

# rural new york minute

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## What does “Community” mean to New Yorkers?

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How we define our community may not just affect the way we view it and our place in society, but our definition can also influence the actions we take personally, politically, and otherwise to shape our community. “Community” has many connotations, most of them positive. A “sense” of community, a bond we share with others, the place we live, a place we identify with in some important way, and a place that may in turn identify us.

Where do New Yorkers consider their “community” to be? We thought we would start with the idea that community often (but not always) has something to do with place and/or geography. We examine data collected on the 2007 Empire State Poll, a telephone survey of 400 downstate (Rockland County and below), 400 upstate, and 300 rural New Yorkers (“rural” is defined here as areas with population densities of less than 500 persons per square mile).

When asked what level of geography best described their definition of community, 42% of all NYS respondents said their

village/city/town best fit their idea of community, followed by 30% identifying their local neighborhood. However, when we analyze and compare the responses by downstate, upstate urban, and rural NY respondents, we see dramatically different stories. Almost half (48%) of downstate New Yorkers, the vast majority of them urban dwellers, identify their local neighborhood as their “community”. Only 25% of them identify their town/village/city, and only 16% identify their county or borough. Only a handful (4%) of downstaters define their community by their region of the state. When these results are compared with Upstate urban residents (which includes places like Syracuse, Buffalo, Albany and the suburbs which have at least 500 persons per square mile), the contrast is rather striking. While almost half of downstate residents identified their neighborhood as their community, only 13% of upstate urban dwellers did so. The majority (53%) of urban upstaters identified their village/town/city. Only 12% and 14% defined their communities as their county or region of NYS, respectively.

The profile of responses from rural New Yorkers, the vast majority of whom live in upstate New York, was remarkably similar to that of the upstate urban respondents. Slightly more rural New Yorkers (58%) named their village or town as best describing their community, with their local neighborhood, county, or region of the state receiving roughly equal responses (a range of 12-14%).

Perhaps in very dense urban areas such as downstate NYS, the town or city as a whole is seen as too big, socially and geographically distant from the individual, and therefore somewhat removed from these urban dwellers’ sense of community. Perhaps in these cases people tend to identify with what is physically close, such as the neighborhood. Conversely, in rural areas, the idea of a “neighborhood” often covers miles and miles of open space, making the connection to rural residents’ village or town more meaningful and important, a centralized place where geographically isolated people can come together for meetings and civic functions, to build “community” around shared experiences. The interesting finding here is that upstate urban New Yorkers are much more similar to their rural counterparts than to their downstate urban ones. These findings are important because the place where local community action occurs may also differ between upstate and downstate, and this may suggest different targets for community based public policy.

**Figure 1:** When you refer to your community, what geographic area best describes what you mean?

