

Location, location, location

When a postdoc has a choice about where to go for a fellowship, how much do non-scientific factors like cost of living weigh on the final decision?

Karen Kreeger investigates.



Without subsidies, Herman Wijnen (inset) believes it would be hard to find convenient properties in New York.

When asked why they chose a particular fellowship, postdocs usually give scientific reasons: the reputation of the institution, the quality of the lab, the track record of the principal investigator. Those factors are paramount, as they should be. But when pressed about how they are managing financially, most of them will say that their main concern is housing.

Postdocs in the United States encounter a wide range of answers to the housing question from different institutions, even among those with equal prestige. In expensive parts of the east and west coasts, institutions have to compete for the best postdocs, and have come up with different ways of attracting them. Some offer more pay, others provide subsidies, and some are building affordable housing themselves.

ON THE EAST SIDE

Rockefeller University eases the high cost of living in New York City by helping with housing costs — as well as with childcare for those who need it.

Postdoc Herman Wijnen says that he chose Rockefeller for the quality of its science. But the university's policy of heavily subsidizing postdocs' housing is a bonus, as it helps him to afford an apartment near the lab. "We're on the Upper East Side, the silk-stocking district, and rents would be totally unaffordable here otherwise," says Wijnen.

Postdocs living in the university's own Manhattan apartments pay 10% less than the standard rent, which is already less than the local average. Kevin O'Donovan, another Rockefeller postdoc, pays just over \$1,300 per month for a one-bedroom apartment. "The going rate in the neighbourhood for an apartment my size would be at least \$2,500–3,000," he says. Most of the Rockefeller housing is within a ten-minute walk of the university.

Even with such subsidies, it is not easy to live in New York on a postdoc's salary. Rockefeller postdoc Allan Coop spends at least half of his after-tax salary

on rent. Coop's wife is unable to work because of visa restrictions, so both of them have to live on his salary. "In fact, it's cost me more to be here than I have earned in the four years since I arrived," he says. "The only way to rationalize that is to say that the whole exercise is an investment in one's future."

Postdocs make ends meet by using public transport, sharing accommodation — and running up debts. Despite all the subsidies, there is still a housing shortage, especially as some institutions grow. The Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center (MSKCC), also in New York City, is undergoing a major expansion over the next few years. To keep pace with its housing needs, it is building a 270-unit apartment building on Roosevelt Island, just off Manhattan, for professional staff, faculty members, students and technicians, due to open this spring. Thomas Kelly, director of the MSKCC's research arm, the Sloan-Kettering Institute, says that the rents, as yet unset, will be below market value.

But New York is not the only address with problems. Elizabeth Courtenay, a postdoctoral fellow in microbiology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in Cambridge, says that she looked for a place at either the University of California, Berkeley, or MIT, both in areas known for their high cost of living. Courtenay took matters into her own hands and asked her mentor for a higher salary than was offered at the time under guidelines by the National Institutes of Health for starting postdocs. "I negotiated to start at \$31,000 because I didn't think I could make ends meet on \$28,000," she says, although she recognizes that not all labs can afford to do that. Even so, paying \$1,500 a month for an apartment means that 75% of her income goes on living expenses — but living ten minutes' walk from work means that she does not need a car.

Public transport played a major role in the housing choice made by Mary Stewart, a postdoc at MIT's Center for Cancer Research, and her husband. Having moved to Boston to be near her family, they share a car

those with children or for a foreign postdoc whose spouse is unable to work because of visa constraints.

"If you'd like to live close to Scripps, which most people do in their first few years here, a one-bedroom apartment is at least \$1,100 in this part of San Diego," says Frosst. Two-bedroom apartments cost about \$1,400–1,500 a month. Rents tend to decrease with distance from Scripps. Frosst lives about 15 miles south of the major research institutes, closer to the city centre, where a one-bedroom apartment costs \$800–900. "I can squeak by," she says. "If you don't want to live with multiple roommates you have to compromise." For her that means a longer commute.

Unfortunately, San Diego's public-transport system is poor, unlike those of San Francisco, Boston and New York, where postdocs get by quite easily without a car.

IN BETWEEN

Major cities on both coasts may have renowned centres of science, but they are expensive for anyone, let alone postdocs on small salaries. Smaller

towns and cities may offer equally good research facilities but without the high costs.

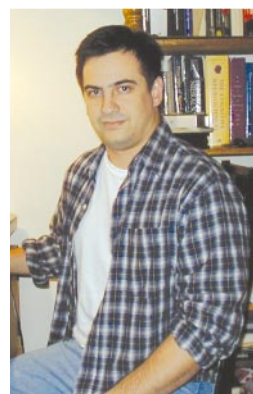
"I think there's no question that there's a significant difference, particularly if you're in a position to buy a house or have small children," says William Snider, director of the Neuroscience Center at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. He says that he finds it easy to recruit postdocs, partly because of the reasonable cost of living, good lifestyle and abundant opportunities.

Nearby Durham has the same advantages. "I think in the \$600 range would be a fair estimate for a one-bedroom apartment," says Susan Murphy, a postdoc at Duke University in Durham and chair of the advocacy committee for the Duke University Postdoctoral Association. In a recent survey conducted by her group, single people reported paying an average of \$645 a month rent, with a range of \$285–1,300; this included a few who said they shared accommodation. Married postdocs paid \$400–2,000 rent, with an average of \$763.

David Pettigrew, a postdoc at the University of Texas Medical Center in Houston, says that he received job offers from Cornell University in Ithaca, New York; Washington University in St Louis; and an institute in Cincinnati. "Even though there was some variance in the salaries that were offered, it did not have a large impact on my decision," he says. He chose to stay in Texas because of the research project offered by his mentor. Pettigrew says that about 40% of his salary goes on rent and he doesn't run a car, taking a bus to work instead.

Although some institutions in expensive areas voluntarily offer subsidized housing or extra money, many postdocs consider that grant-giving institutions should take some of the responsibility. That happens in Britain, where postdocs who work in London receive an "abundant supplement" to offset the cost of living, says Wijnen. He would like to see the same thing happen in the United States. "It wouldn't be unreasonable for stipend levels to be adjusted a little bit to reflect the difference," he says. ■

Karen Kreeger is a freelance science writer based in Philadelphia.



Difficult decisions: both Phyllis Frosst and David Pettigrew (inset) agree that housing and the cost of living affect the career choices made by postdocs.

— expensive to insure in the Boston area — and rent a two-bedroom apartment costing \$1,600 a month in Somerville, about 30 minutes' subway ride from the campus. Somerville is a desirable area, and being close to a subway station means that rents are high. "We know we're paying for it, but we're doing it on purpose for convenience," Stewart explains.

WAY OUT WEST

Instead of subsidizing accommodation, the Gladstone Institute at the University of California, San Francisco, adds a 10% housing allowance to postdocs' already higher-than-average salaries and provides \$1,500 for moving expenses. This is useful because, as Gladstone postdoc Luke Esposito notes: "San Francisco is expensive." The city exerts two opposite forces on anyone considering a move there, he says: the costs are as daunting as the lifestyle is attractive.

Anyone wanting a place of their own is likely to pay \$850–1,050 a month in rent for a studio or small one-bedroom apartment, he says. Two people could share a larger one-bedroom or a two-bedroom apartment for \$1,500–2,000. But housing costs were not crucial in Esposito's decision to come to San Francisco, he says. "If they didn't have the allowance, I probably still would have come, although it makes us feel good that they're doing something to offset the cost of living," he says. Jeannie Chin, another Gladstone postdoc, agrees: "I really came for this lab. Not only are they doing great science, they're trying to take care of their scientists."

Down the coast, the University of California, San Diego, provides generously subsidized housing. Its faculty members, students and postdocs can rent an apartment for about half the market rate. The neighbouring Scripps Research Institute, on the other hand, doesn't provide any allowances or subsidies.

Scripps postdoc Phyllis Frosst, who is president of its Society of Fellows, notes that in her experience housing does enter into the equation. This is especially true for