



Economic Pulse

Corpus Christi as One of America's Happiest Cities

by Jim Lee

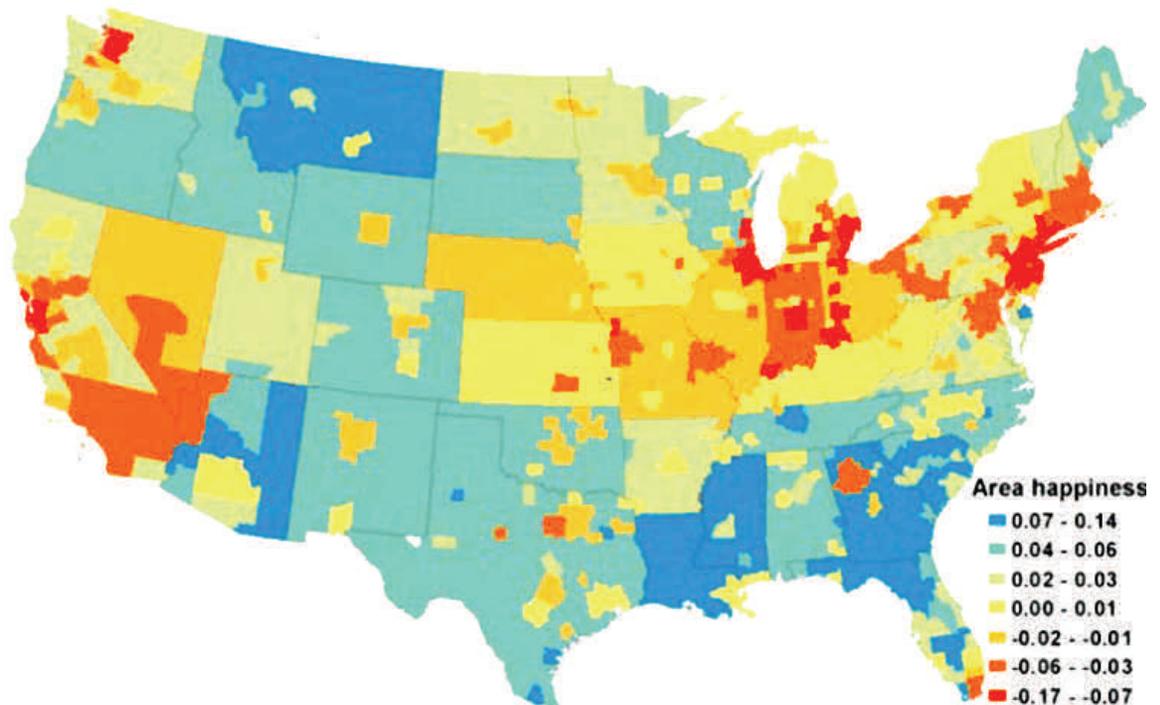
ABSTRACT:

According to survey data, Corpus Christi is ranked among the top 10 cities across the United States for self-reported happiness. Residents in Corpus Christi are overall happier than those living in Austin and New York City. Americans in the South and particularly along the Gulf Coast tend to be happier than people in southern California and the Rust Belt. Yet the fact that people continue to move into those unhappy areas suggests that individuals can trade happiness for higher incomes or other financial gains.

Corpus Christi is one of the top 10 cities in terms of happiness, according to a recent study about people's satisfaction with life. Two economists at Harvard University, Edward Glaeser and Oren Ziv, and one economist at University of British Columbia, Joshua Gottlieb, have released this study on individuals' subjective well-being, or happiness, across different cities in the United States.

Their findings, as summarized in a report titled "Unhappy Cities," are based on surveys conducted by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention in each year between 2005 and 2009. The Center asked a total of 300,000 respondents: "In general, how satisfied are you with your life?" The responses were in four categories between "very satisfied" to "very dissatisfied."

Happiness Scores



Source: Glaeser, Gottlieb and Ziv (2014, Figure 3).

Happiness across the U.S.

The map on the previous page shows the study's happiness scores for areas across the United States after adjusting for individual respondents' income levels and demographical characteristics, including race, gender and age. Positive scores represent measures of above-average happiness, and negative scores represent measures of below-average happiness. In addition to such economic factors as employment and income, people tend to be happier if they are married, or if they have children or hold a college degree.

Happier people are scattered across rural areas of the South, the West and Upper Midwest. Those regions are colored in blue and green in the map. Less happy areas tend to be concentrated in cities in southern California and the so-called Rust Belt in parts of the Midwest and Appalachian regions. Areas in red are where people experience the most misery. It is no surprise that Detroit—an auto city now with a bankrupt government—and Pittsburgh—an old steel town—are among the unhappiest cities. Yet it is surprising that New York City receives the lowest score of self-reported happiness.

Richer Countries are Happier

It is well known that people living in rich countries tend to experience greater life satisfaction than do people in poor countries. According to the popular Happy Planet Index, a leading global measure of well-being, people who are most satisfied with their lives are those living in the most prosperous countries, like Norway, Finland and Sweden in Scandinavia. Conversely, people in least developed countries, like Zimbabwe and Togo in Africa, experience the least well-being.

However, the relationship between income per capita on people's subjective well-being becomes quite fuzzy for countries neither the richest nor the poorest. There is even less evi-

dence to confirm this relationship among people living within the same country. But then, why are people so miserable in New York City and Los Angeles, where many of the nation's richest live?

Money Can Buy Happiness

The authors of "Unhappy Cities" found that people in urban areas tend to be happier than people in rural areas, as long as the cities are growing in population. Residents in declining cities feel less happy than residents in growing cities.

However, the fact that people continue to move to those declining cities perhaps suggests that humans do not necessarily aim to maximize their subjective well-being. An alternative interpretation is that humans are willing to sacrifice happiness if the price is right.

Indeed, the study provides evidence that residents of unhappy cities today do earn more incomes even after adjusting for differences in the cost of living. This finding suggests that financial gains can compensate for people's misery. This is particularly true for New York City, where the saddest people live.

State of Happiness

How happy are Texans? The table on the next page shows a list of scores and rankings for metro areas in Texas among all 318 metro areas in the United States. According to the study's raw scores without adjustment for individuals' demographic and economic characteristics, Tyler is Texas's happiest city at 11th place across the United States. Galveston comes next at 14th in the nation. The third happiest Texas metro area is Corpus Christi.

When the scores are adjusted for differences in individual demographics and income levels, then Corpus Christi comes out the happiest metro area in Texas. Its ranking among all U.S. met-

ro areas of different size categories also jumps from 23rd to 9th place. Similarly, the rankings for a large number of Texas metro areas, including El Paso, Laredo, and McAllen-Edinburg-Mission, also improve remarkably in their rankings when their scores are adjusted for demographics and income. The per capita income levels for those metro areas are below the national average. So, the shifts in the relative rankings for those border cities as well as Corpus Christi suggest that, other things being equal, their residents would feel happier should they earn more money.

Smile Factors

So, why are Corpus Christi residents so happy? Although the three researchers couldn't confirm that weather has any definitive impact on happiness, the wealth of self-reported data do suggest that Americans in the South with sunnier climes tend to be more joyful.

Also, people tend to experience more joy in areas with beaches and waterfronts, like Galveston and Corpus Christi. As for Corpus Christi, the majority of the other top 10 metro areas are near the Gulf Coast in Louisiana.

Richer Countries are Happier

Yet happiness is clearly not the most important factor for people's decision on which city to live in. For more than a decade before 2011, Corpus Christi experienced a negative net domestic migration flow, meaning that more residents left than Americans moving into that area. Its population has continued to grow due to international migration and natural births.

Austin represents another case in point. Like New York City, this fast-growing city has continued to attract people from the rest of Texas and beyond despite its relatively low ranking in reported happiness.

Rankings of Happiness for Texas Metro Areas

Metro Area	Raw Happiness Score	Ranking	Score Adjusted for Demographics and Income	Ranking
Corpus Christi	0.088	23	0.087	9
Tyler	0.107	11	0.071	18
Galveston-Texas City	0.098	14	0.067	25
Lubbock	0.087	24	0.065	27
San Angelo	0.081	28	0.057	36
Waco	0.027	129	0.028	85
Beaumont-Port Arthur	-0.008	208	0.026	89
Houston	0.042	94	0.023	101
Odessa-Midland	0.017	143	0.019	113
San Antonio	0.029	126	0.015	130
McAllen-Edinburg-Mission	-0.027	245	0.015	131
Laredo	-0.047	289	0.012	141
Dallas	0.032	119	0.012	143
El Paso	-0.045	283	0.011	146
Wichita Falls	0.021	139	0.010	148
Austin-San Marcos	0.034	110	0.000	176
Amarillo	0.014	153	-0.001	185
Victoria	-0.021	236	-0.018	244
Texarkana	-0.060	314	-0.026	266
Abilene	-0.075	332	-0.065	348

Notes: A positive score represents an above-average measure of happiness across 318 U.S. metro areas, and a negative score represents a below-average measure of happiness.

Source: Glaeser, Gottlieb and Ziv (2014).

Pursuit of Happiness

Although the self-reported survey data are not definitive measures of individual well-being, they do provide insight into people's perception of their own lives. Economists assume that people's main objective in life is to maximize their own utility levels. The fact that people continue to migrate to unhappy cities might imply that the subjective experience of happiness is not the same as the economic concept of utility.

As the authors of "Unhappy Cities" conclude, people care about more than happiness and life satisfaction, and many other factors may motivate them to stay in a city despite their misery. From this perspective, government officials and community leaders should not consider a boost in subjective happiness as an overriding public policy goal.

Interestingly, people in a number of Texas cities would feel happier if

they could boost their *individual* incomes.

Study Cited: Glaeser, Edward, Joshua Gottlieb, and Oren Ziv, "Unhappy Cities," National Bureau of Economic Research, Working Paper No. 20921, July 2014.



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