



'DON'T JUMP SHIP; DIVE IN!'

*Addressing Population Decline in Erie County,
Pennsylvania, Using Unified Messaging*

JEFFERSON
EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

2025 Jefferson Civic Leadership Academy

Authors' Note

This report draws on qualitative and quantitative data, expanding on the lived experiences of its cohort members to offer a fuller narrative of Erie County, Pennsylvania, as it experiences continued population loss overall while more pronounced in certain regions with other areas reflecting growth. Semi-structured interviews were conducted throughout the process using consistent language such as barriers, belonging, perception, and community. The 30 members of this cohort live in various parts of the county and work in a wide range of industries, including health care, public service, insurance, legal counsel, finance, communications, real estate, and the arts. The cohort met with leaders across the county over nine months to discuss the issues and opportunities in the area. That work culminated in this report. This report utilized artificial intelligence (AI) as a supplementary research tool in limited instances, primarily for data organization and comparative analysis. All AI-assisted outputs were reviewed, verified, and contextualized by cohort members using primary sources and established literature. AI was not used to generate original analysis, conclusions, or narrative content. Responsibility for the research design, interpretation, and written content rests entirely with the authors.

Abstract

In a post-industrial landscape for the once-bustling manufacturing hub of Erie County, Pennsylvania, population decline continues, with a nearly 4% drop in population occurring from about 2010 to 2020 and an estimated 1.2% additional from 2020 to 2024. As this issue continues to erode tax bases and impact the perception of the area, the Jefferson Educational Society Civic Leadership Academy cohort of 2025 sought to examine the causes of population decline on a local level and how to stop the floodgates with the ultimate goal of stabilizing the current population and attracting new residents in the future.

Solutions were focused on a younger demographic, ages 18-35, who would be the next generation of entrepreneurs and community leaders, and possibly raise families in the county. Through its research, this cohort emphasized finding solutions rooted in belonging and storytelling to combat negative perception and feelings of discontent that can drive population decline. This cohort proposes to shift Erie County's narrative from one of decline to one of intentional growth by implementing a unified, authentic countywide rebrand that leverages existing assets, celebrates diverse communities, and gives residents a shared story worth staying— and returning — for.

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Introduction

Casey Corritore was 18 when she decided to leave Erie County, Pennsylvania. Growing up in the Waterford and Summit Township areas — places known for mainly being rural with some suburban development — she felt limited in her goal of working in art management. So, she moved to Baldwin Wallace University near Cleveland, believing the arts scene to be more supportive to the career path she envisioned. After college, Corritore pursued opportunities west, taking a temporary job in Aspen, Colorado, saying, “I intended to network my ass off and carve my path in those three or four months.” Ultimately, it did not work out, and she booked another one-way ticket — this time, back to Erie.

In Corritore’s case, coming home was not planned. However, once back, she discovered something new — a connection. Now 26 years old, Corritore is the capacity-building lead at Erie Arts & Culture, the regional arts council for northwestern Pennsylvania, helping others find the same spark of creativity and connection that drew her back and made her into a cheerleader for the area. Corritore’s story reflects Erie County’s own — one of loss, rediscovery, and belonging. Around Erie County, residents describe a similar pull — the tension between wanting to leave for opportunities and finding unexpected reasons to stay. For some, it is family. For others, it is affordability, community, or the slower pace of life that bigger cities lack.

Erie County has experienced and continues to experience long-term population decline, with significant implications for its future. Census data indicate that the county’s population reached its peak at over 282,000 residents in 2003 but began to decline around 2012, with just over 270,000 residents in 2020 — almost a 4% drop, with most of that occurring since 2010 (U.S. Census Bureau via Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, 2025). Early estimates suggest an additional 1.2% decline from 2020 to 2024 (Center for Rural Pennsylvania, 2025). Population decline does not occur evenly, however. In Erie County, which includes two cities as well as over 30 townships, boroughs, towns and villages, there are places that gain population while others bleed it.

Data show how many people leave and where, yet it became the focus of this cohort to understand the stories of those people counted as “data” to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges that pervade the area. The Jefferson Educational Society’s 2025 Civic Leadership Academy (JCLA) — a group-based learning experience designed for emerging Erie professionals across the public, private, and nonprofit sectors to study the form and function of local government and its relationship to the state government while working collectively to address a critical issue facing the region identified by members of the JCLA Alumni Network — spent nine months meeting with local and state leaders and business owners, and researching Erie County’s post-industrial landscape to develop mindful solutions for population decline. Like other metro regions throughout the Rust Belt and the Midwest, Erie is a place that has established a strong identity in the 20th century through its manufacturing sector and is working to navigate its multi-dimensional 21st-century identity in the wake of changing economies brought on by various factors (Lynch, 2024).

Through its research, this cohort focused on finding solutions rooted in belonging and storytelling to combat negative perception and feelings of discontent that can drive population decline. This cohort proposes to shift Erie County’s narrative from one of decline to one of intentional growth by implementing a unified, authentic county-wide rebrand that leverages existing assets, celebrates diverse communities, and gives residents a shared story worth staying— and returning — for. This report lays out those stories throughout four chapters: Understanding Erie’s Population Challenge; Why People Stay, Leave, and Return; What’s Already Working (and What Could Work Better); and The Solution: A Countywide Rebrand.

Chapter 1: Understanding Erie's Population Challenge

To set the scene, Erie County is in the northwestern corner of Pennsylvania, right along the southern shore of Lake Erie — known as the “chimney” of Pennsylvania as it peaks into the lake at the top. It is the only Pennsylvania county with a Great Lakes coastline, giving it access to freshwater ports, beaches, and tourism, as well as its 3,200-acre peninsula, Presque Isle State Park. The county borders Ohio to the west and New York to the east. The county's urban core is the City of Erie, which has dense neighborhoods, an older housing stock, and major employers such as Erie Insurance, along with health care corporations UPMC Hamot and AHN Saint Vincent Hospital, and higher education institutions Gannon University and Mercyhurst University (Lynch, 2024). Noteworthy employers that stretch into the county include Wabtec Corporation, Penn State Behrend, PennWest Edinboro, and Lord Corporation. Surrounding the city are the inner-ring suburbs of Millcreek Township, Lawrence Park Township, and the Borough of Wesleyville. Other suburbs are Harborcreek Township to the east, Summit Township to the south, and Fairview Township to the west, set along farmland and woodlots. Outside the urban and suburban rings, Erie County has rural and agricultural municipalities that include Waterford, Albion, Union City, Corry, McKean, North East, and Girard. Corry, the county's second city, anchors the southeastern part of the county and has its own industrial and manufacturing base. The Lake Erie Wine Country area, centered in North East Township, is populated with vineyards and wineries. The Borough of Edinboro and Washington Township to the west of Union City in the southern half of the county are home to another small community, including a college and a small lake for recreational opportunities. Erie County's urban and rural epicenters drive the health care, education, agriculture, manufacturing, and tourism industries, but it also shapes its resource allocation and social dynamics. Those geographic differences are not just physical; they shape migration patterns, access to services, and long-term population stability.

Of the county's municipalities, it is estimated that Fairview, Elk Creek, and Harborcreek townships, and the Borough of Edinboro experienced slight population increases. In contrast, the remaining municipalities have stayed the same or decreased — the most severe decreases are estimated to be in Conneaut Township and the City of Erie (Pennsylvania State Data Center, 2024). Meanwhile, Pennsylvania overall experienced slight growth during the same period, with urban counties gaining residents and rural counties losing them (Center for Rural Pennsylvania, 2025). A marginal 0.03% increase in population growth predicted from 2020 to 2050 in Erie County, coupled with other factors, indicates the desperate need for a strategic solution (Kopko, 2025).

One of those factors is an aging population. Data show that Pennsylvania's rural and urban counties alike are experiencing sharp increases in median age, with Erie following this trend (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020; Kopko, 2025). Birth rates have fallen below replacement levels, and deaths now outnumber births locally and statewide (Pennsylvania Department of Health, 2025; Kopko, 2025). At the same time, school enrollment is expected to keep declining through the 2030s, indicating fewer young families will face sustaining population levels and local tax bases (Institute of Education Sciences, 2024). These demographic pressures raise urgent questions about Erie County's ability to retain residents and be resilient in the decades ahead.

Erie County's geographic diversity — urban core, suburban periphery, and rural townships — shapes more than just service delivery and economic patterns. It has created distinct communities with diverging political priorities, racial demographics, and visions for the county's future. Erie is about 69% white and has voted Democratic for decades, while suburban and rural townships are about 95% white and typically lean Republican (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020; Erie County, Pennsylvania, n.d.). Besides voting patterns, this data reflect fundamentally different lived experiences, and often, understandings of what Erie County is and what it should become. This fragmentation showed up in this very cohort.

Despite a shared commitment to Erie's future in broad terms, members from various municipalities and back-

grounds brought different assumptions of the county’s primary challenges. If a carefully selected leadership cohort struggles to find common ground, the broader county likely faces an even steeper challenge as it works to move forward together. The differences between parts of the county today are the result of generations of policies and practices that have isolated neighborhoods, concentrated poverty, and limited mobility, and they continue to affect residents’ quality of life. As one might imagine, the perception of what it means to live in Erie becomes bleak if this is your reality. Initially, the county served as a strategic Great Lakes port and railroad hub, and later as a manufacturing center — paper mills, heavy manufacturing, shipbuilding, and other factory work anchored our region’s economy for generations. Those “booms” produced highly populated neighborhoods and a large industrial workforce, ultimately driving migration into the area. (ExplorePAHistory, n.d.).

To compound that, for much of the 20th century, federal housing policies and local lending practices created and reinforced racially segregated neighborhoods in Erie (Forbes, 2025a). As documented in the Erie Reader, Erie follows the pattern of industrial cities emerging from World War I and World War II, with restrictive covenants, predatory lending, and exclusionary zoning practices shaping much of the city, which pushed minorities into small neighborhoods in the city while investments for suburbs and better quality housing were made for largely white families outside the city (2025). As mortgage capital flowed to the newly developing suburbs of Millcreek, Harborcreek, and Fairview, the city’s tax base eroded (GoErie, 2022).

Neighborhoods with redlining — a discriminatory and now illegal practice in which financial institutions and insurers denied loans, mortgages, and insurance due to the racial minorities in those areas — were starved of public and private investment and experienced rising vacancy rates, deteriorating infrastructure, and underfunded schools. Those trends have persisted long after discriminatory policies became illegal (Forbes, 2025a). Erie remains one of Pennsylvania’s most racially segregated urban areas, as nearly half of the African American population live at or below the national poverty line with significant gaps in job prospects, limiting access to quality housing, education, and upward mobility (USA Today, 2017). This has created varying demographics and economic conditions throughout the county.

Further diversifying demographics — Erie has welcomed refugees and other New Americans through coordinated resettlement programs and community efforts — has helped offset population losses in some neighborhoods and brought new cultural and economic vitality to others. While this may be an adjustment for some, the emergence of New American populations has helped stabilize the financial impact of a shrinking tax base. It also provides a welcome economic boost for Erie County. Specifically, the Economic Research Institute of Erie (ERIE) estimated that immigrants and refugees who settle in Erie County contribute about \$253 million annually to the local economy (ERIE, 2021). This contribution comes from active workforce participants of all kinds, with New Americans making up a significant share of new startup businesses in Erie.

Entrepreneurship is vital to the Erie area. However, despite this support and Erie’s long-standing role as a refugee resettlement hub and immigrant haven, inflows have not fully offset larger structural declines at the county level. Although New Americans are helping to strengthen and stabilize neighborhoods, a force still pulls others away. U.S. Census estimates show Erie County’s population has decreased since 2020, with local reports noting several consecutive years of net losses as deaths outnumber births and domestic out-migration continues (U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants [USCRI], n.d.). Similarly, out-migration has led to “brain drain,” as young, well-educated, and skilled professionals leave for better opportunities elsewhere — a trend in Erie County since the 1960s, but a national phenomenon as well (Ghosheh, 2020). In an Erie County-specific report and later in a book, Dr. Baher Ghosheh reported that migrants tend to be younger, well-educated, and in their 20s or 30s, which are within this cohort’s focused demographic (2020). Subsequently, creating opportunities for both New Americans and existing residents to succeed could help the area recover from deindustrialization and adapt to its new economic landscape.

In the shifting economic landscape, manufacturing has fallen from the leading industry in Erie County at the turn of the millennium to the third largest as of 2025. Between April 2024 and April 2025, the Erie Economic Institute at Penn State Behrend studied and found that Erie is experiencing an economic shift. The FIRE sector (finance, insurance, real estate, rental, and leasing) and the ESHCS sector (educational services, health care, and social assistance) are now Erie's leading industries. Manufacturing, which was the largest sector until the turn of the 21st century, now ranks as the third-largest sector, yet access to job opportunities remains unevenly distributed geographically. Residents in Erie's core may encounter transportation challenges, childcare gaps, or limited professional networks compared to their suburban counterparts. Meanwhile, rural residents in the southern and western municipalities face their own obstacles: geographic isolation, limited access to health and social services, inadequate broadband, and shrinking school enrollment (Jefferson Civic Leadership Academy, 2022).

These patterns help explain why interviewed residents described Erie County as feeling fragmented or like different worlds. We listened, and will now share those voices, while keeping the following research questions in mind:

1. What demographic and social factors are most affecting population decline in Erie County?
2. How does Erie County's population data compare to other counties in Pennsylvania?
3. How is population decline impacting the county?
4. How do belonging, quality of life, resilience, and retention influence residents' decisions to stay, leave, or return?
5. What strategies can improve population resilience and make Erie County a place where people want to build their lives?

Chapter 2: Why People Stay, Leave, and Return

To understand why people stay, leave, or return to Erie County, this cohort went beyond the numbers and turned to the people. Capturing and documenting lived experiences from those in Erie provide insight into the themes that drive people to and from the county. It is important to note, however, that they are not fully representative of the entire population. Yet, these interviews were conducted as a starting point and a means to share with readers a firsthand perspective of what the situation throughout the county currently looks like using the voices of Erie County residents.

Why People Stay

When Edinboro, Pennsylvania, native Ben Kalmey decided to attend college, his initial thought was to leave the area. However, after considering the financial benefits of staying close to home and attending school nearby, he chose to pursue a degree in communications at the Edinboro campus of PennWest University. He dreamed of the walkability and bustling nature of cities like New York and Washington, D.C., but as he grew older, he cited an appreciation for more solitude and the outlet that being around nature provides. Kalmey, 23, is part of a group of people who grew up in the area and have decided to stay in the county. Across interviews, including Kalmey's, residents cited affordability, access to nature, and closeness to family as consistent reasons to remain. These assets also attract people from outside the area. Other students described Erie as a place where opportunity feels accessible compared to the small towns they came from. A Mercyhurst University senior from Titusville pointed to Lake Erie's recreation and civic engagement, while a Gannon student from Bradford said internships and nonprofits revealed, "a lot of possibilities" compared to her small hometown. Erie County has a transient population that could lead to potential residency thanks to its abundant post-graduate educational landscape — places like the Lake Erie College of Osteopathic Medicine (LECOM), which is the medical school with the largest student body in the U.S. In 2023, the student population was about 15,142 (Data USA, n.d.). During the same year, Erie County's total permanent population was approximately 269,544. Tapping into Erie County's post-graduate education sector and expanding employment opportunities to meet local employment needs can strengthen its younger demographics, who will be the next community builders and innovators.

These decisions unfold against Erie's ongoing transition from a manufacturing-based economy to a service- and health-driven one. Across Pennsylvania, rural and older industrial counties like Erie continue to lose population, while a smaller number of suburban counties, including Pike, Cumberland, Chester, Adams, and Butler, are gaining residents (Pennsylvania State Data Center, 2024). As with other post-industrial cities, Erie's challenge is not only statistical but also existential — how to become a place where people want to belong again.

Others, like Elizabeth Williams, D.O., a recent graduate of LECOM, have decided she's not just staying, but she's building a life here. She followed the Gannon-to-LECOM pipeline that secured her employment in her field. "Staying in Erie for LECOM medical school was also a choice that I made," she said. "I could have chosen to go to (LECOM campuses in) Florida or Greensburg, (Pennsylvania), but I built a community here with my husband and our friends, and that is why we decided to stay." She cited her husband's position at Wabtec, social and recreational activities as well as an affordable cost of living as why she wants to raise her family here.

Looking at where Erie County is gaining and losing population, one place stands out: Edinboro. Between 2020 and 2024, the population grew by approximately 17%, while Fairview Township ranked second in growth, with an increase of around 2.7%. What is the key to Edinboro's success, and why do people choose to stay there? Like Kalmey, others have a deep sense of pride in the area. An example of a third space in the community outside of home and work that facilitates community connection and taps into that pride is the Edinboro Hotel Bar. The Hotel Bar, opened for its current purpose in 1952, has cultivated a community for generations. Its owner, Pat Hargest,

attended General McLane High School in the late 1980s, then went to Pittsburgh for his undergraduate degree, but transferred to then-Edinboro University of Pennsylvania (now PennWest Edinboro). Hargest began working at Hotel Bar part time and continued to invest in the place, becoming a minority partner before purchasing the bar outright in 2007. The bar has become a gathering place and source of pride, paying homage to Edinboro's past with memorabilia displayed throughout. Hargest also works with the alumni association, hosts fraternity and sorority events and fundraisers, and even has a canon of yearbooks for people to laugh over and look back on. "I like everything about the town, the school district, the college — so it is easy for me to do my cheerleading job kind of to promote that fact, and the Hotel is like an outlet for me to do that."

For those who choose to stay, it is invariably a commitment. These residents form the foundation upon which Erie can build as it seeks to grow again. Inversely, not everyone shares this perspective. For some, the same closeness and comfort of home can feel limiting. Understanding why people leave — and what it would take to keep them — is the next step toward helping Erie thrive again.

Why People Leave

In a presentation to the JCLA cohort, Christina Marsh, who recently retired as chief community and economic development officer at Erie Insurance, said her son moved away from Erie County because he wanted to pursue a career in film and felt he could not do so there. Contrasting that is Sam Ruot, a 22-year-old senior majoring in communications at Penn State Behrend. Originally from Crawford County, Ruot plans to stay in Erie County after graduating this spring, attracted by the local film scene.

Erie's developing film industry includes Film Erie, which connects filmmakers with locations, crews, vendors, tax incentives, permits, and other resources needed to start filming. Small production companies like Oddity Productions can shoot, produce, and premiere films from their hometown of Erie. The Eerie Horror Fest, the Tom Ridge Environmental Center's Big Green Screen Theater, and the FILM 10/20 series at the 10/20 Collective arts space in downtown Erie offer additional outlets for aspiring filmmakers. "I am trying to pursue film and acting, and entertainment, and there has been a massive recent push to bring film and expand film within Erie," Ruot said. "So, I am a tiny part of a bigger machine, really trying to attract film investors here, get directors, get actors, and everyone, because it is a beautiful area with plenty of opportunities. So, my focus is trying to help grow film or bring film to the area."

However, like Marsh's son, Ruot believes that he will have to leave someday. When talking about friends who are leaving after graduation, he said many of them need to move to larger markets because Erie County is considered a small market in journalism and entertainment. "I will most likely be going out of state as well, but for now, I want to grow, improve my skills, and build myself up in Erie to represent Erie." Ruot represents a middle ground — people who see an opportunity here but still plan to leave.

Some people want to leave but feel trapped, creating a negative perception of place that ultimately spreads. Ariel Wall, 27, exemplifies that as she moved here with her family while still in school and hasn't been financially able to leave. "If I could afford to leave, I would," she said. "I have no interest in staying here in the City of Erie. I love my family. My family is here, but I never wanted to stay in this city." She feels as though the leaders of the City of Erie do not invest enough in young people. "There are plenty of people out here that have wonderful and beautiful entrepreneurial ideas, but either they are incredibly successful because they have the backing, or they are set up for failure." Erie County has a strong entrepreneurial pipeline through start-up programs, coworking spaces, and people like Corritore at Erie Arts & Culture, which shows that there is a larger unawareness of the available resources rather than a lack of them, which can lead to a negative perception. These responses, along with many others, highlight the challenges facing Erie County residents.

Why People Return and Invest

Not everyone who leaves a region does so permanently, and for many, distance offers a new perspective to be shared upon return. Whether they return for family, opportunity, or a sense of unfinished business, some of those who come back become strongest advocates and active community builders, bringing back what insights have been gained from living and working elsewhere. An increasing number of entrepreneurs who return to their economically declining hometowns can help address brain drain in Rust Belt cities and demonstrate how reshaped place images and branding can be powerful.

Wendy Neckers, owner of Painted Finch Gallery and Epiphany's Emporium in Corry knows placemaking well. Neckers, 64, grew up in nearby Clymer, New York, which borders Erie County's eastern side. She left for a career in advertising, attending the Art Institute of Pittsburgh, then worked for a record company in Nashville, Tennessee. She returned to the area in 2002 and chose Corry, situated in the southeastern corner of Erie County and near Clymer, as the place to raise her five children. Recognizing that there was no established venue for local artists to showcase their work or for newcomers to get involved in the art scene easily, she took action, creating pathways for artists to get involved by opening an art gallery downtown.

Neckers is also president of the board of directors of Impact Corry, a nonprofit organization in Corry focused on improving the community through five areas identified in the “#positively Corry Community Strategic Plan,” created in 2021. Since then, the town has emphasized placemaking, beautification, and events like CorryFest and First Fridays to draw people in and foster community pride. CorryFest celebrates the town, featuring a chainsaw carving competition that attracts carvers from across the nation. On First Fridays, the main stretch of Center Street is closed and turned into a themed wonderland for residents and visitors to explore, support local businesses, and connect. “What I have seen as a result of that is more community being built, like people actually proud to be from Corry, and other people — younger people — coming in and saying, ‘Wow, something is going on here,’” Neckers said. Historically a railroad town that also produced the famed NuBone Corset Company, Corry draws on its roots of ingenuity and creativity, combined with its manufacturing heritage, as it plans its future. Corry still retains a strong manufacturing sector and identity with employers like Corry Manufacturing Co.

Neckers also remains keenly aware of the challenges the city faces as it moves forward. All five of her children have moved away for better opportunities. Her children mostly work remotely so that they can return home at any time. Still, the Corry area lacks broadband access throughout the city, making internet connectivity a challenge for many, including young professionals. She points to politics as a barrier to bringing needed connectivity to the area, saying, “One of the things that we have seen in the past few years is that the political will is not listening to the people, and in our case, has shut down projects and returned funds for grants.” She referred to a situation in 2024 and 2025 in which Corry City Council and then-Erie County Executive Brenton Davis were at odds with Impact Corry's plan to install fiber-optic internet across the area and to develop a network of trails for recreation. Political divisions led to the return of Appalachian Regional Commission grant funds, and the projects remain unfinished. Research from the Center on Rural Innovation (2024) shows that rural counties with widespread high-speed internet adoption rates have 213% higher business growth, 10% higher self-employment growth, 44% higher Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth, and 18% higher per capita income growth. The fiber optic project exemplified how political disagreement can torpedo collaborative economic development. Still, Neckers chooses to stay in the area as she sees a better vision for its future.

For others, the return to Erie isn't so much intentional as it is convenient followed by an unexpected sense of belonging that makes them stay. For Corritore, returning to Erie County meant reconciling the place she remembered with the one it is becoming. Where she once saw barriers, she now sees signs of progress, connection, and belonging that did not exist when she was growing up. In her current role at Erie Arts and Culture, Corritore is

helping build those pathways for others. She said that the market here is not over-saturated like in bigger cities, so there's more freedom to run with a new idea. In the art community, she has found her people, identity, and most importantly, place.

Her work in the community gives her a unique lens into what the barriers are that prevent artists and entrepreneurs from being successful. Sometimes those barriers are emotional ones, like the discrepancy in lived experiences and understanding between the rural and urban sectors of the county. Corritore said it requires a specific, deliberate effort to engage with different parts of the county outside the city. "If you are someone who goes or lives within the city school district versus someone who does not live in the city school district ... that all feels very, very obvious here," she said. That sentiment was reported by the 2022 Jefferson Educational Society's Civic Leadership Academy cohort in 2022, as that cohort said that the rural-urban divide in the county is not only geographical. That cohort found that lived experiences and diverse populations create more nuanced divides in the community than those caused by transportation, housing, health care, recreation, education, internet, and utilities. While there's a network of nonprofits and organizations addressing those physical infrastructure barriers, Erie's future depends on more people recognizing the pathways that connect its rural and urban communities, its past and its future. This cohort attempted to tap into the mindsets of residents with the help of a survey.

Survey Data

To complement personal narratives, the cohort gathered broader resident perceptions through a countywide survey. The survey was active over two weeks in October 2025 using Google Forms. The collected information included demographic data such as age, racial identity, gender, employment status, location (by ZIP code), home-ownership status, income level, and education level. Respondents also answered qualitative questions, many on a scale of 1 to 5, to identify the county's pain points as they see them and to assess residents' perceptions of Erie County as a place to live, as well as how outsiders view the county.

Most of the 206 respondents, aged 15 to 90, reported moderate satisfaction with Erie County as a place to live, especially in terms of affordability, natural beauty, and community character. When asked why people leave Erie County, nearly 96% of respondents cited jobs and the economy. Responses showed consistent concerns about economic stagnation, limited job opportunities, and poor quality of life, which respondents linked to limited career growth, infrastructure issues, and a negative perception.

Two overarching themes emerged from the survey:

1. Economic vitality and civic image are intertwined. Respondents linked their personal decisions about staying to visible progress — jobs, entertainment, clean public spaces, and safety.
2. Perceptions differ by demographic group. Age, education, income, and race all influence how residents perceive Erie's challenges and opportunities, suggesting the need for differentiated messaging and targeted investment strategies.

Major themes included Jobs & Wages, Cost of Living and Housing, Government & Leadership, Education and Youth Opportunities, Safety and Crime, and Environment. Cleanliness, Downtown & Amenities.

A quick overview of each of these themes demonstrates the variety of issues that are impacting population retention in Erie County:

- **Jobs and Wages:** The most frequently mentioned theme — appearing in over half of responses — was the need for expanded job opportunities, better wages, and a more diversified economy. Respondents cited

the loss of manufacturing, slow tech growth, and limited career pathways.

- **Cost of Living and Housing:** Respondents appreciated Erie’s affordability but worried about housing quality, property taxes, and neighborhood blight. Revitalization incentives and homebuyer support could improve perceptions and realities.
- **Government and Leadership:** Participants described frustration with fragmented governance and limited long-term vision. Improved transparency and regional collaboration could rebuild confidence.
- **Education and Youth Opportunities:** Erie’s education network remains one of its strengths, but many question how effectively it connects to local job opportunities. Expanding “learn and stay” pathways could help retain graduates.
- **Safety and Crime:** Safety concerns were particularly significant among respondents with lower educational levels, suggesting a connection between crime perception and neighborhood upkeep, as well as community trust.
- **Environment and Amenities:** Racial identity heavily influenced this theme. Respondents identifying as Hispanic or Other were much more likely to mention environmental neglect or unfairness in city services. White respondents focused on beautification and image. Respondents also cited a link between a lively downtown to regional vitality. Residents strongly support continued investment in the arts, recreation, and mixed-use development.

Analyses across six key demographics (racial identity, location, housing status, income, employment, and education level) show, however, that perceptions of Erie’s strengths and weaknesses are not consistent.

Key patterns:

- Younger, lower-income residents emphasized jobs, affordability, and safety.
- College-educated professionals prioritized leadership, civic image, and opportunity.
- Communities of color underscored the importance of environment, equity, and public services.

Data Analysis Overview

The mixed-methods approach combined descriptive statistics, cross-tabulated demographic analyses, and qualitative coding of open-ended responses. The goal was not only to describe residents’ experiences but also to interpret why they view Erie County as a place of opportunity — or limitation — and how local governance, community organizations, and educational partners can respond strategically. The survey was shared on social media platforms by individual cohort members, who posted it on their personal pages and on municipal community group pages. Flyers featuring a QR code that linked to the survey were also displayed at various public locations throughout Erie County.

Overall, the survey had 206 respondents, aged 15 to 90. The sample size is very small, representing only 0.076% of Erie County’s population (2020 U.S. Census), so it may not be statistically reliable. Also, there were more responses from people in areas where the survey was actively promoted, such as in Corry, Edinboro, and Erie, which may skew the data. To assess whether the data might not accurately reflect all of Erie County, key demographic factors from the survey respondents were compared with data from the 2020 U.S. Census (Figure A). The survey demographics align with census data on median age, median income, racial makeup, city-versus-county distribution, and homeownership rates. However, the survey respondents differ from county demographics in a few important ways. They are primarily female, employed, more likely to live in multi-person households, and more likely to have a post-secondary degree.

Just over half (54.8%) are lifelong residents; 20.4% are transplants (born elsewhere); and 24.8% are returning residents who were born in Erie County, moved away, and later returned.

Description	Erie County - 2020 Census	All Survey Respondents
Median Age	40.3	44
Gender	40.85% Female, 50.15% Male	70.5% Female, 28.2% Male
Race	82.2% White, 7.6% Black, 4.44% Hispanic	89.3% White, 5.8% Black, 1.9% Hispanic
Percent of Homeownership	65.60%	68.90%
Households with more than one person	65.70%	79.60%
Percent living within Erie City limits	35%	34.5%
Median Income	\$63,300	22.8% in \$50,000 - \$74,999 range
Percentage Employed	57.50%	74.80%
Education - Undergraduate Degree or Higher	31.1%	73.8%

Figure A

The survey did not ask for exact income amounts but instead requested an income range. Slightly less than 23% of respondents chose the \$50,000-\$74,999 range, which aligns with the median income from the 2020 census. This range is also the median category in the survey, with 42% reporting lower-income ranges and 35% reporting higher-income ranges.

Because the data were not equally representative of all areas of Erie County, the group decided to analyze the results based on overall themes and subthemes shared by the respondents. This type of qualitative analysis emphasizes topics that may not have received as much focus due to the skewed sample sizes. The group felt it was important to report all topics raised by respondents, since not all regions and residents of Erie County were represented in the study. Instead of relying on statistics that focus on percentages or rankings, the group ran statistical tests on the data to determine whether there was a statistically significant difference in responses among subgroups: a Chi-Squared test to evaluate the relationship between two factors and a Cramér’s V calculation. Significance was evaluated using a “Holm-adjusted p” statistic, which determines whether the chi-squared value falls within a range of significance or outside it, making it insignificant. If a calculation was found to be significant, the data underwent an effect size analysis called Cramér’s V. This indicated the level of significance in the chi-squared test, showing either a significant or negligible effect. Two main findings were significant and showed large effect sizes. This indicates that the responses are considered “important” even if they did not appear significant when comparing the “number of times mentioned.”

These two findings are:

- Lower educational attainment is linked to a statistically significant greater mention of safety and crime.

- Respondents of color, particularly African American and Hispanic participants, referenced their environment (this includes neighborhood assets, cleanliness, and available resources like food) significantly more often than white respondents, who referenced themes of equity, neighborhood upkeep, and public-space maintenance.

These findings support research on the ongoing effects of redlining and segregation (Forbes, 2025a) as well as the concentration of crime in more impoverished areas with fewer educational resources (Forbes, 2020). Additional patterns were identified but did not show the same strength of statistical significance. The cohort considered the following patterns worth mentioning. After the data underwent testing, it was entered into ChatGPT to simulate how AI would have coded it based on the given parameters and responses. Although some differences emerged, the overall coding system demonstrated high reliability. When asked to review the statistical calculations and verify their accuracy, AI confirmed there were no significant errors. The data were then incorporated into the report.

The survey overall revealed persistent racial disparities and a negative outlook on the economy and opportunities in Erie County. For example, a respondent who lives in Corry called out the lack of coordination between the city and county, saying, “Perhaps we need to do more to encourage more public input from diverse segments of the population to bring more ideas to the table.” Another person, from Millcreek, said, “Improve cooperation between the City of Erie and the surrounding townships. . . . I think that the bulk of the improvements in Erie recently have been in the city while the rest of the county feels paralyzed.” This shows a want for regionalism and more improvement in the municipalities surrounding Erie to match what the city is doing.

On its own, the City of Erie is not responsible for other municipalities, but these responses show that they’d like to see efforts that impact the larger area outside city limits. These survey responses and other qualitative data collected in this research project show that sometimes county residents view countywide spending on programs that impact the city more than the county as drains on county resources. City residents conversely see the county’s reluctance to support regional transit, housing initiatives, or anti-poverty programs as evidence that they’re viewed as disposable. An example is the 2025 Erie County budget. Then-County Executive Brenton Davis wanted to use a \$2.5 million allocation of American Rescue Plan Act funding, which was part of an economic stimulus package designed to facilitate pandemic recovery, for municipal projects, while the majority of Erie County Council wanted it to fund Diverse Erie, the county’s diversity, equity, and inclusion commission (Erie County, 2024). Because Diverse Erie’s programs address inequalities, a bulk of its work is in the city because that is where the most injustice has existed due to previously discussed discriminatory programs. That prompted councilmembers like Charlie Bayle, who represents more rural areas — Corry, Elgin, Edinboro, Mill Village, Union City, Waterford, etc. — to vote against the allocation to Diverse Erie, saying it would not benefit his constituents as much as specific municipal infrastructure projects would. Those situations, combined with the varying demographics, seem to create an “Us vs. Them” mentality that is then translated into perception and resource allocation. However, the survey data did show that residents were moderately satisfied with Erie County, and this cohort recommends building on that positivity and ensuring messaging promotes a more hopeful, unified future.

Chapter 3: What’s Already Working (and What Could Work Better?)

When it comes to addressing population decline, as the survey showed, there are many factors that make it a complex issue. With multiple structural and social drivers at work in the community, it is essential to look at what’s being done already and what supports could improve that work. Namely, a significant concern for local leaders and residents is not only maintaining public services at previous levels but revitalizing them despite declining tax revenues. With population decreasing but fixed costs for buildings and services remaining, long-term capital planning becomes more complicated, and tough trade-offs become unavoidable (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). Simultaneously, the local labor market is affected by mismatches and economic fluctuations: fewer prime-age workers and the loss of mid-career manufacturing jobs have left available jobs and residents’ skills out of sync. Employers report difficulties in recruitment, while some residents lack clear pathways into the remaining jobs (Brooks, 2025). This situation forces county and city officials to make tough decisions about the costs of living and the level of services they can sustain.

To address this complex web of concerns across all sectors, the cohort suggests local leaders gradually adopt collaborative approaches, recognizing that each municipality in the county’s rural, urban, and suburban areas faces unique challenges. A single, uniform solution is impractical for complicated problems such as this; moreover, it does not effectively address the root causes of population decline. Blanket solutions are like metaphorical Band-Aids; the county must coordinate strategies that respect geographic differences while addressing shared structural pressures to be most effective.

Housing and Neighborhoods

Deteriorating housing stock and blight conditions are long-standing issues across Erie County that have seen some progress from various groups. Research is ongoing in the City of Erie and Erie County concerning housing goals. Studies in the City of Erie, including by Our West Bayfront neighborhood, show that the quality of the housing stock is declining due to a lack of investment. Blight is becoming a serious concern (Our West Bayfront, 2016). Similarly, the Civic Leadership Academy in 2016 noted that blight was a problem in the county and published the “Citizens’ Guide to Blight,” which offers practical tips and policy solutions to address blight, highlighting that it is more than just an eyesore but also impacts the health, safety, and economy of neighborhoods (JCLA, 2016). Some of that work is already being done.

Infinite Erie’s Playbook coordinates stakeholders around neighborhood revitalization, housing development, and blight reduction. This playbook updates annually based on progress, completed projects, and new initiatives. Guided by the Playbook 2026 investment strategy, Infinite Erie aims to promote economic growth, with housing as its primary focus. Emerge 2040 was a similar initiative — now absorbed — and achieved similar goals, but with this acquisition, efforts can be more efficiently coordinated.

Infinite Erie brings together public, private, and civic leaders to advance a shared vision for Erie County’s future. In the housing sector, Infinite Erie operates within a countywide community and economic development initiative to revitalize neighborhoods and expand housing options. One key focus area, the Neighborhoods & Main Streets portfolio, involves developing new affordable and market-rate housing, repairing existing homes, and enhancing property conditions. Its flagship project, Housing First Erie, is a public-private partnership that is creating over 70 units of permanent supportive housing for individuals experiencing chronic homelessness.

Other local municipalities throughout the county are also working in their respective areas. For example, the City of Corry has a strategic plan called #positivelyCorry. That plan has five pillars, one of which explicitly addresses

housing: the Revitalize Our Housing and Neighborhoods initiative, which offers exterior home improvement and commercial façade grants to improve housing quality, boost curb appeal, and stabilize property values across Corry. These programs, like many others, aim to reduce blight, encourage reinvestment, and attract new residents by making neighborhoods more attractive and livable. It is clear how these collaborative efforts, when combined, can start to make a significant impact.

Neighborhoods go beyond housing stock, though, and include the people who live there. The historical inequities that shaped the county geographically are part of today's health, housing, and opportunity gaps, making targeted intervention unavoidable. Organizations like Hamot Health Foundation are leading efforts to address historical wrongs, with initiatives such as BUILD, a nonprofit community development corporation founded in 2023 to reduce disparities in health outcomes across Erie's communities. BUILD recognizes that a person's well-being extends beyond medical care and includes factors such as education, employment, housing security, neighborhood conditions, and access to transportation and nutritious food (Hamot Health Foundation, n.d.). According to the Hamot Health Foundation, historically disadvantaged neighborhoods, including parts of Erie's eastside and westside, disproportionately suffer from higher rates of chronic illness, poor housing quality, food insecurity, and limited access to green space. The BUILD initiative aims to reverse decades of inequity by providing housing repairs, blight removal, and neighborhood stabilization efforts. These programs are vital because earlier public and private disinvestment caused long-term structural harm.

Regarding other solution-focused research across Erie County, data indicate that neighborhoods with quality, affordable, mixed-income housing for all people generate community value that attracts investment and increases population (Gould, 2022). Erie County generally has a lower cost of living, although expenses vary by municipality. For comparison, this group analyzed data for the Erie metro area. The overall cost of living is 13% below the national average, with housing costs 45% below the national average and rent ranging from \$841 to \$1,614 (Apartments.com). Compared to Pittsburgh, Erie has a 12% lower cost of living, 39% lower housing costs, 1% lower grocery prices, 15% lower utility costs, and 6% higher transportation costs, which is expected since larger cities tend to have more extensive transit systems. Cleveland has a 7% higher cost of living, 27% higher housing prices, 3% higher grocery costs, and lower utility and transportation costs (Apartments.com). Similarly, Buffalo has a 10% higher cost of living, 48% higher housing costs, roughly the same grocery expenses, 17% higher utilities, and 13% higher transportation costs (Apartments.com).

The affordability of housing and the overall cost of living make Erie more attractive than nearby cities, despite their transit systems and energy-efficiency efforts. This positions Erie as an affordable city that offers a mix of urban, suburban, and rural living with quick access to other metro areas. However, it is important to note that Erie's housing stock, though more affordable than elsewhere, does not always fully meet the needs of its population. Drew Whiting, the Erie Downtown Development Corporation's executive director, told Jefferson 2025 Civic Leadership Academy cohort members that newly renovated apartment buildings are often offered at below-market rates. However, Erie City Council member Dr. Tyler Titus noted that most jobs in the downtown area around those apartments are food-service positions that do not generate enough income to cover rent at the nearby units. This indicates that as employment opportunities and awareness of residents' needs grow in Erie, there remains a need for alignment between the wages being paid locally and the availability of housing that's affordable — and sustainable — based on those wages. Some solutions can be found in the Jefferson Educational Society's Civil Leadership Academy report, "Erie's Make or Break — Quality, Affordable Housing in Every Neighborhood," which identified a range of current issues in the housing market, along with potential solutions. In it, Court Gould stated that the Erie Land Bank can address only two dozen properties a year, despite thousands of blighted homes. Research showed several housing models offer potential untapped solutions:

- **Community Land Trusts (CLT)**, recommended in the 2008 Erie County Housing Plan. The 2008 plan

states, “Generally, a CLT is based on a program of dual ownership of land and improvements on that land. In its simplest form, a nonprofit organization purchases land, retains all rights to it, and sells any buildings on it to income-eligible buyers or affordable housing developers. Buyers sign a long-term lease (often 99 years). The buyer, within limits, then has the right to sell the building and/or improve it” (Erie County Department of Planning, 2008). This resembles other nationwide research that connects community members with land to encourage further investment in a community, such as the public developer model.

- **Public developer models** enable public entities, such as a housing authority, land bank, or public development agency, to own and manage real estate assets to keep them affordable. A revolving loan fund then provides short-term, low-cost financing during construction to support mixed-income developments, as Gould mentioned, which could benefit Erie County. These models aim to maintain some level of public ownership and often include market-rate units. In such projects, inclusionary zoning policies may require developers to set aside a percentage of units for low- to moderate-income households. Meanwhile, other market-rate apartments are priced higher than usual to offset the revenue lost from the affordable units (Center for Public Enterprise, 2024). This strategy ensures the public to retain a stake in the county’s housing stock and promotes integrated communities through mixed-use, mixed-income developments that do not fully gentrify the neighborhood.
- **Homesharing programs** like Shared Housing and Resource Exchange (SHARE) connect homeowners with renters seeking affordable housing and mutual support. Success has already been demonstrated in nearby Crawford County. Some homeowners want someone to help with daily chores, while others may see the situation as an opportunity to earn extra income by charging a low rent to a home seeker. Homesharing offers a home seeker a private bedroom, shared common areas, and affordable rent. Eligible participants include older adults, persons with disabilities, veterans, working professionals, college students, individuals at risk of homelessness, single parents, or anyone interested in sharing their home (Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, n.d.). In an interview with cohort members, Crawford County SHARE coordinator Gwen Smith said the program has successfully served 40 participants since its launch in 2019.

Public Places and Infrastructure

Public spaces play a key role in Erie County’s quality of life and regional identity. A 2020 plan in Erie County, known as the Parks, Trails + Recreation Plan, highlighted the importance of accessible year-round recreation to boost tourism and enhance residents’ well-being (Erie County, 2020). Likewise, the Emerge 2040 plan — absorbed by Infinite Erie — noted that public places in the county could help position the area as a tourism destination (Emerge 2040, 2021).

Municipal efforts, like Millcreek Township’s Presque Isle Gateway District Plan and Impact Corry’s placemaking initiatives, showcase the broader shift toward transformative placemaking — strategies that enhance the connection between people and places while encouraging mixed-use, culturally rooted development (Project for Public Spaces, n.d.).

Another recent trend in placemaking has been leveraging “third places” — public gathering spaces outside of work and home — coined by sociologist Ray Oldenburg. With a growing epidemic of loneliness and a digital landscape that fails to prioritize in-person connection, third places serve as vital catalysts for genuine interaction. A third place can be a coffee shop, library, art gallery, community center, church, or public park. Not only do they promote social connectedness, but they are also crucial for bringing together diverse populations and strengthening community cohesion (Yarin & Scott, 2025).

Although this cohort believes that a rebrand emphasizing civic pride of the Erie area is necessary to change public perception, it is part of a larger equation. As mentioned before, state birth rates are below what’s needed to replace

the deaths. This trend also occurs on the national and international level, with 2024 marking the U.S.'s lowest ever fertility rate, and global rates following trend (Walsh, 2026). Given those trends and grim future estimations, we recommend that further research is done on rightsizing the community. Rightsizing refers to the process of aligning a community's infrastructure with its current population, typically in response to trends like decline. Rightsizing is meant to increase the quality of life and optimize resources; which this cohort's research showed is a critical component in its ability to build to recover and thrive in a post-industrial landscape (Krupnick, 2020).

Workforce Pipelines and Social Connection

Throughout the county, this cohort found that the network of relationships and the value derived from those relationships emerged as another indicator of how likely someone could feel happy and successful in Erie County. That included someone's ability to succeed and feel fulfilled in the workforce and in their personal lives. As Erie's economy and demographics shift, it's crucial to address both parts of that equation to retain population.

In workforce development, specific industries, such as health care, continue to face staffing shortages after the Covid-19 pandemic at a troubling rate. As the Baby Boomer generation ages out of nursing, physician, and other health care roles faster than the younger generation is training for them, the market becomes more competitive. According to the World Health Organization, "67% of the health and social workforce are women and investing in the health workforce is an opportunity to create decent employment opportunities, in particular for women and youth" (World Health Organization, n.d.).

To meet staffing needs in one of Erie's top industries, local organizations and employers are launching training programs and providing incentives. Here are some of the ones currently in play:

- **Lake Erie College of Osteopathic Medicine's (LECOM) Institute for Successful Living** offers a free Certified Nurse Aide Training program. After completing the program and passing the final exam, trainees are offered full-time CNA positions at one or more of the institute's nursing facilities. LECOM also encourages graduates to stay in Erie County after their residency to become practicing physicians within its health care system.
- **Greater Erie Community Action Committee (GECAC)'s Earn+Learn** (ages 14-21), a collaborative effort between Erie County Government, Erie County Gaming Revenue Authority, GECAC, and other supportive entities, pairs 150 youth with over 50 businesses and nonprofits each summer to develop essential job skills; a Work Ready program (ages 18 and up) trains eligible individuals receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits; and a New Choices program (ages 18 and up) helps those who have lost jobs and are struggling to find family-sustaining employment. GECAC also offers a federal Senior Community Service Employment Program to assist older workers.
- **Vocational and technical pipelines:** The Erie Institute of Technology, Great Lakes Institute of Technology, Noe' Noonan School of Cosmetology, Erie County Technical School, and the Erie Center for Arts & Technology (ECAT) align their curricula with local employer needs.

Meanwhile, entrepreneurship remains a significant opportunity in Erie County. Thanks to its diverse population, affordable cost of living, small-town mindset, and proximity to larger metro areas like Buffalo, Cleveland, and Pittsburgh, Erie is a practical launchpad for entrepreneurs. Several organizations and programs include:

- **Northwest Pennsylvania Innovation Beehive Network:** Made up of six grant- and donation-funded centers — Erie County Public Library, Penn State Behrend, PennWest Edinboro, Gannon University, Mercyhurst University, and Allegheny College — the Beehive promotes collaboration for business growth.

Each center handles specific services covering key areas such as sustainability research and consulting; creative skills, free classes, and access to innovative and technical equipment; crowdfunding and startup capital analysis; market analysis and competitive business intelligence strategies; experienced engineering, product design, and rapid prototyping; brand and marketing strategies, and media packages (NWPAs Innovation Beehive Network, n.d.).

- **Radius CoWork:** Serves freelancers, remote workers, and small businesses by providing operational support, community, and collaboration (Radius, 2025).
- **ErieMade Business Academy:** For local artists and creators, it fosters a sense of community where they can learn business essentials, including developing business plans, applying for grants, launching websites, securing loan approval, outlining financial projections, and building professional relationships.
- **NWPAMade:** The next step after ErieMade. Through peer review and business coaching, maker-entrepreneurs learn best practices, boost entrepreneurial confidence, and become capital-ready through a partnership with PennWest Edinboro and Bridgeway Capital (NWPAMade, n.d.).

By connecting young people to fulfilling education and workforce avenues, research shows they may stay and be happy in Erie County. A study by BetterUp (2019), surveying 1,789 full-time employees, found that employees with a high sense of belonging had a 50% lower risk of turnover and 75% fewer sick days. Belonging was also linked to increased job performance (+56%) and engagement, providing strong evidence that retention is not only about pay or workload but also about employees' sense of inclusion and connection.

Building on the work of previous cohort members about the future of work in Erie County (JES, 2021), which highlighted the need to include younger populations earlier, this cohort recommends expanding current programs to match ones like LaunchCode, a free and accessible tech training program, focused on equipping individuals at all levels of the job market. LaunchCode also works with employers to quickly and effectively create a pipeline of newly skilled workers into their businesses, as most companies aim to stay competitive in this rapidly changing technology landscape (Murray & Berube, 2018). Similarly, the Threads program in Baltimore leverages mentorship from local leaders to encourage high school graduation and civic pride by showing young students what they have to look forward to. This innovative approach aims to transform Baltimore's community fabric and foster meaningful connections to the city (Murray & Berube, 2018). This cohort has discussed pride as a key part of changing Erie's perception among residents. Evidence supports that a program like this could benefit both the urban core and rural municipalities, improve high school graduation rates, gain community support from local leaders, and build a sense of pride that motivates young people to stay and help create a community they can be proud of. Although Baltimore differs greatly in scale, the mechanism of mentorship-based belonging is transferable to Erie County.

Outside of work, there is a case to be made for civic engagement and the sense of belonging that can drive retention in the community. In areas like Erie, where deindustrialization has affected inner-city centers, poverty rates have risen (JES, 2019). Ironically, the increase in high-poverty areas does not mean the population is growing. Poverty concentration, combined with sharp population declines like in Erie County, can weaken social capital by eroding trust, reducing civic participation, and decreasing community cohesion (Bridger & Alter, 2006).

As a solution, the more involved people are in their social and community networks, that is, as they build social capital, the more they feel a sense of trust and belonging. This also helps them feel less isolated, reducing feelings of loneliness (Forbes, 2025b). At the turn of the 21st century, political sociologist Robert Putnam concluded that people who trust their fellow citizens more tend to volunteer more, give more to charity, participate in politics and community organizations, serve on juries more willingly, donate blood more often, fully comply with tax obligations, are more tolerant of minority views, and show other forms of civic virtue (Putnam, 2000). In his book, "Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community," Putnam emphasized that community revi-

talization depends on rebuilding social capital, which in turn helps maintain community cohesion (Putnam, 2000). Theories of belonging and social connection provide an important perspective for understanding population decline in Erie County. In simplistic terms, these theories argue that people’s choices to stay, leave, or return to a community are influenced not only by economic opportunities but also by how connected, valued, and supported they feel. A substantial body of research in sociology and psychology shows that belonging is essential for population stability, including: Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (1943), which highlights belonging as a key human motivation, just above physiological and safety needs, showing that after basic survival is secured, people naturally seek meaningful relationships and acceptance. Similarly, Baumeister and Leary (1995) assert that the desire for social connections is a universal human drive, and that lacking a sense of belonging leads to significant declines in mental health and social well-being. In Erie County, this perspective shows that demographic decline cannot be fully understood without considering residents’ lived experiences and their feelings of being wanted and connected.

The Jefferson Educational Society (JES) actively pursues the work of connecting people with their greater communities. As a nonpartisan think tank, the JES fosters local ideas through engagement. Whether it’s JCLA bringing community members together to work on shared issues or hosting “Community Conversations” every Friday about relevant issues affecting various parts of the county, JES works to create dialogue and connections that move the county forward. It also offers programming in satellite locations throughout the county and virtually to bridge urban and rural divides (JCLA, 2022).

While JES and other organizations foster civic engagement, research from similar communities suggests Erie County could expand its approach to listening and connection. Cities experiencing renewed growth have formalized networks of community ambassadors — trained residents who serve as liaisons between citizens and local institutions. In Sacramento, California, for example, community ambassadors attend monthly meetings to discuss upcoming community engagement activities, events, and city efforts, while also sharing community needs and concerns (City of Sacramento, n.d.). Similarly, Howard County, Maryland’s Community Ambassador Program “provides an opportunity for dedicated community members to learn about important county resources and services. With this knowledge, our ambassadors can advise their respective communities, as well as Howard County at large” (Howard County, Maryland, n.d.).

Beyond ambassador networks, resident-led storytelling initiatives have been effective in building belonging while documenting community assets. Detroit’s first chief storyteller — a journalist embedded within city government — reported on local stories that strengthened community identity, from Asian immigrant populations to young Black entrepreneurs to youth boxing programs (Foley, 2017). The nationwide Documenters program trains residents to attend public meetings, take notes, report outcomes, and publish what they learn, increasing transparency while equipping residents with tools, agency, and often modest stipends (Documenters, n.d.). These approaches work because they shift residents from passive recipients of civic decisions to active participants in shaping their community’s narrative. In Philadelphia, Resolve Philly’s “Sound OFFs” listening sessions allow residents to decide what stories matter, contribute content, and co-create journalism with media outlets, improving trust and making narratives more locally relevant (Lowe, 2024). For Erie County, where survey data revealed fragmented perceptions across urban, suburban, and rural areas, such structured listening could identify shared values while honoring geographic and cultural differences. While these mechanisms show promise, Erie County still needs a unifying framework to align them — a shared narrative that transforms isolated efforts into coordinated momentum. That framework is a countywide rebrand.

Chapter 4: The Solution: A Countywide Rebrand

Why does Erie County’s image matter? Understanding and promoting a location’s unique sense of place can foster civic pride, tourism, and community well-being (Ungvarsky, 2025). More than just a physical space, “home” is a psychological construct in which people find security and stability — qualities that give meaning to life. When a town nurtures a sense of place, not only will residents spend money locally, but it will also attract others (Studer, 2018). As Studer states, the more a town can leverage its uniqueness, the more its distinctive sense of place creates a competitive advantage, attracting new businesses, retaining young people from leaving for jobs, and drawing top talent into the community, thereby boosting the economy (2018). Erie’s current economic situation — described by some as “stable but sluggish” — makes a deliberate effort to strengthen its place identity (Martin, 2025).

By enhancing that image, not only would Erie County retain its population, but it could also attract a key group that already knows about Erie County: “Boomerangs.” Although research and journalistic accounts on the Rust Belt often focus on population decline and its impacts, there is limited research on the growing trend of young professionals and highly skilled workers returning to the area (Harrison, 2017). An in-depth review of young professionals who left and then returned to Youngstown, Ohio, shows that return migrants, or “boomerang” migrants, chose to return despite reporting other, potentially more economically rational, opportunities elsewhere (Harrison, 2017). Similarly, a study by Penn State University found that boomerang entrepreneurs can help combat brain drain in Rust Belt cities (Mafa & Wilkerson, 2024). They discovered that entrepreneurs who return to their struggling hometowns highlight how a renewed place image and branding can be impactful. This indicates that the story of a place matters just as much as its economic fundamentals.

Erie’s identity has historically been shaped by deindustrialization and negative stereotypes, previously being called “Dreary Erie” and the “Mistake by the Lake” (Crosby, 2024). Over time, grassroots efforts like the aforementioned “It’s Okay to Love Erie” have shifted public perception, adding civic pride to the local story, but perhaps at the detriment of outsiders. A 2024 article in the Erie Times-News states that the phrase still suggests Erie is inherently unlovable in some way, and that the moment now calls for a new, forward-looking identity (2024). VisitErie, the official Destination Marketing Organization (DMO) for Erie County, which as its website reports, is “responsible for promoting the region as a year-round destination for leisure travel, conventions, and sporting events. In July 2001, the Erie Area Convention and Visitors Bureau became a standalone 501c6 organization and was designated as the official Destination Marketing Organization (DMO) for Erie County, Pennsylvania. In October 2007, the organization changed its name to VisitErie,” started this change by launching its “Good Life, Great Lake” campaign in 2025. Still, a unified countywide rebrand is necessary to create consistent messaging, reduce fragmentation, and align economic development, tourism, entrepreneurship, and civic engagement under a single narrative. Discussions between VisitErie and the JCLA cohort showed that much of the messaging and attraction is aimed at tourists rather than at building a shared message among current and potential residents. Whether it is Infinite Erie, the Jefferson Educational Society, Impact Corry, ECED in Edinboro, the Union City Community Foundation, Hamot Health Foundation, Erie Community Foundation, United Way of Erie County, or neighborhood associations in various municipalities, key community players are already dedicated to Erie County’s revitalization. This approach leverages those efforts to create sustainable change.

What Other Places Have Done

This group examined how other regions addressed population decline and found that rebranding efforts in areas similar to Erie County were successful. In Pennsylvania, the comparison between the City of Erie and Allentown was particularly notable, as Allentown surpassed Erie in population (which has since fallen to the fifth-largest) to become the state’s third-largest city based on the 2020 Census data (Novak, 2021). After experiencing significant

population growth, Allentown’s most considerable demographic shift was to 25- to 29-year-olds, prompting the city to rebrand (City of Allentown, 2019). The rebranding reflected its demographic changes, which helped it become Pennsylvania’s fastest-growing city. The branding initiative was part of Vision 2030, Allentown’s 10-year plan for comprehensive and economic development (2019), which was created by Allentown’s city government. Its slogan, “All Inspiring,” aimed to promote a diverse yet united community that continually encourages entrepreneurship (City of Allentown, 2019). It taps into community pride by utilizing the “All” in Allentown in phrases like “All Festive,” using the double Ls to form an instrument — promoting its entertainment sector, and “All Delighted” where the Ls form a pretzel to highlight its food scene under a unified narrative.

Likewise, Buffalo connects to Erie in a more geographical sense that reflects the entire county. Both are mid-sized Rust Belt cities along the Great Lakes that have experienced economic decline, population loss, and reputation challenges following industrial downturns. However, in recent years, Buffalo has become a model for how a city can reclaim its identity and civic pride through a community-focused rebranding effort. Since the 1980s, Buffalo had not undergone an official branding process, but many residents and visitors affectionately call it “Buffalove” or the “City of Good Neighbors.” The city’s existing brand did not reflect that spirit; instead, it emphasized its proximity to Niagara Falls, prompting the city to decide it was time for a change. In late 2024, Visit Buffalo Niagara, the city’s tourism organization leading the rebranding efforts, hired the marketing firm MMGY. In early 2025, the new rebranding efforts officially launched to engage residents and amplify the voices of those who love the city most. Similar to Erie County’s situation, MMGY described Buffalo’s state at the time of the rebrand as a city undergoing a cultural revival, with historic architecture being restored, entrepreneurs investing in neighborhoods, and new energy entering public spaces, yet lacking resident input (MMGY, n.d.). The organization started by listening to residents, collecting stories, and identifying what made Buffalo feel like home to its inhabitants, focusing on belonging and culture. The process prioritized community engagement, authenticity, and emotional connection over logos or slogans. Based on these insights, MMGY developed a new campaign: Tough to Break. Easy to Love (n.d.). MMGY highlighted Buffalo’s character, described as “Proudly humble. Fiercely friendly. Refreshingly spicy. Low-key loud,” leading to the campaign slogan “That’s Buffalo For You” (n.d.). The brand launched in September, gaining citywide coverage on “Late Night with Seth Meyers,” albeit humorously, and still providing the city with national exposure for its efforts.

In Pittsburgh, VisitPITTSBURGH, the hub of Allegheny County, found that the post-pandemic period was the best time to undertake a makeover (VisitPITTSBURGH, n.d.). Although VisitPITTSBURGH has not rebranded the county, it started by rebranding itself, noting that Pittsburgh has become known as the City of Bridges, the Steel City, and the City of Champions, and that it felt this went beyond the area’s architectural and sports image. VisitPITTSBURGH hired design firm Landor & Fitch to conduct research and explore every corner of the county to find a unifying image. It was almost impossible to capture a single image, as VisitPITTSBURGH’s Chief Marketing Officer, Susan Klein, said, “we’re a city of multitudes” (VisitPITTSBURGH, n.d.). Instead, VisitPITTSBURGH used a range of colors and shapes that can be customized to highlight different attractions. The new branding was unveiled in 2023 and continues to expand across digital media efforts.

These rebranding efforts offer important lessons for Erie County: prioritize community voices in the branding process, highlight belonging and identity, and develop a shared vision that links economic growth with cultural renewal and civic pride. Pittsburgh and Buffalo both have city hubs that cover much larger areas than Erie, so those lessons can be adapted for Erie County as a whole rather than focusing only on the city center. Nevertheless, it is crucial to focus on the City of Erie — and, by extension, other cities — because it is home to the county’s largest population and is experiencing population decline. By adopting a brand built on belonging, Erie County can craft a new narrative that respects its history while looking toward its future, showcasing progress and potential that start in small communities and spread throughout the entire region.

Why a Rebrand is Necessary Now

Despite substantial efforts in housing, workforce development, entrepreneurship, and collaboration, Erie County still faces challenges with a fragmented perception and inconsistent identity. This group's findings highlight organizational silos, limited cross-sector coordination, overlapping initiatives without unified messaging, gaps in tracking migration outcomes related to perception, and the lack of a central narrative linking revitalization efforts. As mentioned previously and pointed out by previous cohorts, the fragmentation throughout the county is a major barrier in progress (JCLA, 2022). This cohort's own composition, representing Erie County's demographic diversity, surfaced uncomfortable truths. Discussions about equity and resource allocation sometimes replicated broader community tensions, with each member bringing fundamentally different assumptions about history, current needs, and fair distribution. You cannot retain population or attract new residents to a place that does not know what it is or whether its parts belong together. Buffalo's rebrand worked because it gave the city a unified identity after decades of neighborhood and racial division. Allentown's effort succeeded because it created a shared vision across a changing demographic landscape. A countywide rebrand for Erie — done authentically, with genuine listening across political and racial lines — could provide the narrative framework that policy coordination alone cannot. It answers the question: 'What does it mean to be from Erie County?' in a way that includes the city and Edinboro and Corry and Fairview. Not by pretending differences don't exist, but by finding the shared values and aspirations that transcend them.

Erie County is in a unique position thanks to newly elected officials. Reflecting on the last time population decline was an issue, in the late 1980s, new leadership was elected with the expectation that they would work well together and bring about significant change. Similarly, the 2025 municipal election echoed the 1989 election, as a new wave of more collaborative, change-oriented leaders was elected to create a more unified approach (Forbes, 2025c). Although the increase in voter turnout and the flipping of numerous precincts could be attributed to external factors such as the national economy and the federal administration, it nonetheless indicates that Erie County residents are seeking some form of change to improve their lives. This group believes that capitalizing on that desire for change makes it the ideal time for a rebrand, as Erie County moves forward with a new slate of elected officials and ideas to position the county for continued success.

Implementing a Countywide Rebrand

A countywide rebrand rooted in authentic storytelling is a logical, evidence-based response to Erie County's population decline because research consistently points to perception, identity, and belonging as factors for attraction and retention that are currently under-utilized. National efforts like Community Heart & Soul prove that a community development model rooted in storytelling can help share community planning efforts. Community Heart & Soul assists small cities and towns in identifying the priorities, places, and traditions that matter most to the people who live, work, and play there, tapping into community pride and identity to inform planning efforts (Community Heart & Soul, n.d.). Its president, Mark Sherman, has cited tangible, successful outcomes such as improved access to community resources, new bike and river walks, community gardens and farmers markets, community concerts, public art installations, and more, that drive community development and engagement across the over 120 communities it serves (Sherman, 2025). Efforts like Heart & Soul exemplify intentional listening and its critical role in community development. As Erie County has efforts for housing development, job creation, and economic revitalization already underway, this report's qualitative findings suggest that Erie County lacks an effort to collect those lived experiences and connect them through a unifying narrative for community development. While there will still be some voices who feel excluded or that a new message doesn't speak for them, it does not diminish the potential and realized impact that could benefit the community. It's this cohort's belief that the benefits from a rebrand would outweigh any possible negative outcomes, if done properly. This is the cohort's vision for creating a successful branding message.

Phase One: Listening and Story Gathering

To create authentic messaging that properly represents all municipalities, there needs to be an intentional, coordinated listening initiative. A group must emerge to deploy multiple listening mechanisms simultaneously:

- **Public forums:** Utilize the networks already in place like JES and neighborhood associations (Edinboro Lakeside Association, Our West Bayfront, etc.) to hold sessions that collect public feedback about their lived experiences and what assets they feel could be best highlighted in a rebrand.
- **Online platforms:** This cohort recommends using online exchanges to engage people who may not be able to make it to public forums. Looking at other organizations using online platforms to gather information about the community, this cohort found Pittsburgh nonprofit InformUp — a community news outlet that emphasizes two-way communication. It provides subscribers with a newsletter highlighting the three most impactful agenda items for each Pittsburgh City Council meeting then asks respondents how they would like the situation addressed (InformUp: Pittsburgh, n.d.). InformUp then gathers this data, breaks it down by district, and shares the results to council at the next meeting, helping them understand how their constituents in each district voted on various topics. This example of two-way communication that engages people virtually and ensures they have a chance to comment on what other people have said, would be helpful. Use surveys and online platforms to capture the most voices possible.
- **Residential storytelling:** Currently, storytelling initiatives like “Faces of Erie,” a book that highlights and documents the region’s change-makers, and WQLN’s “Chronicles” series, which features various efforts, events, and people in Erie, have already laid the foundation for a shift in perception. Anthony Peyronel, a retired marketing professor from PennWest Edinboro, recently teamed up with TV journalist Mike Ruzzi to launch the “814 Matters” podcast, recorded live at the Edinboro Hotel Bar. The series aims to showcase the people and stories that define the 814 area code. Equipping residents and more storytellers with the tools to gather more of these first-hand accounts would be helpful in this phase of the rebrand.

While deploying various methods, the focus should be on listening for shared values across the county, what makes people proud to live in Erie County, authentic language residents use, and points of connection between city and county residents. The expected outcomes from this phase is over 200 new stories collected, themes identified across demographics and geography, and a drafted narrative framework based on collected narratives.

Phase Two: Professional Brand Development

Once the listening phase is complete, the group should issue a competitive Request for Proposals (RFP) process for place-branding firms. Selection criteria should include a firm with experience in post-industrial cities, demonstrated community-centered approaches, an understanding of urban-rural dynamics, and a portfolio showing authentic, not superficial, branding. This firm should be able to develop a flexible brand platform that:

- Works countywide but allows for municipal customization
- Includes visual identity, messaging framework, and narrative guide
- Provides tools for partners (economic development, tourism, education, etc.)
- Centers resident voices, not consultant opinions

This should include an implementation toolkit for partners, launch campaign materials, and a measurement framework for success.

Phase Three: Alignment and Adoption

The people who will need to adopt the new brand include municipal governments (city and county), economic development organizations (InfiniteErie, ECED, Impact Corry, etc.), tourism entities (VisitErie), educational institutions, major employers, chambers of commerce, and nonprofits. To achieve that buy-in, the firm should explain to partners how the rebrand amplifies existing work, provide customizable tools, demonstrate return on investment, and secure commitments from early adopters to build momentum. It's critical to note that this is not about logo uniformity, it's about narrative consistency. For example, Impact Corry would keep its branding but incorporate countywide messaging about belonging and innovation.

Phase Four: Launch and Activation

There should be a countywide celebration featuring resident storytellers who can showcase the stories that shaped the brand. Unveil the campaign across all platforms simultaneously and use local media outlets and digital creators to share the news. Quick wins to build momentum could include merchandise — as learned is effective by Erie Apparel — downtown murals and public art reflecting the brand themes, welcome signs with new messaging at the county's borders, and a social media campaign.

Measurement and Adaptation

This cohort has started the process of surveying local residents on current perceptions, but looking to economic resilience indicators such as in-migration, startup rates, employment opportunities will be crucial to analyze along with perception changes. Much of the research tracks tourism and investment, but there is a gap in measuring net migration as an outcome of storytelling and rebranding. The county will need ongoing research on how storytelling works—does it create belonging, amenity awareness, job perception? And if so, for whom: students, boomerangs, or newcomers?

Funding and Partnership Structure

To pull this off, the cohort recommends using funding sources that are already available to the community, like the Erie Community Foundation, county and city budgets, Erie County Gaming Revenue Authority support, state economic development grants, private sector sponsors, and federal community development funds. Organizations could also forgo the traditional “buy in” route but still show their support by allocating their resources for this project. Erie County has already demonstrated successful cross-sector funding coordination — the city of Corry's Renaissance Block Grant program pools resources from ECGRA, KeyBank, Erie Insurance, and state agencies to combat blight. This same collaborative approach could fund a countywide rebrand. The lead organization should be a coordinator already experienced in convening stakeholders but willing to partner with the JCLA alumni network for civic engagement and topic expertise. Infinite Erie, which already operates under a “speaking with one voice” strategy, convenes public, private, and nonprofit leaders, and can either be a leader or role model in this coordinator role, as research shows cross-sector collaboration is most effective in implementing solutions (Collins & Gerlach, 2019). There should also be an advisory board with representatives from all municipalities included in this process.

What Success Looks Like

Short-term (Years 1-3):

- Unified messaging across 50%+ of partner organizations
- Measurable increase in resident pride (survey data)
- Media coverage highlighting Erie's transformation
- Boomerang entrepreneurs citing brand as factor in return

Medium-term (Years 3-7):

- Net migration stabilizes or turns positive for 18-35 age group
- College graduate retention increases 10-15%
- Business startup rate increases
- Regional collaboration improves

Long-term (Years 7-10):

- Population decline reverses
- Erie County becomes a case study for other Rust Belt regions
- Sustained civic pride and participation
- New residents cite "sense of community" as a draw

This initiative aims to unify Erie's diverse communities under a single, shared narrative— one that recognizes the region's challenges and highlights its resilience. Learning from experiences elsewhere, Erie's new brand will reflect the genuine stories of its people, not outsiders' perceptions. The process will bring together county and city partners, businesses, nonprofits, and residents, using the civic ambassador network to create a unified, forward-looking identity that honors Erie's history and embraces its future.

Conclusion

Not everyone needs to leave Erie to rediscover it. Stephanie Domowicz, a teacher in the Erie School District, is a lifelong resident of Erie County and described what our research found — that place attachment is not passive. It is an act of choosing, again and again, to invest in the people in the community who make Erie County home. Domowicz described going to the Millcreek Mall as a child and seeing all the manufacturing powerhouses at work. Growing up in the western part of the county, she chose to move to the City of Erie after graduating from college, and she has no qualms about staying there. “It feels like a good fit, and I feel so lucky,” she said. “I was born here; I did not pick this initially, but now I choose it every single day. I could probably leave if I wanted to, but why would I? Everything I need is right here.”

That is the same care for the community that Corritore embodies, which ultimately keeps her in Erie County. After leaving to find an opportunity, she returned to realize that what she had been seeking elsewhere could be built here, and she could contribute. In many ways, Erie County is experiencing the same transformation, learning to see itself anew, to care for its people, and to build something lasting from within. Its renewal, like Corritore’s, is not about returning to the familiar but about becoming something more connected, compassionate, and complete:

I think that if you care for the people who are living in the community now, they will start to love where they live, and if those people love where they live, they feel looked after, and they have a sense of self and belonging. Then word will spread because attractive communities attract people, right? Moreover, I think investing in what we currently have — our unique assets, our ideas, our people — is what will help Erie ultimately recover.

By harnessing that uniqueness, tapping into an existing network of community pride, and building on it, the possibilities for Erie County are limitless. What started as a concern over population decline has evolved into a vision for renewal. The stories in this report show a future Erie not based on nostalgia or numbers, but on care, creativity, and connection. Erie County’s next chapter in this story is not about who is leaving; it is about who is still here, and who is discovering new reasons to call Erie County home. A rebrand puts those thoughts into action, and although not an end-all solution, will make Erie County a place where people are proud to live and work. This cohort calls on community leaders, municipal officials, nonprofit partners, and residents across all municipalities to carry out this strategy. The listening sessions have begun. The momentum exists. The leadership is in place. Now is the time to act — not with fragmented efforts, but with unified purpose. Erie County’s renewal depends not on waiting for the perfect moment, but on choosing, as Domowicz and Corritore have, to invest in what already exists: its people, its assets, and its potential. The work begins now.

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