

The 25 Best Affordable Suburbs in the U.S.

By Maya Roney Wed May 9, 8:08 AM ET

Buying your first house? Fleeing the city for a life within your means?

Here's a novel idea: Move to a suburb where you won't break the bank or get your car broken into. A community with reasonable home prices and decent schools. A suburb close to your city job, with a lively downtown of its own.

For hedge-fund managers, plastic surgeons, corporate lawyers, and other people who earn millions a year, choosing a suburb is not about affordability but convenience and, frankly, prestige. These folks don't balk at high prices or look for fixer-uppers. They can pay for prime real estate on the most exclusive streets in the fanciest towns with the best schools. If they want to live in Greenwich or Brookline or Lake Forest or Malibu, they can. Unfortunately, most people aren't so lucky.

Most people have to balance their real estate aspirations with reality--compromising on acreage or culture in exchange for better schools or lower property taxes. But that's no reason to give up and settle. Sure, you might own the cheapest house in a top suburb, but is that really worth it? Wouldn't it be better if you could live in a decent house and still send your kids to a good school?

Winning Combination

It's not hard if you know where to look. For every prosperous estate section or low-rent neighborhood, major metropolitan areas have communities nearby that offer the winning combination of affordability, academics, safety, and culture that most families dream about but can rarely find--within their budget.

Working with Portland (Ore.)-based Web site Sperling's Best Places, BusinessWeek.com came up with a list of 25 affordable suburbs near the nation's largest metro areas. These suburbs may not have the greatest schools in the country, or the lowest crime rates, but most of them do better than average in these categories. The average secondary test scores index among our featured suburbs is 114, and the average violent crime index is 54 (with 100 being the state and national averages, respectively).

These suburbs don't have the cheapest housing around, either, but none have median home prices over \$619,000 (Santa Clarita, Calif.) or cost-of-living indexes over 172.1 (West Nyack, N.Y.). Sperling calculates that 100 is the national cost-of-living average. New York City, for example, has an average of 256.2. Paw Paw, W. Va., a town of less than 600 people with an average household income of around \$25,000, has a cost of living average of 70.9. The suburb on our list with the lowest median home price and cost-of-living index is Coralville, Iowa, with \$171,600 and 96.9, respectively.

Downtown Diversions

Although they vary in price and quality, all of our affordable suburbs are located within an hour's drive of a major U.S. city, and many have a vibrant downtown scene, with fine restaurants, sophisticated shopping, and seasonal festivals.

"There are so many resources in a metro area," says Bert Sperling, founder and president of Sperling's Best Places and co-author of *Best Places to Raise your Family: The Top 100 Affordable Communities in the U.S.* He looks for places that suit the typical professional American family, making \$50,000 or \$60,000 a year. "People don't want to live in the middle of nowhere," he says.

"I think Santa Barbara is a wonderful place to live, but maybe not for you and me," says Sperling, who helped BusinessWeek.com compile its list of the best affordable neighborhoods in the U.S. "We looked for places with a sense of identity and a good economy, and we excluded areas with economic problems and extremely high prices."

Hudson Valley Haven

Take West Nyack, N.Y., this year's best affordable New York City suburb. About a 30-minute drive from Manhattan, West Nyack is one of five villages and hamlets that make up an area on the western bank of the Hudson River known as "The Nyacks." The neighborhood, which has a median home price of \$605,700 (vs. New York City's \$963,700), is perhaps known best as the location of Palisades Center, the largest shopping mall in the New York metropolitan area. Those with more sophisticated tastes will enjoy browsing the shops in the neighboring town of Nyack, a popular destination for antique hunters.

Twenty minutes by commuter rail from another Northeastern city lies Sharon, Mass., a growing Boston suburb of more than 18,000 people. Sharon residents love to swim, boat, and fish in Lake Massapoag, which is also the setting of an annual Independence Day fireworks display and regular musical performances. With a median home price of \$493,900, life in Sharon is also much more economical than in the affluent communities of Brookline, Newton, and other towns closer to Boston.

Still, Sharon's two best assets may be its stellar schools and religious diversity, according to longtime resident and Coldwell Banker real estate agent Judy Levye. "Our school system is no secret," Levye says, noting that 96% of Sharon High School seniors go on to college. "In fact, that is what drives in a large number of families." Affirmation of diversity is also key in Sharon, which has an Islamic mosque, several Jewish synagogues, and "every kind of church you can imagine" Levye adds.

Suburban Heaven

If the Northeast's concept of "affordable" housing still seems a bit beyond your reach, look no further than the West and Southwest, where towns like Kaysville, Utah, and Sandia Heights, N.M., offer many homes under \$400,000 and even \$300,000.

"We've thought about moving but we haven't made the change. We couldn't replace what we have here anywhere else," says Melissa Coxey, a Realtor with Coldwell Banker and resident of Kaysville for over 20 years. Kaysville, a popular destination for those escaping the higher cost of living in nearby Salt Lake City, has one of the lowest median home price on our list, at \$209,100-- but this still spells status for many Utah homeowners.

"Stuff doesn't last long here," says Coxey, who has been selling houses in the area for the past 10 years. "And part of the reason is to be able to say: I do live in Kaysville."

Sandia Heights, N.M., is also home to many proud residents. The contemporary community, situated at the foot of the Sandia Mountains near Albuquerque, is filled with adobe homes and all-natural sagebrush-and-cactus landscaping. It has spectacular city and mountain views and some of the cleanest air in the country. Sixty-five percent of residents have graduate degrees, due to the high concentration of defense-related federal laboratories in the area. The property tax rate is just \$7 per \$1,000 of home value.

"We're right next to a high-end city neighborhood with high taxes, but we pay county taxes," notes Max Sanchez, a sixth-generation New Mexican and a Realtor with Coldwell Banker. "Why would you want to live anywhere else?"

25 Affordable Suburbs

Anchorage, Alaska

Metro: Anchorage

Nearest city with pop. 200,000-plus: Anchorage

Median Home Price: \$550,000

Cost of Living Index: 135.4

Primary School Test Score Index*: 143

Violent Crime Index: 50

Average Commute Time: 23.7 minutes

Bellingham, Wash.

Metro: Bellingham

Nearest city with pop. 200,000-plus: Seattle (78.3 miles)

Median Home Price: \$359,500

Cost of Living Index: 120.5

Secondary School Test Score Index: 113

Violent Crime Index: 100

Average Commute Time: 21.2 minutes

Castle Rock, Colo.

Metro: Denver

Nearest city with pop. 200,000-plus: Aurora (22 miles)

Nearest city with pop. 500,000-plus: Denver (28 miles)

Median Home Price: \$240,000

Cost of Living Index: 107.2

Secondary School Test Score Index: 137
Violent Crime Index: 22
Average Commute Time: 32 minutes

Eagle, Idaho
Metro: Boise
Nearest city with pop. 100,000-plus: Boise (9.3 miles)
Median Home Price: \$569,900
Cost of Living Index: 107.8
Secondary School Test Score Index: 98
Violent Crime Index: 82
Average Commute Time: 24.5 minutes

Eugene, Ore.
Metro: Eugene
Nearest city with pop. 200,000-plus: Portland (106.4 miles)
Median Home Price: \$429,000
Cost of Living Index: 110.8
Secondary School Test Score Index: 108
Violent Crime Index: 100
Average Commute Time: 19.4 minutes

Folsom, Calif.
Metro: Sacramento
Nearest city with pop. 200,000-plus: Sacramento (22.8 miles)
Median Home Price: \$551,600
Cost of Living Index: 158.7
Secondary School Test Score Index: 145
Violent Crime Index: 34
Average Commute Time: 29.3 minutes

Fort Collins, Colo.
Metro: Fort Collins-Loveland
Nearest city with pop. 200,000-plus: Denver (58.1 miles)
Median Home Price: \$245,500
Cost of Living Index: 107.3
Secondary School Test Score Index: 135
Violent Crime Index: 81
Average Commute Time: 20.7 minutes

Grants Pass, Ore.
Metro: Josephine County
Nearest city with pop. 200,000-plus: Portland (218.5 miles)
Median Home Price: \$310,000
Cost of Living Index: 98.9
Secondary School Test Score Index: 95

Violent Crime Index: 117
Average Commute Time: 18.6 minutes

Kaysville, Utah
Metro: Salt Lake City
Nearest city with pop. 100,000-plus: Salt Lake City (20 miles)
Median Home Price: \$442,900
Cost of Living Index: 100.1
Secondary School Test Score Index: 102
Violent Crime Index: 36
Average Commute Time: 27 minutes

Logan, Utah
Metro: Logan
Nearest city with pop. 100,000-plus: Salt Lake City (69 miles)
Median Home Price: \$183,500
Cost of Living Index: 88
Secondary School Test Score Index: 87
Violent Crime Index: 80
Average Commute Time: 16.6 minutes

Louisville, Colo.
Metro: Boulder
Nearest city with pop. 200,000-plus: Denver (21.2 miles)
Median Home Price: \$297,500
Cost of Living Index: 117.7
Secondary School Test Score Index: 120
Violent Crime Index: 36
Average Commute Time: 20.7 minutes

Minden, Nev.
Metro: Douglas County
Nearest city with pop. 200,000-plus: Sacramento, Calif. (120 miles)
Median Home Price: \$499,900
Cost of Living Index: 147.2
Secondary School Test Score Index: 131
Violent Crime Index: 40
Average Commute Time: 25.8 minutes

Mount Vernon, Wash.
Metro: Mount Vernon-Anacortes
Nearest city with pop. 200,000-plus: Seattle (54.9 miles)
Median Home Price: \$298,000
Cost of Living Index: 105.8
Secondary School Test Score Index: 97

Violent Crime Index: 94
Average Commute Time: 24.2 minutes

Mukilteo, Wash.
Metro: Seattle-Bellevue-Everett
Nearest city with pop. 200,000-plus: Seattle (20.1 miles)
Median Home Price: \$699,900
Cost of Living Index: 126.8
Secondary School Test Score Index: 104
Violent Crime Index: 49
Average Commute Time: 31.1 minutes

Olympia, Wash.
Metro: Olympia
Nearest city with pop. 200,000-plus: Seattle (55.8 miles)
Median Home Price: \$369,900
Cost of Living Index: 102
Secondary School Test Score Index: 110
Violent Crime Index: 97
Average Commute Time: 21.3 minutes

Reno, Nev.
Metro: Reno
Nearest city with pop. 200,000-plus: Sacramento, Calif. (131.6 miles)
Median Home Price: \$439,000
Cost of Living Index: 147.6
Secondary School Test Score Index: 123
Violent Crime Index: 168
Average Commute Time: 19.8 minutes

Sandia Heights, N.M.
Metro: Albuquerque
Nearest city with pop. 200,000-plus: Albuquerque (0 miles)
Median Home Price: \$332,800
Cost of Living Index: 130.9
Secondary School Test Score Index: 90
Violent Crime Index: 36
Average Commute Time: 24.8 minutes

Spokane, Wash.
Metro: Spokane
Nearest city with pop. 200,000-plus: Seattle (338.3 miles)
Median Home Price: \$264,000
Cost of Living Index: 102.2
Secondary School Test Score Index: 135

Violent Crime Index: 140
Average Commute Time: 20.9 minutes

Valencia (Santa Clarita), Calif.

Metro: Los Angeles

Nearest city with pop. 200,000-plus: Los Angeles (24.5 miles)

Median Home Price: \$624,900

Cost of Living Index: 186

Secondary School Test Score Index: 104

Violent Crime Index: 47

Average Commute Time: 40.2 minutes

Winters, Calif.

Metro: Yolo County

Nearest city with pop. 200,000-plus: Sacramento (34.8 miles)

Median Home Price: \$479,900

Cost of Living Index: 146.2

Secondary School Test Score Index: 96

Violent Crime Index: 131

Average Commute Time: 27.4 minutes

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