



Trapped in Poverty

Accessibility, Availability, and
Income in Erie County, Pennsylvania

JEFFERSON
EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

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About the Jefferson Civic Leadership Academy



Launched in 2015, the Jefferson Civic Leadership Academy prepares Erie professionals, approximately ages 25-45, for meaningful, fulfilling, and impactful engagement in their community by providing a dynamic and unique environment that fosters teamwork, growth, and learning through a transformative experience for those seeking to be change-agents for their community. Through the Leadership Academy, students examine the inner workings of local governments to emerge as civic leaders capable of effecting positive change for Erie County's future with an understanding of Erie's past and present. With a close look at Erie's economic, entrepreneurial, and innovation ecosystems, the Leadership Academy informs mindful leaders of Erie's post-industrial landscape while exposing them to global ideas that can be applied to Erie County's overall developmental health and well-being.

Introduction

Erie County is in crisis. Poverty rates exceed both the state and national averages in a number of economic indicators, including unemployment, the number of people on public assistance; and it lags in important community development indicators such as public health and educational attainment. In the City of Erie, some of these indicators register at approximately twice the national average.

A number of local initiatives attempt to thwart the spread of poverty in Erie County. The United Way of Erie County made its mission to “crush poverty.” Erie’s Public Schools implemented and continues to develop its community schools program throughout the district. Erie County government will initiate its first “Blue Zone” – a strategy to increase the collective public health of communities – in 2019 in Corry, Pa. and numerous social service and faith-based organizations continue to target inner-city neighborhoods and rural areas.

In Erie County, efforts have been comprehensive. Yet, poverty persists.

Size of family unit	Weighted average thresholds	Related children under 18 years								
		None	One	Two	Three	Four	Five	Six	Seven	Eight or more
One person (unrelated individual):	12,488									
Under age 65	12,752	12,752								
Aged 65 and older	11,756	11,756								
Two people:	15,877									
Householder under age 65	16,493	16,414	16,895							
Householder aged 65 and older	14,828	14,816	16,831							
Three people	19,515	19,173	19,730	19,749						
Four people	25,094	25,283	25,696	24,858	24,944					
Five people	29,714	30,490	30,933	29,986	29,253	28,805				
Six people	33,618	35,069	35,208	34,482	33,787	32,753	32,140			
Seven people	38,173	40,351	40,603	39,734	39,129	38,001	36,685	35,242		
Eight people	42,684	45,129	45,528	44,708	43,990	42,971	41,678	40,332	39,990	
Nine people or more	50,681	54,287	54,550	53,825	53,216	52,216	50,840	49,595	49,287	47,389

Source: U.S. Census Bureau.

The overall poverty rate in Erie County (17%) exceeded both the state (13%) and national (15%) poverty rates in 2017, the most recent statistical year available. That is a 5 percent increase since 2000, when the poverty rate in Erie County equaled the national poverty rate (12%) and was one percentage point higher than the poverty rate in Pennsylvania (11%).¹ The rate at which poverty continues to grow in Erie County is significant, leaving many to ask why poverty persists at high rates in Erie County despite past and current initiatives.

Poverty, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, is defined as a family of four (two adults and two children) with a median household income of \$24,858 or less. More difficult to categorize are those families and individuals – among the 61 percent of Americans who would not be able to sustain a \$1,000 emergency – whose incomes approach the poverty line and may be within one car problem, one medical issue, or one missed paycheck away from more serious economic and personal hardships.² These individuals often receive some form of social assistance, such as childcare, SNAP, or public housing.

Those who receive some benefits, may also have less job mobility in order to keep a benefit. According to the nonprofit anti-poverty organization Circles USA, “an increase of less than \$50 a month can lead to the loss of several hundred dollars’ worth of programs,” leaving families without the necessary means to meet the basic nutritional, medical, and other needs of the household.³ The “cliff-effect,” as it is known, is among the systemic impediments to economic independence in the United States, particularly in regions such as Erie, where skilled labor is being replaced by lower-wage jobs in the health care, social assistance, leisure, and hospitality,

¹ Erie Vital Signs. (n.d). Economy: People Living in Poverty. *Erie Community Foundation*: <http://erievitalsigns.org/economy/people-living-in-poverty>

² Martin, E. (2018, Jan. 18). Only 39 percent of Americans have enough savings to cover a \$1,000 emergency. *CNBC: Make It*: <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/01/18/few-americans-have-enough-savings-to-cover-a-1000-emergency.html>

³ Circles USA. (n.d.) Mitigating and Cliff Effects. *Circles USA*: <https://www.circlesusa.org/the-circles-solution/systemic-barriers/>

among others, and nominal local economic growth (1.8%) compared to the state (24%) and the nation (30%).⁴ Said one working mother from Erie:

I was on welfare for over 10 years. It's a very nice program for low-income families, but when I started working all of my food stamps and health insurance were taken away from me. I was able to provide food for my family but unable to provide health insurance. My family was without health insurance for two years until I started working as a registered nurse full time. I still have bills to pay off from when they had doctors' appointments and medical bills.

Children Living in Poverty (Under Age 18)			
	2000	2008-12	2013-17
United States	17%	21%	20%
Pennsylvania	15%	18%	19%
Erie County, PA	16%	24%	25%
Broome County, NY	16%	24%	23%
Stark County, OH	13%	22%	22%
Luzerne County, PA	15%	25%	26%
Erie City	27%	40%	39%
Source: U.S. Census Bureau			
Notes: Multiyear results are from rolling American Community Survey. * Margin of error between 20% & 35% of estimate; ** margin of error between 35% & 50%; *** margin of error greater than 50%.			

Financial uncertainty such as this serves as the bedrock of generational poverty in places like Erie, and it manifests in the number of children living in poverty in Erie County. According to 2017 Census Bureau estimates, the number of children under the age of 5 living in poverty in Erie County is 32.3

percent. In the City of Erie those estimates are above 45 percent for the same age bracket. As a benchmark for the future of the region, Erie's situation is dire. Compared to counties of similar size that are historically centers of manufacturing and have experienced significant economic challenges as a result of changes in industry and population, the number of children living in poverty continues to grow at rates greater than the population as a whole.⁵

⁴ Wertz, J. (2018, March 28). The State of Erie Industry in 2018. *Erie Reader*. <https://www.eriereader.com/article/the-state-of-erie-industry-in-2018>

⁵ Williams, M. & Ferencik, M. (2019, January 1). Despite strengthening economy, midsized Ohio cities have been left behind. *Marion Star*. <https://www.marionstar.com/story/news/local/2019/01/01/despite-growing-economy-midsize-ohio-cities-have-been-left-behind/2380667002/>

The United Way of Erie County has identified three primary factors that impact generational poverty throughout the region: 1) family-sustaining jobs, 2) single-parent households, and 3) education. The average annual wage for a person working a full-time job in Erie is \$40,860, which is 22 percent less than the state average; more than 39 percent of households are single-parent households in Erie County; and 14 percent of people with a high school diploma or equivalent live in poverty. Without a high school diploma or GED that number more than doubles to 31.5 percent.⁶

While the ongoing efforts to address poverty in Erie County are numerous and noble, the challenges continue to grow. Potential solutions are complex. For example, advocates for education as a solution to poverty also recognize that educational success is linked to the lifestyle of the student. If the student is unrested, undernourished, and taxed by personal issues that reside largely outside the school, educational success is unlikely.⁷ If a single parent works multiple jobs to support the family, his/her absence from the home is likely to cause instability for the children s/he works to support.

This project intends to identify and address structural impediments to elevating the economic status of people living in poverty by examining a selection of resources in low-income, middle-income, and high-income ZIP codes across Erie County. Our findings address the following questions:

- Which ZIP codes in Erie County represent a range (low, median, high) of median household income?
- How does accessibility and availability of food items affect the cost of living for families across income groups (low, middle, high income)?

⁶ Rink, M. (2018, March 11). Numbers stagnate, despite efforts to reduce child poverty in Erie. *GoErie*: <http://www.goerie.com/news/20180311/numbers-stagnate-despite-efforts-to-reduce-child-poverty-in-erie>

⁷ National Education Association. (n.d.). Facts about Child Nutrition. *National Education Association*: <http://www.nea.org/home/39282.htm>

Our research is highly focused on food prices and the cost of living based on the accessibility and availability of nutrient-rich foods as identified by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. According to the Consumer Expenditure Survey, households with a gross annual income of less than \$20,000 spend nearly twice as much of their total disposable net income on food in the home (10.2%), than do households that make greater than \$150,000 annually (5.4%).⁸ Such inequality has a profound impact on the economic stability and the overall quality of life of those living in poverty. Therefore, we identified both chain and non-chain grocers in urban, suburban, and rural communities to determine the availability and cost differences of select items to assess the economic impact of a basket of goods on a family of four in various regions of Erie County. Further, we evaluate the availability of select resources, such as educational institutions, medical care, and public transportation in Erie's poorest communities.

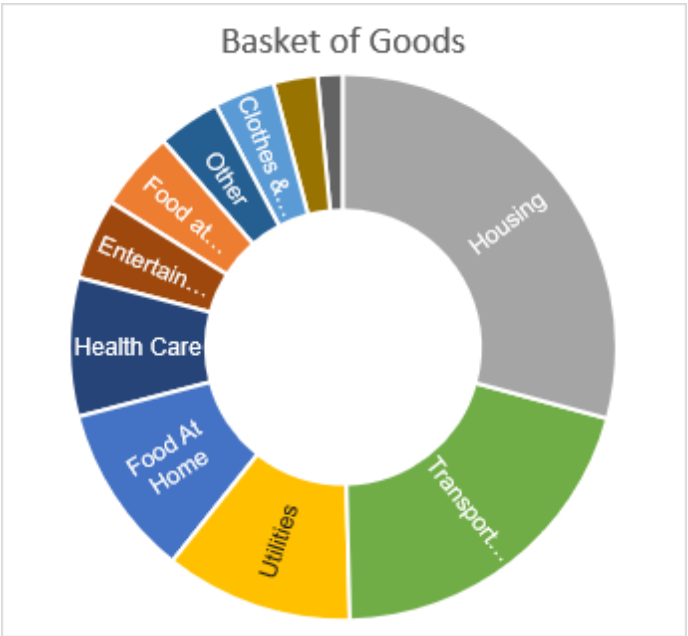
In the next section, we provide an overview of demographic changes in Erie County during the past two decades to provide context for the scope of the community and the diversity of need that is represented in Erie. What follows is an overview of poverty in Erie County based on measurements drawn from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey and other longitudinal census data. The project concludes with the findings of primary data analysis, which unpacks the accessibility, availability, and income disparities that contribute to poverty in Erie County as well as a series of recommendations for policy implementation and future research.

⁸ Goldstein, J. (2012, August 1). How the poor, the middle class, and the rich spend their money. *NPR:Planet Money*. <https://www.npr.org/sections/money/2012/08/01/157664524/how-the-poor-the-middle-class-and-the-rich-spend-their-money>

Methods

This study incorporates primary data collected by JCLA participants as well as secondary demographic and economic data curated from local, state, and national sources including Erie County Government, the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture, as well as the federal Bureau of Labor and Statistics, and the American Community Survey. The primary data allows us to compare food prices in poor, middle-income, and high-income ZIP codes across Erie County in both rural and urban settings. Previous studies conclude that different types of grocery stores across different geographic areas within the same geographic region offer myriad pricing schemes that adversely affect poor people.⁹ Chung & Myers found that those who shop at non-chain stores pay the highest premium for groceries. Therefore, they argue, “the biggest factor contributing to higher grocery costs in poor neighborhoods is that large chain stores, where prices tend to be lower, are not located in these neighborhoods.”¹⁰

Food prices are one consequential variable in what economists commonly refer to as a “basket of goods.” The basket of goods is used to establish the U.S. Consumer Price Index, the Consumer Expenditure Survey, and the World Bank’s Poverty Inequality Handbook. The Consumer Expenditure Survey, for example, found that households with a gross annual



⁹ Chung, C. & Meyers, S. (1999). Do the poor pay more for food? An analysis of grocery store availability and food price disparities. *Journal of Consumer Affairs* 33(2), pp. 276-296.

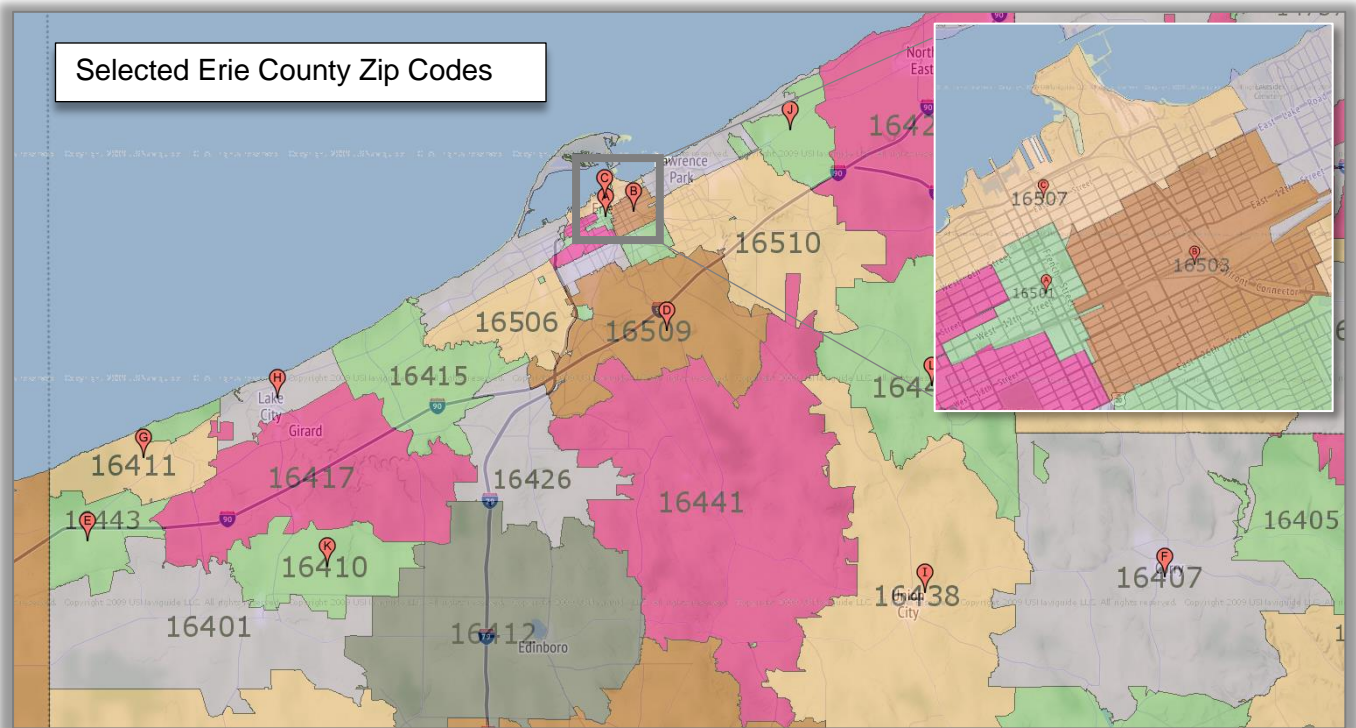
¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 276

income of less than \$20,000 spend nearly twice as much of their total disposable net income on food in the home (10.2%) than do households gross annual incomes of \$150,000 (5.4%) or more (Goldstein, 2012). Such inequality has a profound impact on the economic stability and the overall quality of life of those living in poverty.

Select Zip Codes		Location	Median Household Income
<i>Poor Urban</i>	16501	Erie City	\$10,631
	16503	Erie City	\$22,918
	16507	Erie City	\$28,347
<i>Poor Suburban</i>	16509	Millcreek / Kearsarge (Upper Peach)	\$44,643
	16443	West Springfield	\$45,074
	16407	Corry / Columbus / Elgin / Concord / Lovell / Wheellock	\$45,708
<i>Mid</i>	16411	Springfield Twp.	\$46,496
	16423	Lake City	\$47,568
	16438	Union City	\$48,521
<i>Wealthy</i>	16421	Harborcreek	\$60,833
	16410	West of Edinboro / Not Albion	\$62,917
	16442	Wattsburg	\$63,182

Secondary data shapes a macro-level demographic snapshot of Erie County in 2018 as well as a comparative picture of Erie County over time and in juxtaposition to poverty in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and across the United States. Qualitative interviews were conducted with those who formerly or currently live at or near the fiscal cliff. And economic census data was used to identify the median household income in each ZIP code in Erie County, Pennsylvania. Initially, the study was to include the three poorest ZIP codes, three median income ZIP codes, and the three highest median household income neighborhoods. However, the three poorest ZIP codes were all located within the City of Erie. Therefore, in order to assess and compare poverty in both the urban and suburban/rural, the first three poorest ZIP codes outside of the City of Erie were added to the research design. These 12 ZIP code areas became the units of analysis for housing prices, access to education, medical care, and transportation,

among other variables. Primarily, these ZIP codes were used to identify the number and type of food stores across Erie County.



Food items were selected to be surveyed at each food store in each of the selected ZIP codes. The 49 items were chosen based on the U.S. Department of Agriculture weekly Thrifty Food Plan for a family of four. This food plan specifies the quantity and type of food necessary to meet daily nutritional needs, as well as a selection of common grocery items. The various food and grocery items were divided into six groups for comparison of shelf prices and product availability (Chung & Meyers, 1999).

Data collection worksheets identifying the food and personal items were distributed to all members of the group action project who self-selected from among the identified ZIP codes where they collected data related to product price and availability. All participants were instructed to collect data between November 5 and November 11 in an effort to avoid the first and the fifteenth of the month when some research has indicated that prices fluctuate as a result of the distribution of public food assistance (Chung & Meyers, 1999).

Surveyed Food Items						
No.	Group A	Group B	Group C	Group D	Group E	Group F
1	Apples	Bacon	Orange Juice	Tuna	Corn Flakes	Baby Formula
2	Bananas	Chicken	Oatmeal	Peas	Raisin Bran	Toothpaste
3	Nectarines	Ground Beef	Ketchup	Creamed Corn	Vegetable Oil	Tampons
4	Tomatoes	Rib Chop	Mayonnaise	Canned Corn	White Bread	Carbonated Soft Drinks
5	Celery	Milk	Raisins	Canned Tomatoes	Wheat Bread	
6	Lettuce	Eggs	Syrup	White Rice	Hamburger Buns	
7	Cabbage	Margarine	Peanut Butter	Potatoes	Spaghetti	
8	Green Peppers	Butter	Sugar	Navy Beans		
9	Carrots	Cheese	Corn Meal	Kidney Beans		
10	Onions		Flour			

Subsequently, the grocery data was combined with other economic variables to create the Community Poverty Index (CPI), which allows the community to place a weight on the costs of poverty across ZIP codes in Erie County. The CPI was calculated by taking the mean basket price of available goods in the selected ZIP code and multiplying it with the sum of the maximum number of available goods divided by the minimum number of available goods plus the fair

market rate for a three-bedroom apartment in Erie County divided by the median household income for the ZIP code multiplied by 100.

$$\text{CPI} = \frac{\text{Average Available Basket Price} \times (\text{max available goods} / \text{min available goods}) + \text{FMR Housing} / \text{Median HH Income} \times 100}{100}$$

The result provides an index range that allows us to compare the cost of poverty within each ZIP code while controlling for both access and availability to central household items. This tool allowed the group action team to comparatively assess poverty in Erie County as well as established a tool for future evaluation and longitudinal assessment.

Erie County, Pennsylvania

Population

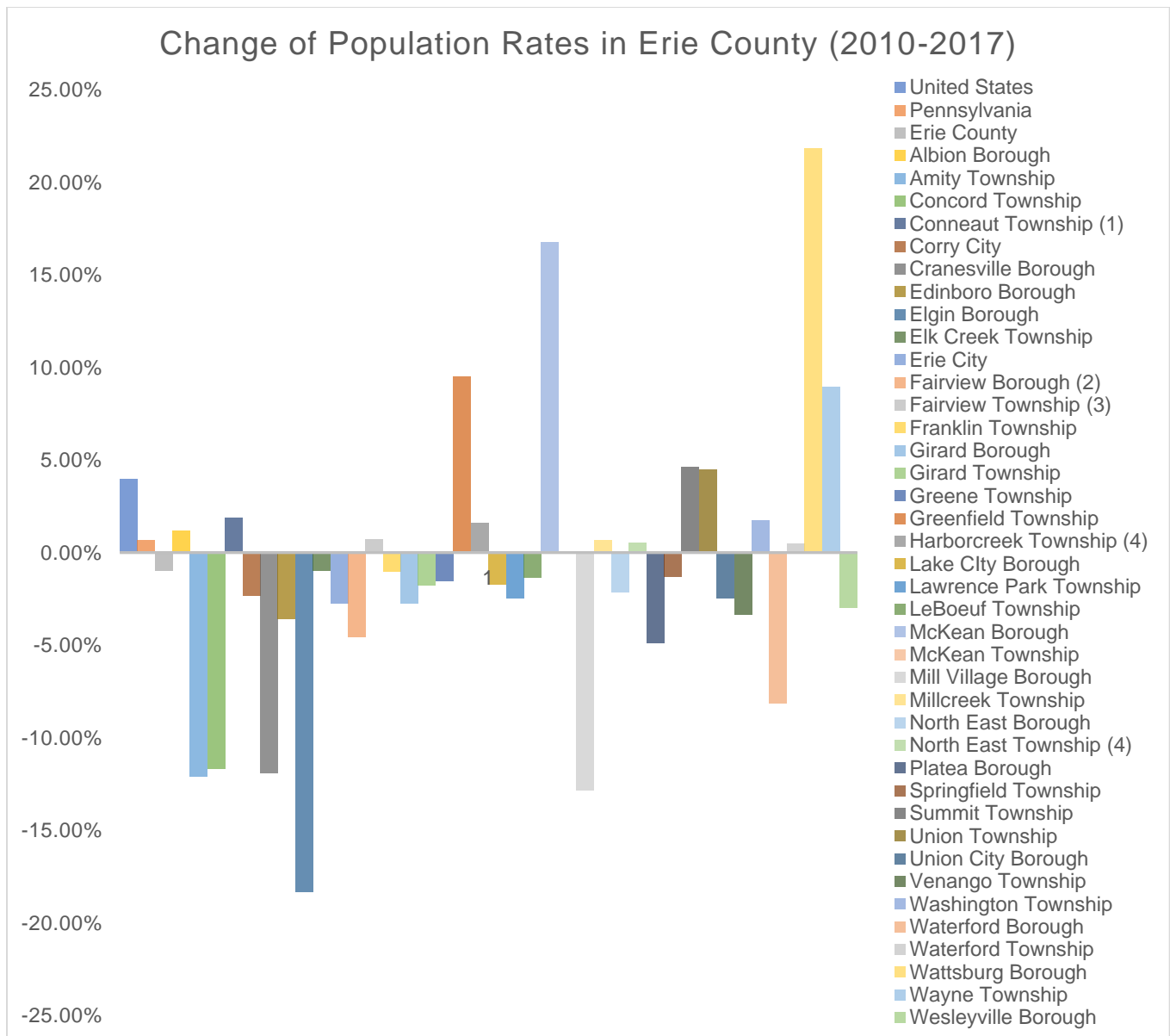
Since the middle of the 20th century, Erie County's population growth has slightly exceeded that of Pennsylvania's but has fallen far short of the overall national trend: the post-war manufacturing boom allowed Erie County to exhibit a 27.89 percent population growth rate – compared to Pennsylvania's 21 percent growth – from 1950 to 2010, while the United States' population more than doubled. However, as the financial markets crippled and technological change prompted a sweeping economic overhaul in the late 2000s and early 2010s, Erie County's population declined alongside of its manufacturing sector, with an overall drop in population from 2000 to 2017. In comparison, both Pennsylvania and the nation experienced an increase in population during this same period.¹¹

A more rigorous analysis of Erie County shows that a select few townships – each being suburban and rural or semi-rural – captured the majority of the population gains from 2000 to 2016, leaving urban and deeply rural areas to bear the brunt of the county's population decline.¹² Conneaut Township, Greenfield Township, Summit Township, and Wattsburg Borough captured double-digit population growth rates. In terms of numerical growth, however, suburban Millcreek, Summit, and Harborcreek townships boast the county's highest respective gains of 1,819, 1,381, and 1,254 people, while other notable gains during this time were made by McKean Borough. Fairview Township merged with Fairview Borough in 1998, resulting in a roughly 30 percent population increase from 1990 to 2000, yet from 2000 to 2017, the semi-rural township grew minutely.¹³

¹¹ U.S. Census Profile of General Population and Housing Characteristics data from 1950, 2010 and U.S. Census American Community Survey from 2017: Erie County, PA; Pennsylvania; United States.

¹² U.S. Census Profile of General Population and Housing Characteristics data from 2010 and U.S. Census American Community Survey from 2017: Erie County, PA.

¹³ U.S. Census Profile of General Population and Housing Characteristics data from 2010 and U.S. Census American Community Survey from 2017: Conneaut Township, PA; Summit Township, PA; Wattsburg Borough, PA; Millcreek



Meanwhile, Erie County's urban and smaller, deeply rural areas shed the largest population from 2000 to 2017. In terms of population percentage, the county's small, deeply rural portions exhibited the highest rates of loss, such as Elgin Borough, Platea Borough, Amity Township, and Concord Township. The City of Erie dominates the County with a total loss of 4,747 people during this period. The City of Corry – the other Erie County city, with Erie City

being the larger and more metropolitan of the two – saw a significant decline in population, as well.¹⁴

According to World Population Review's analysis, *Population of Counties in Pennsylvania (2018)*, Erie County overall has shrunk only slightly and currently is Pennsylvania's 15th most populous county (of 67 counties). The declining rate of growth threatens the county's standing, however, as it exists statistically between the growing Cumberland and Dauphin counties, each with estimated 2018 populations of 250,066 and 275,710 people and seven-year growth rates of 6.01 percent and 2.79 percent, respectively.¹⁵

¹⁴ U.S. Census Profile of General Population and Housing Characteristics data from 2010 and U.S. Census American Community Survey from 2017: Elgin Borough, PA; Platea Borough, PA; Amity Township, PA; Concord Township, PA; Erie City, PA; Corry City, PA.

¹⁵ World Population Review. (2018). *Population of Counties in Pennsylvania (2018)*. *World Population Review*. <http://worldpopulationreview.com/us-counties/pa/>

Age and Fertility

Though Erie County's population is, on average, younger than that of Pennsylvania. Erie County's population is composed of a higher percentage of 0 to 34-year-olds than Pennsylvania's, a trend dating to 1980. Notably, the population's share of 0 to 4 year olds, 5 to 9-year-olds, and 10 to 14-year-olds has declined slightly from 2000 to 2017, indicating that as Erie County's population ages, the overall declining population trend will likely continue.¹⁶

Age	2000 Pennsylvania	2000 Erie County	2000 Pennsylvania	2000 Erie County
0-4 years	727,804	17,440	5.93%	6.21%
5-19 years	2,542,780	62,652	20.70%	22.31%
20-34 years	2,306,572	55,644	18.78%	19.81%
35-64 years	4,784,733	104,851	38.96%	37.33%
65+ years	1,919,165	40,256	15.63%	14.33%
TOTAL	12,281,054	280,843	100.00%	100.00%
Age	2010 Pennsylvania	2010 Erie County	2010 Pennsylvania	2010 Erie County
0-4 years	729,538	16,757	5.74%	5.97%
5-19 years	2,449,852	57,384	19.29%	20.45%
20-34 years	2,385,265	55,055	18.78%	19.62%
35-64 years	5,178,417	110,546	40.77%	39.40%
65+ years	1,959,307	40,824	15.42%	14.55%
TOTAL	12,702,379	280,566	100.00%	100.00%
Age	2017 Pennsylvania	2017 Erie County	2017 Pennsylvania	2017 Erie County
0-4 years	711,647	15,764	5.56%	5.67%
5-19 years	2,334,185	53,989	18.25%	19.43%
20-34 years	2,508,208	56,083	19.61%	20.19%
35-64 years	5,055,443	106,783	39.52%	38.44%
65+ years	2,181,022	45,175	17.05%	16.26%
TOTAL	12,790,505	277,794	100.00%	100.00%
<i>Source: U.S. Census data [2000; 2010]; American Community Survey [2017]</i>				

According to the Pennsylvania Department of Health's birth statistics, Erie County's general fertility rate stands about equal to that of Pennsylvania, but its birth rate is significantly elevated in younger females, specifically ages 15 to 19-years-old and 20 to 24-years-old. This is significant in regards to poverty because teen parents face obstacles that perpetuate the cycle of poverty, including disruptions in educational and career goals. A study by the National Conference of State Legislatures found that 63 percent of teen parents receive public assistance

¹⁶ U.S. Census Profile of General Population and Housing Characteristics data from 2000, 2010 and U.S. Census American Community Survey from 2017: Erie County, PA; Pennsylvania.

in the first year of a child's life and 52 percent of mothers on welfare had their first child when they were teen aged.¹⁷

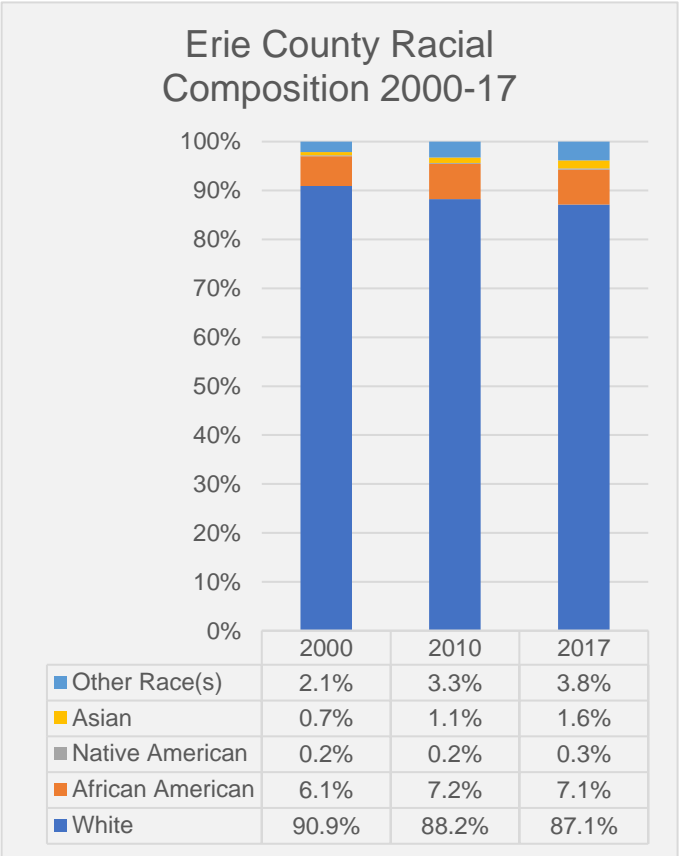
Erie County Birth Statistics				
[2012 to 2016]				
Measure	Erie	Interval (95%)	Pennsylvania	Comparison
Percent cesarean section births	36.9	(36.0 - 37.9)	30.6	Higher
Percent low birth weight births	7.9	(7.4 - 8.3)	8.2	Similar
Percent prenatal care in 1st trimester births	79.1	(77.7 - 80.50)	72.5	Higher
Percent preterm births	8.6	(8.2 - 9.1)	9.4	Lower
Percent non-smoking mother births	79.8	(78.4 - 81.2)	86.7	Lower
General fertility rate - ages 15 to 44	58.6	(57.7 - 59.5)	58.5	Similar
Birth rate - ages 15 to 19	23.9	(22.5 - 25.3)	19.4	Higher
Birth rate - ages 20 to 24	76.5	(74.1 - 78.9)	67.6	Higher
Birth rate - ages 25 to 29	103.7	(100.7 - 106.6)	99.2	Higher
Birth rate - ages 30 to 34	93.3	(90.3 - 96.2)	103.6	Lower
Birth rate - ages 35 to 39	40.3	(38.2 - 42.3)	49	Lower
Birth rate - ages 40 to 44	7.8	(7.0 - 8.7)	9.2	Lower
Source: Pennsylvania Department of Health: Birth Statistics 2012 - 2016				

¹⁷ National Conference of State Legislatures. (2018). Teen Pregnancy Prevention. *National Conference of State Legislatures*: <http://www.ncsl.org/research/health/teen-pregnancy-prevention.aspx#2>.

Race

Though Pennsylvania is overwhelmingly Caucasian, the state has experienced a slight decrease in that demographic and a slight increase in other races. In 2000, Pennsylvania’s population was identified as being 85.40 percent Caucasian but, by 2017, each minority population grew, lowering the statewide Caucasian population to 81.14 percent, as Pennsylvania slowly becomes more diverse.

Like the Commonwealth, Erie County remains predominantly Caucasian but diversity has increased slightly since 2000. From 2000 to 2017, Erie County’s Caucasian population has fallen, while its African-American population share increased 1 percentage point. In addition, the county’s Asian population share roughly doubled from 0.7 percent to 1.6 percent, while the remaining portions of the population also grew to some extent.



Erie County’s Hispanic population continues to grow, as well, with the race’s population share increasing from 2.18 percent in 2000 to 4.01 percent in 2017. Even in the face of such growth, Erie County’s Hispanic population growth falls behind that of the state’s, which boasted a Hispanic population growth rate of more than 120 percent from 2000 to 2017. In comparison, Erie County’s Hispanic population growth rate across the same time span is 82.04 percent.¹⁸

¹⁸ U.S. Census Profile of General Population and Housing Characteristics data from 2000, 2010 and U.S. Census American Community Survey from 2017: Erie County, PA; Pennsylvania.

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Thus, as Erie County's population declines, its diversity slightly rises – yet the county remains considerably Caucasian and Pennsylvania diversifies at a faster rate across the board. As one may expect, the distribution of Erie County's diversity is centralized in its urban and suburban centers – specifically the City of Erie and Millcreek Township. With the exception of the City of Erie, Edinboro Borough, and Conneaut Township, every other township or borough in the County exhibits a Caucasian population share well above 90 percent. The statistically least diverse area in Erie County is Elgin Borough, the county's smallest municipality, exhibiting a 100.00 percent Caucasian population share, but a 2017 population total of only 178 people.¹⁹

¹⁹ U.S. Census American Community Survey from 2017: Erie City, PA; Millcreek Township, PA; Edinboro Borough, PA; Conneaut Township, PA; Elgin Borough, PA.

Household Characteristics

The number of single-parent households grew between 2000 and 2017, with male householders growing at a faster rate than female householders. However, female householders make up the vast majority of single-parent households. Though the number of households climbed slightly in Erie County, the number of family households and married couple households dropped. In 2017, Erie County saw a rise of almost 4 percent from the amount of total households in 2000. However, the county saw a decline in total family households and married couple households. The average family size in Pennsylvania and Erie County continues to hover around three people and a typical household size of about 2.5 people..²⁰

Change in Housing Characteristic Statistics [Between 2000 and 2017]		
	Pennsylvania	Erie County
Change in Total Households	241,901	3,870
% of 2000 Households	5.06%	3.6%
Change in Family Households	52,919	(1,805)
% of 2000 Families	1.65%	-2.5%
Change in Married Couple Households	(49,908)	(3,848)
% of 2000 Married Couple Households	-2.02%	-7.2%
Change in Family, Male Householder	43,473	764
% of 2000 Family, Male Householder	23.37%	17.5%
Change in Family, Female Householder	59,354	1,279
% of 2000 Family, Female Householder	10.70%	9.9%
Change in Non-family Household	188,982	5,675
% of 2000 Non-family Household	12.05%	16.0%
Change in Single Householder	112,474	4,361
% of 2000 Single Householder	8.51%	14.9%
Change in Single Householder, 65 years or older	17,251	1,577
% of 2000 Single Householder, 65 years or older	3.11%	13.2%
	2000 to 2010	2000 to 2010
	Pennsylvania	Erie County
Change in Persons in Households	448,562	309
% of 2000 Persons in Household	3.8%	0.1%
Change in Persons in Families	92,865	(7,464)
% of 2000 Persons in Family	1.0%	-3.4%
Change in Persons in Group Quarters	(7,188)	(1,078)
Change in Institutionalized Persons	(16,678)	(1,157)
% of 2000 Institutionalized Persons	-7.8%	-18.2%
Other Persons in Group Quarters	9,490	79
% of 2000 Other Group Quarters Population	4.3%	1.0%

Source: Census Data [2000, 2010]; American Community Survey [2017]

Complementing the high percentage of single-parent households in metropolitan areas, the lowest percentages of married couple households tend to also reside in the urban areas of Erie County. In 2010, the City of Erie held the lowest rate of married couple households, followed by Corry, while Millcreek Township was above the Erie County average. The highest rates of

²⁰ U.S. Census Profile of General Population and Housing Characteristics data from 2000, 2010 and U.S. Census American Community Survey from 2017: Erie County, PA; Pennsylvania.

married couple households in Erie County in 2010 were found in Amity Township and Venango Township – both small, rural areas.²¹

²¹ U.S. Census Profile of General Population and Housing Characteristics data from 2000, 2010: Erie City, PA; Corry City, PA; Millcreek Township, PA; Erie County, PA; Amity Township, PA; Venango Township, PA.

Housing Occupancy, Home Values, and Transportation

As of the 2017 United States Census, Erie County contained more than 120,000 housing units, with about two-thirds of occupied units being owner-occupied and the remaining units being renter-occupied. Erie County's 2017 vacancy rate was higher than that of other Pennsylvania communities but slightly lower than that of the county's previous decades' measurements.

Erie County home values rose from 2000 to 2017 as the amount of housing units valued at or above \$200,000 quadrupled and the rate of housing units valued below \$50,000 dropped from 14.4 percent to 10.9 percent. However, the 2017 median home value in Erie County was \$124,100 – more than 37 percent lower than Pennsylvania's 2017 median home value of \$170,500. The direct effect of the financial and housing crisis near the end of that decade on Erie County home values is not shown by the data being analyzed.

The vast majority of individuals in Erie County drive an automobile. In 2017, 89.7 percent of Erie County residents' primary means of transportation was an automobile, with 78.8 percent driving alone. Approximately 1.7 percent primarily used public transportation, while 3.9 percent

Housing Occupancy Pennsylvania and Erie County [1980 through 2017]								
	1980 Pennsylvania	1980 Erie County	1990 Pennsylvania	1990 Erie County	2000 Pennsylvania	2000 Erie County	2017 Pennsylvania	2017 Erie County
Housing Units	4,596,431	103,738	4,938,140	108,585	5,249,750	114,332	5,653,599	120,871
Occupied Units	4,219,606	96,820	4,495,966	101,564	4,777,003	106,507	5,007,442	110,377
Owner-Occupied	2,950,649	67,577	3,176,121	69,705	3,406,337	73,729	3,456,360	72,959
Owner-Occupied %	69.90%	69.80%	70.60%	68.60%	67.00%	69.20%	69.02%	66.10%
Renter-Occupied	168,957	29,243	1,319,845	31,859	1,370,666	32,778	1,551,082	37,418
Renter-Occupied %	4.00%	30.20%	29.40%	31.40%	33.00%	30.80%	30.98%	33.90%
Vacant Units	376,825	6918	442,174	7,021	472,747	7,815	646,157	10,494
Homeowner Vacancy Rate	N/A	N/A	1.50%	1.20%	1.60%	1.60%	1.70%	2.20%
Renter Vacancy Rate	N/A	N/A	7.20%	6.90%	7.20%	7.90%	5.90%	7.20%

Source: U.S. Census data [1980 - 2010]; American Community Survey [2017]

walked.²²

²² U.S. Census Profile of General Population and Housing Characteristics data from 2010 and U.S. Census American Community Survey from 2017: Erie County, PA.

Education, Employment, Occupation, and Industry

Educational Attainment				
[2000 and 2017]				
	2000 Pennsylvania	2000 Erie County	2017 Pennsylvania	2017 Erie County
Persons 25 years and over	8,266,284	180,106	8,885,953	188,102
Less than 9th grade	5.5%	4.1%	3.3%	2.7%
9th to 12th grade, no diploma	12.6%	11.2%	6.8%	6.3%
High school graduate	38.1%	41.7%	35.6%	39.5%
Some college, no degree	15.5%	16.6%	16.1%	15.3%
Associate degree	5.9%	5.4%	8.2%	8.6%
Bachelor's degree	14.0%	13.2%	18.3%	18.1%
Graduate or professional degree	8.4%	7.6%	11.8%	9.4%
Percent high school graduate or higher	81.9%	84.6%	89.9%	90.9%
Percent bachelor's degree or higher	22.4%	20.9%	30.1%	27.4%
Source: U.S. Census data [2000]; American Community Survey [2017]				

Erie County is seeing a rise in the percent of residents with college degrees, though the figure still sits slightly below that of Pennsylvania. For example, the share of Erie County's population that held a high school degree or higher in 2017 was just 1 percent higher than the commonwealth, while Pennsylvania exhibits a slightly higher population share with bachelor's degrees or higher when compared to Erie County. Erie County as a whole, though, is seeing a slight rise in the share of its population that holds some sort of college degree, while graduate and professional degree-holders are also increasing in share.²³

As Erie County's labor force declines, its unemployment rate rises, indicating that the county's supply of jobs is dropping at a faster rate than the demand for them. Since 2000, Erie County's civilian labor force has been reduced from 140,700 people to 130,800 people in 2017 – a 7.04 percent drop. Additionally, the county's unemployment rate has fluctuated between a

²³ U.S. Census Educational Attainment by Sex data from 2000 and U.S. Census American Community Survey from 2017: Erie County, PA; Pennsylvania.

new millennium-low of 4.5 percent in 2000 to a new millennium-high of 9.3 percent in 2010. In 2017, the unemployment rate was 5.8 percent, a 1.30 percent net increase since 2000.²⁴

Occupation and Industry [2000 to 2017]						
	2000 Occupation		2010 Occupation		2017 Occupation	
	Pennsylvania	Erie County	Pennsylvania	Erie County	Pennsylvania	Erie County
Management, business, and financial operations occupations	12.3%	10.0%	35.2%	31.9%	37.7%	33.7%
Professional and related occupations	20.2%	19.2%				
Sales and related occupations	10.8%	10.7%	25.4%	25.1%	23.3%	23.2%
Office and administration support occupations	16.2%	15.0%				
Household service occupations	N/A	N/A	16.6%	18.0%	17.4%	20.6%
Protective service occupations	1.7%	1.5%				
Service occupations, except protective and household	13.1%	14.9%	8.9%	7.8%	8.2%	7.2%
Farming, fishing, and forestry occupations	0.5%	0.5%				
Precision production, craft, and repair occupations	8.9%	7.8%	13.9%	17.2%	13.4%	15.3%
Production occupations	9.2%	14.5%				
Transportation and material moving occupations	7.1%	6.0%				
	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
	2000 Industry		2010 Industry		2017 Industry	
	Pennsylvania	Erie County	Pennsylvania	Erie County	Pennsylvania	Erie County
Agriculture	1.0%	0.9%	1.3%	0.8%	1.4%	1.3%
Mining	0.3%	0.1%				
Construction	6.0%	4.7%	6.2%	4.6%	5.8%	4.8%
Manufacturing	16.0%	23.8%				
Wholesale trade	3.6%	2.6%	3.1%	2.4%	2.8%	2.1%
Retail trade	12.1%	12.1%				
Transportation and warehousing	4.4%	2.9%	5.3%	4.0%	5.4%	3.4%
Utilities	1.0%	0.6%				
Information	2.6%	2.1%	2.0%	2.3%	1.7%	1.5%
Finance, insurance, real estate and rental and leasing	6.6%	4.9%				
Professional, related, educational, and other services	35.2%	33.9%	39.0%	32.8%	36.0%	33.7%
Arts, entertainment, recreation, accommodation and food services	7.0%	8.5%				
Public administration and other	4.2%	2.9%	4.1%	2.9%	4.0%	7.9%
	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
Source: U.S. Census data [2000; 2010]; American Community Survey [2017]						
* Some categories had to be combined in 2010 due to data source's apparent reorganization of categories.						

The manufacturing industry – the classic economic lifeblood of Erie County – has sharply declined by nearly half in the region in recent decades. Where manufacturing once comprised almost a quarter of the county’s total industry, about 17.3 percent remained in 2017. Filling the void, the “professional, related, educational, and other services” industries have become Erie County’s primary industry at 33.7 percent. “Arts, entertainment, recreation, accommodation, and

²⁴ Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry. (n.d.) Labor Force, Employment, and Unemployment for Erie County, PA and Pennsylvania: 2000-2017. *Geographic Solutions, Inc.*: https://paworkstats.geosolinc.com/vosnet/dashboards/defaultana.aspx?menuid=MENU_START_PAGE_DASHBOARD_A NA

food services” occupy the region’s third spot at 11.3 percent, but includes predominantly low-wage positions.²⁵

Management, business, financial, and professional occupations supplied the county with a large portion of its jobs, while sales, office, and administrative support occupations fell to second, supplying about a quarter of all jobs. Additionally, lower-paying service, household, and protective occupations rose slightly from 2000 to 2017. These trends are roughly in line with the trends of Pennsylvania’s occupational shifts, with the exception of Erie having slightly fewer management, business, financial, and professional jobs.²⁶

²⁵ U.S. Census Profile of Selected Economic Characteristics data from 2010 and U.S. Census American Community Survey from 2017: Pennsylvania; Erie County, PA.

²⁶ U.S. Census Profile of Selected Economic Characteristics data from 2010 and U.S. Census American Community Survey from 2017: Pennsylvania; Erie County, PA.

Poverty in Erie County

Income and Poverty

Comparative Income						
United States, Pennsylvania, and Erie County						
Median Household Income						
	2009 MHI	2009 AMHI*	2017 MHI	2017 AMHI*	Change (\$)*	Change (%)
United States	\$51,914	\$59,314	\$57,652	\$57,652	-\$1,662	-2.80%
Pennsylvania	\$50,398	\$57,582	\$56,951	\$56,951	-\$631	-1.10%
Erie County	\$43,595	\$49,809	\$48,192	\$48,192	-\$1,617	-3.25%
*Inflation adjusted income in 2017 U.S. dollars						
Source: U.S. Census data [2010]; American Community Survey [2017]						

Erie County's median household income and per capita income levels are below that of Pennsylvania continues to drop, with both income measurements having declined between 2009 and 2017. Erie's median household income fell 3.25 percent in that same period from \$49,809 to \$48,192. In comparison, Pennsylvania experienced only a 1.1 percent reduction and median household income nationwide dropped 2.8 percent.²⁷

Income Distribution Data: 2010, 2017				
Pennsylvania and Erie County				
Households	2010 Pennsylvania	2010 Erie County	2017 Pennsylvania	2017 Erie County
Less than \$10,000	7.3%	9.0%	6.7%	8.0%
\$10,000 to \$14,999	5.9%	6.4%	4.8%	5.3%
\$15,000 to \$24,999	11.3%	13.1%	10.0%	12.1%
\$25,000 to \$34,999	10.9%	12.0%	9.6%	11.3%
\$35,000 to \$49,999	14.3%	15.2%	13.1%	14.9%
\$50,000 to \$74,999	19.0%	19.3%	18.1%	18.4%
\$75,000 to \$99,999	12.4%	11.7%	12.7%	11.9%
\$100,000 to \$149,999	11.7%	9.3%	14.0%	11.6%
\$150,000 or more	7.3%	4.0%	10.9%	6.5%
Source: U.S. Census data [2010]; American Community Survey [2017]				

²⁷ U.S. Census Profile of Selected Economic Characteristics data from 2010 and U.S. Census American Community Survey from 2017: United States; Pennsylvania; Erie County, PA.

The divide between the upper-income households and lower-income households continues to grow across Erie County, while the percentage of households earning \$50,000 to \$74,999 (the middle-income households) has remained generally constant. The county saw a reduction of households earning less than \$15,000 from 2010 to 2017 and, on the opposite end of the spectrum, the portion Erie County's household population earning \$75,000 and above grew significantly. Still, these percentages are below Pennsylvania's household population, which earns \$75,000 and over.

While the median family income in Erie County in 2017 was \$62,251, the median family incomes in Pennsylvania and the United States were \$72,692 and \$70,850, respectively. This means that Erie County households earned less than their fellow Pennsylvanians and Americans. On an individual level, Erie County's 2017 per capita income was \$26,361, compared to \$31,476 in Pennsylvania.²⁸

²⁸ U.S. Census Profile of Selected Economic Characteristics data from 2010 and U.S. Census American Community Survey from 2017: United States; Pennsylvania; Erie County, PA.

Erie County also experiences higher levels of poverty across all measurements when compared to Pennsylvania. In 2017, Erie County had 44,492 residents living below the poverty level – equating to roughly 17 percent of the population, according to the Erie Community Foundation’s Erie Vital Signs research.²⁹ Pennsylvania’s individual poverty rate was 13.1 percent during this year.

Poverty Information: ACS 2017			
Pennsylvania and Erie County			
	Pennsylvania	Erie County	
Total Population	12,377,251	265,377	
Total Population Below Poverty Line	1,623,537	44,492	
Percent of Population Below Poverty Line	13.10%	16.80%	
Ages of Those in Poverty – Totals			
Under 5 years old	147,509	5,015	
5 to 17 years old	343,322	9,851	
18 to 34 years old	462,024	13,045	
35 to 64 years old	498,879	12,920	
65 years old and over	171,803	3,661	
Ages of Those in Poverty – Percentage			
Under 5 years old	21.00%	32.30%	
5 to 17 years old	17.70%	22.40%	
18 to 34 years old	17.50%	22.60%	
35 to 64 years old	10.00%	12.30%	
65 years old and over	8.20%	8.40%	
Percent of Race Living Below Poverty Line			
White alone	10.30%	14.20%	
Black of African American	27.60%	37.10%	
American Indian or Alaska Native alone	27.60%	20.40%	
Asian alone	15.30%	21.80%	
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander alone	27.30%	11.90%	
Some other race alone	33.40%	34.00%	
Two of more races	24.20%	38.40%	
Population Below Poverty by Gender			
Male	717,479	19,590	
Percent of Total in Poverty	44.19%	44.03%	
Female	906,058	24,902	
Percent of Total in Poverty	55.81%	55.97%	
Source: American Community Survey [2017]			

Of those populations in poverty, female-headed families, children, and the elderly typically were most at-risk and experienced poverty at much higher rates than the population as a whole. In 2017, almost one of every three female-headed households in Erie County lived below the poverty line, as did more than 8 percent of the county’s elderly population. More significant is the County’s percentage of children living in poverty: almost 55 percent of all impoverished

²⁹ Erie Vital Signs. (n.d). Economy: People Living in Poverty. *Erie Community Foundation*: <http://erievitalsigns.org/economy/people-living-in-poverty>

residents are under the age of 18 years old (with more than 32 percent being under the age of 5 years old).³⁰

Additionally, a correlation between race and poverty exists in Erie County: ethnic minorities make up a far larger percentage of those in poverty than in the entire population. For example, while African-Americans and Asians make up about 9 percent of the county's total population, of those in poverty, these two races account for almost 59 percent. Though Pennsylvania exhibits similar numbers, they are not quite as large as those seen in Erie County. Similarly, and corresponding with single female-headed households being more at-risk, females make up the majority of those in poverty in Erie County, with 56 percent female to 44 percent male.²⁶ In essence, Erie County's impoverished population is disproportionately minorities, generally children, and typically more female than male.

³⁰ U.S. Census Profile of Selected Economic Characteristics data from American Community Survey from 2017: Erie County, PA.

Statistical Breakdown

Erie County is large and economically diverse. There are 26 ZIP codes in Erie County, excluding college campuses. Erie County ZIP codes range in population from 193 in Mill Village (16427) – which consists entirely of its own ZIP code, unlike Elgin, Erie County's least populated borough, that spans multiple ZIP codes – to 26,810 in part of Millcreek Township (16509). The average population per ZIP code area is 10,413. Within these areas, the average median household income is \$47,256, and more than 89 percent of the population holds a GED or higher. Because Erie's

Zip Code	Population	Median HH Income	% GED or Higher	Square Mileage
16501	2044	10631	0.664	0.68
16503	16850	22918	0.727	2.45
16507	11088	28347	0.846	2.10
16502	16664	30458	0.877	2.55
16504	17322	40773	0.92	2.79
16508	16050	44643	0.93	24.59
16509	26810	44643	0.956	38.13
16443	1425	45074	0.871	11.28
16407	11317	45708	0.894	107.47
16411	1477	46696	0.89	17.77
16423	4450	47568	0.894	9.46
16438	8083	48521	0.885	103.26
16511	11382	48611	0.936	7.49
16401	6581	49796	0.842	57.02
16412	10480	49972	0.944	80.10
16417	8329	50169	0.926	46.41
16510	25625	52201	0.914	32.77
16428	12478	53162	0.922	73.40
16505	17168	53213	0.922	11.87
16426	3730	53750	0.952	27.08
16427	193	55000	0.94	0.26
16506	23720	59427	0.957	14.00
16441	10136	60435	0.931	112.65
16421	2518	60833	0.954	10.60
16410	1854	62917	0.938	22.53
16442	2958	63182	0.873	50.31

population lacks density, it is noteworthy, especially with regard to issues of access and availability, that the average square mileage of a ZIP code tabulation area is 33.41 sq. miles. The distribution of population in Erie County means that centers of commerce are commonly located in more densely populated or more highly trafficked areas. As one moves farther from urban and suburban centers, the access to goods and services becomes a challenge and mobility becomes a critical necessity in everyday life.

ZIP Code by Median Household Income

This project evaluates 12 of Erie's ZIP code areas. The three poorest ZIP codes (16501, 16503, 16507) were located in Erie's urban core. In order to evaluate urban and non-urban poverty, the three ZIP codes outside of the city with the lowest median household incomes (16509, 16443, 16407) were also



Photo credit: Jessica Hunter

selected to represent suburban and rural poverty. Those were contrasted with the three median ZIP codes (16411, 16423, 16438) and the three highest median income ZIP codes (16421, 16410, 16442). Because median household incomes vary greatly within small geographic areas and the spending power of an individual household can be equally unpredictable, food costs can be considered a constant in a household budget because regardless of the spending power of

	Total Stores	Chain	Non Chain
Poor Urban	20	9	11
Poor Suburban	16	15	1
Mid Income	2	2	0
High Income	4	3	1
Total	42	29	13

a household, the accessibility and availability of food within a target market can be a defining factor in the well-being of

individuals and families. All of the interview subjects that researchers spoke with for this project indicated that cooking at home was their primary source for meals and that shopping at supermarkets was their preferred method of acquiring food. Moreover, multiple interview subjects identified groceries as “tremendously” impacting the household budget.

The comparison among different types of grocery stores in select geographic areas was based on a survey of 42 stores in 12 geographic areas. A common assumption of consumer groups posits that lower-income households are further economically disadvantaged by higher prices because of a lack of access to food stores and products.³¹ Survey results show that accessibility to sources of food, generally, is abundant in low-income ZIP code areas in both urban and suburban settings. Within these areas there is little variance in the average cost of food items. However, there is significant difference between the cost and availability of individual food items from store to store.

Average \$ Basket of Goods/Category Unit						
	Produce	Meat/Dairy	Dry Goods	Can Goods	Bread/Grains	Personal Items
Non Chain	1.34	4.41	2.55	1.35	2.05	2.26
Chain	1.27	4.11	2.66	1.43	2.4	3.58
Poor Urban	1.38	4.46	2.5	1.43	2.45	2.46
Poor Suburban	1.21	4.01	2.73	1.45	2.3	4.08
Mid Income	1.92	4.39	2.44	1.51	1.99	3.39
High Income	1.06	3.59	2.08	1.05	2.21	3.01
Variance	0.086	0.111	0.052	0.027	0.034	0.478

Thirty-six stores were located in low-income ZIP codes in Erie County. Chain stores (24) accounted for the majority of food stores in these areas and non-chain stores (12) accounted for the remainder, with the majority found in the urban core were non-chain. Chain stores in these areas include corporate grocery stores, such as Giant Eagle, Wegmans, Save A Lot, and Shur-Fine, but the classification also includes a number of pharmacies and variety stores, such as Rite Aid, CVS, Dollar General, and Family Dollar, which also carry food items. Also included in the survey were convenience stores, such as Country Fair, Sheetz, and Pilot.

³¹ Chung, C. & Meyers, S. (1999). Do the poor pay more for food? An analysis of grocery store availability and food price disparities. *Journal of Consumer Affairs* 33(2), pp. 276-296.

Pharmacies, variety stores, and convenience stores account for the majority of chain stores in low-income neighborhoods.

Food items surveyed were based on the USDA Thrifty Food Plan. Not all selected items were available at each grocery. It became clear that the question of food and its cost concerned availability more than accessibility. For example, in poor urban areas the availability of produce is scant by comparison to the number of stores with food available. Only six out of 20 stores offered apples, which appeared to have a significant impact on unit price that ranged from 99 cents per apple to \$1.99 per pound (4-5 apples). In high-income areas, 75 percent of the stores carried apples with unit prices that ranged from 49 cents per apple to \$1.77 per pound.

Item Availability Per Area		Stores with produce availability						
	Total Stores	Apples	Bananas	Tomatoes	Lettuce	Green Peppers	Carrots	Onions
Poor Urban	20	6	6	8	9	6	7	10
Poor Suburban	16	9	9	7	7	7	7	7
Middle Income	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
High Income	4	3	3	2	2	2	2	3

The survey illustrates that there is great disparity between the cost of basic nutritional staples, such as milk, white bread, cheese, and ground beef. The maximum price for a gallon of whole milk ranges from more than \$6 per gallon in the low-income urban areas to less than \$4 per gallon in high-income areas. A loaf of bread costs between 99 cents and \$3.29 in poor urban areas, but the disparity in pricing is greater in high-income areas where costs range from 88 cents per loaf to \$3.29. This price trend continues for other basic goods, such as cheese, but prices for ground beef – a low-cost protein – are leveled across income, presumably because of its limited shelf life compared to pasteurized and processed goods.

Milk: \$/gallon			
	Avg.\$	Max \$	Min \$
Poor Urban	4.03	6.36	3.29
Poor Suburban	3.85	4.99	3.3
Middle Income	4.22	4.44	4
High Income	3.53	3.67	3.31
Cheese: \$/lb			
	Avg. \$	Max \$	Min \$
Poor Urban	4.98	9.38	3.32
Poor Suburban	3.53	5.05	1.69
Middle Income	3.06	3.47	2.65
High Income	3.55	5.98	2.58

White Bread: \$/Loaf			
	Avg. \$	Max \$	Min \$
Poor Urban	2.2	3.29	0.99
Poor Suburban	2.38	3	1.46
Middle Income	1.25	1.49	1
High Income	2.16	3.29	0.88
Ground Beef: \$/lb			
	Avg. \$	Max \$	Min \$
Poor Urban	3.52	4.5	2.49
Poor Suburban	3.89	5.99	2.89
Middle Income	5.99	5.99	5.99
High Income	3.56	3.99	2.98

Several researchers noted that in addition to fluctuations in pricing within geographic areas or income brackets, some stores, both chain and non-chain, failed to adequately identify the market price for items found throughout the store. This practice of price under-representation – not using price stickers on goods, shelves, or stands – was common in poor urban areas and appeared to correlate with higher unit prices and stores that accept food stamps. Customers for whom food makes up a significant portion of their household budget are, in these cases, making uninformed decisions related to their household food products. As one participant asked, “How can they stretch their budget when they don’t know what they are spending?”

The Community Poverty Index



Photo Credit: Jessica Hunter

Median household income data, fair market rental prices, as well as food prices and availability were combined to create a community poverty index that reveals the variability – what we'll refer to as the “weight” of poverty – in the cost of living from one ZIP code to another. Fair market rental costs for a three-bedroom apartment (\$967) and food costs, controlled for availability, were divided by median household income to create a comparative value for each ZIP code included in this study.

The index ranges from a low score of 1.59 in 16412 (Harborcreek Township) to a high score of 9.35 in 16501, located in the northern State Street corridor in the City of Erie. This means that it is roughly six times more expensive to live in 16501 than it is to live in Harborcreek Township. Only Harborcreek Township and ZIP code 16509 have supermarkets where all 49 products were available. Food availability accounts for approximately 0.25 of the index value. Therefore, one could assume that greater availability of market goods in low-income neighborhoods, such as 16501, would lower the index value from 9.35 to 9.10.

Zip Code	Population	Median HH Income	% GED or Higher	Avg. \$/ Basket	Max Avail	Min Avail	CPI
16501	2044	10631	0.664	71.05	36	15	9.35
16503	16850	22918	0.727	60.55	48	9	4.23
16507	11088	28347	0.846	101.98	41	29	3.56
16509	26810	44643	0.956	79.7	49	11	2.17
16443	1425	45074	0.871	89.89	48	24	2.15
16407	11317	45708	0.894	91.96	36	36	2.32
16411	1477	46696	0.89	132.9	0	0	2.35
16423	4450	47568	0.894	132.9	0	0	2.31
16438	8083	48521	0.885	132.9	43	33	2.10
16421	2518	60833	0.954	96.49	49	42	1.59
16410	1854	62917	0.938	88.17	0	0	1.67
16442	2958	63182	0.873	79.84	36	32	1.63

There is also a high correlation between index value and education. For example, higher educational attainment appears to offset moderately lower household incomes, such as those in ZIP codes 16509 and 16421. Because educational attainment was not an independent variable in this particular study, this observation deserves additional research. However, it reflects the findings of previous research that links educational attainment with poverty reduction strategies.

Conclusion

Food availability has the power to lower the poverty rates based on the poverty index score of a geographic area by .25. It is prudent to conclude, therefore, that increasing the availability of food products in areas with high accessibility to food stores should have a positive impact on poverty levels in those areas. Increasing availability, however, remains a challenge. Stores, such as Dollar General and Family Dollar, which offer few nutritional food options and are not likely to adjust their business model to increase grocery offerings, continue to open new locations in rural and low-income urban areas. In fact, three new Dollar Generals open each day across the United States and the chain has more locations than McDonald's.³² The presence of such stores in Erie County is not likely to decline in the near future and that comes with a price.

Access to fresh food needs to be a public policy decision as much as it needs to be a demand of consumers. Subsidies are regularly disbursed to companies pledging to fill a community void and creating jobs. These subsidies also need to be quality driven to ensure that underserved communities are not only served by the least best option available to them. In sections of New York City policy makers have added tax breaks and granted zoning variances to encourage the establishment and expansion of fresh food markets in neighborhoods that have high rates of poverty and diet-related diseases. As a result, the city has subsidized 21 supermarkets, which have created an additional 940 full-time jobs in targeted areas of the Bronx, Brooklyn, Harlem, and Queens.³³

As the region engages in concerted community development initiatives that align with the City of Erie comprehensive plan, *Erie Refocused*, and the county's guiding document, *Emerge*

³² McGreal, C. (2018, Aug. 13). Where even Walmart won't go: How Dollar General took over rural America. *The Guardian*.
<https://www.theguardian.com/business/2018/aug/13/dollar-general-walmart-buhler-haven-kansas>

³³ Ungar-Sargon, B. (2018, April 5). Have city subsidies to supermarkets made NYC healthier. *CityLab*.
<https://citylimits.org/2016/04/05/have-city-subsidies-to-supermarkets-made-nyc-healthier/>

2040, those charged with its stewardship must be as purposeful about placemaking as they are about economic development. That includes creating and enforcing ordinances and financial incentives that encourage the dissemination of quality foods that serve as the foundation of a healthier and more prosperous community.

Recommendations

- Create fresh food coop arrangements to increase the availability of fresh foods to grocers in low-income areas and offer business assistance and consulting to those grocers who would like to proliferate fresh foods but lack the knowledge or resources to do so.
- Create fresh food specific Local Economic Revitalization Tax Assistance incentives in select areas tied to both the quality of goods sold and the quality of jobs created.
- Monitor Blue Zone benchmarks in Corry with the potential for expansion countywide.
- Support the sale of local foods across the community by offering incentives and encouraging the establishment of farmers' markets.
- Review and revise zoning regulations to promote policies that support community gardens and the distribution of yield.
- Ensure that residents can access healthy and affordable food through public transportation—by realigning bus routes, providing free shuttles, or other means.
- Efforts should be made to replicate this study on a decennial basis in an effort to measure costs of living across Erie County as well as the impact of food availability on households across income.

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