

New York State's Population is Aging: Will Communities Be Ready?

Claire Pendergrast

Ellen is 79 years old and lives alone in a two-bedroom house in a small town in upstate New York. She has owned her home for thirty years, and she loves her town. She raised her daughter there, she volunteers at the local library, and she loves the people and the place. Since her husband passed two years ago, it's been harder to manage. Shoveling the driveway and sidewalk is exhausting, and Ellen worries she could fall on the ice and break a hip, so she stays home more. She has friends in town, but some days she can't get out of the house and she wishes they would come visit her more often. She was recently diagnosed with diabetes, but because of a bad knee, she has trouble getting to the grocery store and standing up long enough to prepare the meals her doctor suggested. Money is tight, especially in the winter when the heating bill is high.

Marcus and Dana are in their early eighties and have lived in Brooklyn for most of their lives. Dana was diagnosed with dementia in 2016, and Marcus been working hard to provide the care she needs as the disease progresses. Their church has always been their biggest support system, but as a caregiver, Marcus needs more specialized resources and support than the church can offer. Dana does much better when she gets outside to walk in the park regularly, but Marcus struggles to help Dana navigate their apartment building's stairs and the park's uneven sidewalk. With higher costs for doctors' bills and rising rent, Marcus is also feeling financially stressed and worries about having enough to cover the grocery bill.

Ellen's and Marcus and Dana's stories show the many interconnected challenges that the aging population in New York and across the country face every day. Older adults' health and wellbeing is about much more than healthcare. It's about social connections, housing, finances, transportation, urban planning, and social services. Healthy aging looks a bit different for every household and in every community, so understanding the diverse needs of the state's aging population is critical for promoting older adults' health today and for preparing for the future.

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New York State is Aging

The population is aging nation-wide, and New York State is no exception. 3.2 million New Yorkers, or nearly one in six, are aged 65 and older, and the older adult population is growing faster than any other age group in the state. There are now more older adults in New York State than the entire population of 21 states.¹

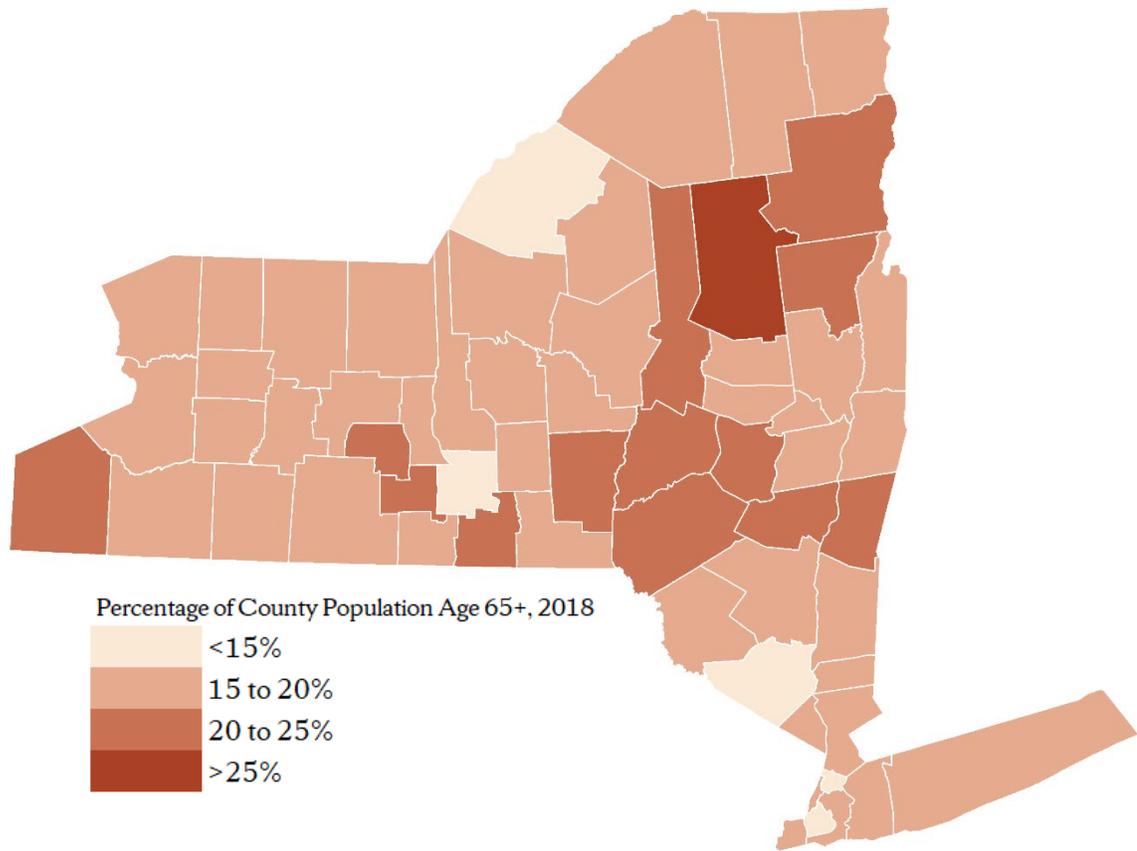


Figure 1. In Several New York Counties, over 20% of Residents are over 65 Years Old

Data Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2018 American Community Survey

Map: Claire Pendergrast

Growing Older at Home, or “Aging in Place” in New York

“Aging in place,” or staying in your own home as you get older, is a growing priority for policymakers and the general public. A 2018 AARP survey found that three out of four Americans age 50 and older would prefer to stay in their homes and communities as they age.² Keeping people in their communities longer improves quality of life for older adults, reducing social isolation and potentially improving physical and mental health outcomes. Additionally, supporting older adults aging in place may yield cost savings at the state and federal levels by reducing demand on Medicare and Medicaid budgets.³

In recent years researchers and policy stakeholders have been working to identify core community features that support healthy aging for older adults. The “Age-Friendly Eight Domains of Livability” framework was developed by the World Health Organization and AARP, outlining built and social environmental factors that support health and wellbeing for older adults aging in place.⁴ The framework identifies eight community features central to “age-friendliness”: outdoor spaces and buildings, transportation, housing, social participation, respect and social inclusion, civic participation and employment, communication and information, and community and health services. The AARP Network of Age-Friendly Communities includes towns, cities, counties, and states across the U.S. working to ensure that their communities provide environments that address the eight domains of livability to support older adults aging in place.

New York State became the first state in the nation to join the AARP Age Friendly Network in 2017, a designation that reflected a state-wide commitment to support healthy aging through state agency decision-making. At the local level, 26 cities, towns, and counties from across New York State are members of the Age Friendly Network. This demonstrates a significant commitment to supporting the diverse needs of the state's growing population of older adults. However, continued efforts by policy stakeholders and community advocates are needed to ensure that funding and political will for creating age-friendly communities continues into the future.

What Programs and Organizations Support Aging in Place in New York?

A diversity of public and private organizations is responsible for delivering a wide range of services and supports to help older New Yorkers stay independent for as long as possible. At the state level, the New York State Office for the Aging coordinates home and community-based programming that is administered at the local level through a network of local offices for the aging located in every county in New York State. Community-based support services provided through offices for the aging include assistance in applying for and receiving benefits such as SNAP or heating assistance, navigating health insurance, connecting to legal services, and linking older adults to congregate and home-delivered meals, nutrition counseling, employment and volunteer opportunities, senior centers, transportation, and in-home supports.⁶ Local non-profits, such as senior centers and home meal delivery organizations, are also heavily involved in providing services to older New Yorkers in communities across the state. NY Connects is another government program providing free information and resources to older adults by telephone, online, or in-person.

Ongoing Advocacy and Investment in Age-Friendly Communities is Needed

The 2020 New York State budget included \$15 million for counties to provide community-based services for older adults, a significant increase in funding over previous budget cycles. This type of investment and political commitment to supporting aging in place is critical for preparing communities across the state for an aging population. Creating age-friendly communities requires collaboration between diverse stakeholders and a multi-sectoral

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approach. New York has made bold commitments to supporting healthy aging and now must act to follow through and support policies and programs that improve health and wellbeing for older New Yorkers, particularly as New York's population is poised to continue aging in the coming years.

References

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