

The benefits of small town living: Research on the mental health impacts on residents



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Mental Health in the Digital Age Lab

Understanding not only the mental health of individuals, but communities



Mental Health in the Digital Age Lab
Faculty of Education, Ontario Tech University

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Lab Mission

How does technology influence human development & well-being?

The Mental Health in the Digital Age Lab is a research hub that explores how technology is impacting human development and well-being across the lifespan. Research and community based projects focus on research to practice ideas for optimum well-being and learning. The lab is a collaboration of work from Faculty and graduate students in the Mental Health in the Digital Age course.



There are many benefits to growing up in small towns, rural area or countryside.

◀ It is important that residents, as well as community councils and planning departments understand those benefits to take advantage and make healthy decisions. ▶

Mental Health Benefits: *Nature and Green Spaces*

Contact with nature, including forests, open spaces, fields, nature sounds and natural skylines provides mental health benefits.

- Reduced stress
- Lower symptoms of anxiety and depression
- Greenspaces during childhood lowers risk of adverse mental health conditions
- Exposure to spaces with tree/tree canopies reduces psychological distress
- Exposure to natural environment increases positive emotions and decreases levels of stress



Mental Health Benefits: *Close Communities*

- Higher levels of social cohesion experience lower rates of mental health problems than those in neighbourhoods with lower cohesion
- Associated with reduction in depressive symptoms and loneliness in seniors
- Enhances children's wellbeing and reduces emotional and behavioural difficulties
- Promotes feelings of safety, trust and fosters a sense of belonging and purpose.



Mental Health Benefits: *Children and Play*

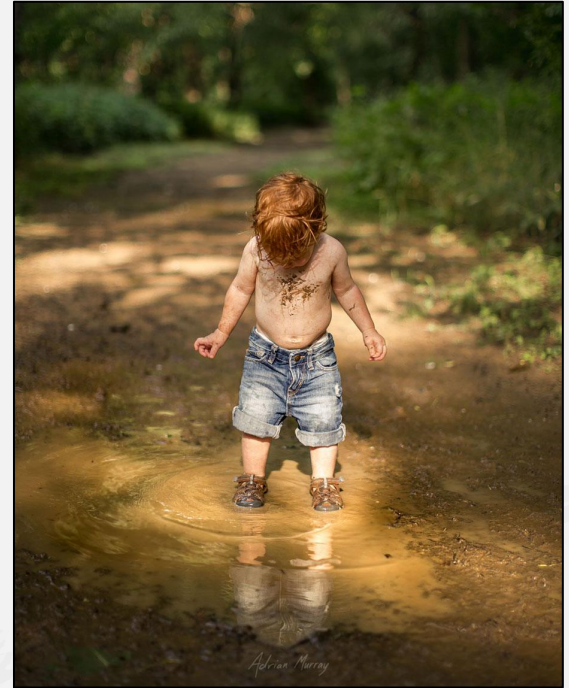
(The average child now spends 7 hrs on a screen compared to 1 hr. of fresh air or free play)

Children growing up in the country or smaller towns play outside more often and use technology less**

Benefit of playing in nature (children develop a greater appreciation towards nature)

Less structured play and more free play (no guidelines, tools promotes creativity and innovation).

(too rural found an increase in technology use)



Are chores different in the country?

Studies of urban vs. rural chores found a significant difference in the type of chores children were required to do.

Age appropriate but responsible chores promote independence and responsibility.

Rural- More frequent, higher expectations, and challenging chores (dependent on necessity to sustain family)

Increased opportunities to learn positive coping skills, problem solving, determination and 'grit' which promote resiliency.



(Kingsley, 2020; Weldon, 2021; Bathrellu et al, 2007; Weldon, 2012)

<https://herviewfromhome.com/12-important-life-lessons-i-learned-growing-up-on-a-farm/>.

Mental Health Benefits: *Age Friendly Community*

Small towns provide many benefits **for seniors including:



(Ryser et al, 2011; Skinner et al, 2008; Kallahar, 2020)

- *Feelings of safety and community connection*
- *More outdoor spaces to explore for nature*
- *Less noise and air pollution*
- *Less traffic for safer and reduced stress driving)*
- *Less accidents and victimization*

** *too rural found a lack of resources for MH*

Mental Health Benefits: Health

Numerous health benefits to living in conditions that are more open and less dense.

Better health outcomes in comparison to those living in urban areas

Reduction in several chronic diseases and associated symptoms, including anxiety, obesity, and cardiovascular disease



(Kingsley, 2020; Weldon, 2021)
<https://herveiwfromhome.com/12-important-life-lessons-i-learned-growing-up-on-a-farm/>.
<https://www.wired.com/2012/06/chores-benefit-kids/>.

Mental Health Benefits: *Clean Air*



- Facilitate feelings of happiness
- Better lung function, enhances immune system, and fosters healing
- Healthy rhythm of awake and asleep
- Clean air and scents in nature linked to reduced stress and higher incidences of relaxation
- Increased oxygen uptake linked to raised energy levels and sharpened minds
- Air smog is increased with population and density.

Mental Health Benefits: *Healthier eating*

- Closer to farmers markets and farms
- Less fast food restaurants and more healthy food options



Mental Health Benefits:

Sunlight and views



- No high rises in small town has been associated with positive mental health
- Access to direct sunlight improves comfort, usability, and enjoyment of outdoor spaces
- Lower suicidal behaviours
- Rates of social support increase in low buildings, in contrast to high rises
- Greater sense of community and social interactions,

Mental Health Benefits: Traffic

- Less traffic equals less stress (pressure)
- Less accidents and road rage incidents**.



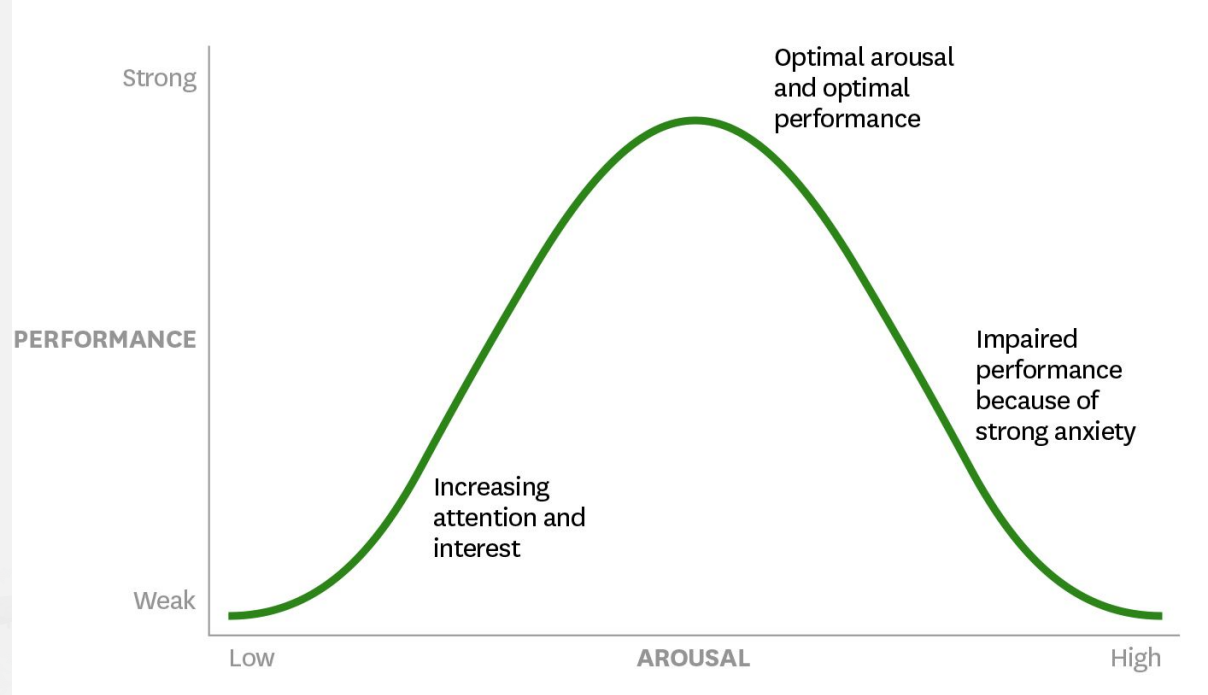
What mitigates the benefits?

- Too low of a population
- Too dense of a population

What is the optimum capacity ?

The Yerkes-Dodson Law

How anxiety affects performance.



SOURCE ROBERT M. YERKES AND JOHN D. DODSON

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Urbanization and Density can increase:

Traffic

Housing costs

Neighbour disputes

Less green space/access to nature

Larger or more crowded schools

Crowded living conditions

High rises

Air, noise and water pollution



Mental Health Impacts of Urbanization:

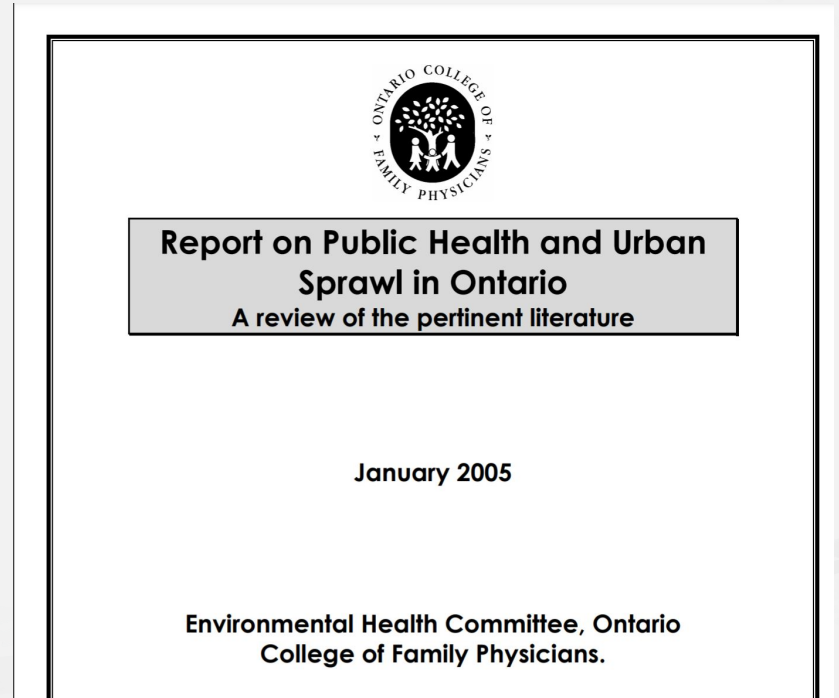
- Increase in mental health conditions such as psychosis, anxiety and mood disorders with urbanization.
- Increased loneliness.
- Congestion can cause frustration, stress, air quality problems, more accidents, noise pollution.



Health Impacts of Urbanization:

- Obesity
- Diabetes
- Air pollution and health conditions
- Ecological footprint

***children** living in **urban sprawl** may be discouraged from outdoor physical activity (PA) due to safety concerns, Wu et al., 2021)



Current Research: How does the current trend of moving out of cities to small communities during the pandemic affect those moving and the existing residents?

(in process, Laffier et., al, 2021)

Preliminary Results:

Has modest improvements on mental health for those migrating to less dense areas (small towns)

Has moderate to significant negative impacts on existing residents mental health.

Key factors:

traffic, noise, congestion, impacts on trust and safety, resource competition, conflicting priorities

Pre-pandemic thinking:

“With 7 in 10 people forecast to live in cities by 2050, and small towns disappearing we must act today to build better cities for better lives”

Post Pandemic thinking:

“With changes in the workplace, schooling and focus on nature we should be rethinking the importance of small communities and greenspaces as well as consider better planning for existing cities”



What does all this mean?

1. Communities should be informed of the benefits in their backyard and take advantage of them. They should also be active or involved in community development decisions to ensure protection of those benefits.
2. Research on mental health should be applied to design principles for cities and urban areas.
3. Education for city councils and planning departments on the benefits of small town living, nature and mental health so they can make wise decisions that benefit the communities they serve.
4. Smart development that includes: consideration for nature, less density, wildlife, water quality, and the reservation of prime agricultural land.



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