Cities

The Best Small Cities To Raise A Family

Francesca Levy, 10.25.10, 4:50 PM ET

Big, bustling cities are magnets for adventure-seekers and ambitious young people. But the grit and flashiness that attract singles to New York, Los Angeles and Miami aren't necessarily what parents look for in a place to settle down. Young people looking to start a family might do well to look past the bright lights of the big city.

Instead, maybe consider a place like Dubuque, Iowa, Manitowac, Wis., or Marquette, Mich. These places boast solid average incomes, good educational prospects, low costs, short commute times and high rates of home ownership--all reasons why they rank as the top three small cities in America to raise a family.

So what is so special about these places? Our top-ranked city, Dubuque, Iowa, is much smaller than a place like New York, with a population of 92,139, but still one of the larger cities on our list (we only ranked cities with a population under 100,000). Dubuque's size puts it in a kind of sweet spot: large enough to be a center of industry, small enough to not be overcrowded. An economy that successfully diversified after the collapse of the local manufacturing industry contributes to an unemployment rate that's nearly half the national average, at 6.5%, and a median household income of $48,779. That means most families have the jobs they need. They also don't have to spend a lot of time getting there: Only 2.6% of the population spends an hour or more getting to work.

Our top three cities are all in the Midwest, and the region is home to 12 of the top 15 cities. It would seem that mountains, big skies and open plains lend themselves to family life. But while the small towns in Michigan, Indiana, Wisconsin, Iowa, North Dakota and Illinois dominate the list, there are small cities that shine in every region of the country.

The rugged mountain town of Casper, Wyo, is the highest-ranked family-friendly small city in the West, and ranked eighth overall in the nation. The city does particularly well providing residents with affordable housing--families there spend only 17% of their income on housing costs.

Auburn, N.Y., a tiny Finger Lakes town probably best known for its correctional facility, takes the top spot for the Northeast region, and comes in at No. 18 in the nation. Prison jobs boost the local income, which ranks 20th among small cities at $48,991.

The best Southern small city for families? Tiny Frankfort, Ky., with a population of only 69,659. It ranks No. 20 on our nationwide list. Frankfort may be small, but the few families there are well off: The median household income is $50,671.

To pinpoint the best small places to raise a family, we looked at quality-of-life measures that make living easier for families. We started with the most recent data available from the U.S. Census Bureau on all Metropolitan and Micropolitan Statistical Areas with a population under 100,000. That left us with 126 cities, which we ranked on five measures.

Short commute times improve family life because they give working parents more time at home with their kids, so we scored cities on the percentage of residents that spent an hour or more

getting to work in the morning: the lower the better. Since educational outcomes are a key consideration of families looking to relocate, we ranked cities on the percentage of adults aged 25 and older that had at least a high school degree. We also scored cities on median household income, the rate of home ownership, and housing affordability, for which we used median housing costs as a percentage of income as a proxy. We averaged the rankings across these measures to arrive at final scores. When cities were tied in rank, we used the rate of homeownership to break the tie.

The choice of where to settle down and bring up youngsters is based on a number of complex and personal factors, many of which can't be measured in a ranked list. But things like affordability, education and jobs are often among them--and these off-the-radar metros have a great deal to offer.