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Best Places

# America's Cleanest Cities

Tom Van Riper, 03.17.08, 5:00 PM ET

Want to live where the air is sweet, the water is pure and the streets are clean? Try the country. But what if you don't like the sticks? Then try Florida.

Led by Miami, the Sunshine State dominates our 2008 list of America's Cleanest Cities with four metro areas in the top 10-- Jacksonville (No. 3), Orlando (No. 4) and Tampa-St. Petersburg (No. 8) all make appearances. Clearly, a state that relies so heavily on tourism and part-time snow-bird residents knows the value of keeping itself spruced up for company.

With the built-in advantage of weather patterns that blow out smog, these large metropolitan areas, together with No. 2-ranked Seattle and No. 5 Portland, Ore., top our 2008 list. But it's more than just sea breezes pushing these metros up the list. These big cities are also reaping the rewards of investing in efforts to keep clean, even as their populations boom.

## In Pictures: America's 10 Cleanest Cities

In recent years, Florida's Department of Environmental Protection has launched programs aimed at providing power plants with the equipment needed to scrub out harmful emissions before they're discharged. The agency has singled out the Tampa Electric Co. for going beyond federal and state requirements on emission reductions.

On the water side, the agency has aimed its budget not only on fighting direct discharges into public waters but on indirect spillage from things like storm drain runoff.

The same is true elsewhere. Portland, for example, is 10 years into a 14-year, $2 billion investment aimed at cleaning up the Willamette River. In addition, the city's added more light rail, sidewalks and biofuels to its bus fleet. It's gone a long way toward reducing air pollution in the region.

"The investments we've made on land use and transportation over the past two decades are paying off," says Portland city council commissioner Dan Saltzman.

Air quality is a huge health factor for urban dwellers, so we made it a very big deal in our study. To determine the cleanest major cities in the U.S., we initially measured the rankings for air pollution and ozone levels among all 49 U.S. metro areas with populations exceeding 1 million, using data from the American Lung Association. After eliminating those areas that ranked poorest in air quality, we measured the remaining 29 cities on the additional but less-weighted factors of water quality and per-capita spending on Superfund site cleanup and solid-waste management. From this list, we drew our top 10.

All figures were based on Metropolitan Statistical Areas (which include the city and surrounding area) with the exception of waste-management spending, which was based exclusively on the city proper.

Water cleanliness rankings were derived from statistics compiled by the University of Cincinnati from local reports of EPA violations. Metros were ranked based on reports of bacteria, chlorine byproducts and chemicals or metals such as arsenic, copper and lead in the drinking water. Operational expenditures for solid-waste management are recorded at city-data.com.

Beyond health, cleanliness appears to have an important economic impact. While nine of our 10 cleanest cities showed population increases between 2000 and 2006, major metro areas losing residents over that period tend to rank near the bottom of the cleanliness list; they include Philadelphia, Chicago, Buffalo, N.Y., and Detroit. Many factors, notably economic ones, go into a person's choice to move, of course. But a reputation for clean air, water and streets seems to count as well.

The migration has been most pronounced in the Sunbelt, with Jacksonville growing its population 8% and Miami 11.5% since the start of the decade. Can they keep clean with all this growth? That's the challenge of the coming decades. Here's hoping they can.

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