

Why Certain Cities Attract Gen Ys

Here's how members of Generation Y are picking their new hometowns as they graduate from college and enter the workforce during a recession

By [Richard Florida](#)

The financial crisis is bringing Generation Y its first big test, according to 30-year-old Duke business professor, Aaron K. Chatterji. He thinks it will [bring out the best](#) in the "entrepreneurial, innovative, and socially aware boomlet." But others see this wide-eyed generation hunkering-down as the economy worsens, trading in their youthful ideals about striking out on their own for safe and secure jobs, and giving up on the verve and excitement of the biggest cities for more stable places.

Guess what cities top the list of a [recent survey](#) of the best places for this year's 2.3 million college grads to launch their careers? New York City was No.1—despite the financial crisis—with 8 in 10 survey respondents listing it as a top destination. Second-place Washington was named by 63%. Los Angeles, Boston, San Francisco, Chicago, Denver, Seattle, and San Diego round out the top 10. And, remember, this is a list of the places that are best to find a job, not to have fun, go to great restaurants or clubs, make friends, or get lots of dates.

The list is heavy on big cities, and it's remarkably similar to a [comprehensive list](#) my research team and I developed of the best places for college-educated 20- to 29-year-olds, which put big cities such as San Francisco, Washington, Boston, Los Angeles, and New York on top. (D.C. jumped to the top of the list when we factored affordability and cost into the mix.) College towns also did well, with Madison, Wisc., topping the list for medium-size regions, and Boulder, Colo., taking first place for small regions. Raleigh, N.C.; Ann Arbor, Mich.; and New Haven, Conn., also score well.

The appeal of big cities stems from a simple economic fact: They offer thicker labor markets with more robust job opportunities across a wide number of fields. Getting ahead in your career today means more than picking the right first job. Corporate commitment has dwindled, tenure has grown far shorter, and people switch jobs with much greater frequency. The average American changes jobs once every three years; those under the age of 30 change jobs once a year.

Hedging Against Layoffs

In today's highly mobile and economically tumultuous times, career success also turns on picking a rich labor market that offers diverse and abundant job opportunities. For new grads, picking the most vibrant location is an important hedge against economic uncertainty and the risk of layoff.

But it's jobs and more. To get at the factors that attract and keep Gen Y in certain places, my colleague Charlotta Mellander and I analyzed the results of a Gallup survey of some 28,000 Americans.

Jobs are clearly important. Gen Y members ranked the availability of jobs second when asked what would keep them in their current location and fourth in terms of their overall satisfaction with their community. In both cases, the highest-ranked factor was the ability to meet people and make friends. Makes perfect sense, since Gen Y intuitively understands what economic sociologists have documented: Vibrant social networks are key to landing jobs, moving forward in your career, and one's broader personal happiness. They not only desire a thick labor market but what I have come to call a thick mating market, where they can meet new people, go out on dates, and eventually find a life partner. They recognize what psychologists of happiness have shown. It's not money per se that makes you happy; it's doing exciting work and having uplifting personal relationships. What do you think is more important to happiness: Finding a great job or finding the right life partner?

Grad School Options

Where older Americans see high-quality schools and safe streets as key, Gen Y understandably ranks the availability of outstanding colleges and universities higher. Many are likely to go back to graduate school, and having great programs nearby is a big plus. When it comes to their overall community satisfaction, access to open space, being in an aesthetically beautiful city, and having access to vibrant nightlife are also quite important; Affordable housing, air and water quality, and availability of religious institutions matter too but slightly less so.

When we look at the factors that affect the likelihood Gen Ys will stay in their current community, the beauty of the place again mattered, along with its climate, the ability to get around easily with little traffic, and affordable housing. This is important, because Gen Y members are considerably less attached to where they live than other Americans. About a quarter (26.5%) of them said they were extremely satisfied with the place they currently live, compared with nearly half (47.4%) of all Americans. Twentysomethings are on average three or four times more likely to move than forty- or fiftysomethings.

My own assessment is that finding the right place to live is among the three most important decisions of your life. Moving is an expensive and time-consuming proposition; mistakes are hard to undo. Maybe this [place-finder tool](#) will help.

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