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Mid-sized metros with the best quality of life

Provo leads the with list strong population growth, low unemployment and bigger houses

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They contain only 20 percent of the U.S. population, but mid-sized metropolitan areas can be an appealing alternative to life in the big city.

The best of the bunch is Provo, Utah, according to a new bizjournals quality-of-life study. Boulder, Colo., and Madison, Wis., are the runners-up.

America's 124 mid-sized metros, with populations between 250,000 and 1 million people, have a total of 60 million residents. That puts them in the shadow of the nation's 51 major metros, those in the million-plus category, which contain 54 percent of all Americans.

The study compared the 124 mid-sized metros in 20 statistical categories, using the latest U.S. Census Bureau data. The highest scores went to well-rounded places with healthy economies, light traffic, moderate costs of living, impressive housing stocks and strong educational systems.

These are the top 10 mid-sized metros in terms of quality of life:

1. Provo, Utah
2. Boulder, Colo.
3. Madison, Wis.
4. Bridgeport-Stamford, Conn.
5. Ann Arbor, Mich.
6. Ogden, Utah
7. Fort Collins, Colo.
8. Boise, Idaho
9. Colorado Springs, Colo.
10. Des Moines, Iowa

Provo, which is located 45 miles south of Salt Lake City, earns top marks for its impressive inventory of big homes. Nearly 26 percent of Provo's houses have nine or more rooms. No other mid-sized metro does better than 20.2 percent.

But housing is not Provo's only strength. The Provo area has enjoyed steady population growth this decade, expanding 31 percent since 2000. Its unemployment rate typically runs two to three points below the national average. And it has a strong educational system, capped by the presence of Brigham Young University.

The runners-up are both college towns, too. Boulder and Madison are respectively the homes of the University of Colorado and the University of Wisconsin.

Almost 55 percent of Boulder's adults have bachelor's degrees, easily leading all mid-sized metros in that category. Boulder is also noteworthy for its healthy entrepreneurial spirit. Seven percent of its adults are self-employed, twice the national average.

Madison not only has a major university, but also serves as Wisconsin's state capital, giving it the benefit of a stable and upscale employment base. Forty-four percent of Madison's workers hold management or professional jobs. The comparable figure for a typical mid-range metro is 33 percent.

The other members of the top 10 took different paths to get there. Profiles of the [top 10 mid-sized metros start here](#).

Bridgeport-Stamford is one of America's most affluent metros. Its median household income of \$80,241 is easily the highest in any mid-sized market.

Ann Arbor, site of the University of Michigan, has the nation's strongest concentration of adults with master's, doctoral and professional degrees, 27.7 percent.

Ogden, which is 40 miles north of Salt Lake City, is the only mid-sized metro other than Provo

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where at least 20 percent of all houses have nine or more rooms.

Fort Collins is another college community, the home of Colorado State University. It's one of just six mid-sized metros where more than 40 percent of all adults hold bachelor's degrees.

Boise is one of the fastest-growing places in America, adding 123,000 people since 2000, a growth rate of 26.4 percent. The typical mid-sized metro grew 8.4 percent over the same span.

Colorado Springs has a sizable corps of young adults, giving it a strong foundation for the future. Nearly 30 percent of Colorado Springs' residents are between the ages of 25 and 44, sixth-best in the mid-range study group.

Des Moines is a joy for commuters fed up with the hassles of big-city traffic. The typical Des Moines adult takes 19.7 minutes to get from home to his or her workplace, compared to more than half an hour in major metros such as New York City, Chicago and Los Angeles.

All [124 markets in the study](#) have been officially classified as metropolitan areas by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget. Each mid-sized metro is centered on a city with at least 50,000 residents. Adjacent suburbs and nearby countryside are added to boost the total population into the range of 250,000 to 1 million.

The largest mid-sized metros are Tucson, Ariz., with 967,000 residents; Honolulu, with 906,000; and Tulsa, with 905,000, based on 2007 Census Bureau estimates. At the tail end are Cedar Rapids, Iowa, with 253,000 residents, and Santa Cruz, Calif., with 252,000.

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More info: [Profiles of the top-rated mid-sized metros](#), [Methodology](#), [Mid-Sized Chart](#).

Ranking quality of life in mid-sized metros

Rank	Metropolitan area (population between 250,000 and 1 million)	Quality of life score	Population growth since 2000	Average commuting time to work (minutes)	Median household income	Management and professional jobs	Houses built since 1990	Adults (25 or older) with bachelor's degrees	Population
1	Provo, Utah	20.31	30.9%	20.64	\$57,270	37.1%	45.9%	36.1%	493,647
2	Boulder, Colo.	19.78	7.6%	21.89	\$63,257	49.3%	31.2%	54.5%	290,262
3	Madison, Wis.	15.20	10.7%	21.14	\$59,709	44.3%	30.9%	40.5%	555,626
4	Bridgeport-Stamford, Conn.	14.42	1.4%	28.36	\$80,241	42.6%	12.6%	42.7%	895,015
5	Ann Arbor, Mich.	14.30	8.4%	21.94	\$61,049	50.3%	28.9%	50.8%	350,003
6	Ogden, Utah	13.93	17.1%	22.60	\$59,002	34.4%	36.0%	27.7%	518,405
7	Fort Collins, Colo.	13.62	14.3%	21.40	\$52,046	41.6%	40.1%	41.5%	287,574
8	Boise, Idaho	12.93	26.4%	21.58	\$49,888	36.5%	48.6%	28.5%	587,025
9	Colorado Springs, Colo.	12.27	13.3%	22.10	\$55,304	39.8%	36.9%	33.5%	608,296
10	Des Moines, Iowa	11.86	13.5%	19.68	\$55,853	37.7%	30.6%	32.5%	546,656
11	Holland, Mich.	11.02	8.8%	20.00	\$53,881	32.2%	36.9%	27.6%	259,206
12	Trenton, N.J.	10.74	4.2%	26.94	\$70,258	42.0%	16.1%	37.8%	365,449
13	Cedar Rapids, Iowa	10.60	6.6%	18.41	\$52,022	34.3%	27.8%	27.6%	252,784
14	Lincoln, Nebr.	9.57	9.5%	17.77	\$49,238	37.6%	29.0%	36.4%	290,404
15	Manchester, N.H.	9.30	5.6%	25.22	\$67,667	40.8%	19.7%	34.1%	402,302
16	Durham, N.C.	8.00	13.2%	23.43	\$48,362	45.3%	37.2%	41.8%	479,624
17	Omaha, Nebr.	7.95	8.2%	19.05	\$52,924	36.7%	26.1%	31.3%	831,712
18	Huntsville, Ala.	7.03	12.8%	22.33	\$50,647	40.9%	37.2%	33.8%	386,632
19	Portland, Maine	6.96	5.2%	23.58	\$53,998	38.2%	24.2%	34.1%	513,102
20	Poughkeepsie, N.Y.	6.94	7.8%	30.82	\$65,945	34.9%	18.8%	28.8%	669,915
21	Albany, N.Y.	6.71	3.3%	21.69	\$55,129	39.5%	15.4%	32.0%	853,358
22	Norwich, Conn.	6.50	3.2%	22.35	\$61,044	36.5%	15.9%	29.1%	267,376
23	Harrisburg, Pa.	6.44	3.9%	21.47	\$53,168	34.5%	21.0%	28.0%	528,892
24	York, Pa.	6.12	10.3%	26.40	\$55,120	31.8%	26.3%	23.0%	421,049
25	Lexington, Ky.	6.06	9.5%	20.41	\$47,081	37.8%	33.5%	32.9%	447,589
26	Anchorage, Alaska	5.54	13.4%	21.32	\$67,995	36.9%	26.7%	29.1%	362,340
27	Lancaster, Pa.	5.32	5.9%	21.67	\$52,764	30.7%	23.7%	23.5%	498,465
28	Naples, Fla.	5.22	25.6%	24.65	\$57,653	28.2%	57.4%	31.2%	315,839
29	Worcester, Mass.	5.03	4.2%	27.05	\$61,988	37.5%	17.0%	31.1%	781,352
30	Columbia, S.C.	4.89	10.6%	23.99	\$47,605	37.0%	35.9%	30.8%	712,760
31	Roanoke, Va.	4.34	2.9%	20.77	\$46,896	34.2%	21.9%	24.5%	300,345
32	Green Bay, Wis.	3.97	6.6%	18.90	\$51,449	31.0%	31.4%	23.8%	301,131
33	Reading, Pa.	3.68	7.6%	23.32	\$52,787	31.0%	21.8%	21.4%	401,955
34	Reno, Nev.	3.33	19.7%	21.24	\$54,322	32.5%	41.3%	27.1%	408,931
35	Charleston, S.C.	3.18	14.8%	24.39	\$49,828	34.0%	36.4%	29.3%	630,100
36	Spokane, Wash.	3.18	9.1%	21.40	\$46,382	34.3%	26.2%	27.1%	456,175
37	New Haven, Conn.	3.13	2.6%	24.07	\$59,916	37.1%	11.7%	30.7%	845,494
38	Knoxville, Tenn.	2.93	10.6%	21.82	\$44,264	34.2%	34.2%	27.5%	682,527
39	Oxnard-Thousand Oaks, Calif.	2.86	6.0%	26.60	\$73,250	35.5%	20.8%	31.3%	798,364
40	Springfield, Mo.	2.60	14.0%	22.23	\$41,480	31.3%	39.4%	24.1%	419,712
41	Fort Wayne, Ind.	2.57	5.1%	20.85	\$48,299	29.4%	23.2%	23.6%	410,149
42	Fayetteville, Ark.	2.57	25.5%	21.14	\$44,552	33.7%	47.2%	25.6%	433,484
43	Allentown-Bethlehem, Pa.	2.30	8.6%	27.54	\$55,038	34.3%	19.4%	25.3%	803,844
44	Grand Rapids, Mich.	2.08	4.9%	21.69	\$49,044	30.3%	26.0%	26.1%	776,742
45	Albuquerque, N.M.	1.85	14.5%	23.80	\$45,325	36.6%	34.3%	28.7%	832,774
46	Wichita, Kan.	1.53	4.4%	18.84	\$47,404	33.6%	23.7%	26.0%	595,725
47	Winston-Salem, N.C.	1.34	9.8%	21.88	\$44,970	33.3%	32.8%	25.8%	463,159
48	Gainesville, Fla.	1.21	10.6%	20.47	\$38,026	42.5%	38.3%	38.4%	257,226
49	Asheville, N.C.	1.16	9.5%	21.82	\$43,819	32.8%	32.9%	27.7%	402,801
50	Syracuse, N.Y.	1.15	-0.7%	20.57	\$48,600	35.7%	13.2%	26.9%	645,293
51	Little Rock, Ark.	1.15	9.2%	21.98	\$45,817	35.4%	32.4%	27.9%	672,623
52	Eugene, Ore.	1.06	6.4%	19.45	\$43,111	32.5%	27.7%	28.4%	343,591
53	Greenville, S.C.	0.94	9.6%	21.92	\$45,210	34.5%	35.7%	26.5%	613,828
54	Tallahassee, Fla.	0.92	10.0%	22.67	\$46,891	41.7%	40.7%	33.7%	353,748
55	Palm Bay-Melbourne, Fla.	0.84	12.6%	23.58	\$50,354	35.1%	35.1%	26.3%	536,161
56	Hagerstown, Md.	0.69	17.2%	28.67	\$51,619	31.4%	32.7%	18.4%	261,953
57	Wilmington, N.C.	0.52	23.7%	22.23	\$44,780	31.5%	47.1%	27.1%	339,511
58	Akron, Ohio	0.50	0.6%	23.13	\$47,898	34.9%	20.6%	28.0%	699,356
59	Davenport, Iowa	0.47	0.0%	19.35	\$45,903	30.6%	14.4%	24.3%	378,163

60	Lansing, Mich.	0.29	1.9%	21.59	\$47,981	36.9%	22.3%	30.5%	456,440
61	Peoria, Ill.	0.23	1.2%	20.27	\$50,650	33.6%	15.1%	24.2%	369,721
62	Santa Rosa, Calif.	0.17	1.3%	25.13	\$62,399	33.7%	23.1%	30.7%	464,435
63	San Luis Obispo, Calif.	0.05	6.4%	19.90	\$56,952	38.1%	27.7%	29.9%	262,436
64	Savannah, Ga.	-0.05	12.3%	23.41	\$47,884	34.6%	36.9%	27.4%	329,329
65	Lafayette, La.	-0.35	7.4%	22.91	\$43,288	32.5%	31.4%	24.0%	256,494
66	Honolulu, Hawaii	-0.54	3.4%	27.36	\$65,367	34.9%	19.1%	30.4%	905,601
67	Bradenton-Sarasota, Fla.	-0.83	16.5%	22.62	\$49,321	31.0%	33.8%	28.5%	687,181
68	Santa Barbara, Calif.	-1.38	1.2%	19.07	\$58,401	36.9%	18.0%	30.1%	404,197
69	Tulsa, Okla.	-1.71	5.4%	20.94	\$45,670	33.2%	23.6%	24.5%	904,966
70	Jackson, Miss.	-1.71	7.4%	23.76	\$44,351	33.9%	33.4%	29.2%	531,869
71	Santa Cruz, Calif.	-1.75	-1.5%	26.86	\$63,778	40.3%	14.2%	39.9%	251,747
72	Cape Coral-Fort Myers, Fla.	-1.87	33.9%	25.49	\$50,699	29.1%	45.8%	24.6%	590,564
73	Erie, Pa.	-1.94	-0.6%	18.76	\$42,394	32.1%	14.9%	23.0%	279,092
74	Tucson, Ariz.	-2.13	14.6%	23.99	\$43,546	35.1%	34.6%	29.5%	967,089
75	Kalamazoo, Mich.	-2.17	2.7%	19.96	\$44,037	34.6%	23.9%	30.6%	323,264
76	South Bend, Ind.	-2.18	0.0%	20.57	\$43,534	30.8%	19.9%	24.4%	316,639
77	Canton, Ohio	-2.38	0.1%	21.61	\$44,856	30.0%	17.0%	21.4%	407,631
78	Evansville, Ind.	-2.56	2.0%	19.88	\$46,173	30.2%	22.7%	20.5%	347,781
79	Springfield, Mass.	-2.56	0.4%	22.44	\$48,981	36.4%	10.1%	28.4%	682,657
80	Pensacola, Fla.	-2.94	10.0%	23.51	\$44,516	32.0%	38.8%	22.9%	453,451
81	Rockford, Ill.	-2.95	10.0%	23.64	\$49,691	28.4%	23.4%	20.8%	352,290
82	Dayton, Ohio	-3.14	-1.5%	20.68	\$46,493	35.2%	16.0%	25.8%	835,537
83	Baton Rouge, La.	-3.15	9.1%	26.37	\$44,660	32.3%	30.8%	25.1%	770,471
84	Greensboro-High Point, N.C.	-3.17	8.6%	21.67	\$42,486	31.0%	33.2%	25.8%	698,497
85	Augusta, Ga.	-3.29	5.8%	22.21	\$43,843	31.7%	32.8%	22.5%	534,641
86	Clarksville, Tenn.	-3.42	12.8%	22.64	\$45,203	29.8%	43.8%	19.5%	265,062
87	Spartanburg, S.C.	-3.46	8.6%	21.78	\$40,923	29.6%	32.6%	19.0%	275,534
88	Duluth, Minn.	-3.63	-0.4%	20.28	\$42,615	33.8%	15.2%	23.0%	276,222
89	Killeen, Texas	-3.63	11.9%	19.26	\$47,313	31.1%	39.2%	20.1%	372,251
90	Montgomery, Ala.	-3.78	5.6%	22.67	\$43,033	34.5%	33.0%	27.1%	366,267
91	Scranton-Wilkes-Barre, Pa.	-3.82	-2.0%	20.85	\$41,945	28.1%	12.0%	20.6%	550,898
92	Charleston, W.Va.	-4.01	-1.8%	23.85	\$39,829	34.2%	19.9%	20.3%	302,949
93	Atlantic City, N.J.	-4.02	7.2%	22.90	\$55,767	28.8%	23.7%	22.0%	270,644
94	Utica, N.Y.	-4.24	-1.7%	20.71	\$42,910	32.1%	11.0%	19.1%	294,862
95	Chattanooga, Tenn.	-4.27	8.0%	22.03	\$43,242	31.1%	28.1%	20.8%	517,253
96	Salem, Ore.	-4.49	11.4%	23.65	\$43,730	30.3%	30.8%	22.6%	386,714
97	Deltona-Daytona Beach, Fla.	-4.66	12.9%	23.71	\$42,276	26.7%	32.6%	19.9%	500,413
98	Toledo, Ohio	-4.91	-1.2%	20.59	\$46,442	31.9%	16.6%	23.8%	650,955
99	Port St. Lucie, Fla.	-5.35	25.3%	26.67	\$49,679	27.9%	40.0%	21.0%	400,121
100	Vallejo, Calif.	-5.62	3.6%	29.60	\$66,880	32.6%	26.7%	22.4%	408,599
101	Ocala, Fla.	-5.69	25.5%	24.82	\$39,294	24.9%	48.3%	16.0%	324,857
102	Lubbock, Texas	-6.31	7.0%	17.43	\$41,538	32.9%	25.7%	27.1%	268,438
103	Hickory, N.C.	-6.65	5.5%	21.53	\$39,398	26.4%	28.8%	15.4%	360,471
104	Kingsport-Bristol, Tenn.	-6.97	1.7%	21.96	\$36,458	28.6%	24.6%	17.0%	302,096
105	Youngstown, Ohio	-6.97	-5.4%	21.36	\$40,292	27.1%	13.6%	19.0%	570,704
106	Fayetteville, N.C.	-7.68	3.7%	20.92	\$42,751	30.5%	38.8%	18.7%	348,940
107	Lakeland, Fla.	-7.77	18.8%	25.49	\$44,348	28.4%	41.1%	17.7%	574,746
108	Huntington, W.Va.	-8.51	-1.6%	22.42	\$34,903	29.1%	18.6%	15.3%	284,026
109	Fort Smith, Ark.	-8.59	6.0%	20.99	\$36,683	26.1%	26.9%	14.7%	293,362
110	Beaumont, Texas	-8.83	-2.3%	20.60	\$43,583	29.2%	21.8%	15.9%	375,644
111	Columbus, Ga.	-8.92	0.4%	19.92	\$41,934	32.3%	25.3%	19.9%	285,518
112	Salinas, Calif.	-9.81	1.5%	22.24	\$57,056	27.8%	21.1%	23.6%	407,637
113	Flint, Mich.	-10.29	-0.3%	25.82	\$43,112	30.0%	21.3%	18.4%	434,715
114	Stockton, Calif.	-10.75	19.1%	30.90	\$52,470	26.9%	31.2%	16.8%	670,990
115	Shreveport, La.	-10.86	3.1%	19.92	\$38,975	30.3%	21.6%	22.0%	387,182
116	Modesto, Calif.	-11.18	14.4%	27.92	\$50,616	26.9%	29.5%	16.4%	511,263
117	Mobile, Ala.	-12.05	1.1%	24.01	\$37,391	29.1%	21.2%	18.9%	404,406
118	Fresno, Calif.	-12.07	12.5%	21.08	\$47,298	28.0%	28.2%	18.6%	899,348
119	Brownsville, Texas	-12.71	15.5%	20.00	\$29,347	25.2%	35.5%	15.0%	387,210
120	McAllen-Edinburg, Texas	-13.19	24.8%	20.68	\$30,295	25.5%	49.6%	14.8%	710,514
121	Corpus Christi, Texas	-13.44	2.8%	19.59	\$40,573	31.3%	22.9%	19.3%	410,568
122	El Paso, Texas	-13.63	8.1%	22.36	\$34,980	28.6%	27.9%	19.1%	734,669
123	Bakersfield, Calif.	-13.90	19.5%	22.44	\$47,105	25.7%	31.8%	14.1%	790,710
124	Visalia, Calif.	-17.32	14.5%	21.13	\$40,595	22.5%	27.7%	12.7%	421,553

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