

# The Daily Star

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## Are walkers smarter than drivers?



Photo: BBC

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**BBC Online**

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Do you prefer walking or driving? Your answer may suggest something about your education level, according to a new study.

A report published last month says metropolitan areas in the United States that were found to be more pedestrian-friendly also often had higher levels of GDP — and their citizens were better educated.

The study was conducted by Smart Growth America, an urban advocacy group based in the District of Columbia. It looked at the 30 biggest metro zones in the US, and ranked them by how much office, retail, and residential area was conducive to walking.

“The end of sprawl is in sight,” the study’s press release reads. “For perhaps the first time 60 years, walkable urban places in all 30 of the largest metros are gaining market share over their drivable suburban competition.” What’s more? There is a “significant positive correlation” between the walkability of a place and the higher education of its workforce.

The question is, why? Do brainier people just like to walk and not drive? It’s a complicated answer.

### **The more walkable a place, the smarter its population**

Christopher Leinberger, professor at the George Washington University School of Business and one of the study’s authors, says that walkable urban places “have a much higher propensity to have highly educated people — about one third higher than drivable metro areas, like Orlando, Tampa, and Phoenix.”

But he says what we don’t know is whether walkable places attract educated people, or whether educated people move to certain places that then become more walkable.

This chicken-and-egg quandary aside, what we do know that is highly educated people tend to veer toward pedestrian-friendly places.

For example, the top three cities in the study with the highest percentages of office, retail, and residential spots in walkable areas — New York, Washington, and Boston — had a lot of citizens age 25 and up who hold a least a bachelor’s degree. Washington had the most of those citizens in the entire study (51%), and Boston had third most (42%).

That’s not all: Education levels aren’t just higher in walkable cities. GDP is, too. The gap between the highest and lowest urban metros by GDP in the study is a chasm of 49%, which Leinberger calls a “first and second world gap. This is serious stuff.”

Of course, correlation doesn't equal causation. There's not enough data to definitively say why these urban areas, which easily allow car-free errands and whose grocery stores are just a stroll away for many citizens, are filled with educated people.

But it's definitely a starting point for conversation: Many socioeconomic and generational trends the world over could help explain why university graduates gravitate toward crowded, subway-lined metropolises these days. In fact, such an intellectual influx has started to change the entire faces of some urban areas.

## **Cities are ditching cars to cater to the educated**

Big cities that topped the study's list in GDP and education level have long been absent of the hallmarks of car-centric suburbia, like freeways and strip malls.

But Leinberger points to two exceptions that have high GDP, but low walkability scores. They're both in the state of Texas: Houston and Dallas. The pair, which are America's fourth and ninth biggest cities by population, respectively, both have aims to lure those car-eschewing, money-making, multiple degree-holders to their cities.

Back in the 1980s oil boom, Dallas's car-dependent infrastructure (think car parks and strip malls) grew at a rate that was 2.5 times faster than the growth of walkable infrastructure (say, light rail or walking paths downtown).

Today, however? Those numbers are reversed, says Leinberger: Walkable urban areas in Dallas are the ones seeing 2.5 times faster growth. It's the same kind of investments places like New York, Boston, and San Francisco have made for years — and they're three of the cities that placed in the top 5 of the walkability study by GDP and education level.

Meanwhile, Americans and non-Americans alike are moving to Texas in droves: Its economic growth was 5.2% annually in 2014, and if Texas were its own country, it would have the twelfth highest GDP in the world, between Canada and Australia.

The mass arrival of educated talent is bringing in money for the economy — and a demand for car-alternative technology, too. The state is currently trying to build a bullet train based on Japan's famous shinkansen. Which cities is it set to connect? The state's two GDP hubs, of course: Dallas and Houston.

Increased urbanisation isn't the only reason car-eschewing cities see smarter citizens. Young people play a role, too.

## **‘Millennial magnets’ draw smart young people**

Millennials — those born between around 1981 and 1996 — are the most educated generation in history. Nearly half of them hold a bachelor’s degree or higher. They’re also all moving to cities, unlike their parents. These spikes in the workforce translate into metros with higher GDP and higher overall education levels.

“This is being driven more than anything else by millennials,” Leinberger says.

Nowadays, twenty- and thirtysomethings are delaying marriage, children, and home-ownership, even as they’re becoming established in their careers. So a big house in the suburbs with front and back lawns — and a driveway with two cars — just aren’t as important. So they’re taking their university degrees and headed to the cities, and all the subways and walkable areas that come with them.

What happens when millennials finally do start a family? “One of the things we are seeing evidence of is that those millennials that are finally settling down are the ones moving to urbanising suburbs,” Leinberger says. “They want the better schools in a walkable urban place.”

He points to Arlington, Virginia, as an example. Just five miles outside Washington, DC, it’s a suburb that sports sidewalks on 90% of its streets, miles of bike paths, and easy access to Metrorail, Washington’s rapid-transit system. (Reminder: Washington placed first in the study for education level, and second for overall walkability.)

Between cities like Dallas and Houston (whose robust economies are attracting top talent and who are trying to reimagine themselves as pedestrian hotspots) and suburbs like Arlington, well-educated, young professionals seem to make any urban centre in the US more walkable.

### **Looking ahead**

Again, there isn’t enough data to pinpoint an exact reason that explains the correlation between walkability and high education levels. But there are other truths we can look at. Large cities are adding walkable infrastructure to lure educated money-makers. Young adults with multiple degrees are living in cities that provide public transit and walkable spaces — and those same young adults are changing places that don’t.

Do people who walk more tend to be brighter, harder working, better educated? It’s tough to say. One thing is for sure, though: If cities want to be filled with smart people ready to boost the GDP, there better be enough sidewalks to go ‘round.

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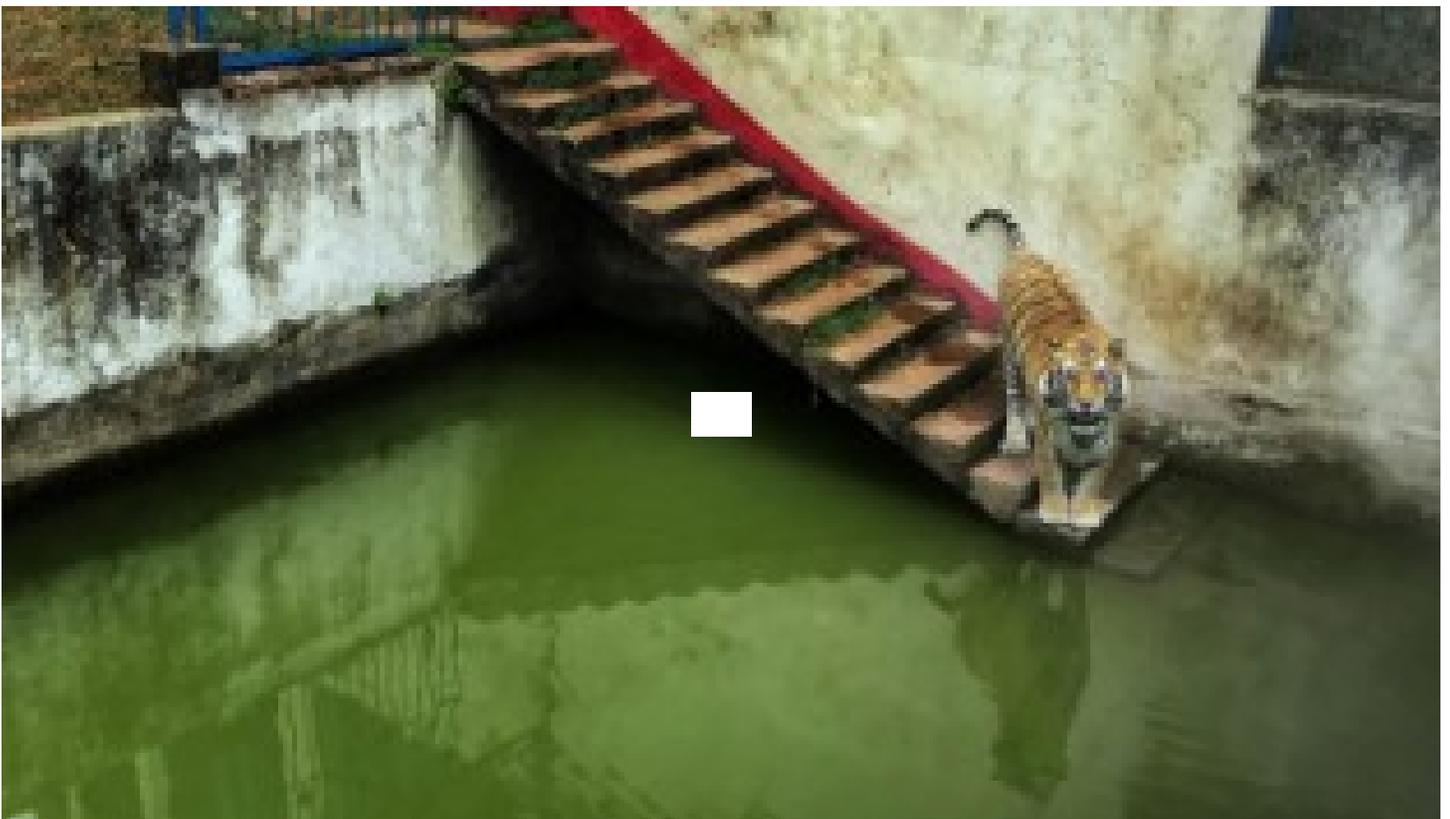
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