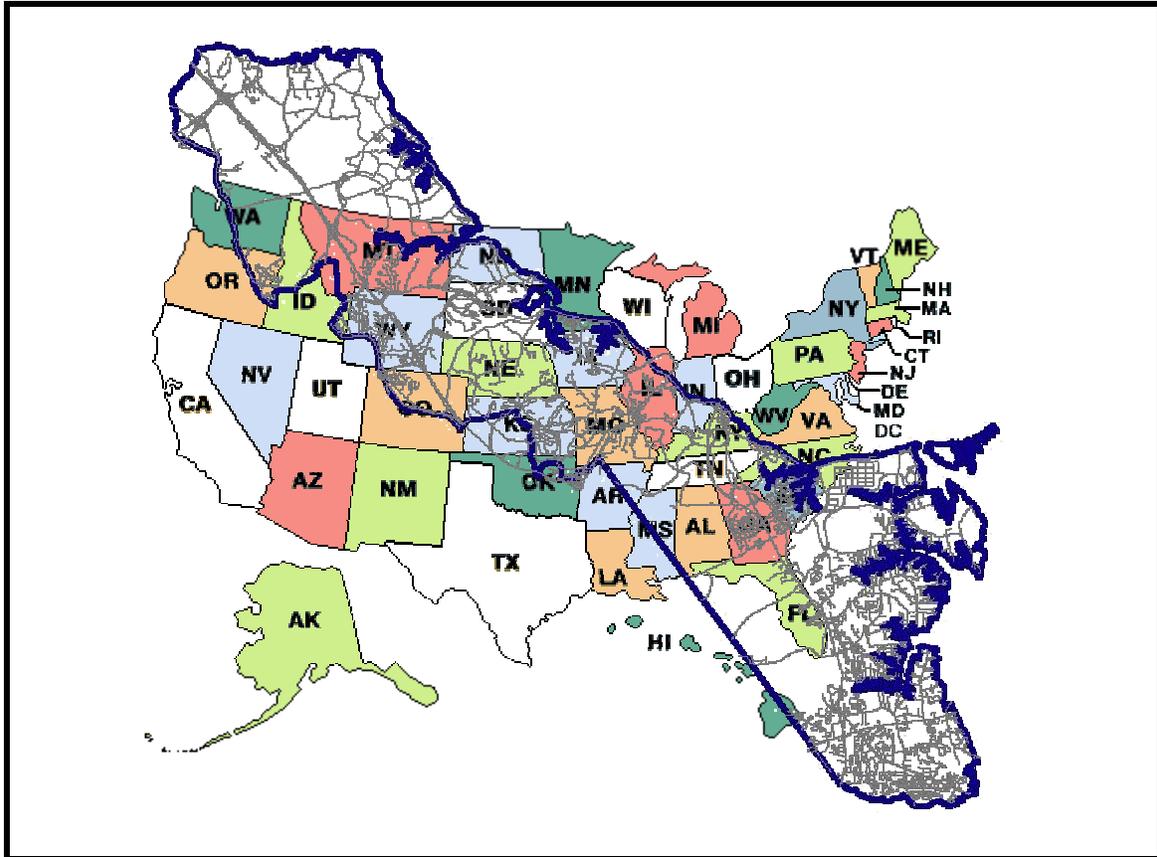


A Review of Community Rating Surveys And Their Applicability to York County



Best Places to Live: Does York County Measure Up?

York County Planning Division
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Each year, *Money* magazine publishes a list of what its editors consider to be the ten best places to live in the United States based on evaluation criteria pertaining to quality of life and economic conditions. In recent years the Board of Supervisors has shown an interest in the *Money* rankings, particularly as they relate to education. One of the initiatives established by the Board is to “(c)onduct a study to identify the criteria used by such publications as *Money* magazine to evaluate and rank school systems in their annual evaluations of ‘best places to live’ and develop an analysis and recommendations concerning steps York County could take to improve its rating/ranking, if deemed necessary.” This report will review the various methodologies and evaluation criteria used by *Money* magazine and the *Places Rated Almanac* and attempt to identify those areas where York County and the region are lacking – or may be perceived as lacking – with regard to not just education but other quality-of-life indicators as well.

With regard to the quality-of-life indicators, York County faces additional obstacles, but none of them are related to education. In fact, York surpasses most of *Money*’s top ten cities in almost every recognized measure of education quality. Whether or not changes in some of these measures (student-teacher ratios, per pupil spending, or number of computers available) would have any impact on the overall rating is doubtful. York County’s student-teacher ratio is already lower than that of eight of *Money*’s “top ten” cities, so the relative importance of this and other education statistics in *Money* magazine’s ranking formula does not appear to be great. Whether or not these measures would yield any tangible benefits in terms of student output measures is beyond the scope of this report.

On many other quality-of-life indicators outside the Education category – such as taxes and crime – York County compares favorably with many if not most of *Money*’s “top ten cities. Where York County and the rest of the region appear to be lacking are in the area of culture and sports. More than any one single factor, having one or more major league sports franchises gives a city or region national recognition that can be difficult to obtain otherwise. Health care appears to be another area in need of improvement; Hampton Roads fared poorly in this indicator in both the *Money* and *Places Rated* rankings.

This study sought to answer a question: What can York County do, particularly in the field of education, to improve its ranking by such publications as *Money* magazine in their annual evaluations of “best places to live?” There is another, perhaps more important question that could also be asked: Is recognition in a national publication a goal worth pursuing? York County is already absorbing more than its share of the region’s population growth, and, with a 33% increase in population between 1990 and 2000, does not need the residential growth stimulation that recognition in a national magazine might cause. Nevertheless, such an analysis may prove interesting when considering quality of life indicators (however that term may be defined) for existing residents.

From a regional perspective, however, there may be some value in pursuing national recognition for the Norfolk metro area, which, for all intents and purposes has stopped attracting new residents, or rather, is losing more residents than it attracts. The region experienced net out-migration during the 1990s and into the new millennium. Since population growth is one of the factors that *Money* magazine takes into account in its rankings, out-migration might have contributed to the failure of the City of Virginia Beach – the largest city in Hampton Roads and the only city in Virginia large enough to be considered – to make *Money*’s “top ten” list.

INTRODUCTION

What do the cities of Austin, Charlotte, Chicago, Denver, Las Vegas, Los Angeles, New York, Phoenix, San Francisco, and Seattle have in common? Not much, except that according to *Money* magazine, they are the ten best places to live – or to live *near* – in the United States. Each year, *Money* magazine publishes a list of what its editors consider to be the ten best places to live in the United States. In developing this list, *Money* establishes various evaluation criteria pertaining to quality of life and economic conditions and, based on these criteria, analyzes a wide range of data for a large number of cities all over the country.

In recent years the Board of Supervisors has shown an interest in the *Money* rankings, particularly as they relate to its ongoing goal of “Continu(ing) to strongly support quality public education in cooperation with the York County School Board.” One of the initiatives established by the Board toward achieving this goal is to “(c)onduct a study to identify the criteria used by such publications as *Money* magazine to evaluate and rank school systems in their annual evaluations of ‘best places to live’ and develop an analysis and recommendations concerning steps York County could take to improve its rating/ranking, if deemed necessary.” This report will review the various methodologies and evaluation criteria used by *Money* magazine and the *Places Rated Almanac* and attempt to identify those areas where York County and the surrounding region are lacking – or may be perceived as lacking – particularly with regard to education but also taking other quality-of-life indicators into consideration as well.

COMMUNITY RATING METHODOLOGIES

Money Magazine

Money magazine’s methodology for evaluating places to live and the criteria it uses seem to change every year. Last year, for example, *Money* selected New York City as its top place to live but did so out of sympathy for the devastation suffered by the city as a result of the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center. At the same time, *Money* selected six additional cities and metropolitan areas based on more traditional ranking criteria.

This year’s ranking process began with a list of 1,224 American cities. Like much of *Money* magazine’s rating methodology, how this initial list was developed is a mystery, as there is no apparent consistency. For example, the only Hampton Roads cities that were included are Chesapeake, Hampton, Suffolk, and Virginia Beach. Newport News, which is larger than both Hampton and Suffolk, was excluded. Elsewhere in Virginia, the process for selecting the initial list of cities is equally murky. For example, Richmond, the state capital with a population of about 200,000, did not make the list, but the city of Fairfax, with a population of just 21,498, did. Arlington also made the list even though it is not a city but a county (albeit a highly urban county with a population density that, at over 7,000 persons per square mile, exceeds that of every city in Virginia except Alexandria). No other counties in Virginia made the list, not even Fairfax County, which leads all other localities in the state with an estimated 2002 population of over a million residents. And yet, even more peculiarly, the list of 1,224 “cities” includes unincorporated sub-county areas of Fairfax County such as Tyson’s Corner, Bailey’s Crossroads, Annandale, and Reston.

For each of these 1,224 cities, however they were selected, *Money* magazine compiled data on a range of economic and quality-of-life indicators, then narrowed its list down to just those with populations greater than 300,000, of which there were 57. *Money* refers to these as “the economic and cultural magnets not just for city dwellers but for suburbanites too.” Virginia Beach, with a population of 425,257 as reported in the 2000 Census, is the only city in Virginia to meet this population threshold.

The 57 largest cities were then ranked by rate of population growth since 1990 based on the assumption that if people are drawn to a given area then it must be a good place to live. *Money* also computed a “housing-premium ratio” (average 2002 home sale price compared to median income. *Money* combined these to create a “money popularity ranking.” For each of the top ten cities *Money* then evaluated and ranked the various neighborhoods and nearby suburbs based on “attractive streetscapes, good schools, community spirit and plentiful recreation,” and the top 3 or 4 were identified as the “best ‘burbs around” Chicago or Las Vegas or wherever.

Money does not identify the specific criteria it used to rate communities, but its “statistical snapshots” provide a clue. These “snapshots” compare individual city statistics with the national average for a number of different quality-of-life indicators grouped into ten categories: Weather, Financial, Housing, Leisure, Culture, Travel, Health, Environment, Crime, and Education. One can only assume that these are among the indicators and categories *Money* uses in its rankings. Another unknown quantity in the *Money* magazine rating system is the relative weight assigned to each quality-of-life category. *Money* supposedly bases the weights on the results of its on-line survey available on its web site. Respondents are asked to choose from a list of amenities to indicate what is most important to them when looking for the best place to live. Choices are nice weather, arts and culture, outdoor activities, low cost of living, slow pace, entertainment and dining, low taxes, and low crime rate. (Note the absence of “good schools” as a possible choice.) Two of the more obvious flaws of this highly unscientific approach are the absence of a random sample (Are *Money* magazine readers truly representative of the population at large?) and the fact that people can vote as many times as they wish and, by so doing, skew the results. What is more troubling is the lack of any apparent correlation between the survey results and the *Money* rankings. New York City, for example, scores well on arts and culture (which are important to only 5% of the respondents) and entertainment and dining (important to 5%) and poorly on low crime rate (most important of all, chosen by 29% of respondents) and low cost of living (selected by 21%).

The Places Rated Almanac

Another nationally recognized publication that attempts to rate and rank communities is the *Places Rated Almanac*, the latest edition of which – the “Special Millennium Edition” – was published in 2000. The approach used by *Places Rated* is to rank metropolitan areas rather than individual cities, counties, towns, and sub-county areas. *Places Rated* collects data and information for each of 354 metropolitan areas in North America, including 330 metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs) in the United States (as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau) and 24 metro areas in Canada. York County is located within the Norfolk-Virginia Beach-Newport News VA NC MSA (referred to herein as the Norfolk metro area), which also includes the Virginia counties of Gloucester, Isle of Wight, James City, and Mathews; the cities of Chesapeake, Hampton, Newport News, Norfolk, Poquoson, Portsmouth, Suffolk, Virginia Beach, and Williamsburg; and Currituck County, North Carolina.

In contrast with *Money*, *Places Rated* gives a full, detailed explanation of its ranking methodology and evaluation criteria. Also, it gives a numerical score and ranking for each of the communities it evaluates, whereas *Money* merely selects its “top ten” cities without ranking them or the remaining 1,214 cities that it evaluated. This makes it impossible to determine how any of the evaluated cities compares with the “top ten” or to compare the “top ten” cities with one another. *Places Rated* even goes so far as to rank the 354 metro areas *in each individual category*. The ten categories are Costs of Living, Transportation, Jobs, Education, Climate, Crime, the Arts, Health Care, and Recreation.

The term “quality of life” means different things to different people and can encompass a wide variety of features ranging from climate, abundant flora and fauna, beaches (or mountains) to recreational and cultural opportunities, high-quality public services, low taxes, and employment opportunities.

EVALUATING EDUCATION

Evaluation Criteria

How can the quality of education in a given community be measured? Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for schools and school systems (and other governmental functions) to be evaluated on the basis of inputs rather than outputs— the results that these inputs are meant to achieve. Teacher salaries, student-teacher ratios, and per pupil spending are all inputs; they are means to an end – the end being well-educated graduates – and not an end in and of themselves. Measures of student achievement, though imperfect, are a more reliable indicator of the quality of the school system.

In the Education category *Money* magazine’s “statistical snapshots” of cities include three specific indicators:

- The number of colleges, universities, and professional schools within a 30-mile radius,
- The number of junior colleges and technical institutes within a 30-mile radius, and
- Student to teacher ratio.

Since *Money* does not reveal its evaluation criteria, the best one can do is infer from its “statistical snapshots” that these three indicators may factor into its formula for evaluating education. Further clues into the magazine’s evaluation criteria can be gleaned by examining its data sources. Most of the data for this year’s ranking was provided by On Board LLC, which is a company that sells demographic data. Some of the data in On Board’s sample school district report include quantitative statistics such as the number of teachers, students, and instructional computer units as well as the total dollar expenditures and the discretionary dollars per pupil. It also includes qualitative information such as the “educational climate index” (above average, average, etc.) and the “technology measure” (high, medium, etc.). Monsterdata, Inc., which furnished *Money* with the data it used for last year’s rankings, includes in its school district reports such indicators as spending per student, average teacher salary, number of students per computer, number of students per teacher, average student population per elementary, middle, and high school, average class sizes. It also includes output measures such as the average score on college entrance exams (SAT and ACT), the percentage of students who receive a high school diploma and the percent who go on to attend college. Like On Board, Monsterdata also uses an undefined “educational climate index.”

Places Rated uses somewhat different criteria to evaluate the quality of education. These include private as well as public schools and emphasize higher education over K-12. The four criteria are described below:

- **School Support** combines metro-area averages for the number of pupils per classroom teacher (the fewer the better) and the percent of funding the schools received from local – as opposed to state and federal – sources (the more the better).
- **Library Popularity** is a combination of the number of library volumes and the library circulation rate.
- **College Town** is college enrollment weighted by the number of years of typical attendance to get the highest degree offered (that is, associate of arts enrollment is weighted by 2, baccalaureate enrollment by 4, etc.), and divided by the metro area’s population.
- **College Options** is the variety of higher education institutions that meet the needs of residents: low-cost night and weekend continuing education courses for people who work, full-time graduate course in the professions, courses leading to occupational certification in 2-year colleges, and the traditional bachelor’s degree curriculum offered in a college or university.

Of these four criteria, “College Options” is weighted the most heavily (two-thirds), followed by “College Town” (one-sixth). “School Support” and “Library Popularity” each account for a relatively small percentage of the overall Education Score (one-twelfth, or 8.33%).

A third source of criteria for quantifying education quality is the *Community Indicators Handbook*¹, published in 1997, which is a guidebook designed to help local governments identify indicators of community health, well being, and sustainability to help them measure the community’s progress toward the accomplishment of shared goals. Listed below is a sample of education indicators that have been used by various localities as reported in this handbook:

- High school dropout rates
- SAT scores
- Number of students enrolled in post-secondary education
- Percentage of schools with high-speed Internet connections
- Rate of illiteracy
- Number of library volumes
- Community support of school district
- Academic and job readiness
- Public-school expenditures per student
- Average public-school teacher salary
- Teachers holding advanced degrees
- National Honor Society members per 1,000 students
- Percentage of public school 1st graders failing 1st grade
- Percentage of public school 4th and 9th graders scoring at or below the 25th national percentile on the Stanford Achievement Test
- Portable units in use in public schools
- Student/teacher ratio in the school district

As noted earlier, these and all education indicators vary widely in their relevance, measurability, and validity. For example, competitive teacher salaries and high per-pupil expenditures may be indicators of the level of importance that the locality places on education and they may be worthy goals, but neither of them, in and of itself, is a measure of education quality. Furthermore, financial measures of education quality are skewed by the cost of living, which varies both among states and within states. For example, a schoolteacher in Poquoson with a salary of \$45,000 would require a salary of \$86,000 in order to live at a comparable standard of living in the City of Alexandria.²

Student-teacher ratios are also a questionable measure. They are *indicative* of education quality and the locality’s commitment to public education but are still input measures. Indicators that actually reflect student achievement, on the other hand – such as dropout rates, test scores, and failure rates – are better measures of education quality, but even they are flawed since educational achievement is closely related to the socioeconomic makeup (e.g., educational attainment, income) of the greater population. Can the school system take credit for having smart students?

Jurisdiction	Student-Teacher Ratio	
	Ratio	Rank
Austin, TX	15.59	692
Charlotte, NC	16.67	820
Chesapeake, VA	14.27	503
Chicago, IL	14.63	525
Denver, CO	17.11	918
Hampton, VA	15.95	766
Las Vegas, NV	19.48	1,100
Los Angeles, CA	23.33	1,220
New York, NY	19.75	1,127
Norfolk, VA	14.42	513
Phoenix, AZ	17.83	978
San Francisco, CA	18.26	1,041
Seattle, WA	16.81	851
Suffolk, VA	15.28	644
Virginia Beach, VA	14.83	568
National Average	15.43	NA

¹ *The Community Indicators Handbook*, Redefining Progress, 1997

² National Association of Realtors

Evaluating York County

The student-teacher ratio in the York County school system is approximately 16.4 to 1, which is above (i.e., worse than) the national average but lower (better) than in eight of the “top ten” cities. Chicago, which has the lowest student-teacher ratio of the “top ten,” managed a ranking of only 525th out of 1,224 cities in this indicator. The relative weight of student-teacher ratios in *Money* magazine’s rating scheme does not appear to be significant.

The same is true of York County’s dropout rate, which, at less than one percent (0.77% in 2000-01), is one of the lowest in the state. Another popular output is Virginia’s SOL (Standard of Learning) tests, which are given to all pupils in 3rd, 5th, and 8th through 12th grade to improve the academic achievements of students attending Virginia’s public schools. York County’s passing rates in all categories, English, Mathematics, History & Geography, and Science, are higher than the state’s results. Unfortunately, since standardized tests vary from state to state, York County’s SOL scores cannot be compared with test scores in other localities outside Virginia.

Test scores figured prominently in a 1996 *Money* magazine article that named York County schools as one of the top 100 education buys in the country.³ York County was chosen as one of a hundred school systems in the United States (out of 16,665 public school systems) “that rate high academically and are in communities that offer reasonable priced housing.”⁴ True to form, *Money* did not identify the criteria it used to evaluate the quality of education; however, the article did list SAT and ACT scores for each of the 100 school systems listed as well as the percent of students taking the SAT or ACT and the percent of graduates going on to college or technical school.

The educational attainment of the adult population is frequently used as an indicator of the educational climate of the community. The nexus here is based on the assumption that well-educated parents will have both the desire and the resources to ensure that their children receive a high-quality education. Income tends to be positively related to educational attainment, so it is likely that the children of highly educated – and hence affluent – parents will have greater access to computers, books, and other learning materials. Furthermore, more educated parents are better able, in general, to help their children with school projects, homework, etc. (Of course, one can also argue that many high-income families are families in which both parents work outside the home and thus are unable to spend as much time with their children.) Whatever the merits of educational attainment as an indicator of education quality, York County clearly has a competitive edge over other communities; according to the 2000 Census, York County has higher percentages of both high school and college graduates than almost all ten of *Money*’s “best places.” In fact, with 91.7% of the adult population holding at least a high school degree, York ranks first in Hampton Roads and third among the cities and counties in Virginia (following the City of Falls Church and Loudoun County).

Another measure of quality is citizen satisfaction. In the 2000 survey of County residents, respondents were asked what their main reason was for choosing to live in York County. The top response, given by 27.7% of the respondents, was that “The schools are good.” The next most frequent response – “I found property/a house we liked” – was far behind, given by 9.0% of the respondents. In a separate question, 90.3% of the respondents indicated that they were either very satisfied or satisfied with the quality of the public schools system’s instructional programs. Indeed the reputation of the school system has long been a source of pride for York County residents.

³ Denise M. Topolnicki, “100 Top Schools in Towns You Can Afford,” *Money*, August 1996, pp. 108-114.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 108.

Both *Money* and *Places Rated* also consider the number and range of higher education opportunities as an indicator of the quality of education. The “statistical snapshots” in *Money* include the number of colleges, universities, junior colleges, professional schools, and technical institutes within a 30-mile radius. The exact number of such schools within 30 miles of York County is not known, but they include the College of William and Mary, Hampton University, Old Dominion University, Christopher Newport University, and Thomas Nelson Community College. According to *Money* magazine, Hampton and Norfolk are well below the national average, so it is likely that York County is as well. In *Places Rated*, however, the results were somewhat different; the Norfolk metro area scored extremely well in its “College Options” category and relatively well in its “College Town” category.

The Top Ten Metro Areas in the United States for Education	
1.	Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill, NC
2.	Boston, MA-NH
3.	Albany-Schenectady-Troy, NY
4.	St. Louis, MO-IL
5.	Chicago, IL
6.	Rochester, NY
7.	Austin-San Marcos, TX
8.	San Francisco, CA
9.	Washington, DC-MD-VA-WV
10.	Dayton-Springfield, OH

Source: *Places Rated Almanac*

On the basis of its criteria and weightings, *Places Rated* ranked the Norfolk metro area 48th out of 354 metro areas (ahead of five of the “top ten” cities in *Money*) in the Education category. Scoring particularly well in the “College Options” and “School Support” categories, the region was ranked higher than any other Virginia metro area except Washington DC, which includes much of the Maryland suburbs as well as Northern Virginia. Education was the second strongest category for the Norfolk metro area (behind Recreation). If, as the data suggests, York County has one of the best school systems in the region, it would not appear that further progress in student achievement in the County would have a material effect on the region’s ranking. However, the County might actually be hurting the region’s Education ranking in *Places Rated* since its “School Support” category considers *local* rather than *total* spending per pupil. York County receives considerable Impact Aid from the Federal government, and this probably counts against the Norfolk metro area.

OTHER QUALITY-OF-LIFE INDICATORS

It is evident both that York County appears to be surpassing most of the “top ten” cities in education and that education, particularly public education in grades K through 12, has relatively little influence on a community’s overall ranking in *Money* magazine. Therefore, the other quality-of-life indicators used by *Money* and *Places Rated* in selecting the “best places to live” merit some study to identify any areas in which York County and the region may need to improve in order to achieve a higher overall ranking.

Weather

One natural asset that York County enjoys is a relatively mild climate, with an average annual temperature of 60° F, an average of 78° F in July, and 39.5° F in January. The average rainfall is 44 inches a year, and annual snowfall is approximately six inches.⁵ The climate is relatively moderate, yet *Places Rated* gave the Norfolk metro area a relatively low score for climate (69.40) and ranked it 109th among the 354 metro areas. In doing so, *Places Rated* notes the “mild winters and especially pleasant springs and falls,” but adds that the summers are “warm, humid, and long.”⁶

⁵ York County Industrial Development Authority, “York County, Virginia Community Profile” (1993).

⁶ *Places Rated*, p.338

Crime

York County's relatively low crime rate compares favorably with most of the other cities and counties in Hampton Roads and across the United States. Unfortunately, instead of crime *rates* (i.e., the number of crimes per 100,000 residents), *Money* uses a crime *index* based on a national average of 100, so there is no way to directly compare York County's crime data (as reported by the Virginia State Police) with the *Money* data. However, general conclusions can be made based on comparisons among Virginia localities and between Virginia localities and other cities around the country. It should be noted that York County's crime rate is well below those of Suffolk and Virginia Beach, both of which, according to *Money*, have a relatively low personal and property crime risk compared with the national average. The table to the right consists of the number of incidents and rates of various violent (murder, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault) and non-violent (arson, burglary, larceny, and motor vehicle theft) crimes in the Norfolk MSA compared to York County. In all but one category, York County is lower than the metropolitan area.

Jurisdiction	Crimes per 100,000 residents
Chesapeake	NA
Hampton	8,327
James City County	5,045
Newport News	10,826
Norfolk	10,884
Poquoson	2,713
Suffolk	7,372
Virginia Beach	7,443
Williamsburg	6,267
York County	4,698

Sources: Virginia Department of State Police, *Crime in Virginia 2001*, and *Money* magazine

Another useful gauge of the crime risk in a given locality is the residents' perception of crime and whether or not they feel safe. In a telephone survey of County residents conducted in 2000⁷, comments included low crime, satisfied with law enforcement, and a feeling of safety among the county. It should be noted that in the Citizens' Opinion Study conducted in 2000, 95.7% of those surveyed were either very satisfied or satisfied with York County's law enforcement services.

Jurisdiction	Personal Crime Risk		Property Crime Risk	
	Index	Rank	Index	Rank
Austin, TX	101	983	136	998
Charlotte, NC	237	1,167	196	1,114
Chesapeake, VA	73	834	74	608
Chicago, IL	368	1,208	169	1,077
Denver, CO	152	1,088	171	1,080
Hampton, VA	93	954	103	827
Las Vegas, NV	403	1,212	326	1,196
Los Angeles, CA	257	1,178	159	1,055
New York, NY	195	1,135	114	891
Norfolk, VA	299	1,191	213	1,129
Phoenix, AZ	153	1,089	225	1,141
San Francisco, CA	191	1,134	156	1,048
Seattle, WA	150	1,083	253	1,170
Suffolk, VA	118	1,026	84	690
Virginia Beach, VA	60	755	83	683
National Average	100	NA	100	NA

Note: Rank is from 1 (lowest risk) to 1,224 (highest risk)

Source: *Money*

Interestingly, not one of the "top ten" cities compared favorably with the national averages for crime risk. In *Money's* ranking of cities from 1 (lowest) to 1,224 (highest), all of the "top ten" had both personal and property crime indices above the national average, and almost all were ranked in the bottom 200 cities in terms of safety from crime. Of these ten cities, New York had the lowest property crime risk (891) but with an index of 114 was still well above the national average. Austin had the lowest overall crime risk but still did poorly. Evidently the personal and property crime risk indices do not weigh heavily in *Money's* ranking formula.

⁷ *County of York Citizens' Opinion Study, Final Report*, December 2000, Continental Research Associates, Inc.

Housing

In the area of Housing, *Money* considers the average home price and the annual property tax. Home prices are relatively high in York County, but it is unclear whether *Money* regards high home prices as a positive or negative attribute. A low cost of living is typically considered an asset, but *Money's* "housing premium ratio" appears to favor high-cost communities based on the somewhat paradoxical assumption that if people are willing to pay an inordinately large proportion of their income to live in a given community, it must be a good place to live. Six of the "top ten" cities in *Money* have average home prices below the national average of \$186,428, the lowest is Phoenix \$103,930, and the highest is San Francisco, with an average of \$481,648 – more than twice the national average.

As for real estate taxes, York County's rate of \$8.60 per thousand dollars of assessed value is approximately half the national average (\$17.29). Of the "top ten" cities in *Money*, only Denver has a lower property tax rate (\$7.00 per \$1,000). In fact, York County's is one of the lowest real property tax rates not just in Hampton Roads (Williamsburg and Isle of Wight and Surry Counties have lower rates.) but also in the entire "urban crescent" that stretches from Northern Virginia through the Richmond metro area all the way to Hampton Roads.

Financial

York County's median household income of \$57,956 (as reported in the 2000 Census) is above the national median of \$41,994 and the Virginia median of \$46,677. It also exceeds the median household income in each of this year's "top ten" cities; San Francisco comes the closest, with a median income, according to *Money*, of \$56,014.) Virginia's 4.5% sales tax also compares favorably with the national average of 6.43%. In fact, it is lower than the sales tax in all ten of this year's "best places to live." The state income tax rates, ranging from 2.0% for the lowest income bracket to 5.75% for the highest bracket, are very close to the national average, where the range is 2.27% to 4.92%. Austin, Las Vegas, and Seattle benefit in the *Money* rankings from the fact that Texas, Nevada, and Washington have no state income tax.

Closely related to income is job growth, and *Places Rated* has a Jobs category that ranks metro areas based on their projected job growth between 2000 and 2005. This considers the percent increase in new jobs, the number of new jobs, and the number of new jobs with above-average pay. The Norfolk metro area scored relatively well, with an overall ranking of 61st out of 354 metropolitan areas. In York County job growth has been strong in recent years, but because of its relatively small size – just 2.5% of the regional employment base – there is little that the County can do to significantly affect overall job growth in Hampton Roads.

Places Rated includes a Cost of Living category in its rankings. The Norfolk metro area was ranked 196th in the nation (and Canada) in this category. Although sales, property, and income taxes are below average, almost everything else – including housing, health care, utilities, food, and transportation – is about average or slightly above; recreation costs are well above average (137 vs. a national index of 100).

Health

The number of hospitals, doctor's offices, and clinics within a 30-mile radius of York County is not known, but it appears to be below the national average. The closest city evaluated by *Money* – Hampton – is far below the national average with 4,501 doctor's office and clinics (compared to a national average of 8,245) and 35 hospitals (compared to a national average of 109) within a 30-mile radius. The planned relocation of Williamsburg Community Hospital from Williamsburg to York County will not alter the County's standing since the hospital, and all the medical offices nearby are already within 30 miles of the County.

Places Rated re-affirms what appears to be the poor state of health care in the Norfolk metro area relative to the rest of the United States (and Canada). The region is low in the number of generalists, specialists, and surgeons, and 5 of the 12 hospitals offer only 4 of the American Hospital Association-defined services offered in a U.S. metropolitan area; the remaining 7 hospitals offer 25 or more services. Overall the Norfolk metro area received a health score of 23.79 (out of 100) and was ranked 270th (out of 354 metro areas) in health care.

Leisure and Culture

Of all the categories used by *Money* to select the “best places to live,” Leisure and Culture are two of the weakest categories for York County and for all of Hampton Roads (at least as *Money* measures leisure and culture). Hampton Roads’ leisure and cultural opportunities as defined by *Money* magazine are not just below the national average but far below. There are no major league sports teams within a 30-mile radius, and the number of movie theatres, golf courses, restaurants, and bars are all below the national average. The same is true of cultural facilities such as libraries, museums, arboreta, botanical gardens, zoos, and theatrical producers. Unfortunately, proximity to nationally known attractions such as Busch Gardens and Colonial Williamsburg does not enter into *Money* magazine’s calculus when it evaluates leisure and cultural opportunities.

Leisure Opportunities in Selected Cities

Jurisdiction	Restaurants		Bars		Movie Theatres		Golf Courses	
	Number	Rank	Number	Rank	Number	Rank	Number	Rank
Austin, TX	2,080	902	218	831	31	841	15	994
Charlotte, NC	2,486	850	160	897	25	911	22	813
Chesapeake, VA	2,401	873	59	1,143	30	857	12	1,065
Chicago, IL	12,443	106	1,704	68	130	105	79	25
Denver, CO	3,834	600	370	580	35	791	34	454
Hampton, VA	2,660	815	61	1,139	34	801	15	994
Las Vegas, NV	2,480	854	351	592	13	1,091	21	845
Los Angeles, CA	17,834	82	1,025	134	289	2	43	263
New York, NY	32,520	1	2,072	3	282	6	40	323
Norfolk, VA	2,458	857	60	1,142	30	857	13	1,035
Phoenix, AZ	4,736	508	446	450	33	814	59	126
San Francisco, CA	9,269	157	800	247	108	129	21	845
Seattle, WA	5,415	446	437	462	91	152	34	454
Suffolk, VA	2,026	915	47	1,168	28	884	8	1,146
Virginia Beach, VA	2,266	890	58	1,144	28	884	12	1,065
National Average	5,938	NA	501	NA	61.3	NA	32.2	NA

Note: Rank is from 1 (best) to 1,224 (worst).

Source: *Money*

Money seems to place a high value on major league sports. With the exception of Austin and Las Vegas, all of the “top ten” cities have at least two major league sports franchises. New York City led them all – and the rest of the nation – with a total of nine (9) teams and was also ranked in the top ten for restaurants (1st), bars (3rd), and movie theatres (6th).

In *Places Rated*, the Norfolk metro area scored extremely well in the Recreation category – ranked 6th in the nation – and not so well in the Arts category, where it was ranked 56th. The contrast between this region’s low Leisure ratings in *Money* and its extremely high Recreation rating in *Places Rated* is sharp. This is probably because *Places Rated* defines recreation more broadly to encompass amenities such as theme parks, water area, and college sports that *Money* does not appear to consider. In addition, *Places Rated* includes *professional* and not just *major league* sports, so the Norfolk metro area gets credit for the Triple-A Norfolk Tides and the

Norfolk Admirals of the American Hockey League. For the arts, *Places Rated* considers the number of art museums, annual museum attendance, and the number of lively arts performances (e.g., ballet, opera, symphony, professional theatre, etc.).

Transportation/Travel

In the Transportation category, *Money* only includes in its “statistical snapshots” the number of airports within a 30-mile radius. There is one major airport (Norfolk International) within 30 miles of the County; Newport News-Williamsburg International Airport, despite its name, is not considered a major airport, and Richmond International is not quite within 30 miles. Here York County is the same as the national average.

In previous years, *Money* included a much broader range of transportation indicators, including average commuting times, mass transit availability, the number of airline flights, and the number of Amtrak stations. The average commute time for York County residents is 23.7 minutes, which is below the national and state averages (25.5 and 27.0 minutes respectively) but higher than the average commuting time in Williamsburg, Hampton, and Newport News. The value of commuting time as an indicator in selecting the “best places to live” is questionable. A long commute is generally thought of as detracting from the quality of life in a community; however, as with *Money*’s “housing premium ratio,” if people are willing to endure a long commute in order to live where they want to live, then a long commute could also be interpreted as a sign of a high quality of life.

Commuting time is one of the measures used by *Places Rated* to evaluate transportation in different metro areas. Also included are the number of transit revenue miles, interstate highways, passenger rail departures, and nonstop airline destinations. The Norfolk metro area was ranked fairly well (67th) in the transportation category.

Environment

In the Environment category, *Money* includes in its “statistical snapshot” the number of Superfund sites in each city and an “air pollution index.” York County has three active Superfund sites: Chisman Creek, Naval Weapons Station (multiple sites), Cheatham Annex. The first two of these are on the EPA’s National Priorities List. The national average is 2.20 sites, and most of the “top ten” cities in *Money* have more than this; Los Angeles leads the way with 93 Superfund sites. With regard to air pollution, precisely how *Money* calculates its index is unknown, but what is known is that all of the “top ten” cities have a higher (i.e., worse) index than the national average. In Hampton, the air pollution index, though above the national average, is lower (i.e., better) than in all of the “top ten” cities.

THE TOP TEN COMMUNITIES

The “top ten” communities, as ranked by *Money* and *Places Rated* respectively, are listed in the table below. Since the two publications use different methodologies and evaluation criteria, it should come as no surprise that they have somewhat divergent results. Nevertheless, there is quite a bit of overlap between the two “top ten” lists. Three communities – Denver, Phoenix, and Seattle – made both lists, and two more – Austin and San Francisco – also did well in both publications, making *Money*’s top ten list and the “top twenty” list in *Places Rated*. Among the areas of disagreement, the most glaring example is Las Vegas, which is one of *Money*’s “top ten” but fared no better than 121st (out of 354 metropolitan areas) in *Places Rated*. Even so, the results are more closely correlated than in previous years. In the 1997 rankings, for example, there was not a single city that was ranked on both “top ten” lists.⁸

Top Ten Communities in the United States	
<i>Money</i>	<i>Places Rated Almanac</i>
Austin, TX (20 th)	Salt Lake City-Ogden, UT
Charlotte, NC (55 th)	Washington, DC-MD-VA-WV
Chicago, IL (67 th)	Seattle-Bellevue-Everett, WA
Denver, CO (5 th)	Tampa-St. Petersburg-Clearwater, FL
Las Vegas, NV (121 st)	Denver, CO
Los Angeles, CA (74 th)	Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill, NC
New York, NY (65 th)	Houston, TX
Phoenix, AZ (9 th)	Minneapolis-St. Paul, MN-WI
San Francisco, CA (15 th)	Phoenix-Mesa AZ
Seattle, WA (3 rd)	Cincinnati, OH-KY-IN
<i>Notes:</i> Cities are listed in alphabetical order. The number in parentheses represents each city’s corresponding ranking in <i>Places Rated</i> .	<i>Note:</i> Metro areas are listed in rank order.

It is interesting and perhaps significant that the Norfolk metro area scored better in *Places Rated* than five of *Money*’s top ten cities. Categories in which Norfolk performed especially well are Recreation, Education, the Arts, Jobs, and Transportation; categories in which it performed relatively poorly include Health Care, Crime (although data indicates York County by itself would rank fairly well), and Cost of Living. In comparison with other metropolitan areas in Virginia, Norfolk ranks second to Northern Virginia/Washington DC (ranked 2nd overall) while surpassing Richmond-Petersburg (51st), Johnson City-Kingsport-Bristol TN-VA (73rd)⁹, Roanoke¹⁰ (84th), Charlottesville (123rd), Lynchburg (149th), and Danville (315th).

<i>Places Rated</i> Rankings of the Norfolk Metro Area by Category	
Category	Rank
Recreation	6 th
Education	48 th
The Arts	56 th
Jobs	61 st
Transportation	67 th
Climate	109 th
Cost of Living	196 th
Crime	200 th
Health Care	270 th
OVERALL	45th
<i>Source: The Places Rated Almanac</i>	

⁸ Howard J. Wall, “Voting with Your Feet’ and Metro-Area Livability,” *The Regional Economist* (The Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis), April 1999.

⁹ This metropolitan area includes the Virginia counties of Scott and Washington and the City of Bristol.

¹⁰ Roanoke, however, recently was named by *Money* magazine as one of the eight best places to retire in the United States.

CONCLUSIONS

There are a number of technical obstacles facing York County if it wishes to be named as one of *Money* magazine's "best places to live." The first such obstacle is being considered in the first place, for as noted earlier, *Money* generally limits its rankings to cities rather than counties (although there are exceptions). On the other hand, York County's proximity to Virginia Beach – the only city in Virginia large enough to make the "top 57" list – gives it something of a competitive advantage over most other counties in Virginia. In this year's rankings, proximity to major central cities lifted such places as Round Rock (Texas), Dilworth (North Carolina), and Ahwatukee (Arizona) from relative obscurity to national prominence in *Money* magazine.

Other technical obstacles are the lack of information about *Money*'s evaluation criteria as well as their apparent subjectivity and inconsistency, for despite the veneer of statistical objectivity, *Money* magazine's ranking of "the best places to live" is highly subjective. This is to be expected; deciding where to live is by definition a value judgment on the part of the individual making the decision. Is it better to have good schools or lots of bars and restaurants? Would you rather live near Busch Gardens or near a major league sports franchise? Different people will answer these questions differently. Furthermore, since the methodology and evaluation criteria seem to change almost every year, to pursue a high ranking in *Money* would require a certain amount of guesswork to determine what evaluation criteria will be used in any given year and how they will be used. *Places Rated* is much more forthcoming than *Money* in revealing its methodology, but it only ranks regions. For *Places Rated*, the most the County can do is to join with its neighbors in regional efforts to advance the quality of life throughout Hampton Roads.

With regard to the quality of education, York County already surpasses most of the top ten cities in almost every recognized measure of educational output. If the County, or any other locality, wishes to improve its *Money* magazine rating in the category of education, the answer is probably that it should hire more teachers (in order to reduce its student-teacher ratio) and increase the amount of money spent per pupil. These are the two most commonly used measures of educational quality. A third possible measure would be to acquire more computers for the students' use. Whether or not these measures would have any impact on the overall rating is doubtful. York County's student-teacher ratio is already lower than that of eight of the "top ten" cities (Austin and Chicago being the exceptions), so the relative importance of this and other education statistics in *Money* magazine's ranking formula does not appear to be great. The more important question – whether or not these measures would yield any tangible benefits in terms of student output measures – is beyond the scope of this report.

Places Rated avoids this problem by assigning equal weight to all of its evaluation criteria, which can be problematic for determining each metro area's overall ranking. As noted by Steven Deller, an Associate Professor and Community Development Specialist at the University of Wisconsin, "this practice results in some weird implications. For example, 'crime' and 'recreation' are considered equally important, and to some perhaps they are. But placing access to a tennis court or a golf course on par with freedom from violent crime appears to be a judgment call many people would disagree with."¹¹ Recognizing that readers may not agree with this equal-weight system, *Places Rated* outlines a method by which people can weight the various categories and indicators based on their own preferences to determine what the best place is for them.

On many other quality-of-life indicators outside the Education category – such as taxes and crime – York County compares favorably with many if not most of *Money*'s "top ten cities." Where York County and the rest of the Norfolk metro area appear to be lacking are in the area of culture and sports. More than any one single factor, having one or more major league sports franchises gives a city or region national recognition that can be difficult to obtain otherwise.

¹¹ Steven C. Deller, "Community Ratings: An Abuse of Secondary Data?," *Community Economics Newsletter*, December 1995

Health care appears to be another area in need of improvement; Hampton Roads fared poorly in this indicator in both the *Money* and *Places Rated* rankings.

The 2000 citizen survey focused largely on asking the residents about government services. Perhaps the focus of the next survey should be broadened to gauge the level of satisfaction with quality-of-life indicators that are not related strictly to County government. For example, in future citizen surveys it may be useful to ask York County residents if they are satisfied with the range of cultural and entertainment opportunities and with the quality, cost, and availability of health care. They could be asked what types of goods and services they would like but are not available in the County. Such information could assist the County in identifying the types of businesses it should be working to attract. It would also be useful to know if the citizens want the County to work with the rest of the region to try to lure a major league sports franchise to Hampton Roads. This is an issue that has arisen in recent years with attempts to attract NBA basketball and NHL hockey teams to Hampton Roads, and it will likely come up again in the future.

This study sought to answer a question: What can York County do, particularly in the field of education, to improve its ranking by such publications as *Money* magazine in their annual evaluations of “best places to live?” There is another, perhaps more important question that could also be asked: Is recognition in a national publication a goal worth pursuing? If York County were to be listed as one of “the best places to live,” how would the County and its citizens benefit? York County is already absorbing more than its share of the region’s population growth, and, with a 33% increase in population between 1990 and 2000, does not need the residential growth stimulation that recognition in a national magazine might cause.

From a regional perspective, however, there may be some value in pursuing national recognition for the Norfolk metro area, which, for all intents and purposes has stopped attracting new residents, or rather, is losing more residents than it attracts. People often associate growth with traffic congestion and school overcrowding, but a certain amount of population growth is needed for a region to thrive. According to the 2000 Census, the metro area grew by 8.4%, but this was entirely the result of net natural increase (births minus deaths); over 14,000 more people moved out of the area than moved in during the 1990s.¹² This regional out-migration has continued into the new millennium, according to the Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service, which estimates that the Norfolk metro area had a net migration rate of -0.5% from 2000 to 2002.¹³

In a 1999 critique of *Money* and *Places Rated*, economist Howard J. Wall suggested an alternative approach that ranks metropolitan areas on the basis of their rates of net migration. Recognizing the subjectivity inherent in any attempt to quantify community livability, Wall recommends a “rational livability ranking” based on “revealed preference.” In other words, by choosing to move from one area to another, people “vote with their feet.” By definition, according to Wall, the best or most livable cities are those that are attracting the most new residents. Not surprisingly, the Norfolk metro area does not fare too well with this approach; Wall’s study ranked the region 33rd among the 59 largest metro areas in the U.S.¹⁴ In fact, since population growth is one of the factors that *Money* magazine takes into account in its rankings, out-migration might have contributed to Virginia Beach’s failure to make *Money*’s “top ten” list.

Finally, it is worth noting that York County is already ranked as one of the best places to live by those who matter most – the people who live here, over 11,000 of whom lived somewhere else ten years ago and chose to move here. According to the 2000 survey the vast majority of them are pleased with that decision. Perhaps that is the most important gauge of the County’s quality of life.

¹² Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service, University of Virginia

¹³ York County, in contrast, has experienced a 3.1% rate of net migration from 2000 to 2002. James City County and Isle of Wight Counties and the cities of Suffolk, Williamsburg, and Chesapeake all are attracting residential growth, but the region as a whole, including the three central cities that give the metropolitan area its name – Norfolk, Virginia Beach, and Newport News – has had net out-migration this decade.

¹⁴ Wall, *The Regional Economist*.

APPENDIX

Money magazine's "Statistical Snapshots" of American cities include the following 28 data elements grouped into 10 categories. *Money* does not specify whether or not these Quality-of-life indicators are among the evaluation criteria it uses to select its "best places to live."

- Weather
 - Annual precipitation
 - High temperature in July
 - Heat index
 - Low temperature in January
 - Cold index
- Financial
 - Median household income
 - Sales tax
 - State income tax rates (highest and lowest brackets)
 - Average auto insurance premiums
- Housing
 - Average home price
 - Property taxes
- Leisure
 - Restaurants and bars within a 30-mile radius
 - Movie theaters within a 30-mile radius
 - Golf courses index within a 30-mile radius
 - Pro baseball, basketball, football, and hockey teams within a 30-mile radius
- Culture
 - Libraries within a 30-mile radius
 - Theatrical producers within a 30-mile radius
 - Museums, botanical gardens, zoos within a 30-mile radius
- Travel
 - Major airports within a 30-mile radius
- Health
 - Doctor's offices and clinics within a 30-mile radius
 - Medical and surgical hospitals within a 30-mile radius
- Environment
 - Superfund sites
 - Air pollution index
- Crime
 - Personal crime risk
 - Property crime risk
- Education
 - Colleges, universities, and professional schools within a 30-mile radius
 - Junior colleges and technical institutes within a 30-mile radius
 - Student-teacher ratio in schools

Evaluation criteria used in the “Millennium Edition” (2000) of the *Places Rated Almanac*:

- Costs of Living
 - Typical Household Income
 - State and Local Taxes
 - Housing Costs
 - Other Costs
 - Combined Cost Index
- Transportation
 - Supply of public transit and commuting times
 - Connectivity with other metro areas via national highways, scheduled air service, and passenger rail service
 - Relative proximity of all other metro areas
- Jobs
 - Percent increase in new jobs by the year 2005 (projected)
 - Number of new jobs created between now and 2005
 - Number of new jobs with above-average pay
- Education
- Climate
 - Winter mildness
 - Summer mildness
 - Hazardousness
 - Seasonal affect
- Crime
 - Violent crime rate
 - Property crime rate divided by 10
- The Arts
 - Number of art museums
 - Annual museum attendance
 - Per capita museum attendance
 - Annual ballet performances
 - Touring artist bookings
 - Opera performances
 - Professional theater performances
 - Symphony performances
- Health Care
 - Office-based physicians in general and family practice
 - Office-based medical specialists
 - Office-based surgeons
 - Accredited short-term, general hospital beds
 - Hospitals with physician teaching programs certified by the AMA or (Association of Canadian Teaching Hospitals)
- Recreation
 - Amusement and theme parks
 - Aquariums
 - Auto racing
 - College sports
 - Gambling
 - Golf courses
 - Good restaurants
 - Movie theater screens
 - Professional sports
 - Protected recreation areas
 - Skiing
 - Water area
 - Zoos