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Virginia Town is Best Place in the U.S. to Raise Kids

With good schools, an affordable lifestyle, and the Blue Ridge Mountains in the backyard, Blacksburg, Va., is No. 1

By [Venessa Wong](#)

More than half the population of Blacksburg, Va., is Virginia Tech students, so it may be easy to mistake this town of 41,383 as just another college town. Yet this small community, between the Blue Ridge and Alleghany Mountains, also has the makings of a great place to raise children. Excellent schools draw many families to Blacksburg, which also has such amenities as a community center with sports, fitness, educational, and social activities; an indoor pool; and even a nine-hole, 54-acre municipal golf course.

“There’s very little crime. There are kids’ programs, green space, trails. It is a nice place to live and a nice place to raise kids. Everyone knows everyone. The weather is nice. The cost of living is not that high,” says Becky MacKenzie, a 34-year-old mother of three and a resident of Blacksburg since 2003.

Excellent schools, combined with an affordable cost of living, relatively low crime, and plentiful amenities lifted Blacksburg to first place in Businessweek.com’s sixth nationwide ranking of best places in each state in the U.S. to raise kids.

MacKenzie says that Blacksburg can seem small at times unless you are a true “Hokie,” or Virginia Tech fan, and there is little interaction with communities beyond the university—similar to many college towns—but “everyone thinks it’s a fabulous place to live.”

CRITERIA WE USE

With help from Bloomberg Rankings, Businessweek.com evaluated 4,169 places with a crime index less than 10 percent above the national average, populations between 1,000 and 50,000 people, and median family income within 20 percent of the state median, using data from real estate information firm [Onboard Informatics](#).

We evaluated educational factors (such as school scores, the number of public and private schools, and colleges), economic factors (including median family income, expenses, job growth, and unemployment), crime, amenities (such as child day-care centers, zoos, aquariums, museums, theaters, recreation centers, green space), air quality, and ethnic diversity. School performance, expenditures, and income were given the most weight.

After Blacksburg, [Arlington, Neb.](#), ranked second, and [Morton Grove, Ill.](#), placed third in the country.

[East San Gabriel](#), a community near Los Angeles, took the top spot in the most populous state, California. In Texas, the second-largest state, the Austin suburb of [Wells Branch](#) beat out competitors. The best place in New York: [Hampton Manor](#), a suburb of Albany.

EDUCATED MIDDLE CLASS

Blacksburg's large university population brings its median age to a low 22 years, but the town is also home to thousands of families. About one-third of households are family households, including 13.3 percent that have children under age 18, according to 2010 Census data.

Blacksburg also is more educated than most: About two-thirds of residents ages 25 and older have a bachelor's degree or higher, and nearly 40 percent have a graduate or professional degree, the Census figures indicate.

In the No. 2 town in this year's ranking, Arlington, Neb., 24.3 percent have a bachelor's degree or higher, and in the No. 3 town, Morton Grove, Ill., 40.7 percent, as the U.S. Census measures it. Median family income in these places is \$70,881 and \$83,601, respectively, Onboard estimates.

Blacksburg has a large middle-income population: According to Onboard, median family income, at \$83,670, is slightly higher than the state median, \$72,476, and is also higher than in such nearby communities as Merrimac and Christiansburg. The median home list price in the town was \$234,900 in October, according to real estate website Zillow.com.

The town's economy relies heavily on Virginia Tech, Blacksburg's largest employer with [1,306 full-time instructional faculty](#), who make an average salary of \$87,400. Other employment hubs include the [Virginia Tech Corporate Research Center](#), which has more than 140 high-tech companies with more than 2,200 employees, and [Blacksburg Industrial Park](#), home to manufacturing and research-and-development businesses.

Blacksburg is also home to such tech startups as [Modea](#), a fast-growing advertising agency founded by Virginia Tech grads in 2006, and e-mail hosting company [Webmail.us](#), which was acquired by [\(RAX\)Rackspace](#) in 2007.

To develop the economy further, the town, university, and economic development organizations are trying to expand the local technology industry, taking advantage of talent coming from the school's engineering program. The Virginia Tech Corporate Research Center, for example, aims to "develop a growing, prestigious research park for high-technology companies" and has an incubator program called VT KnowledgeWorks that creates companies based on VT-developed technology.

SCHOOLS AND RECREATION

In addition to the benefits of a college town, Blacksburg provides the blessings of a family-friendly community. Data from Onboard Informatics reveal that the town has some of the best schools in Virginia. Part of the Montgomery County School System, it is home to seven public schools—five elementary, one middle, and one high school—as well as several private schools, day-care centers, and preschools.

Gilbert Linkous Elementary School, for instance, scores well above average on standardized math and reading exams and is among the few in the state to receive a top score of 10 from GreatSchools.org, a nonprofit that provides school performance data. Students at Prices Fork Elementary and Harding Avenue Elementary also test above average, according to data from the Virginia Education Dept.

Blacksburg also has many recreational options. A [downtown improvement project](#) recently added wider sidewalks, a traffic circle, and new trees. Green space is abundant, with [400 acres of parkland in town](#), plus the Appalachian Trail and the George Washington and Jefferson National Forests nearby. Sports at Blacksburg's community recreation center include basketball, volleyball, and soccer, along with a fitness center, a computer lab, and social activities such as senior programs. And while the memory of the 2007 Virginia Tech shooting remains fresh for many, the town in fact has a relatively low crime rate.

Blacksburg celebrates holidays with music and fireworks on Independence Day, a [10,000-egg hunt](#) on Easter, and games on Halloween.

Says MacKenzie: "People in Blacksburg are very passionate about Blacksburg."

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— *With assistance from Jennifer Prince, Bloomberg Rankings*

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