

The Gazette

Report card ranks Canada's most family-friendly cities

Printed: The Montreal Gazette, June 17, 2010
By Shannon Proudfoot

Take a bow, Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton and Kitchener and Guelph, Ont.: you're the most family-friendly cities in the country, according to one new ranking.

Those five cities earned As overall in a national report card released Thursday by the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada (IMFC). Other cities earned A+ marks for certain family-friendly attributes, such as Winnipeg's low cost of living and Ottawa's ample green space.

No city was assigned an F overall, but grouped at the bottom of the scale with C grades were Saguenay and Trois-Rivieres, Que., Saint John, N.B., St. John's, N.L. and Thunder Bay, Ont.

"It's pretty clear that Canada is a great place to live across the board and it's more a way of making a benchmark," says Andrea Mrozek, manager of research and co-author of this inaugural report. "As we do this every five years, we can examine ways in which places have improved or not."

IMFC graded Canada's 33 largest cities according to five criteria. The first is community feel, measured by bike paths, parks and community centres, the proportion of longtime residents, how many give to charity, daily commute times and homicide rates.

Education choice is based on how many public, private and charter schools are available and provincially funded, while cost of living is measured using the Consumer Price Index, cost of gas, rent for a two-bedroom apartment, rates of home ownership and average mortgage payments.

Economic strength was based on unemployment rates, average family taxes, government transfers and population growth.

The fifth criteria, family independence, takes into account the proportion of households headed by two married parents or a single parent, the percentage of seniors living with family rather than alone or in an institution and unpaid hours spent on care of children and seniors or other household tasks, with more hours resulting in a higher score.

"Social science doesn't really dispute that kids fare best when they grow up with (both) their parents," says Mrozek. "It's not to say that single parents are not good

parents and it's not to say they're not part of community, but just recognizing the body of literature that suggests it's good if kids can be raised with their two married parents."

Overall, these measures of family independence paint a picture of "how well families rely on one another and themselves instead of the government," the report says.

Of the cities that earned As, Calgary earned high marks for rapid population growth, a high percentage of two-parent families, high income and plenty of school choice. Edmonton's ample green space, bike paths and strong economy gave it a boost, while Guelph earned praise for its high family income, charitable givers, short commute times and growing population. Kitchener got high marks for charitable giving, short commutes, high family incomes and population growth. Vancouver's high percentage of elderly people living with families, economic strength and plenty of school choice landed it an A grade.

"I guess I'm surprised by Guelph and Kitchener coming out as A cities, but they really are growing communities and they have strong economies," says Mrozek.

At the other end of the scale, Thunder Bay, Saguenay and Saint John, N.B. earned low marks for sagging populations and weak economies, while low levels of children living with married parents in Trois-Rivieres impacted the city's marks, and reliance on government support and high unemployment were blights on St. John's, N.L.

Jennifer Dales, director of planning and projects with the B.C. Council for Families, says she doesn't disagree with IMFC's rankings, but her organization focuses on supporting all families and allowing them to "define themselves," regardless of family structure. Some of the most important attributes in a family-friendly city are difficult to measure, she says, such as the presence of kids playing on the street.

The cost of living in Vancouver is high, but Dales says she and her husband have chosen to stay in the city with their son because of the grandparent presence she suspects drives many families.

"If you have an extended family that can support you as a parent, that's a massive factor and it's going to help you and help your child," she says. "You're not going to throw that out the window for bike paths."