

Identifying Cities Comparable to Portland, Maine

November 2021

In considering changes to Portland's charter, it is natural to look at the charters of other cities to see how they address common governance issues: what powers do their mayors have relative to their city managers and councils; how do they approve their school budgets; how much do they pay their elected officials; etc. The problem, of course, is that the U.S. has roughly 19,500 incorporated cities and towns, and every one of them has distinguishing characteristics. The question, then, becomes how to identify a reasonable number of cities the Charter Commission may wish to study that are comparable to Portland in terms of population, importance to their surrounding regions, and general demographic characteristics. The Charter Commission Research Committee of the LWVPA has carefully considered this question and identified nine U.S. cities we think are most comparable to Portland. This note describes the process we used to identify these cities and presents a summary table of key demographic characteristics.

We did **not** look for comparable cities among those with populations substantially larger or smaller than Portland's. This is because the level of resources that local governments can bring to bear on the challenges they face is directly related to their size. Accordingly, we looked for cities between 45,000-90,000 in population. We chose this range because Portland's 2020 population (68,408) is in the middle of that range – i.e., these cities are no more than 33% smaller or 33% larger than Portland. There are just under 500 US cities in this range.

Cities selected had to be in states with total population and population density roughly similar to Maine, which ranks 43rd in population among the 50 states and 38th in population density (43 people/square mile). This limited us to states that have a total population below two million people and are in the bottom half of all states when ranked by density (i.e., fewer than 100 people/square mile). This also meant that states considered had three or fewer congressional districts. Ten states in addition to Maine met these criteria: Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont, West Virginia, and Wyoming.

Cities selected from these states had to be among the four largest cities in their state, be geographically distanced from any larger city (both in their own state or in a bordering state), and be the largest city, the economic hub, and the service center for their own surrounding urban/metropolitan region (as defined by the US Census Bureau¹).

For each city that met the above criteria, we looked at several additional demographic characteristics: median household income, per capita income, percent of the population which is non-white, and the percent of the population which is living below the poverty line. Although some variation must be expected, we wanted most of each city's figures to be reasonably similar to Portland's figures. The following table has population and demographic data for Portland and the nine U.S. cities that met our criteria. We used data sources reflecting city-level 2020 census results when available, otherwise we looked for the most recently updated source with comparable information covering all nine cities. Specific sources are shown in notes to the table.

¹See <https://www2.census.gov/geo/pdfs/reference/GARM/Ch13GARM.pdf> for definitions of different types of urban/metropolitan areas.

Population and Demographic Data for Cities Comparable to Portland, Maine

(Data accessed November 2021)

City & State	City Population (1)	Population Ranking Among Cities in State (2)	City Population per Sq Mi of Land Area (3)	Population of Metro Statistical Area (MSA) (4)	City Population as % of MSA (5)	% Non-white (6)	Median Household Income (7)	Income per Capita (7)	% Living in Poverty (8)
Portland, ME	68,408	1st	3,175	551,740	12%	15%	\$60,467	\$37,038	15%
Burlington, VT	44,743	1st	4,339	225,562	20%	15%	\$51,394	\$28,480	26%
Charleston, WV	48,864	1st	1,551	258,859	19%	22%	\$43,344	\$35,412	21%
Grand Island, NE	53,131	4th	1,768	77,038	69%	18%	\$54,965	\$27,203	13%
Cheyenne, WY	65,132	1st	2,019	100,512	65%	11%	\$64,598	\$35,637	10%
Idaho Falls, ID	64,818	4th	2,701	151,429	43%	12%	\$55,148	\$28,520	13%
Missoula, MT	73,489	2nd	2,130	117,922	62%	8%	\$47,426	\$30,810	18%
Bismarck, ND	73,622	2nd	2,123	133,626	55%	10%	\$64,444	\$37,487	9%
Rapid City, SD	74,703	2nd	1,366	139,074	54%	21%	\$52,351	\$31,299	16%
Santa Fe, NM	87,505	4th	1,675	154,823	57%	12%	\$57,972	\$37,081	14%
Mean of Comparables	65,112	2	2,186	150,983	49%	14%	\$54,627	\$32,437	16%
Median	65,132	2	2,019	139,074	55%	12%	\$54,965	\$31,299	14%

NOTES

Data Sources

Links (all accessed 11/17/21)

- (1) Based on 2020 Census results reported on Census Bureau Quick Facts (QF) website.
 (2) From Wikipedia U.S. cities series accessed by typing name of each city as in link.
 (3) Calculated using 2020 Census Population divided by 2020 city land area reported in U.S. Census Gazette Place files (using link at right, scroll down to "Places" file).
 (4) From U.S. Census Bureau's 2020 Population and Housing State Data website. Using link, select "all CBSA", "metro stat", state and "GO" for list & map of official MSA in the selected state. Note that Portland and So. Portland form a single MSA as do Burlington and So. Burlington. URL 4a provides definitions of urban/metro terminology.
 (5) Calculated as City Population/Population of MSA.
 (6) Census Bureau Quick Facts Website. Note that many respondents in Santa Fe who indicated "white" as a race classification also noted Hispanic or Latino as ethnic classifications; this was less common in other cities.
 (7) Averages for 2015-2019, reported in 2019 dollars by the Census Bureau using annual American Communities Survey data; accessed through Quick Facts website.
 (8) American Communities Survey, Census Bureau, accessed through Quick Facts.

- (1) <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/POP060210>
 (2) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grand_Island,_Nebraska
 (3) <https://www.census.gov/geographies/reference-files/time-series/geo/gazetteer-files.2020.html>
 (4) <https://www.census.gov/library/visualizations/interactive/2020-population-and-housing-state-data.html>
 (4a) <https://www2.census.gov/geo/pdfs/reference/GARM/Ch13GARM.pdf>
 (6) <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/POP060210>
 (7) <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/POP060210>
 (8) <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/POP060210>

* Some links do not work in PDF version; must be entered manually.