

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 3.)

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 measurable, uniform indicators—such as FBI crime data, per-capita income growth and EPA air-quality ratings—we ranked each area.

The metropolitan areas we compared are the same standard geographical divisions used for national statistical surveys. These metro areas include city and suburban neigh-

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borhoods 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 below.

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,

THE TOP FIFTY

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| 1. Sheboygan, Wis. | 26. Champaign-Urbana, Ill. |
| 2. Kenosha, Wis. | 27. Wilmington-Newark, Del./Md. |
| 3. Fort Collins-Loveland, Colo. | 28. Enid, Okla. |
| 4. Bremerton, Wash. | 29. Erie, Pa. |
| 5. Pittsburgh, Pa. | 30. La Crosse, Wis./Minn. |
| 6. Burlington, Vt. | 31. Salt Lake City-Ogden, Utah |
| 7. Charlottesville, Va. | 32. Salem, Ore. |
| 8. Spokane, Wash. | 33. Rochester, N.Y. |
| 9. Boston, Mass. | 34. St. Louis, Mo./Ill. |
| 10. Hickory-Morganton, N.C. | 35. Rochester, Minn. |
| 11. St. Cloud, Minn. | 36. Bellingham, Wash. |
| 12. Provo-Orem, Utah | 37. Appleton-Oshkosh-Neenah, Wis. |
| 13. Steubenville-Weirton, Ohio/W. Va. | 38. Clarksville-Hopkinsville, Tenn./Ky. |
| 14. Knoxville, Tenn. | 39. Lima, Ohio |
| 15. Ann Arbor, Mich. | 40. Fargo-Moorhead, N.D./Minn. |
| 16. Glens Falls, N.Y. | 41. Cleveland-Lorain-Elyria, Ohio |
| 17. Dover, Del. | 42. Portland, Ore. |
| 18. Kankakee, Ill. | 43. Cedar Rapids, Iowa |
| 19. Bangor, Maine | 44. Anchorage, Alaska |
| 20. Jackson, Miss. | 45. Terre Haute, Ind. |
| 21. Galveston-Texas City, Texas | 46. Kalamazoo-Battle Creek, Mich. |
| 22. Elkhart-Goshen, Ind. | 47. Green Bay, Wis. |
| 23. Monmouth-Ocean, N.J. | 48. Lynchburg, Va. |
| 24. Jacksonville, N.C. | 49. Reading, Pa. |
| 25. Salinas, Calif. | 50. Iowa City, Iowa |

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 USAir. "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."