

Quality of Place in Rural Maine: The Way Life Should Be

by Todd Gabe

ABSTRACT

This paper examines quality of place across Maine counties, with a focus on differences between rural and urban areas and comparisons to all US counties. A wide range of factors are considered, including climate (e.g., January temperature), natural features (e.g., percentage of area covered by water), the location of arts and recreation businesses (e.g., museums, skiing facilities, and marinas), services (e.g., healthcare and childcare), housing costs, local economic opportunities (e.g., job growth) and population density. Results show that several Maine counties rate high nationally for natural features, arts and recreation, healthcare and childcare services, and low population densities. However, people and places face significant tradeoffs when considering these different aspects of an area's quality of place. The study finds that attempts to enhance a region's quality of place need to recognize that individual preferences vary widely and actions that benefit one group may not align with the interests of others.

INTRODUCTION

A region's quality of place is an important factor affecting the well-being of its residents and can affect an area's ability to attract new households, retain its youth, and promote overall economic development. However, the features that influence quality of place are diverse, and the characteristics that one person might value could be of less importance to others. Put another way, quality of place is inherently subjective. Likewise, the very factors that impact an area's quality of place might be at odds. For some people, it is enhanced by having a wide range of natural and recreational amenities outside the dooryard, while others place a high premium on the availability of housing at a reasonable cost. Yet, because many amenities are capitalized into housing prices, it is difficult to find places that offer a rich set of amenities and the availability of low- to moderate-priced housing.

This study measures and compares quality of place across counties in Maine, examining differences between rural and urban areas and benchmarking Maine counties in the context of regions across the entire United States.¹

The main thesis is that quality-of-place factors vary across Maine counties, yet the patterns among these indicators reveal tradeoffs that people and places face, reflecting the notion that different aspects of quality of place matter more to some individuals than to others. I consider a wide range of amenities, including climate (e.g., July precipitation), natural features (e.g., ruggedness of the terrain), and the location of arts and recreation businesses (e.g., museums). The study also considers quality-of-place factors related to essential services such as healthcare and childcare, housing costs, the economic opportunities that are available in a place (e.g., job growth in recent years), and

places with low population densities. I acknowledge at the outset that these characteristics provide an imperfect and incomplete indication of an area's quality of place. Likewise, I recognize that few places on earth could provide a combination of high-level amenities (e.g., pleasant weather, lakes, mountains, lots of arts and things to do) along with housing at a low cost, good services and a strong local economy—all in an area where people have ample personal space. Nevertheless, I set this standard to help benchmark regions and to illustrate the tradeoffs among different factors that contribute to an area's quality of place.

State and local officials in Maine recognize the importance of quality of place, and the writing of this article comes almost 20 years after the release of the 2006 Brookings Report *Charting Maine's Future*, which had the quality of place of Maine's communities at the forefront of factors important to the state's future economic prosperity.² Following the report's release, Governor John Baldacci created the Governor's Council on Maine's Quality of Place, which recommended an asset-based development strategy that builds from the expertise and abilities of a region's "workforce, businesses,

organizations, and institutions; and its natural, historical, and cultural resources” (GCMQP 2007: 14) The current study considers seven quality-of-place indicators that cover natural (e.g., rugged terrain, water area), historical and cultural (e.g., museums) amenities, the availability of healthcare and childcare workers and businesses, and other factors related to climate, housing costs, and the local economy. Many of these factors were identified 20 years ago as important to Maine’s quality of place, yet they remain relevant to current discussions of community well-being and economic development.

Although most people agree that quality of place matters, there are differences in how individuals perceive an area’s quality of place and in the specific features they consider most important. For example, research shows that personal characteristics influence how recreational amenities contribute to an individual’s sense of place (Jorgensen and Stedman 2006). Furthermore, a 2025 survey conducted by the Maine Department of Economic and Community Development (DECD) revealed wide variation among recent migrants in how they rated the importance of different factors in their decision to move to Maine (WEA 2025).

FACTORS AFFECTING QUALITY OF PLACE ACROSS MAINE COUNTIES

Table 1 shows how Maine counties stack up nationally by seven quality-of-place indicators. The numbers in the table range from 1 to 10, and they indicate a county’s decile ranking across 3,013 US counties.³ The analysis is scaled such that higher numbers are “better” and a 10 indicates the county is in the top 10 percent nationally, a 9 indicates the county is in the top 20 percent, and 8 represents top 30 percent, and so on.

The counties are arranged in Table 1 by their Urban Influence Code, as defined by the USDA (USDA ERS 2024). Urban Influence Codes range from 1 to 9, where categories 1 to 3 indicate counties that are part of large urban areas (at least 1 million people) and counties that are adjacent to them. There are no large metros in Maine and no counties that are adjacent to a large metropolitan area. The absence of large metropolitan areas in Maine means that the rural to urban comparisons, discussed later in the article, do not present as stark a contrast as one might see in states with large cities. That being said, the comparisons between, say, Cumberland County (that is part of a small metropolitan area) and Washington County (not part of a metropolitan area and not

adjacent to one) show substantial differences across the factors that influence quality of place.

Urban Influence Codes 4 to 6 apply to counties that are part of small metropolitan areas (fewer than 1 million people) and counties that are adjacent to them. Maine has three small metropolitan areas, where Portland covers Cumberland, Sagadahoc and York Counties; Bangor covers Penobscot County; and Lewiston-Auburn covers Androscoggin County. The Maine counties with Urban Influence Codes 5 or 6 are located *next door* to these small metros. The Urban Influence Codes 7 to 9 represent counties that are not part of metropolitan areas and not adjacent to them. The Maine counties of Aroostook, Knox, and Washington are not adjacent to one of Maine’s three metropolitan areas.

The first quality-of-place indicator—labeled *natural features*—represents a combination of the ruggedness of a county’s terrain (e.g., mountainous areas are rugged, and flat areas are not) and the percentage of a county’s area that is covered by water.⁴ Fifteen of Maine’s 16 counties are among the top 10 or 20 percent of places nationally for natural features, which is not surprising given the state’s coastal location along with its mountains and lakes. These natural amenities enhance an area’s quality-of-place, and both the ruggedness of a region’s terrain and percentage of water area contribute to outdoor recreation (Gabe and Bell 2024), which is important to the attraction of new residents and tourists to Maine. For example, the DECD survey of recent migrants found that outdoor recreation amenities had the strongest influence on why people moved to Maine (WEA 2025).

The *mild climate* indicator is constructed as a combination of average January temperature (warmer is better) and average precipitation in July (drier is better).⁵ By this definition, there are no places in Maine that can be described as having a mild climate. While more than 1 million people live in Maine—many of whom tolerate or even enjoy the cold winter months—research generally shows that a mild climate (particularly warm winters) is viewed as an amenity that supports population growth.⁶ In the future, however, views may change about what constitutes a favorable climate, and people may relocate to Maine to escape severe climate-related events. According to the report by Wallace Economic Associates, “over 40% of migrants [to Maine] indicated climate-related issues had a moderate influence on their decision to move to Maine, with 22% reporting a somewhat strong to extremely strong influence” (WEA 2025: 9).

TABLE 1: Quality of Place of Maine Counties

	Urban Influence Code	Natural features	Mild climate	Museums & amusement businesses	Healthcare & childcare services	Housing costs	Local economy	Low population density
Small metropolitan areas								
Androscoggin	4	9	3	9	10	4	7	2
Cumberland	4	10	2	10	10	1	10	2
Penobscot	4	9	2	4	10	4	5	6
Sagadahoc	4	10	3	8	9	2	9	3
York	4	10	2	9	9	2	9	2
Adjacent to small metros								
Franklin	6	10	1	8	10	6	3	8
Hancock	6	10	3	9	7	3	5	6
Kennebec	5	9	2	9	9	4	8	3
Lincoln	6	10	3	10	6	3	7	4
Oxford	6	10	1	7	8	5	6	7
Piscataquis	6	10	1	3	5	7	1	10
Somerset	6	9	1	6	5	7	3	9
Waldo	6	10	4	8	8	4	4	5
Remote and not adjacent								
Aroostook	8	8	1	4	6	9	2	9
Knox	8	10	3	10	8	2	5	3
Washington	9	9	2	6	3	8	1	9

Notes: Numbers for the quality-of-place factors are the counties' decile rankings calculated across all US counties, where higher numbers are "better" (e.g., 10 indicates top 10 percent nationally, 9 represents top 20 percent nationally, etc.). Numbers in bold indicate that the county is ranked among the top 20 percent of US counties for the quality-of-place factor. Urban Influence Codes are from USDA ERS (2024). Urban Influence Codes 1–3 indicate large metropolitan and adjacent counties (none in Maine), codes 4–6 indicate small metropolitan and adjacent counties, and codes 7–9 indicate remote places that are not adjacent to metropolitan counties.

The quality-of-place indicator of *museums & amusement businesses* represents the number of museums in a county, as well as businesses in the amusement, gambling, and recreation industrial sector (NAICS 713).⁷ Because there are substantial differences across places in these numbers based solely on an area's overall size (e.g., New York City has a lot of amusement businesses simply because it has a lot of all types of businesses), these indicators are scaled by the total number of businesses in a county and the county's land area. We can think of this quality-of-place indicator as capturing "things to do" in a county, as it covers museums, amusement parks, golf courses, skiing facilities, marinas, bowling alleys, casinos, and other types of amusement and recreation businesses. Seven of Maine's 16 counties are among the

top 20 percentile nationally for museums and amusement businesses, with three of these counties falling in the top 10 percentile.

The *healthcare & childcare services* indicator is formed as a combination of the number of workers in healthcare occupations (relative to a county's population size) and the number of workers employed in the child daycare services industry (as well as child daycare numbers for "nonemployers," to capture at-home providers) relative to population size.⁸ Seven of Maine's 16 counties are among the top 20 percent nationally for these services. This could be explained, in part, by the relatively high demands for healthcare in Maine due to the state's aging population. For example, the state as a whole has a disproportionately high percentage of overall employment in healthcare occupations.⁹

The next quality-of-place factor considered is *housing costs*, calculated as a weighted average of the monthly costs of renting or owning a home in the county. Two Maine counties—Aroostook and Washington—are among the top 30 percent of all US counties for low housing costs (indicated by decile scores of 10, 9, or 8 in Table 1). The *local economy* indicator represents a county's unemployment rate in 2024, as well as its employment growth rate from 2015 to 2024.¹⁰ Three Maine counties are among the top 20 percent of US counties for local economic conditions, and three other Maine counties are in the top 40 percent.

The final quality-of-place indicator shown in Table 1 is a measure of *low population density*.¹¹ It represents the desire, for some, to live in an area where they can spread out far away from neighbors and be surrounded by land area that's not developed for residential housing or commercial businesses. Five Maine counties are among the top 30 percent of the country's least densely populated areas (indicated by decile scores of 10, 9 or 8 in Table 1) and Piscataquis County is ranked among the top 10 percent of US counties for having a sparse population.

RURAL TO URBAN COMPARISONS IN QUALITY OF PLACE

Several of the quality-of-place factors shown in Table 1 align with the Urban Influence Codes and a county's level of rurality. The counties with the lowest population densities have Urban Influence Codes that indicate relatively high levels of rurality, which is somewhat by design given that these categories are based on a county's metropolitan area status and metros generally have higher levels of population density. In addition, the Maine counties in the top 20 percent nationally for the local economy quality-of-place indicator have Urban Influence Codes of 4, indicating higher levels of urban influence. Conversely, the counties in the bottom 30 percent for local economy (those with decile rankings of 1, 2 or 3 in Table 1) have Urban Influence Codes of 9, 8, or 6—indicating higher rurality. Similarly, the urban Maine counties tend to rate higher than the more rural areas for healthcare and childcare services.

Housing costs also align closely with a county's level of urban influence. The two Maine counties with the highest rankings for the housing costs quality-of-place indicator—Aroostook and Washington—have Urban Influence Codes of 8 or 9, indicating very low urban

influence, while three of the four Maine counties with the highest costs of housing (decile rankings of 1 or 2 for housing costs) are part of metropolitan areas.

There are, however, some exceptions to these general trends. Knox County, which is classified as high rurality (category of 8) because it is not adjacent to a metropolitan area, fares well for the museums and amusement businesses and healthcare & childcare services quality-of-place indicators, but rates lower for housing costs and low population density. In some respects, Knox County—with its prime midcoast location—fits the mold of Maine counties with higher levels of urban influence, despite not being adjacent to a metropolitan county. Franklin County, on the other hand, is classified with an Urban Influence Code of 6 because it is adjacent to a metropolitan area county, yet it has a very sparse population and is ranked near the middle of all US counties for the housing costs quality-of-place indicator.

QUALITY-OF-PLACE TRADEOFFS

The results shown in Table 1 illustrate several tradeoffs that households and state and local officials face when considering different aspects of quality of place. One notable tradeoff involves the balance between the availability of cultural and recreational amenities and services—such as museums, amusement businesses, healthcare, and childcare—and housing costs. For example, most of the Maine counties that rank the highest for museums and amusement businesses and healthcare and childcare services (e.g., Cumberland, York, Knox and Androscoggin) are among the lowest ranked for housing costs. Likewise, the two Maine counties—Aroostook and Washington—that rate the best for the housing costs quality-of-place indicator rank relatively low compared to the rest of the state for museums and amusement businesses and healthcare and childcare services.

A second important tradeoff concerns the quality of place afforded by areas with low population densities. The counties that rank highest for low population density are also generally those that score the best for housing costs—so these quality-of-place factors often go hand-in-hand—but places with the sparsest populations rank lower for the strength of the local economy. Likewise, most Maine counties with low population densities (the exception being Franklin County) are relatively lower ranked for the quality-of-place indicators of museums

TABLE 2: Tradeoffs Between Quality-of-Place Factors

	Natural features	Mild climate	Museums & amusement businesses	Healthcare & childcare services	Housing costs	Local economy
Mild climate	-0.023					
Museums & amusement businesses	0.218	-0.328				
Healthcare & childcare services	-0.002	-0.232	0.242			
Housing costs	-0.276	-0.054	-0.207	-0.244		
Local economy	0.059	0.012	0.042	0.213	-0.402	
Low population density	-0.277	0.136	-0.396	-0.351	0.428	-0.222

Notes: The numbers shown in the table are correlation statistics, which range from -1.0 to 1.0, and the sign (positive or negative) indicates whether the two indicators move together (positive) or in opposite directions (negative). Values closer to either -1.0 or 1.0 indicate a stronger connection between the two indicators. Correlations that are higher than 0.3 (in absolute value) are indicated in bold font.

and amusement businesses and healthcare and childcare services. A third tradeoff revealed by Table 1 is the stark reality that a more vibrant local economy (i.e., lower unemployment rate, more robust employment growth) is associated with higher housing costs; put another way, finding a place with low housing costs might mean having more difficulty in finding a job.

These types of tradeoffs are not unique to Maine. Table 2 shows the correlations between the quality-of-place indicators using data for 3,013 US counties. Correlation statistics range from -1.0 to 1.0, where the sign (positive or negative) indicates whether the two indicators move together (positive) or in opposite directions (negative), with values closer to either -1.0 or 1.0 indicating stronger connections. The highest correlations are between the quality-of-place factors of housing costs and low population density, housing costs and local economy, and low population density and museums and amusement businesses.¹²

Table 2 also shows a moderate negative correlation ($r = -0.35$) representing the tradeoffs between the quality-of-place factors of low population density and healthcare and childcare services, and the data show a tradeoff ($r = -0.33$) between the mild climate and museums and amusement businesses indicators. These results underscore the challenge of finding places that offer a full spectrum of amenities, services, low housing costs, and economic opportunities, which highlights the importance of identifying and weighing tradeoffs when assessing a region’s quality of place.

COMPARING MAINE COUNTIES TO THEIR PEERS

Given the notable differences in the quality-of-place indicators across the urban to rural spectrum, Table 3 compares the quality of place in Maine counties to US counties with the same Urban Influence Code. The numbers in Table 3 are ratios that divide the decile rankings of Maine counties by the average decile rankings calculated for all US counties with similar levels of urban influence. Values greater (less) than 1.0 indicate that the Maine county ranks higher (lower) for a quality-of-place factor compared to all US counties with similar urban influence, and ratios of 1.5 or higher are shaded and considered as notably better.

Because Maine has a lot to offer in terms of the natural features of rugged terrain and the percentage of land area that is covered by water, it is no surprise that all 16 counties have decile rankings that are significantly higher (i.e., better) than US counties with similar levels of urban influence. Nine Maine counties, however, also offer a quality of place for museums and amusement businesses that is significantly higher than all US counties with similar urban influence. Knox County—classified as not adjacent to a metropolitan area—has a ratio of 2.61 compared to its peers. This means that Knox County offers significantly “more to do” compared to all US counties with an Urban Influence Code of 8, a code assigned to areas that are neither metropolitan nor adjacent to one.

Half of Maine’s 16 counties offer notably higher levels of services (healthcare and childcare) relative to

TABLE 3: Quality of Place of Maine Counties Compared to Other US Counties with Similar Urban Influence

	Urban Influence Code	Natural features	Mild climate	Museums & amusement businesses	Healthcare & childcare services	Housing costs	Local economy	Low population density
Small metropolitan areas								
Androscoggin	4	1.53	0.54	1.50	1.59	0.93	1.14	0.52
Cumberland	4	1.70	0.36	1.66	1.59	0.23	1.62	0.52
Penobscot	4	1.53	0.36	0.67	1.59	0.93	0.81	1.55
Sagadahoc	4	1.70	0.54	1.33	1.43	0.46	1.46	0.77
York	4	1.70	0.36	1.50	1.43	0.46	1.46	0.52
Adjacent to small metros								
Kennebec	5	1.69	0.38	1.96	1.61	0.63	1.64	0.59
Franklin	6	1.95	0.19	1.57	2.19	0.84	0.67	1.11
Hancock	6	1.95	0.56	1.77	1.53	0.42	1.12	0.83
Lincoln	6	1.95	0.56	1.96	1.32	0.42	1.57	0.55
Oxford	6	1.95	0.19	1.38	1.75	0.70	1.34	0.97
Piscataquis	6	1.95	0.19	0.59	1.10	0.98	0.22	1.39
Somerset	6	1.75	0.19	1.18	1.10	0.98	0.67	1.25
Waldo	6	1.95	0.75	1.57	1.75	0.56	0.90	0.69
Remote and not adjacent								
Aroostook	8	1.66	0.17	1.04	1.11	1.27	0.41	1.21
Knox	8	2.07	0.52	2.61	1.48	0.28	1.04	0.40
Washington	9	1.93	0.37	1.11	0.67	1.10	0.21	1.04

Notes: Values in the table are ratios of the decile rankings of Maine counties, presented in Table 1, divided by the average decile rankings of US counties with the same Urban Influence Code. Values greater (less) than 1.0 indicate that the Maine county ranks higher (lower) for the quality-of-place factor than the average of U.S. counties with similar urban influence. Numbers in bold indicate ratios of 1.5 or higher.

their population size when compared to all US counties with the same level of urban influence. The far-right column of Table 2 shows that Penobscot County has a lower population density compared to all US counties that are part of small metropolitan areas (i.e., Urban Influence Code of 4). Although Penobscot is home to the Bangor Metropolitan Area, the county's large land mass and modest total population result in a relatively low population density when compared to other counties that are part of small metros.

Overall, the results suggest that counties in Maine's small metropolitan areas and those that are adjacent to small metros typically rate higher for the quality-of-place indicators relative to their peers than Maine's most rural counties (i.e., remote and not adjacent). Both Aroostook and Washington Counties only have one quality-of-place indicator—natural features—with values in Table 3 that

exceed 1.5. On the other hand, several less rural counties rate considerably better than their peers for multiple quality-of-place indicators.

MAINE COUNTIES BY LIFESTYLE CHARACTERISTICS

While state and local officials need to consider the tradeoffs across quality-of-place factors, it is equally important to remember that quality of place is inherently subjective. As discussed earlier, the analysis treats warm January temperatures as a positive amenity. However, some individuals may view mild winters as a drawback, especially those who value cold-weather activities such as skiing, snowmobiling, or ice fishing. Likewise, some people are moving to Maine—with its cooler climate—to escape severe climate-related events

(WEA 2025). Beyond individual preferences, people also assign different weights to various aspects of quality of place. For some individuals, one or two factors may matter far more than the rest, effectively defining what quality of place means for them.

As a way to narrow the focus to a few quality-of-place factors and further refine how different places rate for different types of people, Table 4 pulls together the quality-of-place factors into what I refer to as “lifestyle characteristics.” For example, the lifestyle characteristic of *solitude & nature* uses data on the quality-of-place factors of natural features and low population density. People who seek out a solitude and nature lifestyle favor places with low population density and natural amenities. They care less about local economic opportunities and the availability of built amenities such as museums and amusement businesses. For people in

search of solitude and nature, the nine Maine counties of Aroostook, Franklin, Hancock, Oxford, Penobscot, Piscataquis, Somerset, Waldo, and Washington are among the top 20 percent nationally for this lifestyle characteristic.

At the other end of the spectrum, the lifestyle characteristic of *dense amenities* uses data on museums and amusement businesses and population density—but for these calculations higher levels of population density are better. A lifestyle of dense amenities may be favored by young adults who are looking for “things to do” and a relatively high population density to facilitate social interaction. Cumberland County, which is home to Maine’s largest city of Portland, is ranked in the top 10 percent nationally for places that offer a lifestyle of dense amenities, and six other Maine counties are in the top 20 percent nationally for this lifestyle characteristic.

TABLE 4: **Maine Counties by Lifestyle Characteristics**

	Urban Influence Code	Solitude & nature	Nature & things to do	Mild climate & services	Dense amenities
Small metropolitan areas					
Androscoggin	4	5	10	8	9
Cumberland	4	7	10	7	10
Penobscot	4	9	7	7	4
Sagadahoc	4	8	10	7	9
York	4	7	10	5	9
Adjacent to small metros					
Kennebec	5	7	10	5	9
Franklin	6	10	10	5	6
Hancock	6	10	10	4	8
Lincoln	6	8	10	3	9
Oxford	6	10	9	3	6
Piscataquis	6	10	7	1	1
Somerset	6	10	8	1	3
Waldo	6	9	10	7	8
Remote and not adjacent					
Aroostook	8	10	6	2	2
Knox	8	8	10	5	9
Washington	9	10	8	1	3

Notes: The lifestyle of solitude & nature uses data on natural features and low population density; nature & things to do uses data on natural features and museums and amusement businesses; mild climate & services uses data on mild climate and healthcare & childcare services; and dense amenities uses data on museums and amusement businesses and (high) population density. Numbers in the table are the counties’ decile rankings calculated across all U.S. counties, where higher numbers are “better” (e.g., 10 indicates top 10 percent nationally, 9 represents top 20 percent nationally, etc.). Numbers in bold indicate that the county is ranked among the top 20 percent of U.S. counties for the lifestyle characteristic. Urban Influence Codes are from the USDA ERS (2024).

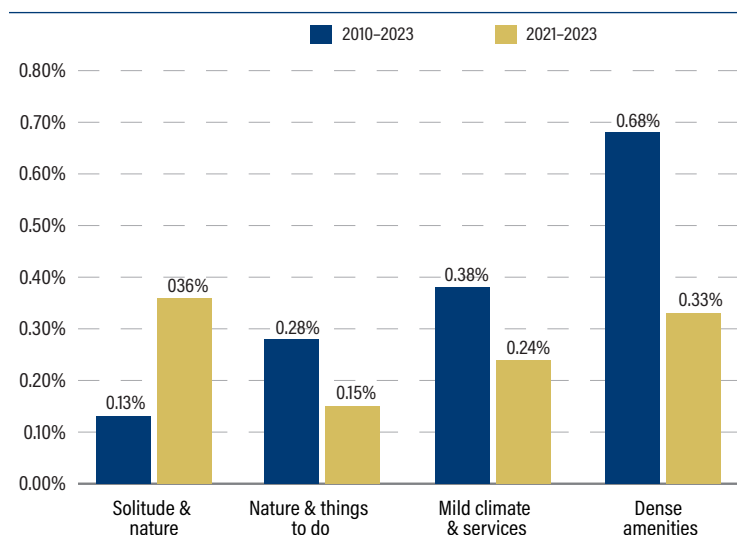
The *nature & things to do* lifestyle characteristic blends interest in both natural and built amenities. Ten of Maine's counties fall within the top national decile for this measure, suggesting that they offer a strong mix of environmental and recreational assets. Finally, a lifestyle characterized by *warm weather & services* could be favored by retirees and families in search of a place with a mild climate and access to healthcare and/or childcare. Maine, with its cold winters, has no counties that fall within the top 10 percent nationally for this lifestyle characteristic.

The data shown in Table 4 suggest that, with the exception of a lifestyle that provides a mix of mild climate and services, Maine has a place for people who favor just about every type of lifestyle. In fact, all 16 counties are ranked among the top 20 percent nationally for either solitude and nature or dense amenities—nine for the former and seven for the latter. Of course, this dichotomy is somewhat by design given how population density is figured into these lifestyle characteristics. That is, having a sparse population improves a county's standing for the solitude and nature lifestyle characteristic, while having more people around helps a county's ranking for dense amenities.

To explore how these lifestyle characteristics relate to the growth of regions, Figure 1 presents the average annualized population growth rates for the top 10 percent of US counties ranked by each lifestyle bundle. The darker-shaded bars represent growth from 2010 to 2023, a longer time period that captures more sustained trends. The lighter-shaded bars represent growth from 2021 to 2023, a shorter time frame following a period when people were relocating during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Although this point might be subtle, the four lifestyle bundles do not incorporate the quality-of-place factors related to housing costs or local economy. This exclusion is intentional. If these factors were included in the lifestyle characteristics, it would be difficult to ascertain whether observed population growth was a result of quality-of-place preferences (e.g., people seeking out natural amenities or things to do) or simply a reflection of economic performance or housing affordability. By excluding the housing costs and local economy factors, we can better isolate the relationship between patterns of population change and lifestyle characteristics.

FIGURE 1: Patterns of US County Population Growth by Lifestyle Characteristic



Note: Annualized population growth rates of US counties in top deciles by lifestyle characteristics

The results presented in Figure 1 indicate that, over the period of 2010 to 2023, the top 10 percentile of US counties for dense amenities (i.e., things to do with high population density) experienced an average annualized population growth of 0.68 percent, which is the highest among the top decile of US counties for any of the four lifestyle bundles. Over that same period, the slowest growing counties by lifestyle bundle—based on the top decile of US counties—are those that provide solitude and nature.

However, the picture shifts somewhat when we examine the more recent period from 2021 to 2023. Over this short time frame, counties in the top decile for solitude and nature experienced slightly faster population growth than those characterized by dense amenities. Although it is difficult to predict if these trends will persist beyond this recent period, they suggest that people's preferences for lifestyle characteristics have changed in the years following the peak of COVID-19. Whereas places offering the best of dense amenities experienced significantly higher population growth over a period covering 2010 to 2023, these areas have annualized population growth rates that are on par with counties that offer solitude and nature over the period of 2021 to 2023. In addition, the lifestyle bundle of solitude and nature is the only one where the annualized growth rate between 2021 and 2023 exceeds the annualized population growth rate from 2010 to 2023. If the trend continues, this may signal

rising interest in lower-density, nature-oriented living environments, which could be an opportunity for rural Maine counties.

SUMMARY AND INSIGHTS

This study of quality of place across Maine counties reveals several key insights with implications for ways that Maine and its regions can support life the way it should be. First and foremost, quality of place is inherently subjective. While certain features—such as being able to find affordable housing—have broad appeal, other elements such as climate, population density, and cultural or recreational amenities appeal differently to different people. Any attempt to define or enhance quality of place must recognize that individual preferences vary widely, and actions that benefit one group may not align with the values or priorities of another.

Another major takeaway is that people and places face tradeoffs among quality-of-place factors, particularly those involving housing costs. Counties that perform well in terms of local economic conditions and having lots of things to do for its residents and visitors often have higher costs of housing. This pattern reflects the market at work: rising demand for housing in economically vibrant areas puts upward pressure on housing costs. In Maine, counties that rate highly for quality-of-place indicators such as healthcare and childcare services and museums and recreational businesses also tend to score lower on housing costs, underscoring the challenges when taking actions to support any one aspect of quality of place.

Third, Maine's greatest strength may lie in the variety of lifestyle options it offers. From the quiet, nature-oriented environments found in Aroostook, Piscataquis, and Washington Counties to the relatively higher density of things to do in Cumberland and York Counties, Maine provides options for people seeking different quality-of-place bundles. However, these differences across Maine regions also presents challenges. Individuals drawn to solitude and natural settings may have fundamentally different values, priorities, and views from those who prefer communities with more things to do and more people to do things with. These differing perspectives can create tension when the state attempts to take actions related to land use, transportation, housing, and the environment and natural resources.

There is no single action or even set of actions that can simultaneously satisfy residents across this broad

lifestyle spectrum. But a constructive first step is to acknowledge the heterogeneity of preferences and conditions across the state. Instead of imposing a one-size-fits-all approach, state and local officials can take actions that respect and build from the distinct assets of different communities. Strategies that support high-quality services and infrastructure in urban areas can coexist with efforts to preserve the rural character and natural beauty that characterize several Maine counties.

Ultimately, this study encourages Maine and its counties to adopt a nuanced and area-specific approach to improving quality of place in Maine. Understanding that people prioritize different aspects of a place—and that those preferences affect where they choose to live—can help guide resource allocation, planning, and community development. Maine's appeal lies not in offering a single vision of life the way it should be, but in supporting a broad range of lifestyles supported by the assets that vary widely across the state.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work is supported by the Rural Economic Development program, project award no. 2023-67023-39501, from the USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the authors and should not be construed to represent any official USDA or US government determination or policy. Gabe's research program is also supported by the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture, Hatch Project ME0-22307, through the Maine Agricultural and Forest Experiment Station.

NOTES

- Counties are an imperfect geographic scale to examine quality of place because of their large size (i.e., a person's immediate surroundings are a better indicator of quality of place) and the heterogeneity among places within the same county (e.g., some parts of a county could have affordable housing costs, while other parts have high costs of housing). Nevertheless, counties are the smallest unit of analysis with data availability for many of the variables used in this study.
- For more information about the Brookings Report, see: <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/charting-maines-future-an-action-plan-for-promoting-sustainable-prosperity-and-quality-places/>
- Some US counties are not included in the analysis due to missing data for one or more of the quality-of-place factors considered.
- The rugged terrain variable is constructed using census tract-level data for Area and Road Ruggedness Scales from the USDA (USDA ERS 2025); <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/area-and-road-ruggedness-scales/documentation>. Data on the percentage of a county's area covered by water are from the US Census Bureau's Gazetteer Files (<https://www.census.gov/geographies/reference-files/time-series/geo/gazetteer-files.html>).
- County-level climate data are from IPUMS NHGIS (Manson et al. 2024).

- 6 For example, research by Glaeser et al. (2014: 15) found that in the years since 1970, "January temperature becomes the most powerful predictor of county-level growth."
- 7 Information on the number of museums per county is from Frehill and Pelczar (2018) and data on the number of business establishments in the amusement, gambling, and recreation industrial sector (NAICS 713) are from County Business Patterns of the US Census Bureau (<https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/cbp.html>).
- 8 Data on county-level employment in the occupational categories of healthcare practitioners and technical occupations (SOC 29-0000) and healthcare support occupations (SOC 31-0000), which are combined to represent healthcare workers, are from the US Census Bureau's American Community Survey (<https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/>) and Nonemployer Statistics (<https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/nonemployer-statistics/data/datasets.html>).
- 9 According to Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics from May 2024, Maine has a disproportionately high share of total employment in both the Healthcare Practitioners and Technical Occupations (SOC 29-0000) and Healthcare Support Occupations (SOC 31-0000). For more information, see <https://data.bls.gov/oes/#/area/2300000>.
- 10 Data on monthly housing costs are from the US Census Bureau's American Community Survey (<https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/>). Information on US county-level unemployment rates and employment growth rates is from US Bureau of Labor Statistics' Local Area Unemployment Statistics (<https://www.bls.gov/lau/>).
- 11 County-level population data are from the US Census Bureau's American Community Survey (<https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/>). Land area data are from the US Census Bureau's Gazetteer Files (<https://www.census.gov/geographies/reference-files/time-series/geo/gazetteer-files.html>).
- 12 For low population density and housing costs, the correlation value of $r = 0.43$ means that places with low population densities tend to have lower costs of housing. For housing costs and local economies, the value of $r = -0.40$ means that places that rank high for having low housing costs have less vibrant local economies. For low population density and museums and amusement businesses, the correlation of $r = -0.40$ means that places with more sparse populations have fewer of these establishments relative to the total number of businesses in a county and its land area.

REFERENCES

- Frehill, Lisa M., and Michelle Pelczar. 2018. Data File Documentation: Museum Data Files, FY 2018 Release. Washington, DC: Institute of Museum and Library Services.
- Gabe, Todd, and Kathleen Bell. 2024. "Economic Contribution of Outdoor Recreation in Maine." Version 2.0.
- Glaeser, Edward L., Giacomo A.M. Ponzetto, and Kristina Tobio. 2014. "Cities, Skills and Regional Change." *Regional Studies* 48(1): 7–43. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2012.674637>
- Jorgensen, Bradley S., and Richard C. Stedman. 2006. "A Comparative Analysis of Predictors of Sense of Place Dimensions: Attachment to, Dependence on, and Identification with Lakeshore Properties." *Journal of Environmental Management* 79(3): 316–327. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvman.2005.08.003>
- GCMQP (Governor's Council on Maine's Quality of Place). 2007. *People, Place, and Prosperity: 1st Report of the Governor's Council on*

Maine's Quality of Place. Maine State Planning Office. https://digitalmaine.com/spo_docs/98/.

- Manson, Steven, Jonathan Schroeder, David Van Riper, Katherine Knowles, Tracy Kugler, Finn Roberts, and Steven Ruggles. 2024. IPUMS National Historical Geographic Information System: Version 19.0 [dataset]. Minneapolis, MN: IPUMS. <https://doi.org/10.18128/D050.V19.0>.
- USDA ERS (United States Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service). 2025. *Area and Road Ruggedness Scales*. Washington, DC: USDA. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/area-and-road-ruggedness-scales>.
- USDA ERS (United States Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service). 2024. *2024 Urban Influence Codes*. Washington, DC: USDA. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/urban-influence-codes>.
- WEA (Wallace Economic Advisors). 2025. *Why People Move to Maine: A Study of Recent Migrants*. Maine Department of Economic and Community Development and Maine Department of Labor. <https://www.maine.gov/decd/strategic-plan>.

Todd Gabe is the director and a professor in UMaine's School of Economics, and the author of *The Pursuit of Economic Development: Growing Good Jobs in U.S. Cities and States*. With more than 25 years of experience in teaching, mentoring, and applied research, his work focuses on human capital, workforce issues, and regional economic growth. He has published over 150 book chapters, journal articles, and technical reports on topics related to regional development.