

MAKING SPACE

Analysing the costs of overcrowding in five cities in Asia

The common perception that crowded urban areas in Asia contribute to feelings of stress and mental pressure is largely true, but is only part of the story. The Economist Intelligence Unit conducted a survey, supported by Pure Group, of 1,000 residents across five cities in East and South-east Asia: Beijing, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Singapore and Taipei. We found that pressures of urban living show some surprising differences and areas of overlap, leading to unique challenges for urban planners and individuals alike in addressing these challenges.

The denser, the better?

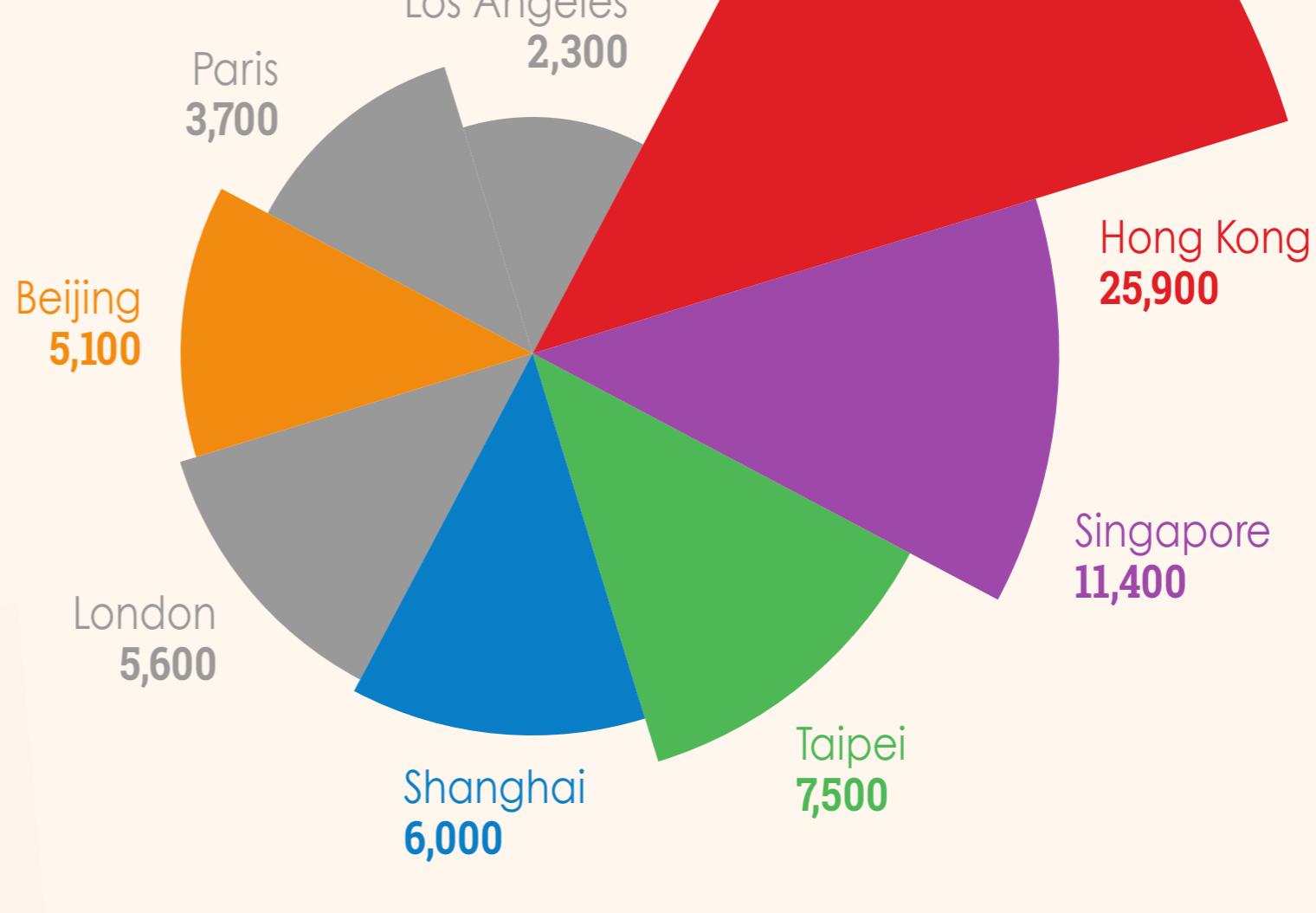
Urban Density

People per square km in built-up areas¹



In terms of raw density, how do the five study cities compare with each other, and globally?

Dense cities may seem like pressure-cookers in some ways, but urban sprawl—the opposite of density—can have drawbacks of its own, as our findings on Beijing and Shanghai, the most spread-out cities in our survey, reveal.



This suggests that urban density, when managed well, can raise convenience by promoting the concentration of goods and services. Urban sprawl, on the other hand, can lead to grinding commutes, high gridlock and other inconveniences.²



Compared with the average across other cities...

14% more Hongkongers feel stressed out by the lack of physical space at home.

15% more Shanghaiese believe that nervousness, anxiety and stress are most heavily correlated with overcrowding.

14% more Beijingers strongly agree that getting around their city is a stressful experience.

13% more Taipeiense watch movies, TV or online video as a means of relaxation and stress-relief.

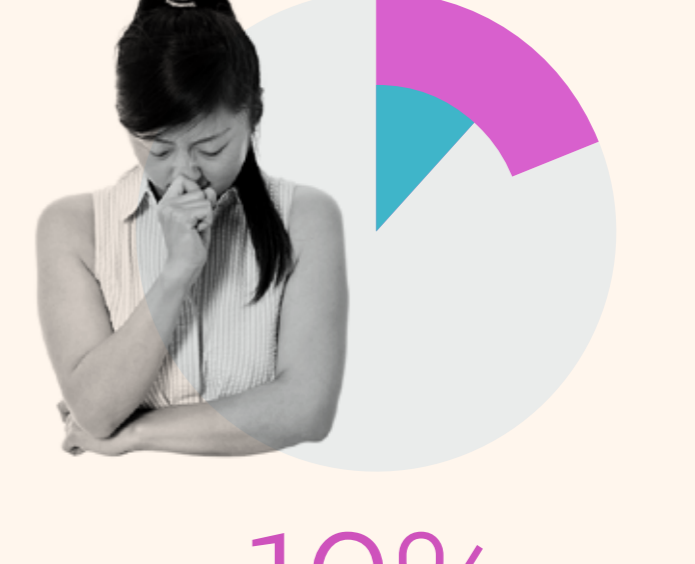
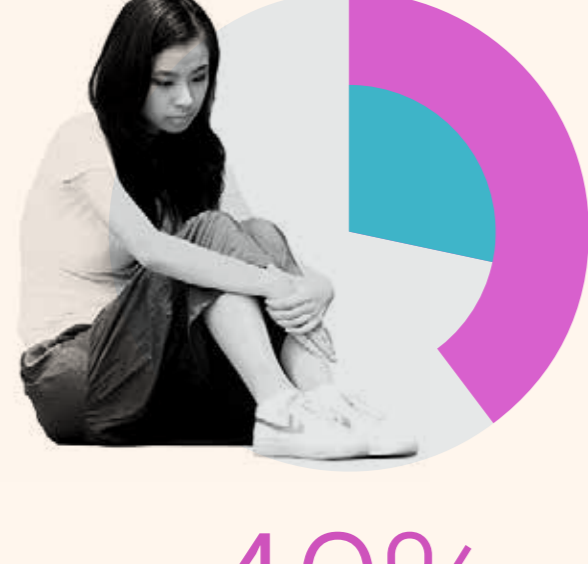
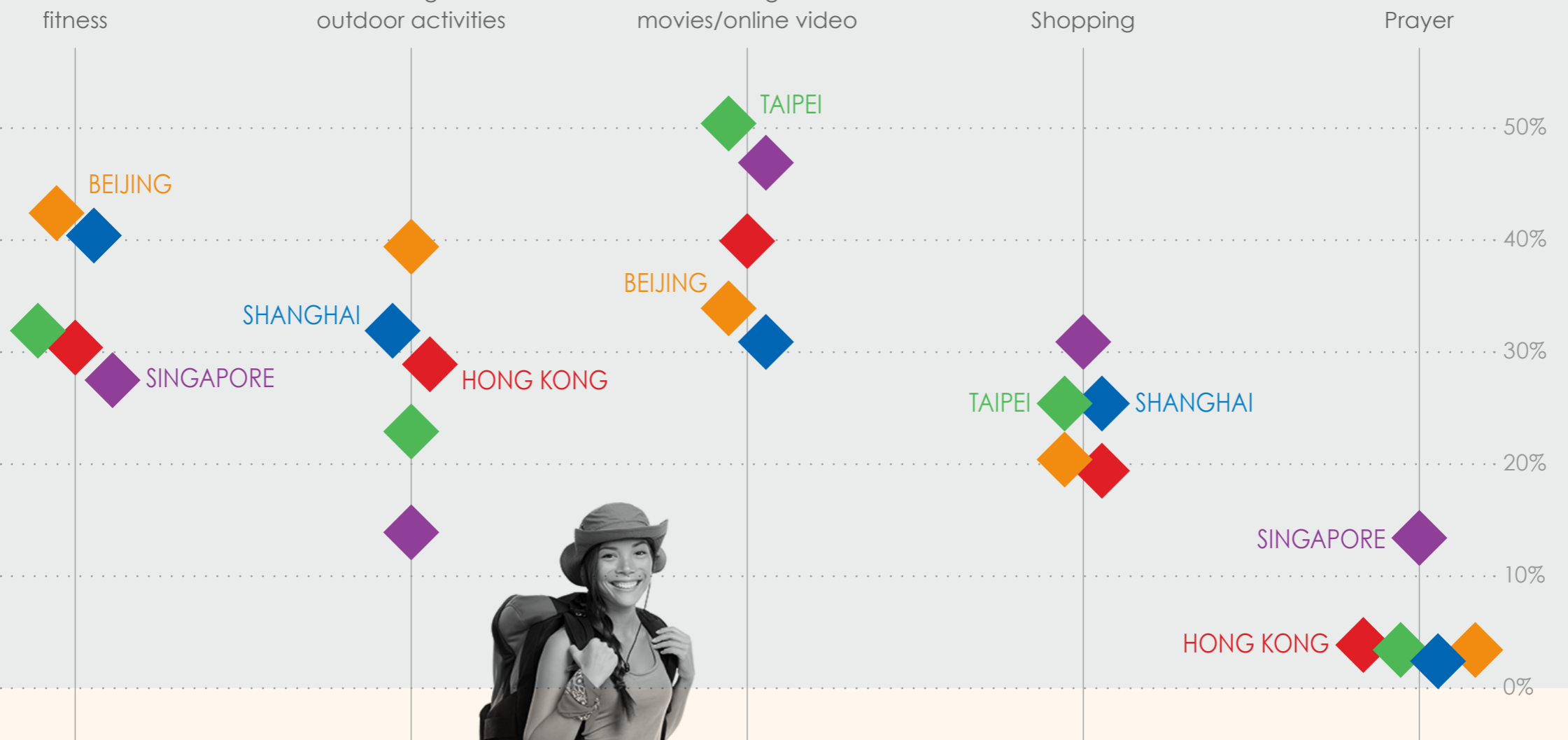
13% more Singaporeans agree that the proliferation of smartphones has made people less conscientious of others' personal space in public.

Coping with pressure

The Individual

Different cities employ different means of letting off steam—the chart here illustrates some notable findings. Variation also occurs not just between cities, but within them. Women, for example, show a subtle yet consistently higher sensitivity towards various aspects of urban overcrowding than men.

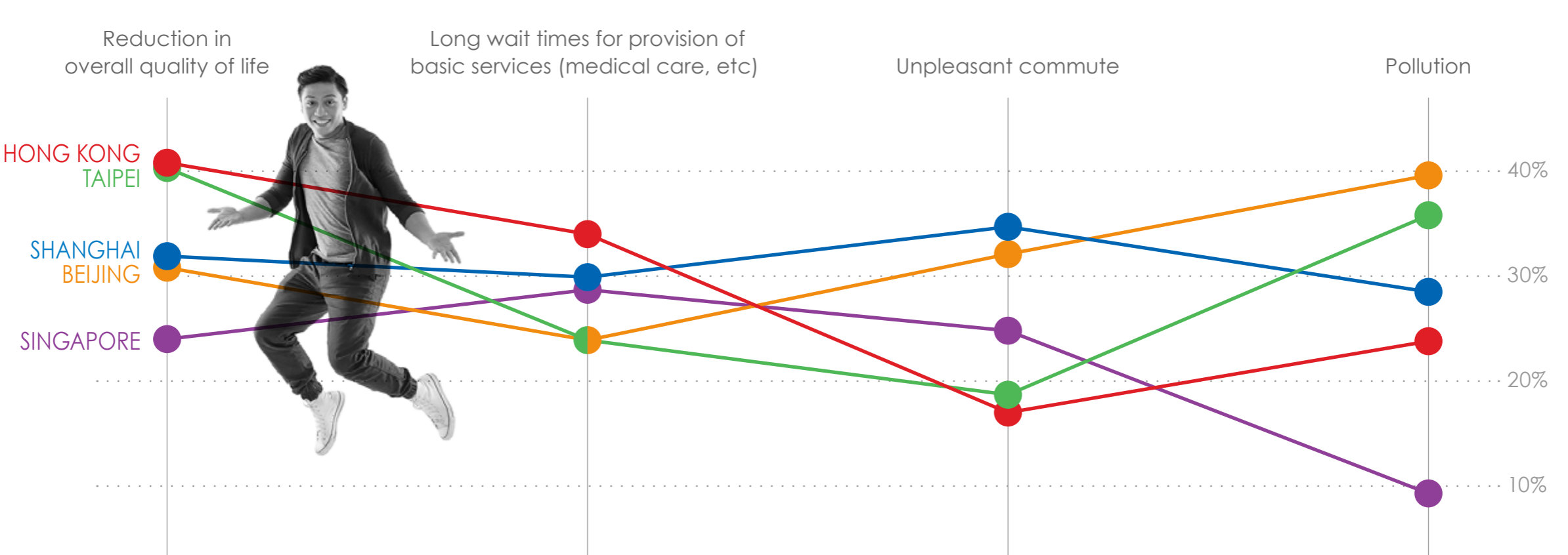
% selecting the following activities as a means of relaxation and stress-relief



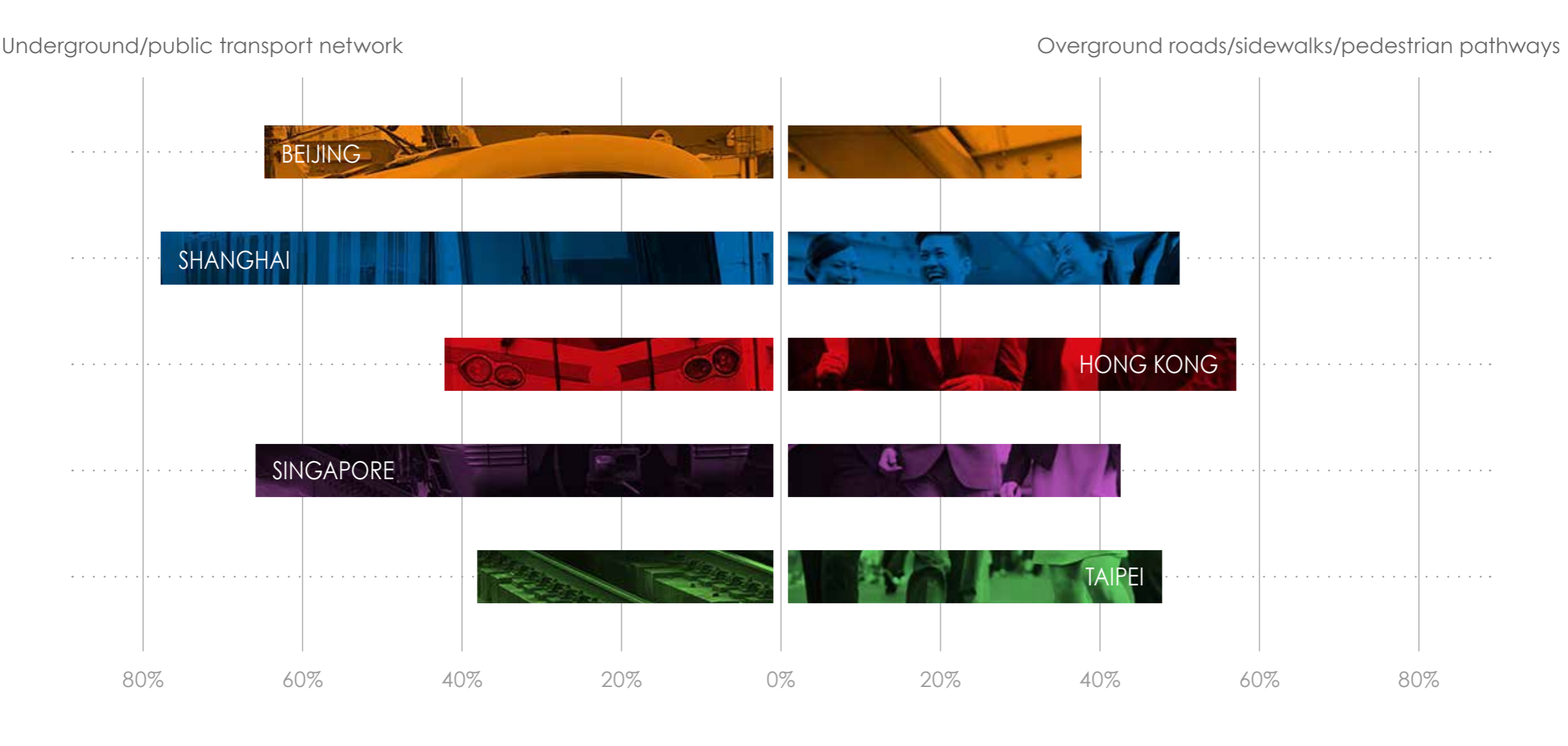
The City

Overcrowding is putting strain on shared resources throughout the five cities, with public transit and above-ground walkways bearing the brunt. Yet residents are not sitting idly by. A large share of people across the five cities is planning to actively put forth suggestions about reducing overcrowding to city, district or community officials.

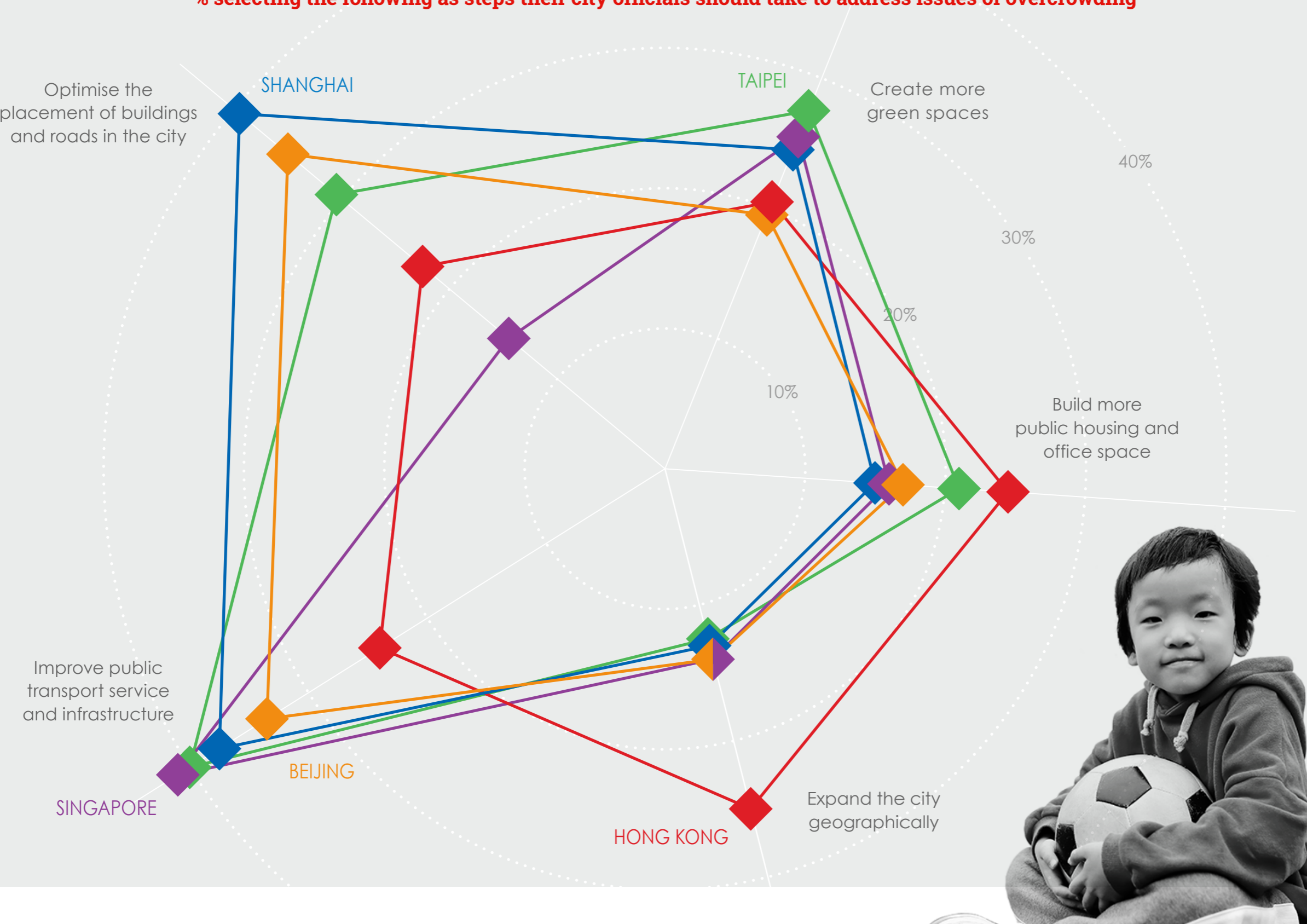
% selecting the following as the chief cost to their city of overcrowding



% selecting the following communal areas as providing the worst environment in terms of overcrowding



% selecting the following as steps their city officials should take to address issues of overcrowding



Sources:
¹ World Urban Areas. 14th Annual Edition, Demographia, April 2018, <http://www.demographia.com/db-worldua.pdf>
² Chandan Deskar, "Despite expectations, cities in East Asia are becoming denser", The World Bank Sustainable Cities blog, February 23rd 2015, <http://blogs.worldbank.org/sustainablecities/despite-expectations-cities-east-asia-are-becoming-denser>