

# Research & Policy Brief Series

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## Terrorism & Residential Location Preferences in New York State

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### What is the Issue?

Does the threat of terrorism influence where people want to live and buy homes in New York State? Our research suggests that the terrorist attacks of 9/11 have indeed strengthened the preferences of many New Yorkers for life in smaller towns and rural areas. However, the strength of this effect has most likely faded over time and seems unlikely, in any event, to have driven a large scale or region-wide change in settlement patterns.

Official estimates of population change since 9/11 show that average annual population growth rates in the NYC metropolitan area are lower in the new millennium than they were in the 1990s. However, counties within a two and a half hour drive of New York City are among the state's fastest growing. Considering only resettlement of people already in the United States (i.e. excluding international migration), communities within this area but more distant from New York City are gaining new people faster than current residents are moving away. In contrast, net losses mark the City and its immediately adjacent communities. Is this merely part of a continuing national trend of population dispersion or a set of demographic events also influenced by 9/11?

### How was the Research Conducted?

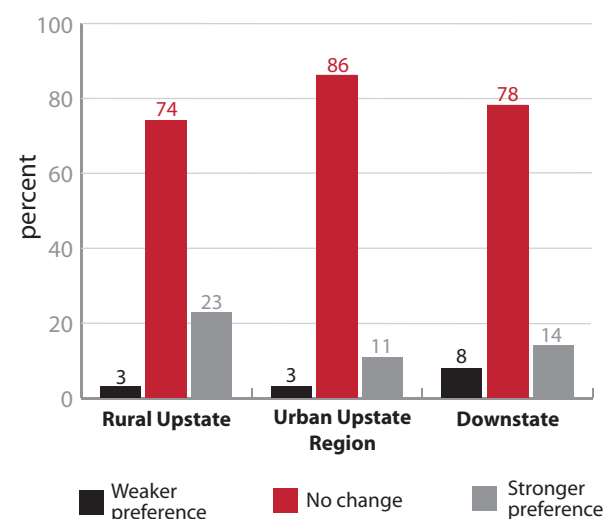
To gain insight into this issue, participants in a 2004 Cornell University survey of New York State residents (the annual Empire State Poll, or ESP) were asked about their perceptions of terrorism and its implications for their own residential location preferences. Responses to a number of survey questions were analyzed so that other variables possibly influencing decisions to relocate (such as gender, political affiliation, level of education, family size, presence in the household of younger and older children, race, and religious identification) could be con-

trolled. The modeling effort tried to predict who would "expect to be living in their community five years from now". Models were constructed separately for four geographies (NYC, all of downstate, urban upstate, and rural upstate) and then compared.

### What were the General Findings?

- Terrorism was not an abiding concern among most state residents 3 years after the 9/11 attack. Though approximately 3 of 4 state residents feared new attacks on the U.S., only a minority—up to 1 in 3 downstate residents—felt it likely their own community was at risk.
- A large majority of the state's residents (three quarters or more, depending on the degree of urbanization of their

**Figure 1:** Has the ongoing threat of terrorist attacks, strengthened, weakened or left unchanged your preferences for city, suburban, small town, or rural locations?



county) asserted that their residential preferences for rural versus urban locations were not affected by the attacks.

- Security concerns can influence preferences. People who perceived greater baseline community security (of all kinds) were less likely to expect to move.
- If there is any effect of perceived terrorism risks on the propensity to move, the threat is not strongly in-

**9/11 fortified upstate residents' tendencies to stay put, especially in rural areas, more than it "pushed" downstate residents to move away.**

fluent; none of those expecting to move mentioned security motivations when questioned.

- The effects of the 9/11 attacks on New York residents' expectations of moving are weak. However, more than providing a strong "push" for downstate residents to move away, our analysis suggests 9/11 fortified upstate residents' tendencies to stay put, especially in rural areas.

### Do Downstate & Upstate Perceptions Vary?

- When asked to identify the "most important issue facing New York State", 7% of downstate respondents designated security/terrorism as their most important issue. This proportion fell to only 1 or 2% of upstate respondents.
- Downstate residents were more wary of future attacks than were upstate residents. Just over one in ten downstate residents thought an attack in their community was very likely, nearly twice the proportion of upstate residents.
- Respondents were asked to compare across the "full range of possible risks" the overall security of their community against that of other U.S. communities. The sense of security is highest upstate. Still, only 7% of residents in downstate counties say their community is among the nation's "least secure".
- Compared to urban upstate residents, a larger fraction of downstate residents asserted their residential preferences were affected by the attacks.
- Expectations of moving are more prevalent downstate: Respondents expecting to move within 5 years ranged from 17/18% in upstate rural/urban counties to 29% in downstate counties.

- Residents in downstate counties who thought an attack probable were more likely than other downstaters to expect to move within five years (35% v.s. 29%). In upstate counties the likelihood of an attack had a weaker association with moving.

### Do Urban & Rural Perceptions Differ?

- The terrorist attacks affected the residential preferences of a higher proportion of rural than urban upstate residents. Rural residents tended to have their preferences for rural life reinforced.
- The sense of community security is highest in upstate NY, but does not vary significantly between rural and urban upstate counties.
- A relatively high percent of urban residents who thought an attack was very or somewhat likely also said they expected to move within five years (35% downstate, 21% urban upstate). In rural counties only 15% felt this way.

**Most New Yorkers did not feel at risk due to terrorist threats when queried about their residential preferences in 2004. Among those who did, proximity to a major city was an evident factor.**

### What are the Policy Implications?

This analysis lends some weight to arguments for the resilience of New York City as a residential location. By 2004, it appears that the 9/11 shock had, to some degree, receded and New Yorkers could respond to the survey questions with perspective and an absence of panic. Though some residents clearly left the city in its aftermath, the 9/11 tragedy was fading as a motive for changing residence and was increasingly overwhelmed by more traditional influences. In the unfortunate event of additional urban terrorist attacks, urban residents' preferences for rural and small town living could once again be reinforced. In addition to the families and individuals directly concerned, the effects of terrorism on residential choice could still have major implications for planners, service providers, employers, builders, demographers, taxpayers and public officials. ♦

