



JOINT UrbanStudies CENTER

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Special points of interest:

- Education editorial from the Executive Director
- A profile of housing in the city of Wilkes-Barre
- Excerpts from two of JUSC's latest released reports
- Update on JUSC's interns
- Statistics on how this region stacks up

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A Letter From The Executive Director

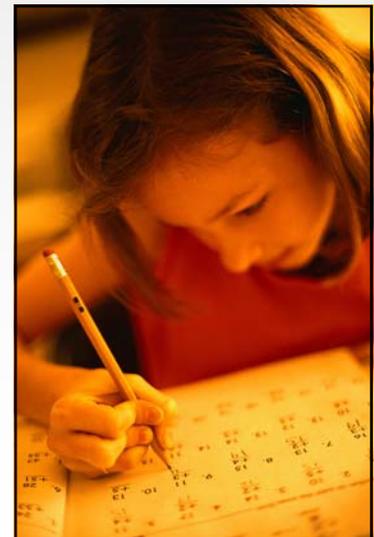
The spring 2005 issue of Urban Insights includes excerpts from three of our recent studies: "Strategy for Housing in the City of Wilkes-Barre;" "A Competitive Agenda for Renewing the Cities of Northeastern Pennsylvania;" and "Why Aren't We Average."

The housing report focuses on the need to not only develop more housing options in downtown through preservation of historic homes, creation of urban villages, and single family and multi family units, but also neighborhood development and revitalization. Demographics tell us that this is a middle income area and that type of housing needs to be cultivated. A goal of the Mayor of Wilkes-Barre is to rebuild its neighborhoods. Both single family and multi-family (condos and townhouses) can be integrated into existing neighborhoods by removing blighted and abandoned properties. Façade improvement programs can be expanded and aggressive code enforcement is encouraged. Developing a community-wide housing strategy that is diverse in both types and cost of housing, but promotes ownership, is integral to revitalization. The city of Wilkes-Barre is on the right track.

Next, JUSC focuses on two reports that are considered companion pieces. In 2003, the Brookings Institution released a report on the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania that highlighted the current state of declining affairs and some variables that have contributed to its economic situation. Brookings also released summaries on issues impacting each of the nine regions in the Commonwealth. JUSC took both the full report and regional summary, and developed a series of recommendations that our Metropolitan Statistical Area should focus on. These are recommendations that can be carried out by local government, K-12, higher education, economic development groups, non-profits, chambers of commerce, and other business and civic groups.

JUSC's second report focuses on the reasons we are not average and how events and market forces during the past 50 years helped to shape who we are now. The report identifies the increase in income this area would see — if we met the statewide averages on key census indicators. And finally, the report shows how these indicators impact each other, and how a change in one indicator could greatly enhance another indicator as well, and how the region as a whole is reflective of this economic situation.

Both reports emphasize that radical change — on all levels and in all sectors — is needed now. What worked in the past will no longer suffice in today's world. We must all embrace change, act immediately to institute proven strategies, be selfless, and work together.



Housing In The City Of Wilkes-Barre

The latest housing data reveals a total of 20,239 housing units exist in Wilkes-Barre city, excluding seasonal and migrant housing. Occupied housing is comprised of owner occupied and renter occupied units. Of this, 9,617 or 53.5% of households own the house they live in. 8,344 or 46.5% of the city's units are rented. The remaining 2,278 housing units are vacant. The median dollar value of owner occupied houses is \$62,596 and the median monthly rent for rental units is \$398.

Looking at Luzerne County as a whole, the numbers identify owner occupied housing at 70.3% and rental occupied at 29.7%. There is a large variation in these statistics. The median home value is \$84,800 and the median monthly rent is \$434. When comparing vacancy rates between the city and county, little variation is revealed. The vacancy rate in the city, as a percent of all units, is 11.3% as opposed to 9.7% for the county.

Not only are the city renter occupied units higher than the county, but they're also nearing a critical level in the community's housing balance. Once renter occupied housing reaches 50%, small to mid and large cities begin to see further decline of property values that creates a situation where existing owner occupied housing will trade up to the suburbs and begin using city units as investment properties. This compounds the situation and promotes more urban decay and crime. Once this vicious cycle escalates, it's almost impossible to reverse the trend.

The median household income in Luzerne County is \$33,771, and it continues to fall below the statewide level of \$40,106. The statewide level is below the national level of \$41,994. There is obviously a connection between income and home ownership as evidenced by the statistics here.

Efforts such as the revitalization of the Sterling Hotel and historic preservation of single family homes (both under the auspices of CityVest) are vital to downtown development. The housing units that are part of the South Main Street project are also successful projects promoting high density, mixed use development. What we need now in Wilkes-Barre are middle income housing and more first-time homeownership programs throughout the city to reach those in the largest economic bracket.

JUSC is committed to working with the city of Wilkes-Barre and Mayor Tom Leighton to achieve his goals of improving neighborhoods and the quality of life for Wilkes-Barre residents.



***“The median household income in Luzerne County is \$33,771, and it continues to fall below the statewide level of \$40,106.”
- JUSC***



Excerpt From JUSC’s “Why Aren’t We Average?” Report

Imagine an additional \$700 million in wages being paid out in Luzerne County. This increase in revenue would dramatically improve the standard of living in the region. More money would flow through local government, increasing its ability to provide local services and public safety. To reap this windfall, all Luzerne County would have to do is move up to the statewide average on key census indicators, such as per capita income, population increases, and employed population.

The information below contains two sets of data. The column on the left provides the facts about Luzerne County in Census 2000. The information on the right is what the numbers would be if all the state averages were applied to Luzerne County in 2000.

Luzerne County in 2000		Luzerne County in 2000 (if average)	
Total Population	319,250	Total Population	339,307
16 and Older Population	260,496	16 and Older Population	276,874
16 and Older Population Employed	151,869	16 and Older Population Employed	166,125
Per Capita Income	\$18,228	Per Capita Income	\$20,880
Total Income of 16 and Older Employed	\$2,768,268,132	Total Income of 16 and Older Employed	\$3,468,690,000
A Difference of: \$700,421,868			

“Weak investment practices, continued emphasis on a low wage economy, and local government fragmentation severely affect this area’s capacity to successfully grow its economy.”
- JUSC

The purpose of the report is to assess why the city of Wilkes-Barre has not met statewide or national average benchmarks in several critical census categories during the past 50 years. All of the Scranton/Wilkes-Barre Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) data reflects similar challenges. Here we explain how and why Wilkes-Barre has found itself in a continuous decline throughout the past five decades and how trends in Luzerne County influenced the MSA as a whole. By analyzing and comparing specific key indicators (such as population, education, housing, and income), the causes for Wilkes-Barre’s below-average status will become clear. The data primarily represents Luzerne County; however, upon analysis, the city of Wilkes-Barre and the remaining portions of the MSA show similar trends.

There are many reasons why this area has not been able to create more jobs and grow. Weak investment practices, continued emphasis on a low wage economy, and local government fragmentation severely affect this area’s capacity to successfully grow its economy.

Throughout this study, the economic and demographic statistics provided serve to highlight the declining condition of Luzerne County: The lower the indicators, the greater the turnaround challenge.

JUSC believes that the region needs to focus on land use policies, local government collaboration, improving K-12 education, and more aggressive economic development. JUSC also focuses on the importance of the aesthetics of a community and the positive impact on its economy. These strategies, case studies, and best practices are elaborated on in the “Why Aren’t We Average?” report.

For the full JUSC report, please visit our website at www.urbanstudies.org.



Excerpt From JUSC’s Follow Up To The Brookings Report: A Competitive Agenda for Renewing the Cities of Northeastern Pennsylvania.

The Brookings Institution Report identified five key areas (see below) that the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania needs to address in order to revitalize the economy. The Brookings Institution based its recommendations on statistical data and interviews with key business, government, and non-profit leaders. Brookings also completed a review of the state’s investment policies, economic development practices, and economic trends.

Brookings five key areas are:

Planning for a more competitive, higher-quality future.

Focusing the state’s investment policies.

Investing in a high-road economy.

Promoting large-scale reinvestment in older urban areas.

Renewing the state’s and regional governance.

For the Scranton/Wilkes-Barre/Hazleton MSA, JUSC created a list of in-depth recommendations that fall under each of the five statewide initiatives identified by the Brookings report. JUSC’s recommendations are suggestions that could be adopted and implemented by local governments; non-profits; K-12 schools; higher education institutions; and business, industry, and civic/service groups in northeastern Pennsylvania.

JUSC precedes the list of recommendations with a section that profiles the region; highlights the problems with the unbalanced age demographic, low “higher education attainment,” inadequate job base, and population loss; and explains their impact on the wealth in this region how they are interrelated.

JUSC also explains why it is so important for this region to take action to revitalize its economy based on the impact such a turnaround could have on each resident. JUSC believes it is important to enhance the quality of life and increase the standard of living for our residents. Concerted action is important because — during the next decade — this region will grow as a result of immigration from the major metropolitan areas. Putting this region on solid footing will allow us to take advantage of the opportunities such growth brings. It also gives us the opportunity to address some of the challenges that come with this type of growth.

Mobilization and action should begin immediately. We must also recognize that — even with sweeping changes — expecting overnight impact is not realistic. JUSC pledges to continue to provide data, customized strategy development, and best practices to assist stakeholders in moving the region forward. JUSC’s expertise lies in working with clients (governments and nonprofits) to provide customized strategies for implementation after a thorough review of the client, community, or organization.

There is no linear progression for acting on any of JUSC recommendations. As a matter of fact, implementation should commence as soon as possible, with each of the stakeholder groups working collaboratively and/or independently based on the various recommendations. JUSC plans to convene a meeting of the county commissioners (of both counties) and the mayors of the largest cities in the region to discuss specific regional approaches to solving problems.



“Pennsylvania should promote much more regional collaboration and cohesion.”

-The Brookings Institution



Continued on next page

Excerpt From JUSC's Follow Up To The Brookings Report Continued

JUSC is recommending some strategies that could be politically charged and controversial. Specifically, these include consolidation of local government services and collaboration on zoning codes, land use, and transportation plans. JUSC recommends holding local governments, businesses, and residents to higher standards in compliance with codes and regulations on property maintenance and streamlining local government processes to be more business friendly and more automated. Specific strategies are outlined in more detail later in the follow up report.

Three themes reoccurring throughout JUSC's initial reports are: economic development; education and workforce development; and the practice of regionalism. JUSC believes that these three themes and the corresponding strategies are the foundation for rebuilding our region.

For the full JUSC report, please visit our website at www.urbanstudies.org.



JUSC Intern Update

Spring 2005 internships at JUSC will be completed in May. This semester we were pleased to have two students from King's College and two from Wilkes University. These four students completed research, analysis, and writing on specific economic indicators in our region. This compilation will be part of a published report due to be released in fall 2005.

Chastity Force is a senior at King's, majoring in criminal justice and sociology with a minor in forensic science. Chastity's research focused on two indicators: social service organizations and education/training. She will continue graduate studies at Shippensburg University.

Pat Van Fleet, a senior at Wilkes University, is majoring in business economics. He was responsible for completing research on jobs and the economy.

Steve Sikorski, is a senior at King's majoring in political science. Steve's research focused on technology and innovation.

Mark Angelo, a senior at Wilkes, is majoring in business administration/finance with a minor in economics. Mark was responsible for completing research on public safety.

All interns will graduate in May.

Each of these students did an exceptional job throughout the semester. All have completed at least 120 hours or more for their respective internships, carried a full course load, and also had part-time jobs. The center was very fortunate to have these diligent and hard-working students working with us during the semester. We wish them well in their future endeavors.

From left to right: Pat, Steve, Chasity, and Mark



*For
additional
information
on
internships
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Did you know that in 2000, 70.3% of Housing Units in Luzerne County were owner occupied?



Did You Know?

As noted in the Brookings Report: “Back To Prosperity: A Competitive Agenda For Renewing Pennsylvania,” the Luzerne and Lackawanna county region continues to struggle with decreasing population figures. In 1930, Lackawanna County was home to 310,397 residents, while Luzerne County was home to 445,109 people. Fast forward 70 years to 2000, and you will see Lackawanna and Luzerne counties have lost a combined 222,961 residents, a decrease of 29.5%.

Figure 1

Total Population From 1980 To 2000			
	1980	1990	2000
Luzerne County	343,179	328,149	319,250
<i>% Change</i>		-4.4%	-2.7%
Lackawanna County	227,908	219,039	213,295
<i>% Change</i>		-3.9%	-2.6%

Figure 1 represents the declining population in both Lackawanna and Luzerne counties from 1980 to 2000.

While local population figures dropped, populations across the state and nation increased. From 1990 to 2000, the United States and Pennsylvania saw increases of 11.6% and 3.3% respectively.

A significant component of the recent population decline of Lackawanna and Luzerne counties, has been the loss of young adults.

From 1990 to 2000, Luzerne County lost 5,828 residents between the ages of 18 and 24. During that same span, Lackawanna County lost 3,577 residents between the ages of 18 and 24. As a whole, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania occurred a net loss of 130,993 residents between the ages of 18 to 24. Overall, the 18-to-24-year-old age bracket continues to decrease, as seen in Figure 2.

Figure 2: 18-To-24-Year-Old Population Percentage Of The Total Population

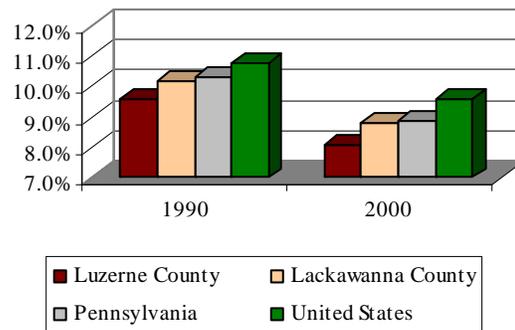
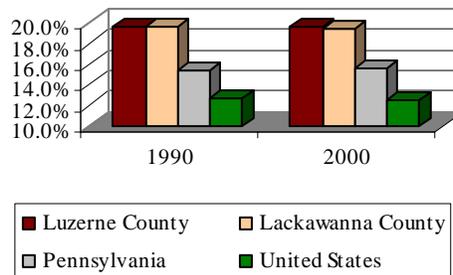


Figure 3: 65 And Over Population Percentage Of The Total Population



While young adults continue to relocate out of this region (and the state as well) the elderly population continues to remain at high levels. More than 19% of the population in both Lackawanna and Luzerne counties are comprised of 65 and older residents. The 19% dwarfs the national average of 12.4% (Figure 3).

Did You Know?

The aging population will continue to affect this region for some time. The statistics show this region continues to possess a high percentage of 65 and over population — higher than statewide and national averages. Another concern for Lackawanna and Luzerne counties is housing. In 2000, Lackawanna and Luzerne counties were above the national and statewide average vacancy rate of 9.0%, with 9.6% and 9.7% rates respectively (Figure 5). The

higher vacancy rate is not for lack of affordable housing. The median value of a house in Lackawanna and Luzerne County is considerably less than the national average (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Median Value Of Owner Occupied Housing Units in 2000

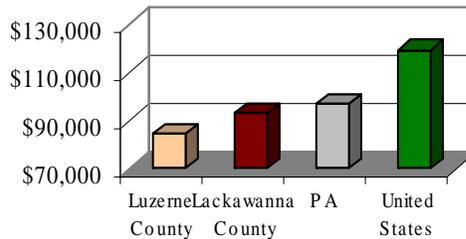
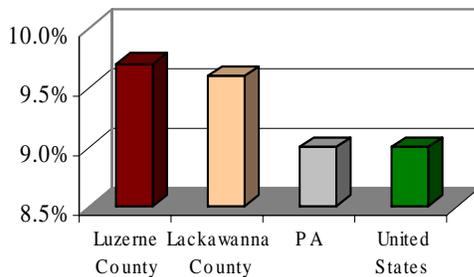


Figure 5: 2000 Vacancy Rate



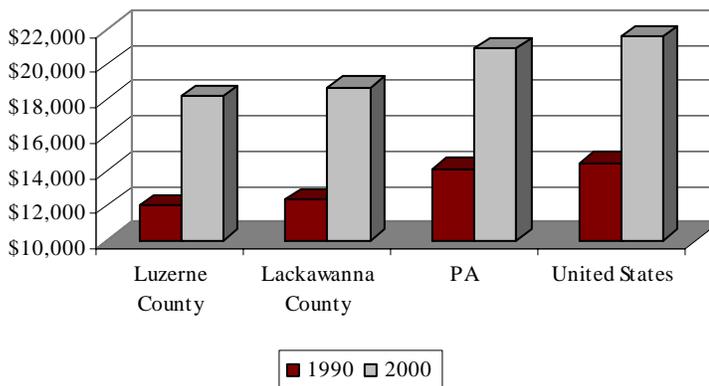
Luzerne County's median value of \$84,800 is well below the national value of \$119,600.

One contributing factor to high vacancy rates in this region is the continued lower than normal per capita income levels. From 1980 to 2000, Lackawanna and Luzerne counties have continued to fall below statewide and national per capita income levels (Figure 6).

Did you know that the Median Value of a House in Lackawanna County during 1980 was \$68,900?

Population, housing, and income levels are just some of the pressing issues facing the region. To learn more about these issues, we suggest reviewing the JUSC Report, "Why Aren't We Average?," located on our website at www.urbanstudies.org. The report highlights how and why the Lackawanna and Luzerne counties continue to fall below national and statewide averages in several important indicators.

Figure 6: Per Capita Income From 1990 And 2000



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JUSC Mission Statement

The JUSC mission is to assist in the revitalization of small to mid-sized cities through the utilization of the center's expertise and resources, including its member university, colleges and their respective faculties and students, by serving as a resource for, and consulting with regard to, effective and efficient government, best practices, preparation of applied research, strategy development, and the process for its implementation. Based upon those efforts, we will develop a model for replication by other small and mid-size cities confronting similar challenges.



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