EXCLUSIVE POLL

The Best Places to Raise a Family

We listened to the experts: parents themselves

BY THE EDITORS

WHERE’S THE BEST PLACE to raise a family? Working with the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, Reader’s Digest polled parents across the country about factors affecting family life.

They told us their most important requirements for a family-friendly area—an absence of crime, low rates of drug and alcohol abuse, good public schools, first-rate health care and a clean environment. Then came an affordable cost of living and strong economic growth. (See box, page 76.)

These factors were weighted, based on the importance that parents gave them. Then they were stacked up against statistical and demographic portraits of 301 metropolitan areas, large and small, throughout the country. Using

THE TOP FIFTY

1. Sheboygan, Wis.
2. Kenosha, Wis.
3. Fort Collins-Loveland, Colo.
5. Pittsburgh, Pa.
10. Hickory-Morganton, N.C.
11. St. Cloud, Minn.
12. Provo-Orem, Utah
16. Glens Falls, N.Y.
17. Dover, Del.
18. Kankakee, Ill.
19. Bangor, Maine
20. Jackson, Miss.
21. Galveston-Texas City, Texas
22. Elkhart-Goshen, Ind.
23. Monmouth-Ocean, N.J.
24. Jacksonville, N.C.
25. Salinas, Calif.
27. Wilmington-Newark, Del./Md.
28. Enid, Okla.
30. La Crosse, Wis./Minn.
31. Salt Lake City-Ogden, Utah
32. Salem, Ore.
33. Rochester, N.Y.
34. St. Louis, Mo./Ill.
35. Rochester, Minn.
36. Bellingham, Wash.
37. Appleton-Oshkosh-Neenah, Wis.
38. Clarksville-Hopkinsville, Tenn./Ky.
39. Lima, Ohio
40. Fargo-Moorhead, N.D./Minn.
41. Cleveland-Lorain-Elyria, Ohio
42. Portland, Ore.
43. Cedar Rapids, Iowa
44. Anchorage, Alaska
45. Terre Haute, Ind.
47. Green Bay, Wis.
49. Reading, Pa.
50. Iowa City, Iowa
measurable, uniform indicators—such as FBI crime data, per-capita income growth and EPA air-quality ratings—we ranked each area.

**What Do Parents Care About?**

Reader’s Digest asked parents to rate 13 features of a good place to raise a family. Here, on average, is how parents rated them on a scale of 1-10:

1. Low crime rate [9.7]
2. Low drug/alcohol problem [9.6]
3. Good public schools [9.5]
4. Quality health care [9.3]
5. Clean environment [9.2]
6. Affordable cost of living [8.9]
7. Strong economic growth [8.8]
8. Extracurricular school activities [8.7]
9. Access to colleges [8.3]
10. Many activities for youth [7.8]
11. Less than one hour to major city [7.0]
12. Many private schools [6.9]
13. Warm and sunny weather [6.0]

Mean average of a “1-10” rating by parents, 10 being “extremely important.”

The metropolitan areas we compared are the same standard geographical divisions used for national statistical surveys. These metro areas include city and suburban neighborhoods and sometimes even neighboring cities and towns. None is without problems. But places that achieved high overall scores in our survey are places that can provide what parents want the most for their families. The 50 “winners” are listed on the previous page.

The top cities may surprise you for their mix of size, location and disparate ambiance. Winners were scattered across the country from coast to coast. Most of the top ten were in the northern tier—no “sunny paradise” climates. Smaller is beautiful, says the survey: six of the top ten places have populations of less than 250,000. But two major metropolitan areas, with million-plus populations, also made the top ten.

After analyzing the survey data, The Digest sent an editorial team out to the top ten metro areas to hear from local parents themselves. We found that if any one thread runs through the fabric of all these places, large and small, it is the golden one called “community”—the concerned neighbors, active churches and community groups that stand behind safe streets, strong schools and thriving towns.

Here’s a closer look:

1. **Sheboygan, Wisconsin**

“We consider Sheboygan a secret haven,” says Ann Scharrer, 39, a mother of four. Just 50 miles north of Milwaukee, it is a secret no longer.

The town that scored No. 1 overall got especially high marks for its affordable cost of living and extracurricular school activities. “It’s easy to live here, easy to get a job, easy to have someone watch your kid,” says Joe Gulig, city editor of the Sheboygan Press. Frank Kolenc, 78, who recently retired after 52 years at a nearby foundry, explains: “If kids get themselves in trouble, someone is going to see it and tell their parents.”

Sheboyganites may take such an active interest in their children because people put down deep multigenerational roots. Many families in town are third- or fourth-generation descendants of German and Dutch immigrants who came in the 19th century and stayed. Today, a healthy economy and pleasant life-style keep many young people in the area—28 percent of the population is 20 or younger; 66 percent is under 45.

Neighborhoods in this city of 51,000 are filled with well-kept homes. Supermarket shoppers leave their car doors unlocked. Preteens walk home alone after dark from soccer or hockey games. And though Sheboygan faced some rough economic times in the late ’70s and early ’80s, unemployment is a microscopic two percent, thanks to the city’s many light industries.

2. **Kenosha, Wisconsin**

When Ruben Silguero came to Kenosha looking for a job as a police-man, the chief of police personally waived the residency requirement so that Silguero could “get a few paychecks under my belt” in order to bring his wife and two small kids from Chicago, an hour’s drive to the south. “Kenosha gave me a home when I had nothing except the stuff I packed in my truck,” Silguero says.

Cassell Lawson, a vice president at Kenosha’s Gateway Technical College, explains: “Kenoshans like to see good things happen, and they work at it.” Signs remind everyone to “Keep Kenosha Clean,” and this tidy Lake Michigan city of 84,000 really means it. A youth group even has a “graffiti SWAT team” that removes graffiti free of charge.

Kenosha’s biggest resource, says Rev. Olen Arrington of the Second Baptist Church, “is its community spirit and its people.” On the day Orville Johnson, who is white, moved to Kenosha, his first visitor was a black neighbor. “He introduced himself and offered the use of his lawn mower,” Johnson says. Over the next 13 years, “we watched one another’s children grow and were there for each other whenever someone needed a hand.”

Ernest Koster, father of two, remembers the way his neighbors pitched in when his mother was dying of cancer. “People would cook for her, clean, run errands,” he says. “It seemed like she was part of everyone’s family, not just ours.”
3. **Fort Collins-Loveland, Colorado**

“I hate to advertise this as a great place to live, but we love it,” says United Parcel Service driver David Nelson, 32, as he cheers his 11-year-old son’s soccer team at a large indoor facility on the outskirts of town.

Located 60 miles north of Denver and home to Colorado State University, Fort Collins mixes small-town friendliness and big-city services. Together with its sister city of Loveland, the area has a population of 226,000 and is growing—fast. “It’s a wonderful place to bring up children,” says Nelson. “For culture and sports you’re within an easy drive of Denver but far enough away to be buffered from the problems of a major city.” Among the top ten family-friendly places, this area rated No. 1 for available youth activities.

The rapid influx of newcomers, together with high housing costs, have some residents fretting about the future. But with all its growth, Fort Collins has managed to retain a neighborly ambiance. After Carol Neil and her husband, David, an engineer, came to the area from Florida, she struck up a conversation with another mother. When the woman learned the family had just arrived, “she wrote me a list of grocery stores and physicians,” says Neil. “People are friendly.”

4. **Bremerton, Washington**

The city sits amid views of almost paralyzing beauty—sparkling water all around, towering forests, the snow-capped Olympic Mountains to the west and the Cascades to the east. Seattle is a 15-mile ferry ride away. Puget Sound Naval Shipyard, with 20,000 jobs, is boss in Bremerton. The area’s booming economy beat every other top ten place for growth. When Edward Shanahan, 35, retired from the Navy, he stayed on here. “I’ve lived in nine different states, and this is by far the best for raising kids,” Shanahan says.

Janet Bayly, 35, works part time at a laundromat to support her son, eight, and daughter, nine. “The safety and schools are very important to me,” she says. Dorothy Magneson, 49, who raised four children in the area, agrees. “I can leave doors unlocked and not worry about it.”

Chris and Kathi Stimmel, in their mid-20s, grew up in the area—and recently moved back after living in Tacoma, Wash. “Everything is more affordable here,” says Chris, a heating and air-conditioning serviceman. The couple, who have an infant son and three-year-old daughter, moved into a four-bedroom home on a pleasant street “with great neighbors and lots of kids,” says Kathi. “Everyone looks out for everyone else.”

5. **Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania**

This is the city that got its face dirty helping build the rest of the country, then cleaned itself up in a spectacular renaissance 30 years ago. Today, skyscrapers soar above three rivers flowing amid green hills.

Randy and Debbie Hollister and their two children moved to Ingomar, north of the city, after living in California, Arizona and Texas. Randy’s business, teaching real-estate agents how to use computer technology, could be conducted from anywhere. “But we chose Pittsburgh,” Debbie says, “for raising our kids.”

Among their top ten places to raise a family, the Pittsburgh area had the lowest property- and violent-crime rate. The Hollisters also like Pittsburgh’s medical facilities, museums and sports attractions. And they point to their children’s schools, where “there is massive parent involvement and good, solid education.”

Attorney Bob Gustine and his wife, Nancy, live with their children in his parents’ old house in the Greentree section, minutes from downtown. As a boy, Gustine couldn’t understand why his dad, Frankie, wanted to stay in Pittsburgh after he retired as a Major League infielder in 1950. “He told me it was because he had never met nicer people than in Pittsburgh—and that’s still true today.”

6. **Burlington, Vermont**

Burlington had the lowest rate of drug crime of any of the top ten. But people in this city of 39,000 delight most in what mother-of-two Lisa Ventris calls “the scale of living.” Filled with restaurants and bookstores, Burlington is home to the University of Vermont. But, says Ventris, “if you drive ten minutes, you’ll find yourself in a very rural part of the state.”

Roy Sokolowski, a financial consultant who moved from the New York City area, rhapsodizes about leaving his downtown office and in 20 minutes being at the farm where his son, six, and daughter, four, “hear the coyotes howl at night.” And yet, he says, in Burlington they are exposed to “the interplay of high-tech information and the arts.”

The clean air, streams and sunsets over Lake Champlain come at a price. Stockbroker Jim Kalbfleisch loves raising his kids in Burlington, but admits “taxes are horrible, especially along the lake.” However, tax-producing development has taken second place to life-style. When Burlington’s planning commission considered permitting an office building that would have blocked the lake view from a public park, the proposal was rejected. “It’s part of the trade-off,” Ventris says.

7. **Charlottesville, Virginia**

It’s an old joke at the University of Virginia: two undergrads pass a statue and one reads the inscription: “Thomas Jefferson, 1743-1826.” “Oh,” says the other, “I didn’t know he was dead.”

Though Jefferson has been gone for 171 years, his spirit is almost palpable in this sophisticated city of 42,000 near the Blue Ridge Mountains. “This is one of the best places in America to raise a family,” Tom Powell,
43, a service-station owner, says flatly. Powell and his wife, Elizabeth, who have three boys, enjoy the "peace of the countryside combined with the convenience of the city." A big part of that "peace" is the safety of their children. "It's a very wholesome town with a very low crime rate," says Powell.

A volunteer spirit abounds. There's an abundance of helpers for school tutoring programs, and Habitat for Humanity and Christmas in April turn out hundreds of people to build and refurbish homes.

8. Spokane, Washington

Sitting between the Rocky and Cascade mountain ranges 110 miles south of the Canadian border, Spokane (population 192,000) is a long drive from other cities its size. Perhaps because of that isolation, Spokane is one of the smallest cities in the country to support a professional symphony, theater company, 12,500-seat sports arena and minor-league hockey and baseball teams.

Mary Ellen Laughary, 32, a mother of three, likes the way Spokane "has that small-town feeling but is large enough to offer cultural diversity." Her husband, Mark, likes "all the outdoor opportunities." He says the family lived just outside Las Vegas for five years, but "we didn't feel safe with the kids. Here it's safe."

"You feel at ease," agrees Christie Olson, 41. A fourth-generation Spokanian with four teen-agers, she works as a buyer for a drugstore chain. "Here you can look people in the eye and say 'How are you doing?' I miss that when I'm in big cities on business trips."

9. Boston, Massachusetts

Downtown, office towers sit hard by historic sites such as Paul Revere's house. Some 3.25 million people live in the surrounding metro area, populating city neighborhoods and suburbs that each have a distinct personality. And the area's abundance of private schools and colleges earned Boston especially high ratings in these categories.

Executive Stan Mescon was raised in affluent Newton. Now he and his wife, Dr. Val Treloar, are raising two kids there. "The community is why we stayed," he says. "It's easy to walk places. There are lots of kids, and that draws people out into the neighborhood."

In the suburb of Brookline, Joan Amsler points to a playground across the street where kids play soccer and climb on the equipment while moms and dads chat. "A good community means that my family is around, my friends are here, and it's easy to be involved in school activities," she says.

Sonia Alleyn, who lives in the city's working-class Mattapan section, is active in the Home Buyers Union, which assists first-time buyers. "People who own homes take more pride in them," she says. "We've been able to improve local neighborhoods."

10. Hickory-Morganton, North Carolina

The small towns scattered among the pine woods between Hickory and Morganton, 25 miles to the west, anchor a metro area of 318,000. Mark and Tammy Girard, who came here from Vermont and New York, are raising four children. "Our taxes are about half what they were," says Mark, who commutes 90 minutes to Winston-Salem, N.C., to work at US Air. "There's a good variety of things to do, and I like the schools," adds Tammy, a substitute teacher.

Among our top ten places, Hickory-Morganton was second only to Sheboygan for its affordable cost of living. Cynthia Julian, 31, waitresses two nights a week so her husband, Joe, a 34-year-old machinist, can have "daddy time" with their three-year-old daughter. But she isn't forced to find a full-time job: "We can get by with just one working because the cost of living here is so reasonable."

The Julians also like the way people in Hickory help one another. Their motorcycle club is typical. Bikers pony up $10 and $20 entry fees to ride for charity. "We've done runs for people who had no insurance and whose house burned down," she says. "And once for a boy who needed a special wheelchair."

What did we learn on our search for the "best"? Family-friendly places can be anywhere—if people work at it. The best places to raise a family are those where people work with each other, trust each other, count on each other. In short, where families can and do shape their own communities.

How does your town measure up?
Reprints of this article are available. See page 236.

Clothes Encounter

As a struggling unknown, Michael Caine once went to the last resort of starving actors: a casting agency run by a man named Ronnie Curtis. As Caine tells it, "Ronnie was very cross-eyed, so when he came out, pointed at us and said, 'You,' three of us stood up. This did not seem to throw him at all—I suppose he was used to it. Then he asked, 'What size is your chest?' Each of us still thought he was addressing us alone, so we answered in unison with our chest sizes: 'Who said forty?' he asked, and I put my hand up. Now I knew how Marilyn Monroe felt. 'What's your inside leg measurement?' he demanded. 'Thirty-two,' I replied. His eyes lit up. 'Perfect. Come in,' he said, beckoning me into his small office.

"When I got inside he explained that I would be playing a policeman in a small film the next day. I had been cast because I fitted the uniform that the company already had in their wardrobe."

—Michael Caine, What's It All About? (Random House)