

# Is your city led by heart or head?

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Is your character shaped by where you live -- or vice versa? University of Michigan psychology researchers found that some cities lead with their heart -- emotional and interpersonal strengths -- while others lead with their head—intellectual and self-oriented strengths.

They also found such distinctions are also related to economic and political consequences.

"The place where we grew up or currently reside is more than a physical space," psychology researchers Nansook Park and Christopher Peterson argue in their study. "It defines who we are, how we think about ourselves and others, and the way we live.

"When we meet others for the first time, we often ask, 'Where are you from?'"

However, psychologists have rarely studied cities, and when they do, the focus is on problems like crime or obesity. More than half of the world's population now lives in cities, and Park and Peterson say it is time for psychologists to look for what is right about urban life in addition to what is wrong.

Park and Peterson studied character strengths—positive dispositions like love of learning, kindness, and teamwork—among more than 47,000 residents of the 50 largest U.S. cities who completed an on-line survey between measuring character strengths. The study is detailed in the journal *American Psychologist*.

Instead of the Red State/Blue State divide that has dominated politics in the past decade, psychologists need to look more at cities and to focus on their unique positive strengths, they say. Heart-strong cities tended to be warmer, less-crowded, more community/team-work oriented with more families with children, and "perhaps kinder and gentler." They were more likely to vote for John McCain in 2008, according to the researchers. The five highest scoring heart-oriented cities were: El Paso, Texas; Mesa, Ariz.; Miami, Fla.; Virginia Beach, Va.; and Fresno, Calif.

"Their residents report more positive emotions and a greater sense of meaning," said Park, an associate professor of psychology. "These features suggest that the culture of heart cities centers on other people and the emotional ties that bind people together. Heart cities are kinder and gentler because they afford greater opportunities for close relationships and—perhaps—more pleasurable and more meaningful lives."

Head-strong cities tended to be more intellectual, innovative, and creative with a greater number of patents per capita. They are often labeled as hot spot cities for talent and high tech industries and tended to vote for Barack Obama. The five highest scoring head-oriented cities were: San Francisco, Calif.; Los Angeles, Calif.; Oakland, Calif.; Albuquerque, N.M.; and Honolulu, Hawaii.

"Cities with strengths of the head are also more crowded and have a higher cost of living," Park said. "These features converge to suggest that the culture of head cities entails individual achievement, affluence, education, and change."

Some cities had both above average heart and head scores. For example, El Paso had the highest heart score but also ranked 10th on the head score, while Honolulu ranked fifth on the head score and 11th on the heart score. Detroit ranked 13th on the heart score and 17th on the head

score.

"Cities as a topic of explicit study deserve greater attention from psychology," said Peterson, psychology professor, national leader in the field of positive psychology and organizer of U-M's "What Makes Life Worth Living" theme semester.

"[Psychology](#) researchers can contribute to future urban policy and the well-being of cities and their residents by addressing how cities create, enable, or allow the expression of different strengths of character among their residents."

Is it better to lead with your head or your heart? Each has its own advantages, the researchers conclude.

"Rather than trying to mimic cities such as San Francisco and Boston, mayors and chambers of commerce of other U.S. cities might instead emphasize the soft trade-off between strengths of the head and strengths of the heart implied by our results and stress that life may already be good in their own towns, simply in different ways," Park said.

**More information:** [www.apa.org/pubs/journals/amp/index.aspx](http://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/amp/index.aspx)

Provided by University of Michigan

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