

Burlington, ON, has the country's lowest crime rate.

Canada's BEST cities for families

by MARY VALLIS

Where is the ideal place to raise kids in this country? Find out how your town did in our exclusive rankings of 180 communities across Canada.

Repentigny, QC, came in third, thanks to affordable housing and child care.

Squamish, BC, has the cleanest air.

THE WINNER: St. Albert, AB

In 2000, after living in Calgary and Edmonton, Tracy and Kelly Aisenstat settled in St. Albert, a suburb of 60,000 just northwest of Edmonton. It wasn't long before they realized they'd made the right decision — while sitting in the bleachers during the annual International Children's Festival, watching a dance performance. Their bellies were full of free pancakes. Their two young children laughed and clapped.

"I remember being so happy we had chosen this place to be our home," says Tracy.



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The Aisenstats — now a family of five with kids Max, 14, Laura, 11 and seven-year-old Jillian — were clearly on to something.

St. Albert came out on top in rankings that looked at everything from housing prices to crime levels, as well as issues of particular importance to families, such as child care. The results aren't a best guess — they were carefully calculated by our friends at *MoneySense* magazine based on hard numbers issued by Statistics Canada, Environment Canada and other reputable sources (check out moneysense.ca/bestplaces2011).

Other cities that ranked well also boast important family-friendly qualities. Burlington, ON, took second place overall, in part because of its safe neighbourhoods. Repentigny, QC, near Montreal, came in third, thanks to the city's affordable housing and Quebec's publicly funded daycare system. (For an explanation of how we arrived at these rankings, go to Todaysparent.com/citiesmethodology.)

But back to St. Albert. In this growing city, many residents are professionals who commute to Edmonton (including Kelly, who works as a lawyer) and earn some of the highest household incomes in the country: The average family brings in more than \$125,000, while paying relatively low taxes. Plus, the air is cleaner and crime levels are lower than in many other communities — St. Albert ranked 58th and 89th (out of 180) respectively on those measures. The city also has its own hospital and plenty of doctors — more, in fact, per 1,000 residents than both



Calgary and Toronto. And it's got loads of kids. About one in five of St. Albert's residents are 14 years old or younger. Near the Aisenstats, there are five other families with at least three children apiece, and some have as many as six.

St. Albert offers all these kids plenty of things to do. An ideal summer day for Tracy is visiting the recently renovated water park, which is free and attracts up to 2,000 people daily. She can watch her girls play in the splash pad, while keeping an eye on Max as he does tricks at the next-door skateboard park. There's also a BMX bike track in town and strong hockey programs for both boys and girls. In the summer, children use coloured marshmallows to bait little crayfish in Lacombe Lake Park. In the winter, the frozen water becomes a popular skating rink.

St. Albert Place even has its own children's theatre company. Max joined when he was eight and, this year, he's landed the starring role in *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*. (His two sisters are in the choir for the play.) He'll be

In St. Albert, the average family brings in more than \$125,000 a year.

Overall ranking*	% of pop. < 14	Affordable housing	Household income	Crime	Doctors per 1,000	Unemployment rate	Weather	Air quality	Transit
1. St. Albert, AB	31	125	7	89	44	24	51	58	53
2. Burlington, ON	73	147	19	1	75	30	3	110	34
3. Repentigny, QC	101	39	50	33	63	49	114	74	39
4. Winnipeg	72	65	60	93	45	25	56	20	20
5. Ottawa-Gatineau	80	117	41	34	33	60	53	96	8
6. Calgary	47	111	6	22	77	38	79	37	10
7. Brandon, MB	68	34	95	129	42	2	76	50	55
8. Edmonton	91	120	37	106	44	42	51	58	21
9. Kingston, ON	135	90	81	53	2	67	33	116	53
10. Lethbridge, AB	33	80	55	117	116	22	55	102	86

*Numbers represent ranking of city in each category.

performing at the International Children's Festival, a five-day affair at the beginning of June, which draws up to 40,000 people to St. Albert each year. Tracy recently took her first job outside the home since becoming a mom, and now works as the festival's volunteer coordinator.

St. Albert is encouraging residents to organize block parties, and Lorraine Gerling, a lifelong resident and new mom, certainly sees the benefits. One early summer day last year, Gerling and her neighbours — some of them also new parents — gathered for face painting, games and a potluck. "I met a bunch of people I didn't know," says Gerling, who moved to the neighbourhood a year and a half earlier.

Now pregnant with her second child, Gerling and her husband, Justin, plan to stay in St. Albert. So do the Aisenstats. They want to raise their children in the bungalow the family bought more than a decade ago. Tracy hopes the kids might even stay home after they graduate from high school. After all, St. Albert Transit — which helped land the city in the top quarter of our public transit ranking — provides buses to colleges and universities in Edmonton. Is there really any reason to leave?

Child care

Comparing how cities measure up in terms of child care is a challenge — there are no city-by-city stats. The best figures track the number of regulated spaces in each province. We scored each community based on the spaces in its province or territory, so, for example, every community in BC received the same amount of "credit" in our rankings for child care.

Quebec's subsidized child care system, which offers spots for \$7 a day, pushed the province to the top of the list. In 2008, Quebec had more than 368,000 regulated spaces. The public funding allows child care providers to hire and retain trained staff, which is key to quality programs, says Martha Friendly, director of the Childcare Resource and Research Unit in Toronto.

"Quebec's program isn't the be-all and end-all," says Friendly, "but it's much further advanced than anything else in Canada." Friendly points out that city-by-city data on child care would improve planning and public accountability. "The fact is we're not doing [child care] well. And part of not doing it well is not having data."

Quebec offers daycare spots at \$7 per day.

Overall Ranking	Daycare spaces per 1,000 pop.
1. Quebec	47.91
2. Yukon Territory	43.79
3. Northwest Territories	36.78
4. Prince Edward Island	34.46
5. Manitoba	22.63
6. Alberta	20.15
7. British Columbia	19.25
8. Ontario	18.90
9. New Brunswick	18.03
10. Nova Scotia	14.21
11. Newfoundland and Labrador	11.16
12. Saskatchewan	9



Housing affordability

We looked at average house prices and average household incomes in each community, then calculated the number of years it would take a family to buy a home if all their money went toward the house. The affordability results reflect a blend of house prices and years it takes to buy.

Cape Breton, NS, took the top spot. With an average household income of \$57,417, and an average house price of just under \$109,000, a Cape Breton family can afford to buy a home in under two years.

"That's less than half the average in Halifax, and quite a bit below the average of other major centres across the country," says Matthew Gilmore, a senior market analyst with Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, pointing out that Cape Breton's myriad recreational and outdoor activities add value to the low cost of housing.

Though the area is also known for some of the highest unemployment rates in the country, Gilmore points to recent positive signs for its economy, including new stores opening, jobs in call centres and retail, and the fact that many Cape Bretoners who work in western Canada are sending money back home.

And, let's face it, settling in a coveted city isn't all roses. In

Cape Breton, NS, has the most affordable housing in Canada.

TOP PLACES FOR AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Overall ranking	Average house price	Average household income	Years to buy a home
1. Cape Breton, NS	\$108,845	\$57,417	1.90
2. Timmins, ON	130,121	73,775	1.76
3. Bathurst, NB	117,375	61,386	1.91
4. Portage la Prairie, MB	128,679	66,680	1.93
5. Chatham-Kent, ON	129,936	67,403	1.93
6. Fredericton, NB	142,642	76,659	1.86
7. Thunder Bay, ON	136,029	69,621	1.95
8. La Tuque, QC	116,714	56,141	2.08
9. Windsor, ON	152,676	79,412	1.92
10. Baie-Comeau, QC	147,000	74,033	1.99

Vancouver, house prices are still soaring — the average is nearly \$800,000. With an average household income of about \$85,000, a family would need to save for nearly a decade before being able to buy a home. That's partly what made Vancouver the least affordable city on our list, falling just behind its neighbours, Richmond and Burnaby.

Air quality

We measured two major components of smog: ozone and particulate matter (which can settle deep in people's lungs).

Small communities in BC stood out for their fresh air: The coastal town of Squamish ranked first, and several other BC communities appear in the top 10, including Powell River, Terrace and Prince

Rupert. These towns are relatively small and isolated, explains Michael Brauer, a professor of environmental health at the University of British Columbia.

Meanwhile, communities near Montreal, such as Drummondville, Granby and Cowansville, landed at the bottom of the list. Cities in eastern Canada are affected by pollution from the American Midwest (and elsewhere in eastern Canada), which generally drifts in a northeasterly direc-

tion. That means even if the cities themselves do not produce much bad stuff, it blows in from afar. Communities in BC generally don't deal with the same pattern. **TP**

To see rankings for all 180 cities, plus more fun features from our exclusive Best Cities for Families online package, visit Todaysparent.com/bestcities.

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RANKINGS FOR AIR QUALITY

BEST

1. Squamish, BC
2. Powell River, BC
3. Terrace, BC
3. Prince Rupert, BC
4. Halifax, NS
4. Courtenay, BC
4. Campbell River, BC
5. Duncan, BC
5. Nanaimo, BC
5. Parksville, BC
5. Port Alberni, BC

WORST

1. Thetford Mines, QC
2. Saint-Georges, QC
3. Victoriaville, QC
4. Cowansville, QC
4. Saint-Hyacinthe, QC
4. Granby, QC
5. Drummondville, QC
6. Norfolk, ON
6. Tillsonburg, ON
7. Lachute, QC



Several BC communities are in the top 10 for air quality.