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# Think your city is best? See the latest rankings

The latest issue of 'Cities Ranked and Rated' is just out. 'Today' talked to the authors about what makes a metropolis great (or bad)

TODAY  
Updated: 10:29 a.m. MT March 30, 2004

*Thinking about relocating? Or just curious how your city compares with others across the nation? Well, the answers to your questions are here, as featured in the annually updated book "Cities Ranked and Rated." The book's authors, Bert Sterling and Peter Sander, talked to the "Today" show about their findings.*

### How did you decide who makes it to the top?

PETER: "We look at over a hundred pieces of information about each place. We group those into nine categories — including, economy and jobs, cost of living, climate, education, arts and culture. We add in a factor for intangibles and another for consistency across categories, press a button, and voila."

### "Cities Ranked and Rated": The Top 10

[Story continues below ↓](#)

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### FREE VIDEO



Launch

March 30: Peter Sander and Bert Sperling talk about their book, "Cities Ranked and Rated."

Today show

Yes  No

Yes  No

Yes  No



- 
- 1. Charlottesville, VA
  - 2. Santa Fe, NM
  - 3. San Luis Obispo, CA (includes Atascadero and Paso Robles)
  - 4. Santa Barbara, CA (includes Santa Maria and Lompoc)
  - 5. Honolulu, HI
  - 6. Ann Arbor, MI
  - 7. Atlanta, GA
  - 8. Asheville, NC
  - 9. Reno, NV
  - 10. Corvallis, OR

(See the complete Top 50 list at the end of this article.)

### **In general, what places make it to the top of the list?**

BERT: College towns do especially well. They have plenty to do, nice downtowns, pleasant surroundings ... and usually aren't too crowded. The strength in higher education spills over into all levels of education, and most have excellent health care facilities. State capitals — which tend to be clean, economically stable, and usually have strong cultural ties — are good. Finally, places that score consistently high across all categories also tend to do well."

### **Were there any surprises in your findings?**

PETER: "Yes, quite a few. For instance, highly ranked cities are found all across the country, not just in the Sun Belt like everybody thinks. There are interesting cross-sections — like our so-called "Big City Bargains" — a big city with a low cost of living) — like Pittsburgh, Indianapolis and Jacksonville, FL.

### **And what about the bad news? Let's take a look at the bottom of your "principal metropolitan areas" list. How would you characterize the less fortunate cities at the bottom?**

- 327. Kankakee, IL
- 328. Merced, CA
- 329. Newburgh, NY
- 330. Stockton-Lodi, CA

- 331. Laredo, TX

BERT: "Areas at the bottom typically have ... high unemployment, crime and cost of living combined with low educational attainment, a lack of amenities and not much to do. That said, most places at the bottom of the list, such as Stockton-Lodi, recognize their shortcomings and are actively working to improve."

**If I'm young and single, just starting out, what places would I find attractive?**

PETER: "Younger singles are interested in building their careers and financial footing. They want lots to do, and of course lots of other singles. Of course, the places that rank highest overall are good bets, but for singles in particular we would choose the Norfolk area in Virginia (#17), Austin TX (#22) and from a little farther down the list, San Antonio, TX (#93)."

**And what if I have a family with kids? Where are the best places for families?**

BERT: "Families look for many things, including good and affordable housing, quality education and more 'daytime' things to do like parks, museums and outdoor recreation. We would choose Olympia, WA (#16), Pittsburgh, PA (#28), and as a dark horse, Lexington, KY (#91) for families."

**Ok, now I've lived a prosperous career and family life, and I'm starting to think about retirement. Where should I look?**

PETER: "Well, first of all, you've brought up a very important value of this book — it isn't just to figure out where you should be now, it's to plan a future, too. ... People approaching retirement are thinking more about healthcare, leisure and overall cost of living and less about jobs, housing costs and general education. Our choices would be Roanoke, VA (#11), Bellingham, WA (#38), and a dark horse from far down the list — Sheboygan, WI (#199). Another dark horse, Fayetteville, NC (#250), is also attractive."

**What makes some of these cities "dark horses"?**

BERT: "The dark horses may not score well in all categories but do have strong characteristics attractive to certain segments of the population. They are also on an upward path. We would expect them to rank higher overall in the next edition of 'Cities Ranked & Rated.'"

**Virginia, Texas and Washington seem to be mentioned a lot. Is there a pattern here?**

BERT: "Yes, there is. These states tend to have favorable business climates, which lead to favorable economic circumstances for their residents. They are physically attractive and have good climates. They also tend to be socially and politically progressive, considerate of their futures but also of their past. All of these things work together to create an environment conducive to better living."

**"Cities Ranked and Rated": The Top 50**

1. Charlottesville, VA




2. Santa Fe, NM
3. San Luis Obispo-Atascadero-Paso Robles, CA
4. Santa Barbara-Santa Maria-Lompoc, CA
5. Honolulu, HI
6. Ann Arbor, MI
7. Atlanta, GA
8. Asheville, NC
9. Reno, NV
10. Corvallis, OR
11. Roanoke, VA
12. Portland-Vancouver, OR-WA
13. Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill, NC
14. Bryan-College Station, TX
15. Lynchburg, VA
16. Olympia, WA
17. Norfolk-Virginia Beach-Newport News, VA-NC
18. Colorado Springs, CO
19. Nassau-Suffolk, NY
20. Pueblo, CO
21. Eugene-Springfield, OR
22. Austin-San Marcos, TX
23. Lafayette, IN
24. Minneapolis-St. Paul, MN-WI
25. Dover, DE
26. Washington, DC-MD-VA-WV
27. Fayetteville-Springdale-Rogers, AR
28. Pittsburgh, PA
29. Bloomington, IN
30. Stamford-Norwalk, CT
31. State College, PA
32. Abilene, TX
33. Champaign-Urbana, IL
34. Athens, GA
35. Wichita, KS
36. Fort Worth-Arlington, TX
37. Madison, WI
38. Bellingham, WA
39. Las Cruces, NM
40. New York, NY
41. Dayton-Springfield, OH
42. Bloomington-Normal, IL
43. Sarasota-Bradenton, FL
44. Bremerton, WA
45. Albuquerque, NM
46. Harrisburg-Lebanon-Carlisle, PA
47. Evansville-Henderson, IN-KY
48. Tampa-St. Petersburg-Clearwater, FL
49. Punta Gorda, FL
50. Columbia, SC

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