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THE VARIETY OF
URBAN EXPERIENCES

Recalibrating Expectations: Lessons from Youngstown, Ohio

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In September 1977, the Youngstown Sheet and Tube Company announced the first major shutdown in the American steel industry. It was closing its largest mill, the Campbell Works, displacing over 10,000 workers.¹ Other shutdowns followed, putting another 40,000 people out of work over the next decade. The Youngstown, Ohio, population had peaked at 170,000 in 1930, but between the shutdowns and 2020, its population fell to just over 60,000 residents. The metropolitan statistical area—known locally as the Mahoning Valley—also lost about 20 percent of its population between 1980 and 2020.²

We have long argued that Youngstown’s story is America’s story. It might not have been the first American city to experience such dramatic losses, but it would not be the last. Youngstown illustrates the “half-life of deindustrialization”³—the long-term effects of restructuring, disinvestment, globalization, and technology that make recovery so difficult for many communities.

Americans have a deep faith in renewal; decline is supposed to be followed by growth. In the early 1980s, experts assured Youngstown residents that the demise of the steel industry was part of a process of “creative destruction” that would ultimately yield new and better jobs.⁴ Journalists soon began calling us, looking for the feel-good follow-up story about how Youngstown was bouncing back. More recently, they have touted other rust belt cities as examples of revitalization, especially Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where technology and health care have replaced steel as the primary industries. When journalists call now, the question is more likely to be, “What’s wrong with Youngstown? Why hasn’t this place recovered?”⁵

We want to propose a more strategic question: What can Youngstown teach us about economic renewal? Youngstown’s story is not a tale of

insufficient effort or community failure. In Youngstown and the Mahoning Valley, a wide range of efforts has been deployed over the past 40 years to attract new businesses and revitalize the economy. Dozens of projects involving government, private businesses, community groups, and various partnerships have helped create new jobs, revitalize downtown, and improve neighborhoods. But all this effort has not generated the prosperity that narratives of recovery lead us to expect.

This is Youngstown's story now: Traditional economic development strategies and community organizing may not be enough to "save" legacy cities. Even in places celebrated for successful rebranding and rebuilding, such as Pittsburgh,⁶ we need to acknowledge the challenges of economic development. As recent history has shown, while the limits and unevenness of recovery may affect residents of some places more than others, their political and cultural consequences affect the whole country.

Not for Lack of Trying: A Brief History of Local Revitalization Efforts

Across the Mahoning Valley, rows of deteriorating homes and commercial buildings, massive empty and polluted lots where steel mills once stood, boarded-up storefronts, and thousands of vacant properties might suggest that residents and local leaders are either incompetent or didn't try hard enough to rebuild the economy.

This landscape doesn't clearly show the effects of the many different economic and community development efforts that have been pursued over the past four decades. These include reducing taxes, subsidizing private development, decontaminating brownfield sites, and conducting targeted place marketing. Federal, state, and local governments; businesses; and foundations have invested millions, and hundreds of residents have participated in community organizing projects. The most significant efforts have concentrated in three areas: preserving the industrial economy, attracting new industries, and building community capacity.

Saving the Industrial Economy

Youngstown began trying to preserve its core industries days after Sheet and Tube announced its first layoffs in 1977. Three busloads of residents headed to Washington, DC, with petitions demanding help from the federal government. Unions, churches, and other community groups formed the Ecumenical Coalition, which proposed that Youngstown should buy part of the closed mill and operate it as a community-owned business. The idea might have succeeded if the US government had agreed to provide a guarantee for the necessary loans and invest in steel-related infrastructure renewal.⁷ Rather than being passive, Youngstown was the only community to organize such an ambitious fight to save its major industry.⁸

The steel industry never fully disappeared. Smaller, niche companies still operate in the Mahoning Valley, though the industry now has only a few thousand workers. Starting in 2010, when the French steelmaker Vallourec invested \$1.2 billion to reopen a section of the Brier Hill Works of Youngstown Sheet and Tube, hydraulic fracturing brought a modest boost to steel.⁹ That project was enabled by funding from the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act and tax abatements, and additional government funding helped the company build a new specialty mill a few years later. While some cite Vallourec as a major win for the Mahoning Valley, the site where thousands of people once worked now employs a few hundred.¹⁰ Along with new steelmaking jobs, fracking brought problems: polluted water wells and earthquakes, one of them a magnitude four, in a region that had previously experienced few.¹¹

The Mahoning Valley's auto industry suffered a similar decline. General Motors (GM) opened its sprawling Lordstown plant a few miles outside Youngstown in 1966, attracting smaller automotive parts suppliers to the area. The largest of these, Packard Electric, which later became part of Delphi Automotive, employed over 14,000 unionized workers in the 1970s. In the 1980s, Delphi began moving its operations to the maquiladora sector in Mexico and to China. Despite numerous tax abatements and government incentives, including the Obama administration's 2010 auto bailout, and massive wage concessions from workers, GM ultimately closed Lordstown along with four other plants in 2019.

A new company, Lordstown Motors, bought the site for its electric pickup operation. Despite \$20 million in local tax incentives,¹² Lordstown Motors soon reported that it didn't have enough capital to start production, and in 2021, Foxconn purchased part of the facility to build small cars.¹³ GM also returned to the area in 2021 with a joint agreement with Ultium Cells to make electric vehicle batteries. A new \$2.3 billion factory near the old Lordstown plant is slated to employ 1,100 workers, far fewer than the 8,000 GM initially employed. While Lordstown Motors founder Steve Burns initially indicated that the company would hire United Auto Workers members and pay the same as the “big three” automakers (i.e., Chrysler, Ford, and GM), Zippia reports that average annual earnings for assembly workers at Lordstown Motors are \$27,525, less than the \$45,000 average for workers doing the same job at GM.¹⁴

Attracting New Industries

Local leaders have also worked hard to attract new employers. Beginning in the 1980s, numerous campaigns tried to lure GM Saturn, Avanti Motors, a blimp factory, and other companies to “save” the Mahoning Valley. Some of those possibilities came to fruition, though none has even remotely restored the area's mid-century prosperity.

Two sectors have created long-term jobs. The first, distribution, takes advantage of Youngstown's location on two interstate highways, halfway between New York and Chicago and between Cleveland and Pittsburgh. Tax abatements and new zoning rules attracted FedEx, Macy's, Taylor Steel, and Anderson Dubose, among others. Most recently, TJ Maxx has opened a massive site just a few miles outside Youngstown, where it is expected to hire nearly 1,000 workers who will earn about \$19 an hour, or about \$37,000 annually—approximately half of what a typical unionized auto or steel-worker earned and well below what is needed to support a family.¹⁵

The second sector has generated better-paying jobs: prisons. In the 1990s, a state maximum-security facility and a private Corrections Corporation of America (now CoreCivic) prison brought several hundred new jobs along with prisoners—including undocumented immigrants awaiting deportation—to the area. Prisoners count as residents, so they shore up

local population numbers and affect government subsidies for the area.¹⁶ The prisons also pay reasonably well—about \$60,000 a year, making them some of the better paid of the new jobs in the Youngstown area. The federal government’s move away from private prisons, however, threatens this sector.

Some of the other newcomers have turned out to be scammers. Perhaps the most dramatic recent example is Chill-Can. In 2016, Youngstown offered tax abatements and a \$1.5 million grant—one of its largest ever—because Chill-Can promised to invest millions to build a complex to house its manufacturing and research operations. The city spent several hundred thousand dollars more to buy and tear down homes to clear space for the facility. Chill-Can built two metal hangar-style buildings, but five years later, it has not created a single long-term job. The city is now suing to recoup some of that investment.

Sadly, this is not an isolated case. ProPublica reports that this “was just the latest in a long line of fizzled developments” in which “officials have gambled with economic development dollars in hopes of reviving the city.” Of 94 projects over the past 30 years, half didn’t produce as many jobs as promised, and one in four created no new jobs at all.¹⁷

Some development schemes have argued for redefining Youngstown as part of a megalopolis linked to Cleveland and Pittsburgh and centered not on steel but on high-tech green jobs. In 2007, Youngstown’s congressional representative, Rep. Tim Ryan (D-OH), helped secure \$45 million in federal matching funds to create the Techbelt Additive Manufacturing Innovation Institute. The institute, since renamed America Makes, is based in Youngstown but has a national agenda to promote advanced manufacturing and the country’s manufacturing competitiveness.¹⁸ While it did not, as Ryan hoped, change the regions’ economy or identity, it has helped create about 100 jobs in the Mahoning Valley and 20 professional positions in its downtown offices.

Economic development efforts often begin with visions of a single employer or a new industry saving the community. Many have failed, and even the successes have had limited impact. New businesses employ far fewer people than once worked in the steel mills and auto plants, and most of the newer jobs pay less than heavy industries did. In 1977, steelworkers earned an average of \$13 an hour, the equivalent of \$58.85 today.¹⁹ Payscale

estimates that workers in the area today earn \$16.03 an hour on average. The tax abatements that lured new companies also left local governments perennially underfunded, while state budget cuts reduced funding for schools, infrastructure, and social welfare. Youngstown has managed to slow its decline, but it has not achieved anything close to a full recovery.

Rebuilding Community Capacity

Along with good jobs, communities need the social capacity to address the many problems that stem from economic distress.²⁰ Here, too, the Mahoning Valley has worked hard to stabilize neighborhoods, improve education and health, fight crime and addiction, and reenergize community life. Many of those efforts can be tied to the “Youngstown 2010” plan, developed in the early 2000s as a response to the city’s declining population.

The 2010 plan was a joint effort between Youngstown State University (YSU) and the city government and designed by urban planners. But it also involved community outreach, for which it won the 2007 National Planning Excellence Award for community engagement. It identified four strategies: expanding the network of public green spaces, developing new industrial sites in brownfield areas where steel mills once stood, strengthening “viable” neighborhoods and decreasing city services in areas deemed beyond salvaging, and creating a more vital downtown.²¹ While most agree that the 2010 plan did not fulfill its vision, it drew national attention for its model of “smart shrinkage,” which the *New York Times Magazine* called one of the best new ideas of 2005.²²

The most successful part of the 2010 plan was downtown redevelopment. Between 1995 and 2008, over \$100 million in public funding helped create a new state office building, a convention and event center, a second federal courthouse, a performing arts center, and the Youngstown Business Incubator (YBI). While these all created jobs and gave people reasons to come downtown, YBI has drawn the most attention for its efforts to support tech startups.

Initially funded by the Ohio Department of Development, YBI has brought in millions of dollars in federal and state grants. It now houses 20 portfolio companies that employ 370 people, including the

education-technology company Turning Technologies, which employs about 170 people. Some downtown development projects involved public-private partnerships, such as a Cleveland real estate developer's conversion of an office building into 23 luxury condominiums. Federal and state tax credits covered about half the \$8 million invested in the project. In 2007, the Youngstown *Vindicator* (which has since closed) proudly declared that "an urban renaissance has been quietly but successfully taking root" in downtown Youngstown.²³

Downtown has also become a hub of community life. New restaurants, bars, and coffee shops opened, starting around 2007. Downtown workers appreciated the new dining options, and suburban residents started to pack the bar at V2 and listen to live music at the Lemon Grove. Today, the Covelli Centre and a new outdoor amphitheater bring people downtown for concerts and other events. A monthly flea market features small local vendors of handcrafted goods.

Downtown development was further boosted when YSU expanded its footprint with a new business school building and several private student housing developments on the south side of campus, just half a mile from downtown. A new community college was also established in largely unoccupied buildings downtown, though most of its students are online, and it has few faculty. In 2021, YSU has lost enrollment, and the community college is on the brink of losing accreditation. In 2019, Doubletree opened a hotel—the first within the city limits since a small inn near the university closed in the late '90s, but it has almost never made the loan payments it owes to the city. While some businesses have closed or faltered, downtown Youngstown today is far livelier than it was two decades ago.

All this generated some service-sector jobs, but it barely affected the city's widespread poverty. Neighborhoods continue to struggle, though some residents remain committed to their homes even as their blocks decline, defeating the 2010 plan's strategy of cutting services to failing neighborhoods. However, the plan's community-engagement efforts and its vision for strategic change inspired new efforts to combine grassroots organizing with public and private investments to address the problems facing neighborhoods and their residents.

Community-based efforts to address poverty were not new to Youngstown. The area had a long tradition of active—and activist—unions,

religious groups, and civic clubs. Common Wealth, an independent nonprofit created in 1986, worked on housing and advocacy. Its leaders, Jim Converse and Pat Rosenthal, helped establish the Alliance for Congregational Transformation Influencing Our Neighborhoods (ACTION), an affiliate of the Gamaliel Foundation, in 1999. ACTION and its 30 member organizations, mostly urban churches, worked on food access, racial justice, and housing. The Catholic Diocese of Youngstown opened its branch of Catholic Charities in the same year, providing services directly to people in poverty.

But the 2010 plan inspired new efforts, starting with increased investment by a major local foundation and the work of two new community organizing groups, the Mahoning Valley Organizing Collaborative (MVOC) and the Youngstown Neighborhood Development Corporation (YNDC). Founded in 2008 by the Ohio Organizing Collaborative, MVOC spearheaded a citywide vacant property survey performed largely by residents, which led to new ordinances and renewed code enforcement activity by city officials. MVOC also pushed officials to create the Mahoning County Land Bank to enable residential demolition and rehabilitation and repurpose abandoned properties, creating new green spaces.

In 2009, YNDC began work in the Idora Park neighborhood, with support from foundations, the city, federal programs, and regional banks. They stabilized housing in the neighborhood, engaged residents in cleanup efforts, and helped renters secure loans to buy homes. All this fostered investment and hope and strengthened the community's capacity to address problems. YNDC is now expanding its work in other neighborhoods.²⁴

These projects produced significant concrete outcomes, and they helped generate an important cultural change: increased engagement by residents, especially younger adults. Some have moved back to the area, attracted by not only family ties, affordable housing, and a sense of connection to the city's working-class past but also new opportunities. As one activist, Danielle Seidita, explained, in a smaller city such as Youngstown, "if you want to do something . . . it is a lot easier to do it here than [*sic*] it might be in [*sic*] to do in New York or even Cleveland or Columbus."²⁵ While some local organizers have left Youngstown for other opportunities, others have remained, and local foundations, city and regional government, small businesses, and community organizations have all benefited from their insight and commitment.

Recalibrating Expectations: Persistent Challenges of Smaller Legacy Cities

In some ways, Youngstown should be counted as a success story. Despite a number of failed economic development efforts, the millions invested in Mahoning Valley have laid the foundation for dozens of small to midsize businesses and a few thousand new jobs over the past two decades. The city is within sight of demolishing the last 800 of its almost 5,000 vacant homes. More people now work in the city and enjoy downtown's nightlife. A few neighborhoods have benefited from new investments and stronger community groups. A new generation of leaders has emerged with creative ideas and a deep commitment to this place.

Yet Youngstown remains among the poorest cities in the US. In July 2021, unemployment in the city was 10.3 percent, almost twice the national rate of 5.2 percent.²⁶ Youngstown's median household income is \$28,822, and its poverty rate is 35.2 percent.²⁷ Achieving this disappointing economic record required massive investment and effort. Why hasn't the recovery been more robust?

Some would blame local failures. Youngstown has a long history of racial divisions, exacerbated by class inequities, and some development efforts have reinforced rather than changed these patterns. In 2000, Youngstown was identified as one of the most racially segregated cities in the US, and a clear divide still runs between the city and its suburbs. More than 53 percent of city residents are black or Hispanic, compared with less than 10 percent in neighboring Boardman. For Mahoning County as a whole, 24.2 percent of residents have at least a bachelor's degree, but in the city, only 13.6 percent have one.²⁸

The divide also involves economic differences. Incomes are higher, and both the poverty rate and unemployment are lower in the suburbs. Many of the most successful economic development efforts have made little difference for lower-income, less-educated residents, either because new jobs are located outside the city or because they require specialized training or college degrees. The education professionals who have benefited tend to live outside the city, exacerbating the region's class and race divide. The divisions even extend into community organizing efforts, which have prioritized inclusion but are mostly led by white people. With "more diverse

leadership,” one activist told us, the region could “benefit from new ideas, perspectives, talents.”²⁹

The Mahoning Valley also lacks strong leadership. Too many elected and appointed officials embrace the historical culture of corruption that includes cronyism, bribery, and other means of generating individual rather than community gains.³⁰ The convictions of two of Youngstown’s recent mayors and its finance director, like the 2002 conviction of local Rep. James A. Traficant (D-OH) on charges of bribery, racketeering, and tax evasion, reflect this persistent problem.

Even among the community’s most dedicated and effective leaders, collaboration is often elusive. Individuals and local governments fail to share information or work together. This reflects the fragmented structure of the Mahoning Valley, where several small cities and more than a dozen townships have separate school districts, police and fire departments, and administrative offices. Despite the Eastgate Regional Council of Governments’s efforts to promote collaborative planning and development, local communities remain balkanized. This pattern is echoed in community and economic development programs. Each group has its own vision and projects, and they too often duplicate efforts or compete with each other rather than collaborating.

Yet these problems do not fully explain Youngstown’s continuing struggles. Systematic disinvestment by corporations and the social costs of that disinvestment—from declining populations, tax bases, and political power to rising rates of mental and physical health problems—create significant challenges for many legacy cities.³¹ Funding cuts from state and federal austerity programs have made it more difficult to address the continuing effects of deindustrialization, and they feed distrust and discouragement.

In contrast, larger former industrial cities such as Pittsburgh and Cleveland benefit from local foundations that invest far more in community development than the Mahoning Valley’s major funders possibly could. Cleveland’s Gund Foundation makes around \$20 million a year in grants, nearly 10 times as much as the local Wean Foundation’s \$2.275 million. Those cities have also benefited from major hospitals and research universities, according to recent reports from the Brookings Institution.³²

Yet even these cities’ recoveries have limits. Pittsburgh and Cleveland have poverty rates far above the national average—20.5 percent and

30.8 percent, respectively. Shifts from manufacturing to service industries, from union contracts to gig jobs, and from public investment in infrastructure and education to austerity—all make a full recovery impossible for many places and working-class people. Without many more good jobs for people with limited training and skills, deindustrialized communities and the people who live in them will continue to struggle.

Contrary to the American faith in renewal, recovery is often hard-won, and it is almost always uneven. Youngstown today has enough jobs, paying high enough wages, to keep the local economy afloat but not enough to generate shared, much less expanded, prosperity. This pattern applies even to “success stories” such as Pittsburgh’s, where many new jobs pay low wages and some neighborhoods have clearly not “bounced back.”³³ Any tale of economic renaissance has to ask: Who benefits, and what are the consequences for those who do not?

Youngstown’s story makes painfully clear that the promises of creative destruction were, for too many, just fantasies. Youngstown might not offer a model of revitalization, but it has proved almost heroically persistent. It offers a cautionary tale, warning deindustrialized communities to resist the false promises of cruel optimism when the most realistic outcome is adaptive resilience.

Notes

1. This chapter draws on more than 25 years of research on Ohio’s Mahoning Valley and our experiences as residents of the area and participants in community life. Together, we wrote *Steeltown USA: Work and Memory in Youngstown* (University Press of Kansas, 2002) and a number of articles on these themes. In developing this chapter, we consulted with local journalists, urban and economic planners, and community leaders.

2. Demographic data throughout are drawn from the “Quick Facts” pages for Youngstown and Mahoning County, available on the US Census website. See US Census Bureau, “Quick Facts Mahoning County, Ohio,” <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/mahoningcountyohio>; and US Census Bureau, “Quick Facts Youngstown City, Ohio; Mahoning County, Ohio,” <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/youngstowncityohio,mahoningcountyohio/PST045219>.

3. Sherry Lee Linkon, *The Half-Life of Deindustrialization: Working-Class Writing About Economic Restructuring* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2018).

4. Sherry Linkon and John Russo, “Youngstown, Economic Nationalism, and the Half-Life of Deindustrialization,” *American Prospect*, September 19, 2017, <https://prospect.org/economy/youngstown-economic-nationalism-half-life-deindustrialization>.

5. In a 2003 article, we documented how reporters began asking if Youngstown had recovered within just a few years after the mills closed. See Sherry Lee Linkon and John Russo, “Collateral Damage: Deindustrialization and the Uses of Youngstown,” in *Beyond the Ruins: The Meanings of Deindustrialization*, ed. Jefferson Cowie and Joseph Heathcott (Ithaca, NY: ILR Press, 2003). More recently, reporters have been interested in why the area continues to struggle. See, for example, Anne Hull, “Recession Hitting Ohio’s Former Steel Towns Hard,” *Washington Post*, December 17, 2009, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/12/16/AR2009121604244.html>; and Dan Kaufman, “Will Trump’s Broken Promises to Working-Class Voters Cost Him the Election?,” Economic Hardship Reporting Project, October 31, 2020, <https://economichardship.org/2020/10/will-trumps-broken-promises-to-working-class-voters-cost-him-the-election>.

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