

Can New Americans Reverse Erie's Population Decline?

Editor's note: The following article by Edinboro University of Pennsylvania Professor Baher Ghosheh, Ph.D., is part of a larger project by Dr. Ghosheh that examines the history, challenges, and opportunities of immigration in the United States. The project is particularly timely given polarizing views of immigration in the nation and a new U.S. Census report due in May 2022. He is currently working on a new book focusing on demographic trends and immigration patterns in Erie, Pennsylvania (1960-2020).

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Erie County is the only territory in Pennsylvania that lies north of the Pennsylvania-New York borders. Both the state of New York and the commonwealth of Pennsylvania laid claim to this geostrategic territory after the U.S. government gained control over it with the 1784 treaty with the Iroquois, who had controlled it for decades. Other states, including Massachusetts and Connecticut, had claims to the land based on original grants. The federal government exerted pressure on other states to cede their claims and the territories were sold to Pennsylvania for \$150,000 (the Erie Triangle land contract). The Native Americans who still lived in the area received minimal compensation. This brokered deal provided Pennsylvania with access to Lake Erie and the Great lakes. There are still signs in parts of the county dating back to New York state claims and the original state borders.

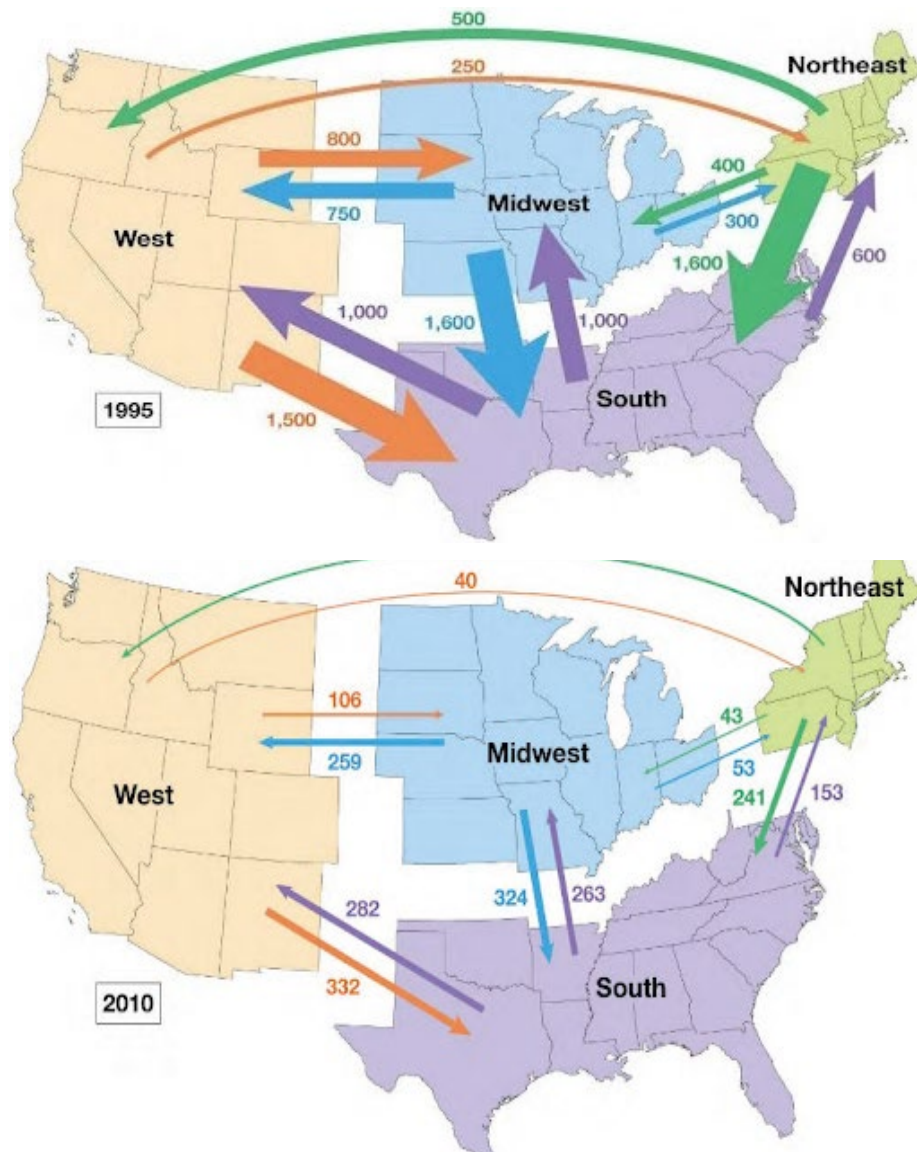
Even though Erie was established as a small town in 1795, it was not given the status of a city until 1851. The War of 1812 put Erie on the map and was pivotal to the growth of the community. The Battle of Lake Erie in September 1813 was fought by American ships built in Erie. Then-Commander Oliver Hazard Perry's victory was a significant turning point in the war and marked a period of rapid growth for Erie. In the aftermath of the war, Erie's location led to rapid growth in shipping as Erie emerged as a center for water and rail transportation. This attracted many manufacturers and factories. Even today, Erie has a healthy mix of heavy and light industries, a vibrant tourist industry and is home to many first-class health and educational institutions. Erie's diversified economy, its role in American history, and the city's rich immigration heritage led to Erie winning the All-American City Award in 1972.

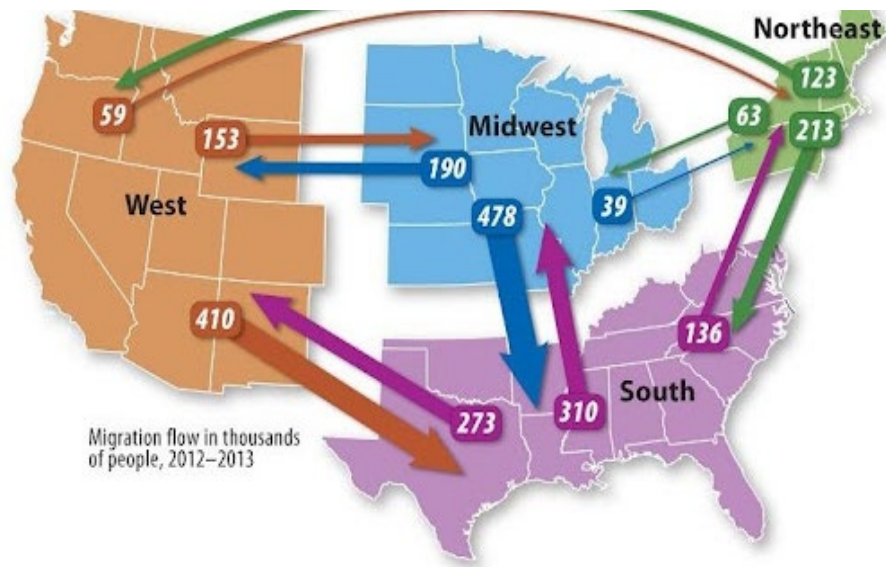
Erie's population was a mere 81 residents in 1800, but the population exploded to 52,969 by 1900, making Erie the 73rd largest city in the United States at the time. Within 50 years, Erie's population increased to 130,803, making Erie the country's 75th largest city. Erie's population continued to grow rapidly as was the case for many manufacturing centers in the Rust Belt. By 1960, Erie's population reached its peak at 138,440. At the

time, Erie ranked as the 88th largest city in America, indicating that some other cities experienced even faster population growth. For 160 years, Erie was one of the 90 largest cities in America. The 1970 census marked the first time Erie’s population registered a marked decline of about 7 percent as it decreased to just over 129,000 residents. The decline continued in next five census years, and, by 2020, Erie’s population was 94,788 residents. The city’s population has decreased by 43,653 or about 32 percent from 1960 level.

Many different factors help explain the population decline in Erie and other Rust Belt cities: globalization, internal migration, industrial migration. And the Brain Drain. The introduction of air conditioning meant that factories and businesses could operate in the hot and humid South. The South also offered cheaper non-unionized labor, lower taxes, and more business-friendly government bureaucracies.

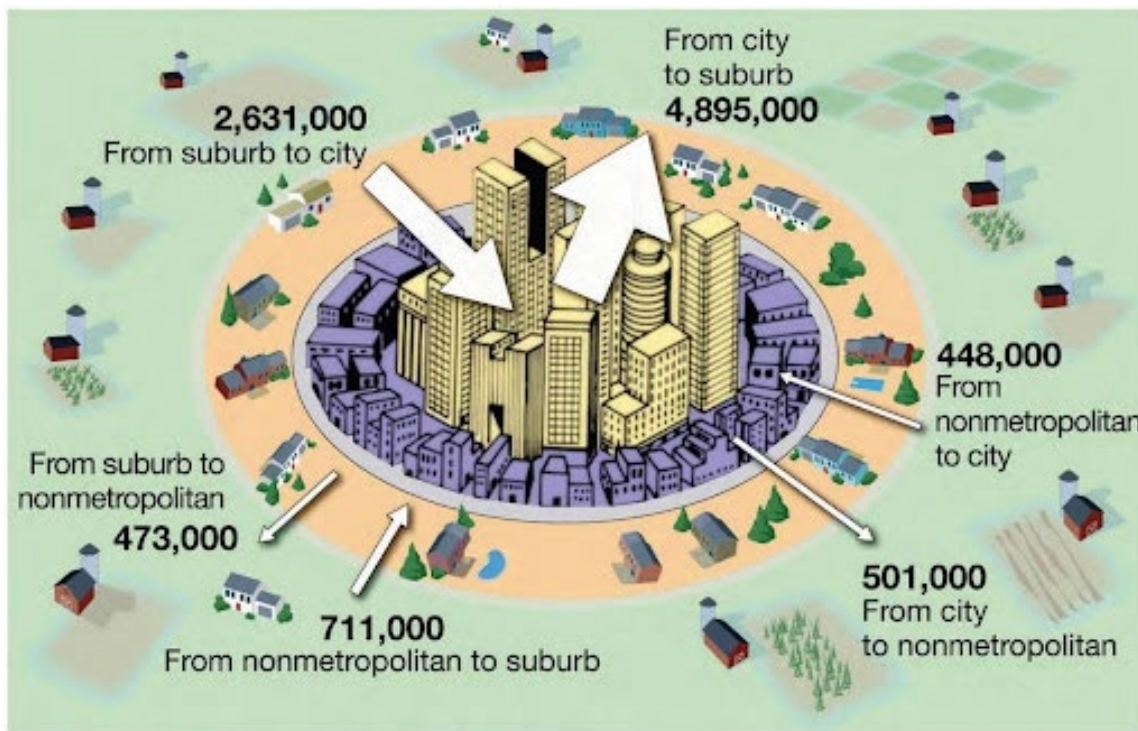
Business migration from the Rust Belt (Northeast and Great Lakes regions) to the Sun Belt (South and West) triggered large population migration as millions followed economic opportunities and others sought milder winter weather and enjoyed air conditioning in the summer. As international free trade treaties opened up markets around the world, business went global and industrial migration was transformed from a national phenomenon into an international phenomenon. Why pay \$20 an hour for manufacturing labor in the Rust Belt if you can pay \$10 in the South, \$2 in Mexico, or a mere 20 cents in China, Indonesia, Vietnam, or Bangladesh?





Sources: Rubenstein, James. M. *The Cultural Landscape: An Introduction to Human Geography*, 2017.

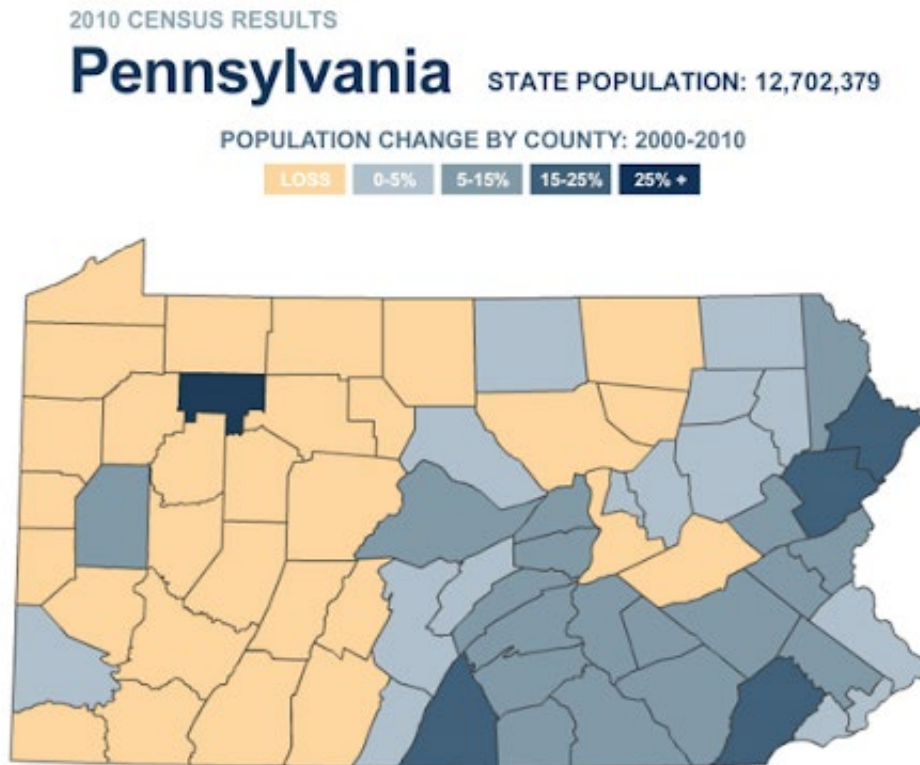
The 20th century also gave rise to a new migration within the United States. The suburbanization of America meant large-scale migration of middle-class Americans from the inner city to the suburbs. What’s often called “white flight” ushered in mass migration of mostly white families to suburbia. If we examine the city of Erie’s population and compare it to Erie County’s population, we can easily discern that most of the population loss was due to suburbanization. **Erie County’s population has not changed much since the mid-1970s, hovering around 270,000 residents. In 1960, the county’s population was 250,682 but by 2020, it stood at 267,912, a modest increase during the period under examination.**



Source: Rubenstein, James. M. *The Cultural Landscape: An Introduction to Human Geography*. Pearson Prentice Hall 2017

A third and most important factor explaining Erie's population decline is the Brain Drain.

The Brain Drain is large-scale migration of young, well-educated, skilled professionals. Migrants tend to be younger, well-educated and in their 20s or 30s. While this phenomenon is usually associated with migration from Lesser Developed Countries-Third World to More Developed Countries-First World, it is clearly a Rust Belt to Sun Belt phenomenon in the United States. Within Pennsylvania, it has hit the western half of the state especially hard.



Source: 2010 Census data

A study in the 1990s found that Erie lost in the Brain Drain battle every year of the decade. According to the “Brain Drain in Erie County” study conducted by James Arthur Washburn and Hazel Garcia Sadiarin in 2001: Erie lost 17 percent of the 20 to 24 population segment and 23 percent of the 15 to 19 segment during the 1990s.

Unfortunately, the trend continues in the 21st century. Many of these young, skilled people would prefer to stay close to family and in this region but are forced to pursue better economic opportunities elsewhere.

Erie has a long history of welcoming new Americans to the community. Waves of immigrants to Erie from Germany, Ireland, Italy, Poland, England, Scotland, Slavic countries, and other European countries made Erie a very diverse community in the 19th and 20th centuries. Americans from other parts of Pennsylvania and other states, including freed American slaves, added to Erie's diversity. As migration patterns changed and global conditions attracted immigrants and refugees from other world regions, Erie became a true melting pot of different racial, ethnic, and religious groups. Erie was designated as a major national settlement center for refugees and thousands of refugees from trouble spots around the globe made Erie their adopted home in America.

Many Rust Belt cities with declining populations continue to look to attract international immigrants, New

Americans, to replace lost urban population. Erie attracts many categories of New Americans. Some come as a result of family connections, others to fill jobs that require their special skills, and some come seeking refuge from war, instability, discrimination, or persecution. Refugees make up the largest segment of New Americans who have made Erie home in the past three decades. Refugee settlements in Erie started slowly in the 1980s but gained momentum in the 1990s and accelerated further in the 21st century. Of course, the number of refugees admitted to the United States and those who settle in Erie fluctuates reflecting global events and immigration policy changes in government administration as was demonstrated during Donald Trump’s presidency.

The number of refugees settled in Erie was merely two a year in the 1980s but that jumped significantly to 55 per year in the 1990s. In the first decade of the 21st century, the average annual number of refugees settled in Erie jumped to 84 and between 2010 and 2016, it rose markedly to 217 per year. The Joe Biden administration has vowed to increase the number of refugees admitted to the U.S. to 125,000 in 2022, roughly double the number admitted during the Obama administration. Erie is expected to welcome more than 200 Afghani refugees in the coming year on top of refugees from other countries.

Period	Total Number of Refugees	Yearly Average
1980s	23	2.3
1990s	551	55
2000-2009	840	84
2010-2016	1302	217
2017-2018	90	45

Source: International Institute data base. Erie, PA

Between 2000 and 2010, Erie’s population decreased from 103,717 to 101,786 but at same time Erie added at least 840 New Americans (refugees) and other international immigrants. Between 2010 and 2020, Erie’s population decreased from 101,786 to 94,787 but Erie added at least 1,392 refugees as New Americans between 2010 and 2018.

While refugees and other New Americans may not fully replace lost population in the city of Erie and Erie County, they have certainly mitigated the dramatic population loss Erie has experienced especially in the 21st Century.

When all New Americans, skilled workers, reunited families, and other immigrants are counted, the numbers are truly significant.

According to the International Institute of Erie, “Erie’s Asian population more than doubled over the past decade, from 3,077 in 2010 to 6,380 in 2020, an increase of 3,303 people. During the same period, the city of Erie’s population dropped by 6,955 people. Without a doubt, international immigration has helped to significantly offset the population decline in Erie and other Rust Belt cities.

In the Covid-19 era, the work environment has changed and many more people are working remotely. This change can help cities like Erie attract professionals to the city. Erie has a much lower cost of living than the national average. Housing locally is much more affordable than other parts of the state or country. For a smaller city, Erie offers all the amenities of a much larger city with rich offerings in art, music, culture, education, health care, entertainment, sports, transportation, and a truly attractive outdoor living environment. Other states and cities offer professionals monetary incentives to move there in the form of tax holidays, tax rebates or cash

offerings. Burlington, Vermont, Tulsa, Oklahoma, and Savannah, Georgia are a few examples of cities that have developed such programs to attract young professionals to their cities and expand the tax base.

Global climate change makes Erie an attractive place to live and work. Winters have become milder and Erie is ranked in the top three of safest cities in the country for natural disasters. As extreme weather and severe natural disasters become the norm, many Americans in the South want to flee the constant flooding, hurricanes, tornadoes, and other disasters. The Great Lakes region and Erie have become more attractive destinations. Erie can capitalize on the beautiful natural environment, abundance of water resources, rich history, diverse population, and economy and can become a “Welcoming City” not just to New Americans but to all Americans.

About the author: Baher Ghosheh, Ph.D., has been a professor of Middle Eastern Studies and cultural and economic Geography at Edinboro University of Pennsylvania since 1989. He holds graduate degrees in International Relations/Middle Eastern Studies, International Trade, and Comparative Economic Development. A native of Jerusalem, Israel, Dr. Ghosheh has lived in eight countries, traveled to 59 countries, and has taught in Japan, China, Russia, Italy, and Morocco. He serves on the Jefferson Educational Society Board of Trustees and is a Jefferson scholar-in-residence.