

## Diversity on Every Level Makes a Region Stronger

Diversity, or diversification, means a change in “being.” That “being” can refer to an economy, skills or experience, education background, and yes, diversity in age, gender, race, religion, or ethnicity, — variety. Diversity by its very nature, is a positive force; yet when it comes to dealing with race or ethnicity, it appears that many people need convincing.

A healthy economy is normally a diverse economy. Businesses of different sizes and economic sectors provide protection against a regional recession. Northeastern Pennsylvania did not have a diverse economy when the coal industry faltered and as a result this region was left with high unemployment, a lack of a technically skilled and educated workforce, and no new businesses or industries to fill the gap.

This region’s long history of embracing ethnic diversity has had a very positive effect. From the early 1900s, when immigrants arrived to take advantage of the thriving coal industry, our communities grew and thrived with the influx of people from different cultures.

Of all places, northeastern Pennsylvania should be one of the easiest geographical markets to accept change. Our region was built on diverse populations of eastern and western Europeans - each group displaying its own culture, religion, beliefs, and values. Our area flourished with ethnic restaurants and stores, people banded together in communities, and worked hard in a blue-collar environment to provide for their families and maintain their heritage. All came with hopes of a better life and a will to work, raise their families, and integrate with the community.

Today, northeastern Pennsylvania faces a new wave of immigrants who are primarily, Hispanic, yet come from many countries with diverse backgrounds, cultures, and dialects in their language. The area is also slowly seeing a rise in Russian and Asian populations. We are benefiting from the same entrepreneurial spirit that the first wave of immigrants displayed over 50 years ago. New restaurants and stores are opening in the region’s cities.

The in-migration of Hispanics/Latinos (“Hispanics”) will continue throughout the region. They are becoming integrated into the educational systems, the business communities, religious institutions, and in all areas of employment. While many in the region believe this is a rebirth for under-populated urban centers.

Others view it as a direct assault on the services and opportunities for established members of the community. But the intentions of Hispanic residents are to work, buy property, pay taxes, and open businesses. These are the same reasons that our forefathers came -- the hope for a better life and a will to work, raise their families, and integrate with the community.

Given the steep population decline this region has suffered, this new growth should be welcomed. In fact, demographic trends indicate that growth from immigrants is the only way in which Lackawanna and Luzerne Counties will see its population expand over the next 20 years. This expansion of the population base has many opportunities — opportunities that are necessary for this region to re-invent itself and become a global competitor.

Population in Luzerne County has been on a continual decline as population statistics from the U.S Census Bureau show that from 1940 – 2000, the region experienced a 27.7 percent population decline from 441,518 to 319,250.

The city of Wilkes-Barre has also shown a decline from 1940 with a population of 86,236 to year 2000 with a population of 43,123. Wilkes-Barre City declined by 50% from 1940 to 2000.

A larger population requires more goods and services. Businesses will expand to meet those needs, which in turn, will create more jobs. With an increased amount of money flowing through the local economy, local governments can provide better public services, including public safety and schools. Growth when managed correctly improves a community.

Equally important, economic expansion should be embraced by all citizens especially those who are native born, so there is a more welcoming environment to accept others who are of a different age, race, culture, or creed. Any region that accepts a diverse population is one that will grow and prosper-- a strength that this region needs.

Over the past 15 years, the economic and social dynamics around us have drastically changed. For one, we live in a global economy; there is fierce competition for goods and services production. Additionally, the average worker needs a much higher educational level and a strong background in technology. Governments need more technically advanced equipment for municipal services and public safety. Change and development are all around us as the world is getting smaller.

To be a player in this global economy and ensure a decent standard of living and quality of life for all our residents, northeastern Pennsylvania has to become more adaptable and have a willingness to embrace change. Accepting the growing diverse nature of our population is one way to begin the process.

*JUSC is a research-based think tank founded by Wilkes University, in partnership with College Misericordia, Keystone College, King's College, Luzerne County Community College, Penn State/Wilkes-Barre, and the University of Scranton. JUSC was formed to research, educate, strategize, and convene on urban renewal, community, and economic development issues.*

*Teri Ooms is the Executive Director of the Joint Urban Studies Center.*