



# State Population Profile

## I'M IN A NEW YORK STATE OF MIND\*

An NPG Commentary  
by Karen I. Shragg, Ed. D.

New York State, along with its renowned iconic city, has had a huge impact on the entire US and the world due to its rich political history and its contribution to the arts with its museums, galleries and theatres. People from all over the globe tune in to watch the ball drop at Times Square on New Year's Eve. Between Broadway plays and musicals and songs immortalized by both Frank Sinatra and Billy Joel, "New York, New York" and "New York State of Mind" respectively, New York is in our cultural bloodstream even if we've never traveled there.

New York state is full of tourist attractions. Besides its highly coveted ethnic cuisines, it is home to the Statue of Liberty, Central Park, The Guggenheim Museum, The Brooklyn Bridge, the Empire State Building, Times Square and Niagara Falls to name just some of the reasons people visit the state.

Right up to the present, New York has been the birthplace of seven US presidents. The eighth president of the United States was Martin Van Buren. He was born outside of Albany in a town called Kinderhook when the state supported less

than 340,000 people and the iconic city often referred to as the Big Apple was a small village.

Part of the original 13 colonies, New York's boundaries were finalized in 1791. It has 54,555 square miles encompassing both the Adirondack and Catskill Mountains, and the Hudson River. New York is one of five states that border two or more Great Lakes. In addition to Lake Erie and Lake Ontario, it borders the Atlantic Ocean on its east side. New York state also has many lakes in the Finger Lakes region and shares part of its border with two Canadian provinces and five states.

### THREATS TO QUALITY OF LIFE

Fast forward to today and New York state remains the same size as it was more than 200 years ago but now must provide resources to 20.2 million people in the state, including the 8.4 million living in the Big Apple.<sup>1</sup> Within the time span of 40 presidential terms, New York's population grew 59-fold. Because the size of New York has remained the same over time, this sets up the conditions of population overshoot.

The fallout of this can be seen in New York's high cost of living with its infamous high tax burden; nationwide it has the second highest homeless population; and it continues to have high pollution levels in its cities, particularly its largest one.<sup>2</sup> New York City visitors and residents must put up with the aggravation and pollution of traffic. It is the most congested metropolitan area in the U.S. despite having an elaborate and highly used public transit subway system. Congestion contributes to poor air quality and increased accidents, creating higher insurance rates and a poorer quality of life.

According to *Hudson Valley News*, these New York cities have the worst quality of life: New York City, Albany, Buffalo, Rochester and Syracuse. In broad strokes, quality of life is all about the ability of people to easily navigate the systems offered by one's community, meaning the delivery and experience of health care, transportation, education, employment, and recreation all of which add up to the enjoyment and comfort of city life. Over decades of continued population growth, the availability and accessibility of these resources have greatly diminished. Lines get longer, traffic gets heavier and services are delayed because the cities' supplies cannot meet the demands of so many people.<sup>3</sup>

## DOWN ON THE FARM

The most remarkable thing about New York's agricultural scene is that it is currently ranked as a major agricultural state. It is in the top ten in production of 30 products. Nationally, it is number one in the production of cream cheese and cottage cheese. It is second in apples, maple syrup, cabbage, and yogurt; and it competitively sells tart cherries and green peas, among other products. But its farms are shrinking due to

corporate consolidation, labor difficulties, and rising infrastructure costs. New York has lost 2,698 farms since 2017. The total cropland acres are also decreasing. The total of 6,502,286 acres being farmed is down from 6,866,171 in 2017. When farmers are faced with rising production and labor costs and low crop prices, it is easy to see why it is hard to resist the offers from developers who are willing to pay top dollar for their land. In New York the average price per acre for farmland is \$4,300.<sup>4</sup>

Upstate New York's average farm size is 212 acres. When over \$900,000 is on the table, no one can blame those who move away from challenging farm life.<sup>5</sup>

## UPSTATE NEW YORK: A PLACE FOR WILDLIFE

New York doesn't exactly conjure up a vision of wildlife watching. It is, however, surprisingly home to 92 mammals, 376 birds, 71 amphibians and reptiles all located within its many refuges and state parks. New York conservation managers struggle with many of the same issues which confront other states. Loss of biodiversity can sum it all up.

Human population growth is rarely blamed in literature for the loss of species and green space, but they do now use the more sanitized term, "anthropogenic." These natural and human-induced changes to the environment create problems like invasive species, habitat loss and fragmentation which is a splitting up of habitat, harming all but the small rodents who can still live there. The word "anthropogenic" is defined as "human-created", but it needs to expand to include the number of humans as well. It needs to be clear that human population growth is the

engine behind the increasing demand for natural resources. This leads to water scarcity, pollution, deforestation and the breaking up of big swaths of habitat required by larger mammals and rare birds. These environmental stressors create conditions which exacerbate the irritating takeover of natural habitat by species like Japanese knotweed. This otherwise attractive purple-flowered plant replaces native plants and disrupts the life cycles of pollinators. Insects like the spotted lantern fly and the emerald ash borer kill trees, while the round goby and zebra mussel disturb aquatic life.

New York is committed to the 30 by 30 Act, which strives to protect 30% of the state's resources by 2030. This commendable effort is challenged by the demands of urban sprawl eating away at the acres needed to be kept wild.

## ENTER ELLIS ISLAND

One of the reasons New York's population has risen so much over the years is that it is home to the most famous processing center for receiving immigrants, Ellis Island. Located in the Upper New York Harbor and near the Statue of Liberty, it served as the main port of entry for immigrants from 1892 to 1954. The workers at Ellis Island processed and approved entrance to 12 million people seeking the promise of becoming new Americans and many of them settled nearby since they came without the means to travel much further. They settled in New York City, their port of entry, and together created communities with other immigrants and refugees from their country of origin and never left. New York is a proud city of immigrants with well-defined ethnic neighborhoods. Despite its measurable diminishing quality of life, the Big Apple became a sanctuary city as

far back as 1989. This has contributed to the state's approximately 825,000 undocumented people. A sanctuary city is defined as one which limits cooperation with federal immigration enforcement.

## CLIMATE CHANGE KNOCKING ON THE DOOR

The state of New York has the added disadvantage of being a victim of global climate issues due to its location on the Atlantic Ocean. New York struggles with a system of failing infrastructure, particularly its subway system due to rising sea levels and the frequency and intensity of storms due to climate change. 4.5 million people ride the New York subways daily, which is more than half of the city's residents, making flooding a potentially catastrophic situation. Mitigating all of these problems will cost billions. The plans which include elevating, rebuilding, and replacing a surface level drainage system complete with pumps and lift stations are very expensive and would disrupt service while being built.

## CONCLUSION

New York City will always have a place in the hearts of millions who love it when a Broadway show opens or when they can visit one of its iconic tourist attractions. The rest of the state will continue to attract millions to its beautiful sites. But the *New York State of Mind* needs to be open to the downsides of encouraging unlimited growth in a limited space with the added instability of a world influenced by climate change.

Frank Sinatra sang about wanting to wake up in a city that doesn't sleep, now we know why.

## NOTES:

1. <https://www.nyc.gov/content/planning/pages/planning/population>
2. <https://cbcnny.org/building-crisis>
3. <https://hudsonvalleypost.com/worst-quality-of-life-in-new-york/>.
4. <https://www.fb.org/market-intel/real-estate-rising-farmland-values-hit-record-high#:~:text=Like%20overall%20farm%20real%20estate,increases%20earlier%20in%20the%20decade.>
5. <https://nyfb.org/about/about-ny-ag>

\*Title is derived from a lyric from Billy Joel's *New York State of Mind*

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**<https://npg.org/stateprofiles>**



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