resonance

The 100 American Cities Shaping Tomorrow

2026

America's Best Cities

Welcome to the 2026 America's Best Cities Report

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American cities have never competed harder for what matters most: residents, visitors, talent, and investment. The forces reshaping where people choose to live, work, and travel are accelerating, and the cities that understand their competitive position are better equipped to respond. Those that don't risk ceding ground to rivals they may not have considered rivals at all.

For more than a decade, Resonance Consultancy has been tracking the performance and perception of places — developing and refining a methodology designed to give cities, destinations, and the organizations that champion them a clear-eyed view of where they stand today, and where their greatest opportunities for growth and differentiation lie ahead.

The 2026 edition of America's Best Cities is our most comprehensive to date. For the first time, we have evaluated all 393 metropolitan statistical areas in the United States, regardless of population size. That breadth reflects a conviction that has only deepened over two decades of research: the competitive landscape is widening. Americans are no longer concentrating their attention on a small set of established hubs. The cities making someone's short list — for living, for visiting, for building a career — have never been more diverse.

This year we have also made a deliberate choice to integrate our proprietary rankings with a broader synthesis of urban research. The data tells us where cities stand. The research tells us why — and what is at stake. Immigration shifts, housing affordability pressures, the restructuring of downtown commercial real estate, the emergence of new technology and manufacturing hubs: these are not background conditions. They are the forces actively determining which cities attract the talent, investment, and visitors that drive long-term growth.

One of the more interesting insights in this year's report is that while being a livable city is necessary to retain talent, livability in and of itself is not sufficient to attract it. There's only a moderate correlation of 0.49 between a city's measured livability performance and how livable people perceive it to be. The places Americans most want to live are overwhelmingly the places they most want to visit — a 0.97 correlation that should reshape how every economic development organization thinks about the relationship between tourism investment and talent attraction. The cities winning the competition for residents are, almost without exception, also the cities that have invested most deliberately in being lovable.

We hope this report serves as both a mirror and a map — reflecting where your city stands, and pointing toward where the greatest opportunities for growth and differentiation lie ahead. As always, we'd welcome the opportunity to discuss the results and how Resonance can help your city improve its livability, lovability and prosperity in the years to come.

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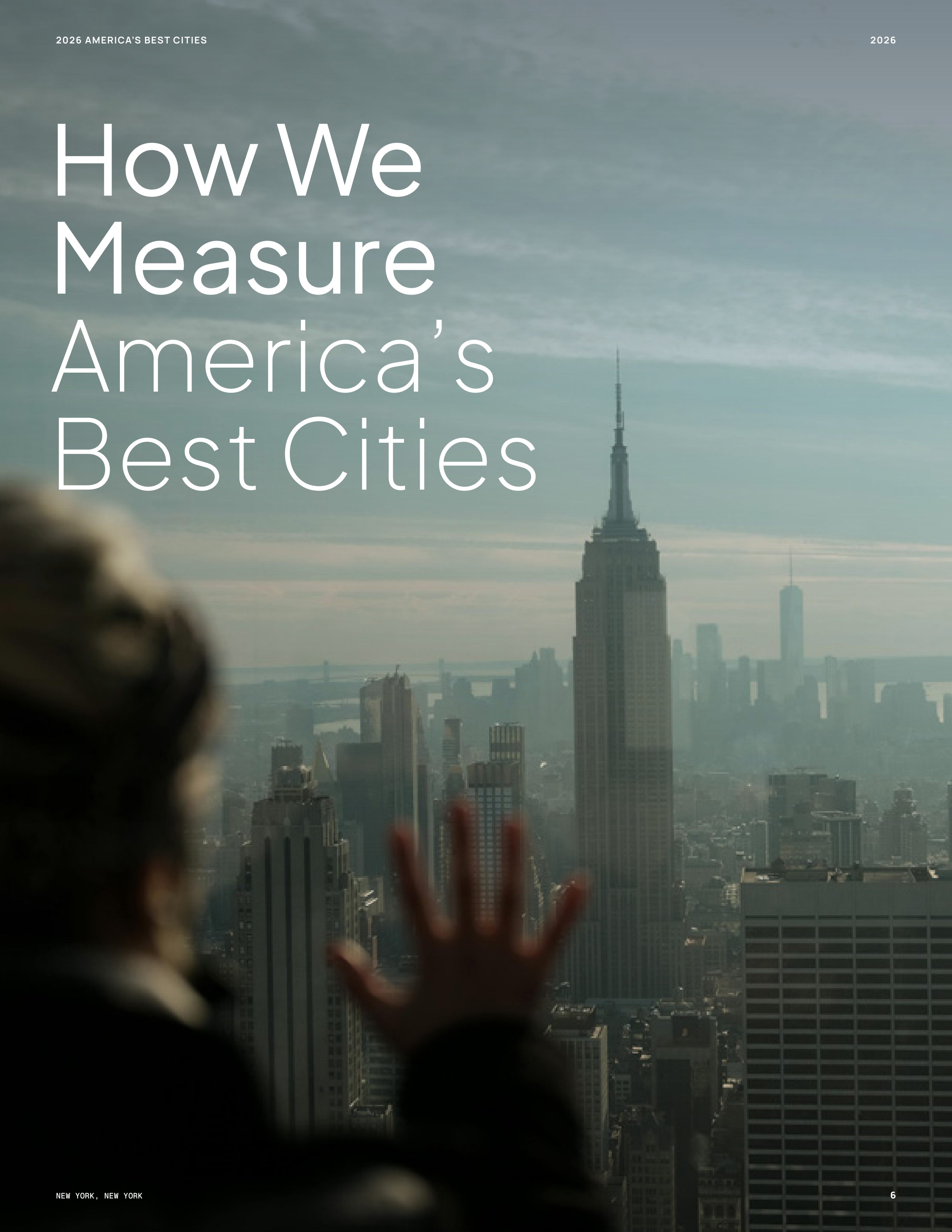
MANHATTAN, NEW YORK

How We Measure America's Best Cities



NEW YORK, NEW YORK

America's Best Cities measures what it actually means to be a competitive city in the modern era — not just whether residents can reach a park or afford housing, but whether the city resonates: whether people want to be there. Our framework rests on three foundational pillars: Livability, Lovability, and Prosperity.

Three Pillars of Urban Competitiveness

Livability

Measures the quality of daily life in a city. Walkability, transit access, air quality, climate risk, green space, housing costs relative to income, broadband connectivity, healthcare access, and life expectancy all feed into this pillar. It also asks: would you want to live here?

Lovability

Captures a city's cultural vitality and its ability to attract visitors and generate desire. Indicators span the quality and volume of restaurants, arts and entertainment venues, museums, outdoor experiences, and nightlife, alongside digital engagement signals — social media activity, search trends, and user-generated content. It asks: would you want to visit?

Prosperity

Measures a city's economic strength and opportunity. GDP per capita, labor force participation, innovation capital intensity, educational attainment, unemployment and poverty rates, the presence of major corporate headquarters, university quality, and the number of direct air connections all contribute. It asks: would you build your career or business here?

Performance and Perception

For each pillar, we measure two distinct dimensions: Performance captures how a city actually functions, derived from approximately 50 quantitative indicators and user-generated content signals. Perception captures how a city is seen by the broader American public, measured through an annual survey of more than 2,000 U.S. households conducted in partnership with Ipsos. Survey respondents answer three open-ended questions: Which cities would you most like to live in? Which cities would you most like to visit? Where do you believe the best job opportunities exist?

The gap between performance and perception — what cities are versus how they are seen — is where competitive strategy begins. A city performing well on livability metrics but not recognized for it has an untapped positioning opportunity. A city perceived as highly desirable but underperforming on fundamentals faces a different kind of risk.

Scope and Coverage

The 2026 edition evaluates all 393 metropolitan statistical areas in the United States. America's Best Small Cities applies the same methodology, indicators, and survey instruments to metros with populations of 500,000 or fewer. Final scores are calculated as a weighted composite of performance and perception scores across the three pillars.

The Competitive State of American Cities

LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

I

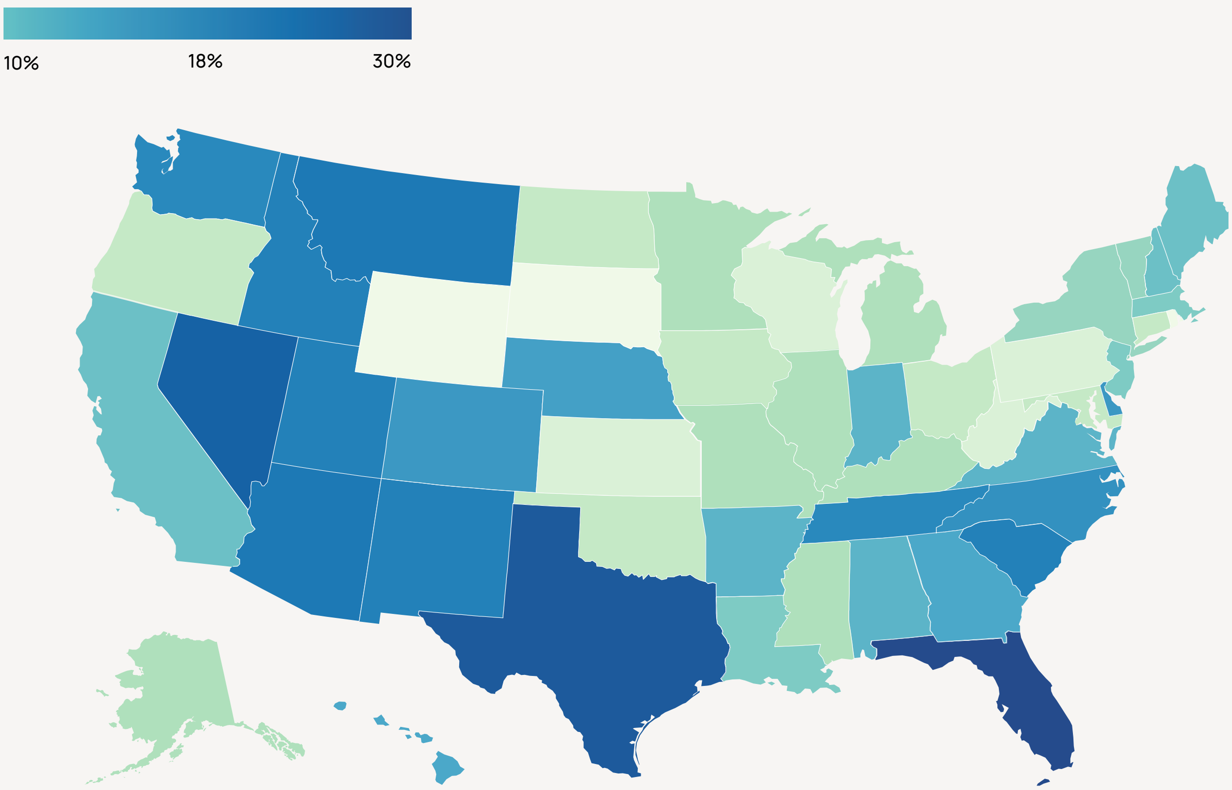
Growth and Capital: Where Economies Are Expanding

Rankings reveal outcomes. Understanding what shapes them requires looking upstream — at the economic trajectories, population movements, labor dynamics, and urban transformations that are quietly redrawing America's competitive map. The forces shaping city rankings in 2026 did not emerge overnight. They have been building across a decade of demographic change, policy shifts, and economic restructuring, and they are now producing visible, measurable divergence between the cities gaining ground and those losing it.

To this day, the United States remains the largest economy in the world. The country accounts for roughly 25% of global gross domestic product (GDP) and household consumption is around $20 trillion — a consumer market so large that it rivals the economic output of entire continents. This has made the nation one of the most powerful magnets for global investment. However, the redistribution of economic and population growth across American metro areas has been one of the defining stories of the past decade. Over the past five years, the Southwest witnessed a 26% rise in real (inflation-adjusted) growth in Gross Regional Product, compared to the national average of 18%. The Southeast and Rocky Mountain regions saw 21% growth over the past five years, while the Far West slightly trailed the national average at 17%. Lagging behind the national average was the New England, Mideast, Great Lakes, and Plains regions — all at around 13 – 14%. The story of regional growth in the South and Rocky Mountains has been powered by a combination of several factors: domestic in-migration, corporate relocations, and a manufacturing revival that directed new capital investment well outside the traditional coastal corridors.

Economic Growth Was Strongest in the South and Mountain West

Growth in Real GDP from 2020-2025 by State



The average growth in real GDP was 18%

SOURCE: BUREAU OF ECONOMIC ANALYSIS

Look past the regional averages and the state-level picture tells a more textured story — one about which economies have genuinely transformed and which have held steady, and what explains the difference.

Florida and Texas sit at the top of the growth table, expanding 30 and 28% respectively in real terms between 2020 and 2025. Both are large, diversified economies, which makes those growth rates all the more remarkable — the bigger the base, the harder it is to grow it that fast. Florida's expansion has been broad, running through Miami's continued emergence as an international financial and creative hub, Tampa's rise as a corporate relocation destination, and a tourism economy that bounced back from the pandemic stronger than almost anywhere else in the country. Texas's growth is anchored by the triangle of Dallas, Houston, and Austin — three metros with distinct economic identities that together form one of the most formidable regional economies in the world. In our 2026 survey, Dallas ranks third nationally as the place Americans believe offers the best job opportunities, Austin fifth, and Houston seventh. That concentration of perceived economic opportunity in a single state is unmatched, and the GDP data confirms it isn't just perception.

Nevada, Arizona, the Carolinas, and Tennessee all grew between 21 and 27% — well above the national average — each for a distinct combination of reasons. North Carolina and South Carolina have built manufacturing and knowledge economy ecosystems that are now attracting capital at a pace that would have been unrecognizable a decade ago. Tennessee has used Nashville's brand and corporate appeal to generate growth that is spreading into Knoxville and Chattanooga. Nevada and Arizona have leveraged cost advantages, infrastructure investment, and policy predictability into sustained corporate and capital attraction.

The Mountain West deserves particular attention. Montana, Idaho, and Utah all expanded at roughly 23%, with Colorado not far behind at 20%. These are states that benefited most directly from the


AUSTIN, TEXAS

remote work shift — their combination of affordability, outdoor amenity, and broadening economic bases made them increasingly competitive for high-earning, location-flexible workers who a decade ago would have had few alternatives to coastal metros. Bozeman, Boise, and Salt Lake City are no longer secondary markets. They are primary destinations for talent and capital that is actively choosing them over alternatives.

Set against all of this, Illinois grew 13% over the same period, Ohio 12%, Pennsylvania 11%, Wisconsin 11% — roughly half the rate of the leading Sun Belt and Mountain West states. That gap reflects where capital, corporate decisions, and talent have been concentrating — and the compounding nature of that concentration means the divergence is likely to continue unless conditions change meaningfully in one direction or the other.

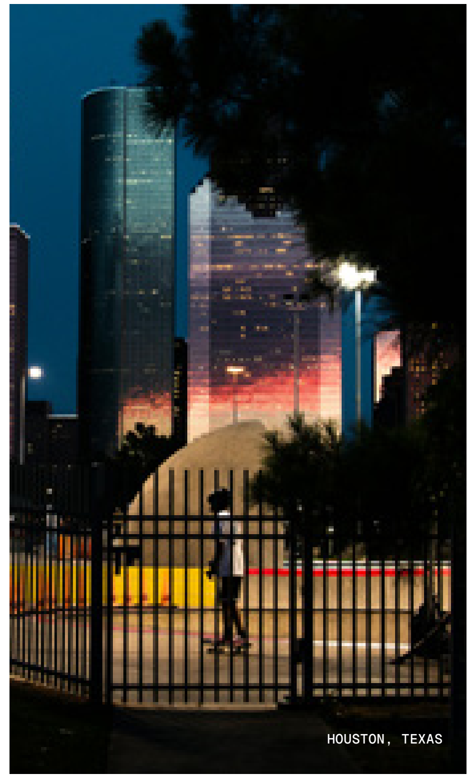
Into this economic expansion picture comes a parallel story of capital attraction. Not only is the United States the largest source for greenfield foreign direct investment — the capital that companies commit to building and expanding operations in a new market — it is also the largest recipient of that investment.

In fact, the past couple of years have been record years for North America according to FT Locations. In 2024, announced projects reached 2,800 — a record high — while capital investment surged 61% in a single year to $268 billion. That surge was driven largely by semiconductors, which alone accounted for $75 billion of investment — nearly 28% of all North America FDI capital that year, reflecting the full force of CHIPS Act incentives mobilizing a global pipeline of foundry investment into the United States. While project announcements pulled back in 2025 in the face of tariff uncertainty, capital commitments climbed further still, rising another 28% to $356 billion, as the region saw some serious capital pledges. That divergence between fewer announcements and record capital is itself part of the story: FDI is concentrating into fewer, larger, more consequential commitments — semiconductor fabs, data center campuses, advanced manufacturing facilities — the kind of foundational infrastructure that reshapes regional economies for generations.

However, that capital is not landing evenly. Texas led the U.S. by project count in both years — 284 projects in 2024 and 252 in 2025 — a reflection of its scale, infrastructure, and business climate. California, New York, and Florida rounded out the volume leaders. But the more instructive stories are in the states outperforming their size. North Carolina absorbed 94 projects in 2024 and 100 in 2025 — making it one of only a handful of states to grow project activity even as the broader market cooled. That trajectory reflects years of deliberate investment in site readiness, workforce development, and the Research Triangle's semiconductor and life sciences ecosystem that has made North Carolina a primary destination for exactly the kind of capital that is reshaping U.S. economic geography. Meanwhile, New Jersey had a breakout 2025: project announcements rose from 45 to 71, and pledged capital investment more than doubled from $2 billion to $4.1 billion, reflecting the pharmaceutical and financial services infrastructure of the greater New York region beginning to show up more prominently in the FDI data.

And Wisconsin went from just 15 FDI projects over the entirety of 2021–2023 to 49 in 2024 alone, with pledged capital rising from $356 million to $3 billion, driven by advanced manufacturing investments that validate the region's industrial resurgence. Ohio similarly saw a jump in project announcements in 2024.

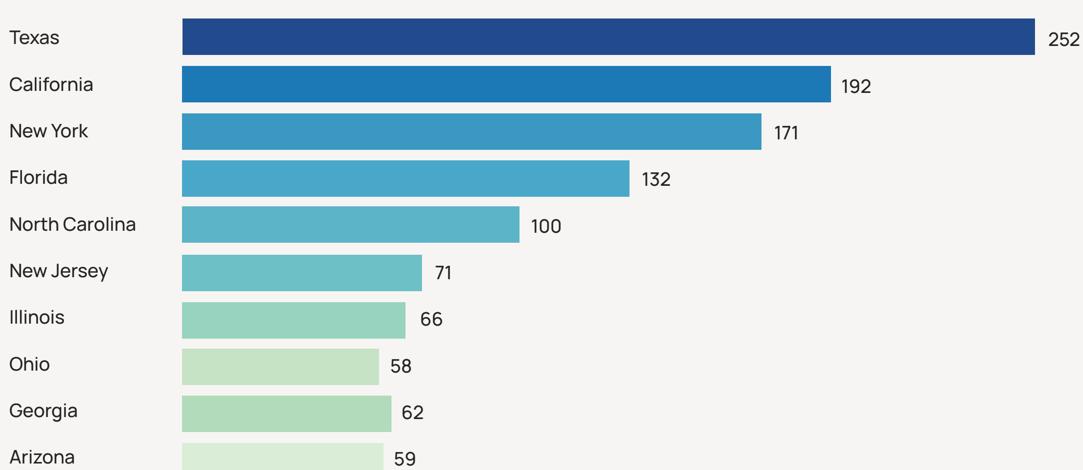
What ties the GRP growth story and the FDI story together is the same logic: capital and people move toward conditions that are favorable, policy that is predictable, and places where the talent these operations require actually wants to live. The metros that understand their economic development strategy and their livability-and-lovability strategy as two parts of the same investment are the ones showing up at the top of both the FDI tables and the America's Best Cities rankings. That alignment is not coincidental.



HOUSTON, TEXAS

Texas Continues to Lead the Number of FDI Investments into the U.S

Top North American Destinations for Greenfield FDI Investments in 2025 by Number of Project Announcements



SOURCE: FDI MARKETS

II

Labor, Population, and the Competition for People

If capital is the first currency of city competitiveness, people are the second — and in many ways the more consequential one. A manufacturing facility without the workforce to run it is a sunk cost. A tech campus in a city that can't attract engineers is a building. The labor market picture in 2026 is one of the most structurally complex in decades, and understanding it requires separating headline numbers from the more meaningful signals beneath them.

The Population Slowdown

Start with the big picture. The United States is in the early stages of a demographic transition that most economic development strategies have not yet fully priced in. Fertility rates have been falling for decades, but the pace has accelerated. Americans are marrying later, having fewer children, and in growing numbers choosing not to have children at all — a pattern that tracks closely with rising educational attainment, housing costs, and the economics of child-rearing in an era of stagnant wage growth for younger cohorts. The total fertility rate has fallen below 1.7, well beneath the 2.1 replacement level, and shows no sign of reversing. Meanwhile, every single day more than 10,000 Baby Boomers turn 65 — a generational retirement wave that is simultaneously withdrawing experienced workers from the labor force and expanding the share of the population that depends on it. The nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office (CBO) puts a number on the combined effect: the U.S. population will grow from 350 million in 2025 to only 367 million by 2055 — smaller and slower than any projection the agency has previously published. By 2035, the population is expected to be 4.5 million fewer people than the CBO forecast as recently as January 2025.

Immigration has historically been the variable that offset these trends. When fertility fell, net international migration filled the gap — supplying the working-age labor force growth that kept the demographic math from closing too quickly. That buffer is now contracting sharply. Net international migration fell from approximately 2.7 million in 2023–24 to 1.3 million in 2024–25, a 54% decline in a single year. Partially as a result of this, the CBO notes that the working-age population — ages 25 to 54 — will be meaningfully smaller than any prior projection assumed. That is the talent pool from which every city, region, and economic development organization in the country will be drawing. For cities that built their growth models on sustained immigration flows, as many of the nation's most dynamic metros did, this is not a cyclical adjustment. It is a structural headwind with multi-decade implications now embedded in official federal projections.

What this means for place competition is direct: the number of Americans that cities are competing for is not going to grow the way prior economic cycles assumed. The overall pool is smaller, the working-age share of it is under pressure from multiple directions, and the historic safety valve of immigration that offset domestic demographic trends is contracting. That makes where people choose to go — and why — a higher-stakes question than it has ever been.

54% DECLINE

Net international migration to the U.S. fell from 2.7 million in 2023–24 to an estimated 1.3 million in 2024–25, with further contraction anticipated per CBO projections.

The Tightening Competition for Talent

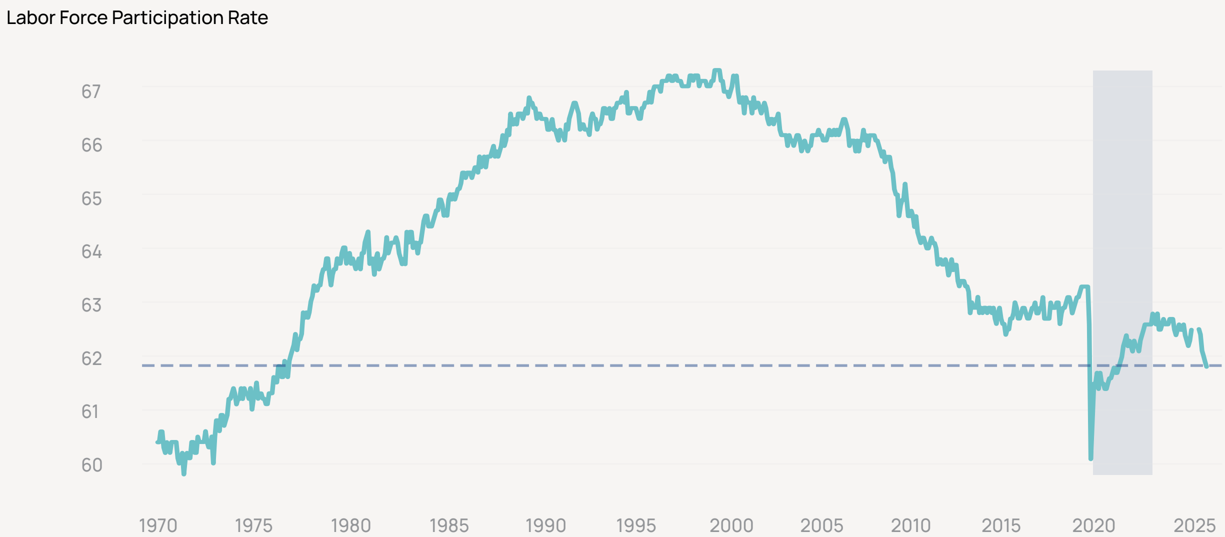
The labor force participation rate — the share of the civilian population that is either working or actively looking for work — sat at 61.8% in April 2026. In plain terms, that means nearly four in 10 Americans are on the sidelines of the labor market entirely. Outside of the first couple of years of the pandemic, that number is at its lowest rate since early 1977.

The aging of the American population is the primary driver. The U.S. population aged 65 and older grew an estimated 15.5% between 2020 and 2025, per Census Bureau data — a cohort expanding at a pace that reflects decades of the Baby Boom generation moving through the life cycle. More than 10,000 Americans turn 65 every day. At that age, most exit the workforce permanently, and the participation rate for workers 55 and older has fallen to 37.1%, reflecting a generation that, in many cases, has the financial means to retire and is choosing to do so. This is not a crisis story — it is a demographic reality that has been building for decades and is now arriving in full. But its labor market consequences are direct: a growing share of the population is drawing on the economy rather than contributing to it, and the math of workforce supply is shifting in ways that compounding growth projections did not fully anticipate.

The pipeline that would typically offset that retirement wave is not filling as fast as prior eras would suggest. The U.S. population under the age of 25 actually declined 0.9% between 2020 and 2025 — a reflection of the sustained decline in fertility rates that has been running for two decades. Americans are marrying later, having fewer children, and the demographic echo that once reliably replenished the entry-level workforce is quieter than it has been in the modern labor market era. The workers who will be entering prime working age over the next decade are a smaller cohort than any prior generation of economic development strategy assumed.

Which makes the prime-age worker — those 25 to 54 — the most consequential cohort in the American labor market, and the most competed-over. This group grew 3.5% between 2020 and 2025, a meaningful but modest expansion relative to the retirement wave it is being asked to offset. Over the past couple of years, their labor force participation

Outside of the First Couple of Years of the Pandemic, the Nation's Labor Force Participation Rate is at its Lowest Since the 1970's



Note: the grey shaded area reflects the COVID-19 pandemic

SOURCE: BUREAU OF LABOR STATISTICS

rate was 83-84% — the highest it has been since the early 2000s. These workers are not on the sidelines. They are engaged, productive, and in a labor market defined by low unemployment and persistent hiring reluctance in many sectors, increasingly difficult to attract away from where they already are. The competition for this cohort is not just about wages or remote work flexibility. It is about where people genuinely want to be.

The Migration Map: A Short-Term and Long-Term Competition for Talent

Prime-age workers are mobile — and where they move, and in which direction, is one of the clearest signals of which places are winning the competition for people. Migration patterns don't perfectly map onto any single demographic group, but at the county level, sustained net migration is one of the most reliable proxies for a place's overall competitive position: its economic opportunity, its quality of life, and its affordability relative to alternatives.

Census Bureau population estimates tracking net migration as a share of county population — from 2020 to 2025 for the long run, and 2024 to 2025 for the most recent year — tell that story at remarkable resolution across all 3,145 U.S. counties. Of the roughly 40 million Americans who relocate each year, most make local moves driven by housing costs or life circumstances. The more meaningful signal is in cross-county and cross-state migration, where destination choices are more deliberate and more reflective of genuine place preference.

The five-year picture is striking. Florida leads all states in median county-level net migration at +9.1% — the typical Florida county absorbed net migration equivalent to more than 9% of its population over five years. Idaho follows at +8.4%, Tennessee at +7.7%, the Carolinas at roughly +5% each. Montana, Arizona, Georgia, and Utah all sit above 4%. At the individual county level, the numbers become vivid: Kaufman County in the DFW exurban ring gained net migration equivalent to +27% of its population over five years. The Austin suburbs — Williamson and Hays Counties — gained +16 and +18% respectively. Brunswick County, North Carolina, gained +24%. Horry County, home to Myrtle Beach, gained +20%. These are not just migration numbers — they are economic transformation numbers, compounding over years into meaningfully larger labor pools, tax bases, and local economies.

The losses are equally concentrated. Los Angeles County sits at -4.3% cumulative net migration, San Francisco at -6.1%, Kings County (Brooklyn, New York) at -5.9%, Cook County (Chicago) at -2.3%. Again — not economically failed places. But sustained net outmigration at this scale over five years carries consequences that accumulate slowly and show up eventually in talent density, tax revenue, and the self-reinforcing ecosystem that makes an innovation economy run.

The more nuanced story is the 17% of counties — around 540 in total — that switched direction between the two time periods. Miami-Dade and Broward Counties recorded strong cumulative gains over five years but turned to modest net outflows in 2024–2025 — the first measurable sign that Florida's affordability advantage may be softening at its core. Denver County made the same switch. In the other direction, San Francisco — down -6.1% cumulatively — posted a small positive net migration figure in 2024–2025, its first such reading in years.

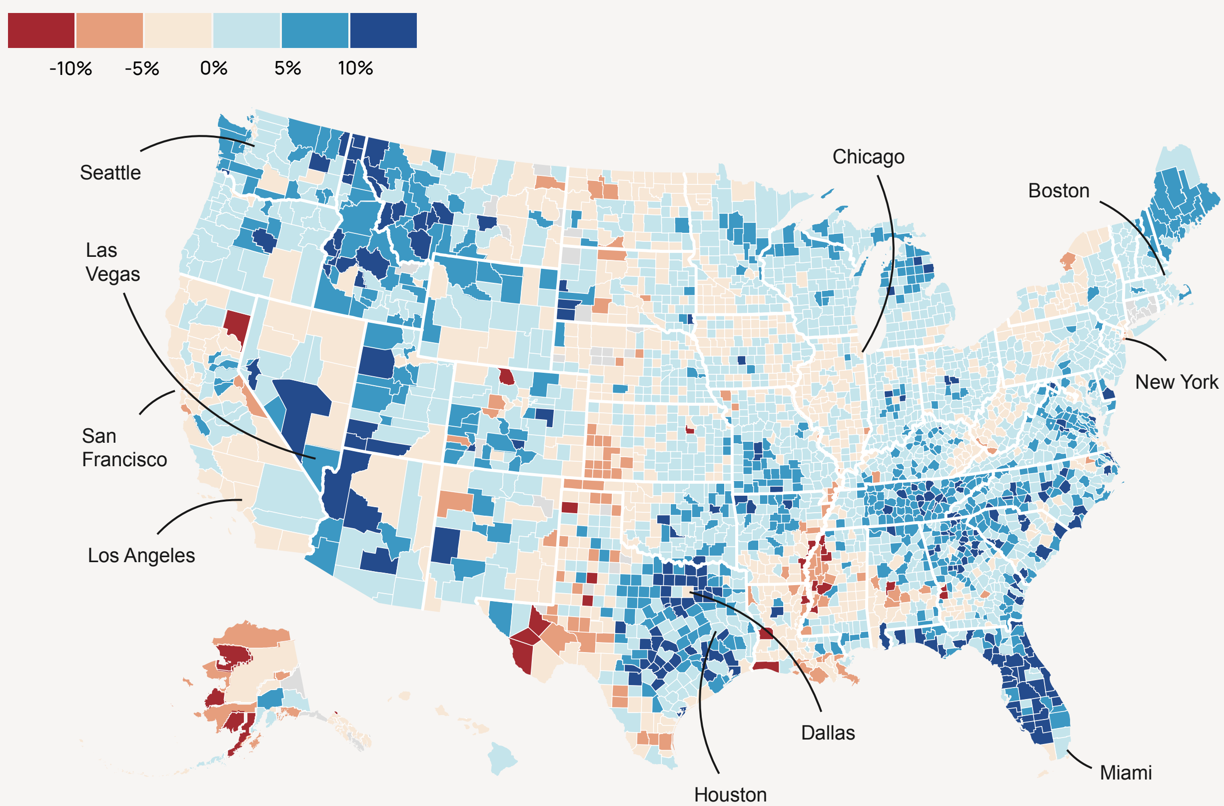
The through-line is consistent with everything else we've seen so far: the counties and regions that have built sustained net migration advantages did not arrive there in a single year. They are the compound result of economic opportunity, quality of life, and affordability reinforcing each other over time. And the places beginning to switch direction are the early signal of where that equation is changing.

Housing, Affordability, and Who Gets to Choose

That affordability equation has a price — sometimes literally. Home prices have risen 60% nationwide since before the pandemic (between 2019 and early 2025), with the national median reaching $414,900 in late 2025 according to the National Association of Realtors. The average mortgage payments on a median-priced home under typical first-time buyer terms hit $2,570 in 2025, requiring a household income of at least $126,700 according to Harvard's Joint Center for Housing Studies — a threshold now out of reach for the majority of American households. Housing affordability continues to be top-of-mind for renters, too — nearly half of U.S. renters pay more than 30% of their income on housing, the highest share on record according to the same study.

What this means for talent migration is specific. When housing costs price workers out of their preferred destination, those workers go somewhere else. But the cities that are keeping housing attainable for the workers they are trying to attract are the ones best positioned to sustain their growth momentum. Austin's aggressive building boom — more apartments permitted per capita than any other large metro tracked by Redfin — has demonstrably pushed rents lower and maintained its position as an addressable destination for mobile workers. Minneapolis' elimination of single-family zoning has become a national policy model. Housing is not a separate challenge from talent strategy. It is the same challenge.

Many People are Migrating to the South and West



Net Migration from 2020-2025, as Share of Total Pop

SOURCE: U.S. CENSUS BUREAU

III

Downtowns, Districts, and the Urban Reinvention

How a city manages its downtown real estate is a leading indicator of governance quality and long-term trajectory.

No urban challenge of the past five years has been more consequential for city centers than the structural shift in office demand. What began as a pandemic disruption has proven to be a permanent restructuring of how knowledge workers use urban space — and what has emerged from the wreckage is something close to a once-in-a-generation opportunity for cities willing to seize it.

Overall U.S. office vacancy stood at 20.2% in Q1 2026, according to real estate firm Cushman & Wakefield — essentially flat for the past year, which is itself a meaningful signal that the market may be finding a floor. But the national average obscures market conditions moving in sharply different directions. Seattle has one of the highest office vacancy rates among major markets at 33.3%, a 3.5 percentage point increase over the past year. Chicago has deteriorated from 23.2 to 26.2% over the same period with Washington D.C. and Portland trending in the same direction. At the other extreme, markets like Charleston at 7.7%, Nashville at 16.6%, and Miami at 15.1% — well below the national average and stable — tell a very different story about what office demand looks like in growing Sun Belt metros. San Francisco, which peaked at 34.3% vacancy a year ago, has pulled back to 31.6% — still one of the highest in the country, but a year-over-year decline of 2.7 percentage points suggests the worst may be behind it. Austin

SEATTLE, WASHINGTON

has improved from 29.3 to 27.1% as the city's growth absorbs space. Nationally, Class A vacancy is falling while older Class B and C assets face something closer to a structural verdict — a flight to quality that is reshaping the competitive landscape within every downtown, not just between them.

What has emerged from this structural vacancy is a conversion wave unlike anything in the modern era of American urban development. The number of residential units delivered through office-to-residential conversion nearly doubled in 2024, with 70,700 units projected for 2025 — a national record, and more than triple the pipeline that existed in 2022. New York City is leading, with 4.1 million square feet converted in just the first eight months of 2025, already surpassing all of 2024. The catalysts have been policy-driven: the City of Yes zoning reforms, a tax incentive offering up to 90% abatement for 35 years, and lifted floor-area-ratio caps that previously made conversion economically unviable. Chicago's LaSalle Street Reimagined initiative is deploying $315 million in tax increment financing to repurpose six downtown office buildings. Boston, Los Angeles, and Philadelphia have each enacted conversion-supportive frameworks.

For economic development organizations, the conversion story matters in two ways that go beyond housing supply. First, how a city manages its downtown real estate challenge is a leading indicator of governance quality and long-term trajectory. Cities moving quickly and creatively on adaptive reuse are demonstrating the kind of problem-solving capacity that attracts investment and talent. Cities that have not are risking a deepening cycle of vacancies, declining property tax revenue, reduced urban vitality, and the perception damage that accompanies all three. Second, and more strategically, the downtown reinvention creates the conditions for neighborhood-level investment that can reshape a city's competitive brand.

The Corridor and Neighborhood Story

The opportunity is not confined to office towers. The corridors and neighborhoods adjacent to converting downtowns are where the next generation of urban investment is forming — and they have their own stories, their own identities, and their own competitive value that deserves deliberate cultivation. The food hall that opens in a converted industrial building, the pop-up arts district that takes over a vacant retail corridor, the park activation that transforms a surface parking lot — these are not amenity projects. They are economic development projects, building the kind of visceral, place-specific identity that distinguishes a city in a national conversation increasingly saturated with generic claims about quality of life.

Mixed-use development has become the dominant paradigm in urban real estate, and the evidence is consistent across markets. CBRE, one of the world's largest commercial real estate services firms, has

NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

found in its research that mixed-use, well-located submarkets consistently outperform — with lower vacancies and higher rents than comparable office-centric districts in the same markets. The anchors of the most successful projects have expanded well beyond the traditional office-and-retail model to include sports venues, healthcare campuses, universities, parks, and entertainment districts — each of which generates foot traffic, economic activity, and the kind of neighborhood energy that shows up in livability and lovability scores simultaneously.

What the most successful cities have understood is that downtown reinvention and neighborhood vitality are not separate from economic development — they *are* economic development. Every dollar invested in activating public space, enabling adaptive reuse, and building mixed-use environments is a dollar invested in the experience of the city. And the experience of the city is what determines whether the people who visit it want to live there, whether the companies that consider it want to locate there, and whether the talent they need wants to stay. The physical environment of a city is not the backdrop for economic activity. It is its foundation.

Infrastructure, Ballot Measures, and Long-Term Capital

A quiet revolution in infrastructure finance is underway at the local level. In 2024, ballot initiatives approved more than $41 billion in new or renewed funding for public infrastructure across the United States. Voters in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, approved a nearly $20-billion plan for road, rail, and bus investment in the Charlotte region. Texas voters approved $20 billion for water infrastructure. Nashville, Seattle, and Maricopa County all passed infrastructure funding packages. These results signal something important: when the case for infrastructure investment is made compellingly and specifically, urban residents will pay for it.

The most ambitious capital programs are in the largest metros. New York City's MTA has a five-year, $68 billion capital improvement plan underway. Los Angeles Metro is executing 28 transit projects worth $20 billion as part of its '28 by '28 initiative. Nationally, cities have 86 miles of new light rail or streetcar under construction, 21 miles of new metro, and 192 miles of improved bus rapid transit. For economic development organizations, the infrastructure investment cycle is a strategic opportunity: cities that use this period to materially improve transit, public realm, and connectivity are building a durable competitive advantage that will compound over decades.

IV

Tourism, Branding, and the Placemaking Premium

The cities winning the competition for residents and visitors are, almost without exception, cities that have made the visitor and resident experience a strategic priority.

The relationship between how desirable a city is to visit and how desirable it is to live in is, at this point, one of the most well-documented findings in our research. The 0.97 correlation between lovability perception and livability perception in our 2026 data — the highest we have ever recorded — should recalibrate how any organization thinks about what it is actually investing in when it funds tourism promotion, visitor experience, or destination marketing.

The mechanism is not abstract. Visitors experience a city at its best: the restaurant that earns a reservation three weeks in advance, the neighborhood that wasn't on their itinerary but became the best part of the trip, the waterfront that makes the skyline feel like a place rather than a backdrop. A positive visitor experience generates a visceral, emotional impression of a place that no marketing campaign can replicate from a distance, and that impression — "I could live here" — is where residential consideration begins. Across 75% of the cities in our dataset, changes in livability perception over the past two years closely tracked changes in lovability perception. When a city's visitor desirability rises, its residential desirability follows. The directionality is consistent and meaningful.

Las Vegas's #9 livability perception rank, driven almost entirely by lovability rather than objective livability metrics, is the extreme expression of this principle. But it is not an outlier — it is an exaggeration of a pattern that runs across the ranking from Nashville to Charlotte to Phoenix. These cities built their residential reputations through visitor experience and economic momentum. The path to being perceived as a great place to live, in our data, runs almost entirely through being perceived as a great place to visit and work.

PITTSBURGH, PENNSYLVANIA

Tourism as Talent Pipeline

The strategic conclusion for destination marketing organizations is that the visitors who come, enjoy, and tell others are not just a tourism asset. They are the talent pipeline. Every traveler who returns home saying "that city was different than I expected — I could see myself living there" is a prospective resident. Every conference attendee who falls in love with a food scene is a potential talent recruiter. Every leisure visitor who discovers a neighborhood they didn't know existed is a potential economic development advocate in their home market. The visitor economy is the talent economy, viewed from a different angle.

For economic development organizations, the implication is a budget argument as much as a philosophical one. DMO investment — in visitor experience, cultural programming, wayfinding, hospitality training, event attraction — is talent attraction investment. Not metaphorically. Not indirectly. The same investment in the quality of the experience serves both goals simultaneously, because the people making decisions about where to live and the people making decisions about where to visit are, increasingly, the same people. Treating those as separate organizational mandates with separate budgets and separate success metrics is leaving a significant return on investment on the table.

The Placemaking Premium

The economic case for placemaking — the deliberate creation of public spaces, civic amenities, and cultural programming that make a city feel like a place rather than a geography — has moved from urban planning theory to mainstream real estate practice. The evidence is now sufficiently strong to make the case unambiguously: cities that invest in the public realm are investing in leasing activity, residential demand, tourism, and tax revenue.

The cities winning the competition for residents and visitors are, almost without exception, cities that have made the visitor and resident experience a strategic priority. Savannah has invested for decades in its squares, its historic preservation, its culinary identity, and its walkable urban form — and it now leads all small cities in America on lovability, with a score comparable to cities 10 times its size. Pittsburgh has invested in its cultural amenities, its neighborhood revitalization, and its food scene — and it has climbed five places in our national survey as a place to visit while dozens of comparably-sized cities have fallen. Kansas City has built a streetcar network, activated its arts district, and cultivated a national food reputation — and it has risen 15 places in our survey as a place Americans want to live over the past two years. These are not coincidences. They are returns on deliberate investment in the experience of place. And they are the most durable form of competitive advantage a city can build, because they are simultaneously hard to replicate and compound over time.

Presenting America's 100 Best Cities

LAS VEGAS, NEVADA

At its summit, the 2026 ranking is a story of remarkable stability: New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago hold the Top 3 positions once again, a reflection of the gravitational force of scale, economic complexity, and cultural depth that no other American cities can yet match. But stability at the top should not obscure what is happening below it. The middle of the rankings is in motion — cities rising and falling in ways that reveal the logic of a competitive landscape being actively redrawn.

Miami (#4) continues to punch above its economic weight, its extraordinary lovability score and global brand sustaining a Top 5 finish. San Francisco (#5) and Seattle (#6) hold firm as the West Coast's technology anchors, with both their performance and perception as a place to work sustaining Top 10 positions. Las Vegas (#7) remains the most striking example of perception-driven competitiveness in the ranking: #248 in livability performance, #9 in livability perception, a gap built almost entirely on the strength of a global entertainment brand. Dallas (#8) and Houston (#9) as the Texan cities with strong prosperity scores and gaining momentum as places to visit. Boston (#10) retains its position as the Northeast's second city.

One of the defining features of the 2026 rankings is scope. For the first time, all 393 U.S. metropolitan statistical areas are included — among them the 280+ metros with populations of 500,000 or fewer, which we refer to throughout this report as small cities. Their performance in the overall rankings warranted attention: 24 of the Top 100 cities are small cities, competing directly against metros many times their size and winning. That result was striking enough to prompt something new — the first-ever standalone ranking of America's 100 Best Small Cities, applying the same methodology, the same indicators, and the same national perception survey to the small city cohort in full. That ranking follows later in this report.

America's Best 100 Cities

RANK	CITY	STATE	LIVABILITY RANK	LOVABILITY RANK	PROSPERITY RANK
1	New York	NY	1	1	1
2	Los Angeles	CA	2	2	2
3	Chicago	IL	3	4	3
4	Miami	FL	4	5	13
5	San Francisco	CA	5	10	7
6	Seattle	WA	6	9	9
7	Las Vegas	NV	14	3	16
8	Dallas	TX	12	11	4
9	Houston	TX	16	8	8
10	Boston	MA	9	13	10
11	Austin	TX	10	17	6
12	San Diego	CA	7	7	22
13	Atlanta	GA	20	14	5
14	Washington D.C.	DC	13	12	11
15	Orlando	FL	15	6	14
16	Denver	CO	11	15	12
17	Nashville	TN	17	16	15

RANK	CITY	STATE	LIVABILITY RANK	LOVABILITY RANK	PROSPERITY RANK
18	Portland	OR	8	19	23
19	Phoenix	AZ	19	20	18
20	Philadelphia	PA	23	21	20
21	Tampa	FL	22	22	27
22	Charlotte	NC	27	24	21
23	New Orleans	LA	32	18	54
24	San Antonio	TX	26	23	36
25	Pittsburgh	PA	24	26	28
26	Charleston	SC	18	27	42
27	Honolulu	HI	21	25	58
28	Minneapolis	MN	28	40	24
29	San Jose	CA	50	51	17
30	Salt Lake City	UT	30	36	25
31	Raleigh	NC	59	46	19
32	Kansas City	MO	35	28	31
33	Baltimore	MD	37	37	26
34	Columbus	OH	47	33	29
35	Savannah	GA	25	29	112
36	St. Louis	MO	43	32	35
37	Boulder	CO	29	54	30
38	Detroit	MI	62	30	38
39	Indianapolis	IN	68	38	32
40	Cincinnati	OH	78	35	45
41	Cleveland	OH	40	43	64
42	Milwaukee	WI	36	52	49
43	Jacksonville	FL	119	34	46
44	Omaha	NE	69	50	33
45	Richmond	VA	63	47	39
46	Madison	WI	46	64	34
47	Sacramento	CA	105	41	44
48	Asheville	NC	34	44	140
49	Louisville	KY	133	45	56
50	Ann Arbor	MI	39	88	41
	Ann Arbor	MI	39	88	41

RANK	CITY	STATE	LIVABILITY RANK	LOVABILITY RANK	PROSPERITY RANK
51	Portland	ME	38	65	67
52	Des Moines	IA	49	78	40
53	Buffalo	NY	45	48	99
54	Albany	NY	33	80	62
55	Myrtle Beach	SC	44	39	242
56	Memphis	TN	200	31	111
57	Tucson	AZ	71	42	143
58	Rochester	NY	42	61	82
59	Grand Rapids	MI	52	68	71
60	Santa Fe	NM	31	67	164
61	Anchorage	AK	58	60	89
62	Knoxville	TN	118	57	65
63	Tulsa	OK	80	53	95
64	Greenville	SC	79	70	66
65	Hartford	CT	48	170	47
66	Providence	RI	54	82	81
67	Albuquerque	NM	83	55	114
68	Lincoln	NE	61	118	61
69	Reno	NV	150	59	76
70	Spokane	WA	60	81	100
71	Durham	NC	254	99	37
72	Trenton	NJ	85	240	43
73	Sioux Falls	SD	89	109	55
74	Naples	FL	74	63	129
75	Virginia Beach	VA	207	56	80
76	Bozeman	MT	127	116	50
77	Colorado Springs	CO	134	58	104
78	Oklahoma City	OK	262	49	102
79	Provo	UT	86	156	53
80	Lancaster	PA	57	87	119
81	Boise	ID	220	71	68
82	Salem	OR	41	69	260
83	Lexington	KY	164	73	83

RANK	CITY	STATE	LIVABILITY RANK	LOVABILITY RANK	PROSPERITY RANK
84	New Haven	CT	56	155	78
85	Fargo	ND	132	117	57
86	Burlington	VT	91	148	59
87	Santa Cruz	CA	53	133	92
88	Missoula	MT	107	108	69
89	Iowa City	IA	72	188	70
90	Bridgeport	CT	116	227	52
91	Rochester	MN	141	180	51
92	Huntsville	AL	259	83	60
93	Wilmington	NC	114	77	115
94	Birmingham	AL	275	62	77
95	Wichita	KS	148	84	98
96	Charlottesville	VA	146	138	63
97	Flagstaff	AZ	51	111	163
98	Ithaca	NY	55	233	97
99	Toledo	OH	145	79	106
100	Amherst Town	MA	64	362	79

RANKINGS REFLECT COMBINED PERFORMANCE AND PERCEPTION SCORES ACROSS ALL 393 U.S. METROPOLITAN STATISTICAL AREAS. PILLAR RANKS ARE SHOWN INDIVIDUALLY. OVERALL RANK AND PILLAR RANKS ARE DISTINCT MEASURES.

Key Insights and Learnings from America's Best Cities

SEATTLE, WASHINGTON

INSIGHT 1

The Competitive Field Has Never Been This Wide

There is a deceptively simple number that captures the most important shift in American urban competitiveness over the past two years: in 2024, 99 distinct cities appeared in survey respondents' top-three selections for where they'd most like to live, visit, or work. By 2025, that number had grown to 107. In 2026, it reached 115. The competitive field that any single city is navigating has expanded significantly in a short period of time.

For cities that have historically been overlooked in the national conversation, the expanding field is a genuine opportunity. Americans are paying attention to a wider range of cities than at any prior point in our research history, and that attention is real — it shows up in search trends, social media engagement, real estate inquiries, and migration data. A city that earns placement in the national conversation now can build a durable reputation that pays off in talent, tourism, and investment over years. The window to capture that attention is open.

But a broader consideration set is also an escalating challenge. More competitors means more noise, more claims, and a higher bar for distinction. The cities that have benefited most from the expansion are those that have made deliberate, sustained investments in their presence in the national conversation — not just in their performance on the underlying metrics. Earning attention in this environment requires more than performing well. It requires being seen.

Within the expanding field, a select group of 11 cities has done something especially difficult: improved their national perception rankings across all three pillars simultaneously over the past three years. They are New Orleans, Honolulu, Kansas City, Santa Fe, San Jose, Greenville, Richmond, Cleveland, Salem, Flagstaff, and Ann Arbor. The list spans regions, sizes, and economic profiles — but the data reveals a common thread. Across the group, the average improvement across those 11 destinations was 0.24 percentage points across the three perception pillars, a modest number that understates what it actually takes to move national perception in any direction at all. In a competitive field of 393 metros, perception gains are hard-won and rarely accidental.

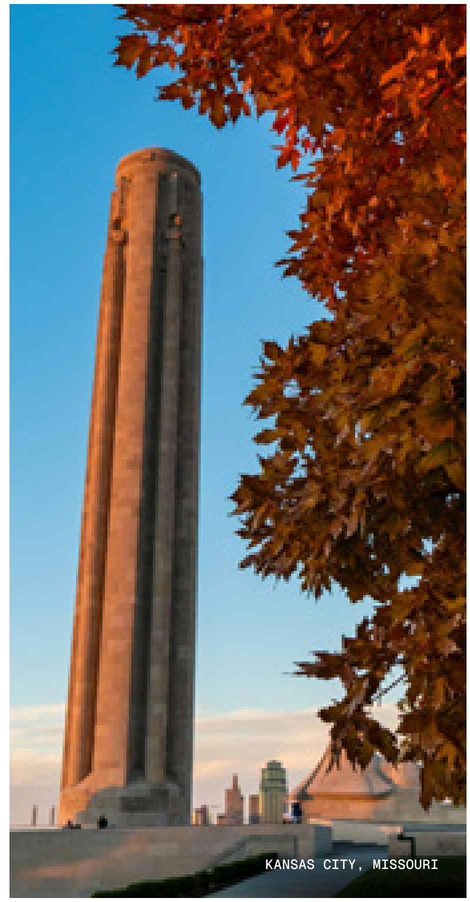
Five cities pulled meaningfully ahead of that average, and each tells a distinct story about how perception is built.

Kansas City led the group at 0.43 percentage points — nearly double the cohort average. What makes its position particularly notable is the structure of where it now stands: its perception across lovability, livability, and prosperity are now among the most evenly balanced of any city in the ranking. Most cities carry a pronounced pillar hierarchy — known primarily as a place to visit, or to work, or to live, with the others trailing. Kansas City has built a reputation that holds up across all three dimensions simultaneously, a reflection of coordinated, sustained investment in its downtown, its food scene, its corporate base, and its cultural identity. There is no single anchor event that explains its trajectory. That breadth of recognition is exactly what makes it the standout riser in this group.

New Orleans and Honolulu are cities where lovability has always been the engine, and where that engine is now pulling the other pillars upward. Both generate visitor desire at extraordinary levels — their survey scores as places to visit run five to 10 times higher than their scores as places to work. What is new in 2026 is that those lovability scores are beginning to lift livability and prosperity perception with them, a textbook expression of the strong correlation between lovability and livability perception running through the broader findings of this report. When people fall in love with a place as a destination, they begin to imagine themselves living there.

San Jose presents the mirror image: prosperity perception runs eight times higher than lovability or livability — one of the most extreme pillar imbalances in the dataset. San Jose is known nationally as a place to build a technology career. It is not yet known as a place to visit or call home in the way its economic performance would suggest it should be. Its multi-pillar gains are meaningful precisely because they signal that work has begun.

Santa Fe's hierarchy is the most internally coherent in the group: livability perception runs roughly twice its lovability score, which runs twice its prosperity score — a clean map of what the city actually is. People want to live there above all, visit it secondarily, and think of it as a career destination last. That is not a weakness. It is a positioning statement, and the 2026 data suggests the audience for it is expanding.


KANSAS CITY, MISSOURI

Cities Appearing in Top-Three Destination Choices, 2024–2026

Distinct U.S cities selected as top-three preference for living, visiting, or working — Resonance/Ipsos Survey

INSIGHT 2

Performance and Perception Are Not the Same City

One of the enduring findings of the America's Best Cities research is that the cities people think they want to live, visit, and build a career in and the cities that actually perform best on the measures of livability, lovability, and prosperity are often not the same place. The gap between performance and perception — between what a city measurably is across all three pillars and how it is seen nationally — is one of the most strategically important dimensions in American urban competitiveness. Perception plays a role in shaping where people move, where companies locate, and where investment flows.

To understand it, start with the overall picture. For each city in this ranking, we compare its composite performance rank — how it actually scores across livability, lovability, and prosperity indicators — against its composite perception rank, drawn from our national survey of more than 2,000 U.S. households.

That comparison produces three groups amongst the Top 100 cities:

38 CITIES

are perceived as more desirable than their combined performance across all three pillars would fully justify — cities whose reputations have outrun their fundamentals

19 CITIES

are roughly aligned — seen about as well as their overall data would predict

43 CITIES

43 cities are performing better than how they are perceived — cities whose composite scores across livability, lovability, and prosperity exceed the desirability the national public attributes to them

The identities of the cities in each group are instructive. On the underperforming-perception side — cities doing better than their reputations suggest — Philadelphia, Minneapolis, St. Louis, Indianapolis, Louisville, Milwaukee, Madison, Providence, Buffalo, and more. Many are primarily Midwest and mid-Atlantic cities that consistently score better on the combined objective measures than how Americans think about them when asked where they'd want to live, visit, or find work. A city like Philadelphia may have a genuinely strong food and arts culture that residents and visitors alike recognize, but building national awareness of that strength takes time — and perception often lags reality by years, particularly for cities that have historically been defined in the national conversation by challenges rather than assets. The strategic implication is the same regardless: these cities are generating competitive value that their national reputation is not yet reflecting.

The cities running above the line — where perception exceeds overall performance — are equally telling. Las Vegas, Phoenix, Nashville, New Orleans, and others all sit above the diagonal. Their national desirability scores are elevated by visitor brands, economic perception through announcements of major corporate investments or relocations, and cultural identities that generate residential and professional consideration well ahead of what the composite performance data would independently produce. Memphis, Anchorage, Reno, Tulsa, and Spokane are in this group, too — cities where a specific asset or narrative has created more national visibility than their overall scores would generate on their own. In most of these cases, exceptional strength in one pillar — like lovability in the case of Memphis and Anchorage — is doing the work of lifting overall perception above what the composite merits.

The 19 aligned cities are worth noting, too. Seattle and Boston sit here, as do Pittsburgh and Boulder — cities where sustained investment across the full range of competitive dimensions has produced a reputation that the composite numbers back up.

Drilling into the pillar-level data explains where the perception gaps tend to originate, and points toward what actually moves the overall composite:

Lovability: 0.92 correlation between performance and perception.

The tightest relationship of the three pillars, and the most intuitive. Cities that have genuinely invested in their cultural amenities, dining, entertainment, and visitor experience are almost universally recognized for it. You cannot fake lovability, and you cannot hide it. When a city has a great restaurant scene and a compelling neighborhood identity, the national public finds out — through travel, social media, and word of mouth. Lovability perception tracks lovability performance more reliably than any other pillar because the signal travels quickly and viscerally.

PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA

Prosperity: 0.62 correlation between performance and perception.

Meaningful, but with significant gaps in both directions. Some cities with genuinely strong economic fundamentals — diversified industry, high educational attainment, low unemployment — haven't translated that strength into a nationally legible story. Others are perceived as dynamic economies on the strength of a few visible employer announcements without the broader prosperity data fully justifying it. Both gaps represent strategic opportunity in opposite directions: one is a communication challenge, the other a fundamentals challenge.

Livability: 0.49 correlation between performance and perception.

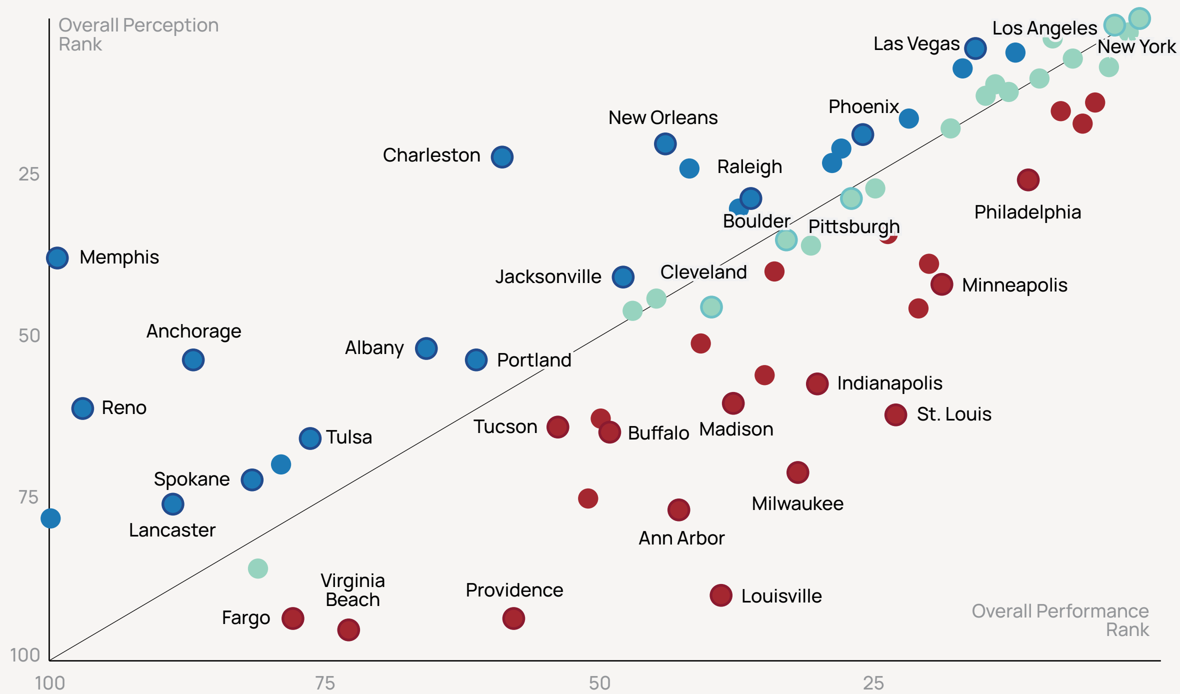
The largest gap of the three, and the most consequential finding for economic development strategy. Half the variance in how desirable a city is perceived as a place to live is unexplained by how well it actually functions as one. This is where the most significant perception deficits originate — and it is the pillar most likely to be dragging a city's composite score below the diagonal on the scatter plot. A city that is strong on lovability and prosperity but carries a large livability perception deficit will often end up in the underperforming-perception group despite doing well on the other two.

Together, the pillar correlations tell a consistent story about what drives the overall gap. Lovability is the pillar that moves perception most efficiently. Prosperity is the pillar where narrative investment pays off most unevenly. And livability — despite being the pillar most directly associated with quality of daily life — is the one where the national public's perception diverges most sharply from objective reality. The cities best positioned to close their overall perception gap are those that invest in their lovability and prosperity story first, because that is where perception is most responsive to what a city actually does.

For the 43 cities currently doing better than their reputations suggest across the composite — the Philadelphias, St. Louises, and Madisons of this ranking — the data is a call to action that doesn't require building anything new. The work has been done. The gap is in the *story*, not the city.

The Plurality of U.S Cities Have a Perception Deficit

Performance vs Perception of U.S. Cities



SOURCE: AMERICA'S BEST CITIES

> "A city can rank in the Top 10 on every livability metric and still not be recognized as a desirable place to live. The places Americans most want to live are, almost without exception, the places they most want to visit."

INSIGHT 3

Prosperity Drives Migration — and Migration Drives Perception

Not all migration is created equal. Of the roughly 40 million Americans who move each year, the majority are making local moves — finding a less expensive apartment, adjusting to a life change within a metro area they have already chosen. These moves matter for housing markets and municipal planning, but they are not the competition that economic development organizations are in. The competition is for the roughly 7 million Americans annually who cross state lines — workers who are disproportionately higher-earning, higher-skilled, and younger than local movers, and whose arrival or departure has compounding consequences for the economies they choose and the ones they leave.

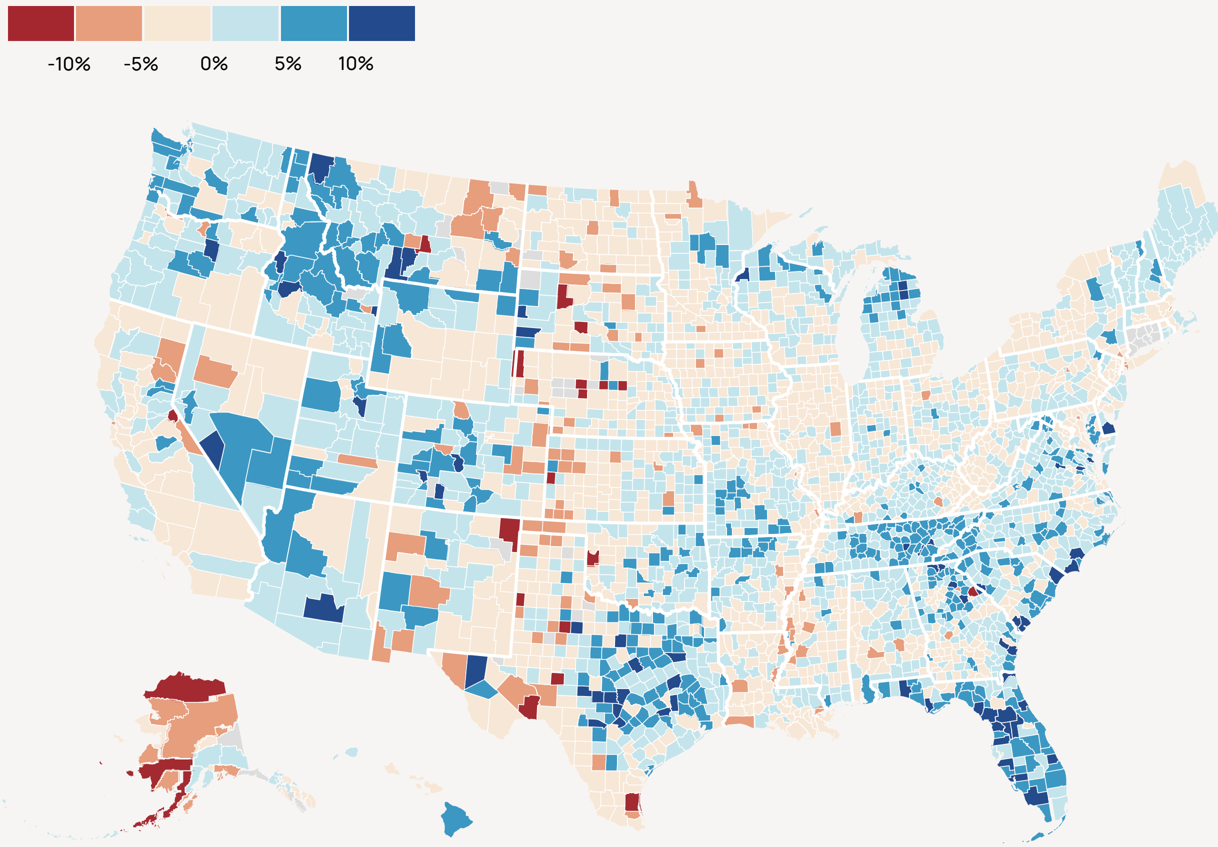
The IRS tracks not just how many tax filers move between counties, but the adjusted gross income (AGI) they carry with them — making it possible to see, at county resolution, which places are winning and losing the competition for high-earning talent. The map below shows net AGI change by county for 2022–2023. Blue counties are net gainers of income-carrying talent. Red and orange are net losers. It is a single-year snapshot, and it captures all cross-county moves including local affordability-driven ones, so the most meaningful signal is in the broader regional patterns rather than any individual county. Those patterns are striking — and they are not random.

The Southeast and Mountain West dominate the blue end of the map, in a pattern that should look familiar to anyone who has read the growth and investment sections of this report. Florida's coasts, the Charlotte and Research Triangle metros, Nashville's surrounding counties, Atlanta's suburban ring, and the Austin-DFW-Houston corridor all register net AGI inflows. The Mountain West shows blue in its most competitive pockets — the Denver-Boulder corridor, parts of Idaho and Utah. The connection to the GRP growth data presented earlier is direct and not coincidental: the states that led real economic growth between 2020 and 2025 — Florida at 30%, Texas at 28%, Nevada at 27%, the Carolinas and Tennessee in the low twenties — are the same states whose counties show the most sustained AGI inflows on this map. High-earning movers, economic growth, foreign direct investment — all factors are tied to one another and help make regions prosper.

The red end of the map tells the same story in reverse. Bay Area counties, Cook County, and parts of urban California register net AGI outflows — not because those economies are weak, but because more high-earning residents are leaving than arriving. The consequences of that compositional drift accumulate slowly and show up later: in tax base, in talent density, in the self-reinforcing ecosystem that makes an innovation economy compound. These are not failed economies. They are economies whose migration signal has been pointing in a direction that other economic data is only beginning to reflect.

Our perception survey data, which begins in 2024, cannot trace the full historical arc of these flows — but where the two datasets overlap, the alignment is consistent. Dallas ranks third nationally in our 2026 survey as a place where Americans believe the best job opportunities exist. Austin ranks fifth. Houston seventh. Three Texas metros in the Top 7 for perceived economic opportunity, and the map shows their surrounding counties deeply blue — the perception of Texas as a place to build a career is not a marketing claim but a migration reality that has been compounding for years and showing up in county-level income data.

Income Migration has been the Strongest in the Southeast and Mountain West



Net Change of Adjusted Gross Income by County, 2022-2023

SOURCE: IRS

For the first time in our survey, Seattle has surpassed San Francisco as a place Americans want to live, visit, and work — and the map shows Bay Area counties in outflow while Seattle's surroundings remain largely blue. Perception shifts and migration trends often follow one another and that connection is one that matters most for destinations thinking about long-term competitive strategy.

The Seattle data point is worth singling out because it illustrates how perception can signal what migration data will later confirm. For the first time in our survey, Seattle has surpassed San Francisco as a place Americans want to live, visit, and work. San Francisco still performs at an extraordinary level on objective prosperity metrics — it remains one of the highest-productivity economies in the country. But the perception gap has opened, and the AGI map shows Bay Area counties in outflow territory while Seattle's surrounding counties remain in the blue. If the historical relationship between perception and migration holds, the flows are likely to follow.

The cycle the AGI map reveals is the same one running through every section of this report. Perception shapes where high-earning workers choose to go. Their arrival raises talent density, which attracts employers and capital. Employers and capital generate economic growth — the GRP gains and FDI flows documented earlier. That growth strengthens the fundamentals that drive prosperity perception. And stronger perception attracts the next wave of talent. The map and the rankings are not measuring different things. They are measuring different moments in the same compounding process — and cities that understand that are the ones investing in perception not as a communications strategy but as an economic development one.

INSIGHT 4

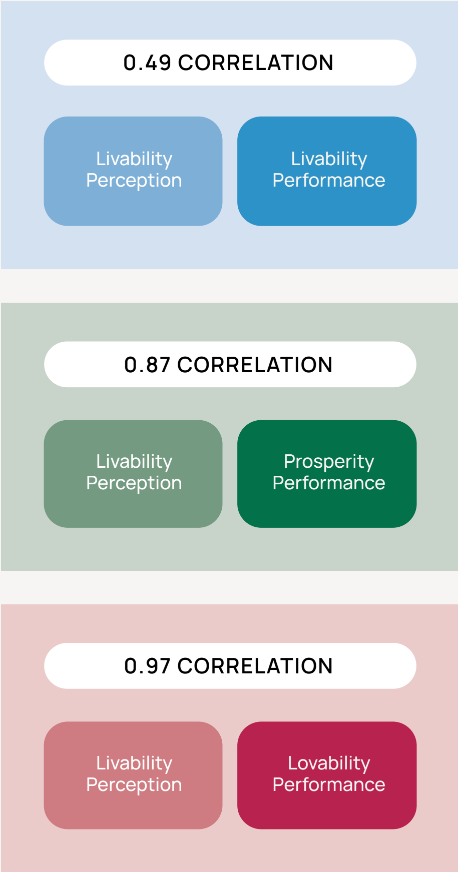
Where You Want to Visit Shapes Where You Want to Live

The 0.97 correlation between lovability perception and livability perception is the most operationally significant number in our 2026 dataset. It has appeared consistently in our research for years, but it reached its highest recorded level in 2026 — and what it means for how destinations allocate their investment has never been clearer or more pressing.

The relationship works through experience. Visitors encounter a city at its best: its restaurants, cultural venues, neighborhoods, outdoor spaces, and hospitality ecosystem. A positive visitor experience generates the kind of visceral impression of a place that no marketing campaign can fully replicate from a distance, and that impression — "I could live here" — is the seed of residential consideration. More concretely, across 75% of the cities in our dataset, changes in livability perception over the past two years closely tracked changes in lovability perception. When a city's visitor desirability improves, its residential desirability follows. When it declines, residential desirability follows in the same direction. The connection is not statistical noise. It is a signal.

The implications are most visible in the extreme cases, but the pattern holds broadly. Cities that have invested heavily in visitor experience — Savannah, Nashville, Austin, New Orleans, and others — illustrate this dynamic clearly. Strong visitor experiences shape how people imagine everyday life in these places, causing the perception of potential residents to outperform what their underlying livability fundamentals alone would predict.

For destination marketing organizations, this finding validates the economic development case for tourism investment in the most direct terms possible. The visitors who come, enjoy, and tell others are the talent pipeline — not metaphorically, but causally. For economic development organizations, it is an argument for treating DMO investment as part of the talent attraction budget. The underlying investment — in the quality of the experience — serves both goals simultaneously. A city with extraordinary restaurants, walkable neighborhoods, cultural institutions, and outdoor amenities will be perceived as both a great place to visit and a great place to live. Separating those as organizational functions is a structural error that leaves significant return on investment uncaptured.



Presenting America's 100 Best Small Cities

When we set out to evaluate all 393 U.S. metropolitan statistical areas for the first time, 24 of the Top 100 cities had populations under 500,000 — competing on the same measures, against the same field, as metros many times their size, and placing in the top quarter of the country. That performance warranted its own lens. America's Best Small Cities is the same ranking — same methodology, same three pillars, same indicators, same perception survey — filtered to the 280 metros with populations of 500,000 or fewer and presented in full. Seeing small cities measured only against each other reveals patterns and stories that the full ranking, dominated by the scale advantages of large metros, can obscure.

Savannah leads on both lovability and livability — the compound return on decades of investment in historic preservation, culinary identity, a walkable urban grid, and a visitor experience that generates word-of-mouth that cannot be purchased. Boulder (#2) and Ann Arbor (#4) tell a different story: both rank in the Top 5 across multiple pillars simultaneously, Boulder through the alchemy of a research university, tech spinout ecosystem, and outdoor industry cluster, Ann Arbor through the economic and cultural weight of the University of Michigan. Neither depends on a single dimension to carry them. Asheville (#3) and Myrtle Beach (#5) sit closer to Savannah's model — lovability and livability doing the heavy lifting — proof that a relentlessly specific place identity can be as powerful a competitive asset as any employer anchor.

The thread running through the best small cities in our ranking is the same one visible in those five cities: the small cities that compete most effectively know precisely what they are and have invested in being that thing consistently. Sometimes it is a university town that provides the cultural vitality, economic resilience, and national visibility — Ann Arbor, Iowa City, Charlottesville, Ithaca, and Burlington all reflect that. Sometimes it is landscape and outdoor identity — Santa Fe, Flagstaff, Missoula, and Bozeman compete on a sense of place that cannot be manufactured. And sometimes it is a visitor experience so specific and so consistently delivered that it becomes self-reinforcing, attracting residents because it first attracted visitors. What these cities share is not a formula. It is clarity about what makes them worth choosing, and the discipline to keep investing in it.

The findings that follow are less about economic or demographic trends across the nation and more about understanding the different paths a small city can take to become genuinely competitive — and what it looks like when those paths are pursued with real conviction.

America's Best 100 Small Cities

RANK	CITY	STATE	LIVABILITY RANK	LOVABILITY RANK	PROSPERITY RANK
1	Savannah	GA	1	1	35
2	Boulder	CO	2	4	1
3	Asheville	NC	4	3	56
4	Ann Arbor	MI	5	13	2
5	Myrtle Beach	SC	7	2	145
6	Santa Fe	NM	3	7	75
7	Anchorage	AK	11	5	22
8	Lincoln	NE	12	31	10
9	Trenton	NJ	26	132	3
10	Sioux Falls	SD	28	24	7
11	Naples	FL	19	6	47
12	Bozeman	MT	57	29	5
13	Salem	OR	6	8	159
14	Fargo	ND	61	30	8
15	Burlington	VT	30	53	9
16	Santa Cruz	CA	9	40	25
17	Missoula	MT	42	23	12

RANK	CITY	STATE	LIVABILITY RANK	LOVABILITY RANK	PROSPERITY RANK
18	Iowa City	IA	17	84	13
19	Rochester	MN	68	76	6
20	Wilmington	NC	48	11	37
21	Charlottesville	VA	72	45	11
22	Flagstaff	AZ	8	26	74
23	Ithaca	NY	10	125	28
24	Amherst Town	MA	13	251	17
25	Hilton Head Island	SC	58	9	70
26	Fort Collins	CO	78	34	15
27	Tallahassee	FL	82	10	57
28	Appleton	WI	41	73	19
29	Duluth	MN	18	25	91
30	Lansing	MI	36	43	31
31	Bloomington	IL	93	93	14
32	Billings	MT	98	19	32
33	Champaign	IL	16	136	43
34	Lawrence	KS	52	97	21
35	Eugene	OR	15	21	131
36	Traverse City	MI	21	47	68
37	Manchester	NH	96	109	16
38	State College	PA	14	154	53
39	Green Bay	WI	91	37	26
40	Gainesville	FL	50	17	77
41	Oshkosh	WI	44	118	27
42	Bellingham	WA	20	41	83
43	Ames	IA	74	164	23
44	Springfield	MO	75	15	81
45	Cheyenne	WY	37	57	52
46	Midland	TX	226	111	4
47	Grand Forks	ND	53	242	24
48	Kalamazoo	MI	32	68	60
49	Peoria	IL	64	51	49
50	Bremerton	WA	24	58	94

RANK	CITY	STATE	LIVABILITY RANK	LOVABILITY RANK	PROSPERITY RANK
51	Olympia	WA	22	50	108
52	Atlantic City	NJ	27	20	141
53	Bismarck	ND	112	175	18
54	South Bend	IN	31	86	66
55	Bloomington	IN	84	42	50
56	Bangor	ME	73	16	127
57	Corvallis	OR	25	147	87
58	Erie	PA	56	14	156
59	Athens	GA	100	35	71
60	Cedar Rapids	IA	127	64	34
61	Logan	UT	146	184	20
62	La Crosse	WI	49	102	73
63	Salisbury	MD	103	178	30
64	York	PA	51	71	84
65	Springfield	IL	34	44	122
66	Wausau	WI	92	227	36
67	Napa	CA	102	113	42
68	Eau Claire	WI	69	133	64
69	Columbia	MO	154	69	29
70	Fairbanks	AK	114	139	38
71	St. Cloud	MN	45	192	78
72	Springfield	MA	33	59	130
73	Dubuque	IA	129	162	33
74	Sheboygan	WI	77	193	62
75	Fort Wayne	IN	140	22	96
76	Roanoke	VA	85	38	114
77	Racine	WI	35	163	111
78	Lexington Park	MD	89	282	51
79	Santa Rosa	CA	116	66	79
80	Barnstable Town	MA	134	127	48
81	Kenosha	WI	86	114	86
82	Norwich	CT	120	123	58
83	Blacksburg	VA	40	232	110

RANK	CITY	STATE	LIVABILITY RANK	LOVABILITY RANK	PROSPERITY RANK
84	San Luis Obispo	CA	66	83	121
85	Columbus	IN	143	247	40
86	Idaho Falls	ID	110	130	82
87	Sioux City	IA	97	143	93
88	Evansville	IN	150	77	65
89	Manhattan	KS	157	172	44
90	Lafayette	IN	168	117	41
91	Pittsfield	MA	55	263	112
92	Lebanon	PA	43	168	137
93	Mankato	MN	119	212	72
94	Midland	MI	94	257	89
95	Janesville	WI	106	185	88
96	Minot	ND	138	244	59
97	Topeka	KS	109	85	106
98	Santa Maria	CA	166	157	45
99	Fond du Lac	WI	81	236	102
100	Canton	OH	107	62	125

SMALL CITIES RANKINGS ARE A SUBSET OF AMERICA'S BEST CITIES, BUT ONLY FOR METROPOLITAN AREAS UNDER 500,000 POPULATION. RANKS ARE RELATIVE TO OTHER SMALL CITIES.

Key Insights and Learnings from America's Best Small Cities

BOISE, IDAHO

INSIGHT 1

There Is No Single Path to the Top

In America's Best Cities overall, population and rank move together. New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago are the three largest metros and the Top 3 in the ranking. Dallas and Houston are the fourth and fifth largest and rank eighth and ninth. Scale compounds at the large city level — more people generate more economic activity, more cultural infrastructure, more employer presence, which attracts more people. The table tells a clean story: size and success are largely the same thing.

The small city results tell the opposite story. Not a single Top 10 small city is a Top 10 small city by population. Savannah — the top-ranked small city in the country — ranks 17th in the cohort by population. Boulder ranks 52nd. Santa Fe ranks 169th. Sioux Falls ranks 60th. What this tells us is that the competitive logic of small cities is fundamentally different from that of large ones. At large scale, size compounds — more people generate more economic activity, more cultural infrastructure, more employer presence, which in turn attracts more people. At a small scale, that flywheel either doesn't exist or spins too slowly to matter. The cities at the top of this ranking have not won by accumulating mass. They have won by being something specific — and then investing in that specificity with enough consistency that it becomes nationally visible and recognized.

The mechanisms are worth naming, because they are replicable. Boulder and Ann Arbor have leveraged their universities not just as employers but as full economic ecosystems — research commercialization, startup formation, cultural programming, and a steady supply of educated graduates who stay and build. The university is not a tenant in those cities. It is the engine. Santa Fe and Bozeman have turned geographic identity into competitive infrastructure — the outdoor setting, the climate, the specific character of the landscape — attracting a growing cohort of remote-capable, high-earning workers who are actively choosing place over proximity to an office. Savannah and Myrtle Beach have invested so deliberately and consistently in their visitor experience that tourism has become a talent pipeline, generating the kind of visceral city impressions that make people consider a move they would never have otherwise contemplated. And cities like Sioux Falls and Lincoln have quietly built diversified regional economies — financial services, agricultural technology, healthcare — that produce strong prosperity scores without the marquee anchors that typically generate national attention, and then leveraged regional connectivity to remain accessible enough to compete for talent and investment.

The pattern that emerges from all of these is the same: small cities that outperform their population have identified things they can genuinely be best at — or at least distinctively good at — and have organized their economic development, their visitor strategy, and their civic investment around those things rather than trying to replicate what larger metros do at reduced scale. That is the insight. The question for any small city looking at this ranking is not how to become bigger. It is how to become more specifically, more visibly, and more consistently what it already is.

Overall and Population Rank for Best Large Cities

DESTINATION	BEST CITIES RANK	POP. RANK AMONGST ALL CITIES	DIFFERENCE
New York, NY	1	1	-
Los Angeles, CA	2	2	-
Chicago, IL	3	3	-
Miami, FL	4	6	+2
San Francisco, CA	5	13	+8
Seattle, WA	6	15	+9
Las Vegas, NV	7	29	+22
Dallas, TX	8	4	-4
Houston, TX	9	5	-4
Boston, MA	10	11	+1

Overall and Population Rank for Best Small Cities

DESTINATION	BEST CITIES RANK	POP. RANK AMONGST ALL CITIES	DIFFERENCE
Savannah, GA	1	17	+16
Boulder, CO	2	52	+50
Asheville, NC	3	22	+19
Ann Arbor, MI	4	40	+36
Myrtle Beach, SC	5	25	+20
Santa Fe, NM	6	169	+163
Anchorage, AK	7	27	+20
Lincoln, NE	8	48	+40
Trenton, NJ	9	34	+24
Sioux Falls, SD	10	60	+50

INSIGHT 2

The University Premium Is Real — and It Is Buildable

The top of the small cities prosperity ranking reads like a selective university catalog.

Boulder (#1 in prosperity) owes part of its economic performance to the University of Colorado's research enterprise and the tech and outdoor industry ecosystem it has seeded across the region. Ann Arbor (#2 in prosperity) is driven by the University of Michigan's economic and cultural footprint, which transforms a metro of 373,000 into a nationally competitive knowledge economy hub. Fargo, North Dakota — perhaps the most surprising top-15 entry in the small city ranking — posts a prosperity score that most observers would not predict from its geography, driven by North Dakota State University, a diversified agricultural technology sector, and one of the strongest employment markets in the northern Great Plains.

Trenton, New Jersey, is a different kind of university story. It ranks 9th overall in the small cities, largely on the strength of a remarkable prosperity score (#3 in the cohort) driven by proximity to Princeton University's research enterprise and the pharmaceutical and professional services cluster that has grown around it. Rochester, Minnesota, ranks 19th overall in small cities on the strength of an extraordinary prosperity performance anchored almost entirely by the Mayo Clinic. Rochester is a metro of 230,000 people that competes with research universities and major metropolitan economies on the strength of a single world-class institution. Its lovability score is modest — the visitor experience of Rochester is not what draws people there — but the economic gravity of the Mayo Clinic is sufficient to lift the city to top-20 status and make it one of the most attractive talent destinations in the Midwest for healthcare professionals, researchers, and the service economy that supports them.

Lincoln, Nebraska, offers a useful model for what a mid-tier research university can achieve when the city commits to building around it. The University of Nebraska's research enterprise and the city's diversified economy — insurance, finance, agricultural technology, manufacturing — produce a prosperity performance that ranks 8th in the small cities cohort. Lincoln ranks 8th overall in the small cities ranking with a metro population of 350,000, a city that competes seriously for talent and investment not because it has Boulder's outdoor amenity or Savannah's lovability, but because it has built a genuine economic ecosystem around a strong institutional anchor and managed to attract and retain the workforce that ecosystem requires.

The lesson from these cases is not simply that universities matter — it is that world-class institutions of any kind create compounding competitive advantages. A research university, a major medical center, a national laboratory, a military installation with a significant R&D mission: all of these function as anchor institutions that generate talent, economic activity, and civic identity in ways that are extremely difficult to replicate through organic economic development alone. For small cities that have such institutions, the strategic imperative is to ensure that the relationship between the city and the institution is maximally productive — that research is commercialized locally, that graduates stay, that the cultural programming of the institution enriches the city, and that the city's identity and the institution's identity are mutually reinforcing. For small cities that do not have such institutions, the challenge is to build the alternative differentiators — outdoor amenity, food and arts culture, specific economic specializations — that can achieve a similar anchoring effect at a smaller scale.

SANTA FE, NEW MEXICO

INSIGHT 3

Lovability is the Small City Differentiator — and It's Time to Invest In It

Of the 282 small cities in this dataset, only 43 showed up in our national perception survey as a place people want to visit. That is not a commentary on the quality of the others, it is a reflection of the fundamental challenge of small city competitiveness at national scale. Building the kind of cultural resonance that puts a city on a stranger's shortlist, from a metro of less than 500,000 people, is genuinely hard. The cities that have done it represent one of the most important competitive case studies in this entire report.

What makes those 43 cities particularly instructive is what happened next: 42 of the 43 cities that showed up as places people want to visit also showed up as places people want to live. The exception is Atlantic City, New Jersey — a city whose visitor identity is so specifically associated with gambling and entertainment that it does not translate into residential aspiration. Every other small city that earned a place in the national visitor conversation also earned a place in the national residential conversation. The 0.97 correlation between lovability and livability perception that runs through the overall America's Best Cities ranking is just as powerful at small scale. You cannot separate the visitor brand from the residential brand.

The cities that have broken through — Savannah, Asheville, Myrtle Beach, Santa Fe, Anchorage, and Naples to name a few — share a critical feature: their lovability performance and lovability perception are closely aligned. Savannah ranks #3 on lovability performance and #1 on lovability perception. Myrtle Beach ranks #1 on performance and #2 on perception. Asheville ranks #2 on both. These are cities that have built genuine visitor experiences and then told those stories effectively enough that the perception has caught up to the reality. That alignment — asset and narrative working together — is what distinguishes the cities that have broken through from those that have not.

The strategic implication depends entirely on where a city sits in the data. For cities with strong lovability performance but no national perception — Charlottesville (29th on lovability performance, was not selected in the survey), Fort Collins (19th on lovability performance, was not selected in the survey), Bellingham (26th on lovability performance, was not selected in the survey) — the assets are already there. The visitor experience these cities offer is genuinely competitive. What they lack is not quality but visibility: the sustained national presence that converts local excellence into broader awareness. For these cities, the strategic direction is to tell the story louder and more consistently, in the national forums where destination perception is formed. The gap between what they are and how widely they are known is a communication challenge, not a product challenge.

For cities with modest lovability performance — the cities that have not yet built the visitor experience infrastructure that would generate strong scores — the direction is different. Investment in the visitor economy itself comes first: the restaurants, the cultural programming, the walkable public spaces, the events calendar, the hospitality ecosystem that gives people something genuinely worth experiencing. Perception follows investment. The cities at the top of this ranking did not build their reputations and then build their visitor experiences. They built the experiences first, sustained them over years, and the reputations followed. That sequence — invest, deliver, tell the story — is the model that the data consistently supports.

The Most Lovable Small Cities are Largely Aligned on their Performance and Perception

DESTINATION	SMALL CITY LOVABILITY PERFORMANCE	SMALL CITY LOVABILITY PERCEPTION
Savannah, GA	3	1
Myrtle Beach, SC	1	2 (tied)
Asheville, NC	2	2 (tied)
Boulder, CO	6	4
Anchorage, AK	15	5
Naples, FL	17	6

NAPLES, FLORIDA

INSIGHT 4

The Specialization Advantage — How Small Cities Win Through Economic Identity

The cities at the top of this ranking that neither fit the university town model nor the visitor experience model share a different kind of competitive logic — one rooted not in cultural amenity or academic infrastructure but in economic specialization and regional gravity.

These are cities that have become the dominant provider of something specific: a sector, a service, a regional function that generates economic activity, institutional density, and workforce depth disproportionate to their size. And in a national environment where the competition for talent and investment is intensifying, that kind of structural economic identity may be the most durable competitive advantage a small city can build.

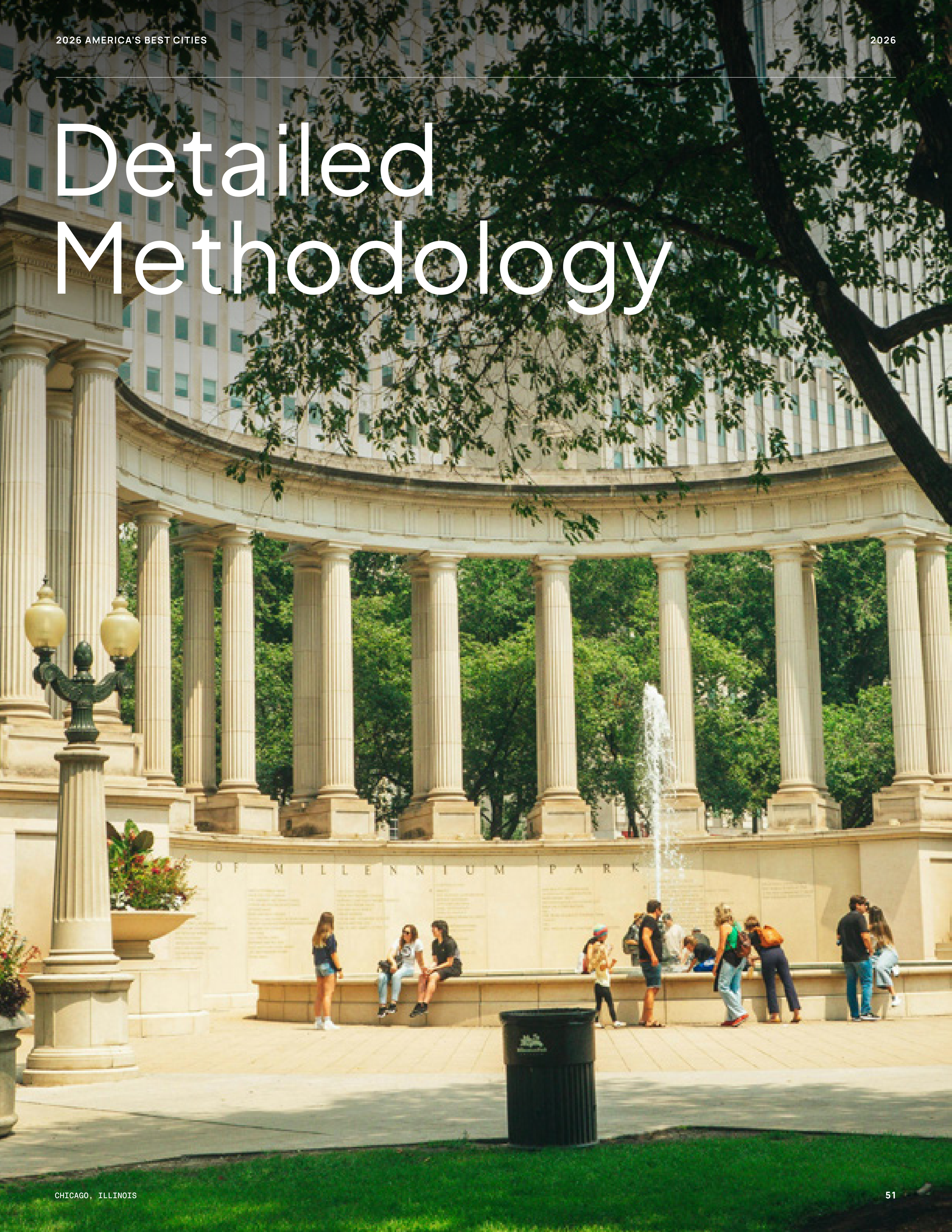
Sioux Falls is the clearest example in this dataset. It ranks 10th overall in the small city ranking with a prosperity rank of #7 — driven by a financial services cluster that has made it one of the most important banking hubs in the country, a regional healthcare system anchored by Sanford Health and Avera, and a cost structure that has made it consistently attractive for corporate back-office and distribution operations. Sioux Falls does not need to be nationally famous. It needs to be indispensable to the region it serves — and it is. Fargo tells a similar story: a prosperity rank of 8th built on North Dakota State University's agricultural technology research, a diversified economy spanning healthcare, financial services, and manufacturing, and a regional hub function that gives a metro of nearly 270,000 the economic footprint of something considerably larger.

What these cities share is a common strategic logic: they identified what they could be best at within a regional geography, built the institutional infrastructure to support it, and sustained that investment long enough for it to become self-reinforcing. Sioux Falls did not become a financial services hub by accident — South Dakota's banking regulations created the initial conditions, but the city built the workforce, the real estate, and the quality of life that kept companies there. Fargo did not become an agricultural technology center by coincidence — North Dakota State's research mission created the knowledge base, but deliberate commercialization and startup ecosystem investment converted that knowledge into economic activity.

The regional hub dimension of this model is underappreciated in most economic development conversations, which tend to focus on individual city metrics rather than the geographic context in which cities operate. Billings, Montana, ranks 32nd in the small city cohort with strong prosperity scores, serving as the dominant regional center for a geography spanning much of Montana, northern Wyoming, and the western Dakotas — a large region that relies on Billings for healthcare, retail, professional services, logistics, and air connectivity that few other cities in the area can provide. That regional gravity generates economic activity that pure city-level metrics undercount. Lincoln, Nebraska, functions similarly within its state — not just a university town but the regional anchor for a broad swath of the Great Plains, with its insurance, financial services, and agricultural economy drawing workers and businesses from a geography far larger than its population would suggest.

The strategic implication for small cities is concrete. Industry cluster development — the deliberate cultivation of supply chain depth, specialized workforce pipelines, and institutional relationships within a specific sector — is one of the most well-documented paths to small city economic resilience in the literature, and one of the most underinvested in practice. It requires a longer time horizon than event attraction or incentive packages, and it requires coordination between city government, anchor employers, workforce development institutions, and regional partners that is genuinely difficult to sustain. But the cities that have done it — Sioux Falls, Fargo, Rochester, Billings, Lincoln — win quietly, consistently, and in ways that are extremely difficult for competitors to replicate quickly. In a small city landscape where population growth is crucial and the competition for mobile talent is intensifying, that kind of durable economic identity may matter more than it ever has.

Detailed Methodology



CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

Indicator Framework

The following table summarizes the full set of performance indicators used in the America's Best Cities and America's Best Small Cities frameworks. Indicators are organized by pillar, category, and metric. Both rankings use identical indicators.

Livability

CATEGORY	METRIC	SOURCE
Walkability	Walk Score	WALKSCORE.COM
Bikeability	Bike Score	WALKSCORE.COM
Weather	Annual average amount of precipitation, deviation from average	WEATHER-AND-CLIMATE.COM
	Average temperature in coldest month	WEATHER-AND-CLIMATE.COM
	Average temperature in warmest month	WEATHER-AND-CLIMATE.COM
Climate Risk	Resilience-adjusted climate risk score	ALPHAGEO
Air Quality	Air Quality Index	IQAIR
Green Space	Share of green area	OECD
Sights & Landmarks	Quality sights and landmarks	GOOGLE
	Popularity of sights and landmarks	GOOGLE
Nature & Parks	Quality parks and gardens	GOOGLE
	Popularity of parks and gardens	GOOGLE
	Quality outdoor activities	GOOGLE
	Popularity of outdoor activities	GOOGLE
Public Transit	Transit Score	WALKSCORE.COM
	Share of population who take public transit to work (%)	U.S. CENSUS BUREAU
Internet	% with fixed broadband speed >250/20	FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION
	% with 5G mobile broadband connection	FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION
Standard of Living	Median gross rent, 1-bedroom	U.S. CENSUS BUREAU
	Median gross rent as % of household income	U.S. CENSUS BUREAU
Health	Life expectancy at birth	OECD
	Crude mortality rate	OECD
	Physicians per 1,000 residents	OECD

Lovability

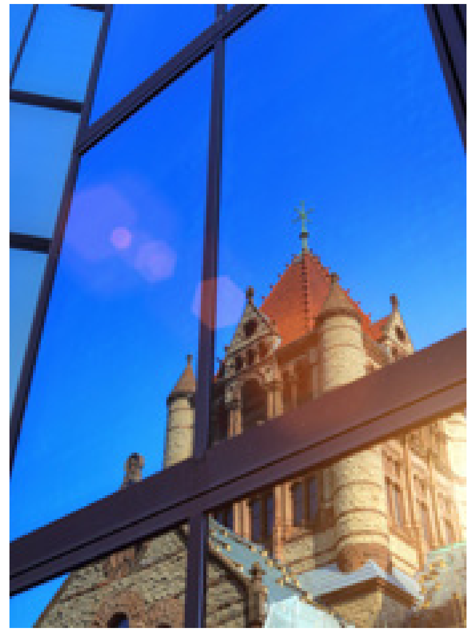
CATEGORY	METRIC	SOURCE
Google Trends	Google Trend Score	GOOGLE TRENDS
Facebook Check-ins	Facebook check-ins (deviation from average)	FACEBOOK
Instagram Posts	Instagram posts (deviation from average)	INSTAGRAM
TikTok Videos	Number of TikTok videos for a city	TIKTOK
Reddit	Reddit engagement score	REDDIT
Museums	Number of quality museums and galleries	GOOGLE
	Popularity of museums and galleries	GOOGLE
Nightlife	Number of quality bars and clubs	GOOGLE
	Popularity of bars and clubs	GOOGLE
Shopping	Number of quality shopping experiences	GOOGLE
	Popularity of shopping experiences	GOOGLE
Restaurants	Number of quality restaurants	GOOGLE
	Popularity of restaurants	GOOGLE
Theaters & Concerts	Number of quality theaters and concerts	GOOGLE
	Popularity of theaters and concerts	GOOGLE
Family-Friendly Attractions	Popularity of zoos and aquariums	GOOGLE
	Popularity of fun and games	GOOGLE
	Popularity of amusement parks and fairgrounds	GOOGLE

Prosperity

CATEGORY	METRIC	SOURCE
Convention Center	Size of largest convention center	VENUE WEBSITES
Large Companies	Companies with 1,000+ employees HQ'd in principal city	CRUNCHBASE
Labor Force	Labor force participation rate	U.S. CENSUS BUREAU
Airport Connectivity	Number of direct destinations from major airports within a 50-mile radius of primary city	FLIGHTSFROM
University	Score of highest-ranking university	QS, USNEWS, AND TIMES HIGHER EDUCATION
Economic Output	Gross Regional Product per capita (USD)	U.S. BUREAU OF ECONOMIC ANALYSIS
Innovation	Innovation Capital Intensity	STATSAMERICA
Poverty Rate	Poverty rate	U.S. CENSUS BUREAU
Unemployment	Unemployment rate	U.S. CENSUS BUREAU
Educational Attainment	% population with bachelor's degree or higher	U.S. CENSUS BUREAU

SAVANNAH, GEORGIA

NEW YORK, NEW YORK



BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS

Small Cities Definition

America's Best Small Cities includes all U.S. metropolitan statistical areas with populations of 500,000 or fewer, as measured by the most recent Census Bureau population estimates. The ranking uses identical methodology, indicators, weighting, and survey instruments as the main America's Best Cities ranking. All pillar ranks within the small cities table are relative to the small cities cohort only.

Perception Survey

The perception component of each pillar is derived from an annual survey conducted in partnership with Ipsos. In 2026, 2,000 U.S. households were surveyed, representative of the national adult population by age, gender, income, and geography. Respondents were asked three open-ended questions: (1) Which cities would you most like to live in? (2) Which cities would you most like to visit? (3) Where do you believe the best job opportunities exist? Responses were weighted by respondent demographics and aggregated at the metropolitan area level.

Scoring and Weighting

All performance indicators are normalized using z-scores relative to the full population of 393 metropolitan statistical areas. Category z-scores are averaged to produce pillar performance scores. Perception scores are similarly normalized across the full distribution of survey responses. The final pillar score combines performance and perception scores using equal weighting. The three pillar scores are then averaged to produce the overall composite score used for ranking.

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