

Population and Settlement Decline in Southwestern Indiana

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Abstract

The largest contiguous and historically continuous area of population and settlement decline in Indiana is found in the southwestern part of the state. This mobile and declining population influences many facets of the economy and life style. Reasons for, and potentialities of, a Southwestern Indiana Regional Planning Commission are presented. Population shifts are not a disaster if proper short- and long-ranged plans are adopted to readjust to the situation.

Introduction

The largest continuous area of population and settlement decline in Indiana is found in the southwestern part of the state. Except for Vermillion County, there are 17 counties located in the crotch of the Wabash and Ohio Rivers in which populations declined between 1950-1960, and 4 counties which gained population only because births exceeded the combined number of deaths and emigration. The counties designated in this paper as southwestern Indiana are listed in Table 1. Population mobility is characteristic of this area with some people moving from: 1) one county in the area into another in the area, 2) the countryside into the settlements, 3) smaller settlements to the largest cities, and 4) from the area. This moving and declining population influences many facets of the society, such as: taxation and debts on formerly fully-used public and private facilities; property values; need and support for commercial establishments and services; land-use requirements; and future economic development. Population shifts in a state are not a disaster if proper short-ranged and long-ranged plans are adopted to re-adjust to the situation.

County Population Decline

During 1950-1960, 21 Indiana counties decreased in population and 17, or over 4/5 of these, are located in southwestern Indiana. The four counties outside of this region that declined in population are Warren, adjacent to the Indiana-Illinois boundary and adjacent to this region on the north, and Union, Ohio and Switzerland counties, adjacent to the Indiana-Ohio boundary in southeastern Indiana.

Not only did counties in this region decline in population between 1950-1960 but also the number of counties with such declines steadily increased in the past 30 years, 1930-1960 (Table 1). During the 1930-1940 decade, 14 counties increased in population and only 7 decreased; the highest percentage loss was 6.2 in Vermillion County. However, during the decade of 1940-1950 when employment opportunities and

Statistics in this paper preceding the centerhead "Some Chain Reactions" are taken from the 1930, 1940, 1950 and 1960 *Census of Population* of the United States or secured by using the data from these volumes.

TABLE 1. *Population percentage changes in Southwestern Indiana.*

County	1930-1940	1940-1950	1950-1960	Estimated 1966-1985
Clay	— 4.2	— 5.7	+ 1.2	— 4.1
Crawford	+ 0.1	— 8.7	— 9.8	— 25.0
Daviess	+ 1.3	+ 2.3	— 0.5	— 15.3
Dubois	+ 9.9	+ 5.3	+ 15.5	+ 20.6
Gibson	+ 5.2	+ *	— 2.5	— 10.3
Greene	— 0.5	— 11.0	— 5.6	— 25.9
Knox	+ 0.4	— 1.3	— 4.3	— 21.4
Lawrence	— 1.5	— 2.0	— 6.5	— 5.2
Martin	+ 1.9	+ 3.7	— 0.7	— 9.0
Orange	— 0.8	— 2.5	— *	— 6.2
Owen	+ 6.5	— 2.7	— 3.1	— 16.6
Parke	+ 4.8	— 9.7	— 5.6	— 14.2
Perry	+ 6.9	— 2.3	— 0.8	— 16.6
Pike	+ 4.2	— 12.0	— 14.7	— 33.3
Posey	+ 7.4	+ 3.3	— 3.0	— 23.8
Spencer	— 3.0	— 0.2	— 0.6	— 17.6
Sullivan	— 4.0	— 12.4	— 8.2	— 23.8
Vanderburgh	+ 15.4	+ 22.7	+ 3.3	+ 29.0
Vermillion	— 6.2	— 9.5	— 10.3	— 18.7
Vigo	+ 0.9	+ 5.5	+ 3.1	+ 3.6
Warrick	+ 6.6	+ 10.8	+ 9.5	+ 12.0

* Change too small to compute percentage.

employment surpassed the previous decade, 13 counties declined in population, 7 gained and Orange County had a small net loss. During 1950-1960 only 5 counties gained in population and 3 of these only slightly—Clay 1.2%, Vigo 3.1% and Vanderburgh 3.0%.

Although 11 counties in this region had both gains and declines during the 30-year period from 1930-1960, 10 counties experienced consistent declines or gains. Four counties (Dubois, Vanderburgh, Vigo and Warrick) registered continuous gains and six counties (Greene, Lawrence, Orange, Spencer, Sullivan and Vermillion) had continuous losses. The six declining counties are located adjacent to the four gaining counties. Two of the four counties with continuous population growth, Vanderburgh and Vigo, contain the two largest cities in this area, Evansville and Terre Haute, respectively. Three counties with continuous gains (Vanderburgh, Warrick and Dubois) are adjoining, but the three-county cluster is surrounded by Indiana counties where one or two decades of population decline has taken place.

The severity of population decline was greater during the more prosperous decades of 1940-1960 than during depression years of the 1930's. The population declines during the 1930-1940 period in the 7

counties ranged between 1.5 and 6.2%. In contrast, the population declines during the decade of 1940-1950 in 13 counties ranged between 1.3 and 12.0% with 6 counties having declines greater than 6.2%. During the 1950-1960 decade the decline in 16 counties ranged between 0.7 and 14.7%.

Population Growth in the Region

The 21 counties in this region have had a small population gain during 1940-1960. The gain was 2.8% between 1940-1950 and dropped to about 0.5% during the 1950's.

This region is characterized by emigration. None of the 21 counties escaped emigration. Any gain in population was chiefly due to births outnumbering the total deaths and emigration. Not one of these counties registered an increase of 18.5%, which was both the state and national growth rate during the 1950-1960 decade. In contrast, 22 counties in Indiana had a population growth greater than 18.5% with increases ranging between 19.7% in Tippecanoe and 66.3% in Hendricks counties.

Growth in Settlements

Settlements with over 1,000 inhabitants increased in 15 counties and decreased in 4 during 1930-1960. The increase ranges between 3.3% in Spencer County to 39.7% in Parke County, and the rate of decrease between 3.0% in Knox County and 23.9% in Vermillion County. Crawford County does not have a settlement with 1,000 inhabitants, and in Sullivan County, settlements with over 1,000 decreased by 7 persons.

During this 30-year period the number of settlements with populations over 1,000 increased from 41 to 46. Six of these 46 did not have a population of 1,000 in 1930. And, only one settlement with 1,000 or more inhabitants in 1930 dropped below that level before 1960.

While it is true that the population in settlements of over 1,000 has increased in 15 counties during 1930-1960, 18 of these were smaller in 1960 than they were in 1950 (Table 2). Moreover, 12 of these 18 were cities with a minimum population of 2,000 and the largest, Vincennes, had 18,046 in 1960. The 18 settlements with population declines totaled 78,312 in 1960, as compared with 83,605 in 1950, or a loss of 5,293. This loss is relatively small when compared with the gain of 12,907 persons by Evansville in the same decade. At the same time, 3 of the small cities lost over 10% of their inhabitants: Oakland City, 14.8%, Jasonville 17.0% and Bicknell 37.0%. During the preceding decade, 1940-1950, Oakland City's population gained while Bicknell's declined by 10.5%, and Jasonville lost 14.1% (2).

More settlements of 1,000 or more declined in population during 1940-1950 than during the following decade. There were 41 settlements of this size in 1950; 20 of these had a population decline during the 1940's.

The cities with populations of over 5,000 registered a smaller decline during 1950-1960 than cities of less than 5,000. Of the 12 cities

TABLE 2. *Population trends in county seats and/or largest cities.*

County	County Seat and/or Largest Cities	1930- 1940	1940- 1950	1950- 1960	Population greater in 1960 than any other decade
Clay	Brazil	—	+	+	✓
Crawford	English	+	+	—	
Daviess	Washington	+	+	—	
Dubois	Jasper	+	—	+	✓
Gibson	Princeton	+	+	+	✓
Greene	Bloomfield*	—	—	+	
	Linton	+	—	—	
Knox	Vincennes	—	+	+	
Lawrence	Bedford	—	+	+	
Martin	Loogootee*	+	+	+	✓
	Shoals	—	+	+	✓
Orange	Paoli	+	+	+	✓
Owen	Spencer	+	+	+	✓
Parke	Rockville	+	+	+	✓
Perry	Cannelton	—	—	—	
	Tell City*	+	+	+	✓
Pike	Petersburg	+	—	—	
Posey	Mount Vernon	+	+	—	
Spencer	Rockport	+	+	—	
Sullivan	Sullivan	—	+	—	
Vanderburgh	Evansville	—	+	+	✓
Vermillion	Clinton*	—	—	—	
	Newport	+	—	—	
Vigo	Terre Haute	—	+	+	✓
Warrick	Boonville	+	+	—	

* Largest city in county but not the county seat.

with over 5,000, 7 had a larger population in 1960 than in 1950, and 5 had less. The two largest cities, Evansville and Terre Haute, with over 70,000, gained in population during the 1950's while the next 2 largest cities, Vincennes and Bedford, lost.

Summary of Population Decline

Counties, towns and cities have lost population in Southwestern Indiana. Some of these declines existed during only 1 decade, some during 2 and in others, declines were continuous over 30 years, between 1930-1960. Projections of population growth between 1966 and 1985 predict that 17 of these 21 counties will decline by approximately 57,000 and 4 counties, Dubois, Vanderburgh, Vigo and Warrick, will gain about 61,000 inhabitants during the same period (4). The total gain would be only 4,000, a very small gain (less than 1%). Should the projection be correct, since the total population gain was only 0.5% during 1950-1960, it is obvious that this region has problems with population declines, almost stagnant growth and emigration. In contrast, other counties in Indiana will rapidly gain in population due to births and immigration. For example, according to John M. Huie, Monroe County's population increased by 35.5% between April 1, 1960, and July 1, 1966, and immigration of more than 14,000 was the highest of any county in the state. During the same period Vanderburgh's emigration reached 11,800.

Some Chain Reactions

As the population of an area declines over a period of several decades a chain of economic, social and political reactions bring about complications. Some of these interrelated reactions are briefly described in the following paragraphs.

1) Local employment opportunities either stagnate or decline. In Southwestern Indiana employment in mining, agriculture, commerce and services has declined in recent decades. Technological change and new techniques have influenced need for employment in all these occupations. New machinery and techniques in coal mining have drastically cut the need for a large number of miners. Machinery, farm consolidation and corporate farming have resulted in rapid declines in population and farm employment opportunities. With decline of mining and farming employment, fewer people are needed to supply goods and services resulting in some becoming temporarily or permanently unemployed. As work opportunities appeared in adjacent counties or in nearby cities people were forced either to commute to work or to move.

2) Areas with declining populations generally have a larger number of their people in the upper age brackets. Emigration generally consists of the younger workers and those more economically "foot loose." And the older people who are: unable to liquidate their property; willing to accept less affluent living conditions; and/or incapable of leaving life-long friends, remain behind.

3) Employees who remain in the area spend more time and money in commuting to work in cities such as Evansville, Terre Haute, and Vincennes and to factories in Dubois County or in counties outside the area such as Monroe.

4) As the population declines in townships, counties, incorporated villages and small cities, school districts and special districts, it often becomes more expensive per person or family to support the existing services and to provide new facilities. Moreover, as commercial and/or small industrial establishments go out of business or move from the area, heavier taxes fall upon residential and agricultural land and structures.

5) In attempting to reduce costs, new services (typical of more prosperous counties and cities) are often postponed and the quality of the service already established may decline. For example, the size of police and fireman forces may be cut, new equipment may not be purchased and that on hand may not be adequately repaired.

6) With the resulting population decline, public services retarded and/or restricted, and tax rates increased, it becomes very difficult for settlements to attract manufacturing and service industries which could give the community a more varied employment mix. Industrial management makes careful investigations of the quality and quantity of services available before moving into a city.

7) Residential property values may decline in villages and small cities thus putting owners with large debts in a financial squeeze and preventing people, if they must sell, from receiving a reasonable price for their land and buildings.

8) The number and quality of commercial and service establishments in small cities may decline which may: reduce customer selection; raise prices; and/or influence customers to shop in other cities.

9) The number, kinds and quality of professional services may also decline and some may disappear. Some villages and smaller cities which formerly had several doctors, dentists, lawyers and bankers now have only one or none of each profession.

10) As cities become dormitory settlements where most of the taxes are levied on residences, the taxing unit cannot afford to provide the services considered necessities in a twentieth century community or, if it does, it becomes a burden.

11) Vacant urban structures and land provide a poor economic image to potential developers.

12) Commuters who live outside the corporate limits may be subject to payroll taxes. Mayor Frank F. McDonald, Evansville, estimates that 15,000 persons who work in Evansville live outside the political city (1).

As these and other actors interact the economic situation spirals downward aggravating forces already in operation, sometimes introducing other degrading forces, and stimulating additional emigrations to more prosperous areas in Indiana and other states. According to Huie (4), Indiana's employment grew by approximately 206,000 jobs between 1950-1960 but, according to the United States Department of Commerce, if Indiana's employment had grown at the national rate there would have been an additional 29,000 jobs.

Some Suggested Action

What has been done in the last decade or two to help the county leaders and people to meet the problems associated with declining populations? Have conferences been held, study groups organized and/or a program of investigations been launched? Is there literature on these problems that could be made available to the high schools and universities in this area? Does the Legislature or the State have study groups for research and to offer suggestions and alternate courses for action?

It seems that not too much has been written either about the 21 counties under consideration or the problems associated with declining populations and settlements. And one of the best publications *a propos* to this area, entitled *Regional Development and the Wabash Basin* (3), either has not been read or understood or, if so, has not stimulated much action or reaction in Southwestern Indiana.

It seems that most of the American literature on settlements, urbanism and urban problems and solutions to problems is about cities with populations over 100,000. Moreover, the literature on problems created by rapid population and city growth far exceeds that on problems and alternate solutions for areas of population and settlement decline. There is need for material written on smaller settlements. Southwestern Indiana is a region of small settlements with only 5 of the 46 having populations of 10,000 or more. Twenty of the 46 have populations in the 1,000 to 2,000 bracket. And in Indiana where a settlement qualifies as a city if it has a population of 2,000, there are 26 cities with 14 in the 2,000-5,000 bracket and 7 in the 5,000-10,000 bracket.

The government provides information on surveys and studies dealing with the Wabash and Ohio River watersheds and has made or will make suggestions for economic and social development. But most of these studies focus on areas of both rapidly-expanding and declining counties.

Is it possible for the 21 counties in this area and Warren (adjacent and to the north) to create a regional planning organization which could focus directly on the problems, potentialities and beneficial adjustments for this area? Such an organization could provide a forum wherein the problems of the area could be aired, freely discussed and courses of action agreed upon in a non-partisan atmosphere. Conferences could be held for high school students and their parents, university audiences, and in settlements throughout the region to discuss economic and social problems and alternative solutions. A Southwestern Indiana Regional Planning Commission could outline and start a program of study investigations. It would seem that such a program would be better than the present situation. This is serious and action is needed now.

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