

# Ranking Hampton Roads



# RANKING HAMPTON ROADS: HOT OR NOT?

*Detestation of the high is the involuntary homage of the low.*

– Charles Dickens, “A Tale of Two Cities”

Who's No. 1? Americans love lists that rank the best – and the worst – of just about everything. The places where we live are no exception. In 2007, David Savageau released the seventh edition of his popular Places Rated Almanac, and Bert Sperling and Peter Sander produced a second version of their rival guide, Cities Ranked & Rated. These two volumes are most frequently cited when cities and regions are compared and ranked.

These hefty reference works analyze the 370-plus metropolitan areas that are home to more than 80 percent of the U.S. population, scoring each on a scale of 0 to 100 in categories such as education, crime, transportation and cost of living. The authors each use these scores to produce a hierarchical list of the country's best places to live. Places Rated Almanac identifies America's most livable city as Pittsburgh. In Cities Ranked & Rated, the honor goes to Gainesville, Fla. The unenviable last-place rankings fall to Goldsboro, N.C., and Modesto, Calif.

How does Hampton Roads fare in the ratings game? It depends whom you consult. According to Places Rated Almanac, our region (formally identified as the

Metropolitan Statistical Area “Virginia Beach-Norfolk-Newport News, VA-NC”) ranks 20th among all metro areas. By this estimation, Hampton Roads is one of the most desirable places to live in the entire United States, having improved upon its 45th-place standing in the book's previous edition. Cities Ranked & Rated, however, takes a more critical stance. Its authors consign Hampton Roads to 137th place – just outside the top third of America's best cities, and a significant drop from the region's 17th-place finish just three years before.

A quick glance at both books' best places shows that their authors hardly see eye to eye on the definition of metropolitan excellence. Table 1 summarizes their most recent Top 20 rankings plus (in the case of Cities Ranked & Rated) Hampton Roads. **In fact, the only metro region to appear on both books' Top 20 lists is the Greater Portland area. Clearly, the ranking of cities is not an exact science.**

Both sets of authors concede that we all have different tastes and priorities; one person's “best place” may hold little

**TABLE 1  
THE BEST PLACES TO LIVE: PLACES RATED VS. CITIES RANKED AND RATED**

	<b>Places Rated</b>	<b>Cities Ranked &amp; Rated</b>
1	Pittsburgh	Gainesville, FL
2	San Francisco	Bellingham, WA
3	Seattle	Portland-Vancouver
4	Portland-Vancouver	Colorado Springs
5	Philadelphia	Ann Arbor, MI
6	Rochester, NY	Ogden, UT
7	Washington, DC	Ashville, NC
8	San José	Fort Collins, CO
9	Boston	San Luis Obispo, CA
10	Madison, WI	Boise, ID
11	Minneapolis-St. Paul	Santa Barbara, CA
12	Baltimore	Logan, UT
13	San Diego	Provo, UT
14	Cleveland	Corvallis, OR
15	Newark	Durham, NC
16	Cincinnati	Olympia, WA
17	Richmond	Charlottesville, VA
18	New York City	Flagstaff, AZ
19	Denver	Indianapolis
20	Hampton Roads	Santa Fe, NM
....	...	...
137		Hampton Roads

appeal for someone else. Thus, the authors attempt to identify those features that most people will agree contribute to a place's quality of life – good schools, affordable housing, diverse recreational opportunities and so forth. Even so, determining how best to measure and compare these features is a tricky matter. On a scale from 0 to 100, Savageau gives Hampton Roads a 75 in transportation, while Sperling and Sander offer only a 10. As we shall see, these authors have developed very different standards in the judging of transportation networks (and other areas as well).

**So why should we pay any attention to Hampton Roads' depiction in such subjective rankings? For better or worse, the rankings attract national attention and contribute to the public image of our region.** We may not agree with Sperling and Sander that Hampton Roads has slipped to 137th place among all American metropolitan areas in just three years, but it's worth investigating why the authors believe so.

Moreover, both Places Rated Almanac and Cities Ranked & Rated contain a wealth of statistical information about life in our region. Hierarchical ranking of the "best" and "worst" cities aside, these reference works tell us a great deal about the attractive and not-so-attractive features of the Hampton Roads metropolitan area. Beyond familiar statistics like the unemployment rate and median home price, the authors have assembled data about public library usage, hospital services, college and professional sports, and even the number of Starbucks outlets. Table 2 summarizes some of these data, while Table 3 provides some context by reporting the rankings assigned to Hampton Roads and other metro areas in major measurement categories by Places Rated Almanac.

Without placing undue weight on the books' numerical rankings, we can get a good sense of how Hampton Roads compares to other metropolitan areas in the American South, and how our relative strengths and weaknesses have shifted in the past few years. To begin, let's take a closer look at these two publications and their authors.

**TABLE 2  
COMPARING METRO AREAS: HAMPTON ROADS AND THE REST**

	Population	Population Growth	Median Age	Percent Democrat	White	Black	Asian	Hispanic / Latino	Active Religious Observance	Single	Married	Single with Children	Percent Age 65+
U.S. Average		21.1%	36.1	44.5%	79.0%	10.5%	2.7%	10.6%	48.9%	32.4%	52.7%	9.1%	12.9%
Hampton Roads	1,645,236	16.7%	34.6	47.3%	61.0%	31.8%	2.9%	3.2%	34.8%	32.7%	50.6%	11.2%	10.7%
Charleston	583,676	15.6%	34.9	42.5%	63.6%	31.7%	1.7%	2.4%	39.3%	35.1%	49.7%	10.8%	11.0%
Charlotte	1,484,570	47.7%	34.9	42.8%	69.1%	23.4%	2.5%	7.0%	49.9%	31.2%	54.2%	8.7%	9.9%
Jacksonville	1,243,108	36.6%	36.1	36.7%	70.8%	22.8%	2.7%	4.3%	43.0%	30.0%	52.6%	10.4%	11.3%
Richmond	1,160,347	25.5%	37	45.5%	64.1%	30.6%	2.2%	2.8%	42.5%	33.0%	51.4%	9.9%	11.7%
Washington, DC	4,080,798	37.0%	35.6	62.2%	55.4%	29.2%	7.0%	10.6%	43.2%	36.1%	49.1%	9.2%	9.0%
Raleigh	922,315	70.7%	34	45.8%	70.7%	19.9%	3.5%	7.5%	42.0%	31.4%	54.5%	7.8%	8.2%
Durham	456,036	32.6%	34.3	63.1%	61.0%	28.3%	3.8%	8.6%	37.3%	39.3%	46.3%	8.9%	10.4%

Source: Cities Ranked & Rated, Profile of Southern Metro Areas (2007)

**TABLE 3  
COMPARING THE RANKINGS**

Places Rated Scores of Southern Metropolitan Areas (2007) — scores are expressed as percentiles from 0 (worst) to 100 (best)

	Rank from 1 to 379	Ambience	Housing Costs	Job Outlook	Crime	Trans- portation	Education	Health Care	Recreation	Climate		Mean Score
Washington, DC	7	93	5	97	60	96	100	62		64		75
Richmond	17	94	30	86	59	67	97	87	85	52		73
Hampton Roads	20	97	25	85	58	75	91	64	98	59		72
Durham	36	96	42	91	7	79	95	99	60	49		69
Charlotte	52	86	42	96	4	92	70	66	65	79		67
Raleigh	57	93	39	96	37	71	89	44	70	50		65
Charleston	76	88	28	83	17	69	62	84	99	39		63
Jacksonville	83	80	28	89	12	72	46	69	91	74		62

Cities Ranked & Rated Scores of Southern Metropolitan Areas (2007) — scores are expressed as percentiles from 0 (worst) to 100 (best)

	Rank from 1 to 373	Arts & Culture	Cost of Living	Economy & Jobs	Crime	Trans- portation	Education	Health & Healthcare	Leisure	Climate	Quality of Life	Score
Durham	15	84	28	58	22	38	90	94	66	63	73	87.2
Richmond	30	83	46	92	28	67	69	79	62	35	73	83.5
Raleigh	63	84	23	86	74	5	91	33	67	63	87	75.9
Charlotte	85	85	24	92	6	23	73	27	60	43	73	70.9
Washington, DC	130	96	5	88	25	50	98	25	95	42	87	66.2
Hampton Roads	137	85	31	62	40	10	66	66	82	62	56	65.4
Charleston	174	66	34	81	10	6	55	42	79	57	83	60.4
Jacksonville	252	65	80	93	10	0	59	10	86	74	56	48.9

## Places Rated Almanac (David Savageau)

David Savageau's Places Rated Almanac (PRA) is the grandfather of "best place" ratings guides. Its first edition, which appeared in 1981 (and was co-authored by Richard Boyer), became one of the first popular works to use statistics as a means of assessing the quality of life in American cities. The almanac, now in its seventh edition, has been a strong seller ever since. Over the past 25 years, its methodology has remained largely the same. Each metropolitan area earns a score in nine different categories (in 2007, these were ambience, housing, jobs, crime, transportation, education, health care, recreation and climate). The average (or "mean") of these nine scores is used to create a hierarchy of the country's most livable cities.

As Savageau acknowledges, his ratings tend to favor large cities over small ones. In 2007, only three of PRA's Top 40 metropolitan areas had populations under 1 million. (Hampton Roads, ranked at No. 20, has more than 1.6 million residents.) **Large metro areas have an edge because they are richer in the kinds of facilities that tend to produce higher scores in the categories of ambience, education, health care, recreation and transportation. This advantage outweighs the lower crime rates and more affordable housing costs that typically enhance the scores of smaller metro areas.** As a means of compensating for this (or any other) bias in his rankings, Savageau includes a "preference inventory" in PRA that allows readers to determine which of the nine categories they find more or less important. Armed with this knowledge, readers can better identify their own best places.

## Cities Ranked & Rated (Bert Sperling and Peter Sander)

The first edition of Cities Ranked & Rated (CRR) appeared only in 2004, but it is part of a larger, well-established enterprise. Co-author Bert Sperling is also the founder of Fast Forward Inc., self-described as "responsible for more 'Best Places' studies and projects than any other single organization." Sperling helped to initiate Money magazine's annual "Best Places to Live" issue in 1987, and today his Web site (BestPlaces.net) allows users to access a wealth of useful data for any ZIP code, town or metropolitan area in the U.S. Sperling partners regularly with sponsors like AXE Deodorant Bodyspray and Ladies' Home Journal to produce best-place lists of all kinds, including the best cities for dating (Norfolk ranks No. 5, "due to the exceptional amount of flowers bought as gifts for a special someone"), and the best big cities for women. (Virginia Beach topped this list, which was determined by factors such as crime rates, the quality of child care and the presence of women in local government.)

The CRR approach to evaluating metropolitan areas is similar to PRA, with a few important differences. Nine of its ratings categories are nearly identical to those used in PRA, but a 10th category, quality of life, relies mainly on personal experience and anecdotal evidence to assess a metro area's heritage, physical attractiveness and overall ease of living. Table 4 records the scores assigned by CRR to Hampton Roads and other Southern metropolitan areas in several categories in 2007.

Notably, the CRR authors do not assign all categories equal weight. In 2007, they placed particular emphasis on quality of life, cost of living, and economy and jobs – not Hampton Roads' highest-scoring categories – which contributed to our region's recent decline in their rankings. The result is a best-places list that favors college towns like Ann Arbor, Mich., and Durham, N.C., as well as northwestern cities like Portland, Ore., and Colorado Springs, Colo.

The ratings in CRR (particularly in the arts and leisure categories) are more openly reflective of their authors' tastes than those derived from PRA's more clinical approach. Sperling and Sander's half-page-long descriptions of each metropolitan area provide a personal touch, although their conclusions will not please everyone (Virginia Beach is "by far the most prosperous and fun" of Hampton Roads' major cities; Williamsburg is "perhaps the top choice among all parts of the area if affordable"). A final distinction between the two ratings guides is their presentation; we found CRR's statistics easier to interpret and compare. Sperling and Sander give precise numbers and percentages wherever possible, and they juxtapose metro area ratings with national averages. By contrast, Savageau uses different symbols in each chapter to represent ranges of achievement; exact numerical ratings are often omitted.

**TABLE 4  
WHERE DO THE SCORES COME FROM? CITIES RANKED & RATED ASSIGNS SCORES**

<b>Arts &amp; Culture</b>	<b>Hampton Roads</b>	<b>Charleston</b>	<b>Charlotte</b>	<b>Jacksonville</b>	<b>Richmond</b>	<b>Wash DC</b>	<b>Raleigh</b>	<b>Durham</b>	<b>U.S. Average</b>
<b>Media &amp; Libraries</b>									
Arts radio rating	8	1	8	1	5	9	8	8	3
No. public libraries	50	22	47	27	56	120	28	13	27
Library volumes per capita	2.84	2.41	2.24	2.66	3.01	3.01	2.25	2.13	2.84
<b>Performing Arts</b>									
Classical music rating	6	4	8	5	7	10	7	7	4
Ballet/dance rating	8	5	3	1	3	9	3	3	3
Professional theater rating	6	1	1	1	8	10	6	6	3
University arts program rating	5	8	8	7	8	10	8	8	5
<b>Museums</b>									
Overall museum rating	10	8	8	9	9	10	9	7	5
Art museum rating	9	8	8	8	8	10	7	6	5
Science museum rating	10	7	9	8	9	10	6	8	5
Children's museum rating	10	1	3	1	7	10	7	3	3
Score -- expressed as percentile from 0 (worst) to 100 (best)	85	66.6	85.3	65.2	84	96.5	84.8	84.5	
Ranking -- from 1 (best) to 373 (worst)	57	125	56	129	61	14	58	59	
<b>Cost of Living</b>	<b>Hampton Roads</b>	<b>Charleston</b>	<b>Charlotte</b>	<b>Jacksonville</b>	<b>Richmond</b>	<b>Wash DC</b>	<b>Raleigh</b>	<b>Durham</b>	<b>U.S. Average</b>
<b>Indexes &amp; Taxes</b>									
Cost of living index	103.0	97.6	93.7	96.1	99.1	140.6	98.1	91.9	100.0
Buying power index	107.4	104.6	129.9	113.8	120.7	114.5	135.9	119.7	100.0
Income tax rate	5.75%	7.00%	7.00%	0.00%	5.75%	9.50%	7.00%	7.00%	4.70%
Sales tax rate	5.03%	5.81%	7.14%	6.88%	5.00%	5.11%	7.00%	7.00%	6.58%
Property tax rate	\$12.13	\$6.89	\$9.40	\$11.69	\$9.92	\$11.23	\$8.41	\$10.07	\$12.00
<b>Housing</b>									
Median home price	\$237,300	\$213,800	\$191,400	\$213,000	\$227,300	\$443,400	\$207,700	\$177,900	\$220,000
Home price appreciation (2002-2006)	91.3%	55.2%	20.0%	78.1%	59.3%	121.3%	18.7%	23.7%	10.1%
Median rent	\$844	\$690	\$704	\$774	\$783	\$1,273	\$850	\$766	\$709
Homes owned	59.5%	60.9%	64.5%	62.3%	66.4%	61.4%	63.3%	55.5%	62.3%
Home price ratio	4.8	4.7	3.5	4.4	4.3	6.2	3.5	3.6	4.2
<b>Necessities</b>									
Food index	96.1	101.5	100.2	100.6	95.4	106.1	102.3	101.0	100.0
Housing index	77.1	72.4	67.1	75.6	74.7	136.6	86.0	85.2	100.0
Utilities index	138.3	92.3	92.1	87.5	107.8	93.7	95.0	92.3	100.0
Transportation index	105.2	95.8	97.9	98.5	103.1	114.2	100.4	94.9	100.0
Healthcare index	93.3	98.6	101.0	88.3	89.5	112.7	104.3	104.4	100.0
Miscellaneous cost index	94.2	100.8	97.7	98.7	95.4	105.1	105.4	107.2	100.0
Score -- expressed as percentile from 0 (worst) to 100 (best)	31.3	34.5	24.3	80.2	46.8	5.9	23.5	28.6	
Ranking -- from 1 (best) to 373 (worst)	257	245	282	75	199	351	285	267	
<b>Crime</b>	<b>Hampton Roads</b>	<b>Charleston</b>	<b>Charlotte</b>	<b>Jacksonville</b>	<b>Richmond</b>	<b>Wash DC</b>	<b>Raleigh</b>	<b>Durham</b>	<b>U.S. Average</b>
Violent Crime Rate	470.3	843.7	837.7	741.9	406.0	482.0	330.9	497.7	465.5
Change in Violent Crime Rate (2001-2005)	9.6%	3.6%	9.7%	1.5%	-6.0%	-3.8%	0.1%	-4.0%	-2.2%
Property Crime Rate	3,683.0	4,394.3	5,170.6	4,511.9	3,501.9	3,306.2	2,918.2	4,492.3	3,517.1
Change in Property Crime Rate (2001-2005)	1.3%	2.9%	-4.2%	0.4%	-3.0%	-14.1%	-2.1%	-6.2%	-2.1%
Score -- expressed as percentile from 0 (worst) to 100 (best)	40.1	10.7	6.4	11	28.3	25.9	74.9	22.2	
Ranking -- from 1 (best) to 373 (worst)	224	333	349	332	267	277	95	291	



**TABLE 4  
WHERE DO THE SCORES COME FROM? CITIES RANKED & RATED ASSIGNS SCORES**

	Hampton Roads	Charleston	Charlotte	Jacksonville	Richmond	Wash DC	Raleigh	Durham	U.S. Average
<b>Transportation</b>									
Commuter									
Average commute time	26.0	26.6	28.5	28.7	27.3	36.0	28.5	24.9	27.4
Percent commutes > 60 mins.	5.1%	5.2%	6.1%	6.1%	5.6%	14.5%	6.1%	4.2%	5.9%
Commuter by auto	78.9%	78.4%	81.2%	80.6%	81.6%	67.0%	81.0%	74.6%	78.9%
Commuter by mass transit	1.9%	1.5%	1.3%	1.4%	2.0%	11.3%	1.0%	2.6%	1.9%
Work at home	2.7%	2.3%	2.9%	2.3%	2.7%	3.4%	3.5%	3.4%	3.1%
Mass transit miles per capita	1.85	1.54	1.35	1.39	1.98	11.29	1.01	2.63	1.87
<b>Intercity Services</b>									
Major airports within 60 miles	0	0	1	1	2	3	1	1	1
Size of regional airport	Small	Small	Large	Medium	Large	Large	Medium	Medium	Large
Daily airline activity	266	258	915	156	1351	1722	461	461	686
Amtrak service	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
<b>Automotive</b>									
Insurance, annual premium	\$1,805	\$1,404	\$1,675	\$2,005	\$1,065	\$1,457	\$1,023	\$1,211	\$1,432
Gas, cost per gallon	\$2.45	\$2.41	\$2.49	\$2.55	\$2.47	\$2.59	\$2.53	\$2.53	\$2.49
Daily vehicle miles per capita	23.7	22.5	28.8	33.5	28.7	22.8	30.6	30.1	24.0
Score - expressed as percentile from 0 (worst) to 100 (best)	10.7	6.1	23.5	0.8	67.9	50.5	5.9	38.2	
Ranking - from 1 (best) to 373 (worst)	335	350	286	370	121	186	352	232	
<b>Quality of Life</b>	Hampton Roads	Charleston	Charlotte	Jacksonville	Richmond	Wash DC	Raleigh	Durham	
	56	83	73	56	73	87	87	73	

## The Notion of an MSA and How It Influences Our Rankings

With minor exceptions, both sets of authors use federally defined Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSAs) as their unit of analysis. According to the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB), an MSA must have “at least one urbanized area of 50,000 or more population, plus adjacent territory that has a high degree of social integration with the core as measured by commuting ties.” MSAs typically link together one or more urban cores with surrounding counties, and MSAs may cross state boundaries. Hampton Roads – the Virginia Beach-Norfolk-Newport News MSA – includes 15 Virginia localities, plus Currituck County in North Carolina. The federal government uses MSAs for purposes of budget allocation and statistical analysis. For those seeking to identify America’s best places, a site’s MSA usually captures its character, as well as the living and working patterns of its residents, more fully than city, county or state boundaries.

Metropolitan areas are moving targets. **The OMB regularly adjusts MSA definitions to keep pace with population growth, changes in commuting patterns and other related factors. The federal government first recognized the region we now think of as Hampton Roads in 1983, when Southside and Peninsula localities were combined into a single MSA. Such changes can make a big difference in the PRA and CRR rankings.** After the last census, 45 new MSAs and 29 Metropolitan Divisions (subdivisions of the nation’s largest MSAs) were created – thus, a lower ranking in 2007 may reflect the increased “competition,” not necessarily deterioration in living standards. Of the Southern MSAs compared in this year’s State of the Region report, all but Charleston, S.C., underwent some boundary shifts between 2000 and 2007. The greatest of these shifts split Raleigh and Durham into two separate MSAs – a factor that likely contributed to both cities’ dip in the latest PRA and CRR rankings. (Surry County joined the Norfolk-Virginia Beach-Newport News MSA, which also was renamed to reflect Virginia Beach’s status as the region’s largest city.) The bottom line: when comparing metro area rankings from

year to year, it's important to remember that the definition of these areas is constantly changing. An MSA's rating depends upon the localities it formally encompasses.

## How Hampton Roads Stacks Up

Overall, Hampton Roads earns positive reviews from both PRA and CRR. In the most recent two editions of both publications, our region placed between the 65th and 85th percentiles among all metropolitan areas. Our CRR score dipped to the lower end of this spectrum in 2007, but we improved our performance in PRA by nearly four percentiles. These differences notwithstanding, there are some clear trends in Hampton Roads' performance. **We receive the highest marks in the arts and leisure categories, while our main weakness is cost of living. Our scores in the remaining six categories are mixed.**

### OUR STRENGTHS

#### ● Arts & Culture/Ambience

The authors of PRA and CRR agree: Hampton Roads is an excellent place to enjoy "the good life." Our region enjoys the highest marks in the category that encompasses the arts and other cultural opportunities. In 2007, we received an arts and culture rating of 85 (CRR), and an impressive 97 in ambience (PRA), thereby outranking most comparable metropolitan areas in the American South.

CRR derives its arts scores from a three-pronged assessment of museums, performing arts, and media and libraries. Sperling and Sander rate the quality and quantity of each metro area's arts radio stations, classical music ensembles, professional theaters, dance companies, university arts programs and different types of museums on a 1-10 scale. This approach leaves room for debate (What is the difference between a 7 and 8, and what criteria do the authors use to decide?), but it does draw attention to the overall richness of Hampton Roads' cultural assets. Our region performs well in this category because it supports many different kinds of high-quality institutions – including two public radio stations, numerous performing ensembles, the cultural offerings of the Historic Triangle, and specialized museums like the Virginia Air & Space Center and the Children's Museum of Virginia. In fact, our excellent museums rating in CRR approaches that of Washington, D.C. (home to the Smithsonian Institution and other federal facilities).

The 2007 edition of PRA looks at the ambience of American metro areas, rather than the arts in a stricter sense. (This may be a means of addressing quality of life factors that figure prominently in the CRR rankings.) Savageau assembles an eclectic bundle of criteria: AAA restaurant ratings, per capita bookstore sales, classical music performances, the number of state and federal historic sites, and the number and size of residential historic districts. These criteria helped to boost Hampton Roads' standing in the ratings, since our region performs well on all counts. We received 13 more points in this category than in 2000, when Savageau focused exclusively on the arts.

Nonetheless, our performance in this category is not an unambiguous triumph. Despite our high overall marks, Savageau singles out Hampton Roads (as well as Richmond) as one of the country's "big losers" in the arts. "These are metro areas with populations over 1 million where people ought to enjoy a full calendar of professional, non-profit ballet, opera, theatre, and symphony – but don't." Many of the "big losers" are rapidly growing Southern metro areas that have not developed an arts infrastructure comparable to that of older urban centers. Savageau's assessment derives from 2005 performance statistics compiled by the journal *Musical America*. The continued growth of the Virginia Arts Festival, as well as the opening of new performing arts centers in Newport News, Suffolk and Virginia Beach, may improve our region's showing in future editions.

#### ● Recreation/Leisure

Hampton Roads' second-strongest category is recreation and leisure. Our region boasts an attractive array of entertainment opportunities by any measure, but we receive the higher score (98) in PRA. Savageau divides his recreation category into three equally weighted parts: common denominators (movie screens and golf courses), crowd pleasers and outdoor assets – and Hampton Roads performs well in all three groups. Our particular strengths are water area (681,600 acres, significantly



more than other Southern metro areas) and crowd-pleasing destinations like the Virginia Zoo, Virginia Aquarium, and Busch Gardens and Water Country USA. Hampton Roads' relative weakness in this category is sports. We host fewer professional sports games per year than other comparably sized metro areas – although the exact number is somewhat fuzzy, as Savageau accidentally attributes the Salem Avalanche to our region, while excluding the Norfolk Admirals. We have no auto racetracks or horseracing tracks, two other sporting opportunities considered in this category.

In CRR, Sperling and Sander give leisure in Hampton Roads mostly favorable reviews (our overall category score is 82). Unlike Savageau, however, the CRR authors also include dining and shopping in their evaluation of metropolitan leisure. In this ratings subset, our performance is mixed. Hampton Roads possesses a higher-than-average number of Starbucks (27) and warehouse shopping clubs (6), the authors' chosen indicators for overall retail quality, and availability of large-scale discount shopping. Yet we receive an outlet mall score of 0 (presumably in error, given Williamsburg's large number of factory outlets), and a restaurant rating of 1. The CRR authors describe the latter score as "a 1-10 rating of restaurants in the area mainly considering quality and availability as compiled by travel guides and other industry sources." They are apparently tough graders – none of the other Southern metro areas that are compared in this year's State of the Region report scored higher than a 3. (By contrast, all but Charlotte place in the 80th percentile or above in the restaurant ratings that are part of the ambience category in PRA.)

## OUR WEAKNESS

### ● Housing/Cost of Living

**Hampton Roads may be an excellent site for arts and recreation, but it is an increasingly expensive place to live and work. In 2007, our region received low marks in cost of living – a 31.3 in CRR, and 25 in PRA (which examined housing costs alone).** These scores represent an approximately 20-point drop from the books' previous editions – a sharper decline than experienced by other Southern metropolitan areas.

The books' data (which derive from 2006, before the current downturn in the housing market was fully apparent) reveal a rate of home price appreciation that outstrips national averages, as well as the price increases experienced by other Southern metro areas. (Jacksonville, Fla., and Washington, D.C., are notable exceptions.) Savageau tells us that the price of a typical "starter home" in Hampton Roads is \$260,100, which represents a 130 percent increase between 2000 and 2006. According to Sperling and Sander, the median home price in our region is \$237,300 – a 91.3 percent increase between 2002 and 2006. Sperling and Sander note that Hampton Roads' home price ratio (which compares home prices to typical household incomes) is higher – which is to say, less favorable – than that of other Southern metro areas, excluding Washington, D.C. Further, it appears that our typical apartment rents (\$670-\$850) are greater, and our rate of home ownership (59.5 percent) is lower, than those of our geographic peers.

However, both of these pieces of housing data require comment. In Table 4, we report that Sperling and Sander state that the median monthly rent in Hampton Roads is \$844, which clearly is at the high end of their \$670-\$850 monthly range. While not impossible, these numbers appear to be inconsistent. Further, a variety of reputable sources report that more than 70 percent of Hampton Roads households own their own home, more than the national average and dramatically above Sperling and Sander's 59.5 percent. **These problematic pieces of data (similar circumstances also appear in Savageau's Places Rated Almanac) remind us that it is palpably unwise to place too much reliance on numbers when making comparisons between cities and metropolitan areas. It's fun to rank and compare cities and regions, but we should not fall prey to a tyranny of numbers that are themselves moveable feasts. The authors of these studies do their best to publish accurate, representative data, but inevitably some of their numbers are inaccurate, or fail to capture what is really going on.**

How do our other costs of living measure up? According to the CRR, we spend more on necessities than residents of other Southern metro areas (once again, excluding Washington, D.C.). As determined by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, our cost of living index is 103, three points above the national average. Utilities and transportation costs are particularly high in our region, while food and health care are more affordable. A Buying Power Index (BPI) developed by CRR, which "compares metro area incomes to metro area cost of living," suggests that Hampton Roads incomes are not keeping pace with higher costs. The Southern metro areas with the most favorable BPIs are Raleigh and Charlotte; Hampton Roads and Charleston, S.C., have the lowest.

## THE REST OF THE STORY

### ● Economy and Jobs

Together with housing, the job outlook helps to round out the picture of a metro area's economic well-being. In this category, Hampton Roads finds itself on steadier ground. In recent years, our region's economy and jobs rating in CRR has remained solid: 66 in 2004 and 62 in 2007. PRA, which looks exclusively at forecasted job growth, gives us even higher category scores: 83 in 2000 and 85 in 2007.

During this decade, job growth in Hampton Roads has exceeded national averages, though it has trailed urban hot spots such as Charlotte, Raleigh-Durham and Washington, D.C. CRR forecasts 11.4 percent job growth between 2006 and 2010, while PRA predicts 12.1 percent growth (or 112,871 new jobs) between 2007 and 2015. Since 2000, per capita income in our region has grown nicely and now exceeds the national average; however, once again, we trail the southeastern hot spots badly. In 2006, per capita income in our region was \$34,858, while it was \$38,164 in Charlotte, \$36,393 in Durham, \$37,221 in Raleigh and \$51,868 in Washington, D.C. ([www.bea.gov](http://www.bea.gov)).

### ● Education

Hampton Roads receives solid marks in education – though once again, we receive the higher scores from PRA (86.68 in 2000 and 91 in 2007). We earned a 71 from CRR in 2004, but our standing slipped by five points in 2007. As a ratings category, education is tricky to quantify. Parents of children in grades K-12 may be interested in student/teacher ratios and public school funding, while others might place greater emphasis on university and library facilities. The disparity in Hampton Roads' scores stems from the different criteria selected by the two sets of authors to assess this very broad field.

Savageau derives PRA's education scores from five equally weighted criteria. Two of these factors concern primary and secondary education (school support and private school options), another two concern higher education (college town and college options) and the final factor is library popularity. Hampton Roads' library grade is the weakest, due to a low book turnover rate that suggests our public libraries are under-used. We earn our strongest grades in college options and private school options. The former looks not only at the number of metropolitan colleges and universities, but also at the variety of their degree programs. (Savageau counts 13 major institutions of higher education in Hampton Roads, although the now-departed Johnson & Wales University is erroneously included in his count.) Private school options, which Savageau did not evaluate in PRA's previous editions, helped to enhance our education score in 2007. Hampton Roads is home to 12 Catholic, plus 59 other religious and 16 nonsectarian private schools, which together educate approximately 8 percent of our school-age children.

Sperling and Sander use three criteria to evaluate education in CRR: public schools, higher education and achievement. Of these three criteria, achievement (which reflects the education level of metro area residents) receives the greatest weight. The authors state that "some important studies confirm" that parents' education level is one of the best predictors of school quality in any given area. **The educational attainment of Hampton Roads residents is just about average. Slightly more of our residents have earned a high school or two-year college degree than the population at large, but slightly fewer of us have earned four-year college or graduate degrees.** (Washington, D.C., Raleigh and Durham boast the most highly educated populations among the Southern metro areas.)

### ● Crime

Like our scores in education and economy and jobs, our crime ratings in PRA and CRR have remained relatively consistent – though at a less favorable level. In the ratings guides' most recent two editions, our crime scores have ranged between the 40th and 58th percentiles. This means that our region is roughly average in the rate of crimes reported. Among Southern metropolitan areas, Charlotte, Jacksonville and Charleston all report significantly higher incidences of both property and violent crime.

But is crime in Hampton Roads getting better or worse, with respect to the country at large? Here the two sets of authors part ways, despite having consulted the same FBI statistics. In 2007, Savageau *raised* our category score from 43.63 to 58, while Sperling and Sander *lowered* it from 46 to 40.1. Savageau arrives at his 2007 scores by averaging each metro

area's crime rates from the latest five years, giving property crimes like theft and burglary one-tenth the weight of violent crimes like murder, robbery and assault. (In 2000, he used data from the previous eight years.) Sperling and Sander use the FBI's crime data somewhat differently. They draw their scores from four separate statistics: the current violent crime rate, the current property crime rate and the change in each of these rates between 2001 and 2005. (In the first edition of CRR, they looked at the change in crime rates between 1996 and 2001.)

Both sets of authors have developed reasonable yardsticks to assess the shifting crime rates of America's metro areas. The disparity of their results reveals that how any group of statistics is interpreted is just as important as the statistics themselves.

## ● Transportation

The transportation category further demonstrates how different analytical approaches can yield very different ratings. The authors of PRA and CRR agree that the transportation outlook in Hampton Roads has deteriorated somewhat in recent years, largely due to longer commuting times, but beyond this point, they concur on little else. **Savageau lowered our transportation score to a 75 in 2007 – a 6-point drop from 2000, but still solidly within the top third of all metro areas. Sperling and Sander, however, sent our score plummeting by 25 points. With a transportation rating of 10, we now place near the bottom of all metro areas.**

The concept of transportation encompasses a wide range of phenomena. Savageau evaluates the transportation network of each metro area according to three equally weighted criteria: commute, connectivity and centrality. Commute includes average travel times, as well as the number of miles traveled by metro area public transit fleets. Connectivity combines interstate highway access, nonstop airline destinations and passenger rail departures. (Rail departures receive the least weight, since they figure prominently in only a few urban corridors.) Centrality, he says, "measures how near a metro area is to all other metro areas." According to these criteria, Hampton Roads and the other Southern metro areas all perform in the 67th percentile or above in the PRA rankings. The category's Top 20 is dominated by major urban hubs like Washington, D.C., Chicago, Minneapolis and Houston.

Sperling and Sander use three different criteria in their evaluation of transportation: commute, intercity services and automotive. Commute is the most heavily weighted factor of the three, with mass transit playing a greater role than in Savageau's ratings system. Intercity services include airport size and activity, as well as Amtrak service (but not interstate highways). Automotive considers the cost of gasoline and insurance, as well as daily vehicle miles per capita. By these standards, *none of the Southern metro areas score higher than the 67th percentile*. Ironically, Richmond receives a transportation score of 67 from both guidebooks. But Hampton Roads, Raleigh, Charleston and Jacksonville all land in CRR's bottom 10th percentile. The authors were not available for comment, but it appears that our region did not receive full credit for the size of our airports and daily airline activity. CRR's top-scoring places for transportation are densely populated regions in the mid-Atlantic – including large cities like New York and Philadelphia – as well as the smaller metro areas that surround them, such as Atlantic City, N.J., New Haven, Conn., and Lancaster, Pa.

## ● Health and Health Care

Hampton Roads' health and health care ratings are somewhat unusual. In 2007, we received a 64 in this category from PRA, and a 66 from CRR. Both scores represent an improvement of nearly 40 percentiles from the books' previous editions. The parallel spike in our ratings is all the more remarkable, given that the two sets of authors use almost entirely different statistics to reach their conclusions. Have standards of health and health care in Hampton Roads really improved so dramatically in less than a decade?

Savageau's numbers appear to say yes. In PRA, he assesses the supply of health care services – not, he emphasizes, the quality of these services, or the health of metro area residents. In 2000, Hampton Roads ranked in the 40th percentile or below in its number of general/family practitioners, medical specialists and surgical specialists per 100,000 residents. Seven years later, we placed between the 40th and 60th percentiles on all three counts. In 2000, PRA identified only 12 general hospitals in Hampton Roads that were certified by the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations; this figure rose to 16 in the 2007 edition. By telephone, Savageau suggested to us that the increase in Hampton Roads' health care score might be explained by the expanding boundaries of our region. In other words, doctors and hospitals not considered in PRA's 2000 edition may have been included in 2007.

In CRR, Sperling and Sander define this category rather differently. These authors examine metro area hazards that can cause health problems, as well as health care services and their costs. Between 2004 and 2007, our performance remained relatively consistent on both counts. The quality of our air and water is higher than average, and our “stress score” (calculated through variables such as divorce and unemployment rates, commute time and cloudy days) has ranged between a favorable 26 and 39 on a 0-100 scale. Our number of physicians per capita (249.3) is roughly average, while our number of hospital beds per capita (328.5) is somewhat below average. Our improved health and health care score in CRR’s latest edition can be traced chiefly to one variable: health care costs. **According to the measure of an average visit to the doctor (\$67) or dentist (\$61), health care in Hampton Roads is more affordable than in many other metro regions.** On this count, our performance improved slightly between 2004 and 2007, but the small gain made a large difference in our category score. Escalating health care costs and the growing number of Americans without full-coverage insurance led Sperling and Sander to place additional ranking weight on health care costs in the latest edition of their book.

## ● Climate

Climate is one thing that Hampton Roads citizens and policymakers can do little to change. Happily, the ratings experts seem to agree that we have a pretty good one – in 2007, we earned a climate score of 59 in PRA, and 62 in CRR. Climate may be even more dependent on individual tastes than the other ratings categories, but the authors nonetheless put forth that some standards of evaluation are possible. In essence, both sets of authors agree that the best climates are the most moderate ones.

In PRA, Savageau awards points on a 0-100 scale for the mildness of metropolitan area summers and winters, as well as for the infrequency of hazards like thunderstorms, strong winds and heavy snowfall. A fourth 0-100 rating is for seasonal affect; here, metro areas with the fewest annual cloudy, rainy and foggy days receive the highest scores. In CRR, Sperling and Sander identify “desirable ranges” for several different climate attributes – for example, 20-30 inches of annual precipitation, 250-300 mostly sunny days and January low temperatures between 30 degrees and 50 degrees. Metro areas falling within this range receive maximum points, while “areas outside the range get reduced points, which are further reduced the farther away the number falls,” the authors note.

According to these criteria, our main strength is a mild winter (only 54 days of temperatures below freezing, with an average January low of 32.2 degrees). We lose some points, however, with our sultry summer months (30 days of 90 degree-plus weather, with 71 percent relative humidity in July). Further downsides include a climate that is wetter than average, with 45 inches of precipitation annually, and a proximity to the coast that places us at moderate hurricane risk.



# Is There a Moral to the Ratings Stories?

Hampton Roads residents can be pleased that our region has placed in the 65th percentile or above in recent editions of the Places Rated Almanac and Cities Ranked & Rated. The authors of both volumes agree that we stand among the top third of all U.S. metropolitan areas. Beyond this, however, they differ considerably. Between 2000 and 2007, our mean score in PRA rose from 68.4 to 72 – a small improvement that had a substantial effect upon our numerical ranking. According to PRA author David Savageau, Hampton Roads rose from the 45th to the 20th best place to live among all U.S. metro areas. By contrast, our overall score in CRR dropped from 85.8 in 2004 to 65.4 in 2007. This pushed our numerical ranking still lower. In the estimation of Bert Sperling and Peter Sander, we sank from 17th to 137th place among all metro areas.

So who's right? Both sets of authors have important points to make about the strengths and weaknesses of our region. In a sense, their portraits represent two different sides of the same coin. We ought not place undue weight on scores and rankings that sometimes can be misleading, but we should listen carefully to the broader message that stands behind them.

**CRR authors Sperling and Sander zero in on some of our critical regional weaknesses. In 2004, they identified urban sprawl and “frequent traffic problems, especially at bridges and tunnels” as downsides of life in Hampton Roads. In their book’s current edition, they add that “job-growth projections have fallen off and home prices have risen some 76 percent; both factors have a lot to do with the drop in ranking.”** These are fundamental issues that threaten to reduce the quality of life for Hampton Roads residents.

**PRA author David Savageau, by contrast, tends to emphasize our regional assets. By telephone, he told us that he would include Hampton Roads in the “great second tier” of U.S. metro areas.** Hampton Roads’ relative youth as a major metropolitan area, combined with its geographical sprawl, means that our region has difficulty matching sophisticated infrastructure in the arts, professional sports, health care, transportation, etc., which is a hallmark of more established urban centers. We do, however, benefit from a number of other assets, which Savageau terms “lucky circumstances”: an attractive location on the middle of the Atlantic Coast, older neighborhoods and a sense of history that appeal to a mobile creative class, and a strong record of regional growth over the last several decades.







