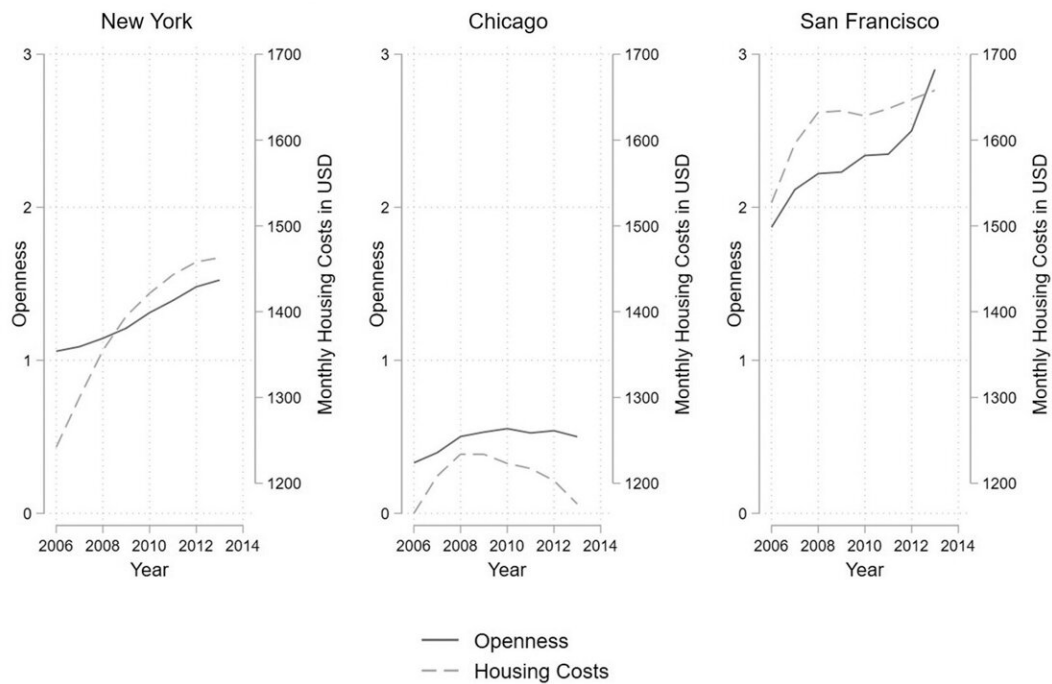


'Gentrification' changes the personality make-up of cities in just a few years, study suggests

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Smoothed (LOWESS) Openness and Housing Cost Trajectories From 2006 to 2014 in Three Major U.S. Cities (New York, Chicago, and San Francisco)



Openness and housing cost trajectories from 2006 to 2014 in three major U.S. cities (New York, Chicago, and San Francisco). Credit: American Psychological Association

Rising house prices may change the personality make-up of US cities within a few years, with residents becoming increasingly open-minded—not just as wealthier people move in, but also among longer-term locals.

This is according to a University of Cambridge-led study of almost two million people in the US living across 199 cities. Psychologists tracked annual [personality](#) scores over nine years (2006 to 2014) and compared the data to local housing markets.

The researchers found that just a \$50 rise in a [city](#)'s average housing prices saw the characteristic of "openness" increase significantly among residents (relative to other US cities). Openness is one of five major personality traits, and captures levels of curiosity and creativity.

Changes in housing prices were associated with shifts in 'Openness' in US cities where the trait was already very high compared to the rest of the country, such as New York and Chicago.

Even in San Francisco, long famous for its open-minded residents, citywide levels of 'Openness' rose sharply over the nine-year period as average housing costs jumped by almost \$200.

Previous research has shown that [house prices](#) largely reflect the prevalence of "social amenities": from restaurants to theaters, sports venues, green spaces and well-performing schools.

The study's authors point out that such amenities appeal to open-minded people, and argue that greater access to these facilities helps to drive "local cultures of openness".

"Theorists going back to Karl Marx have argued that economic development drives national shifts in personality and culture," said Dr.

Friedrich Götz, lead author of the study published today in the journal *American Psychologist*.

"We can now see how rapidly those changes occur in smaller and more nimble communities such as cities, where major cultural shifts can be experienced in just a few short years, rather than decades or centuries," he said.

The trait of 'Openness' is strongly associated with liberal votes and attitudes as well as entrepreneurial activity. It is also linked to [socioeconomic status](#): the desire and freedom to explore new experiences can be a side effect of sufficient wealth and security.

Data modeling was used to discount socio-economic status at an individual level by incorporating education and self-reported "social class" into calculations. The team also separated out the cities from overall national and state-level trends for 'Openness'.

The psychologists then investigated two main ways that house prices and associated amenities are linked to personality shifts within [urban populations](#).

"Selective migration" is when certain types of people move to cities or neighborhoods, having been attracted by the local culture. "Social acculturation" refers to changes in individual personalities, in this case through exposure to greater opportunities—from arts scenes to diverse cuisines—and more open-minded neighbors.

Researchers attempted to disentangle these effects by separating out the data into "established populations"—those who lived in a city prior to 2006, the earliest year in the study—and "newcomer populations": those who relocated between 2006 and 2014.

The study showed both factors at play: rising housing costs predicted a significant increase in 'Openness' among both established and newcomer populations in cities right across the US.

"Substantial personality shifts within cities can and do occur within a couple of years," said Dr. Jason Rentfrow, the study's senior author from Cambridge's Department of Psychology.

"Cities are magnets for certain types of people, even as they become increasingly unaffordable—particularly for young people. These cultural changes may go on to affect the personality of long-term residents."

"Research has shown that openness is related to economic resilience, creative capital and innovation, as well as liberal politics and arts," adds coauthor Tobias Ebert. "The geographical clustering of personality reinforces existing social and economic differences across the country. We can see this reflected in contemporary political divisions."

The study author's point to cities such as Pittsburgh: once home to blue-collar industry, it was devastated by the manufacturing collapse in the 1970s, yet by the mid-1980s had become a hub for medicine and higher education—leading to rising housing costs and a cultural transformation that continues to attract the young and open-minded.

The researchers analyzed all major personality traits, such as neuroticism and extroversion, as part of the study—but only openness was connected to housing costs. Importantly, the price of housing appears to drive local culture, but not vice versa: increases in openness did not predict more expensive [housing](#).

More information: Local Housing Market Dynamics Predict Rapid Shifts in Cultural Openness: A 9-Year Study Across 199 Cities, *American Psychologist* (2021). [DOI: 10.1037/amp0000812](https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000812)

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