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# Local Governments in New York State: A Profile of Chief Elected Officials

Michael R. Hattery

*State University of New York College at Brockport*, mhattery@brockport.edu

Celia A. Watt

*State University New York, Brockport*, CWatt@Brockport.edu

Dawn Footer

*State University of New York College at Brockport*, dfooter@brockport.edu

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**Policy Brief 2019:01**

By Michael Hattery, Celia Watt, and Dawn Footer\*

## Local Governments in New York State: A Profile of Chief Elected Officials

### Introduction

In the summer of 2019, the Public Management Program at the College at Brockport conducted a survey of New York State’s chief elected officials (CEOs). The survey was sent to town supervisors, village and city mayors, and the chairs of county governing boards. All 1,593 CEOs in New York State were included in the survey distribution. Four hundred and ninety-three responded<sup>1</sup>, resulting in a 31% response rate (for more information about the survey and survey respondents see *2019 Survey of New York’s Local Chief Elected Officials: The Details*).

The survey was designed to collect information in four key areas: (1) the characteristics of local elected officials, (2) local policy issues of importance to local elected leaders, (3) the training needs and preferences of these leaders, and (4) local government capital planning and risk management practices. This policy brief, the first in a series describing the survey results, focuses on the first area, and provides profile information about New York State’s CEOs.

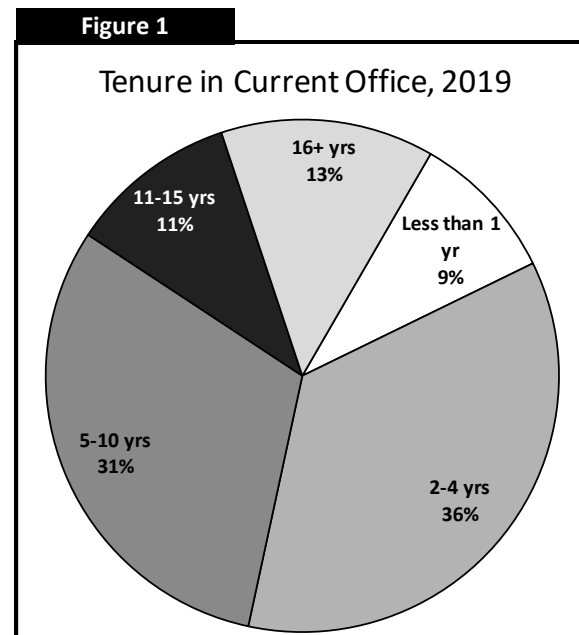
### Chief Elected Officials: Who Are They?

The survey results provide insight into five important characteristics of local elected officials: (1) length of tenure in office, (2) previous local

government experience, (3) their status as full or part-time government employees, (4) compensation for their service, and (5) the age distribution of those serving as CEOs.

### Tenure in Office

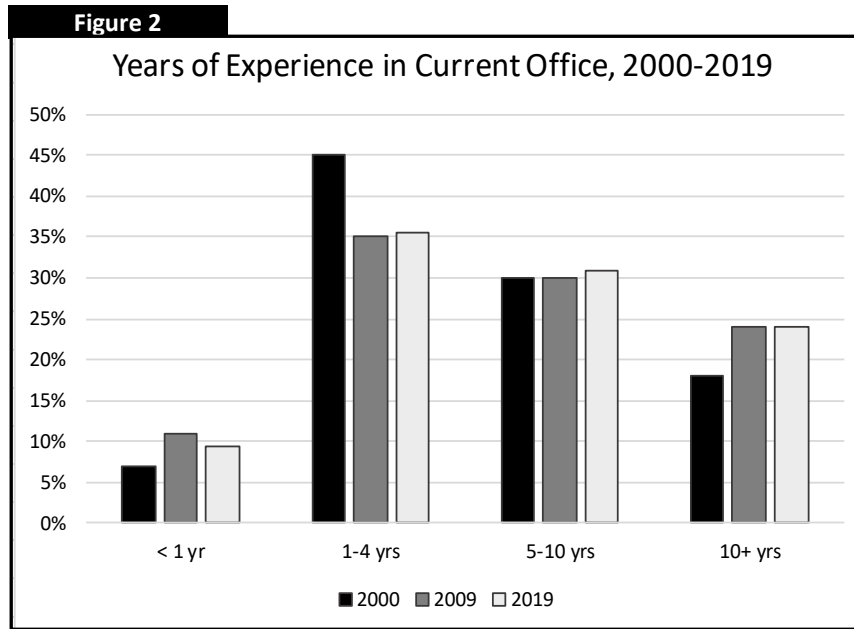
Figure 1 shows the years of experience of current CEOs in New York State. Nearly half (45%) have served in their current office for less than five years, 31% have served five to ten years, and the remaining 24% have served more than ten years.



<sup>1</sup>Of the 493 that responded to the survey, 58 were non-CEOs. In this brief we limited our analysis of CEO characteristics to the 434 respondents that identified as CEOs. Polling results are often reported with a qualification noting the degree of accuracy or margin of error. Based on the more limited CEO respondent sample size of 434, the total percentage estimates reported for survey items in this study have a maximum margin of error of plus or minus 4% (at a 95% level of confidence) around the reported percent figure. The margin of error for reported subgroups (e.g., village mayors) are generally larger and depend on several factors including the size of the sample subgroup and the size of the subgroup total population. (See Survey Details at: [https://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/public\\_management/](https://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/public_management/).)

Figure 2 compares the years of experience for CEOs of the current sample with CEOs from previous surveys conducted in 2000 and 2009. Data from all three time periods indicate that, over time, at least half of the chief elected leaders have been in their leadership positions for less than five years. The percent of more experienced

cohorts (serving more than 5 years) appears to be increasing over time. More CEOs have stayed in office longer than reported in 2000. The total number of individuals who have served more than ten years in their current positions increased 6% since 2000.



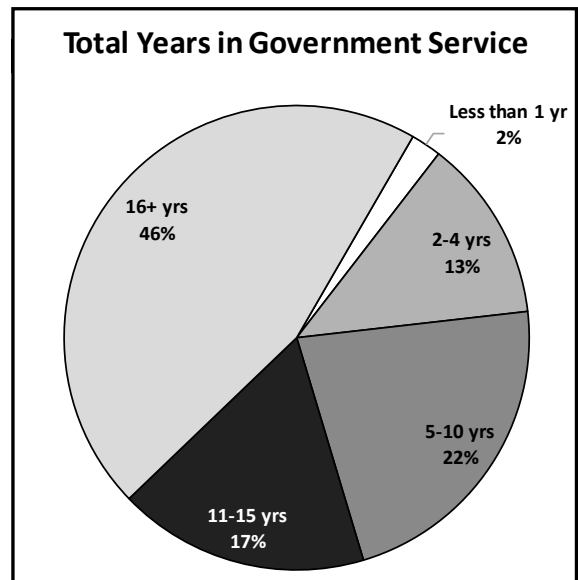
Sources: Hattery, M. (2001), Hattery, M. and Lindstrom J. (2009)

### Previous Local Government Work

CEOs often bring a wealth of previous experience to their current positions. While nearly half (46%) have served for less than five years in their current leadership positions (see Figure 1), only 15% of the leaders in the current sample have less than five years of *total* local government experience as elected or appointed officials (see Figure 3, below). At the other end of the spectrum, while only 13% of local CEOs have served in their current positions for 16 or more years (see Figure 1), 46% have 16 or more years of total experience.

Many of those surveyed have previously held an appointed local government office (51%). A smaller number (30%) have served specifically as appointed members of planning or zoning boards of appeals. If examined separately by type of local government (county, city, town, and village), the

percentages of CEOs previously holding appointed positions varies, but not substantially.



### Full-time or Part-time

A majority (72%) of local CEOs consider their elected roles as “part-time” positions. Over half of city mayors (57%) view their work as full-time while fewer in other local governments view their work as full-time (county board chairs [27%]; town supervisors [28%]; and village mayors [10%]).

| Municipal Type | Full-time | Part-time |
|----------------|-----------|-----------|
| City           | 57%       | 43%       |
| County         | 27%       | 73%       |
| Town           | 28%       | 72%       |
| Village        | 10%       | 90%       |
| Total          | 28%       | 72%       |

An examination of part-time versus full-time service by size of the municipality reveals that as population size increases, the percent of officials who view their position as full-time also increases.

| Population Categories | Full-time | Part-time |
|-----------------------|-----------|-----------|
| 0-2,499               | 15%       | 85%       |
| 2,500-4,999           | 16%       | 84%       |
| 5,000-9,999           | 37%       | 63%       |
| 10,000-19,999         | 53%       | 47%       |
| 20,000-49,999         | 68%       | 32%       |
| 50,000 or more        | 63%       | 37%       |

### Compensation of Chief Elected Officials

Survey respondents were asked to indicate their level of annual compensation for their local government service. Table 1, below, indicates that sixteen percent of local CEOs reported that they receive less than \$5,000 for their service and over a third receive more than \$20,000. About half of local CEOs indicated they receive compensation between \$5,000-20,000. The population categories in Table 1 provide

more detail regarding how this compensation varies by size of local government. In general, compensation increases with population size. For example, 61% of officials serving municipalities with fewer than 2,500 residents receive less than \$10,000 and 78% of officials serving local governments with populations exceeding 20,000 residents receive \$20,000 or more in annual compensation.

| Population Categories | Annual Local Government Compensation |                    |                    |                      |                      |               |
|-----------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|----------------------|----------------------|---------------|
|                       | Under \$2,000                        | \$2,000 to \$4,999 | \$5,000 to \$9,999 | \$10,000 to \$19,999 | \$20,000 to \$60,000 | Over \$60,000 |
| 0-2,499               | 9%                                   | 21%                | 31%                | 26%                  | 12%                  | 0%            |
| 2,500-4,999           | 4%                                   | 6%                 | 15%                | 51%                  | 23%                  | 1%            |
| 5,000-9,999           | 0%                                   | 1%                 | 6%                 | 36%                  | 53%                  | 4%            |
| 10,000-19,999         | 0%                                   | 3%                 | 3%                 | 28%                  | 41%                  | 26%           |
| 20,000-49,999         | 0%                                   | 0%                 | 4%                 | 25%                  | 17%                  | 54%           |
| 50,000+               | 0%                                   | 0%                 | 0%                 | 14%                  | 23%                  | 64%           |
| Total                 | 21%                                  | 46%                | 76%                | 139%                 | 106%                 | 41%           |
|                       | 5%                                   | 11%                | 18%                | 32%                  | 25%                  | 10%           |

Table 2 provides detail on how compensation varies by municipal classification. CEOs in cities and counties on average receive higher compensation than towns and villages. This

pattern is related, in large part, to the general differences in population size across the municipality types or classes (see Table 3 in *2019 Survey of New York’s Local Chief Elected Officials: The Details*).

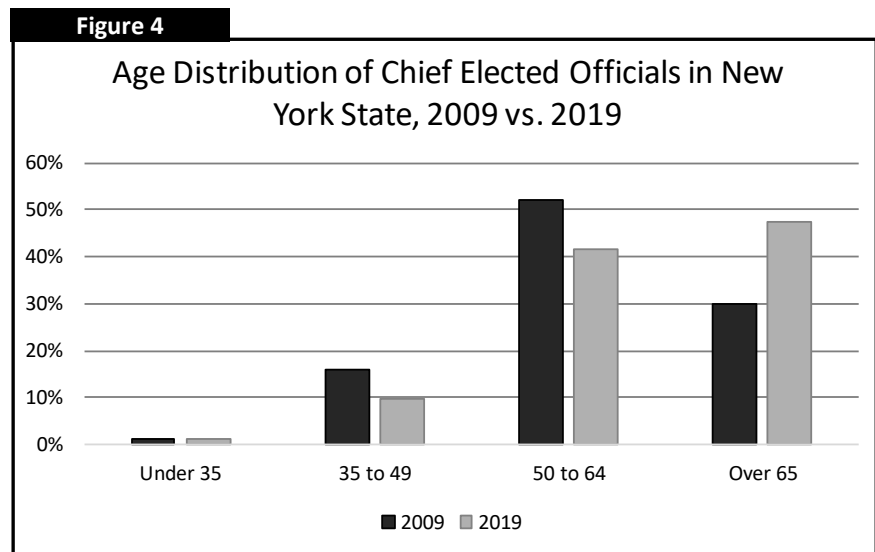
| Municipal Type | Annual Local Government Compensation |                    |                    |                      |                      |               |
|----------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|----------------------|----------------------|---------------|
|                | Under \$2,000                        | \$2,000 to \$4,999 | \$5,000 to \$9,999 | \$10,000 to \$19,999 | \$20,000 to \$60,000 | Over \$60,000 |
| City           | 0%                                   | 5%                 | 5%                 | 24%                  | 24%                  | 43%           |
| County         | 0%                                   | 0%                 | 9%                 | 27%                  | 27%                  | 36%           |
| Town           | 1%                                   | 5%                 | 15%                | 37%                  | 33%                  | 9%            |
| Village        | 14%                                  | 23%                | 26%                | 26%                  | 8%                   | 3%            |
| Total          | 21<br>5%                             | 46<br>11%          | 76<br>18%          | 139<br>32%           | 106<br>25%           | 41<br>10%     |

Higher levels of compensation for CEOs are strongly related to their status as full-time elected officials. Of the 102 officials indicating that their position was full-time, 80% indicated that their

compensation was over \$20,000. In contrast, 65% of the part-time CEOs indicated their compensation was less than \$20,000.

### The Age of Chief Elected Officials

Figure 4 shows the breakdown of age of CEOs and compares the age distribution from the current survey with the survey taken in 2009. While 16.4%<sup>2</sup> of the state’s total adult population<sup>3</sup> is over the age of 65, almost half (48%) of all CEOs in 2019 fall within this age group. Almost 90% of the local CEOs are over 50 years of age in both surveys. However, the 2019 survey reveals a growing number of CEOs in the 65 and over age cohort, with a corresponding decline in CEOs between the ages of 35 and 64.



<sup>2</sup> Source: [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov) estimate 7/1/2018

<sup>3</sup> Adult population is defined as individuals over the age of 18.

## Summary

While almost half of surveyed CEOs have served for less than five years in their current office, most of these officials bring valuable additional experience with them. In comparison with the two previously conducted surveys, at least half of chief elected leaders in all three surveys have held their positions for less than five years. A strong majority (77%) of New York's CEOs view their position as part-time public service. Those who view their role as full-time tend to come from larger municipalities, particularly cities and counties. The compensation received by CEOs varies substantially and tends to increase with the population size of the local government they serve in. More than half (55%) of CEOs receive between \$5,000 and \$20,000. An overwhelming majority (89%) of the local CEOs are over 50 years of age and the change between 2009 and 2019 suggests a trend toward older CEOs.

### References:

Hattery, M. (2001). *2000 Survey of New York's Local Government Leaders: Policy Issues, Training Needs and Technology Use*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Local Government Program.

Hattery, M. and Lindstrom, J. (2009). *Local Governments in New York State: A Profile of Chief Elected Officials*. Policy Brief 2009:02. Binghamton, NY: Binghamton University Center for Local Government.

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SUNY – College at Brockport  
Department of Public Administration  
Public Management Program  
161 Chestnut Street  
Rochester, NY 14604  
585-395-5564  
[mhattery@brockport.edu](mailto:mhattery@brockport.edu)

\*Michael Hattery, PhD,  
Program Coordinator  
Celia Watt, PhD, Professor  
Dawn Footer, MPA, MS  
Graphic Design by Kim Ross

Project co-sponsors:  
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