

# Is Los Angeles more crowded than New York?

## Using GIS to compare population density in Los Angeles & New York

Sandra O'Flaherty, Andrea Osgood, and Lara Regus

### Project Overview

This research was prepared for Livable Places, a nonprofit housing developer and policy advocate in Los Angeles, California that works to make neighborhoods more livable and environmentally sustainable by encouraging development that is denser, concentrated around public transit, and includes a mix of both residential and commercial uses.

Because Livable Places advocates for higher density residential development, they often experience opposition from the neighborhood on the idea of increasing density.



A recent Los Angeles Times article by Robert Bruegmann entitled, "L.A. The King of Sprawl? Not at all," has reinforced neighborhood activists' feeling that there are already too many people living in Los Angeles and that Los Angeles is already very dense. In the article, Bruegmann reports that the Census data for the **urbanized area** of Los Angeles indicates that it is the densest area in the United States -- exceeding the population density of New York and other large cities. He further argues that LA's reputation as a low-density, sprawling city is inaccurate and undeserved.

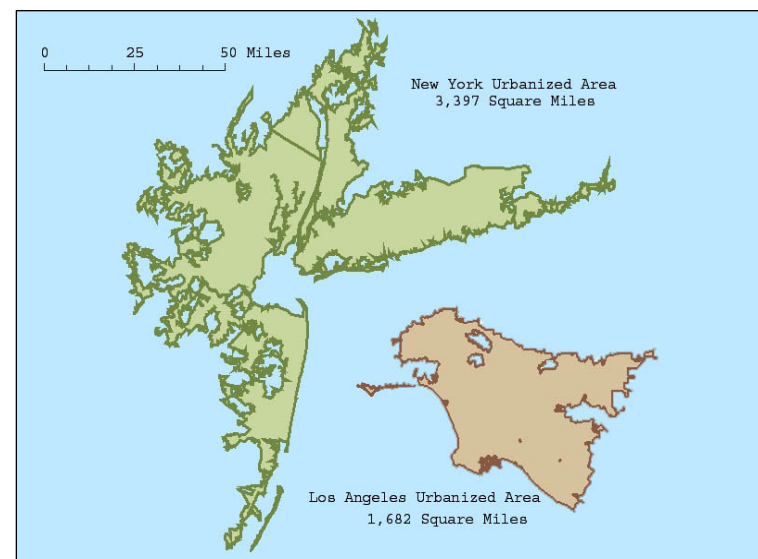
We set out to examine this claim, understand how the Census Bureau defines the "urbanized area" for any given city and, finally, analyze how the New York and Los Angeles populations are spatially dispersed within their respective urbanized areas.

### Comparing Density in the Urbanized Areas of New York and Los Angeles

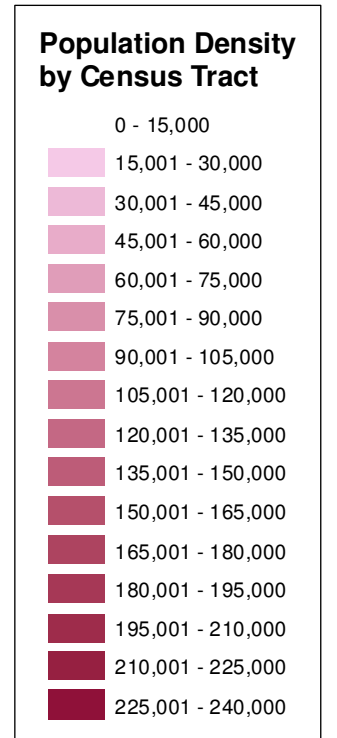
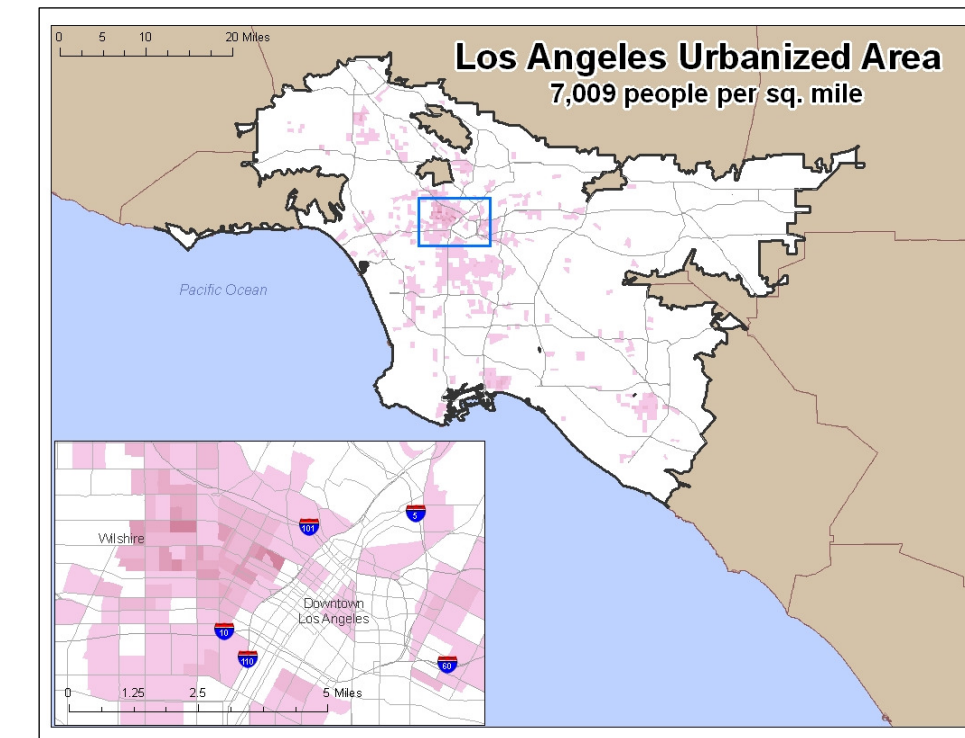
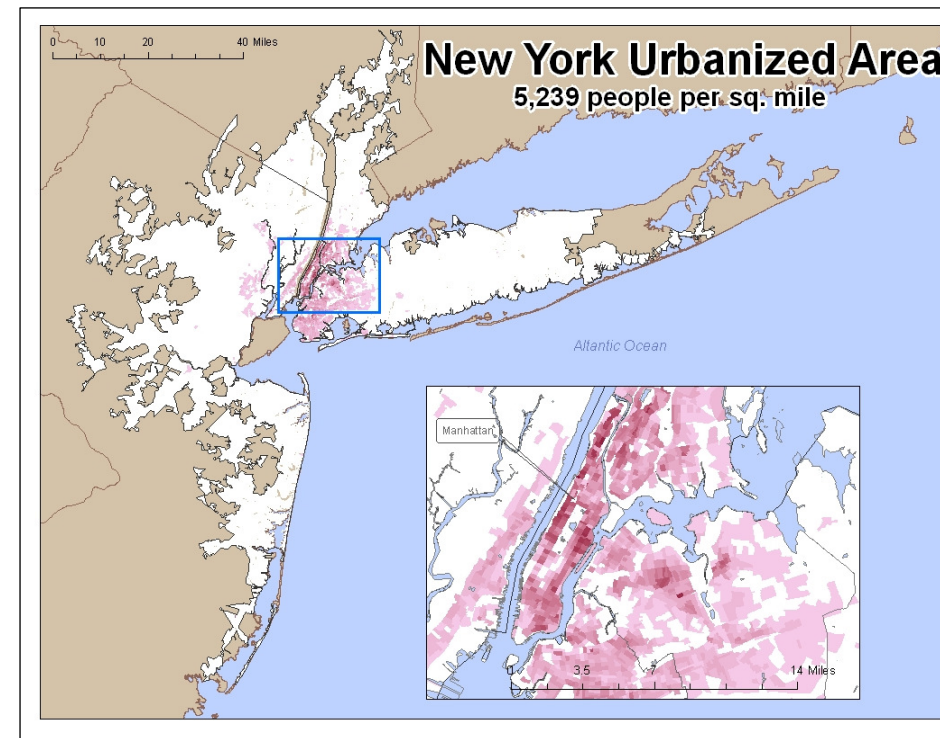
#### What is an "Urbanized Area"?

The 2000 U.S. Census defines urbanized areas as "core census block groups or blocks that have a population density of at least 1,000 people per square mile and surrounding census blocks that have an overall density of at least 500 people per square mile."<sup>1</sup>

Following this definition, the urbanized area of Los Angeles covers approximately 1,682 square miles, spreads into 5 counties, and is home to 11,789,487 people. In comparison, the New York urbanized area is more than twice the size. It covers roughly 3,397 square miles, spreads across 28 counties in three states, and is home to 17,799,861 people.



<sup>1</sup> Data Source: U.S. Census 2000  
[http://www.census.gov/geo/www/ua/ua\\_2k.html](http://www.census.gov/geo/www/ua/ua_2k.html)



\*Note: maps not shown in same scale

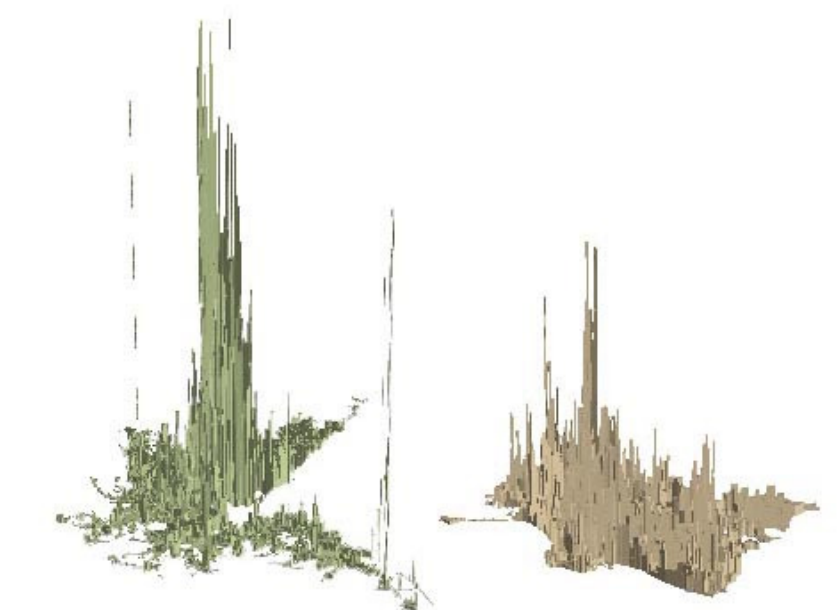
#### Is Los Angeles really more dense than New York?

The population density of the Los Angeles *urbanized area* is indeed greater than that of the New York *urbanized area*, with 7,009 people per square mile versus 5,239 people per square mile. However, this density figure is quite misleading.

The maps above and figures to the right show the population density by Census tract for each of these urbanized areas. Both maps utilize the same population density breakdowns and color scheme, so the difference in population dispersion is clear when comparing the two areas. As one can see, there are several census tracts in the New York area with population densities upward of 200,000 people per square mile.

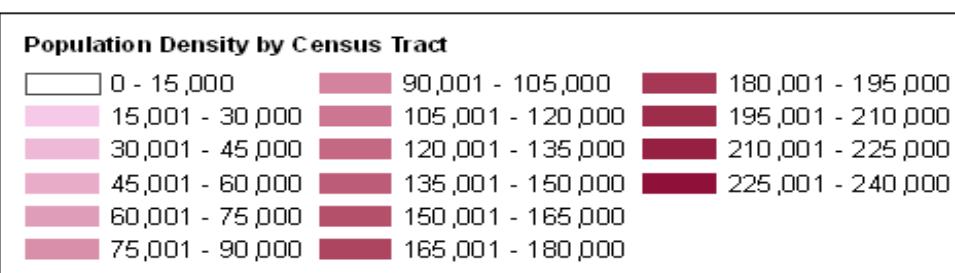
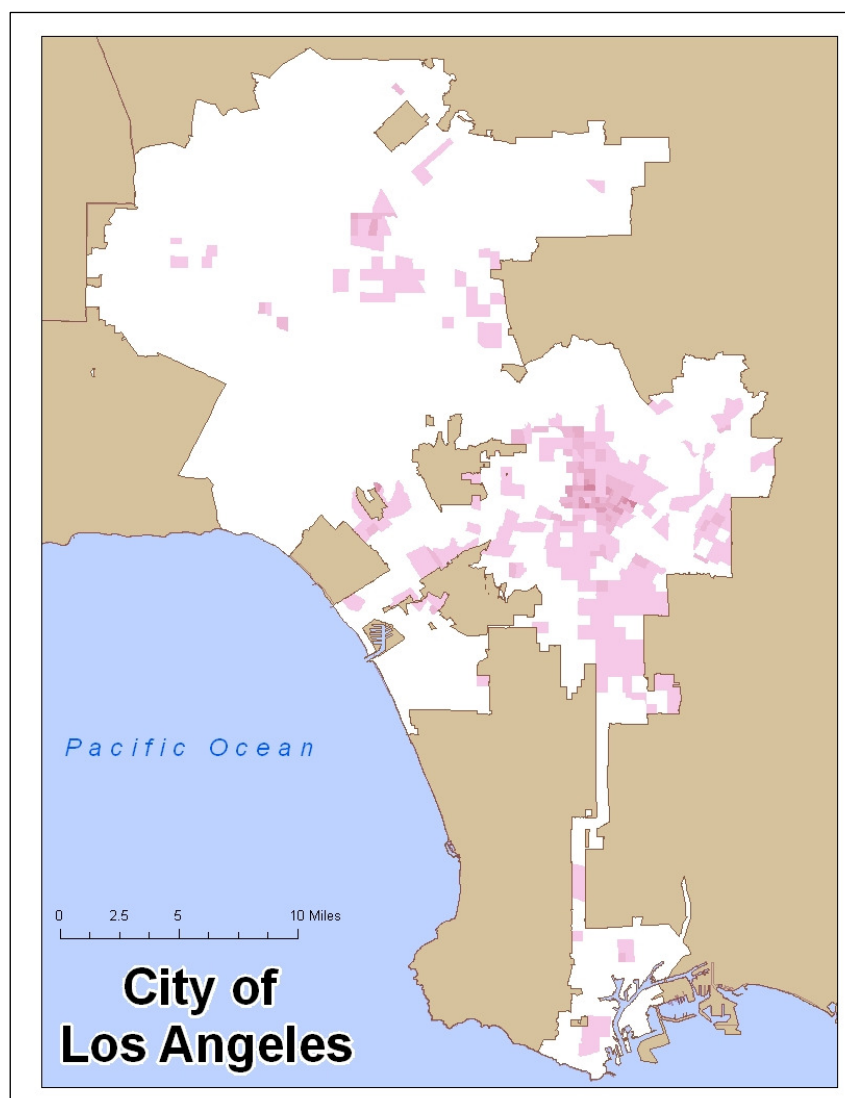
Conversely, there are no census tracts in the Los Angeles urbanized area with this same intense population concentration. **In fact, the tracts with the highest population density in the Los Angeles urbanized area are approximately 90,000 people per square mile – not even half as populous as New York's densest tracts.**

As a result, we believe comparing density by *urbanized area* is deceptive, and is a poor measure for determining whether infill development in Los Angeles is desirable or appropriate. **A better vehicle for comparison is the population densities within the cities of New York and Los Angeles.**



Population Density in 3D. New York Urbanized Area on left, and Los Angeles on the right. By Census Tract.

### Comparing Density in the Cities of New York and Los Angeles



\*Note: maps not shown in same scale

#### NYC is nearly 4 times denser than City of L.A.

The maps to the left highlight the spatial distribution of each city's population, reinforcing what most people already know – New York, particularly Manhattan, is crowded. While Los Angeles does have a few areas of its own with higher population concentrations, these concentrations are not even half as large as those found in New York. More than half of the land area of New York City exhibits a population density greater than 15,000. In the City of Los Angeles, only about 15 percent of the area meets this density level. **The City of Los Angeles simply does not exhibit the high-density patterns that one associates with the City of New York.**

Total Square Miles of High Density			
CITY LEVEL	Total Area (mi <sup>2</sup> )	Area with > 15,000 people/ mi <sup>2</sup>	Percent
Los Angeles	472	75	15%
New York	304	156	51%

### Conclusion

While it is true that the *urbanized area* of Los Angeles has a higher population density than the urbanized area of New York, our analysis shows that the **City of Los Angeles is much less dense than the City of New York.**

The analysis presented here aids in dismantling the perception that Los Angeles' density exceeds that of New York and should be the reason for limiting development in the City of Los Angeles. **It is disingenuous to compare density figures by "urbanized area," as doing so lacks the necessary apples-to-apples comparison quality.**

Instead, we argue that discussions about density should focus on more reasonably defined urban areas, such as proper city limit boundaries as presented here.

Location	City Level			Urbanized Area Level		
	Area (mi <sup>2</sup> )	Population	Density	Area (mi <sup>2</sup> )	Population	Density
Los Angeles	472	3,694,820	7,828	1,682	11,789,487	7,009
New York	304	8,008,278	26,343	3,397	17,799,861	5,239