

## America's Most Sinful Cities?

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What are America's most sinful cities? How could we know? Well, give *Forbes* magazine credit for giving this ranking challenge a try. The magazine recently offered rankings on the traditional seven deadly sins — and ranked America's "top ten" on each sin.

The folks at *Forbes* determined a way of tracking statistics on each of the sins. As the staff explained, "For each sin we stretched our imagination to find a workable proxy—murder rates for wrath, per capita billionaires for avarice—then culled the available data sources to rank the cities. Some of the results were surprising: Salt Lake City as America's Vainest City. Some were not: Detroit as America's Most Murderous."

Here are the sins and the top cities in each sinful category:

Most Lustful: Denver ranked first, joined by San Antonio, Portland, Seattle, Salt Lake City, Boise, Washington, DC, Cincinnati, Columbus, Baltimore and Buffalo/Rochester. The research firm of AC Nielson used sales figures for contraceptives and sex items in ranking the list.

Most Jealous: Memphis tops the list, followed by Charlotte, San Antonio, Seattle, Providence, Phoenix, Salt Lake City, Columbus, Oklahoma City, Chicago. The rankings were linked to crime rates for personal property.

Most Obese [Gluttony]: Memphis, Birmingham, San Antonio, Riverside/San Bernardino, Detroit, Jacksonville, Nashville, Oklahoma City, Kansas City, San Diego. Health statistics drove this listing.

Most Avaricious [Greed]: San Jose, San Francisco, Seattle, Denver, Boston, New York, Dallas, Los Angeles, Washington, Miami. The rankings on this sin were determined by looking at the concentration of great wealth.

Most Murderous [Wrath]: The crime statistics are clear — the most murderous city is Detroit, followed by Baltimore, New Orleans, Newark, St. Louis, Oakland, Washington DC, Cincinnati, Philadelphia, and Buffalo.

Most Slothful [Sedentary]: Memphis tops this list as well, followed by New Orleans, Las Vegas, Detroit, Birmingham, Louisville, San Antonio, Jacksonville, Nashville, and Miami.

Most Vain [Pride]: "Pride is supposed to be a deadly sin. When it comes to their looks, however, fewer Americans are seeing it that way," say the reporters, who used plastic surgery as the marker for this sin. Perhaps surprisingly, Salt Lake City ranked first, followed by San Francisco, San Diego, San Jose, Miami, Louisville, Nashville, Virginia Beach, New York, and Los Angeles.

Interestingly, the Bible and the Christian tradition often associate sin with cities. The concentration of human beings in cities often fuels the business of sin and presents opportunities not available elsewhere. From the "cities of the plains" to Nineveh, Babylon, and Rome, cities often became symbols of human pride, lust, and egoistic sin.

Similarly, John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* — perhaps the most influential book in English (other than the Bible) among Christians — symbolized the sinfulness and allure of the city in its portrayal of Vanity Fair.

But what about the *Forbes* list? In the final analysis, it is probably not worth more than conversation points. Are the

folks in Salt Lake City really more vain than those in Atlanta? Are citizens of Memphis really more jealous than those of Houston? Who can know? The statistics chosen for the report tell only part of the story.

Still, it is interesting to ponder the question of whether sins are particularly celebrated and concentrated in certain cities. It would be hard to ignore the self-advertisement of Las Vegas. Yet, it is not true that what happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas. Sins spill over quite readily, and sin is a powerful contagion.

In reality, the whole world is a Genesis 3 world — a fallen world inhabited by sinners. Sin is a universal problem and every single human being is a sinner. Put sinful humanity in close quarters, and sin inevitably multiplies.

If anything, the *Forbes* sin listings should remind Christians of the great challenge of evangelizing the cities — a task that demonstrates Christian failure to date. In that sense the *Forbes* list is haunting, humbling, and heart-breaking. Yet, in another sense, it may also be motivating. We can hope.

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