



State Population Profile

THE DEEPLY ICONIC AND IRONIC ROOTS OF THE GARDEN STATE

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

New Jersey has deep historical roots and is the birthplace of everything from submarines to saltwater taffy and canned soup. This coastal state holds many records, from the significant to the mundane. New Jersey can boast that it was the very spot where the first organized baseball game was played in 1846. The first boardwalk in the world was built in 1870 in Atlantic City. It is home to the first copper mine, drive-in movie theater, and ferry service. New Jersey is also the home of the first brewery, Miss America pageant, pro-basketball game and even the first incandescent light bulb. In addition, the first movie, seashore resort, and balloon flight all call this small coastal state home. These are just some of the remarkable firsts that happened in the state. Not bad for the 5th smallest state in the union.

Many famous people came from New Jersey. They have bragging rights to rock & roll singer/songwriter Bruce Springsteen, comedian John Stewart, actors Meryl Streep, Jack Nicholson, and Danny Devito, singers Frank Sinatra, Jon Bon Jovi, and Whitney Houston, and scientist Thomas Edison.

NEW JERSEY'S COMPLICATED COLONIAL HISTORY

The history of this state's name is indicative of its ties to colonial times. The King of England wanted to honor Sir Carteret, who was then the governor of the Isle of Jersey. Carteret had remained loyal to the crown during the English Civil War in the 1600s. The nickname, "The Garden State," was coined much later at the state's centennial celebration in 1876. During an exhibition in Philadelphia, farmer and politician Abraham Browning (who was also an attorney)

coined the phrase referring to New Jersey as a barrel filled with good things to eat, serving both Pennsylvania and New York.¹

The indigenous people of the land now called New Jersey were the Lenape, who were later called the Delaware by European settlers. They numbered about 8,000 and extended all along the eastern seaboard, before the Dutch, English, and Swedes arrived and took their land. The settlers encouraged slavery by offering land for every enslaved person brought over. The English dominated the area and passed laws which made sure slavery took a stronghold there. They rewarded enslavers 60 acres of land taken from the Lenape who became displaced and weakened by European diseases. For every enslaved person during 1664, 60 acres were given. The next year a bit less was offered, 45 acres for each person. By 1665, 30 acres was the prize for having a slave on your homestead. This ensured that New Jersey's enslaved population grew from just 50 in 1664 to thousands by 1763, amounting to 12 % of their total population at the time.²

New Jersey was the site of the most battles of the Revolutionary War, with more than 600 taking place there. After the war, New Jersey became the 3rd state to ratify the Constitution and the first to approve the Bill of Rights.³ Its deep roots to slavery were hard to shake off. The state sent large numbers of troops to fight for the Union during the Civil War and it was also instrumental in establishing the Underground Railroad. The record shows, however, that the New Jersey state legislature refused to ratify the Thirteenth Amendment which officially abolished slavery and it became the last state to end the terrible practice.⁴

UNIQUELY URBAN

During colonial times the population of New Jersey was approximately 120,000, circa 1775. The size of the state was 7,354 square miles of land then and now. Fast forward to today and the state's size has remained the same while its population is 80 times larger.

New Jersey is the only state in the country where every county – all 21 of them – is labeled urban. The state ranks 47th in size but 11th in population. Amazingly enough, 42% of the state is still covered in forest. Its population density is the highest in the land, with more than 9.5 million people living in an area of 7,354 square miles. In other words, if the US were as densely populated as New Jersey, we would be shoulder to shoulder with 4 billion people!

OVERCROWDED CLASSROOMS

When one interviews teachers about what can be done to improve education, they uniformly report their desire to reduce classroom size. They want fewer students so they can give each one more attention. New Jersey's overcrowded classrooms speak to an issue directly connected to overpopulation. The Hillsborough Township in Somerset County, New Jersey has a current population of 47,159, up from 43,242 in 2020.⁵

The Township is located in the northern part of the state, along its border with New York. This population pressure means that “the school there has grown so overcrowded that educators have turned to whatever spaces remain, carving out improvised classrooms to keep up with rising enrollment and the need for small-group instruction. Staff say nearly every extra room in the building has been claimed.”⁶

The situation in New Jersey's schools speak to the need to halt growth in the state. In a report recently released by the New Jersey Department of Education (DOE) it revealed that “the majority of Schools Development Authority (SDA) districts – formerly known as Abbott districts – do not have sufficient space to meet student needs, highlighting an ongoing crisis in school infrastructure.”⁷

Nathaniel Gronewold explored this issue in an NPG Forum Paper. He stated that, “Overcrowding is one of the most significant issues facing schools and teachers in the United States today,” citing a 2019 article from Patch. The author bravely pointed to population growth as a cause, along with funding crunches and, yes, teacher shortages.

Just as I experienced back in my high school days, classroom sizes of 30 or even 40 students or more are now normal. Newly enrolled students are being packed into “temporary” trailers to be taught by instructors who may or may not be qualified to teach the subjects they're teaching, or by a continually rotating roster of substitute teachers.⁸

Gronewold goes on to further explain that one of the reasons teacher shortages are becoming more common is due to a lack of affordable housing for them, considering their typically low salaries. As population pressure increases the demand for housing, teachers find they cannot afford to live near the schools that need them.

INDUSTRIALIZATION IN THE GARDEN STATE

New Jersey's location has allowed it to remain a prime location for industry even today. Due to its location, it has easy access to 33% of the entire US population within a day's drive of the state's center. Within 2 hours, a given distribution center located in central New Jersey can serve more than 38 million consumers. Manufacturers have the added advantage of being close to their suppliers and those who sell their products. Supplies for manufacturing come through the Ports of New York and New Jersey, some of the busiest seaports for imports on the continent.

WATER QUALITY AND THE PRICE OF INDUSTRIALIZATION

New Jersey's current citizens are paying a hefty price for their industrial roots. While it is surrounded by the Atlantic Ocean and the Delaware River, its waterways are threatened. Industrial run-off and pesticides are among the biggest threats to the state's water supply.⁹ As the nation's most densely populated state, the forests, and open spaces – which naturally filter out pollutants – are disappearing. In many places the fish are too contaminated to eat, and many homeowners can't trust their tap water because lead-lined pipes threaten their children's health.

NEW JERSEY'S IMMIGRATION HISTORY

While many think of the historic entry point of Ellis Island as being a part of New York City, it is mostly in New Jersey. Known as the most active port of entry for immigration in the country, more than 12 million people came to the small island in New York Harbor to be processed and start their lives as Americans before its closure in 1954. Immigration remains a controversial issue in the state as it

has one of the nation's largest immigrant populations. Nearly 25% of residents – roughly 2 million people – are immigrants: 450,000 of them are undocumented.¹⁰

The densely populated state cannot afford any immigration policies which encourage more growth. For example, New Jersey has no laws in place to require that employers verify the citizenship of their new hires. E-Verify would help curb the numbers of illegal immigrants, thereby helping to reduce growth in the state. Larger populations demand more infrastructure, require more homes, and need schools, healthcare facilities, and other public buildings. In addition, population growth can increase demand for commercial buildings like retail stores, offices, and entertainment venues, as businesses seek to capitalize on a larger customer base.

Under pressure to house more and more people, zoning laws are changed to permit multifamily units. This increases the population of a given area, which in turn strains local budgets and existing infrastructure, leading to the need for new roads, more utilities, and better transit systems to support the increased numbers.¹¹

WILD NEW JERSEY

Despite its population density, industry, and the infamous New Jersey Turnpike, New Jersey has some spectacular wild areas. One was nearly obliterated by plans for an airport expansion in the 1960s but local conservationists fought back and preserved what became a model of conservation efforts, the Great Swamp National Wildlife Refuge. Located only 26 miles from New York's Times Square, it is home to 39 species of mammals and 42 species of reptiles.¹²

New Jersey's shoreline, salt marshes, and coastal bays are a mecca for migrating and overwintering waterbirds. They are also popular among birdwatchers. The Cape May observatory is a popular hotspot for birders. Established in 1976, in a good year, over 1 million migrating birds can be seen. The Wildlife Management Area System in the state encompasses 358,000 acres in 122 different areas. Funded by hunting and fishing licenses at first, it was also aided by the issuing of bonds (called Green Acre Bonds) which helped to pay for capital projects throughout the system. Despite some spectacular areas set aside for wildlife and public recreation, New Jersey loses approximately 45 square miles of wildlife habitat each year due to population-growth-inspired development.¹³

INCREDIBLE BEAUTY

Without a doubt, New Jersey is a small state with a 90-mile coastline of coveted sandy beaches. They attract people from all over the state and from New York City. With so many people desiring to spend the weekend on the New Jersey shore, the headaches of getting there are getting worse. Bottlenecks and traffic jams all add up to hours of clogged travel time. The natural beauty of the state is simply lost if you can't reach your destination without spending most of your weekend on the road. In addition to the residents wanting access to their own recreational areas, tourists add to the problems of accessibility. Many associate tourism with an increase in economic activity, but it also diminishes the experience for locals. "New Jersey welcomed 123.7 million total visitors in 2024, up three million visitors from 2023, with visitation increasing 2.7% year-over-year. Day-visitor volume reached more than 69.9 million, with spending hitting an all-time high of \$6.915 billion. Overnight visits to New Jersey reached 53 million with overnight spending equaling \$43.6 billion."¹⁴

CROPS OF THE GARDEN STATE

When one learns that New Jersey produces more than 100 different kinds of fruits and vegetables it becomes clear that its nickname was earned. The Garden State is one of the top 10 producers of the following: blueberries, cranberries, peaches, tomatoes, bell peppers, eggplant, cucumbers, apples, spinach, squash, and asparagus.¹⁰

A BUMPER-TO-BUMPER CONCLUSION

This small state packs a big punch. It offers mountains, rivers, and proximity to the Atlantic Ocean. It offers higher education and tons of seaside fun in Atlantic City. But because it is small, coupled with it being a commuter state for those who work in New York City and Philadelphia, local traffic problems are monumental and getting worse. Nearly half a million people commute to where the job market calls. That puts more traffic on the New Jersey turnpike, a highway so infamous for its accidents and congestion that it has been nicknamed, *The Monster Road*. Spanning 148 miles with some sections as wide as 14 lanes, the turnpike has become a dangerous place. There were 7,768 crashes recorded in 2019. For all its offerings, it seems that if New Jersey were a hotel, it would have to hang a No Vacancy sign because there is no more room at the inn.¹¹

NOTES:

1. <https://www.jerseysbest.com/community/how-did-new-jersey-get-its-name/>
2. https://www.nj.gov/nj/about/history/short_history.shtml
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. <https://worldpopulationreview.com/us-cities/new-jersey/hillsborough-township>
6. <https://www.nj.com/somerset/2026/02/overcrowded-nj-school-is-so-pressed-for-space-the-principal-gave-up-her-office.html>
7. <https://edlawcenter.org/state-report-finds-two-thirds-of-sda-districts-lack-adequate-school-facilities/>
8. <https://npg.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/CrowdedClassroomsTeacherShortagesDemographicChanges-FP2022.pdf>
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11. <https://www.buildcentral.com/using-population-growth-trends-to-identify-new-construction-projects/>
12. <https://dep.nj.gov/njfw/conservation/the-wildlife-management-area-system/>
13. *Ibid.*
14. <https://www.nj.gov/state/press-2025-0508a.shtml>
15. <https://extension.rutgers.edu/ag/crops>
16. <https://www.njadvocates.com/2021/07/20/new-jersey-turnpike-continues-to-be-a-dangerous-road-for-travelers/>

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