



HAPPY CITIZEN DESIGN Towards a New Metric for Measuring Urban happiness

JOSÉ ANTONIO ONDIVIELA GARCÍA (JOSEA.ONDIVIELA@UFV.ES), AURORA LÓPEZ FERNÁNDEZ
(AURORA.LOPEZ@DTHM.UHU.ES), JAIME MATEO LÓPEZ (JAIMEMLOPEZ03@GMAIL.COM)
Universidad Francisco de Vitoria, Spain

KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
Urban happiness Social cohesion Well-being Public space Urban index	<i>Global happiness rankings often rely on national-scale, perception-based surveys that fail to capture the true quality of urban life. This article introduces a new metric the Urban Happiness Index based on the Hexagon of Happiness model, which includes six urban dimensions: prosperity, social cohesion, civic pride, public space, safety, and environmental sustainability. Using data from 175 global cities, the study cross-references this model with suicide and depression rates to mitigate perception bias. Findings suggest that the happiest cities are also the most attractive to talent, offering valuable insights for urban planning and policy design.</i>

Received: 01/ 07 / 2026

Accepted: 06/ 01 / 2026

1. Why a New Urban Metric? Cities as Infrastructures of Well-Being

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition that cities play a critical role not only in economic development or service provision but also in shaping the daily experiences and well-being of their inhabitants. Urban environments influence how people interact, how safe and connected they feel, and how they perceive their quality of life. However, despite this growing awareness, traditional frameworks for measuring happiness remain largely detached from the urban scale.

Most existing happiness metrics are designed at the national level and based on subjective surveys. While these approaches capture certain emotional or perceptual dimensions, they tend to overlook key urban variables such as walkability, access to green spaces, cultural infrastructure, or housing affordability. Moreover, they often obscure important differences between urban and rural areas, as well as within cities themselves. Scientific evidence increasingly demonstrates the impact of the built environment on mental health and social cohesion. Studies have shown that elements such as urban vegetation, accessible public space, and safe pedestrian networks are directly correlated with higher levels of perceived well-being. At the same time, issues such as unaffordable housing, urban sprawl, and depersonalized infrastructures contribute to undesired loneliness and emotional stress.

Faced with this gap, urban theorists and practitioners have begun to advocate for more comprehensive metrics that reflect the complex realities of city life. Instead of relying solely on macroeconomic indicators or national sentiment, these emerging frameworks place greater emphasis on tangible, place-based factors that shape daily urban experience. This article contributes to that shift by proposing a new model specifically tailored to the city scale: the *Urban Happiness Index*, which combines six interrelated dimensions that define a happy and liveable city from both a material and emotional perspective.

2. What Is Happiness? A Perspective from Social and Urban Sciences

Happiness is a complex and multifaceted concept that has evolved over time across different academic disciplines. While traditionally addressed by philosophy and psychology, in recent decades it has become a relevant topic in economics, public health, and increasingly, urban studies. Rather than a singular state, happiness is now widely understood as a dynamic condition of subjective well-being that includes not only the presence of positive emotions, but also a sense of life satisfaction and the absence of prolonged negative emotional states (Diener et al., 1999; Seligman, 2011).

From a scientific standpoint, this concept is often operationalized through the framework of Subjective Well-Being (SWB), which includes three interrelated components: evaluative (satisfaction with life and specific domains such as work or housing), emotional (balance of positive and negative feelings), and eudaimonic (sense of meaning, purpose, and personal growth) (OECD, 2013).

When applied to the urban context, these dimensions become intertwined with the material and social environments that shape daily life. Factors such as public safety, walkability, green space availability, transportation access, and social interaction directly influence how residents evaluate their lives and navigate emotional experiences. In this sense, happiness in cities cannot be understood as a purely internal or individual matter, it is deeply conditioned by spatial, social, and political configurations. Urban happiness, therefore, must be seen as an emergent phenomenon: it is produced not only through personal circumstances, but also through the collective environment that enables or restricts well-being. The design of public spaces, the availability of inclusive services, the rhythm of the streets, and the sense of belonging to a community, all shape the emotional landscape of a city.

2.1. How Is Happiness Measured Today? Limitations and Biases

Despite widespread consensus on the importance of happiness and well-being in shaping public policy, the tools currently used to measure happiness remain limited in scope especially when applied to the urban scale. Most global happiness indices, such as the *World Happiness Report* (Helliwell et al., 2023) or the *OECD Better Life Index* (OECD, 2024), rely on a combination of objective indicators (e.g., GDP per capita, life expectancy, access to education) and subjective assessments (e.g., life satisfaction, trust in institutions, perceived freedom of choice). While this approach provides useful cross-national comparisons, it introduces several methodological challenges. One of the most significant is cultural bias: perceptions of happiness are strongly mediated by cultural norms, national identity, and differences in how people interpret and respond to survey questions (OECD, 2013). As a result, countries with high social cohesion or strong institutional trust may report high levels of happiness despite showing signs of social or mental health distress.

A second limitation is the aggregation of data at the national level, which tends to mask disparities between urban and rural contexts or among different neighbourhoods within the same city. This is particularly problematic for large metropolitan regions, where indicators such as access to services, housing conditions, or safety vary dramatically from one district to another. Furthermore, empirical contradictions have emerged in recent years. Countries that consistently top global happiness rankings such as Finland, Denmark, and Iceland also report some of the highest suicide and depression rates in Europe (World Population Review, 2025). These findings raise important questions about the validity of self-reported data and the extent to which existing metrics reflect the true emotional and psychological state of a population.

In response to these shortcomings, researchers have begun exploring alternative ways to calibrate happiness measures by integrating mental health indicators and spatial data. Studies conducted at Tilburg University, for instance, have proposed incorporating life course analysis and social needs mapping to better capture long-term patterns of well-being (Hofstra et al., 2019). Other proposals emphasize the need to shift from abstract national averages to concrete, city-specific metrics that reflect real conditions on the ground. This study aligns with that effort, proposing a new model for evaluating urban happiness through objective, disaggregated indicators that go beyond perception and reflect the tangible qualities of life in cities.

2.2. Aim of this Research: A New Urban Happiness Index

This study introduces an alternative metric for evaluating urban happiness, designed to overcome the methodological and contextual limitations of traditional global indices. While existing happiness rankings are largely shaped by national averages and self-reported perceptions, the proposed model focuses specifically on cities and emphasizes objective, spatial, and socially grounded indicators.

The core of this framework is the Hexagon of Happiness (Adams & Cohen, 2017), which identifies six critical dimensions that define the quality of urban life:

- **Economic Prosperity** – Level of income, employment opportunity, affordability, and access to basic services.
- **Social Cohesion** – Community trust, intergenerational inclusion, and social connectivity.
- **Civic Pride** – Residents' identification with their city, cultural vitality, and sense of belonging.
- **Quality of Public Space** – Availability and design of parks, walkable streets, and inclusive public areas.
- **Safety and Trust in the Environment** – Actual and perceived safety, as well as public confidence in urban security.
- **Environmental Sustainability** – Air and water quality, connectivity, access to nature, and walkability.

We also include the happiness score; it complements the six objective dimensions of the Hexagon by capturing the subjective perception of happiness:

- **Happiness Score** - Self-reported life satisfaction and emotional well-being, derived from international survey data.

2.3. Methodology

The index is built from data on 175 global cities, sourced from recognized platforms including the OECD Better Life Index, Day Zero Project, NUMBEO, and the IESE Cities in Motion Index. To ensure comparability, all indicators are normalized, reversing those where lower values imply better outcomes. The six objective dimensions of the Hexagon are combined with the Happiness Score, producing a composite of seven indicators per city. The final ranking is then calculated through a balanced formula: 50% from this aggregated score and 50% from the inverse suicide rate, so that both structural conditions and mental health outcomes are equally represented. To address the biases inherent in perception-based surveys, the model is thus cross-referenced with mental health data specifically, depression prevalence and suicide rates which serve as corrective indicators to align perceived and actual well-being. The aim is to construct a more accurate, inclusive, and policy-relevant metric of urban happiness. By doing so, the study seeks to support urban decision-makers in designing and governing cities that foster not only economic growth, but also emotional, social, and environmental well-being.

3. Reading Between the Lines: What Makes a City Truly Happy?

The Urban Happiness Index proposes a multidimensional, empirical model of urban happiness. This index integrates six tangible variables (economic prosperity, social cohesion, civic pride, public space, safety, and environmental sustainability) and adjusts them through mental health indicators, namely suicide rates. This framework offers an understanding of well-being in cities, uncovering key contradictions and patterns often overlooked in global reports.

3.1. Understanding Each Variable's Weight: From Infrastructure to Emotion

Each dimension in the *Urban Happiness Index* contributes differently to shaping how a city is perceived, experienced, and felt. While some variables demonstrate consistent alignment with higher happiness outcomes, others reveal complex or contradictory roles especially when examined through the corrective lens of suicide rates. Here is how each dimension performed across the spectrum of 175 global cities:

- **Natural Space** (OECD, 2024): Natural space emerges as one of the weakest and least differentiating dimensions in the Urban Happiness Index. Even cities that dominate the overall ranking, such as Dubai, London, and Singapore, achieve only modest scores when it comes to green areas and public environmental amenities. Their rapid development and dense urban growth leave limited room for accessible, everyday nature. In contrast, cities traditionally associated with strong connections to their natural environment, such as Tampere or Oulu, stand out more clearly, though they are not at the very top of the global ranking. At the other end of the spectrum, cities like Johannesburg, Kiev, and Hyderabad reveal the sharpest deficits, where urban expansion, lack of planning, and limited investment in ecological infrastructure create environments almost entirely deprived of restorative green space.

The pattern is consistent: natural space is globally undervalued, and even in thriving cities it remains an unmet potential rather than a cornerstone of urban life.

- **Main Cultural and Sports Events** (Day Zero Project, 2025; Ondiviola, 2021) (Attractive Cities Worldwide Observatory): the ability of a city to activate cultural and sporting life through festivals, concerts, and large-scale civic gatherings remains one of the weakest yet most revealing dimensions of the Urban Happiness Index. Interestingly, the leaders of the overall ranking do not always dominate in this field. London and Madrid stand out with

comparatively higher scores, reflecting their deep-rooted traditions of public festivals, internationally visible cultural programming, and robust infrastructures for leisure and entertainment. These cases show how events serve as vital social adhesives, creating shared rituals that strengthen community identity.

By contrast, other top-ranked cities such as Dubai and Abu Dhabi perform much less strongly in this dimension, despite excelling in safety, urban planning, and economic prosperity. Their relatively low event scores highlight a structural gap: rapid infrastructural and economic growth has not been matched by equivalent investment in cultural and civic programming, leaving an imbalance between material modernity and emotional vitality. At the bottom of the ranking, cities like Johannesburg, Durban, and St Petersburg also score poorly, though for different reasons. Here, fragile institutions, economic pressures, and competing priorities limit the development of consistent cultural life, resulting in fewer opportunities for collective expression and belonging.

This pattern reinforces the idea that cultural and sporting activation is a universal blind spot. Whether in wealthy cities prioritizing competitiveness or in struggling cities focusing on basic services, the absence of sustained events translates into fewer opportunities for bonding, symbolic richness, and civic pride. Far from being a luxury, events are essential rituals that animate public space, humanize urban environments, and nourish the shared imagination of the city.

- **Urban Planning** (IESE, 2024): Urban planning emerges as one of the clearest differentiators between successful and struggling cities. Dubai, Singapore, and Amsterdam stand out as models of coherence, where infrastructure is designed to support accessibility, service integration, and predictable spatial organization. These cities demonstrate that thoughtful planning reduces daily stress and builds a foundation for trust in the city as a functioning system. London and Madrid also perform strongly here, balancing historic urban fabrics with modernized infrastructures that maintain usability. In stark contrast, bottom-ranking cities such as Johannesburg, Santo Domingo, and Kiev display fragmented urban forms, weak service distribution, and infrastructural decay. In these environments, residents face logistical stress simply to access essential services, and urban space reinforces inequality rather than cohesion.

The comparison reveals that while planning alone does not guarantee happiness, the absence of coherent urban structures almost always correlates with lower well-being and higher social fragmentation.

- **Safety Index** (Numbeo, 2025): Safety proves to be one of the most decisive drivers of happiness, as cities with higher safety scores consistently cluster near the top of the ranking. Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and Oslo are clear examples: their reputations for low crime and secure public spaces create environments where people feel confident to navigate the city freely, reinforcing trust and everyday stability. London and Singapore, though larger and more complex, also perform well, showing that safety is achievable in both rapidly growing and historically dense cities.

However, the data also reveals that safety, while necessary, is not sufficient. South Korea and Japan, for instance, maintain relatively high safety levels but still appear in the lower half of the happiness index. The paradox highlights that without parallel investments in cultural vibrancy, social interaction, and emotional support, safety alone cannot generate happiness. Conversely, unsafe conditions, as seen in Johannesburg or Cape Town, consistently undermine well-being, regardless of other structural qualities.

- **Civic Pride** (Bloom, 2025): Civic pride introduces a symbolic but powerful dimension to urban happiness. London and Barcelona stand out as cities that generate strong feelings of pride and belonging among both residents and international visitors. Their symbolic richness, historical depth, and global visibility reinforce not only identity but also a sense of shared ownership and engagement. Madrid and Amsterdam also perform strongly,

suggesting that pride in place is as much about cultural narrative and history as it is about modern infrastructure.

At the other end of the scale, cities like Minsk, Kiev, and Vilnius struggle with low civic pride, reflecting fragile or contested identities and weaker global recognition. In these contexts, citizens may lack a strong sense of belonging, which reduces their engagement in the co-creation and care of the city. Civic pride is not simply an aesthetic quality, it is a measure of symbolic cohesion, and the cities that cultivate it tend to demonstrate greater resilience in the face of social and economic challenges.

- **Economic Prosperity** (World Bank, 2025): Economic performance remains one of the most decisive factors separating top from bottom cities. Dubai, Singapore, and London lead in this dimension, reflecting strong employment opportunities, high investment flows, and diverse economies that provide psychological security and greater freedom of choice for residents. Madrid and Abu Dhabi also score highly, confirming the close correlation between economic stability and overall urban satisfaction.

In contrast, cities like Montevideo, Durban, and Hyderabad score very low on economic potential, reflecting limited job creation, unstable growth, and persistent structural constraints. For these cities, the lack of financial resources and opportunities directly undermines happiness, restricting not only material well-being but also autonomy and time balance. While the data affirms that money does not guarantee happiness, it strongly suggests that the absence of economic stability nearly always leads to vulnerability, insecurity, and frustration in urban life.

- **Happiness Score** (Helliwell et al., 2023): The happiness score, derived from subjective global surveys, largely aligns with the overall ranking, yet it reveals significant nuances and paradoxes. Top-performing cities such as Dubai, London, and Amsterdam combine strong structural metrics with high self-reported satisfaction, showing that when planning, safety, prosperity, and civic pride converge, they reinforce subjective well-being. Cities like Oslo and Madrid also reflect this pattern, where economic stability and cultural visibility translate into greater reported life satisfaction.

Yet the dataset also exposes striking contradictions. Japan and South Korea, for instance, possess advanced infrastructures and relatively safe environments, but consistently record some of the lowest happiness levels worldwide. These results point to deeper cultural dynamics, such as high work pressure, limited social interaction, and stigma surrounding emotional vulnerability that urban structure alone cannot offset. Similarly, bottom-ranking cities like Kiev, Minsk, and Johannesburg display both low subjective happiness and weak structural performance, suggesting cumulative vulnerabilities where economic fragility and poor planning compound with emotional stress.

The happiness score thus reminds us that self-reported well-being is shaped not only by material or spatial conditions, but also by social values, cultural expectations, and emotional freedoms. Without acknowledging these dimensions, the picture of urban happiness remains incomplete.

- **Suicide Rate** (World Population Review, 2025): The inclusion of suicide data provides the most sobering corrective to the index. It reveals that cities can excel in safety, planning, and even reported happiness while simultaneously struggling with profound emotional distress. Switzerland, Japan, and South Korea are telling examples: despite wealth, stability, and global recognition, they are undermined by elevated suicide rates that expose the limits of conventional success indicators. These cases highlight the disconnect between structural well-being and psychological resilience, demonstrating that high-functioning infrastructures cannot substitute for emotional support and cultural openness.

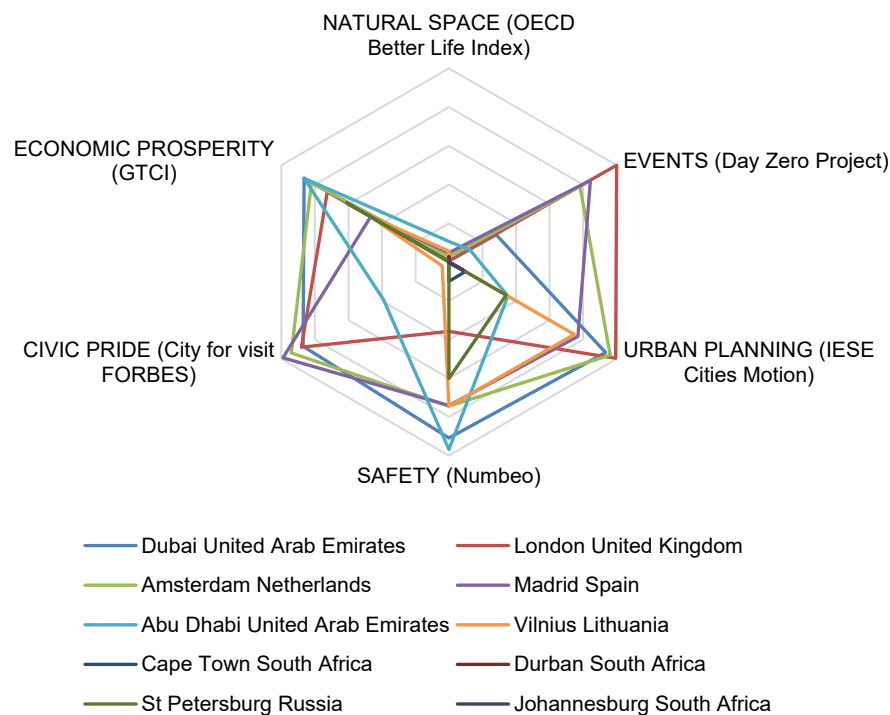
Conversely, cities like Buenos Aires and Istanbul, though modest in infrastructure and economic performance, show relatively healthier outcomes in suicide rates. Their resilience may stem from strong community bonds, cultural traditions, and social

networks that act as protective buffers even in the face of material shortcomings. At the very bottom, cities such as Johannesburg, Kiev, and Minsk reveal the compounded vulnerabilities of low subjective happiness, economic instability, and high suicide rates, creating environments where distress becomes systemic rather than exceptional.

This metric makes clear that emotional infrastructure, networks of care, shared rituals, mental health visibility, and community trust, is as vital as spatial planning or economic prosperity. Without it, even the most prosperous cities risk becoming emotionally fragile, while less materially wealthy cities can sometimes cultivate greater resilience through social cohesion and cultural strength.

This variable-by-variable analysis confirms that urban happiness is not the product of a single strength but rather the result of balance. High-performing cities tend to combine solid infrastructure, particularly in safety and planning, with moderate to strong scores in civic pride and economic stability. However, dimensions such as natural space and cultural activation remain weak even in the most successful cases, suggesting blind spots in how cities nourish emotional and communal life. Ultimately, the happiest cities are those that integrate the technical with the human planning with purpose, and safety with soul.

Figure 1. Top 5 vs Bottom 5 Cities: Sorted by Final Ranking



Source: Author's elaboration from Urban Happiness dataset, 2025.

3.2. Comparative City Profiles: What Makes the Best Cities Stand Out?

Cities at the top of the Urban Happiness Index, such as Dubai, London, Amsterdam, and Madrid, share several structural and social characteristics:

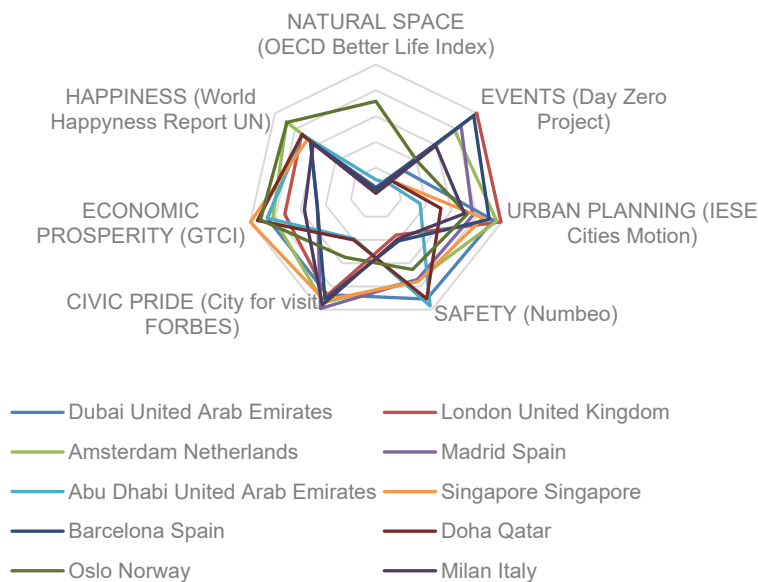
- They score high in urban planning and safety, offering organized and secure environments.
- They provide strong economic opportunities, contributing to a sense of stability and autonomy.
- They demonstrate moderate to high civic pride, reflecting a positive urban identity and global visibility.

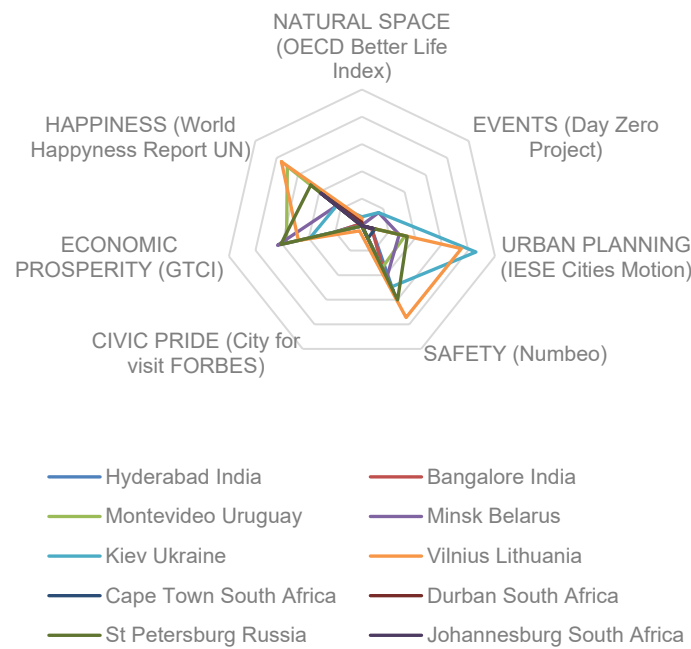
- They show uneven performance in events, highlighting a gap between infrastructure and civic vitality.
- Some also record moderate suicide scores, showing that strong infrastructure does not fully protect emotional health.

In contrast, the lowest-ranking cities such as Vilnius, Cape Town, Durban, St. Petersburg, and Johannesburg tend to exhibit systemic weaknesses across categories:

- They suffer from weaker urban structure, with lower planning and accessibility scores.
- Safety levels are reduced, increasing everyday stress and uncertainty.
- Events and public rituals are scarce, limiting opportunities for collective expression and reinforcing weak civic pride.
- Interestingly, some record lower suicide rates than their “happier” counterparts, suggesting that family bonds, cultural traditions, or informal networks may compensate for material deficiencies.
- The contrast between the highest- and lowest-ranking cities reveals that while they differ greatly in structural strengths such as planning, safety, and economy, they share common gaps in cultural activation and natural space. Even the top cities struggle to provide emotionally vibrant and socially engaging environments, often scoring low in cultural life and mental health outcomes. On the other hand, some lower-ranked cities show surprisingly resilient emotional patterns, with lower suicide rates despite weaker infrastructure, hinting at the importance of informal social supports or cultural cohesion. In both cases, it becomes clear that infrastructure alone does not ensure happiness. True urban well-being depends on a delicate balance between material systems and the emotional, symbolic, and communal life of the city.

Figure 2. Circle Map of Happiness: *Top 10 vs. Bottom 10 Cities.*





Source: Author's elaboration from Urban Happiness dataset, 2025.

3.3. Suicide and Happiness: A Complex, Nonlinear Relationship

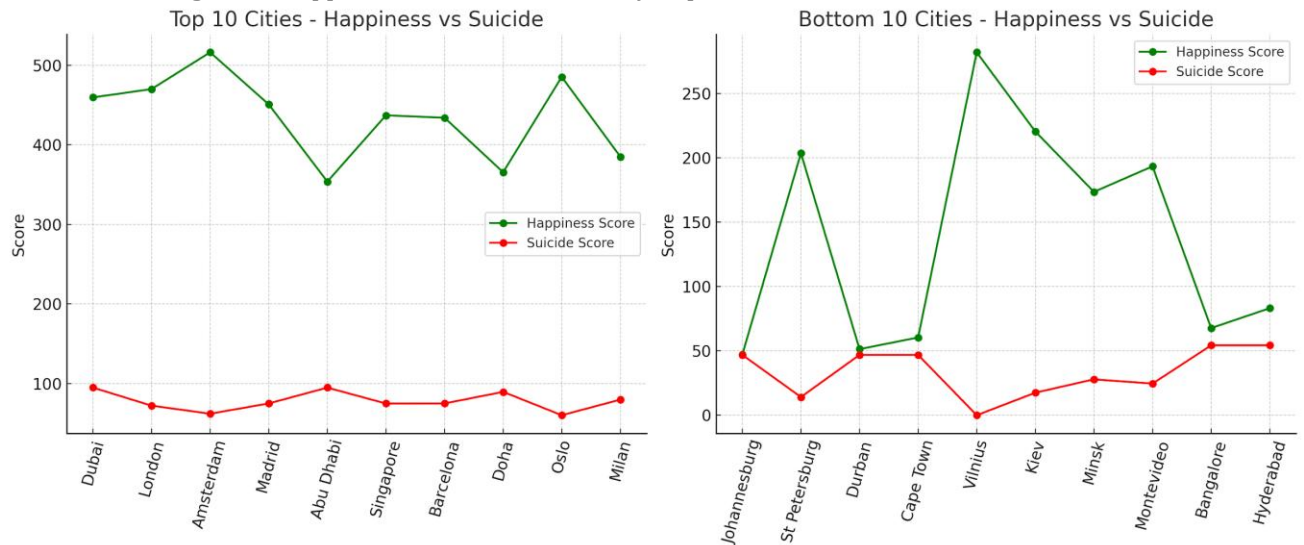
One of the most revealing findings of this study is the disconnect between happiness and suicide scores. When cities are ranked solely by infrastructure or prosperity, the expectation is that higher structural quality should correspond to lower emotional suffering. However, the data shows that this relationship is neither linear nor consistent. It must also be noted that there may be a high bias in administrative accounting for suicide, since reporting practices and institutional transparency differ significantly across regions.

Cities such as Dubai, London, and Amsterdam rank among the happiest in the Urban Happiness Index, excelling in safety, planning, and economic stability. Yet, some of these same cities also display moderate suicide scores, suggesting that structural well-being does not fully shield against emotional vulnerability. Even in environments where residents enjoy organized infrastructure, security, and economic opportunity, feelings of pressure, alienation, or social fragmentation can persist, particularly in highly globalized and competitive contexts.

Conversely, bottom-ranked cities like Vilnius, Durban, and Johannesburg show a dual pattern. In some cases, they combine low happiness with high suicide, reinforcing the cumulative effect of infrastructural weakness, safety concerns, and poor economic conditions on mental health. However, in other instances, despite low structural scores, suicide rates are not as elevated as expected. This hints at the presence of alternative forms of resilience such as strong family networks, cultural traditions, or informal community ties that buffer emotional suffering even in environments of systemic urban fragility.

Perhaps the most important pattern is that both the top and bottom cities share a common blind spot: structural performance does not guarantee emotional health. High-ranking cities risk overlooking psychological distress hidden beneath strong infrastructure, while lower-ranking cities may underestimate the importance of social and cultural resilience as protective factors. The evidence reinforces that suicide rates must be treated not as marginal data, but as central corrective indicators in happiness research. They reveal the difference between living in a city that is materially efficient and one that is emotionally liveable.

Figure 3. Happiness and Suicide Scores by Top 10 Cities and Bottom 10 cities

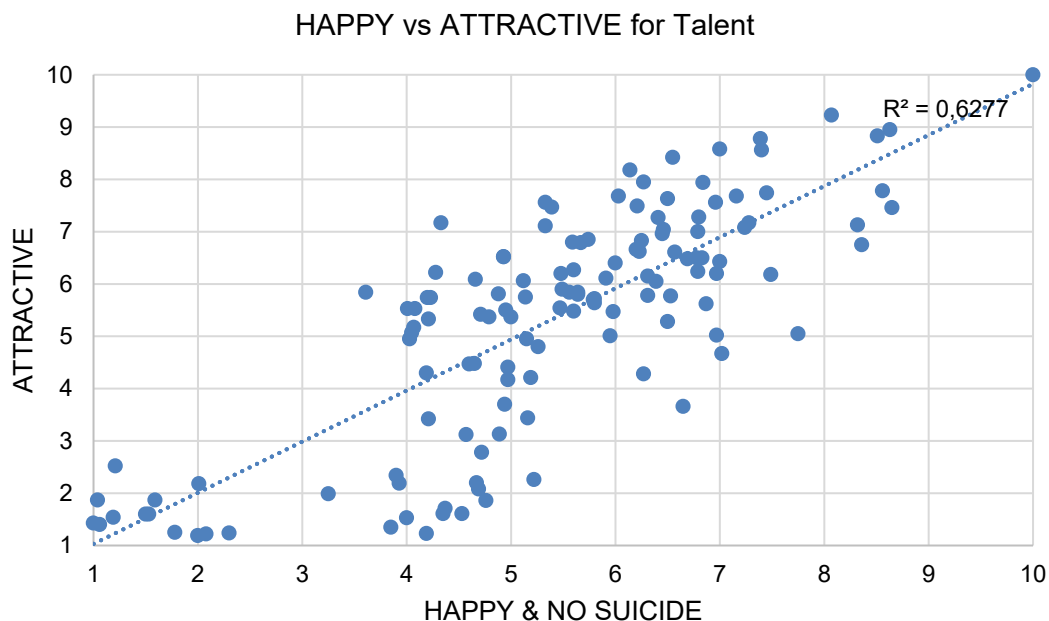


Source: Author's elaboration from Urban Happiness dataset, 2025.

3.4 Comparing with attractive cities

Although this version of the Urban Happiness Index offers a multi-layered model, future iterations could further refine both the scope and sensitivity of the data. A particularly promising avenue is the comparison of happiness scores with other strategic urban indicators, such as city attractiveness for talent and investment (Ondiviela, 2021). Preliminary tests already demonstrate a strong correlation: when analysing the 133 best-performing cities, the relationship between happiness and urban attractiveness produced an R^2 value of 0.6277, an excellent result that suggests emotional well-being is not just socially important but directly linked to a city's competitiveness and capacity to attract global talent. This opens a new field of research where happiness is not only an end, but a driver of long-term prosperity and urban appeal.

Figure 5. Outlier Cities: Happiness vs Suicide Points



Source: Author's elaboration from Urban Happiness dataset, 2025.

Another direction of refinement lies in the integration of real-time and high-frequency data sources. Social media sentiment analysis, mobility data, or participation in civic events could provide dynamic insights into how moods, emotions, and collective life evolve within cities. Rather than annual snapshots, this would allow for a temporal, more fluid understanding of urban well-being, sensitive to sudden shocks or gradual cultural shifts.

Cultural specificity also emerges as a key challenge. Current models assume universality in how happiness and distress are expressed, yet this can obscure deeply local realities. Some societies may report high satisfaction while masking emotional suffering, while others may express discontent yet enjoy strong social cohesion and relational support. Ethnographic research, community-based participatory studies, and interviews could help uncover these nuances, enriching the quantitative framework with context-sensitive insights.

Climate is another dimension that must increasingly be integrated into future iterations. Rising temperatures, extreme weather, and climate-related migration shape not only material resilience but also emotional security and psychological well-being. Including climate vulnerability and adaptation capacity as part of the happiness framework would recognize that sustainable cities must safeguard not only bodies and infrastructure, but also collective mental health during ecological disruption.

Finally, religion, spirituality, and symbolic rituals deserve closer attention. In many cities, collective belief systems provide cohesion, resilience, and hope in the absence of robust infrastructure or wealth. While difficult to quantify, these elements shape how people interpret suffering, build meaning, and sustain a sense of belonging. Careful integration of symbolic and spiritual dimensions could enrich the emotional geography of cities and offer a fuller picture of resilience.

The Urban Happiness Index presented here should be seen as a foundation, not a conclusion. As cities evolve under pressures of globalization, climate change, cultural transformation, and demographic shifts, the tools we use to understand them must adapt. Future research has the opportunity to expand the index into a richer diagnostic system one that integrates structural, emotional, cultural, and symbolic factors to guide the next generation of urban design and policy.

Using the data from the Observatory also corroborates the reliability of the index: people choose to live in attractive cities, and it is precisely there where they report being happier.

4. Conclusions

The results of this study show that designing for happiness is no longer a utopian ambition but an urgent necessity for contemporary cities. The Urban Happiness Index demonstrates that well-being does not emerge solely from infrastructure, GDP, or safety. Instead, it is generated through the interplay between tangible systems such as urban planning, economic stability, and public safety and intangible dimensions like civic pride and emotional health. By combining structural indicators with psychological outcomes, this research highlights not only which cities lead the ranking, but also why they succeed and where their vulnerabilities lie.

One of the most striking findings is that happiness and emotional suffering are not mutually exclusive. The inclusion of suicide as a corrective indicator shows that even structurally strong cities may conceal emotional fragility. Top-ranked cases excel in planning, safety, and prosperity, yet some also display moderate suicide scores, suggesting that material well-being alone does not guarantee emotional resilience. Conversely, several cities with weaker infrastructures do not always show equally high suicide levels, hinting at the role of family networks, cultural traditions, and informal social ties in buffering emotional distress. These patterns emphasize that efficiency and material progress are insufficient if citizens do not experience belonging, connection, or expressive freedom.

The consistent underperformance in *Natural Space (OECD Better Life Index)* reveals a critical gap. Even cities that score highly in planning, safety, and prosperity frequently lag in the provision of accessible green areas. This weakness limits opportunities for daily contact with nature, which

research consistently links to psychological restoration, social interaction, and long-term well-being. In many cases, rapid urban development has prioritized infrastructure and competitiveness over ecological presence, resulting in a deficit that undermines broader happiness outcomes.

Planning and safety continue to emerge as indispensable foundations. Most of the highest-ranking cities combine high scores in these dimensions, which create the baseline conditions for trust, creativity, and social life to flourish. Yet the persistence of suicide rates within otherwise successful environments underscores the limits of this model: emotional distress can remain invisible beneath polished infrastructure, making mental health an essential axis of urban policy.

By integrating suicide alongside happiness data, the Urban Happiness Index addresses a critical flaw of traditional rankings: their reliance on self-reported satisfaction, often shaped by cultural bias or national narrative. Mental health outcomes provide a corrective lens, grounding well-being in measurable realities. This transforms the index from a descriptive tool into a diagnostic one, capable of revealing hidden crises in cities that otherwise appear successful.

From a policy standpoint, the implications are profound. Emotional well-being must be deliberately planned, funded, and measured as part of urban development. This requires investment in mental health systems, accessible green spaces, inclusive cultural programs, everyday rituals of participation, and fostering symbolic and civic identity. Happiness is not an abstract or “soft” goal; it is a structural requirement for sustainable and liveable cities.

Finally, the role of civic pride deserves emphasis. Cities where people feel a strong sense of symbolic connection, shared authorship, and belonging tend to show greater resilience to structural shortcomings. These qualities cannot be engineered through infrastructure alone; they require engagement with local narratives, traditions, and collective memory. Designing for happiness, then, is not only about efficiency and order, but about emotion, expression, and meaning.

In the end, this study suggests a new guiding question: not only *what works* in a city, but *what connects*. A happy city is not only one that functions, but one that feels. The true challenge of urban design today is not just to build more efficient cities, but to build more meaningful ones.

4.1 Future Research and Development of the Index

Although this version of the Urban Happiness Index offers a multi-layered model, future iterations could further refine both the scope and sensitivity of the data. A particularly promising avenue is the comparison of happiness scores with other strategic urban indicators, such as city attractiveness for talent and investment. Preliminary tests already demonstrate a strong correlation: when analysing the 133 best-performing cities, the relationship between happiness and urban attractiveness produced an R^2 value of 0.6277, an excellent result that suggests emotional well-being is not just socially important but directly linked to a city's competitiveness and capacity to attract global talent. This opens a new field of research where happiness is not only an end, but a driver of long-term prosperity and urban appeal.

Another direction of refinement lies in the integration of real-time and high-frequency data sources. Social media sentiment analysis, mobility data, or participation in civic events could provide dynamic insights into how moods, emotions, and collective life evolve within cities. Rather than annual snapshots, this would allow for a temporal, more fluid understanding of urban well-being, sensitive to sudden shocks or gradual cultural shifts.

Cultural specificity also emerges as a key challenge. Current models assume universality in how happiness and distress are expressed, yet this can obscure deeply local realities. Some societies may report high satisfaction while masking emotional suffering, while others may express discontent yet enjoy strong social cohesion and relational support. Ethnographic research, community-based participatory studies, and interviews could help uncover these nuances, enriching the quantitative framework with context-sensitive insights.

Climate is another dimension that must increasingly be integrated into future iterations. Rising temperatures, extreme weather, and climate-related migration shape not only material resilience

but also emotional security and psychological well-being. Including climate vulnerability and adaptation capacity as part of the happiness framework would recognize that sustainable cities must safeguard not only bodies and infrastructure, but also collective mental health during ecological disruption.

Finally, religion, spirituality, and symbolic rituals deserve closer attention. In many cities, collective belief systems provide cohesion, resilience, and hope in the absence of robust infrastructure or wealth. While difficult to quantify, these elements shape how people interpret suffering, build meaning, and sustain a sense of belonging. Careful integration of symbolic and spiritual dimensions could enrich the emotional geography of cities and offer a fuller picture of resilience.

The Urban Happiness Index presented here should be seen as a foundation, not a conclusion. As cities evolve under pressures of globalization, climate change, cultural transformation, and demographic shifts, the tools we use to understand them must adapt. Future research has the opportunity to expand the index into a richer diagnostic system one that integrates structural, emotional, cultural, and symbolic factors to guide the next generation of urban design and policy.

4.2 Final Thought: Designing for Emotional Citizenship

The conclusion of this research is not technical, but human: cities must be designed not only for functionality, but for feeling. A happy city is not simply the one with efficient transport or economic productivity it is the city that knows how to shelter, connect, and move its people emotionally. It is the city where silence is not isolation, where difference does not become distance, and where the street is not just a corridor of movement but a stage for encounter.

To design for happiness is to take emotion seriously not as a secondary concern, but as a right. Urban design must evolve beyond the physical and into the symbolic. A city is not fully alive until it has rituals, identities, memories, and shared meanings that bind people into a community. That is not merely the job of planners or politicians it is the responsibility of emotional citizenship.

This is the challenge for future cities: not just to grow, but to feel. Not just to house, but to hold. Not just to function, but to inspire.

References

- Adams, R., & Cohen, B. (2017). *The Happy Cities Hexagon: A framework for measuring urban well-being*. Happy Citizen Design. <https://www.happycitizendesign.com/>
- Bloom, L. B. (2025). The 100 best cities in the world to visit in 2025, according to a new report. *Forbes*. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/laurabegleybloom/2025/02/27/the-100-best-cities-in-the-world-to-visit-in-2025-according-to-a-new-report/>
- Day Zero Project. (2025). *Top 50 most popular festivals*. In Day Zero Project. <https://dayzeroproject.com/festivals/>
- Diener, E., Suh, E. M., Lucas, R. E., & Smith, H. L. (1999). Subjective well-being: Three decades of progress. *Psychological Bulletin*, 125(2), 276–302. <http://media.rickhanson.net/Papers/SubjectiveWell-BeingDiener.pdf>
- Helliwell, J. F., Layard, R., Sachs, J. D., De Neve, J., Aknin, L. B., & Wang, S. (2023). *World Happiness Report 2023*. The World Happiness Report. <https://www.worldhappiness.report/ed/2023/>
- Hofstra, E., Elfeddali, I., Metz, M., Bakker, M., De Jong, J. J., Van Nieuwenhuizen, C., & Van Der Feltz-Cornelis, C. M. (2019). A regional systems intervention for suicide prevention in the Netherlands (SUPREMOCOL): study protocol with a stepped wedge trial design. *BMC Psychiatry*, 19(1). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-019-2342-x>
- IESE (2024). *IESE Cities in Motion Index*. <https://citiesinmotion.iese.edu/indicecim/>
- Numbeo. (2025). *Crime index by city 2025 mid-year*. In Numbeo. <https://www.numbeo.com/crime/rankings.jsp>
- OECD. (2013). *OECD guidelines on measuring subjective well-being*. OECD Publishing. https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/oecd-guidelines-on-measuring-subjective-well-being_9789264191655-en.html
- OECD (2024). *OECD Better Life Index*. OECD. <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/tools/oecd-better-life-index.html>
- Ondiviela, J. A. (2021). *Beyond smart cities: Creating the most attractive cities for talented citizens*. Springer.
- Seligman, M. E. P. (2011). *Flourish: A visionary new understanding of happiness and well-being*. Free Press.
- World Bank (2025). *Employment to population ratio, 15+, total (%) (modeled ILO estimate)* [Data set]. World Bank Open Data. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.EMP.TOTL.SP.ZS>
- World Population Review. (2025). *Suicide rate by country 2025*. In *World Population Review*. <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/suicide-rate-by-country>

Appendix – List of Studied Cities

Dubai	United Arab Emirates
London	United Kingdom
Amsterdam	Netherlands
Madrid	Spain
Abu Dhabi	United Arab Emirates
Singapore	Singapore
Barcelona	Spain
Oslo	Norway
Rome	Italy
New York City	United States
Munich	Germany
Berlin	Germany
Copenhagen	Denmark
Sydney	Australia
Montreal	Canada
Melbourne	Australia
Florence	Italy
Zurich	Switzerland
Paris	France
Dublin	Ireland
Lisbon	Portugal
Toronto	Canada
Seville	Spain
Bergen	Norway
Stockholm	Sweden
Edinburgh	United Kingdom
Ottawa	Canada
Valencia	Spain
Vancouver	Canada
Tampere	Finland
Jerusalem	Israel
Helsinki	Finland
Stavanger	Norway
Las Vegas	United States
Vienna	Austria
Prague	Czech Republic
Frankfurt	Germany
Taipei	Taiwan
Luxembourg	Luxembourg
Oulu	Finland
Los Angeles	United States

Gothenburg	Sweden
Den Haag	Netherlands
Torino	Italy
Manchester	United Kingdom
Liverpool	United Kingdom
Eindhoven	Netherlands
Zaragoza	Spain
Rotterdam	Netherlands
Aarhus	Denmark
Glasgow	United Kingdom
Santander	Spain
Bilbao	Spain
Bristol	United Kingdom
Washington, D.C.	United States
Hong Kong	Hong Kong
Nottingham	United Kingdom
Bern	Switzerland
Basel	Switzerland
Canberra	Australia
Linz	Austria
San Francisco	United States
Belfast	United Kingdom
Stuttgart	Germany
Málaga	Spain
Espoo	Finland
Birmingham	United Kingdom
Miami	United States
Hamburg	Germany
Geneva	Switzerland
Tokyo	Japan
Bordeaux	France
Ankara	Turkey
Porto	Portugal
Warsaw	Poland
Nice	France
Boston	United States
Malmo	Sweden
Seattle	United States
Tallinn	Estonia
Honolulu	United States
Chicago	United States

Ljubljana	Slovenia
Dusseldorf	Germany
Cologne	Germany
Budapest	Hungary
Adelaide	Australia
Atlanta	United States
Rio de Janeiro	Brazil
Santiago	Chile
Denver	United States
Bucharest	Romania
Bratislava	Slovakia
Brussels	Belgium
Auckland	New Zealand
Wellington	New Zealand
Wroclaw	Poland
Brasilia	Brazil
Bogota	Colombia
San José	Costa Rica
Osaka	Japan
Antwerp	Belgium
Houston	United States
Baltimore	United States
Riga	Latvia
Dallas	United States
Asuncion	Paraguay

Lille	France
Kansas City	United States
Marseille	France
Lyon	France
Philadelphia	United States
Phoenix	United States
Córdoba	Argentina
Sofia	Bulgaria
Zagreb	Croatia
Quito	Ecuador
Nagoya	Japan
Belgrade	Serbia
New Delhi	India
Mumbai	India
Moscow	Russia
Hyderabad	India
Bangalore	India
Montevideo	Uruguay
Minsk	Belarus
Kiev	Ukraine
Vilnius	Lithuania
Cape Town	South Africa
Durban	South Africa
St Petersburg	Russia
Johannesburg	South Africa