

# What determines our 'best' cities?

A friend of mine and I grew up in the same small town, and both of us still have fond memories of that typical small New England community. The military, then college, marriage and family took us away, although we still maintain contacts there. But now we have a different attitude toward the town.

We both agree that it is not attractive, is limiting, has little charm and some might even consider it seedy. This is not a reflection on the good people who live there nor is this view shared by our contemporaries who stayed on and made their lives there. Have my friend and I become more sophisticated or just more arrogant in this view toward the town in which we were raised and thought so wonderful?

The answer, of course, is neither. It is just that the two of us have lived in other places and have drawn comparisons between those places and that place we called home. As a result, we see that small town in a different perspective and can better judge its assets and liabilities, as it compares with other communities.

But since we can't easily experience all cities, what we need are measurable criteria that could be used in assessing the worth of a city—its quality of life.

Various media and authors have made such comparisons of cities and ranked them, based on leisure activities, dining characteristics, number of college-educated persons and a host of other criteria. But none have done this as well as Richard Boyer and David Savageau.

*Places Rated Almanac* has been a major success, now having gone through four editions over the past 12 years.

In their first three editions the authors used nine criteria to evaluate urban centers: subsequently, a 10th measure, "cost of living," was added. The nine criteria are "jobs, housing and environment, crime, transportation, education, recreation, climate and the arts."

There is one tricky concept in Boyer and Savageau's work of which the reader should be aware. All of the rankings are for metropolitan areas rather than individual cities.

As the authors rightly state, metropolitan areas are "the smallest units of urban geography for which there is the largest amount of comparable data;" thus the cities ranked also include the county in which the city is located as well as surrounding counties that are economically and socially linked with the city. Dallas, for example, has a population of 1 million but its metropolitan area of eight counties contains nearly 3 million residents, the figure used by the authors.

This system of rankings is not perfect, but it does address those centers of population concentration—metropolitan areas—in which three-fourths of Americans live and for which detailed, comparable data are available.

So what are the best cities (metropolitan areas) in the country over this period of 12 years, from the 1981, 1985, 1989 and 1993 editions? Cincinnati is ranked first in 1993, a position that Atlanta, Pittsburgh and Seattle, respectively, garnered in previous editions. And

Pittsburgh, tops in 1985, is the only city that occupied a position in the top 10 in each of the four editions.

Cities that have appeared three times in the top 10 listings of the four editions include Philadelphia, Seattle, Louisville, Raleigh-Durham and Washington, D.C. Appearing twice were Boston, San Francisco and Nassau-Suffolk counties on Long Island.

Metropolitan Providence shows the difficulties of making comparisons over time, primarily because of a change in the definition of the metro area. In 1981 the Providence-Warwick-Pawtucket Metropolitan Area ranked 32 out of the 277 ranked metro areas. In 1985 the Providence Metropolitan Area received a name change and ranked 26 out of 329. Much of the rest of the state fell into the Pawtucket-Woonsocket-Attleboro Metropolitan Area which ranked 205. A few Rhode Island communities fell within the Fall River and New London-Norwich Metropolitan areas.

Providence fell out of the top 50 metro areas in 1989 to a ranking of 68 out of 333, a result primarily of high house prices. The Pawtucket-Woonsocket-Attleboro Metropolitan Area ranked 202.

A new definition of the Providence metro area came about in 1993, according to Boyer and Savageau's data. The Providence-Warwick Cranston Metropolitan Area, with a population

of 928,741, was the 64th largest of the 343 areas ranked. It included 30 cities and towns in the state, excluding Newport and the five towns comprising Newport County, Foster, West Greenwich and Block Island. So it is important to remember that all references to "Providence" include the city and 29 surrounding cities and towns of the 39 that comprise the entire state!

So how does the Providence-Warwick-Cranston Metropolitan Area (Providence) compare in this ranking of 343 metro areas in which three of four Americans live? Ranked from the poorest to best, they are: cost of living—304; housing—299; recreation—157; health care—144; crime—140; climate—98; the arts—96; transportation—75; education (college-level only)—69; and jobs—46. With this score, Providence ranks as 86th best metropolitan area in the country, placing us in the top 25 percent of these 343 American and Canadian population centers.

Using data to compare metropolitan areas is a start to determining our best "cities." But like that small town in which I was raised, it is the good people who make a place special, no matter the ranking.

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