Notes on the Size, Distribution, and Growth of Indiana Cities

Thomas Frank Barton, Indiana University

The size of the cities in this article will be based on the 1940 census. The writer plans to prepare a paper comparing the size of Indiana cities of 1940 with that of 1950 as soon as the statistics become available.

Size and Distribution

Our state's cities are characteristically small. There are 100 political units with populations over 2,500. Of these, nearly one-third or 32 have less than five thousand; and 33 more have a population of five to ten thousand. By combining these two groups, we have sixty-five cities or sixty-five per cent of them with a population of less than ten thousand. There are 15 cities that range from ten to twenty thousand, and 12 that have from twenty to fifty thousand inhabitants. In 1940, only 4 out of the 100 had a population of over one hundred thousand, namely, Indianapolis, Fort Wayne, Gary, and South Bend. Undoubtedly, the 1950 census will show Evansville in this group.

In the United States, it is common practice to classify cities into *small* (2,500-25,000), *medium-size* (25,000-100,000), and *large* (over 100,000). Applying this classification to Indiana cities, we have 82 small, 14 medium-sized, and only 4 large cities.

Indiana does not have a metropolis. Indianapolis, our largest city, in 1940 had a population of less than 400,000. Yet, adjacent to this state and easily accessible to our people are three cities with a million or more inhabitants. Within a radius of 150 miles of Indiana is St. Louis to the west; Chicago to the northwest; and Detroit to the northeast. Two additional large cities are located just outside the boundaries of the state. To the southeast is Cincinnati with a population of nearly a million and to the south is the large city of Louisville. Chicago, Cincinnati, and Louisville are so close that the metropolitan districts of which they are the centers, actually occupy parts of our state.

In this post-war period, the small size of our cities may be an advantage. Industry is moving from larger to smaller cities. Big enterprises are beginning to scatter their future plants rather than concentrating them in one place. The National Industrial Conference Board reported in May, 1948, that "It had queried 148 large manufacturing companies and learned that of the plants they built or acquired before 1940 nearly half were in cities of 100,000 and more. But in the period 1940-1947, only one-third of the new plants were in cities that large. Cities of from 10,000 to 100,000 were most popular. There was a large increase, too, in the number of new plants placed in cities of 10,000 or fewer." Let us keep in mind that all but four of our cities have a population of less than 100,000.

Pattern of Indiana Cities

The cities over the state are so distributed that they form several major and minor patterns. Looking at a map, one can see at first glance that they are grouped along an axis extending in a northeast-southwest direction across the state. A line drawn from Evansville on the southeast through Indianapolis to Fort Wayne on the northeast marks the approximate core of this axis. Adjacent to this line and on either side of it are grouped most of the large and small cities of Indiana.

This northeast-southwest axial pattern is due to a combination of physical and cultural factors. Some of these factors are: 1. the orientation of Indiana rivers from northeast to southwest, especially the Wabash and the west fork of the White River; 2. the early significance of water transportation, especially on the Maumee-Wabash rivers and canal; 3. the extension of the National Road from Richmond to Indianapolis and Terre Haute; 4. the Kankakee swamps in northwestern Indiana between the Wabash drainage area and Lake Michigan; and 5. the poorer agricultural potentialities in southeastern Indiana.

The one big exception to this axis pattern is a group of cities in the extreme northern part of the state. Here a second and smaller axis consists of cities grouped along a line drawn from South Chicago and Gary to South Bend and Elkhart.

Another major city pattern is the semi-circular zone of cities found grouped to the north half-way around Indianapolis. This semi-circular zone starts with Terre Haute on the west and swings north through Lafayette to Logansport and Peru. Then it turns southeastward through Marion, Muncie, Anderson, and New Castle, and ends in Richmond and Connersville. In this zone and within a seventy mile radius of Indianapolis are 15 of the 27 cities having a population of between ten and fifty thousand. Also within 70 miles of Indianapolis and to the south are three additional cities of ten to fifty thousand that form a nucleus which may someday help extend the semi-circular zone and make it a circular one. These three cities are Bloomington, Columbus, and Bedford.

The cities in southern Indiana are generally smaller than those in the central and northern parts. South of a line drawn from Terre Haute to Indianapolis and Richmond is more than a third of the state. Of the 34 cities in this southern area, 25 have less than ten thousand inhabitants. Evansville is the only large city. In this area we also have two of our 12 cities ranging from twenty to fifty thousand in size, and six of our 15 cities from ten to twenty-thousand.

There is a large wedge-shaped area in Indiana that does not have one city with a population of over ten thousand. This area is between the Wabash valley and the Chicago metropolitan district and is occupied in part by the recently drained swamplands of the Kankakee River.

A distinctive minor urban pattern is a line of cities strung along the Wabash-Maumee Rivers. Today water transportation along this historic route is insignificant, but these cities after their early start continued to grow because of other geographic factors.

In fact, most Indiana cities of ten thousand or more started as pioneer settlements on waterways and state and national highways. Later they became focal points for railroads, electric interurban lines, and hard surfaced roads.

Growth

From the standpoint of an opportunity to grow, our cities exemplify that early settlements that provided governmental services had the advantage over those that did not. Sixty-three of our 100 cities are county seats. Of the 15 cities with populations of ten-twenty thousand, only two were not county seats, namely, Elwood and Whiting. And only three out of the 12 cities with population of twenty-fifty thousand are not county seats, namely Elkhart, Michigan City, and Mishawaka.

Although the political function was and still is an important factor in the development of our small cities, the presence of urban facilities is an increasingly important factor today. Young people are more critical of their environment and perhaps better able to evaluate it. Influenced by movies, newspapers, radio and the rapidity and ease of travel, our people are observing, comparing, and evaluating various communities. Most people want homes in cities that have paved streets, water and sewage facilities, larger schools, parks, and a variety of professional services. The county seat is often able to measure up to these demands more so than other settlements.

Our urban centers also illustrate the importance of an early start. With few exceptions, the largest cities in 1900 were still the largest in 1920 and 1940.

Since 1900 and especially since 1920, manufacturing rather than retailing, wholesaling, or mining greatly influenced the growth of urban areas. Although mining and quarrying contributed materially to the growth of many cities, few today owe their present size primarily to these industries.

After 1910, the largest urban development took place in strategic northwestern Indiana. This area is astride the important lowland corridor of transit from the portal city of New York to the focal city of Chicago. In the future there will be a tendency for cities here to increase in size and number until they nearly coalesce, forming a continuous urban area from South Chicago to South Bend. The prospects of steady growth for our cities are good.