

City or country living? Research reveals psychological differences

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Living in the country, in rural areas, has long been idealized as a pristine place to raise a family. After all, open air and room to run free pose distinct advantages. But new findings from a University of Houston

psychology study indicate that Americans who live in more rural areas tend to be more anxious and depressed, as well as less open-minded and more neurotic. The study also revealed those living in the country were not more satisfied with their lives, nor did they have more purpose or meaning in life than people who lived in urban areas.

The research points to disparities in access to psychological services as one potential reason for these psychological differences.

Since 2010, there has been a surge in rural hospital closures that has also contributed to a reduction in the health care provider workforce, including [mental health professionals](#). Almost 85% of all rural counties have a mental health professional shortage, despite [rural residents](#) desiring more psychological services.

"It will be critical to improve access to [psychological services](#) in remote areas and to identify how characteristics and values of rural communities can be leveraged to promote positive psychological health," reports Olivia Atherton, assistant professor of psychology, in the *Journal of Personality*.

To conduct her research, Atherton analyzed data from two large longitudinal studies of U.S. Americans: Midlife in the United States (MIDUS) and the Health and Retirement Study (HRS). She examined whether there were rural-urban differences in levels and changes in the Big Five [personality traits](#) (extraversion, agreeableness, openness, conscientiousness, neuroticism) and well-being (psychological well-being, life satisfaction) across adulthood.

The study fills important gaps in the literature by showing that where people live can impact personality and well-being in adulthood, while simultaneously raising more questions for future work to explore.

"Given the far-reaching consequences of rural health disparities for individuals, families and communities, there is a pressing need to identify the psychological, social and structural mechanisms responsible for disparities and the ways in which to intervene upon those mechanisms to improve the health of rural Americans," said Atherton.

More information: Olivia E. Atherton et al, Rural–urban differences in personality traits and well-being in adulthood, *Journal of Personality* (2023). [DOI: 10.1111/jopy.12818](https://doi.org/10.1111/jopy.12818)

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