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Rating the Suburbs

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No. 1 University Park

Low crime, good schools, and the unmatched diving-board aerobatics found at the Curtis Park community pool launched UP over Southlake.

University Park is back. It topped our biennial list in 2002 and held the spot in 2004. But in 2006 UP was dethroned by Southlake and fell all the way to No. 4. Predictably, this caused mass hysteria and rioting in the streets. There was one report of a family's Labradoodle, so distraught over the No. 4 ranking, throwing itself into rush hour traffic on Preston Road.

What did UP do to trounce the competition this year? Of course it scored well in all four of our ranking criteria—education, safety, housing, and ambiance—but it scored particularly well in education. As did its ISD buddy, Highland Park, which ranked No. 6. But UP fared better in housing appreciation and safety than HP. For a detailed breakdown of our methodology, see “How We Did It” (below).

Overall, the cast of characters atop our list hasn't changed much since we last ranked them. Hickory Creek got knocked out (it's No. 17 this year), and Keller found its way in (from No. 21 previously). In addition to profiling these highly ranked suburbs, we also take a look at four that didn't make the top 10 but are worthy of consideration: Plano, because it is transforming its reputation from heroin to hip; Roanoke, because it's our most improved suburb, climbing from No. 38 to No. 18; Wylie, because it's the eighth-fastest-growing suburb in the nation; and Grapevine, because there's more to it than just the Gaylord Texan Resort.

But the most interesting thing we found on our travels to 62 suburbs wasn't the naan in Murphy or the lofts in Flower Mound. It was the apparent unconcern over rising gas prices. Although we complained about paying nearly \$4 per gallon as we filled up endless tanks of gas, those enjoying walks among the pecan trees in Parker and cheering on their robotics team in Southlake barely mentioned it. Go figure.

Links

- [Download the chart here.](#)

RATING THE SUBURBS: HOW WE DID IT

Our ranking is based on four factors: safety, education, housing values, and ambiance. The first three measures involve data and the objective analysis thereof; the fourth entails some subjectivity. The ambiance factor takes into account air quality, but it mostly reflects our good taste.

Because each factor includes multiple statistics (TAKS scores, SAT scores, etc.), we created a scale from 1 to 5 for each statistic so that their relative values could be added together. For mean SAT scores, for example, the lowest score (Lancaster ISD's 808) was assigned a value of 1, and the highest score (Highland Park ISD's 1188) was given a 5. All other scores fell in between. Doing the same thing for TAKS scores and other measures, we could combine statistics to create an overall education score.

Safety: 25%. Based on statistics for seven crimes: murder, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny, and auto theft. We gave twice as much weight to the first four, on the belief that getting bludgeoned is worse than having your car stolen. Sources: 2007 statistics from the Texas Department of Public Safety, Dallas Sheriff's Department, Oak Point Police Department.

Education: 25%. Calculated from the percent of students passing the TAKS tests in 2007, the mean SAT score of the class of 2006, percent of the class of 2006 taking college admissions exams, and the amount of money each district spent on instructional expenses for the 2005–06 school year. Most cities have students who go to more than one district. If a district has a large percentage in more than one district, we averaged each district's numbers. If a city's students overwhelmingly go to one district, we just used that one. Sources: Texas Education Agency, Highland Park ISD, Carroll ISD, Lancaster ISD, Sunnyvale ISD.

Housing: 25%. Based on the percent of owner-occupied homes in a suburb (40 percent of overall housing score) and increased average home sales price from 2005 to 2007 (60 percent of overall housing score). Sources: 2000 U.S. Census, North Texas Real Estate Information Systems (NTREIS).

Ambiance & Air: 25%. Ambiance is what it is. It's part of what makes Highland Park and Cockrell Hill two very different suburbs. The air pollution index is an analysis of ozone, carbon monoxide, lead, nitrogen oxide, and particulate matter. Ambiance was 70 percent of this score while air quality was 30 percent. Sources: Staff of D Magazine on ambiance; air pollution statistics from On Board, using EPA data.

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1. University Park

Population: 23,150

Annual growth since 1990: 0.3%

Average home sales price in 2007: \$1,245,435

Median age of residents: 31.2

Families with kids under 18: 40.8%

Median household income: \$92,778

What They Say: Residents enjoy a sense of connectedness here. "Every morning when we get up, we find that someone has placed our newspaper on our front doorstep," one resident says. "We don't know who it is, but it could easily be anyone on our block." Kids ride their bikes to school, and neighbors socialize at block parties.

The small-town feel is one of the best things (with big-city amenities nearby) and one of the worst things (everyone knows your business). Those who live in the Bubble say the Park Cities come by that name honestly, with too much conformity and narrow-mindedness. Some longtime residents feel a sense of entitlement, skipping ahead in line at Starbucks or in carpool.

Real estate agents crow about how homes have appreciated. From 2005 to 2007, the average sales price increased 34.5 percent—the biggest jump on our list. You can't get into UP for less than \$650,000 (for a small cottage or a house on a busy main street). If you want and find something under \$1 million, sign quickly on the dotted line. Most sales are between \$1.1 million to \$1.6 million.

What We Say: University Park has just about everything Highland Park does at a lower price. So if you're just moving to the Park Cities for the schools, UP is a no-brainer. We find the recent case of 10-year-old Julius Stener—who wanted to keep chickens from a school project as pets—indicative of the UP mentality. This is a town that mandates everything from trash lids to the inches of landscaping that can encroach on your alley. Julius got to keep his chickens (an old ordinance permits fowl with Council approval), but city staff soon changed the law so these would be the last chickens allowed. UP is kind, fair, and acutely aware

of appearances.



HIP TO BE SQUARE: The townhomes of Southlake Town Square give residents the feel of in-town living.

2. Southlake

Population: 25,700

Annual growth since 1990: 9.6%

Average home sales price in 2007: \$610,684

Median age of residents: 36.7

Families with kids under 18: 60.4%

Median household income: \$131,549

What They Say: Southlake was known for two things: schools and football (mostly the latter). Now it's known for schools, football, and Central Market, which opened with much fanfare in December 2006, across from Southlake Town Square. For at least a little while, news of the high-end grocery trumped news of the Southlake Carroll Dragons (who are ranked No. 2 in the state after several straight state football championships). Locals believe the restrictions placed on home builders (few lots are less than half an acre, no apartments or condos) will keep their investment safe. "Our property value has almost doubled in the past 10 years," one resident says. Some residents feel taxes are a bit high (though they land in the middle of the pack of our research) and worry that the schools and sports are a bit too competitive. Lots of families live here, especially those with stay-at-home moms and traveling dads (DFW Airport is close by). Houses range from \$400,000 to the multi-millions. Homes priced \$500,000 to \$600,000 are selling the best these days.

What We Say: In many ways, Southlake is like University Park dropped in the middle of the country. Affluence is evident around every corner. You should know the town's prom queen received a tiara with freshwater pearls and Swarovski crystals worth \$695 (compared to the \$47 one nearby Grapevine gave its queen). Yet down the street from the new Central Market, you'll find a field of hay bails, and the high school's robotics team won the state championship this year (again).

3. Colleyville

Population: 22,150

Annual growth since 1990: 4%

Average home sales price in 2007: \$522,768

Median age of residents: 40

Families with kids under 18: 49.8%

Median household income: \$117,419

What They Say: The trees are a big draw, and although Colleyville is practically next door to DFW Airport, it isn't in the flight pattern. It's a wealthy town with a heart. One resident says, "You're as likely to find Birkenstocks as Jimmy Choo stilettos on the feet of ladies who lunch." Locals love Market Street, an independent grocery store that features organics and staples like Heinz ketchup. "My sister-in-law lives in Highland Park, and she wishes she had a store like that near her," one resident says. You'll see a lot of teardowns in Colleyville, which is down the road—and price range—from Southlake. "When I have somebody looking in Southlake who can't find what they want, I direct them to Colleyville. It just doesn't have all the bells and whistles," says Realtor Becky Washam. New homes start in the upper \$300,000s for homes in the Grapevine/Colleyville ISD; lower \$300,000s for Birdville ISD. You can find something in the mid \$100,000s, but it will need work.

What We Say: You'll hear the nickname "Colleywood" thrown around a bit here, referring to the wealth in Colleyville. Local newspaper writer Michele Valdez once said in her weekly column, *The Confessions of a Mad Housewife*, that she loved living in Colleyville because she was surrounded by high-maintenance women just like her. Yet she also challenged the town to be more open-minded when the presence of minorities became an issue at the local schools. Locals Jeff Dyson and son Michael won a Grammy this year and are founders of the Blue Shoe Project, which takes the blues to kids in Texas schools. Cash and kindness mingle well.

4. Trophy Club

Population: 7,450

Annual growth since 1990: 4.7%

Average home sales price in 2007: \$295,533

Median age of residents: 37

Families with kids under 18: 43.2%

Median household income: \$92,492

What They Say: Terry Fator, winner of America's Got Talent, recently got a five-year, \$100 million gig in Vegas. But he has no intention of selling his Trophy Club home. "The area is beautiful, and everyone is so incredibly friendly. It's an amazing place," says the impersonator/ventriloquist who was born in Mesquite. Residents love that there is no major—or really even minor—thoroughfare through Trophy Club and that the speed limit is 30 mph throughout the city limits. Kids ride their bikes and feed the ducks. Parents are excited about the upcoming Byron Nelson High School, which opens in the fall of 2009. At \$96 million, it will be one of the most expensive high schools in Texas. The Trophy Club Country Club is the anchor of the town, a big golf community, yet many people find a starter home here. "We are in a fabulous spot," says Jennifer Roeltgen of Trophy Realtors. "People who live here commute to Dallas, Fort Worth, up to Denton." Construction of 1,500 new homes (ranging from \$250,000 to \$850,000) will build out Trophy Club to Grapevine Lake. Homes range from \$150,000 to \$2 million.

What We Say: Trophy Club feels like you're entering a gated community. The entire town. Which was the original plan in 1973, to be the state's first entirely planned community. And while there is a certain sense of Kool-Aid drinking here, people still love it 25 years later. All retail is on the fringe, with neighborhood after neighborhood inside. A flashing sign announces community events and what's on sale at Tom Thumb. These are people who enjoy cutting their shrubs into geometric shapes (or having them cut). Not that there's anything wrong with that.



TOWN IN COUNTRY: Parker maintains a rural feel even though it's just down the road from Plano. It's home to Southfork Ranch and a peacock-inhabited vineyard.

5. Parker

Population: 3,300

Annual growth since 1990: 7.4%

Average home sales price in 2007: \$451,834

Median age of residents: 40.8

Families with kids under 18: 33.8%

Median household income: \$101,786

What They Say: Parker isn't different just because Southfork Ranch sits within its borders. Its people are different, too. "It seems like the people who want to have some land to themselves kind of like their independence," one resident says. Locals are drawn to its seclusion (there's no easy way in or out), the shady walks, grazing horses—all just a few blocks from Plano. Parker might seem like it's in the middle of nowhere, but Realtor Dacia Reyes puts it another way: "We are literally in the smack middle of everything." Parker is all about low density within its five square miles. Builders must maintain an average of two acres for each lot. It's difficult to find property here for less than \$200,000, and prices go up to \$3 million. Most builders are doing custom homes. A new subdivision, Brooks Farm, is in the works and should include a new elementary school.

What We Say: You don't drive through Parker. You *meander* through it. The roads and mindset give you no choice. The pecan trees are plentiful (as are the pecans in the winter) and the green on a spring day seems never ending. We were most intrigued, though, by the Khatter Vineyard. Just four miles east on Parker Road, you'll see a peacock sign, leading you to the vineyard and tasting room. You might even see a peacock while tasting their award-winning Cab. Remember, it's all about the meander.



THE REEL WORLD: Two kids try their luck at Lakeside Park, in Highland Park.

6. Highland Park

Population: 8,600

Annual growth since 1990: -1.6%

Average home sales price in 2007: \$1,515,541

Median age of residents: 42

Families with kids under 18: 33.6%

Median household income: \$149,380

What They Say: While residents certainly can afford private school, the public schools are a major draw. So is the focus on children. Last year, Highland Park banned cell phone use by drivers within school zones during mornings and afternoons, a move followed by University Park (the ban might go citywide, in both towns). Other pluses: the Katy Trail, proximity to Dallas, and the feeling of safety that allows some residents to leave their doors unlocked. The construction on Mockingbird Lane is a major drawback, albeit a temporary one, scheduled to be done in January. Other drawbacks are its lack of diversity, the competitiveness of the school system, and the George W. Bush Presidential Library, whose attendant traffic increase has people on both sides of the political spectrum worried. When moving in, the most common request is to live near Highland Park Village or a specific elementary school. In HP, \$900,000 will get you a small cottage, while you might be able to score a home along Mockingbird Lane for \$700,000. From there, prices quickly go into the multi-millions.

What We Say: The term “parkie” is in the Urban Dictionary. Used in a sentence: “Look at those rich parkies in their BMWs.” Many who don’t live in HP harbor unkind feelings about those who do—for their affluence and for the ostentatious display thereof. But underpinning those feelings probably lies something that looks a lot like envy. In most places, bulk trash pickup comes monthly. In Highland Park, it comes whenever you wish. Just imagine.

7. Murphy

Population: 12,450

Annual growth since 1990: 16.1%

Average home sales price in 2007: \$305,360

Median age of residents: 33.9

Families with kids under 18: 47%

Median household income: \$83,547

What They Say: Where there was recently only a field, now an entire retail center—Lowe’s, Sprouts, 24-Hour Fitness—is under construction. While some residents enjoy the conveniences, others would rather keep traffic to a minimum and drive to Plano to shop. The day the local Baskin-Robbins gave away 31-cent ice cream cones, a line of parents and kids formed outside for hours. Locals enjoy the community and the lingering. The diversity is surprising. “Just about any nationality I can think of, I can find here in Murphy,” one resident says. You get a lot of house for your money, with a new 2,800-square-foot home going for \$290,000. Overall, homes range from \$150,000 to \$800,000. Minimum lot sizes are 9,000 square feet, though most run closer to 12,000. Homes must have side-entry garages, creating a bit of intentional space

for everyone.

What We Say: Just when you think you have the feel for this small town bordering Plano—quiet neighborhoods with the occasional herd of sheep—you run across the enormous Tom Kimbrough Stadium, where Plano teams play football. It looks out of place in a small town. That's the conundrum in Murphy: how to take a small town and update it without creating disharmony. We were surprised to find a market with Ethiopian food here, but the Medina International Grocery at Murphy Road and 544 will have us coming back for its curry and flatbread.



A WAKE IN AMERICA: Custom homes in Highland Shores on Lake Lewisville run about \$1 million.

8. Highland Village

Population: 14,650

Annual growth since 1990: 5.4%

Average home sales price in 2007: \$289,028

Median age of residents: 37.7

Families with kids under 18: 53.2%

Median household income: \$102,141

What They Say: The biggest news in Highland Village is the Shops at Highland Village, a mini-version of Southlake Town Center. The upscale retail center houses Harry & David, Patrizio, Rockfish, a 12-screen movie theater, lululemon athletica, and a Nestle Tollhouse ice cream/cookie shop (who knew such a thing existed?). Residents often call the police when they go on vacation. One got a call back while out of town, asking about a truck parked in her driveway (it was the pool man). "My husband travels a whole lot, yet I feel really safe even when he's gone," she says. "I go out in our subdivision late at night by myself, put my headphones on and just walk." New conveniences and development mean more traffic, which residents aren't keen on. The terrain looks like Oak Cliff on a lake, with more hills than we North Texans might expect. New construction in Stillbrooke and Stonebrook subdivisions runs \$200,000 to \$400,000. Custom homes in Highland Shores, the most popular upscale neighborhood, are more than \$1 million. Newer homes on Lake Lewisville start at \$600,000, although an older home on the water (a rarity on the market) can go for \$300,000 to \$400,000.

What We Say: Here's what upscale suburban will get you: the Highland Village Wal-Mart has fresh sushi and a bicycle center (instead of an automotive center). The town's Inland Trails are one of its best features, connecting neighborhoods to schools to anywhere a pedestrian might want to go. So far, the trails cover 2.7 miles, but 5 miles of additional trails are in the works.

9. Keller

Population: 37,700

Annual growth since 1990: 7.5%

Average home sales price in 2007: \$301,539

Median age of residents: 35

Families with kids under 18: 52%

Median household income: \$86,232

What They Say: Last year, Keller was voted the 50th best place to live in the United States by CNN's Money.com (the only other Dallas-Fort Worth cities mentioned were Mansfield, No. 83, and Grapevine, No. 97). Keller is an affordable option to its neighboring cities, drawing families who want to live off one income. The city is full of bike trails, including a favorite along Bear Creek where you'll trek by a few longhorns along the way. Residents have high hopes for the city's new ArtHouse, a tres chic retail and residential space with lofts. There is plenty of new construction still going on in Keller, most on the west side of Highway 377. Homes range from the low \$100,000s to \$500,000.

What We Say: We were amused by the sign announcing "goats for sale" just down the street from enormous homes in the Tuscany addition (one almost 5,000-square-foot home was listed for \$800,000). Why pay Southlake home prices when Keller's amenities are so close and you've got cool projects like the ArtHouse in the works?



PICTURE PERFECT: Mature trees and quaint new homes make Flower Mound an ideal suburb.

10. Flower Mound

Population: 62,350

Annual growth since 1990: 10.4%

Average home sales price in 2007: \$294,269

Median age of residents: 33.3

Families with kids under 18: 56.8%

Median household income: \$95,416

What They Say: People in Flower Mound always mention the trees and the proximity to the airport. Housing is relatively inexpensive compared to neighboring cities, and commercial development has brought residents a Kroger, pizza, and burgers. What it hasn't brought is diversity. "I don't like the white bread nature of it," one resident says. "Everybody is just like us. It gives the kids a tainted view of what life is really like." Still, it's a friendly town, a place where you have to factor in talking time for a trip to the grocery store because you'll always run into people you know. "We have watched Flower Mound go from cow pastures to city without losing the essence of 'rural,'" another resident says. You can get an older home, probably from the mid-'70s, in the \$150,000s, while a place on Lake Grapevine will go for more than \$1 million.

What We Say: Love the lack of chains in the city's Parker Square. Okay, there's a Smoothie King inside the Excite Gym and a Mi Cocina, but you've never heard of anything else: Kay's Kloset, Thai Tango, Crush! Wine Boutique, Burger Bistro, and the Music Conservatory of Texas. We respect Flower Mound's nature,

as do they: almost 13 acres of the original mound of wildflowers belong to a non-profit, and the city mandates developers work around existing trees.

Four Burbs to Watch

They didn't score high in our ranking, but each has a story to tell.

No. 22 Plano Not As Bad As You Remember

In the late '90s, 18 Plano teenagers overdosed on heroin. This decade, it was in the news for teen steroid use. By 2005, though, CNN's Money magazine named Plano the best place to live in the Western United States.

So how did Plano turn its image around? It started when DART came to downtown in 2002, the same year Pat Evans became mayor. "I moved here in 1972 and we were 17,000 people, a bedroom community," she says. "We have totally reversed our way of thinking of what Plano is and should be."

Plano's historic downtown has bricked streets, an Austrian pub, and West Village-like housing. More than 900 more housing units are planned in the space where Eisenbergs Skatepark sits. It has Legacy, a modern, walkable community with everything from Frito-Lay to luxury apartments and Taco Diner. A performing arts center is in the works to be the anchor of a 124-acre park and arts destination at Custer Road and Highway 121.

Mayor Evans says, "It was easy to say this is a wealthy, successful place and look at the problems they've had. The schools tried to do their job of taking care of the kids. Our police pioneered a new way of prosecuting the drug dealers, holding the dealers responsible for the deaths that took place. And at the same time, we were building a city."

No. 18 Roanoke Most Improved Suburb

What has this Denton County town of 6,000 or so done to move up 20 spots from the last time we ranked suburbs? Well, the city's overall housing score almost doubled, mainly because of how home values have increased here. Two years ago, Roanoke's home prices were dropping. This time around, they increased 17.7 percent from 2005 to 2007.

The city has also become safer. In 2005, Roanoke had 2.3 violent crimes per 1,000 residents, while in 2007 it had 0.88 per 1,000 residents. In non-violent crimes, Roanoke had 23.54 per 1,000 last time, 15.96 per 1,000 this year.

Sales tax receipts help, too. Roanoke sits at the crossing of three major highways, 377, 114, and 170. This has drawn in Wal-Mart, Chili's, and Home Depot. "That one corner at 377 and 114 produces over a million dollars in sales tax each year," says Mayor Scooter Gierisch, a lifelong resident. With this influx of cash, the city built a 5,000-square-foot community pool, a state-of-the-art recreation center, and a new fire department. A new library is in the works. The city pays its fire and police personnel well, resulting in better people who give better services. The city is also developing its downtown area, called Oak Street, following Grapevine's model.

No. 42 Wylie Fast & Furious

Wylie is the eighth-fastest-growing suburb in the nation. Wylie's population grew 109.3 percent from 2000 to 2006, from 15,619 to 32,600. Now the city is up to about 42,000, according to John Mondy, who was the mayor of Wylie for 10 years, until his term ended in May.

"We had a sudden acceleration seven or eight years ago," Mondy says. And with its current boundaries, the city could grow to 65,000 people. Every major road in Wylie will be widened and improved in the next three years. The city has more than a million square feet of retail development in the works, of which 650,000 will be built in the next few years (news of the Super Target has Wylie and neighboring suburbs buzzing). The city's 6,000-square-foot library will be replaced by one seven times that size, and the city is putting \$5.4 million into Founder's Park.

No. 24 Grapevine More Than the Gaylord

In the late '80s, Grapevine and Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport got into it over runways, causing the airport to take a good chunk of its tax dollars and go home.

"We were kind of an airport city," says William D. Tate, who has been Grapevine's mayor off and on over

the last three decades. "That was really our future. That had changed and no longer was a viable option. We decided we had to become independent of the airport."

City officials decided to start with Grapevine's heritage. The city is the oldest in Tarrant County. And it had Grapevine Lake. Plenty of people came to town, yet Grapevine didn't have a way to monetize those visits. "We decided to be a hospitality city, to be in the entertainment business as a way to attract those dollars," Tate says.

And attract they did. The city has GrapeFest, Main Street Days, and the New Vintage Wine Trail. Downtown you'll find eight wine tasting rooms, impressive public art, and the nearby Nash Farm (an 1880s homestead). The Glass Cactus might not be Denton, but it does have a respectable live music scene. The city went after and got Grapevine Mills Mall, the Bass Pro Shop, the Gaylord Texan, Ripley's Aquarium, and the Great Wolf Lodge—all in the last 10 years.