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The 10 Most Popular Cities for College Grads

by Derek Thompson
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Americans value mobility. But if you want to move up in the world, sometimes you have to move, literally. In a recession, that's a problem.

In 2010, migration within the United States slowed to its lowest rate in recorded history, according to new research from William Frey at the Brookings Institution. Among college graduates, the story is particularly striking. Here are the 10 most popular cities for college graduates since the recession:

Frey's analysis challenges the story of the 2010 Census, which is the Rise of the Sun Belt. In the last decade, 7.5 million people — more than the total population of Massachusetts and Vermont — moved to Texas and California, while Arizona and Nevada led the nation in pace of growth. Imagine a river flowing from the northeast to the southwest, and you've got a sense of America's general migration pattern.

That's changing, fast. At the height of the housing boom, the most popular destinations for college graduates were Phoenix, Seattle, Atlanta, Riverside (CA), and Charlotte. But when the bubble burst, Texas cities have zoomed up the list: Austin and Dallas were the most popular destinations for bachelor degree earners between 2007 and 2009.

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"In 2005-2007, college-educated adults, like other segments of the population, were strongly attracted to "bubble" metro areas like Riverside, Phoenix and Las Vegas," Frey writes. After the burst, degree-earners are clustering in more "knowledge economy" metros, like Austin, Raleigh, Charlotte and Seattle.

According to Frey's figures, the five metro areas with the highest concentration of people with bachelors degrees are: Washington, D.C./Arlington (47%), San Francisco (43%), San Jose (43%), Boston (42%), and Raleigh (42%). The most popular destination in America, Austin (38%), is number six on that list. New York City (36%) is number ten.

When I asked Frey to call out some of the more surprising results of his analysis, he pointed out that interstate migration rates have generally fallen over the last few decades, but the recession accelerated the trend.

Why didn't the recession increase migration, sending families fleeing from weak states like Florida to stronger states like Texas? Frey answered: "The financial crisis meant families couldn't get a loan to get a house. They couldn't sell a house. They were frozen in place because of the housing market and the paucity of jobs."

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In his Brookings paper, Frey concluded by sounding the alarm on slow interstate migration:

The recent more tentative migration patterns of the younger and "best and brightest" segments of our population are holding back the free flow of human and social capital that has made our society more vital and dynamic than most of our developed country peers. This slowdown, in addition to the decline in immigration can be expected to pick up when the economy revives. But if it takes too long, we run the risk of creating a "lost generation" of young adults, the likes of which we have not seen for some time.

10. Tampa, FL

Percent with BA: 26

On the one hand, Tampa and St. Petersburg have every reason to be on this list, with beautiful weather, large universities, and hordes of young people. But consider the headwinds: the Tampa-St. Petersburg area has one of the worst housing markets in the country (Brookings puts it in the bottom quintile) and a relatively low share of bachelors degree earners.

9. Raleigh, NC

Percent with BA: 42

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The Research Triangle of Duke, UNC and NC State make Raleigh an inevitable destination for young degree-earners on the move — especially if they're interested in medicine or looking to go back to graduate school. But Raleigh is more than a college town. It's also a blooming high tech center, with IBM among its highest employers.

8. Riverside, CA

Percent with BA: 19

Nice weather! But Riverside's inclusion in the top ten is somewhat an artifact of the housing bubble. Only 19 percent of its population holds a BA, by far the lowest on this list. Once the most popular destination for young people during the bubble, Riverside's attractiveness took a hit in the recession. Brookings recently called Riverside one of the worst performing metro areas in the country, based on growth, housing and employment. But still: nice weather!

7. Atlanta, GA

Percent with BA: 34

It's no surprise that only Deep South city on this list arguably has the region's best school: Emory University. Before being slammed by the recession, Atlanta was the 3rd most popular destination for both college grads and young people between the ages of 25 and 34. Today it ranks 7th among both groups.

6. Seattle, WA

Percent with BA: 37

Seattle has long been a magnet for young brainiacs looking to either start their own firm or work for a major corporation. As the headquarters for Amazon, Microsoft, it's a major draw for other companies in the Web-and computer-tech business. The city gets an additional boost from the temperate weather (for those who don't mind the misty rain) and a coffee culture that makes it something like a modern Vienna.

5. Houston, Texas

Percent with BA: 28

One of three Texas on this list, the largest city in the Lone Star State isn't just an oil town, anymore — but recovering oil prices aren't exactly hurting the economy, either. An expanded biotech sector and an aeronautical cluster draw brains and BAs from across the country — if they can stand the infamous humidity.

4. Portland, Ore.

Percent with BA: 34

What is it about Portland? Despite an unemployment rate over 10 percent, the city has drawn hoards of young, creative, educated graduates in the last few years. Frey chalks it up to a unique cult status. "If you're going to be underemployed somewhere," he said, "you might as well embrace the lifestyle." Here, here!

3. Phoenix, Ariz.

Percent with BA: 27

The sun is fun, but is it enough? Phoenix is a city that has, in the last few years, lived up to its namesake. The second-fastest growing metro in the 2000s (after Las Vegas) got rocked by the recession, and median home prices are down 43 percent from their peak in 2009. Phoenix has been on Brookings' list of 20 weakest city economies for more than a year.

2. Dallas, Texas

Percent with BA: 30

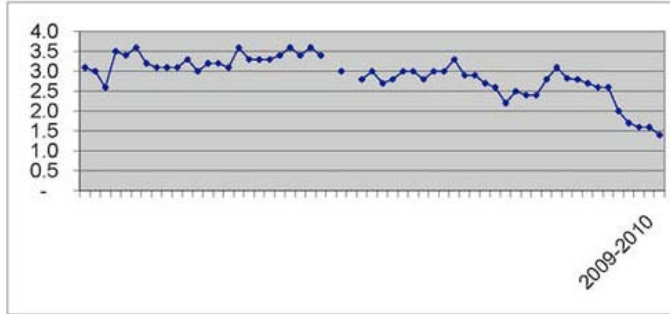
The second most popular city in the Texas is also the second most popular city in the country for college grads. Credit the ample housing, the legendary (if recently disappointing) sports franchises, and the legendary and non-disappointing tech and transportation industries.

1. Austin, Texas

Percent with BA: 38

Austin is one of the most resilient cities in the U.S., buffeted by state government spending, a large public university and a thriving high-tech sector. It is also the most dynamic city in the United States, according to the Brookings Metropolitan Policy Program, a mecca for music lovers, and a cultural jewel of the South. It's got brains, it's got growth: Indeed, Austin could be America's hottest city at the moment.

Figure 1:
Annual Interstate Migration Rates, 1947-48 to 2009-10
(data for years 1971-75 and 1976-80 were not collected)



This cities were ranked by total migration among BA earners. But as a percentage of total population, the cities with the fastest growing college-educated community are (in order): Austin, Raleigh, Portland (Ore.), Riverside, Phoenix, Charlotte, San Antonio, Tampa, Nashville, and Kansas City.