

# Mental Disorders in Urban Areas: An Ecological Study of Schizophrenia and Other Psychoses

Article

## Places Change Minds: Exploring the Psychology of Urbanicity Using a Brief Contemplation Method

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### Abstract

An accruing body of research suggests that urban environments negatively affect mental health and well-being. It is thought that some of this so-called "urbanicity effect" can be explained by the perceived quality of the living environment. The two studies reported here used online survey methods to explore changes to self-reported psychological mechanisms thought to underpin mental health and well-being before and after participants briefly contemplated urban/rural or desirable/undesirable residential images. Our findings demonstrate that even brief contemplation of places change how we consider our futures and that places deemed relatively undesirable appear to promote a threat-focused anticipatory set. Importantly, these changes were not found to be associated with perceived urbanity but rather with perceived desirability of place. These findings should be considered alongside increasing evidence that urban regeneration and place-making are matters of public health concern.

### Keywords

urban/rural, desirable neighborhoods, psychological mechanisms, mental health and well-being

### Introduction

#### The Urbanicity Effect

The phenomenon known as the "urbanicity effect" refers to the accruing body of evidence that living in urban areas has detrimental effects on mental health and well-being. This research began in earnest when Faris and Dunham (1939) reported a per capita linear decrease in rates of severe mental illness from densely populated, disorganized, inner-city regions, to affluent, residential areas on the outskirts. More recent research supports Faris and Dunham's finding with one meta-analysis showing that urban environments confer a 2.37 times greater risk of schizophrenia than rural environments (Vasson, Pedersen, Murray, Collier, & Lewis, 2012). While there has been some attempt to explain the relationship between psychosis and urban living in terms of downward social drift (Murah & Oyebode, 2004), dose-response evidence suggests that there is a more fundamental, causal relationship between urban living and psychosis (Krabbedam & Van Os, 2005; Pedersen & Mortensen, 2001; Van Os, 2004). Furthermore, although effect sizes are smaller, urban environments have been shown to increase risk of major depression and anxiety (Lederbogen et al., 2011; Peen, Schoevers, Beckman, & Dekker, 2010; Sundquist, Frank, & Sundquist, 2004; Wang, 2004). These analyses have used population density to define urbanity, and


some researchers have commented that this tight epidemiological research focus limits our understanding of the specific effects of physical and social contexts on mental health (Weich, Twigg, & Lewis, 2006). These authors suggest a need to widen the focus of research into the urbanicity effect and to develop methods that enable the objective study of how people respond to different living environments.

#### The Physical and Socioeconomic Urban Context

In the United Kingdom, 98% of the most deprived areas are found in cities, tending to be areas where urban regeneration initiatives are focused (Department of Communities and Local Government [DCLG], 2011). However, research has continued to find urbanicity effects even when controlling for indices of deprivation (McKenzie, Murray, & Booth, 2013). Such findings indicate that some of the urbanicity effect may be attributed to the psychosocial stress associated with living in physical and social environments perceived to

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