

Why Aren't We Average

April 2005

The Joint Urban Studies Center (JUSC), a research-based think tank working in collaboration with six area colleges and universities, recently completed a study on why Luzerne County is not average on key census indicators over the past 50 years.

This paper explains how and why Wilkes-Barre has found itself in a continuous decline over the past five decades and how trends in Luzerne County influenced the MSA as a whole. By analyzing and comparing specific key indicators such as population, education, housing and income, it will be easy to see the trends in history and causes for Wilkes-Barre's current state of being below average. The data primarily represents Luzerne County; however, upon analysis, the city of Wilkes-Barre and the remaining portions of the MSA show quite similar trends.

Imagine an additional \$700 million in wages being paid out in Luzerne County. That is the increase in revenue that would exist if we met the key state averages on employment, population growth, and income. This increase in revenue would dramatically improve the standard of living among the residents. More money would flow through local government as a result. Luzerne County would be \$1.3 billion richer by meeting national averages.

By and large the most significant single event appears to be the 1980s recession. It hit this region hard because of the high volume of manufacturer jobs present in that era. That event initiated the decline in manufacturing through consolidation and closing of firms. The region did not have another large existing employment cluster that would have lessened the impact of the loss. From that point, the area has not recovered significantly because it hasn't been able to create more jobs in a variety of industries or different types of jobs to balance and rebuild its economy.

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

JUSC states that the region needs to focus on land use policies, local government collaboration, improving K-12 education and more aggressive economic development. It also focuses on the importance of the aesthetics of a community and the positive impact on its economy. These strategies, case studies and best practices are elaborated on in this report and the recently released JUSC report, "A Competitive Agenda for Renewing the Cities of Northeastern Pennsylvania."