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Phoenix among least stressful metro areas, according to study

The Business Journal of Phoenix - by [G. Scott Thomas](#) Phoenix Business Journal

Despite long commutes, numerous pollution advisory days and bearing a heavy load in the national housing crunch, Phoenix is the third-least stressful major metro area in America to live, according to a new **Bizjournals** study.

Several factors contribute to the daily pressure felt by millions of Americans, ranging from finances and unemployment to traffic, crime and pollution. The intensity of this toxic mixture varies from market to market across the country, as does the level of stress. Bizjournals created a 10-part formula to estimate the stress levels in 50 leading metros, using data collected by several government agencies and private firms.

Nowhere is the situation worse than in Detroit, which ranks as the nation's most stressful metropolitan area. Detroit is saddled with the highest unemployment and murder rates of any of the nation's 50 largest markets. And it's among the 10 places with the most robberies, the slowest rates of income growth, the most heart attacks and the fewest sunny days.

Right behind Detroit on the stress index is Cleveland, which is burdened with the group's worst robbery rate, second-worst frequency of heart attacks and strokes, and fourth-worst unemployment rate. Rounding out the list of America's 10 most stressful markets are St. Louis, Riverside-San Bernardino, Calif., Los Angeles, Chicago, Memphis, New York, Philadelphia and Atlanta.

The outlook is much sunnier in Virginia Beach/Norfolk, Va., which ranks as America's least stressful metropolitan area. It ranks among the nation's five best markets for healthy air, freedom from crime, stable employment and strong income growth.

Salt Lake City is the runner-up in the low-stress derby. It enjoys America's lowest unemployment rate, 2.6 percent, as well as light traffic, healthy citizens and low crime rates. Phoenix ranks as the third least stressful.

Other markets with low levels of stress, ranking from fourth through 10th place, are Oklahoma City; Austin, Texas; Las Vegas; Denver; San Diego; Jacksonville, Fla.; and Providence, R.I.



Bizjournals cast a broad statistical net to identify the metros that subject their residents to unusually high or low amounts of stress.

The following are the 10 indicators included in the study, along with a brief summary of the best and worst markets.

- **Unhealthy air:** Six places, including Virginia Beach/Norfolk, don't experience any days of heavy pollution in a typical year, according to Environmental Protection Agency records. Riverside/San Bernardino, with 28.2 unhealthy days a year, is the worst.
- **Sunshine:** Las Vegas and Phoenix soak up 85 percent of possible sunshine each year, leading the study group. Pittsburgh ranks as the gloomiest market, at 45 percent. These figures come from the [National Climatic Data Center](#) and Weatherbase.
- **Robberies:** San Jose, Calif., has the lowest rate: 111.9 robberies per 100,000 residents, based on records compiled in 2006 by the [Federal Bureau of Investigation](#). Cleveland is the worst in this category, with 947.1 robberies per 100,000.
- **Murders:** The level of danger is lowest in Austin, with 2.8 murders per 100,000 residents in 2006. The worst ratio belongs to Detroit: 47.3 murders per 100,000.
- **Unemployment rate:** Salt Lake City is the positive extreme, with a jobless rate of only 2.6 percent. Detroit takes another hit, as the latest figures from the [U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) show 7.2 percent of its workers are unemployed.
- **Income growth:** New Orleans is this category's surprise winner, increasing its per-capita income by 45.8 percent between 2000 and 2006, according to U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis data. (Hurricanes Katrina and Rita drove thousands of poverty-stricken residents out of town in 2005, artificially inflating the market's income level.) At the bottom is San Jose, with a virtually stagnant growth rate of 0.3 percent over six years.
- **Long-distance commuters:** Traffic is exceptionally light in Buffalo, N.Y., where only 6.5 percent of commuters hit the road for 45 minutes or more. New York, at 31.0 percent, qualifies as the most congested market. Figures for this category and the two that follow come from the [U.S. Census Bureau's](#) 2006 American Community Survey.
- **Families below poverty level:** The Washington market is the most affluent in the group, with just 4.7 percent of its residents living in poverty. Memphis has the worst poverty problem, with 13.9 percent.
- **High mortgage payments:** Few residents of Buffalo are bothered by enormous housing costs, as only 1.5 percent write mortgage checks for \$3,000 or more each month. One-third of San Jose's residents (33.9 percent) spend at least that much, the nation's steepest ratio.
- **Deaths from circulatory diseases:** Austin has the lowest number of deaths caused by heart failure, hypertension and stroke, a rate of 145.7 per 100,000 residents. The highest rate belongs to Pittsburgh: 441.4 deaths per 100,000. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention collected these statistics in 2004, the most recent year for which figures are available.



Methodology

Bizjournals set out to measure the levels of personal stress within America's major metropolitan areas.

Goal: To identify markets that subject their residents to unusually high or low amounts of stress. Markets were evaluated for factors that have a direct impact on stress levels, including pollution, weather, crime, unemployment, traffic, finances and health.

Markets: The study covered the nation's 50 largest metropolitan areas, based on 2006 population estimates by the U.S. Census Bureau. The markets ranged from New York, with 18.82 million residents, to New Orleans, with 1.02 million.

Source: The raw statistics were collected by several agencies: the **U.S. Environmental Protection Agency**, National Climatic Data Center and Weatherbase, Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, U.S. Census Bureau and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Most rates and percentages, and all rankings, were calculated by Bizjournals.

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