

You're a thousand times more likely to perish crossing the street to purchase a low-cal, low-cholesterol, low-sodium, healthy heart banana frozen yogurt at the 7-Eleven than are you to perish while sipping on a three martini-juicy steak transcontinental brunch, as you nervously twist the olives about its tiny toothpick-skewer at 30,000 feet in a plane crash. Stay in the water too: you're more likely to die from a bee sting than are you from a shark bite. And you don't have to fall from out of the sky in that speeding fireball to simply become another digit in that ubiquitous mortality table: Far more of us will die from a slip around the house -- the stairwell, the bathtub, the back porch -- than will we from a drowning, fire, choking, bullet or poison. Just stay out of the car, and you'll live to enjoy your hard-earned IRA's. Maybe.

Statistics and their myriad systems of computations by which we can separate our predispositions, prejudices and plain superstitions from the hardened facts of empirical evidence do not lie. We can, and do, however, lie through them and for them, as we stretch, fold, mutilate, soften, and spin these numbers toward our own shepherded ends. For this very reason, we often find these very same numbers, paradoxically, incapable of telling any truth. Simply summon any Monday-morning actuary, that is, the marketers of Classic Coke, for example. Numbers don't have taste buds, we find, just averaged ones. There is, we realize, a telling

difference between biologic longevity and glandular receptivity.

The very difference between these two simultaneously sustains an insurance industry erroneously hen-pecking and leading astray a perceived consumer preference. Numbers, it seems, are only telling insofar as the people who use them.

Take -- and please look both ways before you cross the street and read on here -- Money Magazine's latest rankings for the "Best Places To Live." If numbers were ever given a spin, the editors here have employed a centrifuge. We are told they solicited answers from 252 of their subscribers: median age 48, median household income \$66,550, sans cranial circumference. And what, pray tell, did these folks (as averaged as you or I, the editors impose) see as their number one priority in evaluating the very best place to live? A community immune from human suffering? Accessible hair-dresser or stockbroker? No, Silly. Clean water.

Now, one must ask, do they mean to say clean water from the tap, a good well, the soundness of their ground water/table, acid-less rain, or just a nice, clean, wet, deep and wide spot to plunk their boats in which to delight in the good, clean fun of water skiing, as the story photograph of the Halls (presumably Bremerton, WA's first family as well) suggests? Cheerio! When people insist that their number one priority for "staking a claim" is clean water, one begins to wonder if: a)

claimants are refugees from Love Canal or b) any known set of numbers, real or imagined, could have averaged these people out. That is, we ought to assimilate these findings closer to our taste buds than should we our periodic or tide tables. Let's take the Big Gulp, then, and have a go at it, shall we? In fact, let's see just how hard these numbers have had to be worked simply to come-up with an "average" Money Magazine subscriber, shall we? After all, these numbers aren't here to better determine the red-shift of receding galaxies. They're here, of course, to better determine the amount of kerning needed separate the letters JERK.

How, then, do MM readers prioritize their stakes to a claim?

Number two on their list "low crime rate," is perhaps, after all, most understandable and sympathetic. Nobody likes to get mugged. Thank God, these numbers crunchers must have mused, they're not likely to encounter pirates between the calm shores of their clean lakes.

Number three, "clean air," is again understandable, though I can't imagine many places with clean air. Why don't they simply prioritize by saying: "A place where everybody walks." A motor's tailpipe may be clean air's sootiest enemy. I guess when vehemently prioritizing, hardship takes a back seat. Shudder at the thought of inconvenience.

Numbers four and five are most curious, if not clearly reeling the numbers crunchers around the carousel.: "many doctors" and "availability of hospitals" can mean more than just adequate access to medical assistance. Could it be that most of those surveyed (median income \$66M plus) are in some way tied to the medical profession? Or are those surveyed simply outrageous hypochondriacs, filled with aquatic nightmares of getting slapped between the ears by a slippery, errant water ski? Loch Ness feces? Algae on general assistance?

At numbers eight and nine we find low taxes, both income and property. With priorities of numbers one through seven having direct relationship to governments' willingness and capability to give and maintain clean water and air, together with the high costs of medical care, one wonders who they expect to pay for all of these priorities. You can't have your hydrocake and chew it too.

Ten through fifteen prioritize economic strength, stability and potential. Secure from all bodily harms -- bad water, bad air, pirates, severe lacerations and concussions and primordial poops -- those surveyed now turn to secure their burgeoning wallets (hey, remember, low taxes). No place on earth operates in an economic vacuum. All places and industries have slow and fast times. No place is recession-proofed. Perhaps they mean, in effect, the easiest place to launder their money,

phosphate-free, of course. Obviously, the numbers here weren't designed to calibrate naiveté.

At number sixteen we find -- Oh! these monogrammed starched shirts -- "cheap car insurance." Hey, what happened to all that clean air? Turn to just hot air? Priorities indeed. I say raise the rates as high as the Seattle Kingdome's steeple and let everyone backpack.

Cursorily, we almost miss number seventeen, "good public schools." Nice of them to think about the kids, isn't it?

At number eighteen we find "Conservationist's rating," without, I'm relieved to report, any explanation as to what exactly this means or entails. Perhaps we ought to consult with Green Peace.

Numbers twenty and twenty-one "near lakes and oceans" and "close to colleges" suggest that maybe they were talking about tap water in number one after all, and that -- near the halfway mark in prioritizing here -- they would perhaps like to see those kids, hardly heard or seen in high school, go away to college. Alternatively, they could be suggesting that they're on the fence about continuing their own education. Of course, any college worth its ivy offers wind surfing.

At twenty-three we may be quite surprised and perplexed to find "small chance of radon gas" (as slight chance, we must infer, would not interfere too much with the water sports). Surprising, as the scope of this

problem, far from established and fully understood, is just now become of serious and intense study. Perhaps they indeed prioritize the availability of medicine to help them cope with their tendencies toward mass hysteria.

Numbers twenty-six and twenty-eight, "local amusements" and "near places of worship," in that order, are, respectively, puerile and quixotic. Must we infer that they prioritize pinball and skeetball over their choice of pew? We could, but let's just assume them to know that every corner has a church. Though they must realize, at median age of 48 after all, that most arcades are open Sundays, too.

At number thirty hysteria peeps its trembling countenance again with "chance of natural disasters." We all like to avoid the mess and tedium of disaster, no doubt, but being the "outdoorsy" types, those surveyed have probably hedged their bets here on the singular occasion when, in full commune with Mother Nature, she strikes -- flooding, quaking, burping -- and strikes them dead for a good, deserved measure.

At number thirty-two -- almost invisible through our daily haste -- "close to relatives," seems totally out of place here or anywhere in this survey of questions about the best place to live. 'Zounds, who needs people? They just pollute your air and water, mug and steal from you, crowd your pristine lakes, slopes and oceans, siphon your tax dollars for their general welfare and, generally, denigrate and devalue everything you've got or want.

People all too easily disintegrate your lifestyle. Besides, they insist on going to church, PTA meetings and other car-dependent activities. A real and true hindrance in consummating the ultimate lifestyle. Wash your hands of these.

And, finally, at number forty-two, those surveyed prioritized “skiing close by” long before they’d settle for “minor-league sports teams” (43) or sit and watch “near nuclear reactors” (44). Understandable, as when the lake freezes over you’d like to plunk your skis on the snow. Never mind that “sunny weather” at number thirty-one should prevent such a quick and easy change in sporting seasons. Apparently, even the numbers crunchers fell asleep.

As we might have guessed, the 252 Money Magazine subscribers surveyed are pretty active, outdoor types, not wishing to lack in any of the material goodies only the “Best Places To Live” can afford.

The numbers don’t lie here. But the truth is, should it ever want to be known, these numbers seem to indicate, seem to direct our attention, not necessarily to the best place to live, but rather to the best place to perhaps express a lifestyle, to manifest the ideal silhouette of living.

I think most Americans would be just as happy to simply have been excluded from mention here, their town or region left to blissful obscurity in light of the priorities expounded here. Pretty egotistical,

consumptive, selfish, “me-consuming” stuff. I wouldn’t want my hometown to reflect such an attitude nor mentality towards a lifestyle.

And I might be stretching it a notch, but I’ll go the limb and say that my hometown is a bit more concerned about our families, schools and community. Sure environment is important, as are the other considerations presented in choosing where is best to conduct our lives. But how we conduct our lives seems infinitely more important than where. Two-hundred and fifty-two jerks do not bespeak a nation. They bespeak only a publication.

So I patiently await Astronomy Magazine’s “Best Places To Live.” You know, number one, “availability of the building blocks of life....”