

# THE BEST PLACES TO LIVE | 2006

## Ontario County New York



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Story and Photos By Joe Link

When the last of the Ice Age glaciers receded 10,000 years ago, they had given upstate New York two magnificent creations: Giant grooves in the earth that, high on the slopes, give breathtaking views of the land and of the deep, clear lakes below. And on the flatter ground, the glaciers deposited some of the best farmland in the United States. The people of Ontario County treasure both.

The Progressive Farmer puts this county in its list of top counties for many reasons. Great schools. Low crime. Excellent health care. And residents here are just a short 45 minutes from Rochester, N.Y., a wonderful city with an easily accessible international airport.

But Ontario County tops our list because of the people and the communities they've created. Instead of just relying on what they've been given—a great resource in the land—they have worked together to make the most of it and to preserve it.

Tourism is blossoming, thanks largely to the county's agricultural heritage. Ever heard of a grape pie? No? Well go to Naples, where this self-proclaimed (and who's going to challenge them on this?) "Grape Pie Capital of the World" brings in well over 100,000 visitors during the few weeks of grape harvest. When it's over, about two-dozen women have sold more than 70,000 pies from their kitchens. The Concord grape may not be as popular as it once was, but folks here still find it quite useful, thank you very much.

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Along routes 20 and 5 and its many side roads are dozens of stands where you can pick up in-season vegetables--squash, beans, corn, they have it all, including the very abundant cabbage. (Yes, this also is the "Cabbage Capital of the World.") At these roadside stands, the honor system still applies--every stand has a small box in which to put your money if the farmer isn't home. But if you're lucky, he will be and will talk about agriculture--and the weather, of course. The county nurtures plenty of other tourism opportunities, including a growing wine industry. Cornell University's experiment station in the county is doing some of the best grape research in the world. Nancy Irelan, a vice president at E. & J. Gallo Winery in California, made frequent trips to the area and fell in love with it. She and her husband now have land just south of Geneva and recently planted their first grape cuttings. The plan is to one day move here and operate their own small winery. "It's all about the community and the family," says Irelan of their decision. "There are a lot of people here who are committed to community."

Despite sprawl pressures from Rochester, farms here are still farms. They haven't all been divided into 40-acre parcels and then cut into 10-acre plots. Residents place a high priority on keeping their rural roots. Farmers are a big part of the government, and they decided some years ago to limit housing development on good farmland. Yes, most people call it zoning, but it was done by bottom-up planning from local communities, not top-down from county officials. Action like that takes coordination and agreement. We repeatedly heard how well the county's various elected officials work together, regardless of party affiliation. And when debate on an issue ends, people here agree to move on and make it work.

Pat Pavelsky, executive director of the county's Extension office, says she had never seen anything like it before she arrived two and a half years ago. "There is a culture of cooperation that exists here that really gets things done," she explains.

At a time when the word "government" is so negative, look to Ontario County to see how its residents make it work. Longtime county planner Kris Hughes is impressed. "It's democracy the way it was supposed to work."

## Ontario County New York

**RANK:** 1 Overall; 1 Northeast

**POPULATION:** 103127

**POPULATION DENSITY:** 155.95  
per square mile

[\[ARTICLE\]](#) [\[GALLERY\]](#)



### How To Read These Statistics

**COUNTY STATS** The data for the specified county.

**TOP 200 AVG.** The average data for the top 200 counties on our list, for comparison purposes.

**AVERAGE HOUSEHOLD INCOME** The average total income for all wage earners.

**AVERAGE HOUSEHOLD SPENDING** The average total spending for a household, which includes mortgage and consumer debt payments.

**SPENDING TO INCOME RATIO** The average total spending for a household, which includes mortgage and consumer debt payments, against average household income. These ratios were used to rank counties by cost of living.

**COUNTY SALES TAX** Combined state and county sales tax; there may also be city sales tax in individual communities.

**AVERAGE HOME PRICE** Includes all single-family homes, condominiums, townhomes. Not available for all counties on our list.

### ECONOMICS

	COUNTY STATS	TOP 200 AVG.
<b>AVERAGE HOUSEHOLD INCOME</b>	59626	58314
<b>AVERAGE HOUSEHOLD SPENDING</b>	48317	47489
<b>SPENDING TO INCOME RATIO</b>	1.23	1.22
<b>COUNTY SALES TAX</b>	7%	5.75%
<b>AVERAGE HOME PRICE</b>	127797	219591

## EDUCATION

	COUNTY STATS	TOP 200 AVG.
STUDENT/TEACHER RATIO	11.66	13.46
COLLEGE BOUND PERCENTAGE	69.37%	63.8%

## CRIME

	COUNTY STATS	TOP 200 AVG.
PERSONAL CRIME	20	30
PROPERTY CRIME	29	47
TOTAL CRIME	21	41

## HEALTH CARE

	COUNTY STATS	TOP 200 AVG.
HEALTH DENSITY	0.79	0.71

## CLIMATE

	COUNTY STATS	TOP 200 AVG.
AIR QUALITY INDEX	87	94
ANNUAL RAINFALL (INCHES)	33.72	37.06
MINIMUM JANUARY TEMPERATURE (AVG.)	12.21	16.31
MAXIMUM JULY TEMPERATURE (AVG.)	83.56	85.44

## CULTURE

	COUNTY STATS	TOP 200 AVG.
LEISURE INDEX	3.31	3.52

**STUDENT/TEACHER RATIO** The number of students for every one teacher; also called classroom size.

**COLLEGE BOUND PERCENTAGE** The percentage of high school graduates who enter undergraduate education.

**PERSONAL CRIME** Risk of incidence based on FBI crime data. Personal crimes are crimes committed directly against an individual, such as assault. The national average is 100; 200 would be twice the average risk and 50 would be half the average risk.

**PROPERTY CRIME** Risk of incidence based on FBI crime data. Property crimes are crimes dealing with possessions, such as theft. The national average is 100; 200 would be twice the average risk and 50 would be half the average risk.

**TOTAL CRIME** Total risk taking both personal and property crimes into account.

**HEALTH DENSITY** A measure of the number of health resources per person within the county borders.

**AIR QUALITY INDEX** Based on the EPA air quality rating. 100 is the national average pollution level, 200 would be twice the average level and 50 would be half the average level.

**ANNUAL RAINFALL** Average yearly precipitation, including snowfall, in inches.

**MAXIMUM/MINIMUM TEMPERATURES** The maximum temperature is the average high in this county in July. The minimum temperature is the average low in January.

**LEISURE INDEX** A measure of the number of leisure resources per person within the county borders (restaurants/bars, museums, theaters, golf courses, etc.).

### Ontario County, New York

Image 2 of 11 from Ontario County

Farmland here is some of the richest in the area, and locals know that farmers are an important part of the economy and community. (Photo: Joe Link)

