

2023's Dirtiest Cities in America

by Staff Writer | Updated: February 16, 2023 | 0 Comments

[Studies](#)



City living has its advantages, but more residents usually means more pollution, more rats, and more trash. The problem is worse in some cities than in others.

[LawnStarter](#) ranked [2023's Dirtiest Cities in America](#) following one of the trashiest times of the year, the winter holiday season.

We compared over 150 of the biggest U.S. cities across four categories, including pollution, living conditions, infrastructure, and consumer satisfaction.

Depending on where you live, you may want to buy some air fresheners, mouse traps, or a can of Raid.

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City Rankings

See how your city and others fared in our ranking:

Search:

| Overall Rank (1 = Dirtiest) ⚡ | City ⚡ | State ⚡ | Overall Score ⚡ | Pollution Rank ⚡ | Living Conditions Rank ⚡ | Infrastruct Rank ⚡ |
|----------------------------------|----------------|---------|-----------------|------------------|--------------------------|--------------------|
| 1 | Houston | TX | 56.02 | 3 | 4 | |
| 2 | Newark | NJ | 55.25 | 14 | 5 | |
| 3 | San Bernardino | CA | 51.58 | 1 | 56 | |
| 4 | Detroit | MI | 48.3 | 9 | 35 | |
| 5 | Jersey City | NJ | 48.11 | 50 | 2 | |
| 6 | Bakersfield | CA | 47.95 | 27 | 69 | |
| 7 | San Antonio | TX | 47.43 | 34 | 12 | |
| 8 | Fresno | CA | 47.27 | 31 | 81 | |
| 9 | Oklahoma City | OK | 46.51 | 5 | 25 | |
| 10 | Yonkers | NY | 46.36 | 46 | 8 | |

| | | | | | |
|----|------------|----|-------|-----|----|
| 11 | Shreveport | LA | 46.34 | 26 | 86 |
| 12 | New York | NY | 46.19 | 102 | 1 |



Showing 1 to 12 of 12 entries



Note: For presentation purposes, not all ties may be displayed for some of the above metrics.

The Good, the Bad, and the Dirty

Houston, We Have a Problem

Space City lands at the top of our ranking's trash heap as America's Dirtiest City. It claims the title from Newark, New Jersey, its 2022 predecessor and this year's No. 2.

Among the 152 cities we ranked, Space City is the third most polluted. In fact, a recent [study](#) found that the city's petrochemical facilities severely violate EPA safety guidelines.

Our data supports those findings: Houston ranks third worst in greenhouse gas emissions from large industrial facilities. The city has the biggest cockroach problem, too, according to the Census Bureau.

Despite such conditions, Houstonians are still more satisfied with the cleanliness of their city than the residents of 33 other big cities, including Amarillo (No. 33) and Fort Worth (No. 32).

Salt Life = the Good Life?

“Coastal” doesn’t necessarily equate with “clean,” but cities close to water, particularly in California, Virginia, and North Carolina, dominate the 10 cleanest spots in our ranking.

For the second consecutive year, Virginia Beach, Virginia, outshines all other cities in our ranking. The city’s stellar scorecard includes lack of Pollution (No. 149) and above-average Living Conditions (No. 112) that come highly praised by locals (No. 132 in Consumer Satisfaction).

Farther inland cities like Fremont, California (No. 148), and Winston-Salem, North Carolina (No. 146), also sparkled based on similar rankings.

At No. 149, Des Moines is the lone exception representing the Heartland, thanks to fantastic scores across the board, especially in Living Conditions.

All Choked Up

Los Angeles (15th dirtiest) is often characterized as the poster child of pollution. However, the Inland Empire region — once an orange paradise and now a [sea of warehouses](#) east of LA — has consistently ranked [worst](#) for air quality in the nation.

This trend bears out in our own study. The biggest cities making up Inland Empire, such as San Bernardino, Riverside, and Ontario, all tied for the poorest median air quality.

It’s a pretty low bar to cross when one’s own residents already consider their city the “[Armpit of California](#),” but San Bernardino managed to downgrade from fourth to third dirtiest this year.

This negative sentiment among locals also bears out in our ranking: For the second year in a row, San Bernardino has the most dissatisfied residents when it comes to the cleanliness of their city. Other cities in the region fared better overall, but some weren’t far off in Consumer Satisfaction.

Surprising Findings

The Life Un-aquatic

The Southwest water crisis is a double whammy — both [quantity](#) and quality are in decline. A decades-long drought, climate change, and over-consumption have not only zapped the

Southwest's water supply, but they also have exacerbated drinking-water [contamination](#).

Except for Salt Lake City, every Southwest city we ranked violated the Safe Drinking Water Act at least once in 2020, the year of the most recent EPA data.

Lack of access to clean water — let alone water itself — can drastically reduce quality of life, but the Southwest's cleanliness problem extends beyond unsafe drinking water. Every city in this region landed in the worse half of our ranking. Las Vegas is the dirtiest among them at No. 19, while Chandler, Arizona, is the “cleanest” at No. 71.

The Butt of All Dirty Jokes

Ohioans are kicking butts — cigarette butts, that is — onto places where they shouldn't. Cigarette butts are the [most littered](#) item across the globe, and in some of the Buckeye State's biggest cities, it's one of the filthiest problems.

Five out of the six Ohio cities we ranked occupy the top six spots of our “share of smokers” metric. Cleveland has the highest percentage, 29.1%, among the six Ohio cities, while Columbus — one of the cleanest cities overall at No. 137 — has the lowest at 22.1%.

That's not to say every smoker in Ohio litters, but cigarette butts are a common sight across the state — despite strict [litter laws](#). Thankfully, cities like Cleveland have introduced [programs](#) to help residents kick their littering habit.

Our data suggests, however, that the state needs better programs to help residents kick their smoking habit, too.

Ask The Experts

Trash, smog, and pests are unsightly, but many of us don't consider the deeper impact of filth — and our own filthy habits — on our lives.

We turned to a panel of urban planning and sanitation experts to help us better understand those effects and how to improve our cities. Read their thoughts below.

1. In what ways does a dirty city directly affect its citizens?
2. What steps can cities take to achieve a cleaner environment and better air quality?
3. Cleanliness isn't cheap. How can local governments balance their budgets while spending the necessary funds to keep their cities clean?

4. What lessons can we learn from some of the world's cleanest big cities like Copenhagen and Singapore?
5. How can individual residents contribute to a cleaner city?



Kevin Svitana
Professor, Biolo...



Richard S...
Agricultural...



Dr. Jerry Kavouras
Associate...



Dr. Edgar Stach
Institute directo...



Morgan Berman
Thomas Jeffers...

Methodology

For each of the 200 biggest U.S. cities, we gathered publicly available data on the factors listed in the table below.

We then grouped those factors into four categories: Pollution, Living Conditions, Infrastructure, and Consumer Satisfaction.

Next, we calculated weighted scores for each city in each category.

Finally, we averaged the scores for each city across all categories. We eliminated 48 cities lacking sufficient data for a fair comparison, resulting in a final sample size of 152 cities.

The city that earned the highest average score was ranked “Dirtiest” (No. 1), while the city with the lowest was ranked “Cleanest” (No. 152). (Note: The “Cleanest” among individual factors may not be No. 152 due to ties.)

| Metric | Weighting | Lowest Value | Highest Value | Dirtiest |
|---|-----------|--------------|---------------|----------|
| Pollution | | | | |
| Median Air Quality Index | 5 | 23 | 84 | Highest |
| Presence of Water Quality Violations (1 = Present, 0 = Not Present) | 3 | 0 | 1 | Highest |
| Greenhouse-Gas Emissions (Metric Tons CO ₂ e) per Capita | 3 | 0 | 31 | Highest |
| Annual Excess Fuel Consumption (Gallons per Auto Commuter) | 1 | 3 | 23 | Highest |
| Percentage of Smokers | 3 | 7% | 29% | Highest |
| Living Conditions | | | | |
| Population Density (Residents per Square Mile) | 2 | 169 | 28,182 | Highest |

| Metric | Weighting | Lowest Value | Highest Value | Dirtiest |
|---|-----------|--------------|---------------|----------|
| Share of Overcrowded Homes | 1 | 0% | 13.7% | Highest |
| Share of Homes with No Kitchen Facilities | 1 | 0.5% | 18.9% | Highest |
| Share of Homes with No Plumbing Facilities | 1 | 0.1% | 16.5% | Highest |
| Share of Homes with Mold | 2 | 1.7% | 5.2% | Highest |
| Share of Homes with Signs of Mice or Rats | 3 | 0.2% | 21.6% | Highest |
| Share of Homes with Signs of Cockroaches | 3 | 1.3% | 37% | Highest |
| Share of Homes with Sewage Disposal Breakdowns | 2 | 1.7% | 5.2% | Highest |
| Unsheltered Homeless Rate (per 1,000 Residents) | 1 | 0 | 5.4 | Highest |
| Infrastructure | | | | |
| Tons of Waste in Landfills per 100,000 Residents | 3 | 0 | 24.4 Million | Highest |
| Rating of State Waste Regulations and Measures | 2 | 1 | 50 | Highest |
| Refuse and Recycling Collectors per 100,000 Residents | 1 | 7 | 242 | Lowest |
| Alternative-Fuel Stations per 100,000 Residents | 1 | 5 | 194 | Lowest |
| Number of Junk Yards | 1 | 0 | 121 | Highest |
| Consumer Satisfaction | | | | |
| Share of Residents Who Find City Dirty and Untidy | 3 | 0% | 92% | Highest |
| Share of Residents Dissatisfied with Pollution | 3 | 0% | 71% | Highest |
| Share of Residents Dissatisfied with Garbage Disposal | 2 | 0% | 82% | Highest |
| Share of Residents Dissatisfied with Greenery and Parks | 1 | 0% | 100% | Highest |

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Sources: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, County Health Rankings & Roadmaps, National Transportation Research Nonprofit (TRIP), Numbeo, Other LawnStarter Studies, Salvage-Parts.com, Texas A&M Transportation Institute, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Energy, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

Why This Study Matters

During the pandemic, lockdowns helped clean our air and water, but old habits die hard. Nearly three years later, pollution is [worse](#) in many urban areas, and U.S. emissions are [back up](#).

In many cities, residents also deal with pests, litter, and even bad [waste-management services](#).

These problems are unsightly, but they're more harmful than we might realize. Air pollution, for instance, worsens [lung cancer](#) and increases our chances of [heart disease and stroke](#).

Dealing with dirt and grime can be a huge drain on municipal budgets, too. San Francisco, for example, spent [\\$72.5 million](#) in 2019 to clean its streets, up from [\\$46 million](#) in 2017.

Where does all that money come from? You, the taxpayer.

Here's the bottom line: Dirty cities aren't just an eyesore — they also damage our bodies and our wallets.

As spring cleaning season arrives, it's a good time to check on our dirty habits and make positive changes for a healthier life and a more beautiful city to enjoy.

Clean cities tend to have lots of tidy, healthy, green lawns. If you need help getting and keeping your yard looking picture-perfect and pest-free, [LawnStarter's pros can help](#).

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