

## ‘Federations of Neighborhoods’



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For most of history, people lived in the same locations from birth until death; their lives revolved around their large extended families. Nowadays, Americans are much less likely to stay put for life – just as it’s less likely that they will have one job for life. In my 2008 book [“Who’s Your City?”](#) I noted that geographic mobility is a key prerequisite of economic mobility. I divided Americans into three groups – “the mobile,” who move to opportunity; “the rooted,” who choose to stay close to family and friends; and “the stuck,” who are trapped in a self-perpetuating cycle of poverty that is driven and exacerbated by the deleterious “neighborhood effects” identified by the urban sociologists [Rob Sampson](#) and [Pat Sharkey](#).

The best cities are not homogenous, but diverse mosaics. At new life stages, people could move a few blocks instead of across the country.

While Americans’ overall rates of geographic mobility [have fallen](#), the growing ranks of highly educated, highly skilled people in knowledge, professional and creative occupations – who make up roughly a third of the work force and over 50 percent in leading cities – organize their lives around a series of locations, making three big moves at key stages of their lives.

The first occurs after college, when it’s time to begin an independent life and career. Even though there are no shortage of studies that show young Americans moving back to their parents’ basements, the past couple of decades have seen a clear trend and a clear preference of talented young people toward large center cities like New York, Washington, Boston, Chicago, Atlanta, Minneapolis, Denver, San Francisco, Los Angeles and others, which offer not just one job but a rich labor market with diverse career possibilities, robust social networks of other highly skilled young people, a large mating pool, excellent universities and graduate schools, and abundant amenities like active outdoor recreation, restaurants and nightlife. Others tend to stay in college towns for a bit until they undertake this first big move.

The second big move occurs a decade or perhaps two decades later, and happens not with marriage or cohabitation but with the arrival of school-age children. This move is driven by the tradeoff between cost of living and access to quality schools. It has several permutations. Some choose to stay in the urban center, and others move back to their hometowns to raise their kids around a supportive network of family. One clear trend is a move to the older, inner-ring suburbs of large knowledge economy cities that offer good schools, safe streets, abundant parks, older homes, mixed-use commercial districts, walkable neighborhoods and good connections to the city center by public transit.

The third big move comes when the kids have left the home. Instead of moving into the leisure villages of the exurbs and the Sunbelt, growing ranks of empty nesters are opting to return to (or stay in) the big cities and college towns that they started out in, for access to quality health care, opportunities for life-long learning, proximity to their children who have also been drawn there, abundant amenities and the opportunities for lively social lives.

In “Who’s Your City?” I ranked cities and metros on their appeal to these life stages, as well as such considerations as cost of living, diversity, tolerance, employment opportunities, etc. A relatively small number of places ranked consistently highly. The San Francisco Bay area was among the top-ranked places on 20 out of 25 lists; Boston was on 13. Austin, Tex.; Minneapolis; Raleigh, N.C.; and Seattle each came up 11 times; New York 10. Among smaller metros, Ann Arbor, Mich.; Boulder, Colo.; Madison, Wis.; Santa Barbara, Calif.; Stamford, Conn.; Portland, Me.; and Manchester, N.H. turned up on multiple lists as well.

These locations appeal to such a variety of life stages not because they are “one size fits all,” but because they are diverse mosaics of different kinds of places. In Jane Jacobs’s words, they are “federations of neighborhoods,” where virtually everyone, no matter their age, ethnicity, religion, level of education, sexual orientation or income, can find a niche where they feel welcome and comfortable.

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