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# Demographics Daily

## Demographics Daily

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## Morgantown tops list of America's best small cities

### 141 places earn 'dreamtown' designation in Demographics Daily study

G. Scott Thomas Demographics Daily

Morgantown, W.Va., is the best small city in America, according to a new study by Demographics Daily.

The study designated 141 places as "dreamtowns," defined as cities with populations of 10,000 to 50,000 that offer an outstanding quality of life. Morgantown topped the list, followed by Owatonna, Minn.; Bozeman, Mont.; Columbus, Ind.; and Oxford, Miss. (Profiles of the top five dreamtowns and the list of all dreamtowns are at the bottom of this story.)

Demographics Daily rated the quality of life in 632 small cities. The study group included every U.S. nonmetropolitan city with 10,000 to 50,000 residents, along with several cities in small metro areas or on the sparsely settled fringes of large metros.

#### Spreadsheets

**Overall scores and category scores for all small cities (632 small cities, 2000)**

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**Dreamtowns [80 or more points]: 20 quality-of-life indicators (141 small cities, 1990-2020)**

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**Tier 2 [70-79 points]: 20 quality-of-life indicators (195 small cities, 1990-2020)**

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**Tier 4 [59 or fewer points]: 20 quality-of-life indicators (103 small cities, 1990-2020)**

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Morgantown, the top city overall, was awarded 100 points. Scores for the other 631 small cities were based off that benchmark. The 141 places with scores above 80 points were classified as dreamtowns. (An alphabetical list of dreamtowns is at the end of this story.)

The study was inspired by strong public interest in small-town life. More than 18 million people moved from metropolitan areas into small cities or rural counties during the 1990s, according to a Demographics Daily analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data. And a 1998 poll by Professional Builder magazine found that two-thirds of Americans would prefer to live far from a major city.

Demographics Daily used 20 sets of statistics to answer the following eight questions that residents of metro areas commonly ask about small towns. Scores in the eight categories below were combined to determine each city's overall rating:

**Vitality:** Are the local population and employment bases growing at a healthy pace? (Kingsland, Ga., was best in this category.)

**Supply of good jobs:** Can a newcomer easily find a challenging job that pays well? (Charlottesville, Va., was No. 1.)

**Freedom from stress:** Is the community a refuge from metropolitan evils such as violent crime and lengthy commutes? (Brookings, S.D., was the category leader.)

**Connection to cultural mainstream:** Do residents feel connected to the outside world? (Canandaigua, N.Y., was at the top of this list.)

**Support for schools:** Are local adults committed to education, and are they willing to open their wallets to support it? (Pullman, Wash., led this category.)

**Access to health care:** Is it easy to find a doctor or a medical specialist? (Charlottesville, Va., finished first.)

**Low cost of living:** Are housing prices and taxes at affordable levels? (Troy, Ala., ranked first in this category.)

**Small-town character:** Does the community have a distinct identity, and is it likely to retain its small-town feel in the future? (Brookings, S.D., was best.)

Morgantown earned first place overall because of its consistently strong category performances. It ranked among the nation's 35 best small cities in five categories: access to health care (second), supply of good jobs (12th), connection to cultural mainstream (17th), support for schools (26th) and low cost of living (35th).

The 141 dreamtowns were scattered through 42 states. Neighboring Minnesota and Wisconsin had the most, 12 dreamtowns each. The six runners-up were Florida, Kansas, Kentucky, Missouri, Ohio and Virginia, each with six dreamtowns.

The 491 small cities that fell below dreamtown status were divided into three groups. Tier 2 consisted of 195 communities with scores from 70 to 79 points, tier 3 had 193 places with scores in the 60s, and tier 4 included the 103 small cities with scores of 59 points or less.

### Top five dreamtowns

**1. Morgantown, W.Va.:** America's best small city is nestled along the Monongahela River in northern West Virginia. The state is struggling economically, but Morgantown is a prosperous exception. It is the home of West Virginia University, Monongalia County government, world-famous glass manufacturers and two large health-care systems serving parts of West Virginia and Pennsylvania. Another strength is Morgantown's proximity to metropolitan attractions. Pittsburgh is slightly more than an hour away on Interstate 79.

**2. Owatonna, Minn.:** Owatonna is named after a Native American princess who, according to legend, regained her health after drinking the area's healing waters. The city has blossomed into a regional manufacturing and banking center, with more than half of its jobs in those two sectors. Weather is a strong or weak point, depending on personal preference. "Winter offers distinct beauty," says a brochure from the chamber of commerce. That's a polite way of saying it's cold. Owatonna averages 33 subzero nights a year.

**3. Bozeman, Mont.:** Frontiersman John Bozeman led the first settlers into the fertile Gallatin Valley in 1864. They found it beautiful, yet isolated and intimidating. Their settlement was 4,800 feet above sea level -- nearly a mile in elevation -- and was surrounded by the towering Rocky Mountains. Modern-day Bozeman is a marketing center for livestock, grain and dairy products, the home of Montana State University and a northern gateway to Yellowstone National Park, which is a bit more than an hour's drive away.

**4. Columbus, Ind.:** Columbus has an unlikely distinction for a city so small. It is a showplace of modern architecture. Tourists come to see the works of renowned architects such as Eliel Saarinen, I.M. Pei and Eliot Noyes. Fifty local buildings have been conceived by world-class designers. Columbus also is a manufacturing center, specializing in diesel engines and motor-vehicle parts. And it has a strong interest in the arts, which inspired the Indianapolis Museum of Art to establish a separate Columbus gallery.

**5. Oxford, Miss.:** Oxford has made history in flattering and unhappy ways. Its positive association is with William Faulkner, the local author

who won the Nobel Prize. Oxford earned unwanted publicity in 1962, when agitators and students rioted in a futile attempt to prevent integration of the University of Mississippi. Tranquillity has long since returned to the college, which is among the city's strongest assets. Oxford also produces electric motors and wood products, and it is the Lafayette County seat.

This article was part of a series. Articles in the series are:

- [Morgantown tops list of America's best small cities.](#)
- [12 Eastern small cities earn top honors](#)
- [38 cities in South achieve 'dreamtown' status.](#)
- [Midwest wins 63 slots on 'dreamtowns' list](#)
- [Bozeman named best small city in West](#)

## Alphabetical list of dreamtowns

Aberdeen, S.D.	Fulton, Mo.	Newport, R.I.
Ames, Iowa	Gainesville, Ga.	Newton, Kans.
Anacortes, Wash.	Gillette, Wyo.	New Ulm, Minn.
Athens, Ohio	Grand Forks, N.D.	Niceville, Fla.
Auburn, Ala.	Greenfield, Ind.	Norfolk, Nebr.
Bangor, Maine	Greensburg, Ind.	North Mankato, Minn.
Bartlesville, Okla.	Harrisonburg, Va.	North Platte, Nebr.
Bemidji, Minn.	Hastings, Nebr.	Opelika, Ala.
Bend, Ore.	Hattiesburg, Miss.	Owatonna, Minn.
Berea, Ky.	Hays, Kans.	Oxford, Miss.
Blacksburg, Va.	Helena, Mont.	Perrysburg, Ohio
Boone, N.C.	Hilton Head Island, S.C.	Plover, Wis.
Bowling Green, Ky.	Huntsville, Texas	Pullman, Wash.
Bowling Green, Ohio	Hutchinson, Minn.	Radford, Va.
Bozeman, Mont.	Idaho Falls, Idaho	Red Wing, Minn.
Brookings, S.D.	Ithaca, N.Y.	River Falls, Wis.
Butte, Mont.	Jackson, Mo.	Riverton, Wyo.
Canandaigua, N.Y.	Jasper, Ind.	Rolla, Mo.
Cape Girardeau, Mo.	Jefferson City, Mo.	Rutland, Vt.
Carbondale, Ill.	Juneau, Alas.	St. Augustine, Fla.
Carson City, Nev.	Kalispell, Mont.	St. George, Utah
Casper, Wyo.	Kearney, Nebr.	Salina, Kans.
Cedar City, Utah	Keene, N.H.	San Luis Obispo, Calif.
Charlottesville, Va.	Kerrville, Texas	Sheridan, Wyo.
Chaska, Minn.	Key West, Fla.	Siloam Springs, Ark.
Christiansburg, Va.	Laconia, N.H.	Silver City, N.M.
Columbus, Ind.	Laramie, Wyo.	State College, Pa.
Concord, N.H.	Lebanon, Ind.	Statesboro, Ga.
Cookeville, Tenn.	Lebanon, N.H.	Statesville, N.C.
Dalton, Ga.	Lewiston, Idaho	Stevens Point, Wis.
Danville, Ky.	Logan, Utah	Stillwater, Okla.
Daphne, Ala.	Macomb, Ill.	Traverse City, Mich.

Destin, Fla.	Manhattan, Kans.	Tullahoma, Tenn.
Dodge City, Kans.	Manitowoc, Wis.	Tupelo, Miss.
Durango, Colo.	Mankato, Minn.	Twin Falls, Idaho
Elizabethtown, Ky.	Marquette, Mich.	Warrensburg, Mo.
Ellensburg, Wash.	Marshfield, Wis.	Watertown, S.D.
Emporia, Kans.	McMinnville, Ore.	Waterville, Maine
Fairhope, Ala.	Menomonie, Wis.	Wausau, Wis.
Faribault, Minn.	Minot, N.D.	Wenatchee, Wash.
Fergus Falls, Minn.	Monroe, Wis.	Whitewater, Wis.
Findlay, Ohio	Morgantown, W.Va.	Willmar, Minn.
Fond du Lac, Wis.	Moscow, Idaho	Wilmington, Ohio
Fort Atkinson, Wis.	Mount Pleasant, Mich.	Winchester, Va.
Fort Walton Beach, Fla.	Mount Vernon, Wash.	Winona, Minn.
Frankfort, Ky.	Murray, Ky.	Wisconsin Rapids, Wis.
	Naples, Fla.	Wooster, Ohio

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