

How a small state fits the big picture

Every once in a while it is useful to make a self-examination of who we are in order to give us some perspective on ourselves and how we fit into the bigger picture. The following is such an examination.

For statistical purposes, the U.S. Census Bureau divides the country into four regions: the West, the South, the Midwest and the Northeast — in which Rhode Island is located. The 51 million people who live in the nine-state Northeast region, made up of New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey and the six New England states, comprise 20 percent of the nation's population.

Each of the four regions is subdivided into divisions, of which there are nine for the country. The Northeast consists of two divisions: New England and Middle Atlantic. The 13 million people who live in New England make up nearly one-fourth of the Northeast's 51 million persons and 5 percent of the nation's 249 million population counted in 1990.

Close to one-half of New Englanders live in Massachusetts (6 million); one quarter in Connecticut (3.3 million); and the remaining quarter (3.9 million) in the other four states. Maine, New Hampshire and Rhode Island each have just over 1 million population, while our least-populated state, Vermont, has just over one-half million. Rhode Island's share of New England's population is 8 percent and only .4 percent of the nation's, although seven states in the country have smaller populations.

Rhode Island is the smallest state in area, but all states east of the Mississippi River are also small. Many Americans think that river divides the country into two halves when, in reality, it divides the country into thirds. Going west the 3,000 miles across this country, from the East Coast it is approximately 1,000 miles to the Mississippi; another 1,000 to the Rockies; and another 1,000 to the Pacific Coast.

There are 26 states located east of the Mississippi, approximately one-third of the country, and the other 24 states west of the Mississippi are in the other two-thirds of the nation. It, therefore, allows that the states west of the Mississippi will be larger in area.

By contrast, the six New England states are especially small. For example, our largest state in New England — Maine — covers one-half the area of New England, yet it ranks as only the 39th largest state in area in the country. Smallest of all, Rhode Island, covers only 2 percent of this small New England division.

The population picture is much the same. Although Rhode Island ranks 43rd among states in population, New England has the smallest population of the nine divisions, and the Northeast has the smallest population of the four regions.

One should not be misled, given the smallness of the area and population of Rhode Island, New England and the Northeast, for this area ranks highest in crowding.

Crowding, measured by relating population to land area and called population density, can be compared from place to place. For example, the United States is less crowded than the world, measured this way, for in this country there are 70 people per square mile as compared with the world population density of 95.

Within our country the Northeast has the highest population density, at 312 persons per

square mile, with the second place South at 99 persons. The Middle Atlantic Division, part of the Northeast, ranks first of the nine divisions, at 377 persons per square mile, and New England is second at 210 persons.

The four states ranking highest in population density in the country are here: New Jersey, with 1,042 people per square mile, is first; Rhode Island ranks second, at 960 persons; Massachusetts is third, with 768 persons; and Connecticut is fourth, at 678 persons.

Smallest Rhode Island fits into the smallest census division and region in the country, both in area and population, but we are in the most crowded section of the nation. And we help comprise that massive urban agglomeration

stretching from Boston to Washington, D.C., called Megalopolis, in which lives one of every five Americans.

Not to leave the impression that Rhode Island's size is what characterizes this state, keep this in mind: Rhode Island has a population of 1 million, making it 43rd in the nation, but if Rhode Island were a separate country, its population would make it larger than 37 other countries in the world! Of the 194 countries in the world, this small state would be larger than approximately one-fifth of them!

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