

# OPINION

COMMENTARY/ **Chet Smolski**

## City ratings need closer scrutiny

**T**he September issue of Money magazine has just come out with its ninth annual ranking of the best "places" in the country in which to live. Somewhat of a surprise, five of the top ten are in Florida, with Gainesville garnering the number one position, and Jacksonville, Ocala, Fort Lauderdale and Naples in positions 3, 5, 6 and 10 respectively.

In looking at this ranking, one must realize that these "places" refer to a major city together with its suburbs that are socially and economically integrated with this central city, something that the Census Bureau call a Metropolitan Statistical Area and which is named for the principal city or cities. Data are the most complete for these statistical areas and thus lend themselves to rankings.

Since counties are the major subdivisions of government below the state level in this country, except in New England where cities and towns prevail, the Census Bureau uses counties to define these metropolitan areas. The result is that city names actually represent a county or several counties rather than the actual city.

In the Money article, for example, the 300 "places" ranked are referred to as "metropolitan areas," "areas" or "cities." Because the Ocala Metropolitan Statistical Area is too cumbersome to repeat each time, it is common to simply refer to Ocala.

Ocala has a population of 48,300, slightly smaller than East Providence, while the Metropolitan Area has a population of 202,000, a population approximately equal to that of East Providence and Providence combined. Since rankings are done by Metropolitan Areas which are counties, Ocala, as used in the rankings, covers all of Marion County which covers an area of 1610 square miles.

Put in different terms: the above cited Ocala has an area 60 percent larger than the state of Rhode Island and its population is only 20 percent of the one million residents crowded into this state!

Consider Providence, the full name is Providence-Fall River-Warwick metropolitan Statistical Area, which came in at 136 of the 300 metropolitan Areas ranked, and was ranked number 12 of the 22 areas cited in New England.

Our Metropolitan Area covers 33 cities and towns of Rhode Island as well as eight communities in Massachusetts, including Fall River, that lie to the east of the state. So Providence, according to this ranking, covers 1,141 square miles (larger than the entire land area of Rhode Island) and holds more than one million persons!

Is this the Providence that you know?

The point here is that when ranking "places" and the name of the city is used interchangeably with the Metropolitan Area, there may be considerable confusion on the part of the reader.

Another caveat in considering the Money rankings is to know what criteria were used in making these ratings. The 41 topics gathered from readers were condensed into nine categories for evaluation, including economy, health, crime, housing, education, weather, transit, leisure and arts.

Since the views of the readers of the magazine altered the weight given to each of these nine categories, it is important to know who these readers are because they are not your average American.

The 252 subscribers in the sample, for example, are 16 years older than the average American, better educated and have a household income of \$62,000, almost twice that of the typical American household. And such folks would likely view best places differently, more golf courses and leisure activities, for example.

A final note in this ranking of "places" is that data are current because rankings are done annually but since criteria vary from year to year and because of annual swings in economic activities, rankings can be altered dramatically. Ocala, ranked 5 this year was 78 last year; Jacksonville at 3 this year was 67 last year; and top-ranked in New England, Salem, New Hampshire-Haverhill, Massachusetts (are you serious about Haverhill?) and 7 in the country was ranked last year at

146.

So when you read that Gainesville, Florida is rated as No. 1 city in the country, you have to realize that the population of 186,000 (slightly larger than the city of Providence) is scattered throughout the Metropolitan Area of Alachua County, about the size of Rhode Island, and that the city of Gainesville itself is heavily populated by the thousands of University of Florida students who live there.

Ranking "places" or cities is always an interesting exercise and it does sell magazines, but one should approach these listings carefully to determine the methods used in coming up with these rankings. Otherwise, you might walk away with the idea that Haverhill is the seventh best city in the country. Are you kidding?

*Chester E. Smolski is a retired professor of geography from Rhode Island College. He is a regular contributor to the Providence Business News*