The Pension Problem: Myth or Reality?
The State of Public Pensions in Upstate New York

Abigail Rivin and Yunji Kim,
City and Regional Planning, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Media and popular culture have described public pensions as being an enormous threat to local government fiscal health. Are public pensions the problem? This report investigates the claims about public pensions with a focus on New York State. We find that New York State's public pension fund is not running out of money; not overestimating rate of returns; and not underfunded. However, the combination of low contribution rates in the past and external pressures, such as the stock market crash, tax cap, and state mandated spending have intensified the effect of public pensions on local government budgets.

Although the New York State pension system is fully funded and closely monitored, the media often presents a counter narrative of impending doom. Using research drawn from pension experts and NYS Comptroller's Office data this paper explores some common pension myths found in popular debates and assesses their validity in New York State. Research supports the following conclusions:

Fact #1: Public pensions are *not* running out of money in New York State.
Fact #2: Public pension funds are *not* overestimating returns on investment in New York State.
Fact #3: Public pensions are fully funded in New York State.
Fact #4: Defined benefit plans are cheaper than defined contribution plans – and they are better for retirees and the economy.
Fact #5: While employees pay a significant portion of pension costs from their own salaries, pension obligations put pressure on the budget for current services.
Fact #6: Public sector pensions are *not* overly generous.
Fact #7: Public pensions can stimulate local economies.

Over the last couple of years the media has focused on public pension systems, raising concerns about under funding and escalating liabilities. Inflated pension benefits that have received media attention, are not the norm. The majority of workers receive a modest package after retirement. The Great Recession has contributed to the pension problem, by reducing returns below historical levels. However, not all pension systems are equal; each state pension system has different structures and characteristics. New York State's pension fund is well funded and well managed.

While pensions are not the cause of fiscal stress, they do add to the fiscal burden faced by local governments. Pension obligations are a considerable expenditure for upstate cities struggling to provide services within resource constraints. Reforms, such as the amortized payment scheme and the new Tier VI may help address pension stress, but they are not enough. As society ages, pensions have an important economic impact of ensuring income security for retirees and stimulating the local economy. The challenge is to balance current obligations and future needs so that public workers, local governments and society at large all benefit.