

WHAT'S AT ISSUE HERE?

New York Metro Area
Residents on the Problems
That Concern Them Most

November
2015

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on the Problems That Concern
Them Most

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Available online at:
[http://publicagenda.org/pages/
wnyc-new-york-metro-area-survey](http://publicagenda.org/pages/wnyc-new-york-metro-area-survey)

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INTRODUCTION

BY WILL FRIEDMAN, PRESIDENT OF PUBLIC AGENDA

For 40 years, Public Agenda has worked across the country to help leaders and citizens navigate divisive and complex issues and partner on solutions. Rarely, however, have we had the opportunity to do so in our home territory, New York City and its greater metropolitan area.

Thanks to the generous support of donors to Public Agenda's Deborah Wadsworth Fund, Public Agenda teamed up with WNYC, the nation's most listened to public radio station, on an ambitious opinion research and public engagement project. With WNYC's input, Public Agenda conducted focus groups and a survey of area residents, asking people about their concerns and priorities regarding public issues, including a special focus on economic inequality and opportunity. With Public Agenda's participation, WNYC developed programming based on the results to engage area residents in fresh conversations about the research's implications for improving life in the region. That programming can be found online here: <http://publicagenda.org/pages/w NYC-new-york-metro-area-survey>.

In conducting this research, we wanted to know: What are the issues residents of New York City and the greater metropolitan area care about most? Where do they think government is doing a good job, and where is there the most room for improvement? For what causes are people willing to roll up their sleeves and personally contribute to solutions? Where is there common ground, and where are there significant differences of opinion?

In brief, the results tell us the following:

1. A large majority of area residents feel trapped by rising costs, stagnant wages and a lack of opportunity.
2. Urban dwellers are especially worried about many issues, including crime, policing and the quality of public schools.
3. There is a racial divide on a number of key issues, especially crime and police-community relations.
4. Government gets low ratings on the issues people are most concerned about, and a majority of residents agree that government is mainly responsive to the rich.
5. People are willing to try new government policies and volunteer their time to address key concerns.



If the first four findings are disheartening, the last is anything but. People are eager to see responses to the issues they identify. They are not only ready to try out a range of policy solutions, they are willing to contribute their own sweat equity to strengthen the region that they (and we, at Public Agenda) call home. Will residents transform these sentiments into action in their communities and at the voting booth? Will leaders partner with residents and respond to their concerns?

We present a more detailed analysis of our findings, punctuated by quotes from focus groups, in the pages that follow. We hope this research gets you thinking, talking and acting in support of solutions to the region's challenges.

Will Friedman
President

NOTE ON METHODOLOGY

The Public Agenda/WNYC New York Metro Area Survey was conducted between June 29 and July 21, 2015, with 1,535 residents in the New York metro area, including New York City, Long Island, southern New York State, northern New Jersey and southern Connecticut. Additional responses were collected from 219 residents on a small subset of questions between August 25 and September 4, 2015. Data were collected via phone, including cellphone, and online and weighted to be representative of known demographics in the region. The survey was preceded by three focus groups with residents in New York City and New Jersey. See the end of this report for a more detailed discussion of the methodology. Also see <http://publicagenda.org/pages/w NYC-new-york-metro-area-survey> for a full description of the questions asked in the survey, complete survey responses and a comprehensive methodology report.



MAIN FINDINGS



A large majority of area residents feel trapped by rising costs, stagnant wages and a lack of opportunity.

Our survey results paint a picture of a metropolitan area where residents feel beset by economic insecurity. Across the New York metro region, and across income groups, people are most worried about affordability. More than 8 in 10 residents say the *high cost of living* and the *high cost of housing* are serious problems where they live. More than 7 in 10 say *high taxes* and the *high cost of college* are serious problems. (See figure 1.)

People also sense that opportunities to get ahead are lacking. Two-thirds of area residents (66 percent) say a *lack of well-paying and secure jobs* is a serious problem in their cities and towns. Similarly, 64 percent say that *small businesses closing down* is a problem where they live. (See figure 1.) Just 16 percent of area residents say they feel opportunities to get ahead are improving. (See figure 2.)

Income inequality is palpable to most residents in the area, with two-thirds (65 percent) saying the gap in income between the richest residents and everyone else is a serious problem; see figure 1. Residents overall are concerned not only about the fact that *most working people's wages are staying flat*, but also about the trend that *the wealthiest Americans are getting wealthier*, with 76 percent worried about the former and 60 percent worried about the latter; see figure 3.



“It’s just getting ridiculous, not only for people who are living below the poverty line, but the so-called middle class, people who have good jobs. I hate to see people being pushed out of their neighborhoods and then actually moving out of the city because it’s no longer affordable for them. After paying the rent, the transportation, the increasing cost of gas, everything increases. Then you go to the movies, take the kids and then buy the popcorn and it’s like \$50. I think that’s ridiculous. It’s not right.”¹

—QUEENS COUNTY, NEW YORK, RESIDENT; IN HER 30s; WHITE.

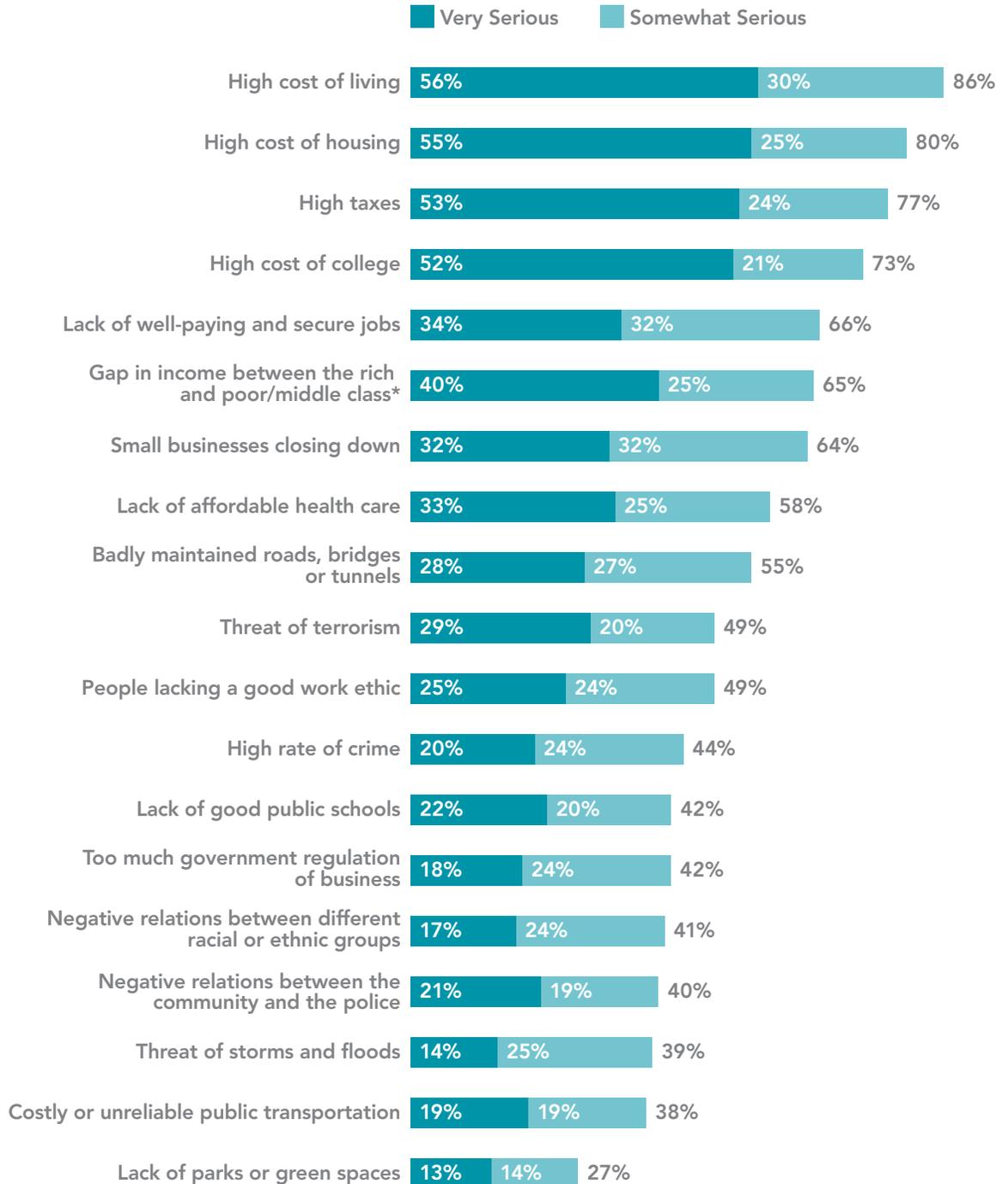
“My son just got out of college. I’m a single mom. I was not able to help him pay for college, so the amount of debt that my poor son is in, what can I do? I’m living from paycheck to paycheck. What happens with him?”

—HUDSON COUNTY, NEW JERSEY, RESIDENT; IN HER 40s; HISPANIC.

¹Quotations have been minimally edited for clarity.

Residents of the New York metro area are most concerned about affordability.

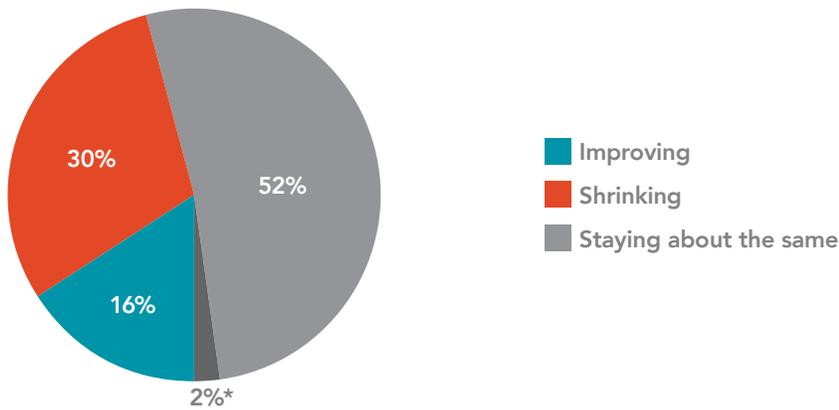
Figure 1. Percent of metro area residents who say that each of the following is a very serious or somewhat serious problem in their city or town:



* Indicates one random half of the sample was asked to rate how serious of a problem they thought "the gap in income between rich and poor" was in their city or town. The other random half of respondents rated "the gap in income between the rich and the middle class." Response patterns were comparable and items were thus combined. Base: The number of respondents for each item in this battery varies between N=1,535 and n=492, as each respondent was asked four common questions from the battery and an additional random five questions.

Fewer than 2 in 10 New York metro area residents feel opportunities to get ahead are improving.

Figure 2. Percent of metro area residents who say opportunities to get ahead for people in their city or town are improving, shrinking, or staying about the same:

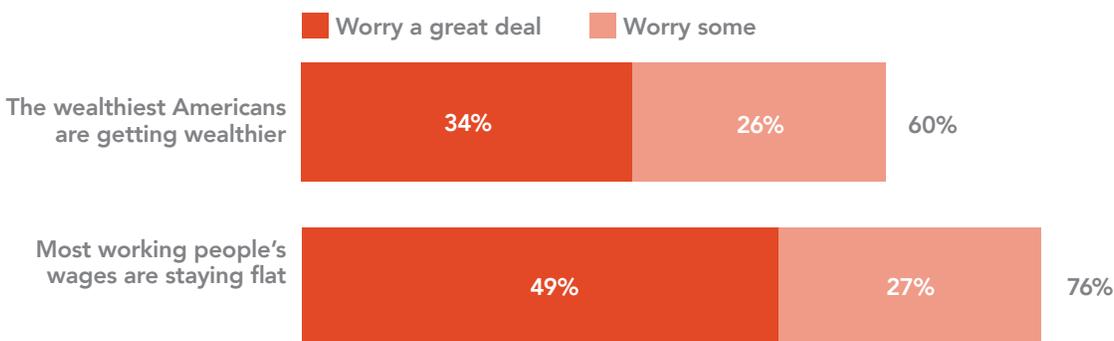


Base: All respondents, N=1,535.

*Not sure/Don't know

New York Metro area residents are concerned about income inequality.

Figure 3. Percent of metro area residents who say they worry a great deal or some about each of the following trends:



Base: All respondents, N=1,535.

2

Urban dwellers are especially worried about many issues, including crime, policing and the quality of public schools.



While residents across the metro area are similarly concerned about the high costs of living, college and taxes, many other issues are intensified in the region's urban centers, which include New York City, Newark, Yonkers, Bridgeport and others. In most instances, residents who say they live in urban areas are more likely to perceive serious problems where they live than residents who describe the areas they live in as suburban, rural or a mix; see figure 4.

On a few key issues, the difference in urban dwellers' perspectives is especially stark. For example, while the majority of urban residents (65 percent) say the *high rate of crime* is a serious problem, just one-third (33 percent) of residents outside the urban areas say the same; see figure 4. Also, 57 percent of urban dwellers say *negative relations between the community and the police* is a serious issue, while only 26 percent of residents in non-urban areas feel this way; see figure 4. We also saw a substantial racial divide on perceptions of crime rate and policing, as we discuss in finding 3.

Moreover, 65 percent of residents who say they live in urban areas feel the *lack of good public schools* is a serious problem, versus 33 percent of people who say they live in suburban, rural or mixed areas of the metro region; see figure 4.

Other issues that are of much greater concern to urban residents than residents elsewhere in the region are the gap in income between the richest residents and everyone else, as well as a *lack of well-paying and secure jobs*; the *threat of terrorism*; *negative relations between different racial or ethnic groups*; and a *lack of parks and green spaces*. On each of these items, the difference between the proportion of urban residents versus residents elsewhere saying this is a serious problem is at least 15 percentage points. (See figure 4.)

Note: About 8 out of 10 survey respondents who describe the area they live in as urban live in New York City. The patterns of results in the above analyses remained generally the same even when New York City residents were excluded, with a few exceptions: for example, the threat of terrorism and the high cost of housing, where we found no significant differences between urban and non-urban dwellers' perspectives when New York City residents were excluded. Analysis of urban dwellers outside of New York, however, are only suggestive and need to be treated with caution, given that some questions were answered by only a small number of urban residents outside of New York City.

Notably, one issue demonstrated a reversed trend. Residents in the suburban, rural and mixed areas of the region are more likely to view the *threat of storms and floods* as a problem, compared with those who say they live in an urban area. Forty-two percent of non-urban residents say the threat of storms and floods is a serious problem, versus 31 percent of urban residents who feel that way; see figure 4.

There were no statistically significant differences between urban dwellers and residents elsewhere in the region on the issues of the *high cost of living; high cost of college; high taxes; badly maintained roads, bridges or tunnels; people lacking a good work ethic; and too much government regulation of business.*

“There’s five blocks from the train station to my house. One time I came off the train, and I’m walking, and I turned around, and there was a guy behind me. He followed me all the way. It’s very unsafe. Carry mace, a blade, a knife, a Taser. You have to protect yourself.”

—KINGS COUNTY, NEW YORK, RESIDENT; IN HER 40s; BLACK.

“You want to be safe. You don’t want to have to worry that you’re going to get mugged. You don’t want to have to worry if there’s crime around you. But, if you live in the city or the outer edges of the city, it’s the reality of living in the neighborhoods.”

—QUEENS COUNTY, NEW YORK, RESIDENT; IN HIS 20s; WHITE.

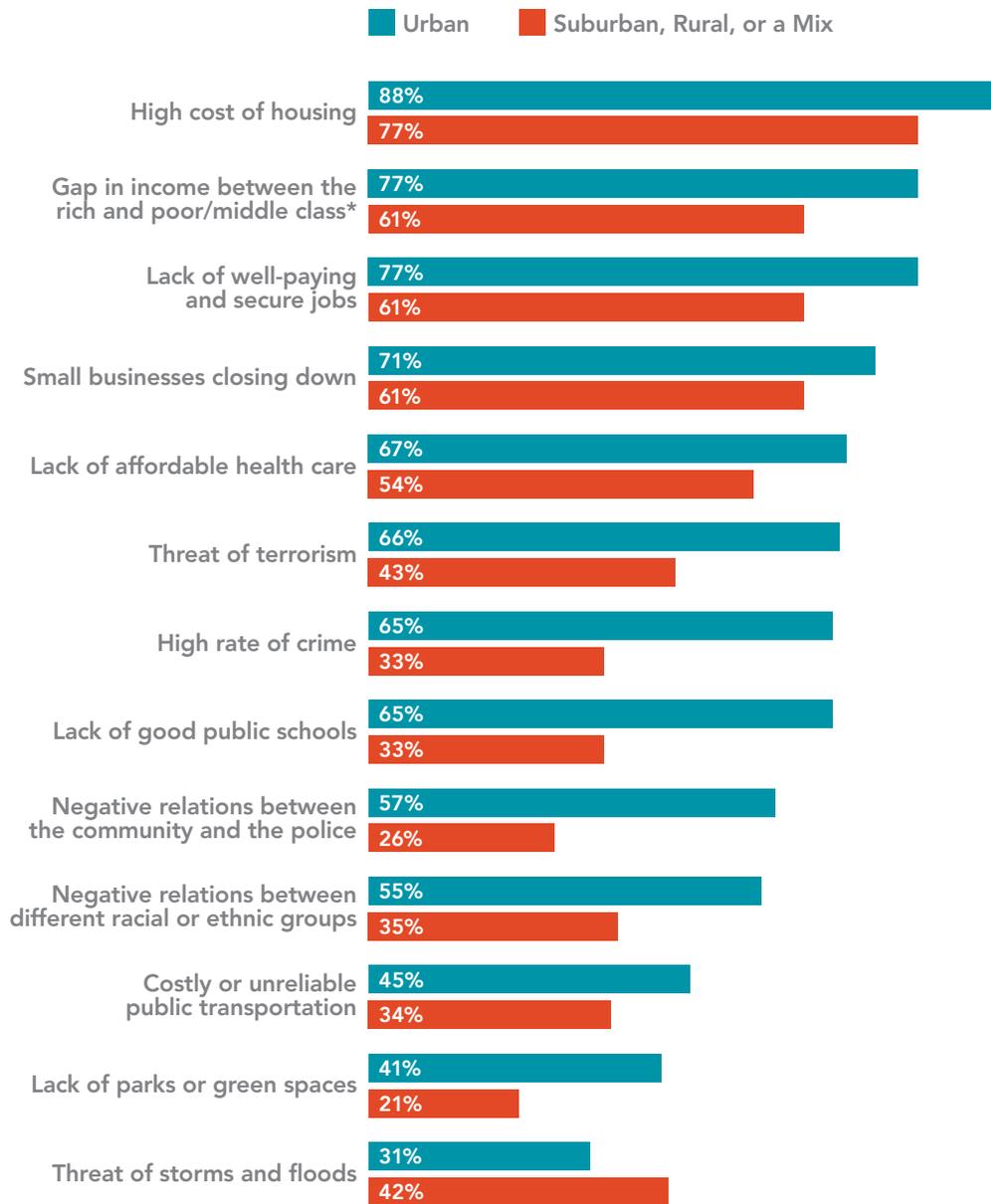
“The school in my neighborhood, it’s horrible. I refuse to put my child in that school. I wake up at six o’clock in the morning to get my son to school on time so I can get to work, because he goes to school on the other side of the freaking Bronx.”

—BRONX COUNTY, NEW YORK, RESIDENT; IN HER 30s; HISPANIC.



Urban dwellers view many issues as especially problematic.

Figure 4. Percent of metro area residents who say each of the following is a very serious or somewhat serious problem in their city or town, by urbanicity:



* Indicates one random half of the sample was asked to rate how serious a problem they thought the “gap in income between the rich and poor” was in their city or town. The other random half of respondents rated the “gap in income between the rich and middle class.” Response patterns were comparable and items were thus combined.

Base: The number of respondents for each item varies between N=1,535 and n=492 by design, as several questions were asked only of random subsamples of the respondents.

Note: For these analyses, respondents who categorized the area they live as urban are compared with respondents who described their area as suburban or as rural or as a mix of urban, suburban and rural or as any two of these categories. Group differences are significant at the $p < .05$ level.

3

There is a racial divide on a number of key issues, especially crime and police-community relations.

The survey results highlight a sharp racial divide in the way residents experience and view both crime and community relations with the police. More than half of black and Hispanic residents view *negative relations between the community and the police* as a serious problem (53 percent and 56 percent, respectively). Similarly, 56 percent and 54 percent, respectively, say that the *high rate of crime* is a serious problem in their cities or towns. (See figure 5.)

These views are in stark contrast with the 27 percent of white residents who feel *negative relations between the community and the police* are a serious problem in their areas and the 35 percent who say the *high rate of crime* is a serious problem; see figure 5. We also saw a substantial geographic divide on perceptions of police-community relations and crime, as we discuss in finding 2. Together, these findings suggest that the groups of people and communities who may need the police the most are also most likely to say their relationships with the police are problematic.

In addition, black and Hispanic residents are more likely to say that a *lack of well-paying and secure jobs* is a serious problem, compared with white residents. Black and Hispanic residents are also more likely than white residents to express concern about the *lack of good public schools*. (See figure 5.)



Photo: Michele Ursino

“I think that relations need to be improved between the community and the cops. Back in the day there used to be cops walking the beat, and people would know who the cop was, and the cop would know who the people were. That’s gone now.”

—KINGS COUNTY, NEW YORK, RESIDENT; IN HIS 40s; HISPANIC.

“Before I moved to my neighborhood, I emailed the police commissioner and told him I’m moving in this area and I wanted to make sure it’s safe for me and my kids. He had the sergeant from the precinct call me and tell me that they have undercover cops walking through there, that I have nothing to worry about. And I felt safe. I really don’t have a problem with the cops. It’s all about minding your business and going to work and taking care of your family.”

—KINGS COUNTY, NEW YORK, RESIDENT; IN HER 40s; BLACK.

“Something happened to a young boy in front of my building. All he did is ask the officers a question. They choked him. He was no more than 18. By the time it let up he was unresponsive. I have a problem with that. It’s like nobody black and young has a chance.”

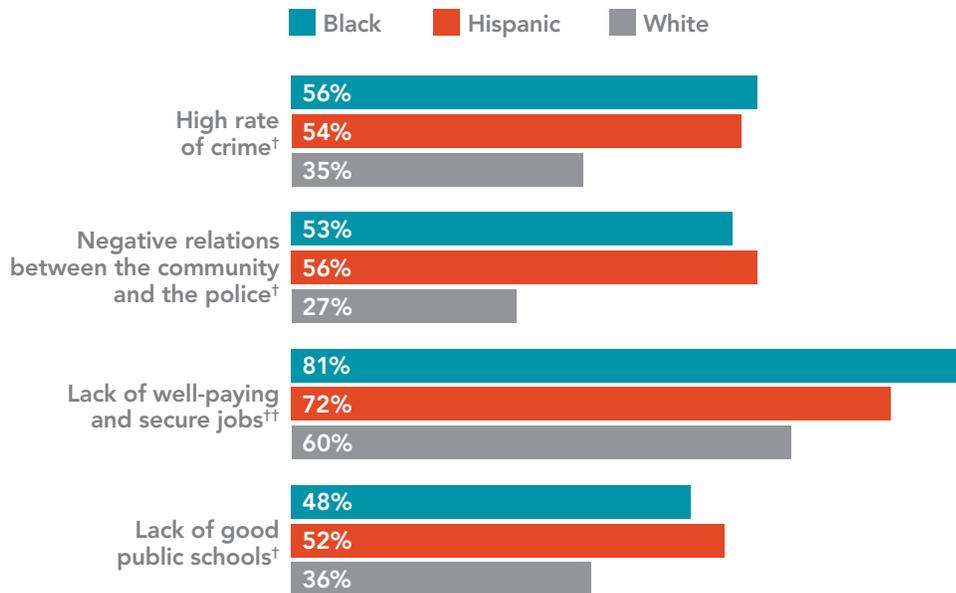
—NEW YORK COUNTY, NEW YORK, RESIDENT; IN HER 40s; BLACK.

“I think that the police, they need to be trained more in—I don’t know—sensitivity. They need to find some way [for the police] and the public to—I don’t know what the solution is—to meet, to talk. Most people are afraid of the police. I think they should find a way to eliminate that somehow.”

—KINGS COUNTY, NEW YORK, RESIDENT; IN HER 60s; BLACK.

Black and Hispanic residents are more worried than white residents about key issues, especially crime and policing.

Figure 5. Percent of metro area residents who say that each of the following is a very serious or somewhat serious problem in their city or town, by race/ethnicity:



† Indicates that black and Hispanic group estimates are statistically significant from white group estimates at the $p < .05$ level, but they are not statistically different from each other.

†† Indicates that all three group estimates are statistically different from one another at the $p < .05$ level.

Base: The number of respondents across these questions varied between $N=1,535$ and $n=492$, as, by design, several questions were given only to random subsamples of respondents.

Note: Differences by racial/ethnic group remain large and statistically significant in analyses that also control for differences in views between urban dwellers and residents outside of the region’s urban centers.

4

Government gets low ratings on the issues people are most concerned about, and a majority of residents agree that government is mainly responsive to the rich.

More than half of residents throughout the New York metropolitan region say government is doing a mostly bad job on the problems they deem most serious, including the *tax rate*, the *cost of living* and the *cost of housing*. More than half also say the government is doing a mostly bad job on addressing the gap in income between the richest residents and everyone else. Similarly, government gets mediocre ratings on how it is addressing the *availability of well-paying and secure jobs*.

(See figure 6.)

Most residents have little reason for faith that government will do much to improve their lot, in that nearly 6 in 10 (58 percent) say the government mostly responds to the needs of the rich and powerful. Just 6 percent say government responds mostly to the needs of ordinary residents. Thirty percent say government responds to both.

(See figure 7.)



“We need a solution, we need jobs, we need opportunities for not only young people, but for a million people. We have the ability to do that if only we have the politicians to lead and to create solutions. But it’s no longer the land of democracy that it was. The government is not representing us any longer.”

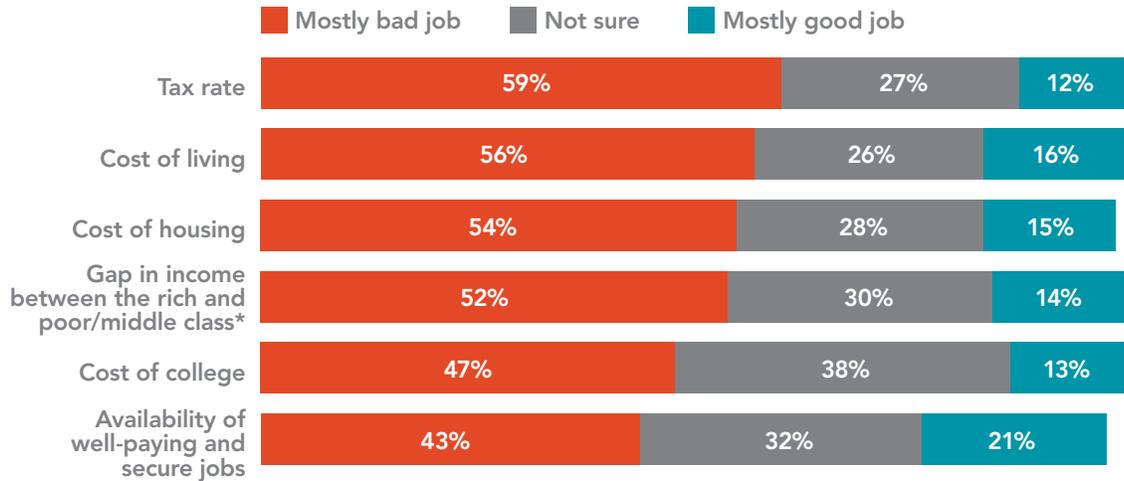
—BERGEN COUNTY, NEW JERSEY, RESIDENT; IN HIS 60s; WHITE.

“People now are getting unemployment for barely three months. How are people supposed to live? You can’t find a job and then the unemployment period is cut down by weeks. What do you do?”

—BRONX COUNTY, NEW YORK, RESIDENT; IN HER 40s; BLACK.

New York metro area residents say government isn't addressing the most pressing issues.

Figure 6. Percent of metro area residents who say the government is doing a mostly bad job or a mostly good job at addressing each of the following issues in their city or town, or who say they are not sure:



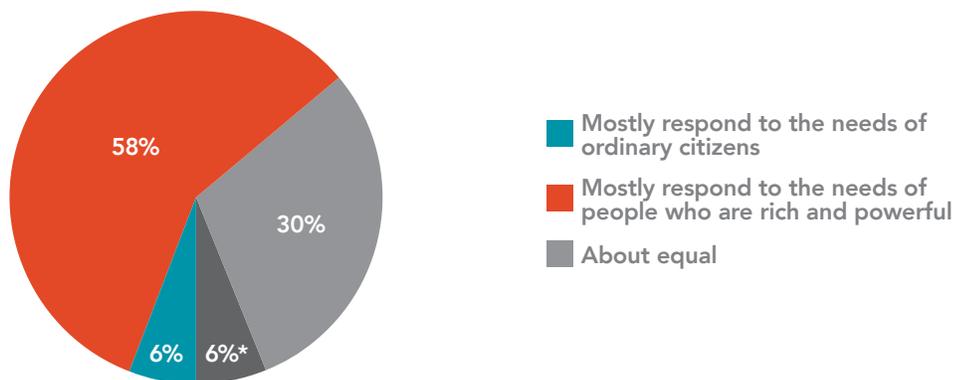
* Indicates one random half of the sample was asked to rate how good a job the government is doing at addressing the "gap in income between the rich and poor" in their city or town. The other random half of respondents rated the "gap in income between the rich and middle class." Response patterns were comparable and items were thus combined.

Base: The number of respondents for each item in this battery varies between N=1,535 and n=500, as each respondent was asked four common questions from the battery and an additional random five questions.

Note: Percentages may not add up to 100 percent. Chart does not include the small number of respondents who replied with "Other" or refused the question.

Most residents say government responds mostly to the needs of the rich.

Figure 7. Percent of metro area residents who say the government mostly respond to the needs of the rich and powerful, mostly respond to the needs of ordinary citizens, or say it is about equal:



Base: All respondents, N=1,535.

*Don't know/Refused

5

People are willing to try new government policies and volunteer their time to address key concerns.

Despite the fact that people feel trapped by economic insecurity and say the government responds much more to the rich than to the majority, they are eager for solutions and willing to work for them.

Residents express great support for a number of policies that could increase opportunities for more residents. For example, 80 percent say they mostly favor tax breaks for new companies to bring jobs to their area; 79 percent support more government spending on public colleges so that students can study without taking out loans; and 61 percent favor tax breaks for developers to build more affordable housing. (See figure 8.)

Moreover, in order to make greater investments in education and in housing that is affordable for middle- and lower-income residents, 7 in 10 of the region's residents support raising taxes on the wealthiest people and raising taxes on large corporations; see figure 9.

Finally, residents across the New York City metro region are also open to collaborating with their neighbors on solutions to the problems they identify. Typically, 2 in 3 people who see a problem say they are willing to work with other residents to advocate or find solutions. Among those who view an issue as very serious, 7 in 10 say that they are willing to roll up their sleeves and work with others on solutions.



“Why can’t we at minimum offer a free community college degree to every single student graduating New York City public high schools? I came from an immigrant family, I was raised in the tenements, and yet I knew that I was going to college. The city of New York made it possible.”

—RICHMOND COUNTY, NEW YORK, RESIDENT; IN HER 60s; WHITE.

“We should have a say in where government funding goes. We should be able to vote on it. We should be able to know X, Y and Z funding is here.”

—HUDSON COUNTY, NEW JERSEY, RESIDENT; IN HER 30s; HISPANIC.

“You have problems in your community? Start doing something about it. Walk around, talk to the people. Let’s fix this neighborhood.”

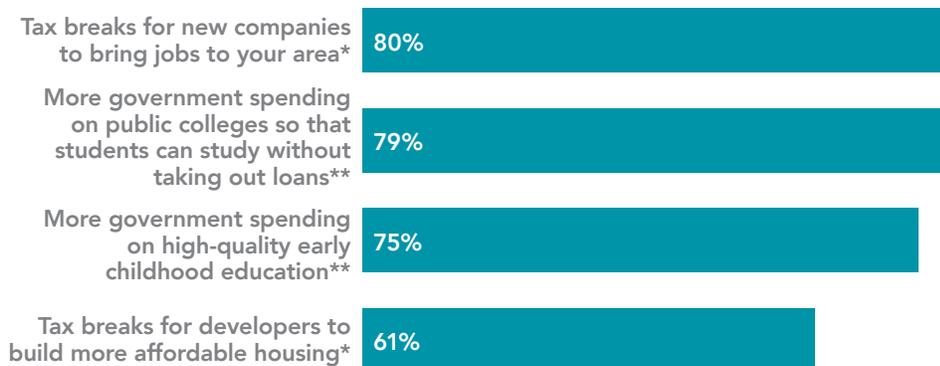
—QUEENS COUNTY, NEW YORK, RESIDENT; IN HER 40s; HISPANIC.

7 in 10

residents say they are willing to roll up their sleeves and work with others on solutions.

The vast majority of New York metro area residents support policies and taxes to boost opportunity.

Figure 8. Percent of metro area residents who say they mostly favor the following ideas for government to improve opportunities for people to get ahead:



*Base: Split sample; each respondent was asked one or the other of these two items. For Tax breaks for new companies, n=768, and for Tax breaks for developers to build more affordable housing, n=767.

**Base: Split sample; each respondent was asked one or the other of these two items. For More government spending on public colleges, n=784, and for More government spending on high-quality early childhood education, n=751.

Figure 9. Percent of metro area residents who say they mostly favor the following ways for government to pay for efforts to improve opportunities for people to get ahead:



Base: Split sample; each respondent was asked one or the other of these two items. For Raising taxes on large corporations, n=771, and for Raising taxes on the wealthiest people, n=764.



METHODOLOGY

The findings in this report are based on data from a representative survey of 1,535 adults in the New York metropolitan area (including New York City, Long Island, southern New York State, northern New Jersey and southern Connecticut) conducted between June 29 and July 21, 2015, using a hybrid random digit dialing (RDD) dual-frame (landline and cellphone) and web panel methodology. Of the 1,535 interviews, 920 were conducted via phone and 615 were completed online.

Additional responses were collected from 219 Hispanic and black residents in the New York metro area on a small subset of questions, between August 25 and September 4, 2015, using also a combination of RDD dual-frame phone and web panel methodology. Of those, 119 were conducted via phone and 100 were completed online.

The survey was fielded by Social Science Research Solutions, Inc. (SSRS). SSRS was responsible for data collection only. Public Agenda designed the survey instrument and analyzed the data. When using these data, please cite Public Agenda.

The survey was designed to be compatible with online and phone interviews. Respondents to both could refuse to answer any question. The overall response rate for the phone interviews was calculated to be 17.3 percent using the American Association for Public Opinion Research's RR3 formula. A total of 11,922 online panelists were invited to complete the survey. The cooperation rate for the web panel was 5.6 percent. The phone and online samples were combined using propensity score matching.

The final data were weighted to correct for variance in the likelihood of selection for a given case and to balance the sample to known population parameters to correct for systematic under- or overrepresentation of key demographics. The margin of error for the original weighted data is +/- 3.7 percent at the 95 percent confidence level. It is higher, however, for questions that were not asked of all respondents and for subgroup results.

A note on the New York metropolitan area:

For the purposes of this study, we defined the New York metro area as comprising 31 counties across New York City, Long Island, southern New York State, northern New Jersey and southern Connecticut.

The following shows the breakdown of counties included in this research, separated by New York City counties, counties surrounding New York City and counties that are farther away from New York City.

New York City counties:

- New York County, NY
- Bronx County, NY
- Kings County, NY
- Queens County, NY
- Richmond County, NY

Surrounding counties:

- Nassau County, NY
- Rockland County, NY
- Westchester County, NY
- Bergen County, NJ
- Essex County, NJ
- Hudson County, NJ
- Middlesex County, NJ
- Monmouth County, NJ
- Union County, NJ
- Fairfield County, CT

Farther-out counties:

- Suffolk County, NY
- Dutchess County, NY
- Orange County, NY
- Putnam County, NY
- Sullivan County, NY
- Ulster County, NY
- Hunterdon County, NJ
- Mercer County, NJ
- Morris County, NJ
- Ocean County, NJ
- Passaic County, NJ
- Somerset County, NJ
- Sussex County, NJ
- Warren County, NJ
- Litchfield County, CT
- New Haven County, CT

For a full description of the questions asked in the survey, complete survey responses and a comprehensive methodology report, see: <http://publicagenda.org/pages/wnyc-new-york-metro-area-survey>.

Pre-survey focus groups

We conducted three focus groups with diverse New York metro area residents before developing the survey instrument. Focus groups were conducted in March and April 2015 in New York City, New York, and Secaucus, New Jersey. In total, 28 people participated in these focus groups.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors of “What’s at Issue Here? New York Metro Area Residents on the Problems That Concern Them Most,” the first project of the Public Agenda Deborah Wadsworth Fund, would like to thank the following people for their support and contributions:

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The family of Deborah Wadsworth;

The New York metro area residents who took the time to participate in our survey and focus groups;

Social Science Research Solutions, Inc. (SSRS);

Ann Duffett and Steve Farkas;

Laura Walker, president and CEO of New York Public Radio and friend of Deborah Wadsworth;

WNYC’s Brian Lehrer, Jim Schachter, Megan Ryan, John Keefe, Brigid Bergen, David Lewis and the rest of *The Brian Lehrer Show*, newsroom, and data news teams at WNYC;

And Public Agenda’s Board of Directors and staff, with special thanks to Deborah Wadsworth’s longtime colleagues Jean Johnson and Ruth Wooden, Board Chair Mitch Wallerstein, and Public Agenda’s communications team, including Megan Donovan and Michael Rojas.



About Public Agenda

Public Agenda is a nonprofit organization that helps diverse leaders and citizens navigate divisive, complex issues. Through nonpartisan research and engagement, it provides people with the insights and support they need to arrive at workable solutions on critical issues, regardless of their differences. Since 1975, Public Agenda has helped foster progress on K–12 and higher education reform, health care, federal and local budgets, energy and immigration.

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