

## ALTRUISM TOWARD DEVIANT PERSONS IN CITIES, SUBURBS, AND SMALL TOWNS<sup>1</sup>

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*Summary.*—Of 405 letters “lost” in Florida, 167 were returned in the mail (the altruistic response). Addressees’ affiliations were significantly associated with return rates; fewer highly deviant “Communist” and “FLAB” addressees were returned. The associations of urban size and addressees’ affiliations with altruistic responses in 31 cities and 10 suburbs were substantially greater than in 5 small towns but only moderately so if the addressee was highly deviant. Small town residents returned only 7 letters to highly deviant addressees compared to 31 for nonrural residents.

Altruism has been defined as “social behavior carried out to achieve positive outcomes for another rather than for the self” (Rushton, 1980). In 1965, Milgram, Mann, and Harter developed the lost letter technique to assess community orientations toward political groups and other institutions. In their study the dependent variable was a mail finder’s willingness to pick up and return a stamped, addressed, and apparently lost letter. Presumably, the return rates of lost letters served as a measure of public altruism.

Milgram (1970) suggested that altruism, as measured by telephoning a number for a caller who had run out of money and had dialed a subject’s number in error, occurred less frequently in cities than small town settings. Later, both Hansson and Slade (1977) and Whitehead and Metzger (1981) addressed letters to fictitious persons considered to differ in conformity to conventional social norms. They concluded that there was no difference in return rate of lost letters from cities according to whether the addressee was deviant or nondeviant, whereas small towns returned fewer lost letters if the addressee was deviant. These researchers’ definition of deviancy-nondeviancy was based upon whether the addressee was affiliated with the Friends of the Communist Party or with the Gay Pleasure Alliance, respectively.

The present experiment expanded the designs of Hansson and Slade (1977) and of Rushton (1978) by adding both new addressee affiliations for the lost letters and another setting, suburbs, for the urban size condition. A total of 405 lost letters were distributed in equal numbers at automated teller machines, on sidewalks of busy streets and around phone booths in cities, suburbs, and smaller towns in Palm Beach county, Florida. A coded note was enclosed in each envelope to indicate the location of the letter drop. One-hundred and thirty-five letters were dropped in each of the three urban size settings. Specifically, four or five letters in each of 31 coastal cities located east of the Turnpike (population  $M=21,871$ ), 13 or 14 in each of 10 suburban areas west of Turnpike but east of the Everglades and agricultural areas (population  $M=14,945$ ), and 27 letters dropped in each of five smaller towns around Lake Okeechobee (population  $M=7,213$ ).

Of 405 letters distributed, 167 (41.2%) were returned in the mail by the finders (the altruistic response). Addressees’ affiliations were associated with different return rates, with the percentage of mail returned in the T. C. Jackson, Desiree Jackson, c/o Bubba’s Bar and Grill, The National Association for the Advancement of Fat Acceptance, Young People’s Communist Par-

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ty, and FLAB: Fat Lesbian Activist's Brigade conditions being 49.4%, 54.3%, 55.6%, 20.9%, and 25.9%, respectively [ $\chi_4^2(N=405)=36.34, p<.001$ ]. Addressees' affiliations were associated with different return rates in cities [ $\chi_4^2(N=405)=28.83, p<.001$ ] and in suburbs [ $\chi_4^2(N=405)=22.85, p<.001$ ], rates being substantially greater in cities and suburbs than in small towns but only moderately greater when addressees' were highly deviant. Small town residents returned only 7 letters to both highly deviant Communist and FLAB addresses compared to 16 and 15 returns, respectively, for urban and suburban residents. The return rates in each of the conditions are depicted in Table 1.

TABLE 1  
NUMBER AND PERCENT OF LETTERS RETURNED AS A FUNCTION  
OF LOCATION AND ADDRESSEES' AFFILIATION

Condition (Addressee)	City		Suburb		Town		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Control	17	62.9	18	66.7	5	18.5	40	49.4
Desiree	18	66.7	21	77.8	5	18.5	44	54.3
Fat Acceptance	23	85.2	16	59.3	6	22.2	45	55.6
Communist	5	18.5	8	29.6	4	14.8	17	20.9
FLAB	11	40.7	7	25.9	3	11.1	21	25.9
Total	74	54.8	70	51.9	23	85.2	167	41.2

Unexpectedly, across kinds of addressees, there were larger differences in the number and percentage of lost letters returned from the cities and suburbs than in small towns. The present findings are not consistent with those of Hansson and Slade (1977) and Whitehead and Metzger (1981) as over-all differences in returned letters were found in Florida cities and towns, and no differences were found in Florida in small towns across all addressees' affiliations. On the other hand, our outcomes are similar to those of Forbes and Gromoll (1971) who reported identical return rates for letters in both large cities and medium size suburbs.

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