

Job Sprawl in Northeast Pennsylvania

A 2009 report released by The Brookings Institution focused on job sprawl trends across 98 of the largest U.S. metropolitan areas. The report concluded that the Scranton/Wilkes-Barre metro region was ranked as the second most decentralized area, with considerable job sprawl. Further, the report concluded that the City of Wilkes-Barre is actually a suburb of Scranton, which further contributes to the sprawl. Proper analysis of the Wilkes-Barre and Scranton area refutes this effort. Appropriate analysis reveals that the level of employment at central business districts for both cities has steadily increased.

In formalizing its methodology, Brookings used criteria to apply to all metro areas when determining the Central Business District (CBD). For a city's employment center to be considered a CBD, it must first be listed in the official metro area name. Other cities mentioned in the official metro area may be considered to contain a CBD if such cities meet the following three conditions:

1. Population over 100,000;
2. Contain a CBD identified in the 1982 Census Retail Trade; and
3. Zip codes that lie within the CBD must contain at least half of the number of jobs found in the primary CBD's zip codes.

The Brookings report identified Scranton as the region's CBD and Wilkes-Barre as a suburb lying within Scranton's outer ring. Wilkes-Barre was classified as a suburb of Scranton because, although the city met criteria two and three, it did not meet the first criterion — population greater than 100,000. By classifying Wilkes-Barre in this way, the job share outside of Scranton's CBD was high, as it included Wilkes-Barre's employment center. Therefore the region appears much more decentralized. The standard used misrepresents the Scranton/Wilkes-Barre metro area as well as other metro areas with unique situations —multiple central business districts.

A more suitable analysis for the metropolitan statistical area would hold the magnitude of the metro area's downtown working population instead of total city population as a criterion. Going by population can be misleading since a city may be heavily populated, yet not be a center for employment, (i.e., Detroit, MI). The opposite is also true. A city may have a population of less than 100,000, but if a significant portion or magnitude of people works in that city's downtown, it is an employment center (i.e., Nashville-Davidson, TN). By creating a new analysis that uses magnitude of employment rather than population as the first criterion, Wilkes-Barre meets all criterion to be considered its own CBD.

In addition, an alternative analysis focusing on Wilkes-Barre and Scranton as their own individual employment centers should only extend the study area as far out as ten miles for each city. Scranton and Wilkes-Barre are too close in proximity to measure a 35-mile ring around each of their CBDs. Outside of the ten-mile boundary, the zip codes within each city's 35-mile ring

overlap. Such overlap would cause the employees of those zip codes to be counted for both cities. Using the jobs analysis and the 10 mile ring show that both of our major cities are strong central business districts that have contributed very little to sprawl in the past decade.

As a proportion of total population, Wilkes-Barre has a high job share in the inner ring. Wilkes-Barre City is ranked in the top five of Pennsylvania downtowns, with the largest working population. In 1998, 28,109 people worked in downtown, compared with 28,476 people in 2006. This represents a 1.7% increase from 2000 and 2006. Such increase is significant considering the population decreased 4.0% since 2006.

In 2000, Scranton's population was 76,415. By 2006, the population decreased by 4.6% to 72,861. Despite decline, the downtown working population increased by almost 9% during this same time period.

It was necessary for Brookings to develop criteria that can define CBDs of all metro areas, but the methodology used cannot be rightfully applied to the Scranton/Wilkes-Barre metro area. The fact that a CBD is judged based in part, by population automatically disqualified Wilkes-Barre as an employment center. Judging Wilkes-Barre as a suburb and not an employment center because it has under 100,000 residents does not reflect the real state of job sprawl in Scranton and Wilkes-Barre. Although both cities are economically interdependent upon each other and part of a greater region, they each have their own thriving employment centers, which the original methodology ignores. Both cities are equally as important as a CBD. Aware of the effects that population and urban decline can have on the economic development of a city, revitalization efforts have helped to attract businesses and jobs into the city's urban core. Wilkes-Barre has a high job share in the inner ring, making it as much a CBD as Scranton. Employment in both rings has been steadily increasing. The city of Scranton experienced a significant decline, but, despite this, its downtown working population has increased by an astonishing 9% from 1998 to 2006. Using an alternative methodology tailored to our unique area's situation reveals that the area has been defying the job sprawl trend. The region has a very dense concentration of employment in our central business districts and that is an asset worth protecting.

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