

Is Los Angeles more crowded than New York?

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

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Introduction

This research was prepared for Livable Places, a nonprofit housing developer and policy advocate based in Los Angeles, California. This organization was founded in 2000 by housing advocates and environmentalists who sought to make Los Angeles neighborhoods more livable and environmentally sustainable by encouraging smart growth – or 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 along transit lines in Los Angeles, they often experience neighborhood opposition to 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 this article, Bruegmann reported that the Census data for the urbanized area of Los Angeles indicated that it is the densest area in the United States -- exceeding the population density of New York and other large cities. He further argued 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. Our goal was to create maps that could visually respond to Mr. Bruegmann’s article and help people get a handle on density in Los Angeles.

What is an “Urbanized Area”?

Although Bruegmann cites population densities for the Los Angeles and New York urbanized areas, he fails to define exactly what the term “urbanized area” means. 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.”¹

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. See Figure 1 for a visual comparison of the two urbanized areas.

Thus, Bruegmann is technically correct. 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. As we will demonstrate, however, this density figure is quite misleading.

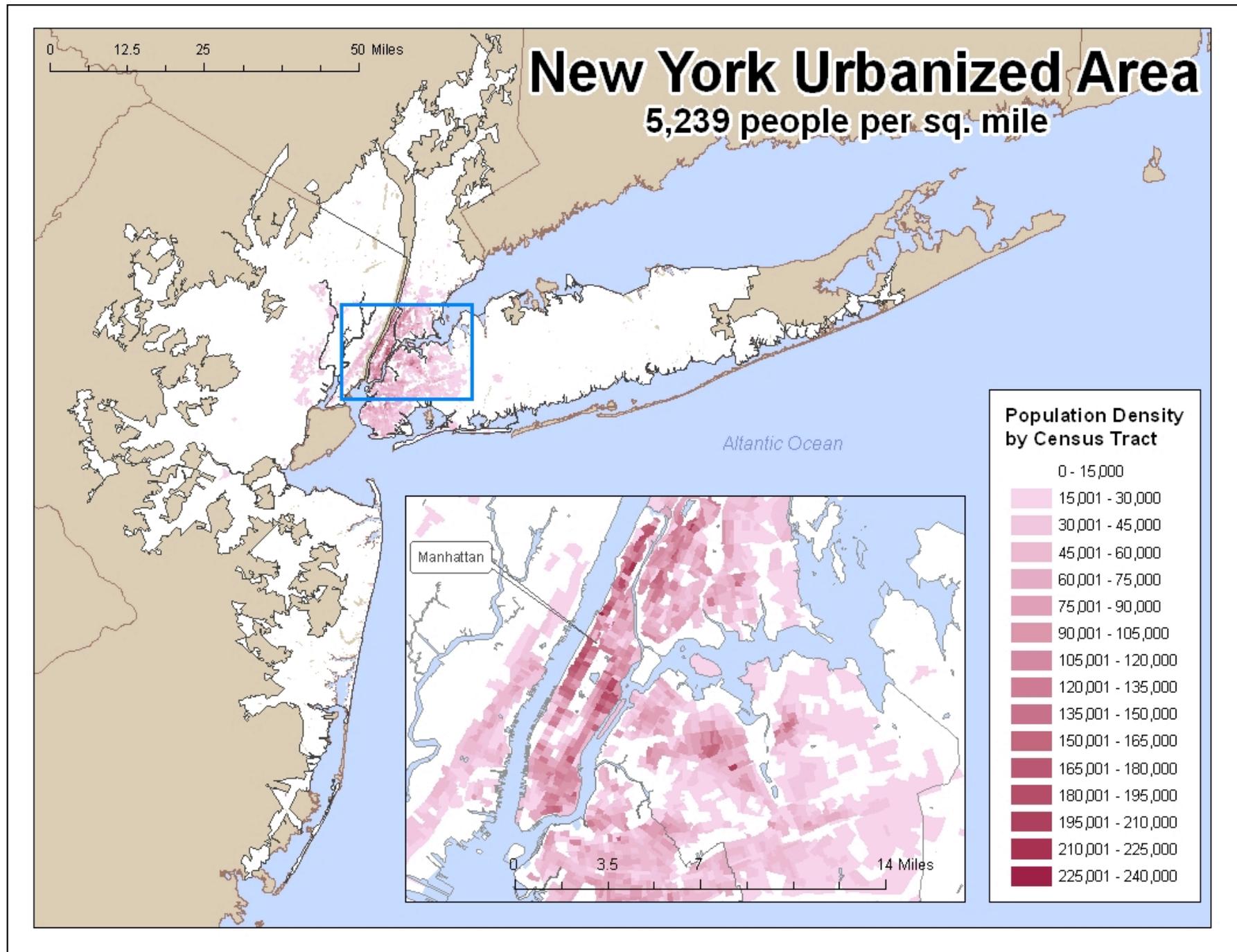
Maps 1 and 2 show the population density by Census tract for each of these urbanized areas. Both maps utilize the same population density breakdowns and color scheme, so the difference in population dispersion is clear when comparing the two areas. As one can see, there are several census tracts in the New York area with population densities upward of 200,000 people per square mile (represented by the dark pink shading). 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.

Figure 1.

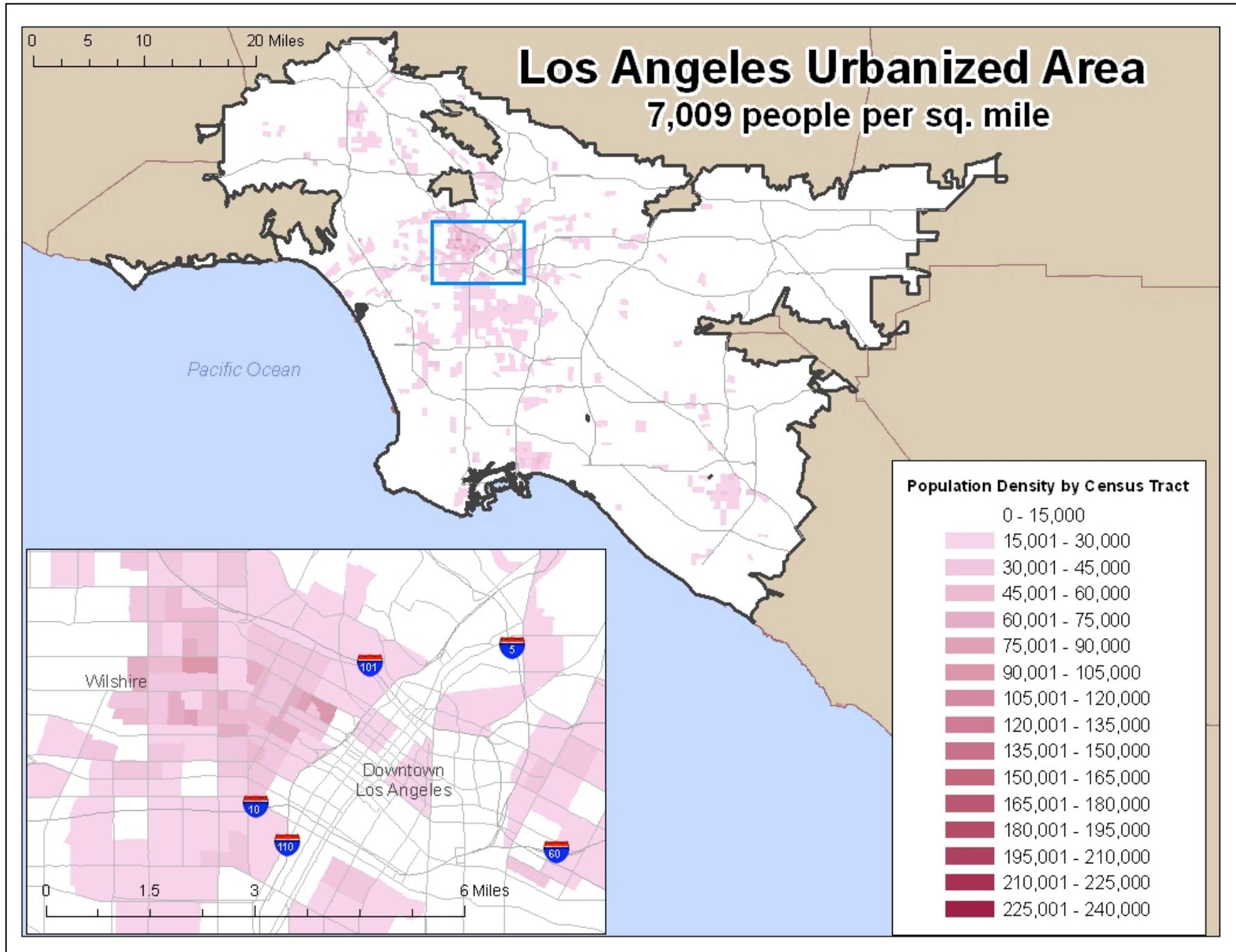


¹ U.S. Census 2000 http://www.census.gov/geo/www/ua/ua_2k.html

Map 1.



Map 2.



Comparing The City of Los Angeles to New York City

The City of Los Angeles is approximately 472 square miles in size, with a population of 3,694,820. The City of New York is 304 square miles in size, and has a population of 8,008,278. Based on this data, the City of New York is more than 3 times as dense

as the City of Los Angeles, with population densities of 26,343 and 7,828 people per square mile, respectively.

Table 1: Urbanized Area vs. City

Location	City Level			Urbanized Area Level		
	Area (mi ₂)	Population	Density	Area (mi ₂)	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

Map 3 highlights 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 (particularly in the Macarthur Park area just west of downtown Los Angeles), these concentrations are not even half as large as those found in New York. The City of Los Angeles simply does not exhibit the high-density patterns that one associates with the City of New York.

New York has more square miles of high density than Los Angeles

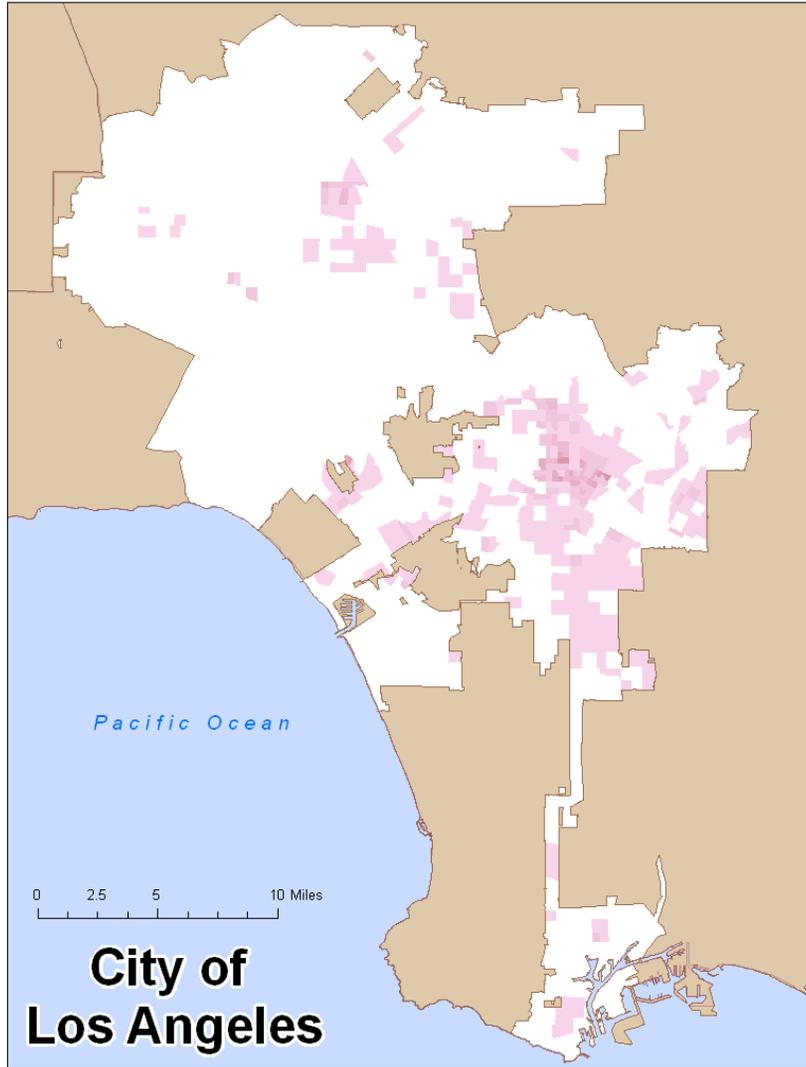
Table 2: Total Square Miles of High Density

CITY LEVEL	Total Area (mi ₂)	Area with > 15,000 people/ mi ₂	Percent
Los Angeles	472	75	15%
New York	304	156	51%

If we look only at the land area within each city that has a population density greater than 15,000, New York wins again. 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.

NYC is nearly 4 times denser than the City of LA

Map 3.

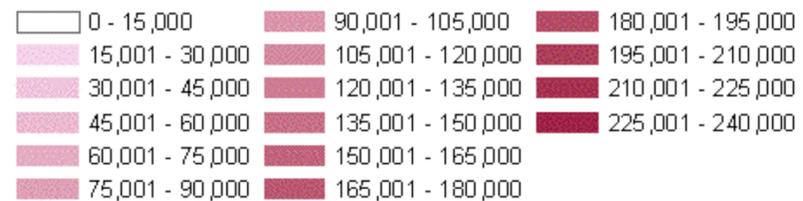


City of LA = 7,828 people per sq. mile

City of NY = 26,343 people per sq. mile



Population Density by Census Tract



*cities not shown in same scale

Conclusion

While it is true that the *urbanized area* of Los Angeles has a higher population density than the urbanized area of Los Angeles, 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 in this paper.