

Benchmarking New York

Counties, Cities, Towns and Villages

New York State residents pay some of the highest local taxes in the nation. To help New Yorkers compare some of the basic fiscal measures for local governments, the **Empire Center for Public Policy** has calculated effective property tax rates and per-capita values for the spending, debt and tax levels of counties, cities, town and villages throughout the state, excluding only New York City.

Derived from statistics gathered annually by the Office of the State Comptroller, the result is a database of measurements that taxpayers can use as benchmarks for evaluating local governments.

Government performance should be measured against standards set by competitors and peers. Spending, debt and taxes are all key indicators taxpayers care about.

Businesses have long known the benefits of benchmarking – measuring performance against standards set by competitors and peers. Benchmarks in isolation may say little about the quality of management or public services in different communities; however, by spotlighting differences and trends, the benchmarks in this report provide a framework for evaluation. And they provide goals for improvement for governments that need to compete more effectively to attract jobs and promote economic growth.

Our statewide findings, displayed in Table 1 on page 4, provide high, low and average benchmarks for the major categories of spending, taxes and debt. We further break down findings for small, medium and large jurisdictions.

Here are just a few examples of what the data show:

- Among the five largest cities, Yonkers has the highest per-capita tax burden, Albany has the highest effective property tax rate and Rochester leads in per capita spending.
- Saratoga County offers the best combination of low spending and low effective property tax rates among mid-sized county governments.
- Oyster Bay, in Nassau County, is both the highest spending and most heavily indebted large town, well above the average for its peers.
- Seasonal resort villages have sky-high spending patterns — topped by \$124,372 per person in the wealthy enclave of Saltaire, on Long Island's South Shore. Upstate villages spend comparatively low amounts but have high effective property tax rates.

To further empower taxpayers to dig beneath the summary numbers, we have created a searchable online tool, including categorical breakdowns of spending, for 2,297 counties, towns, cities, villages and school districts in the state. **Benchmarking NY** at **SeeThroughNY.net** lets users rank and compare spending, tax and debt levels for local governments. Including the 2013 fiscal year data, there are now eight years of data to explore in **Benchmarking NY**.

It's all (sometimes) relative

Considered on a statewide basis, the data reflect vast differences in the cost of living and in property values between upstate and downstate regions. Downstate communities have below-average effective property tax rates (but above-average per-capita taxes), while effective property tax rates tend to be highest upstate. Even allowing for such differences, however, grouping local governments by region and size reveals significant differences among peers.

Why do some governments tax, spend or borrow so much more, or less, than their peers? By prompting such questions, benchmarking promotes a public dialogue about the forces driving costs for taxpayers.

For example, the city of Glens Falls spends 50 percent more than the similarly-sized city of Cohoes. The northern Westchester County town of Yorktown spends twice as much per-capita as the neighboring town of Cortlandt. In Central New York, the city of Oswego spends 76 percent more per capita than the city of Cortland. The data offer possible answers for such disparities (among other things, Glens Falls spends more than most on transportation, while Yorktown spends heavily on public safety and sanitation). Local officials can undoubtedly add some explanations of their own.

The purpose here is not to stigmatize, but to raise questions—and to promote a more-informed public discussion of the forces driving high local taxes in every corner of New York.

The sluggish economic recovery in the aftermath of the Great Recession has only intensified the urgent need to reduce taxes at every level of government.

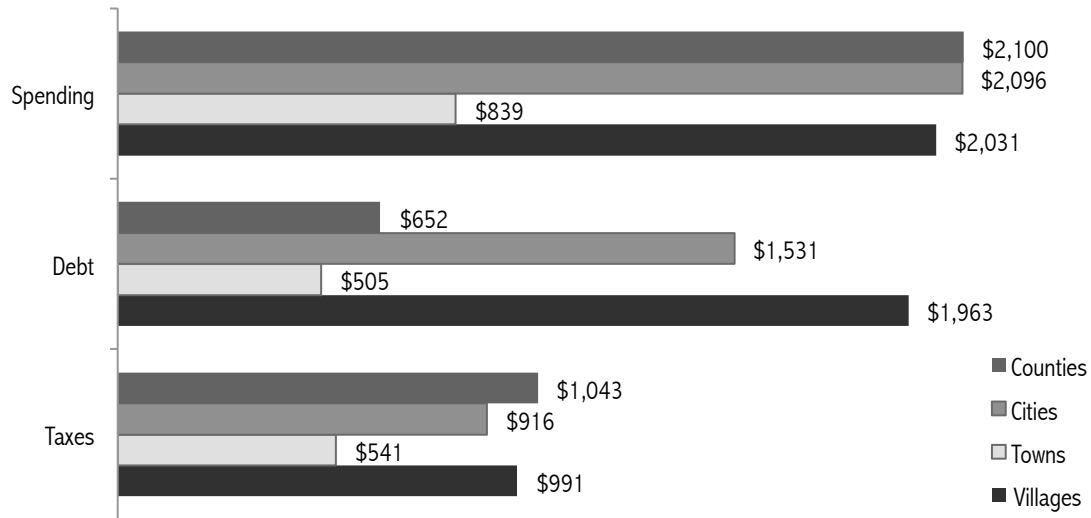
Governor Cuomo has focused on shared services and consolidation as a response to high local spending and taxes. To be sure, there are opportunities in this area, as the Empire Center has highlighted in two reports.¹ The good news is that there already are many cases of service-sharing arrangements involving different government entities throughout the state. These arrangements can be expanded or serve as examples for more jurisdictions.

However, consolidations or service-sharing arrangements are not a panacea.² It's time to start seriously scrutinizing our local governments' bottom lines. It's time to *demand* appropriate actions to reduce costs, improve efficiency and make our communities more affordable and competitive. Benchmarking fiscal outcomes is a necessary first step towards achieving these goals.

¹ "The streamline search: options for localities," *Empire Ideas* No. 4, and Municipal cooperation: sharing services in NY," *Empire Ideas* No. 5 at <http://www.empirecenter.org/empire-ideas/>

² See, for example, Cox, Wendell *Government Efficiency: The Case for Local Control*. Albany, New York: The Association of Towns of the State of New York (2008).

Per-Capita Averages for Counties, Cities, Towns and Villages 2013



Source: Office of the State Comptroller, further calculations by the Empire Center for Public Policy

On a per-capita basis, as shown above, towns have the lowest tax, debt and spending levels among local governments. Villages have the most debt, while counties collect the most in total taxes per capita—which reflects their control of sales taxes.

Methodology

Local governments and school districts report their expenditure, tax and debt data in annual reports compiled by the Office of the State Comptroller (OSC), which in turn posts the data on the Internet.

To allow for more meaningful comparisons, the Empire Center recalculated the OSC data on taxes, debt and spending as per-capita values—i.e., relative to population. Property tax burdens were recalculated as effective rates, based on OSC estimates of assessed property values converted to full value based on equalization rates. Local governments also were organized into population size bands—small, medium and large—based on population. Finally, they were grouped by area and by economic development region.

A searchable database of comparative tax and spending data for local governments has been posted at SeeThroughNY.net/benchmarking-NY.

The database allows users to generate a single benchmark report; a comparison of several local governments; or a ranking of local governments for different measurements of taxes, debt and expenditures. Users can also download the complete spreadsheets used to generate the reports.

Table 1. 2013 Local Government Benchmarks

All New York Regions

	Counties			Cities		Towns		Villages	
Large									
Per-Capita Spending									
High	Westchester	\$2,670.15	Rochester	\$2,675.93	Oyster Bay	\$1,584.92	Rockville Centre	\$3,148.89	
Low	Erie	\$1,660.14	Albany	\$1,903.96	Islip	\$663.94	Mastic Beach	\$291.93	
Average		\$2,209.55		\$2,258.42		\$992.80		\$1,394.65	
Per-Capita Debt									
High	Nassau	\$3,324.20	Yonkers	\$2,696.43	Oyster Bay	\$2,789.34	Tarrytown	\$4,202.47	
Low	Erie	\$738.30	Albany	\$1,267.94	Smithtown	\$146.26	Floral Park	\$220.51	
Average		\$1,774.94		\$2,028.62		\$942.83		\$1,119.33	
Per-Capita Taxes									
High	Nassau	\$1,606.27	Yonkers	\$1,381.78	Amherst	\$752.49	Scarsdale	\$2,157.27	
Low	Erie	\$1,094.35	Buffalo	\$632.90	Brookhaven	\$337.53	Mastic Beach	\$117.03	
Average		\$1,323.73		\$996.94		\$539.84		\$877.05	
Property Tax Rate									
High	Erie	0.54%	Albany	1.22%	Amherst	0.87%	Hempstead	1.80%	
Low	Suffolk	0.23%	Yonkers	0.67%	North Hempstead	0.26%	Mastic Beach	0.12%	
Average		0.42%		0.89%		0.41%		0.78%	
Medium									
Per-Capita Spending									
High	Broome	\$2,655.48	White Plains	\$3,716.14	Massena	\$5,608.11	East Hampton	\$18,987.17	
Low	Saratoga	\$1,364.64	Cortland	\$1,351.12	Milton	\$225.65	New Hempstead	\$163.12	
Average		\$1,980.36		\$2,075.24		\$881.42		\$1,532.03	
Per-Capita Debt									
High	Rockland	\$1,948.67	Geneva	\$3,317.56	East Hampton	\$5,582.31	Castile	\$10,361.04	
Low	Jefferson	\$110.64	Lackawanna	\$298.50	Parma	\$3.31	Camden	\$3.21	
Average		\$653.76		\$1,513.30		\$601.18		\$1,306.67	
Per-Capita Taxes									
High	Ontario	\$1,193.77	White Plains	\$1,897.89	East Hampton	\$2,419.87	East Hampton	\$11,048.22	
Low	Saratoga	\$773.49	Utica	\$639.00	German Flatts	\$114.58	Kaser	\$30.64	
Average		\$995.43		\$937.22		\$556.03		\$727.43	
Property Tax Rate									
High	St Lawrence	0.97%	Binghamton	2.51%	Cheektowaga	1.50%	Herkimer	2.06%	
Low	Saratoga	0.25%	Rye	0.31%	Wilton	0.03%	North Hills	0.003%	
Average		0.61%		1.22%		0.44%		0.71%	
Small									
Per-Capita Spending									
High	Lewis	\$4,659.08	Hudson	\$2,864.31	Newcomb	\$10,431.17	Saltaire	\$124,372.46	
Low	Putnam	\$1,424.94	Norwich	\$1,529.06	Attica	\$139.64	Cold Brook	\$120.91	
Average		\$2,151.77		\$2,102.21		\$829.83		\$3,069.18	
Per-Capita Debt									
High	Essex	\$1,061.79	Johnstown	\$2,305.67	Essex	\$9,264.36	Saltaire	\$151,756.76	
Low	Fulton	\$2.36	Sherrill	\$601.65	Middlesex	\$2.01	Harrisville	\$6.21	
Average		\$505.71		\$1,356.60		\$501.44		\$3,702.09	
Per-Capita Taxes									
High	Hamilton	\$2,176.57	Rensselaer	\$1,046.16	Newcomb	\$6,502.25	Saltaire	\$58,566.92	
Low	Franklin	\$722.33	Salamanca	\$313.20	Attica	\$95.40	Laurens	\$62.12	
Average		\$1,035.03		\$785.26		\$539.20		\$1,514.16	
Property Tax Rate									
High	Allegany	1.56%	Little Falls	1.87%	Alma	1.69%	Angelica	1.39%	
Low	Hamilton	0.22%	Sherrill	0.50%	Orleans	0.01%	Sagaponack	0.01%	
Average		0.73%		1.21%		0.47%		0.52%	

Notes:

1. Zero values were excluded.
2. Due to their unique system of reporting data, the five town-villages (East Rochester, Green island, Harrison, Mount Kisco and Scarsdale) were omitted from these calculations.