

If you live in this Florida county, your earnings go further

By Graham Brink
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We should all be lucky enough to live in St. Johns County.

Not for its cool beach towns or world-class golf. Not even for easy access to venerable St. Augustine.

No, we should go for the money.

For the fourth consecutive year, St. Johns residents ranked No. 1 in the state for purchasing power, according to a recent report from SmartAsset.

The financial technology company looked at every county in the country and compared the cost of living to the median income.

In St. Johns, a single adult with no kids spent a relatively high \$37,256 on basic living expenses, including food, clothing, housing, transportation and health care, according to the analysis. But with a median income of \$69,523 — by far the highest in the state — residents had more than \$32,000 left over, vaulting St. Johns to No. 1, well ahead of second-place Nassau County.

St. Johns benefits from a steady stream of tourists and residents who earn high salaries in nearby Jacksonville. In fact, it ranked in the top 30 in the nation for purchasing power, out of more than 3,100 counties.

Our Tampa Bay counties were more middle of the pack.

With a median income of \$51,681, the typical Hillsborough resident had more than \$15,000 left over after subtracting the basic cost of living. That ranked it 20th out of Florida's 67 counties. Not bad, though the county has slipped down from fourth in 2015.

Pinellas (No. 26) and Pasco (No. 31) had lower costs of living compared to Hillsborough, but also lower median incomes. Hernando and Citrus, which both ranked in the low 40s, were hurt by much lower income levels. The typical Citrus resident, for instance, earned just \$39,054.

It doesn't cost much to live in many of Florida's rural counties, but earnings were low, too. Madison County, on the border with Georgia, had the fifth-lowest cost of living in the country. Its median income, however, was so low that it still ranked near the bottom in purchasing power.

Mid-sized coastal counties like St. Johns generally scored better than their smaller inland neighbors, especially those home to low-paying agricultural jobs.

Case in point: Putnam County, which borders St. Johns to the west, had the state's lowest purchasing power, hurt by the state's second-lowest median income. The county ranked near the bottom in the nation.

Putnam's 5.6 percent unemployment rate in July was among the highest in the state. At 3 percent, St. Johns tied for lowest with Okaloosa.

In addition, a lower percentage of Putnam residents work or were looking for work. And despite having less than a third of St. Johns' population, Putnam had more residents on federal disability benefits.

Those factors all affect overall earnings, and they are hard to remedy.

Nationally, Williamson County, south of Nashville, Tenn., ranked No. 1. Its \$100,140 median income easily trumped a relatively high \$47,227 cost of living.

States with a lots of counties with high purchasing power include Wyoming, Nevada, Utah, North and South Dakota, New Jersey, Connecticut and Massachusetts. Texas, however, dominated, with five counties ranked among the top 10 in the nation.

At the other end, Mississippi, Alabama and Kentucky all had many counties with little purchasing power.

McCreary County, in southeast Kentucky, ranked last, with a median income less than \$19,000 and a cost of living of \$29,428.

Purchasing power: Who's got it?

St. Johns County south of Jacksonville isn't the cheapest place to live, but its \$69,523 median income is far higher than its \$37,256 cost of living. That gives its residents the most purchasing power in the state.

At the other end of the rankings, Putnam County has a relatively low cost of living, but it also has one of the state's lowest median incomes.

Tampa Bay's counties fall in the middle of the pack.

Florida rankings			
Rank	County	Cost of living	Median income
1.	St. Johns	\$37,256	\$69,523
2.	Nassau	\$36,038	\$59,156
3.	Clay	\$36,415	\$59,179
20.	Hillsborough	\$36,456	\$51,681
25.	Manatee	\$36,976	\$51,483
26.	Pinellas	\$33,902	\$47,090
31.	Pasco	\$33,848	\$46,010

42.	Citrus	\$31,173	\$39,054
43.	Hernando	\$33,955	\$42,274
65.	Dixie	\$31,001	\$34,634
66.	Glades	\$31,151	\$34,143
67.	Putnam	\$31,827	\$33,003
National rankings			
Rank	County	Cost of living	Median income
1.	Williamson, Tenn.	\$47,228	\$100,140
134.	King, Wash. (Seattle)	\$46,467	\$78,800
706.	Maricopa, Ariz. (Phoenix)	\$37,409	\$55,676
973.	San Francisco	\$60,700	\$87,701
1,025	Dallas	\$35,795	\$51,411
1,165	Fulton, Ga. (Atlanta)	\$41,602	\$58,851
1,392	Denver	\$40,733	\$56,258
1,479	Los Angeles	\$42,446	\$57,952
1,512	New York	\$55,543	\$75,513
3,133	McCreary, Ky.	\$29,429	\$18,972

Source: SmartAsset and the U.S. Census Bureau