

rural new york minute

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Where do New Yorkers want to live?

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What is the Issue?

While a lot of attention has been paid to the so-called “brain drain”, in NYS this phenomenon has been largely re-cast as more of a failure to attract new migrants to the upstate region of the state, rather than a mass exodus, especially among the younger, well-educated demographic. Attracting new residents has become a focus of many local, regional and state level efforts to create community and economic development opportunities particularly in the upstate region. However, while attracting people to the state is important, the retention of current residents is also critical to maintaining a stable population and workforce.

While NYS’s out-migration rate is similar to that experienced by many states, most New Yorkers choose to remain in the state. To complement the many efforts to attract new residents, we also need to understand why people plan to stay. In order to better understand people’s residential plans and expectations, and the factors driving their residential choices, we examine data from the Empire State Poll, an annual telephone survey conducted by Cornell University’s Survey Research Institute. The 1,000 responses are categorized according to whether the respondent lives in an upstate urban, rural, or downstate urban setting.

Where do New Yorkers expect to live in 5 years?

The majority of New Yorkers (68.7 percent) see themselves living in the same community five years from now (Figure 1). Rural New Yorkers are the most likely (74.9 percent) to hold this expectation, and downstate urban (the New York City greater metropolitan area) are the least likely (65.6 percent). Among the downstate urbanites who expect to live in a different community in five years, about 42 percent expect to live in a small town or rural place. The rural preference is even stronger among upstate urbanites who expect to move during the next 5 years. Almost two-thirds (59 percent) see themselves as living in villages or in the open country. Rural respondents who expect to move overwhelmingly see themselves as staying in rural areas. So, while the majority of respondents across all geographic categories expect to stay in the same community, those who plan or expect to move seem to prefer a smaller, less densely populated community.

Figure 1: Five years from now I see myself living . . .

	NY State	Downstate Urban	Upstate Urban	Rural
In the same community	68.7%	65.6%	73.5%	74.9%
In a large city or metropolitan area (different community)	6.5%	7.6%	4.3%	4.2%
In a medium sized city (different community)	8.1%	9.1%	6.6%	5.2%
In a small town or rural village (different community)	12.4%	14.6%	9.5%	8.9%
In the open country (different community)	4.4%	3.1%	6.2%	6.8%

For those respondents who report they were likely to leave their current residence, about one-third expect to leave New York State (Figure 2). The likelihood of leaving NYS is just slightly greater for rural respondents than for urban respondents.

Figure 2: If you leave your current residence, how likely are you to stay in New York State?

	NY State	Downstate Urban	Upstate Urban	Rural
Very unlikely	25.1%	23.3%	26.5%	29.6%
Somewhat unlikely	8.6%	9.2%	7.6%	7.8%
Somewhat likely	14.8%	14.6%	14.7%	15.6%
Very likely	51.4%	52.8%	51.2%	46.9%

What is important in determining where to live?

Many factors play a role in deciding where to live. When asked what was most important in making this decision, about a third of New Yorkers cited “being close to friends and family” (see Figure 3). This sentiment was strongest among rural respondents (40.9 percent) and weakest among downstate urbanites (28.8 percent). Upstate urban New Yorkers were roughly in the middle (36.9 percent). Considerations such as an affordable cost of living (18.1 percent) and the availability of well-paying jobs (10.6 percent) were also important. Taken together, these two economic factors play a significant role in determining where people choose to live (28.7 percent, in sum). These two factors were somewhat more important to downstate and upstate urban respondents than to rural respondents. While NYS’s relatively higher tax rates are often blamed for population losses and other economic woes, our data suggest that taxes actually play a relatively small part in deciding where to live. Only 6.1 percent of respondents indicated that paying fair and reasonable taxes is most important to them in determining where to live. On the other hand, “living in a fun place” was cited by 14.5 percent of downstate urban respondents as the most important criteria, compared to only 7.5 and 7.3 percent for upstate urban and rural respondents, respectively.

Figure 3: What is most important to you in determining where to live?

	NY State	Downstate Urban	Upstate Urban	Rural
Numerous well-paying job opportunities	10.6%	9.4%	13.6%	10.4%
Being close to friends and family	32.5%	28.8%	36.9%	40.9%
Being close to others my age	1.1%	1.3%	0.9%	0.8%
Opportunities to improve my community	2.6%	2.8%	2.8%	1.6%
Living in a fun place	11.7%	14.5%	7.5%	7.3%
Weather and climate	3.9%	3.3%	4.2%	5.7%
Affordable cost of living	18.1%	20.7%	14.0%	11.9%
Paying fair and reasonable taxes	6.1%	5.9%	5.1%	8.3%
Other	13.5%	13.3%	15.0%	13.2%

Conclusions

Limited population growth restricts community and economic development at the local, regional, and state level. Hence, understanding the plans, expectations, and factors driving residential choices for New York State residents is an important piece of the overall population puzzle. While attracting new residents is important for invigorating local economics and for replacing persons who have moved away, it is also important to retain current residents who contribute widely to social and economic development and to community life. ▲

