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Got stress? How America's top metro areas stack up

Detroit leads the pack with its high unemployment and murder rate, slow income growth.

Orlando Business Journal - by [G. Scott Thomas](#) Business Journal Staff Writer

We live in stressful times.

Consider the evidence:

- Forty percent of Americans say they are subjected to stress frequently, and another 36 percent sometimes feel that way, says a January survey by the Gallup Poll.
- Nearly half of U.S. adults believe the stress in their lives has escalated during the past five years, as reported in an October study by the American Psychological Association.
- Three of every 10 Americans experience persistent stress or have panic attacks, as documented in a November survey by the Anxiety Disorders Association of America.

These numbers reflect a "national pressure-cooker" causing untold damage to physical and emotional well-being and relationships, says the American Psychological Association's report. "Given the potential health complications related to these behaviors, it is fair to say stress is a major health problem in America," concludes the report.

Several factors contribute to the daily pressure felt by millions of Americans, ranging from finances and unemployment to traffic, crime and pollution. The intensity of this toxic mixture varies from market to market nationwide, as does the level of stress.

Nowhere is the situation worse than in Detroit, which ranks as the most stressful metropolitan area in America, says a new Bizjournals study.

Detroit has the highest unemployment rate, 7.2 percent, in any of the nation's 50 largest markets, as well as the group's worst murder rate. And it's among the 10 places with the most robberies, the slowest rate of income growth, the most heart attacks and the fewest sunny days.

Mix all of these factors together, and Detroit is cursed with America's ultimate recipe for stress.

Right behind Detroit is Cleveland, another Great Lakes metro with its share of economic woes; the group's worst robbery rate, second-worst frequency of heart attacks and strokes, and fourth-worst unemployment rate.

Others in America's 10 most-stressful markets include St. Louis, Los Angeles, Memphis, Philadelphia and Atlanta.

Bizjournals created a 10-part formula to rank the stress levels in 50 leading metros, using data collected by several government agencies and private firms.

Less-stressful places

The outlook is much sunnier in Virginia Beach-Norfolk, Va., which ranks as America's least-stressful metro area.

Virginia Beach's slogan is "Live the Life," emphasizing its reputation as a relaxing destination for seashore vacations. It ranks among the nation's five best markets for healthy air, freedom from crime, stable employment and strong income growth.

Salt Lake City is the runner-up in the low-stress derby, with America's smallest unemployment rate, 2.6 percent, as well as light traffic, healthy citizens and low crime rates.

Other less-stressful metros included Phoenix, Austin, Denver, San Diego and Jacksonville.

Bizjournals cast a broad statistical net to identify the metros that subject their residents to unusually high or low amounts of stress. The following are the 10 indicators included in the study, along with a brief summary of the best and worst markets.

- **Unhealthy air:** Six metro areas, including Virginia Beach-Norfolk, don't experience any days of heavy pollution in a typical year, say Environmental Protection Agency records. Riverside-San Bernardino, Calif., with 28.2 unhealthy days per year, is the worst.
- **Sunshine:** Las Vegas and Phoenix soak up 85 percent of possible sunshine per year, leading the study group. Pittsburgh ranks as the gloomiest market at 45 percent, says the National Climatic Data Center and Weatherbase.
- **Robberies:** San Jose has the lowest rate, 111.9 robberies per 100,000 residents, based on central-city records compiled in 2006 by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Cleveland has the highest rate, 947.1 robberies per 100,000.
- **Murders:** The level of danger is lowest in Austin, with 2.8 murders per 100,000. The worst central-city ratio belongs to Detroit, 47.3 murders per

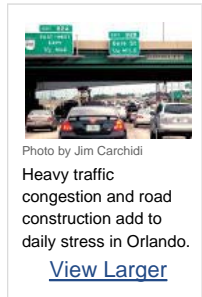


Photo by Jim Carchidi

Heavy traffic congestion and road construction add to daily stress in Orlando.

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100,000 residents as of 2006.

- **Unemployment rate:** Salt Lake City is the positive extreme, with a jobless rate of only 2.6 percent. Detroit takes another hit, as the latest figures from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics show 7.2 percent of its workers are unemployed.
- **Income growth:** New Orleans is this category's surprise winner, increasing its per capita income by 45.8 percent between 2000-2006, based on U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis data. Hurricanes Katrina and Rita drove thousands of poverty-stricken residents out of town in 2005, artificially inflating the market's income level. At the bottom is San Jose, with a virtually stagnant growth rate of 0.3 percent over six years.
- **Long-distance commuters:** Traffic is exceptionally light in Buffalo, where only 6.5 percent of commuters hit the road for 45 minutes or more. New York City, at 31 percent, qualifies as the most-congested market. Figures for this and the next two categories come from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2006 American Community Survey.
- **Families below the poverty level:** The Washington market is the most affluent in the group, with just 4.7 percent of its residents living in poverty. Memphis has the worst poverty problem, 13.9 percent.
- **High mortgage payments:** Few residents of Buffalo are bothered by enormous housing costs. Only 1.5 percent write checks for \$3,000 or more per month. One-third of San Jose's residents, or 33.9 percent, spend at least that much -- the nation's steepest ratio.
- **Deaths from circulatory-system diseases:** Austin has the lowest number of deaths caused by heart failure, hypertension and stroke, a rate of 145.7 per 100,000 residents. The highest rate belongs to Pittsburgh, 441.4 deaths per 100,000, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Best & Worst

Least-stressful metros

City Stress index

Virginia Beach-Norfolk: -8.98

Salt Lake City: -8.47

Phoenix: -5.35

Oklahoma City: -5.17

Austin: -4.76

Most-stressful metros

City Stress index

Detroit: 10.64

Cleveland: 6.53

St. Louis: 5.72

Riverside-San Bernardino, Calif.: 4.58

Los Angeles: 4.31

Source: Bizjournals

Orlando

Rank: -1.30 (20th least-stressful metro)

Days of unhealthy air per year: 0.1

Murders per 100,000 residents: 22.6

Unemployment rate: 4 percent

Commuters traveling at least 45 minutes to work: 16.8 percent

Homeowners making monthly house payments of \$3,000 or more: 4.9 percent

Deaths from circulatory-system diseases per 100,000 residents: 220.8

Population: 1,984,855

Source: Bizjournals

Methodology

Markets: The Bizjournals study covered the nation's 50 largest metro areas, based on 2006 population estimates from the Census Bureau.

Scoring: Each market was compared against the study group's average scores in 10 categories. Instances of higher-than-normal stress received positive scores, while cases of lower-than-normal stress were given negative scores.

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