

Statistical Abstract for My Home of Spokane, Washington

by Jess Walter, published in *McSweeney's*, April 2011

1. The population of Spokane, Washington is 195,526. It is the 105th biggest city in the United States.
2. Even before the recession, in 2008, 34,000 people in Spokane lived below the poverty line—a little more than 17 percent of the population. That's about the same as it was in Washington D.C. at the time. The poverty rate was 11 percent in Seattle and Portland.
3. Spokane is sometimes called the biggest city between Seattle and Minneapolis, but this is only true if you ignore everything below Wyoming, including Salt Lake City, Denver, Phoenix, and at least four cities in Texas.
4. This is really just another way of saying nobody much lives in Montana or the Dakotas.
5. My grandfather arrived in Spokane in the 1930s, on a freight train he'd jumped near Fargo. Even he didn't want to live the Dakotas.
6. On any given day in Spokane, Washington, there are more adult men per capita riding children's BMX bikes than in any other city in the world.
7. I've never been sure where these guys are going on those little bikes, their knees up around their ears as they pedal. They all wear hats—ballcaps in summer, stocking caps in winter. I've never been sure, either, whether the bikes belong to the men's kids or if they've stolen them. It may be that they just prefer little BMX bikes to ten-speeds. Many of them have lost their driver's licenses after too many DUIs.
8. I was born in Spokane in 1965. Beginning in about 1978, when I was thirteen, I wanted to leave.
9. I'm still here.
10. In 2000 and 2001, the years I most desperately wanted to move out of Spokane, 2,645 illegal aliens were deported by the Spokane office of the U.S. Border Patrol. They were throwing people out of Spokane and I *still* couldn't leave.
11. In 1978, I had a BMX bike. It didn't have a chain guard, and since I favored bellbottom jeans, my pant legs were constantly getting snagged. This would cause me to pitch over the handlebars and into the street. My cousin Len stole that bike once, but he pretended he'd just borrowed it without my permission and eventually he gave it back. Later on it was stolen for good by an older guy in my neighborhood named Pete. I was in my front yard afterward, being lectured by my father for leaving my bike out unprotected, when I saw Pete go tooling past our house on the bike he'd just stolen from me. Stocking cap on his head, knees up around his ears. I was too scared to say anything. Fear has often overtaken me during such situations. I hated myself for that. Far more than I hated Pete.
12. In 1978, Spokane's biggest employer was Kaiser Aluminum. My dad worked there. Kaiser went belly-up in the 1990s and all of the retirees, my dad included, lost a chunk of their pensions.
13. Now all of the biggest employers in Spokane are government entities. Technically, I haven't held a job since 1994. This does not make me unique in my hometown.
14. The poorest elementary school in the state of Washington is in Spokane. In fact, it's right behind my house. 98 percent of its students get free and reduced-price lunch. I sometimes think about the 2 percent who don't get free lunch. When I was a kid, we lived for two years on a ranch near Springdale, on the border of the Spokane Indian Reservation. My dad commuted sixty miles each way to the aluminum plant. On the third day of school in 1974, a kid leaned over to me on the bus and said, "What's the deal, Richie, you gonna wear different clothes to school *every day*?" Because of my dad's job, my siblings and I were the only kids in school who didn't get free lunch *and* free breakfast. At home, we had Cream of Wheat. At school they had Sugar Pops.
15. Sugar Pops tasted way better than Cream of Wheat. In 1974, my dad got laid off from the aluminum plant and we *still* didn't qualify for free breakfast. You must have had to be really poor to get Sugar Pops.
16. Now they're called Corn Pops. Who in their right mind would rather eat Corn Pops than Sugar Pops?
17. While it's true that I don't technically have a job and that I live in a poor neighborhood, I don't mean to make myself sound poor. I do pretty well.
18. In Spokane it doesn't matter where you live, or how big your house is—you're never more than three blocks from a bad neighborhood. I've grown to like this. In a lot of cities, especially in

19. Spokane's more affluent neighbors, Seattle and Portland, it can be easier to insulate yourself from poverty; you can live miles away from any poor people and start to believe that everyone is as well-off as you are.
20. They are not.
21. The median family income in Spokane, Washington is \$32,000 a year. In Seattle, the median family income is \$57,000 a year. Point: Seattle.
22. In Seattle, though, the median house price is \$302,000. In Spokane it is \$118,000.
23. Drivers in Spokane spend a total of 1.8 million hours a year stuck in traffic on the freeway. This is an average of five hours a year per person. In Seattle, they spend 72 million hours stuck on the freeway, an average of twenty-five hours per person. That's an entire day. Suck on that, Seattle.
24. What would it take for you to willingly surrender an entire day of your life?
25. This used to be my list of reasons why I didn't like Spokane: It is too poor, too white, and too uneducated. There is not enough ethnic food. It has a boring downtown and no art-house theater and is too conservative.
26. In the past few years, though, the downtown has been revitalized, the art scene is thriving, and the food has gotten increasingly better. There are twenty-nine Thai and Vietnamese restaurants listed in the yellow pages. The art-house theater briefly reopened at a time when similar theaters were closing everywhere else. There are bike paths everywhere, and I keep meeting cool, progressive people. The city even went for Obama in '08—barely, but still.
27. For the most part, despite all that, Spokane is still poor, white, and uneducated.
28. My own neighborhood is among the poorest in the state. It has an inordinate number of halfway houses, shelters, group homes, and drug- and alcohol-rehab centers.
28. I remember back when I was a newspaper reporter, I covered a hearing filled with South Hill homeowners, men and women from old-money Spokane, vociferously complaining about a group home going into their neighborhood. They were worried about falling property values, rising crime, and "undesirables." An activist I spoke to called these people NIMBYs. It was the first time I'd heard the term. I thought he meant NAMBLA—the North American Man/Boy Love Association. That seemed a little harsh to me.
29. Bedraggled and beaten women, women carrying babies and followed by children, often walk past my house on their way to the shelters and group homes. Often they carry their belongings in ragged old suitcases. Sometimes in garbage sacks.
30. Poverty and crime are linked, of course. Spokane, Washington is ranked fifty-first among American cities for its crime rate. There are about ten murders a year, and 1,100 violent crimes. There are almost 12,000 property crimes— theft and burglary, that sort of thing. One year, a police sergeant estimated that a thousand bikes had been reported stolen.
31. I believe it.
32. My wife looked out the window at two in the morning once and saw a guy riding a child's BMX bike while dragging another one behind him. He was having trouble doing this, and eventually he laid one of the bikes down in the weeds. I called the police and crouched by the window all night, watching until they arrested him when he came back for the second bike. I felt great, like McGruff the Crime Dog.
33. Another time, before I was married, I had gone for a bike ride and was sitting on my stoop with my bike propped against the railing when a guy tried to steal it. He just climbed on and started riding away. With me sitting there. I chased him down the block and grabbed the frame and he hopped off. "Sorry," he said, "I thought it was mine." What could I say? "Well... it isn't."
34. Another time, we hired a tree trimmer who showed up with three day laborers in the back of his pickup truck. One of them disappeared after only an hour of work. The tree trimmer didn't seem concerned; he said workers often wandered off if the work was too hard. It wasn't until the next day that I realized the day laborer had made his escape on my unlocked mountain bike. I'd paid only \$25 for that one, at a pawn shop where I was looking, in vain, for my previous bike, which had also been stolen. Since pawn-shop bikes have almost always been stolen from somewhere, it seemed somehow fitting that it would be stolen again.

35. A friend's rare and expensive bike once went missing and showed up for sale on Craigslist. I drove with him to meet the seller. We made this elaborate plan that involved the two of us stealing the bike back, or confronting the thieves, or something like that. I just remember I was supposed to wait in the car until he gave me a signal. When we arrived at their house we discovered that the bike thieves were huge, all tatted up and shirtless. They were sitting on a couch on their porch, drinking malt liquor and smoking. I waited for the signal. A few minutes later my friend got back in the car. It wasn't his bike. He was disappointed. I was tremendously relieved.
36. The largest number of people I ever saw walking to one of the shelters in my neighborhood was five: a crying woman and her four children, all behind her, like ducklings. I smiled encouragingly at them. It was a hot day. I had the sprinkler on in my front yard and the last duckling stepped into the oscillating water and smiled at me. I don't know why the whole thing made me feel so crappy, but it did.
37. Once, when I was watching sports on TV, a guy pounded on our front door and started yelling, "Tiffany! Goddamn it, Tiffany! Get your ass down here!"
38. I went to the door. The guy was wearing torn jeans and no shirt and a ballcap. He seemed sketchy and twitchy, like a meth user. I said there was no one inside named Tiffany. He said, "I know this is a shelter for women and I know she's here." I insisted that it wasn't a shelter, that the place he was looking for was miles away, and that I was going to call the police if he didn't leave.
39. He said he was going to kick my ass. I tried to look tough, but I was terrified.
40. My lifetime record in fistfights is zero wins, four losses, and one draw. I used to claim the draw as a win, but my brother, who witnessed that fight, always made this face like, *Really?*
41. The shirtless guy looking for Tiffany swore colorfully at me. Then he climbed on a little kid's BMX bike and rode away, his knees hunched up around his ears.
42. Later, when I was sure he was gone, I went to the shelter and knocked on the front door. A woman's voice came from a nearby window. "Yes?" she said. I couldn't see her face. I told her what had happened. She thanked me. I left.
43. For days, I imagined the other things I could have said to that asshole. Or I imagined punching him. I felt like I'd not handled it well, although I can't imagine what I should have done differently.
44. After that I decided to volunteer at the shelter. I'd always seen kids playing behind the high fence, and I thought I could play with them or read to them. But I was told they only had a small number of male volunteers because having men around made so many of the women nervous.
45. Of the 33,000 people living in poverty in Spokane, most are children.
46. Right at the peak of my obnoxious and condescending loathing for my hometown, I rented a houseboat in Seattle for \$900 a month so I could pretend I lived there. While staying on that boat, and hanging around Seattle, I had a conversation with someone about all that was wrong with Spokane. He said that it was too poor and too white and too uneducated and too unsophisticated, and as he spoke, I realized something: this guy hated Spokane because of people like me. I grew up poor, white, and unsophisticated. I was the first in my family to graduate from college. And worse, I had made the same complaints. Did I hate Spokane because I hated people like me? Did I hate it for not letting me forget my own upbringing? Then I had this even more sobering thought: Was I the kind of snob who hates a place because it's poor?
47. I think there are only two things you can do with your hometown: look for ways to make it better, or look for another place to live.
48. Last year I volunteered at the low-income school behind my house, tutoring kids who needed help with reading. Most of the other tutors were retired, and it was sweet to watch the six-year-olds take these smiling seniors by the hands and drag them around the school, looking for a quiet place to read. One day I was helping this intense little eight-year-old, Dylan. We read a story together about a cave boy who was frightened by a wolf until the wolf saves his life and becomes his friend. Every time I showed up after that Dylan had the wolf book out for me to read. I'd say, "You should get another book," and he'd say, "Why should I read another book when this one's so good?" Point: Dylan.

49. One day we talked about what scared us. After I told Dylan how I used to be afraid of the furnace in our basement, Dylan told me he was scared that his brother would kill him. I laughed at the commonalities of all people and told him that brothers just sometimes fight with each other, it wasn't anything to be afraid of, his brother loved him, and he said, "No, my brother really tried to kill me. He choked me and I passed out and my stepfather had to tear him off me. I was in the hospital. He still says he's gonna kill me one day." I reported this to the teacher, who said the boy's brother had indeed tried to kill him.
50. The Halloween before last, I glanced out the window and saw a woman making her way past the front of my house with a toddler in her arms. I grabbed the candy bowl, thinking they were trick-or-treating, and that's when I noticed a young man walking beside the woman. I noticed him because out of nowhere, he punched her. She swerved sideways but kept limping down the street. I dropped the candy and ran outside. "Hey!" I yelled. "Leave her alone!" Now I could see the woman was crying, carrying crutches in one hand and a three-year-old boy in the other. Her boyfriend, or whoever he was, was red with anger. He ignored me and kept yelling at her. "Your mom told me you were coming here! Now stop! I just wanna talk to you! You can't do this!" I stepped between them. "Leave her alone!" I said again; then I said, "Get outta here!" He balled his hands into fists and said, "That ain't happenin'." But during all of this he refused to look at me, as if I weren't even there. His eyes were red and bleary. I was terrified. I told him he just needed to go home. He wouldn't acknowledge me. He kept stepping to the side to get an angle on his girlfriend, and I kept stepping in front of him. At some point the woman handed me her crutches so she could get a better hold of her child. She was limping heavily. We air-danced down the block this way, painfully slowly, silently: her, me, him. Eventually I said, "Look, I'm gonna call the cops and this is all gonna get worse." His face went white. Then he tensed up and took a short, compact swing. At himself. It sounded like a gunshot, the sound of his fist hitting his own face. It was loud enough that my neighbor, Mike, came outside. Mike is a big, strapping Vietnam veteran, about as tough and as reasonable a man as I know. The guy seemed worried by Mike, certainly more worried than he'd been by me. Mike and I stood on either side of the woman until her angry young boyfriend gave up and stalked off. Twice more he punched himself as he walked. He was sobbing. We waited until he was gone and then we escorted her to the shelter. All the way there, the little boy stared at me. I didn't know what to say. For some reason I asked if he was going trick-or-treating later that night. His mother looked at me like I was crazy.
51. At the shelter, I gave her back the crutches. The woman knocked on the door. It opened. Mike and I stayed on the street, because that's as close as we're supposed to get. Maybe as close as we want to get. A gentle hand took the woman's arm and she and her boy were led carefully inside.