

Cities on a Human Scale

Place and the Pursuit of Happiness, Upward Mobility and the American Dream

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ntroduction: Communities and American Ideals

Public conversation about the future of communities is often dominated by debates about talent attraction, urban-versus-suburban development priorities, access and affordability. But any attempt to envision America's communities of the future needs to expand beyond these narrow objectives and begin with the more fundamental ideals that unite and ground American society. Communities that hope to flourish need to allow their residents to achieve the American Dream of upward mobility. They should also enable the expression of self-determination, unity amid diversity and strong familial and communal life.

More than abstractions, these ideals have practical consequences. For most, the American experiment is first experienced in the communities where they live, and their reasons for moving to, or staying within a community often have to do with how diversified and

robust the overall experience of opportunity is. The ideal community, I will argue, is both competitive and desirable. It capitalizes on its distinctive qualities to compete with other communities for people, investment, and jobs, and it also offers a level of life satisfaction that makes its residents think twice before leaving. Most importantly, it caters to diversity of preferences and allows for individual realization of aspiration.

As American leaders look to the future, they should pay attention to three key economic and demographic trends that shape the preferences of residents and the competitiveness and desirability of our communities.

First, as knowledge-intensive enterprises continue to drive economic growth, thriving communities need to find ways to attract and retain workers with high degree of sociability. Jobs requiring high levels social skills grew by 12 percent between 1980 and 2012, and during that period math-intensive jobs actually shrank by 3.3

percent.¹ Employers have increasingly demanded that jobs requiring high levels of cognitive ability be filled by people also possessing strong communication and social skills.² Automation and offshoring have raised the demand for “new artisans,” workers who possess both technical and interpersonal skills.³ These socially skilled knowledge workers have congregated in knowledge centers across the country’s urban landscapes. Understanding the preferences of these workers, planners and city leaders can design and build communities that support them. Sociability and the types of communities that support it are important phenomena for urban planners and city leaders to understand.

The second trend is demographic. America’s population is defined by a growing aging population and a millennial generation even larger than the baby boomers. Since 2000, Americans over the age of 65 grew from 35 million to nearly 50 million, or from 12.4 to 15.2 percent of the population.⁴ As retirees grow in proportion to the U.S. population as a whole, so do retirement destinations, which grew by 2 percent last year.⁵ Older Americans as a group are wealthy, and yet they look to economize and stretch their dollars. Millennials, while commonly described as city dwellers who defy conventional aspirations for family and homeownership, actually have higher numbers in the suburbs, a trend that is only increasing as they age. Still, it seems that their residential preferences lean toward places with characteristics of urban lifestyles and amenities.⁶ To retain wealth and wisdom while attracting young talent that will

fuel their economies, community leaders need to pay attention to the preferences and interests of both of these populations.

Finally, digital technology has given rise to what we might call “the preference economy” in which individuals have the ability to develop and pursue diverse interests and to associate with others who share them. The preference economy has helped to facilitate what some have called the “democratization of taste,” whereby formerly elite choices are available to the masses. The internet permits everyone to dive deep into our interests, refine our tastes, find others who share our interests and form a virtual community without ever leaving our home. Given the choice, we will also live in a place that matches our interests. The rise of the preference economy has created demand for customization in many spheres of life, including choice of community.

Getting the Basics Right: Why People Move and Why They Stay

If cities and communities are laboratories in which we pursue our basic aspirations for a better life, we should aim to understand how aspiration and preferences shape community choice. Why do people move to, or stay, in a community? The aspirations that guide people’s preferences and ultimately, choices should serve as a guide for policymakers, developers, and community leaders. What should a “policy of aspiration” look like?

1 David Deming, “The growing importance of social skills in the labor market,” NBER Working Paper 21475, June 2017. <http://www.nber.org/papers/w21473.pdf>

2 Catharine Weinberger, “The increasing complementarity between cognitive and social skills,” The Review of Economics and Statistics, 96(5): 849-861, December 2014. <https://econ.ucsb.edu/~weinberg/MathSocialWeinberger.pdf>

3 Daron Acemoglu and David Autor, “Skills, tasks, and technologies: Implications for employment and earnings,” NBER Working Paper 16082, June 2010. <http://www.nber.org/papers/w16082.pdf>. Lawrence Katz, “Get a liberal arts B.A., not a business B.A., for the coming artisan economy,” PBS July 2014. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/get-a-liberal-arts-b-a-not-a-business-b-a-for-the-coming-artisan-economy>

4 U.S. Census Bureau, June 2017. <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2017/cb17-100.html>

5 See, for instance, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/retirees-reshape-where-americans-live-1521691261>.

6 Dowell Myers, “Peak Millennials: Three reinforcing cycles that amplify the rise and fall of urban concentration by millennials,” Housing Policy Debate, April 2016. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10511482.2016.1165722>.

Most residential choices are driven by “hard factors” such as jobs, affordability, safety, and good schools. “Soft factors,” such as parks, natural amenities, restaurants, and third places in which residents can socialize and pursue their interests, also play an important role in attracting and retaining knowledge and services sector workers and older people. Too often, however, enthusiasm for soft factors leads to a focus on design features — such as higher-density neighborhoods and mixed-use development — missing the hard factors that heavily influence most people’s residential decisions. The final, often neglected factor in commentary on urban development, is social connectivity, increasingly understood as key to growth and dynamism.

Hard Factors: Jobs, Affordability, Education

The communities in America with the fastest job growth are also the places in which workers can afford to buy a home or rent an apartment that matches their aspirations for a good life. Contrary to the urban booster myth that young people only want to live in dense urban areas, most upwardly mobile 25 to 34-year-olds seek less dense and even suburban-style communities. Major metro meccas such as New York and Los Angeles are losing population, while mid-sized metros with less density such as Austin, Nashville and Raleigh are growing.

Creative class types, it turns out, share the common American interest of a home and a yard more widely than is usually reported.

When young adults decide to settle down, they tend to leave higher-cost cities that seemed exciting just a few years earlier and head for lower-cost cities. Even tech jobs that do not need to be in Silicon Valley tend to migrate to more affordable cities with a promising quality of life.⁷

Upwardly mobile 25 to 34-year-olds are a big part of the migration story. Their numbers swelled by 49 percent between 2000 and 2014, and there are now more of them living in Austin than in the San Jose metro area. And yet the total migration into the city’s center is minuscule compared to the growth of its suburbs. Between 2000 and 2012, a period of explosive population growth, 564,700 of the 588,000 people who moved to Austin located in the suburbs. The booming downtown that comes to mind when most people think of Austin’s dynamism only accounted for 1.6 percent of its growth during this period.⁸ Creative class types, it turns out, share the common American interest of a home and a yard more widely than is usually reported.

The outmigration of families from city centers to the suburbs when children reach school age is well-known. But it seems clear that if schools are important to a family with children, it is a significant factor in deciding where to live. Heterogeneity in school offerings is a net benefit for a community, as traditional public schools vie for students with charter schools, private schools, and non-traditional options such as online schools and homeschooling cooperatives. Good schools are a sign of local institutional health, which correlates with higher levels of social capital and community stability.

⁷ Joel Kotkin and Michael Shires, “The Best Cities for Jobs 2018,” Forbes, May 2018. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/joelkotkin/2018/05/07/best-cities-for-jobs-2018-dallas-austin-nashville/#5f8e07901f0c>. Joel Kotkin, “Tech’s new hotbeds: Cities with fastest growth in STEM jobs are very far from Silicon Valley,” Forbes, January 2018. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/joelkotkin/2018/01/11/techs-new-hotbeds-cities-with-fastest-growth-in-stem-jobs-are-far-from-silicon-valley/#91641bcbed1>

⁸ Ryan Streeter, “Opportunity Urbanism: The Tech Edition,” *The Texas Way of Urbanism*, Center for Opportunity Urbanism, 2016: pp. 33-34, 36.

Soft Factors: Amenities, Recreation and Entertainment, Services

While hard factors such as economic opportunity and affordability drive basic decisions on where to live, amenities matter a good deal, especially with regard to elderly Americans, college graduates, and people working in knowledge-intensive occupations. Natural amenities such as temperature, hills, and proximity to water, have been found to matter more to older people, while constructed amenities such as coffee shops, entertainment venues, bars, and shops, matter more to college graduates and knowledge workers.⁹ The happiness of older residents of a city has also associated with good government services such as public safety and schools, while the happiness of younger people stems from access to cultural and recreational assets.¹⁰ Workers in professional services and knowledge sectors have diverse preferences when they choose where to live depending on life cycle and personal interests.¹¹ These findings suggest that a future-oriented community should provide diverse residential and lifestyle options for people working in growing sectors of the economy rather than catering to the narrow preferences of knowledge workers.

Another detailed study of 164 metro areas found that mid-size metros (cities between 500,000 and 2.5 million residents) had a greater presence of college-educated workers and higher overall population growth when certain quality of life factors were present, defined by measures of

crime, housing costs, and diversity together with cultural amenities. The effect was more limited for smaller metros between 250,000 and 500,000 residents. The study suggests that young talent considers amenities along with housing affordability when moving to mid-size metro areas.¹²

Social Factors: Networks and Upward Mobility

Social relationships and networks are the final factor shaping residential preferences. They do not fit neatly into the concepts of hard or soft factors. The presence of social and professional relationships affects people's happiness with their location and their relocation decisions. A study of 13 cities in Europe found that professional and social connections were a powerful factor in location decisions, followed by hard factors such as job availability and quality. Soft factors such as amenities and cultures of openness and tolerance mattered much less.¹³ Research has also shown that social connections matter a great deal to economic opportunity, including for low-income people; more social connections increase chances of getting a job, and better-paying jobs.

In the economic geography of today's America, these networks are unevenly distributed. People living in high-growth areas are not only highly educated and well-paid, they are also highly networked. They have access to information

9 Clark, <https://culturalpolicy.uchicago.edu/sites/culturalpolicy.uchicago.edu/files/clark-amenities.pdf>

10 Michael Hogan, Kevin Leyden, Ronan Conway, Abraham Goldberg, Deirdre Walsh, Phoebe E. McKenna-Plumley. "Happiness and health across the lifespan in five major cities: The impact of place and government performance," Social Science and Medicine, v. 162, August 2016: 168-176. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0277953616303239>

11 Amnon Frenkel, Edward Bendit, and Sigal Kaplan. "Residential location of knowledge workers: The role of amenities, workplace, and lifestyle," Cities: The International Journal of Urban Policy and Planning (February 2013): 33-41. http://orbit.dtu.dk/fedora/objects/orbit:122707/datastreams/file_44a8e7a2-487c-44fb-b963-9d2ffd9e992a/content; and https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17549175.2016.1223740?needAccess=true#a_HR0cHM6Ly93d3cudGFuZGZvbmpbmUuY29tL2RvaS9wZGYvMTAuMTA4MC8xNzU0OTE3NS4yMDE2LjEyMjM3NDA/bmVlZEFlY2Vzc10cnVIQEBAMA

12 Janet Kelly, Matt Ruther, Sarah Ehresman, Bridget Nickerson. "Placemaking as an economic development strategy for small and mid-size cities," Urban Affairs Review, v. 53: 435-462, July 2016. <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1078087416657895>

13 Sako Mustard and Olga Gritsai, "The creative knowledge city in Europe: Structural conditions and urban policy strategies for competitive cities," European Urban and Regional Studies, 0(0), 2012. <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.1018.9016&rep=rep1&type=pdf>

about opportunities and live and work in networks of relationships that augment this information. Their networks open doors and expand and accelerate options and opportunities. Many studies have also shown, though, that lower-income people with richer and more extensive networks fare better than those who do not. Conversely, high-achieving lower-income young people often miss opportunities to advance their education and economic position because of a lack of connectivity. The problem is one of scale, namely that even lower-income families with good networks are not as equally connected to opportunity-creating networks such as institutions of higher education and professional networks as higher-income people who take them for granted. The challenge for cities of the future is to build bridges between less-networked communities and populations with those institutions and communities that are rich in networks leading to a wide range of opportunities.

Competitive and desirable communities will therefore strive to create new forms of social and vocational connections. New tools are emerging to help better understand which jobs requiring which types of skills are in demand. Future-oriented community leaders should strive to be the first to find ways to provide that information, along with guidance on the educational and training institutions that provide requisite skills training, directly to aspiring workers, their families, and their teachers and coaches. Community leaders can also do more to connect lower-opportunity with higher-opportunity neighborhoods through job fairs, community festivals, and transportation between them. They can also work to improve the ability of institutions of higher education, including community colleges and technical training institutes, to build stronger networks

with employers and aspiring learners in other cities through digital tools. Not only would such a forward-looking community benefit its residents, its reputation for connectivity could become an attraction for migrants from other places.

City leaders can promote the growth of social networks by involving civic and professional associations in their planning. The best way for local organizations to grow and work with one another is to be given an opportunity to do so. Rarely can such activity be mandated or overly engineered. Whether it is a public health campaign or an initiative to boost the arts in a community, private and public sector leaders should invite not only the participation but the *leadership* of community organizations with direct ties to neighborhoods and households, such as religious organizations, schools, neighborhood-focused community groups, professional associations and locally-owned businesses.

Human Scale and Happiness

The preference economy, the need for greater connectivity, and even the fundamental tenets of political philosophy suggest that the competitive and desirable community of the future will be on a human scale. Human beings are communal – even tribal – in nature, and our happiness is closely tied to the strength of our community ties. Cities and towns that figure out how to provide greater options for associational life and work-life balance will be more competitive and desirable than those that do not. Cities that figure out how to create living environments at human scale will attract new residents. But the notion of human scale is usually missed in analyses of hard and soft factors.

The Importance of Life on a Human Scale

The value we attach to smaller-scale communities is a deeply rooted element of the human condition. Plato and Aristotle both grappled with the proper size of a city-state because a successful polity depended upon relationships between governing and governed; among people who know each other and can hold one another accountable. This is a central argument in the Federalist Papers; the American republic could work at a large scale only with a proper system of checks and balances. James Madison believed that through a proper set of constitutional checks and balances in a federal republic, small-scale polities could live side by side and form a larger, coherent whole. Unity amid smaller-scale diversity is a fundamental American principle.¹⁴

These and other philosophers were concerned with the idea of happiness and the preconditions for human flourishing. They observed that people are at their best when they are fully functioning members of communities in which their voices, opinions, and actions matter. Their insights have been confirmed and furthered by social scientists and economists more recently who have found, for instance, that there is a limit to the number of relationships each of us can manage, and that we derive our greatest sense of purpose and happiness from family, community involvement and relationships, religious engagement and work.¹⁵ Additional studies have found that regions with multiple local governments fare better

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economically, and Americans trust their local governments significantly more than the federal government or even their state governments.¹⁶ A recent survey showed that Americans in every demographic category derive a sense of community more from their city or neighborhood than their political ideology or ethnicity.¹⁷

Districts matter

To the extent that people have a choice, they typically prefer communities in which school, work, grocery shopping, hanging out and community membership are proximate and in balance with each other. The “high street” in London is a quintessential instance of how communities within a large metropolitan area are anchored by unique, core set of community characteristics. High streets, equivalent in some ways to an American urban Main Street, anchor the retail and social life of particular districts within the greater London metro area. Each district and its walkable high street have unique personalities and identities. They create a kind of village within a large global city with which residents identify. Any large city with strong, distinct districts can be analyzed similarly.

¹⁴ David Hume, “The Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth.” James Madison, Federalist No. 10. Douglass Adair, “That politics may be reduced to a science: David Hume, James Madison, and the 10th Federalist,” Huntington Library Quarterly, v. 20, no. 4, August 1957. https://www.jstor.org/stable/3816276?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents

¹⁵ Arthur Brooks, *The Conservative Heart* (New York: Broadside, 2015), pp. 30-33. On limits to relationship networks and Dunbar’s number, see Robin Dunbar, “Neocortex size as a constraint on group size in primates,” Journal of Human Evolution, 22(6), 469-493. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/004724849290081J?via%3Dihub>.

¹⁶ John Hatfield, “Competition among local governments,” Localism in America, AEI and Center for Opportunity Urbanism, February 2018. <https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Hatfield1.pdf>, and Sam Abrams, Karlyn Bowman, Eleanor O’Neil, “Government and Localism: What Americans Think,” Localism in America, AEI and the Center for Opportunity Urbanism, February 2018. <https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/BowmanAbrams13.pdf>

¹⁷ Samuel Abrams, Karlyn Bowman, Eleanor O’Neil, and Ryan Streeter, “AEI Survey on Community and Society,” February 5, 2019. <https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/AEI-Survey-on-Community-and-Society.pdf>

One way to evaluate the human scale of a place is by assessing the walkability of a neighborhood or district. There is evidence that people prefer living in communities in which services, amenities and key institutions are proximate and even reachable by foot. A kind of “village instinct” seems hardwired into us. Given a choice, most people prefer to live in places that have some sense of a physical center in which life’s essential activities — work, school, religious and civic spaces — hang together. The success of new urbanist and mixed-use real estate developments on grid-patterned roadways is further evidence for the power of these preferences. Studies of various cities have found that all else being equal, home buyers are willing to pay more to live in neighborhoods marked by connected streets and a mix of residential and commercial uses. They will also pay more to live closer to the central business district and to shorten commute times. Home values increase the closer they are to core community amenities such as grocery stores, parks, schools, hardware stores, and so on.¹⁸

That neighborhoods with mixed uses and tighter connectivity between core amenities and services correlate with higher home prices will not surprise longtime readers of Jane Jacobs’ views on sidewalk life in cities. Communities are more

desirable when the basics of everyday life are all around us and nearby, rather than scattered across disconnected landscapes. When all else is equal, people prefer a sense of community in the built environment. This does not always have to take the form of village-like, walkable neighborhoods. It is possible to blend together Americans’ penchant for detached single family homes and automobiles, as numerous new urbanist developments have done. Studies have shown that proximity to Walmart raises home values, just as it does in neighborhoods close to a Whole Foods or Trader Joes.¹⁹

In summary, when work, play, relationships and leisure “hang together” in a community, people generally fare better by any economic or social measure we value.

The Multi-Centric City

What are the lessons that community leaders should learn from insights into the virtues of smaller-scale social and political organization? The short answer is that cities should aspire to be “multi-centric,” that is, organized not only around the older urban core, but around local districts throughout the larger community for several key reasons.

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- ¹⁸ For instance, Michelle Bina and Kara Kockelman, “Location Choice vis-à-vis Transportation: The Case of Recent Homebuyers,” Austin: University of Texas, 2006: http://www.ce.utexas.edu/prof/kockelman/public_html/TRB06HomeChoice.pdf; Beth Wilson and James Frew, “Apartment rents and locations in Portland, Oregon: 1992-2002,” *Journal of Real Estate Research*, 29(2), 2007: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=978977; Charles Tu and Mark Eppli, “An Empirical Examination of Traditional Neighborhood Development,” *Real Estate Economics*, 29(3), 2001: https://epublications.marquette.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=1002&context=fin_fac; Yan Song and Gerrit-Jan Knaap, “New urbanism and housing values: a disaggregate assessment,” *Journal of Urban Economics*, 54(2), 218-218, 2003: <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.197.7545&rep=rep1&type=pdf>. A 2009 study of more than 90,000 home sales in fifteen U.S. metro areas found a correlation between walkability and higher home values in thirteen of them. Using data from Walk Score, an algorithm designed by Redfin to assess the proximity of services to residential neighborhoods everywhere in America, the study found that in a typical housing market, a one percent Walk Score increase was associated with an increase in home values between \$500 and \$3,000. Joe Cortright, “Walking the walk: How walkability raises home values in U.S. cities,” CEOs for Cities, 2009. https://nacto.org/docs/usdg/walking_the_walk_cortright.pdf. In the first nationwide analysis of walkability, a 2018 study found that a one-point increase in Walk Score delivers a .14 percent price premium in property values, which in effect means that a \$200,000 home in a neighborhood with a Walk Score of 0 would sell for \$228,000 in a neighborhood with a score of 100. The study also finds that the price premium is owing in part to the lack of availability of walkable neighborhoods because of land-use restrictions. According to another measure of walkability in a 2011 study, a 10-point increase in walkability on a 100-point scale resulted in a one to nine percent increase in retail, office, and apartment values. Gary Pivo and Jeffrey Fisher, “The walkability premium in commercial real estate investments,” *Real Estate Economics*, March 2011. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/j.1540-6229.2010.00296.x>
- ¹⁹ Devin Pope and Jaren Pope, “When Walmart comes to town: Always low housing prices? Always?” NBER Working Paper No. 18111, May 2012. <http://www.nber.org/papers/w18111.pdf>. “Trader Joe’s vs. Whole Foods: Which boosts your home value the most?” Fortune 2015. <http://fortune.com/2015/08/13/trader-joes-whole-foods-home-value/>

First, diversity of interests and preferences is here to stay. As taste making has become both more democratic, diffuse, and particular, a competitive and desirable community will incorporate such proliferation into its design and structure. A multi-centric city with multiple uses within each of its “centers” helps to enable such diffusion and increases the likelihood that people with shared particular interests can be together socially, professionally, and residentially.

Second, increasing social connectivity allows for the spontaneous production of goods that are often better than those planned in advance. Increasing opportunities for nonprofits, associations and local businesses to join and lead initiatives aimed at the public good increase civic connectedness. Doing so locally within the larger community does so even more. Ensuring that local land-use allows for entrepreneurs, businesses, and residents to mold their particular district in unique ways promotes interaction and creative adaptation. Top-down planning cannot achieve what socially and professionally networked individuals can.

Third, keeping costs low and opportunity high will create the conditions for flourishing across a diverse set of local communities within a larger polity. The story of growth among cities in the south and west over the past few decades is very much a story about the balance between economic opportunity, new development, and affordability. As we have seen, counter to urban legends that abound, 25 to 34-year-olds tend to move to less expensive, opportunity-rich places as they move into the phase of life where one begins to make longer-term plans. On the other end of the life spectrum, an active class of older Americans also values affordability. Another added value to the multi-centric city is the

options it makes available to an aging population as they downsize, move closer to core services to become less auto-dependent, and so on. Keeping the wisdom and wealth of aging people in a community should be a priority.

The successful community of the future will be multi-centric, meaning that as a city grows, it should not put all of its eggs in the “downtown” basket. It should have multiple downtowns, so to speak. Community leaders should obsess about districts rather than downtown-versus-suburbs calculations. Suburban communities should increasingly offer urban amenities such as festivals, food, and fun, while urban communities should offer suburban goods such as good schools, safe streets, and new housing.

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The multi-centric city of the future will succeed to the degree it realizes the twin ideals of competitiveness and desirability. Basic preferences should always be the initial guide, followed by a good grasp of the diverse ways those preferences are expressed across the city. People generally want affordable places to live, good schools, and access to good and basic amenities. People want good jobs, and they benefit from living in areas with high levels of social capital. But they do not want all of these goods in the same way, which is why successful communities offer options. Leaders of competitive and desirable communities in the future will continuously work to meet these preferences with a diverse array of districts that, taken together, offer something for everyone.

About the Author



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Ryan Streeter is the director of domestic policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI). Before joining AEI, he was executive director of the Center for Politics and Governance at the University of Texas at Austin. Streeter has also served as deputy chief of staff for policy for former Indiana Gov. Mike Pence, special assistant for domestic policy to President George W. Bush at the White House, and policy adviser to Indianapolis Mayor Stephen Goldsmith. Outside of government, he has served as a senior fellow at the Legatum Institute and as a research fellow at the Hudson Institute. He is the author and co-author of two books, and has published studies, reports, and articles in leading outlets. He regularly appears on television and radio programs to talk about policy and current affairs. Streeter has a Ph.D. in political philosophy from Emory University.

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