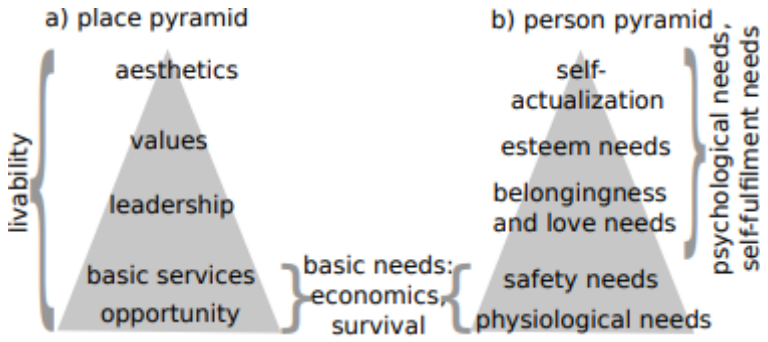

Figure 2: a) Livability as a place pyramid; b) Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Source: Okulicz-Kozaryn & Valente (2019).

QOL is often high in cities, because it is typically (and mistakenly) mostly measured as material comfort (Okulicz-Kozaryn & Martinez 2025). But if we measured it in a more comprehensive way, i.e. as per livability theory in terms of human needs satisfaction, not just material comfort then QOL would not be clearly higher in cities. Cities score well on dollar amounts: salaries, housing value, consumption, etc, but often fail on other dimensions such as social and spiritual. For instance urban social relations are shallow and transitory (Wirth 1938), the human brain is overloaded and overstimulated with information in the city making it hard to find peace and tranquillity (Simmel [1903] 2023).

Economists tend to equate happiness with production or consumption and by those metrics urban areas excel and hence economists infer that cities should be the happiest places (e.g., Glaeser 2012). Another example is Burger et al. (2020), "In line with earlier research, we found that urban populations are, on average, happier than rural populations in that they return higher levels of happiness." But it is the other way round, in line with earlier research, urban populations are less happy (Okulicz-Kozaryn et al 2021b).

8.3 The three happiness theories and urban-rural happiness

There are at least 3 happiness theories that can be used to explain urban-rural happiness. First, evolution–genes predict about 50% of SWB (Schnittker 2008). This theory is not necessarily in opposition to livability theory as sometimes argued. Genes do not predict all the variability in SWB, and there is some variability left for environmental factors such as urbanism. And actually

evolution may support livability theory in one way. Livability theory is about human needs and human needs are a product of evolution.

The second major theory is comparisons (Michalos 1985). It's without doubt that humans compare much of the time and that comparisons are an influence on SWB. The debate is how much effect there is from comparisons on SWB. Ruut would say not much if anything, and he was not fond of this theory. My stance is that there are quite a lot of comparisons as evidenced in the literature, say as in Luttmer (2005) and many others.

There are more stimuli in the city than in natural environments as aptly observed already about 100 years ago by Simmel [1903] (2023), and accordingly arguably there are more comparisons. Humans tend to compare upwards, and hence those better off than us tend to impose negative externality on us, and we may end up less happy (Frey & Stutzer 2002, Frey 2010). This could be one mechanism for urban unhappiness.

On the other hand, it can be argued that social comparison predicts more happiness in cities because social comparison is more substantial in the countryside. Especially people who are different may be happier in big cities with more anonymity and less conformity. Cities do provide more anonymity and accommodate better nonconformist types–"city air makes men free (Stadt Luft macht frei)" Park et al. ([1925] 1984, p. 12). Indeed concern for moral reputation is greater in rural than urban areas (Danielson et al 2023). But to my knowledge there is no empirical evidence specifically on social comparison by urban-rural–a direction for future research.

I perform a quick exercise here using data from Baldwin & Mussweiler (2018) and indeed find a negative relationship in figure 3. The higher the population density, the lower the frequency of social comparison. Still, the data are crude: at US state level, and measuring social comparison with searches on Google. And clearly in open country and wilderness there is less social comparison than in a city (Tesson 2013, Thoreau 2006).

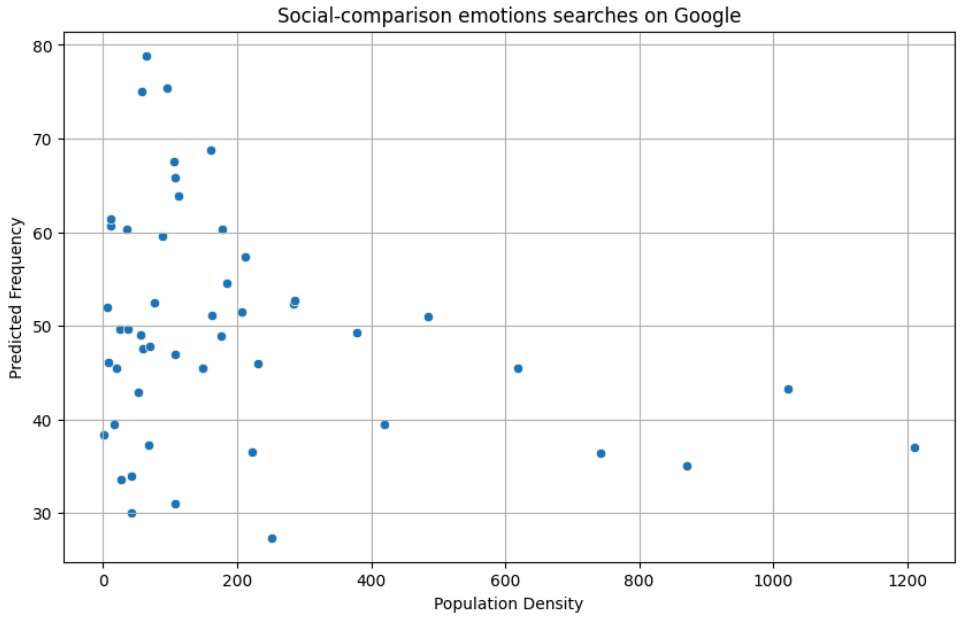

Figure 3. Population density is negatively related to social comparison across US states (r = -0.3). Data source: Baldwin & Mussweiler (2018).

8.3.1 Livability Theory

Finally we turn to Ruut Veenhoven's livability theory, the key happiness theory. Seems like Ruut himself would probably rather argue in favor of urbanization and greater livability there v rurality as based on our private conversations. Then this is where we disagree.[4]

Still, Ruut's livability theory can actually hold true because I argue that ruralities are livable and hence happy, and cities are unlivable and hence unhappy. This is the main point here: ruralities are actually quite livable (outside of the poor areas such as Sub-Saharan Africa)[5] and so they are happy; and cities are quite unlivable and so they are unhappy.

Human needs are widely satisfied in decently developed countries. The bottom rungs of Maslow's pyramid, physiological and safety needs are about as satisfied as they can be in highly developed countries such as Western and Northern

[4] Still, Ruut was open-minded. And his main point was that livability is a more practical theory than set-point (evolution/genes) and Michalos MDT (Michalos 1985). And regarding urbanism I half-agree with Ruut–we both agree that livability results in happiness, we just probably disagree where livability is greater–I argue in rurality.

[5] Many not very poor countries do have very poor subregions, for instance in Colombia the whole departments/states like Choco are very poor and large cities like Cali or even Pasto do have many very poor neighborhoods–even basic human needs are not satisfied there.

Europe. Higher needs, psychological and fulfillment needs are not so much the business of the government as of an individual, and those are quite widely satisfied in highly developed countries, too.

And here's the main point, one does not need to live in a metropolis or a city, or even a small town to satisfy her needs (again, the poor areas like Sub-Saharan Africa aside). Human needs can be easily satisfied in a village or even in an open country. In fact this is where humans belong. Humans have not evolved for a city, nor even for a town. We have evolved for a very low density rural environment.

There is a wonderful book by Maryanski and Turner, "The social cage: Human nature and the evolution of society" (1992). It was highly recommended to me by Ruut. The book is about human nature and what humans have evolved for. And human needs, as those of any other living organism, are shaped by evolution. Modern urbanized industrial and post-industrial societies often contradict human nature, trapping us in "cages" that limit our innate desires for autonomy and freedom,[6] unlike simpler hunter-gatherer societies which better align with our genes.

As hunter gatherers, for tens of thousands of years, humans have evolved to live in bands of 50-80 people. For over 99% of our species' evolutionary history there were no cities. We are living in the mass urbanization era as shown at the beginning of the chapter in figure 1, and it is forgotten that we have not evolved for such a habitat. A modern city of more than several hundred thousand inhabitants is a very recent invention. Only several generations ago it pretty much did not exist. In 1800, a minuscule 1.7% of the world population lived in cities larger than 100k (Davis 1955). Urbanism is several generations old, say somewhere between 100 and 300 years old. Hunter gatherers appeared around 2m years ago and homo sapiens around 300k years ago. Assuming industrial revolution as the start of modern urbanism, it is about 200 years old, really nothing as part of hunter gatherers timeline: 200/2,000,000=0.0001 or 0.01%.

Humans have evolved to live in nature in small bands at low density, not in cities among millions at very high densities. Some species such as ants or bees thrive at high densities–but human nature is unlike that of ants or bees–by one estimate humans are 90% chimp and only 10% bee (Haidt 2012).

[6] See also wonderful Freud's "Civilization and its discontents" (2015)--by building up a civilization and living in it we gave up on human nature.

In the past, and still in poor environments, livability is about survival; and in developed environments livability is about lifestyle and self-actualization. The point is nicely visualized by Inglehart (2020) in figure 4. Likewise with urbanization.

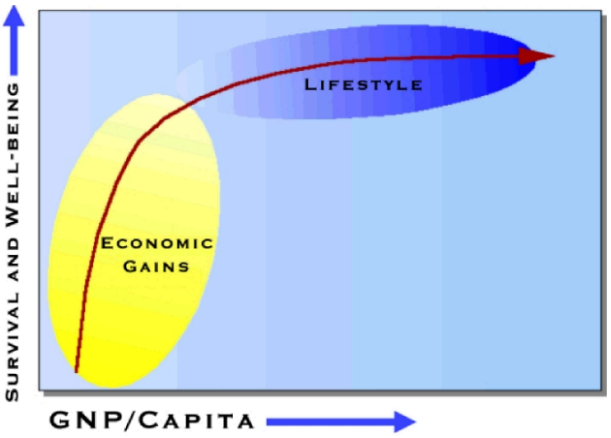

Figure 4. Source: Inglehart (2020).

Urbanization used to be a sheer necessity to survive–finding a job or crucial conditions, commodities or services, like safety, food and medical care–all related to basic needs such as those at the bottom of the Maslow's hierarchy. We still see this in some parts of the world, with many seeking to satisfy the most basic needs in cities. And in earlier historical periods people in cities had more freedom–for instance they could get away from the landlord in cities.[7] Even in more recent periods cities enjoyed more freedoms as aptly observed by Tönnies (1887). While nowadays in some sense cities still may offer more freedoms especially to nonconformist types such as LGBTQ+, cities are uniformly less safe than rural areas in terms of crime (Bettencourt et al 2007).

As per central place theory,[8] cities enjoy a certain advantage in satisfying higher human needs. Notably, self-actualization is often easier in a city, as there are more amenities and like-minded people. Indeed, this is one main reason why adults, especially young ones, may find cities more livable or useful. Production and consumption is mainly meant for adults.[9] Cities are built for production and

[7] I am grateful for these points to Jan Ott.
[8] https://www.britannica.com/money/central-place-theory
[9] Children and elderly cannot use neither factories nor office space. Neither can they fully use or need many amenities (with exception of amenities meant for them such as hospitals). Biggest consumption items, house and car are meant for adults–children and older elderly do not buy them. Likewise with self-actualization–young children do not need a city yet, and older elderly do not need city anymore–the urban amenities benefit is not there or very small, and urban disamenities such as stress, air, light and noise pollutions affect them equally if not more than adults as they are more fragile. Indeed, young, single and well-educated persons report relatively higher life satisfaction in

consumption. Earlier it was industrialization with factories, and more recently office space and service sector.

Fundamentally, human needs can be satisfied in rural areas in decently developed countries–there is not really a need for cities to satisfy human needs. On the other hand, at least in some ways cities can help with the satisfaction of some human needs–notably regarding freedoms, amenities, and self-actualization. Given somewhat conflicting predictions regarding human needs satisfaction across urban-rural gradient an empirical test using a happiness yardstick is useful–and indeed ruralities are typically happier–urban unhappiness is common across the world (Okulicz-Kozaryn & Valente 2021b).

8.4 Discussion and Conclusions

"Nature is not a place to visit, it is home" (Gary Snyder)

It is forgotten that nature is our species' home, not a place to visit, like a park in a city where one can go for a walk on the weekend. It does not mean that the ideal human habitat is wilderness, but it does mean that humans have not evolved for city life, which again is not just a built environment but a way of life. And humans have an innate ability to connect with other living organisms, so called biophilia (Wilson 1986). Another key point that is forgotten is that the more urban, the less natural is the environment. There is a clear conflict between the two. It is nicely visualized in a human-wildlife conflict diagram in figure 5.

cities than in non-city areas, whereas the opposite is the case for the unemployed (Carlsen & Leknes, 2025).

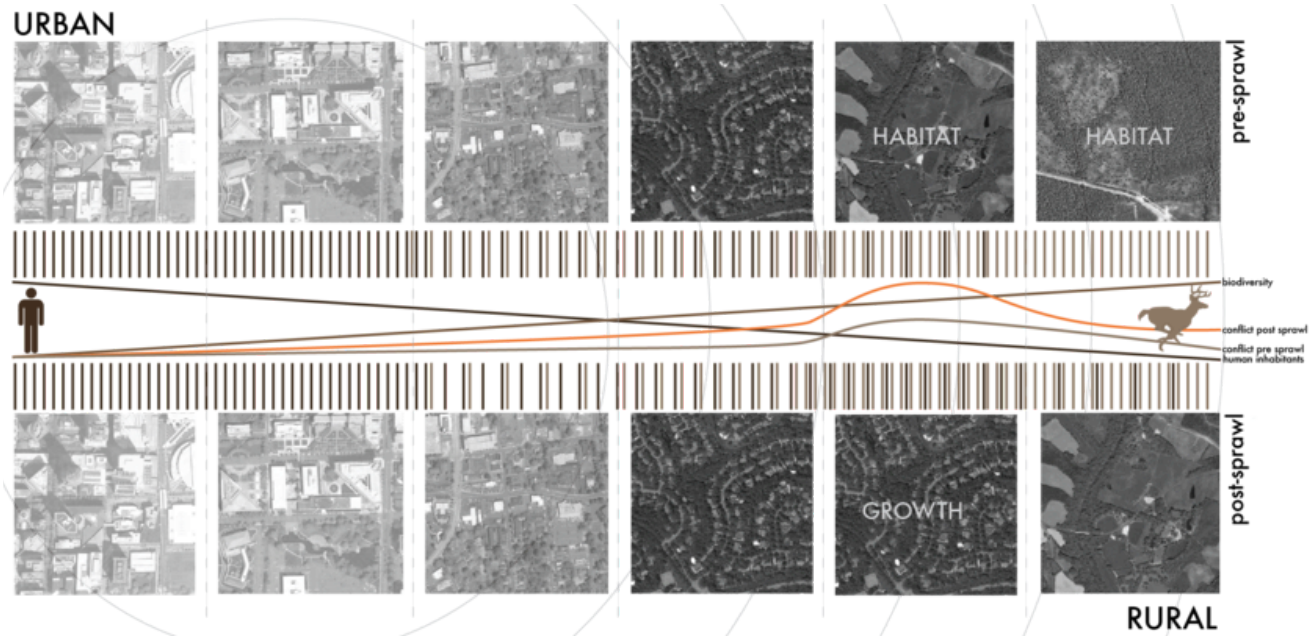

Figure 5. Human-Wildlife conflict. To the left, urban environments are full of humans and with little biodiversity and other organisms. To the right, there are few humans and more other organisms. And ever sprawling cities generate conflict between humans and other organisms by turning rural into urban. Source, and full resolution: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Humanwildlife_conflict_labeled.png And there is also a related visualization of the so called "rural-to-urban transect," https://transect.org/img_lib2.html for instance see: https://urbanenvironmentalstudies.org/2017/09/15/city-vs-country-the-urban-rural-continuum/ and https://www.cnu.org/publicsquare/2017/04/13/great-idea-rural-urban-transect.

It is not that governments should try to get rid of cities, and urbanites should try to move out of them. We need cities due to overpopulation to house 8b+ humans. In the long term, we need to think about overpopulation and overurbanization. For instance, California is not fit to house 40m people. But in the near future we are stuck with urbanism. Likewise, urbanites should not move en masse out of cities–for starters that would just create giant suburb.

Suburbanization is one of these phenomena that is "smart for one and dumb for all." Assume there is no suburb, just a dense city and untouched virgin nature outside of it. Then it makes sense to live on the outskirts or just outside of the city to enjoy the best of the both worlds, being close to city amenities such as airport and hospital, but also away from disamenities such as noise and pollution. But then as many act this way we end up with a US suburb, arguably the worst form of settlement of all, indeed in some ways the worst of the 2 worlds, congested, fake, and not so close to city amenities anymore but still close enough to disamenities. On US suburbs see timeless Duany et al (2000).

8.4.1 Research Agenda for the Future–What we Want to Know Additionally

So far I have mostly focused on what we know. But there are also things we want to know.

Much of existing research uses cross sectional surveys such as World Values Survey, Eurobarometers, and US General Social Survey. Panel datasets such as German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) are of limited use–humans often spend a lifetime at one urbanity level such as a large city and do not move frequently across urban-rural spectrum. Still some countries, such as China, have experienced massive urbanization and in such context longitudinal data are worthwhile.

One direction are novel and or underused data sources. For instance, the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS, cdc.gov/brfss) is rarely used. Social media is a great source of SWB geographic data, one can infer SWB from geo-tagged tweets (e.g., Mitchell et al 2013), instagram posts, and so forth. Urbanism can be measured in a multitude of ways–one recent measurement was distance from a city center (e.g., Finnemann et al 2024).

Another direction is interactions–which subgroups, say gender, age, education, are happier at what urbanity level? Say I'm a young uneducated single mother–am I better off in a village, town, or a metropolis? Such research is useful for evidence based pursuit of happiness–one can then relate better findings to herself based on idiosyncratic characteristics. See research by Giovanni Perucca,[10] notably see Lenzi & Perucca (2022), and Philip S. Morrison.[11]

Experimental or even quasi-experimental data seem non-existent. Still such data may exist, or may appear in the near future. Causal inference may be possible then.

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[10] https://scholar.google.com/citations?hl=en&user=kY9mo2wAAAAJ&view_op=list_works&sortby=pubdate

[11] https://scholar.google.com/citations?hl=en&user=A6hptiMAAAAJ&view_op=list_works&sortby=pubdate

SWB is not just life satisfaction–there are many approaches and various schema–for one review see Veenhoven (2009). For instance, it can be different parts of a scale (e.g., Okulicz-Kozaryn 2024a), domain satisfactions (e.g., Finnemann et al 2024), and so forth.

Urban unhappiness is not only about the built environment, but also about the way of life. Urban way of life is transient, stressed, rapid, disconnected from the environment, hunkered down and so forth (Okulicz-Kozaryn 2015). There is great variability in the urban built environment and urban way of life–measurement of these can improve inference greatly. It is not just urban v rural or even degrees of urbanness. Rather it is the multitude of urban characteristics that matter for both QOL and SWB. Some are city characteristics, what makes a city city: size, density, heterogeneity (Wirth 1938). Some are straightforward and relatively easy to measure such as green areas, and public transit accessibility. But many are yet unexplored or underexplored and difficult to measure such as city "energy," "vibe," meaningful social connection, and so forth. There was pioneering work in that direction by Richard Florida to understand city "personalities,"[12] and there are more recent approaches e.g., Mouratidis & Delclòs-Alió (2026).

Perhaps the biggest near future changes over the next few decades and associated need for research is due to technology. Technology has affected urbanization and will continue to do so arguably even more as there is more and more technology. Notably in the past sanitation has enabled high density living as initially without it urban streets were drowning in sewage. Recent technologies such as smart phones, self-driving cars, and video-conferencing are already making cities less necessary–one can produce and consume more easily from far away. This has been seen with covid19 pandemic–many have left cities to avoid another overlooked city problem, increased infectious disease spread–and found livability and greater happiness outside of the city (Okulicz-Kozaryn 2024b). AI, smart-city, and general automation will likely accelerate the process making the city less necessary. Perhaps the distant future will be a city mostly inhabited by robots (and city loving humans such as economists) and most humans will live in their natural environment (it would require a small fraction of current population or inhabiting other planet(s)). See figure 6.

[12] https://creativeclass.com/richard_florida/books/whos-your-city/

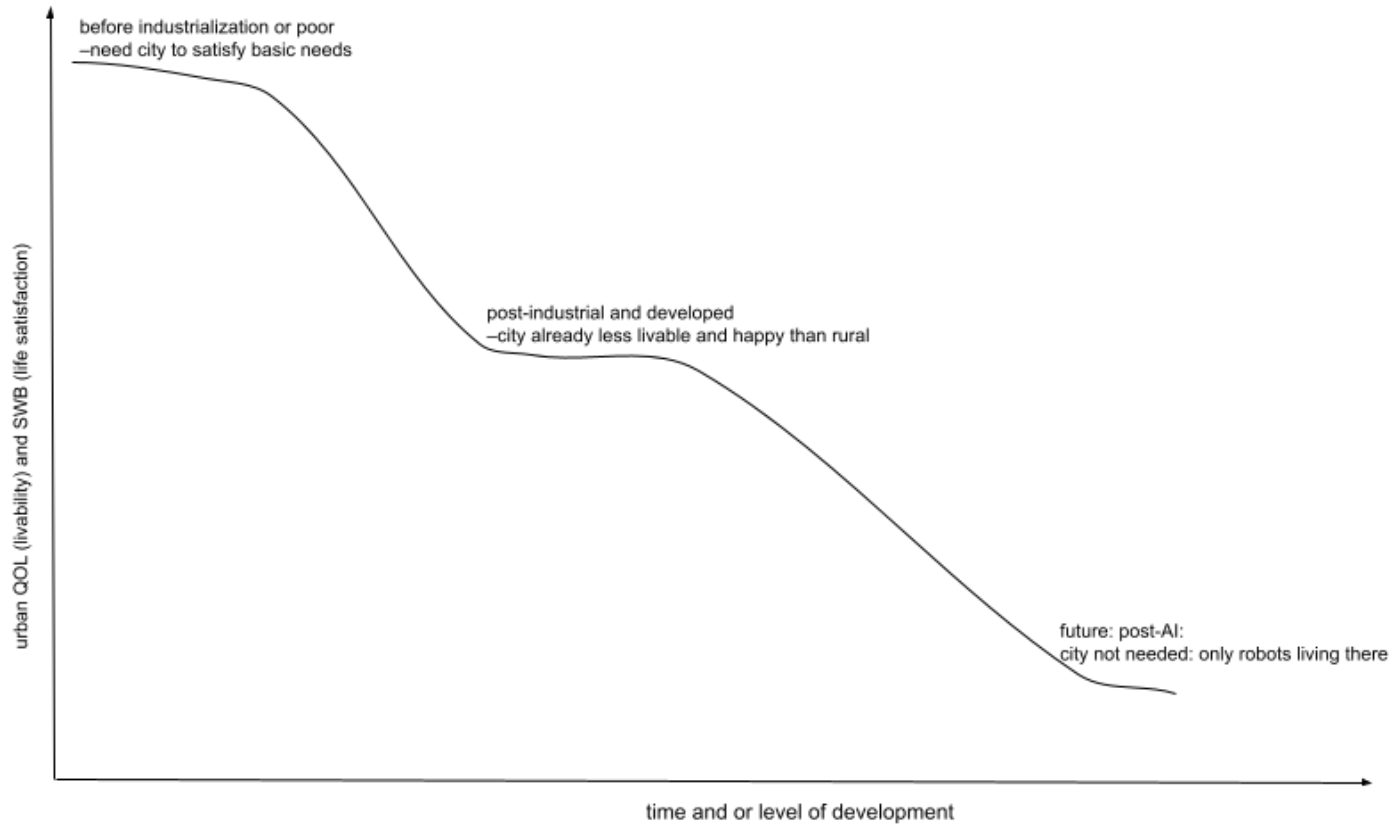

Figure 6. Timeline of livability and happiness of cities including speculation about future.

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