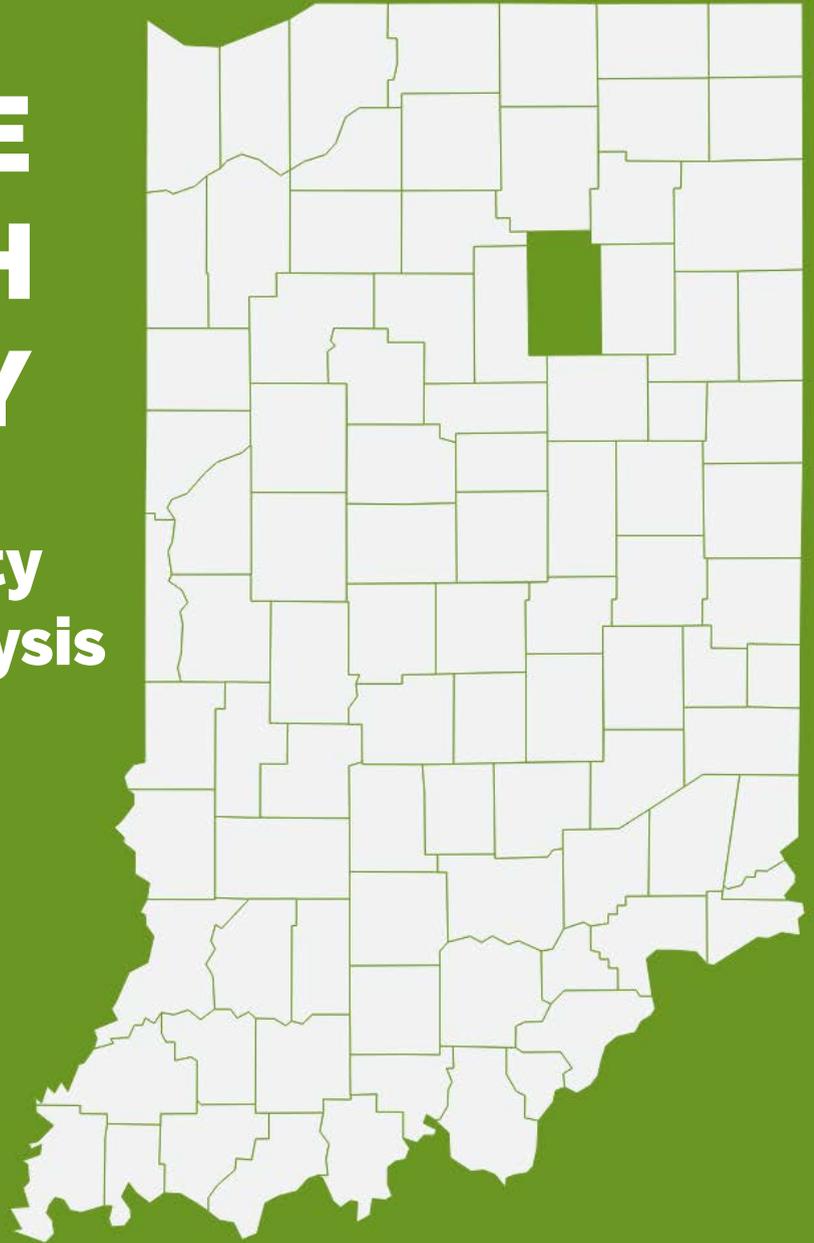


# IMAGINE WABASH COUNTY

## Wabash County Population Analysis Key Findings

July 2019



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# INTRODUCTION

The Community Research Institute (CRI) at Purdue University Fort Wayne prepared these key findings as part of a project for the Community Foundation of Wabash County and its partner, Grow Wabash County. The research was funded by the Community Foundation from a Lilly Endowment Inc., GIFT initiative phase VII grant. The full report can be found on the Community Foundation's website, [www.cfwabash.org](http://www.cfwabash.org) and Grow Wabash County's website at [www.growwabashcounty.com](http://www.growwabashcounty.com).

CRI worked with Transform Consulting Group, Becker Consulting, and Make No Small Plans, LLC, to provide quantitative and qualitative data about Wabash County, Indiana, as it relates to the forces and dynamics around Wabash County's population decline. This information is designed to provide Community Foundation and its community partners a common understanding of the past, present and future: what has happened locally, what is currently occurring, and where Wabash County could go.

Population decline in Wabash County has been a real but almost invisible trend when factored against rising income, increasing households, and escalating property values. Just because it isn't obvious doesn't mean it isn't happening, and its potential for detrimental effects is not far off for Wabash County.

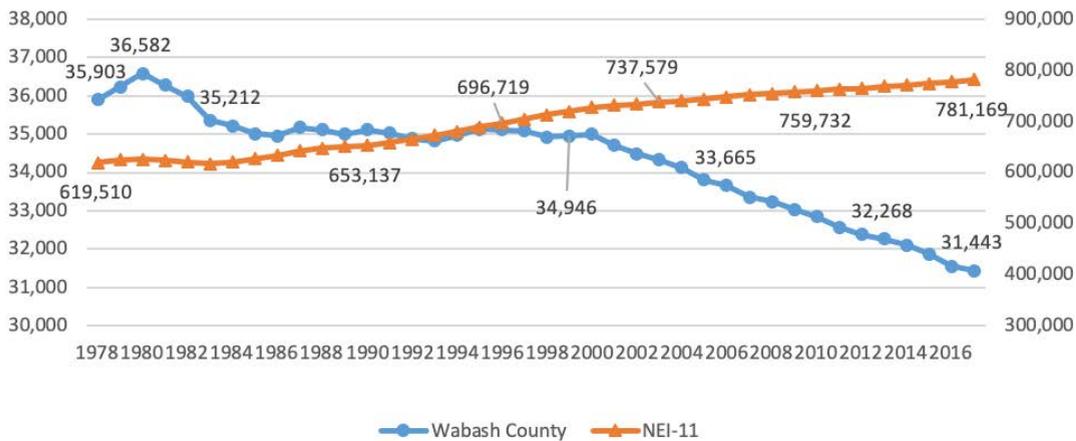


# QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS

## POPULATION

Wabash County's population peaked in 1980 at 36,582. The population declined 14.05 percent since then. In contrast, the population for the 11-county northeast Indiana region (NEI-11)<sup>1</sup> trended upward in this same time period, save for three years in the early 1980s, which were the only years with annual population loss.

FIGURE 1: Population, Wabash County and NEI - 11, 1978-2017



Wabash County's population has declined 14.05% since 1980.

Source: U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis with NEI-11 calculated by CRI

Wabash County is not alone in its population trends. Grant, Huntington and Miami counties also had small, persistent declines, year over year since 2010. There was no large, one-time decline, indicating a plant closure with employee relocation or other economic event. Rather it is nearly invisible annually, yet the cumulative effect is jarring. Accordingly, Community Research Institute (CRI) calculated the percentage and numeric change for each county during that time.

FIGURE 2: Population Change 2010-2018

	Percentage	Numeric
Grant County	-5.68%	-3970
Huntington County	-2.38%	-877
Miami County	-3.63%	-1243
Wabash County	-4.89%	-1568

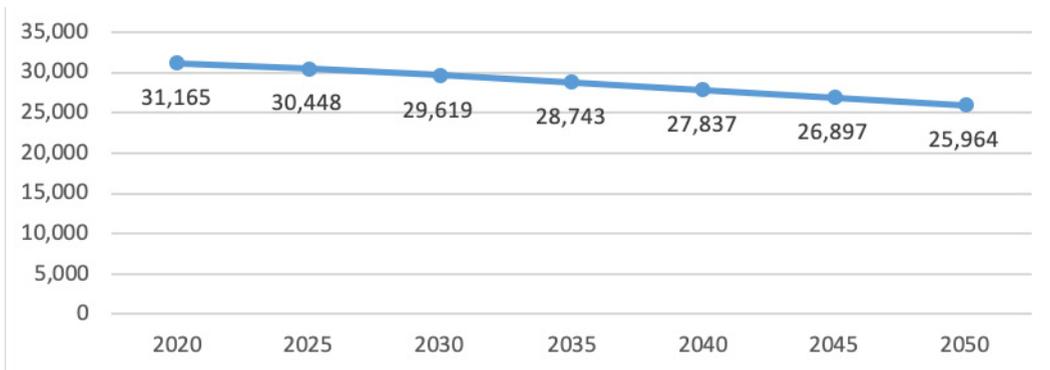
Source: Calculated by CRI using U.S. Census Bureau Population Estimates

1. The 11-county region consists of Adams, Allen, DeKalb, Huntington, Kosciusko, LaGrange, Noble, Steuben, Wabash, Wells and Whitley counties.

# POPULATION PROJECTIONS

The Indiana Business Research Center (IBRC) at the Indiana University Kelley School of Business creates the state- and county-level population projections for Indiana. The projections are created after the decennial census and projects out 40 years in five-year increments. For this chart, CRI used the years yet to occur. New projections will happen after the 2020 census.

FIGURE 3. Indiana Business Research Center Population Projections, Wabash County, 2020-2050



Source: Population projections, STATS Indiana, Indiana Business Research Center, Indiana University

**Wabash County's population is projected to decline 16.69% in the next 30 years.**

Comparing population estimates to projections, **Wabash County's actual population decline is accelerating faster than what was expected.** Wabash County is on track to be at or below the 2020 projection with the 2019 population estimate.

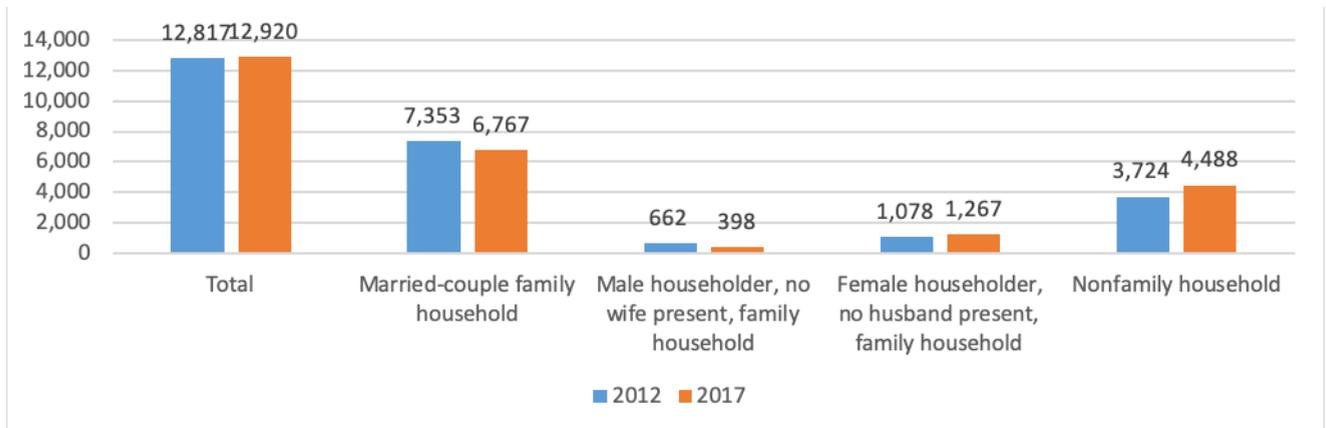
Wabash County is not alone in the projected population decline. Grant, Huntington, and Miami counties are projected to have fewer residents in 2050 than they did in 2010 based on the IBRC population projections. Indiana's population is predicted to increase 7.92 percent from 2020 to 2050.



## INCREASING HOUSEHOLDS AND ASSESSED VALUE MAKES POPULATION LOSS AN INVISIBLE PROBLEM

In many ways population decline is an invisible problem. The number of Wabash County households increased between 2012 and 2017, using five-year data from the U.S. Census Bureau. However, the largest household type – married-couple families – declined. The growth occurred with single-mother families and non-family households, which for Wabash County are primarily people living alone.

FIGURE 4: Number of Households by Household type, Wabash County, 2012 and 2017

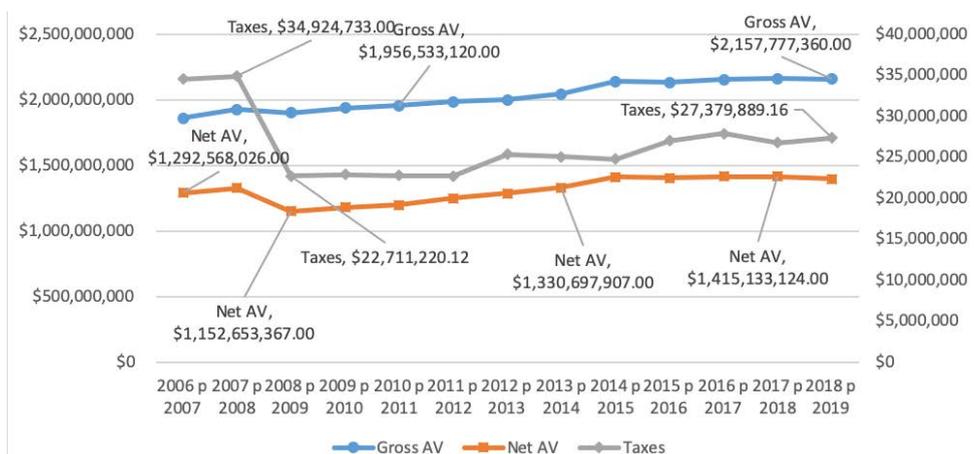


Source: Table S1101, U.S. Census Bureau

## ASSESSED VALUES AND PROPERTY TAXES

Wabash County's assessed value – gross (total property value) and net (gross minus deductions like homestead exemptions or tax abatements) – has risen since the Great Recession. The drop in taxes between 2007 pay 2008 and 2008 pay 2009 reflects Indiana's property tax restructuring. That was incidentally followed by the Great Recession and its associated housing crises. Gross and net AVs remained flat for a few years and then experienced a slight increase in 2012 pay 2013. From there, AVs plateaued for 2015 pay 2016 and essentially stayed at those levels through the most recent information. Once the economy entered the recovery, property taxes started to increase.

FIGURE 5: Assessed Value and Property Taxes, Wabash County, 2006 Pay 2007-2018 Pay 2019



Source: Table S1101, U.S. Census Bureau

## INDUSTRY TRENDS: LOSS OF MANUFACTURING JOBS



Wabash County has not recovered manufacturing jobs since the Great Recession and has lost more than 50% of jobs in that industry since 2001, using data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Wabash County is not alone with its loss of manufacturing jobs with similar trends in Grant, Huntington, and Miami counties. Kosciusko County is exceptional for its slight gain for manufacturing workers in this same time period.

Recognizing qualitative data gathered during this project indicated an interest in creating more jobs in Wabash County for people with college degrees, CRI looked at employment data for the same period as manufacturing in two sectors that tend to employ people with a bachelor's degree or higher: Financial Activities and Professional, Scientific, Technical Services.

Again, Kosciusko County performed well while Wabash County struggled to keep pace. If Wabash County leaders are looking to increase the number of jobs for people with bachelor's degrees or higher, these two sectors offer significant promise, especially because of the proximity to counties that are doing well in these industries.

FIGURE 6: Industry Employment 2001-2018

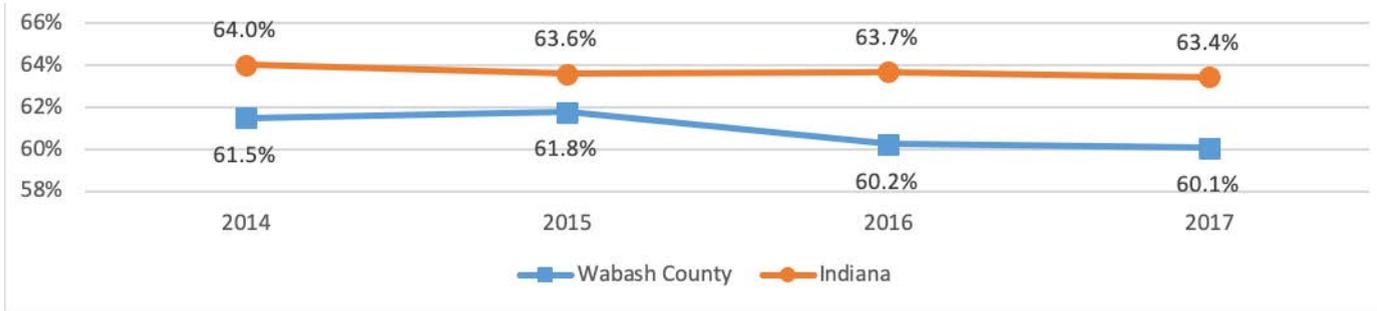
County	MANUFACTURING			FINANCIAL ACTIVITIES			PROFESSIONAL, SCIENTIFIC, TECHNICAL SERVICES		
	2018 Jobs*	% Change	# Change	2018 Jobs*	% Change	# Change	2018 Jobs*	% Change	# Change
Grant	4,743	-40.95%	-3289	882	-11.36%	-113	1,739	51.48%	591
Huntington	3,385	-36.18%	-1919	559	9.82%	50	824	15.08%	108
Kosciusko	15,560	4.47%	666	940	16.19%	131	2,761	89.63%	1,305
Miami	1,914	-38.42%	-1194	340	5.26%	17	274	79.08%	121
Wabash	2,712	-50.35%	-2750	406	-13.25%	-62	538	45.01%	167

\*Preliminary numbers  
Source: Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages (QCEW), U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics; change calculated by CRI

## LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATE

The labor force participation rate is the percent of people ages 16 and older who are employed or unemployed – the total labor market – compared to the total population ages 16 and older. These data reflect Wabash County's residents. In addition to having a smaller share of the working-age population working compared to Indiana, Wabash County's labor force participation rate is decelerating at a faster pace than Indiana's in this four-year period of 2.28 percent compared to 0.94 percent.

FIGURE 7: Labor Force Participation Rate (16 and older), Wabash County and Indiana, 2014-2018



Source: Table K202301, U.S. Census Bureau

## TRIPLE PLAY INDUSTRIES

The following chart shows the Wabash County industries in 2018 with Location Quotient (LQ) above 1.25, above-average earnings, and Gross Regional Product (GRP) greater than \$10 million. Despite the decline in manufacturing employment, six of the triple-play industries remained in manufacturing.<sup>2</sup>

FIGURE 8: Wabash County Triple Play Industries in 2018

NAICS Code	Description	2018 GRP	2018 LQ	2018 average earnings
2382	Building Equipment Contractors	\$35,524,762	2.02	\$61,091
3221	Pulp, Paper, and Paperboard Mills	\$43,536,701	24.58	\$62,932
3241	Petroleum and Coal Products Manufacturing	\$19,051,763	1.53	\$163,539
3251	Basic Chemical Manufacturing	\$52,351,008	12.37	\$51,083
3329	Other Fabricated Metal Product Manufacturing	\$67,931,808	24.18	\$67,574
3359	Other Electrical Equipment and Component Manufacturing	\$33,580,792	13.08	\$101,583
3363	Motor Vehicle Parts Manufacturing	\$23,628,377	5.61	\$60,492
4238	Machinery, Equipment, and Supplies Merchant Wholesalers	\$12,516,688	1.55	\$71,299
4249	Miscellaneous Nondurable Goods Merchant Wholesalers	\$21,522,939	3.9	\$70,992
5221	Depository Credit Intermediation	\$34,045,777	1.52	\$60,248
5621	Waste Collection	\$12,165,918	5.44	\$62,709

Source: Emsi 2019.2

2. LQ, earnings, and GRP are defined in the full report.

Wabash County's 2007 triple play industries, listed on the following chart, were more concentrated in manufacturing with 10 4-digit manufacturing NAICS codes having a GRP greater than \$10 million, above average earnings for that year, and an LQ above 1.25. There were 14 triple play industries in 2007 compared to 2018's 11. Six are on both lists: 3221, 3241, 3359, 3363, 4249, and 5221. Accordingly, only four manufacturing industries sustained their triple play status.

FIGURE 9: Wabash County Triple Play Industries in 2007

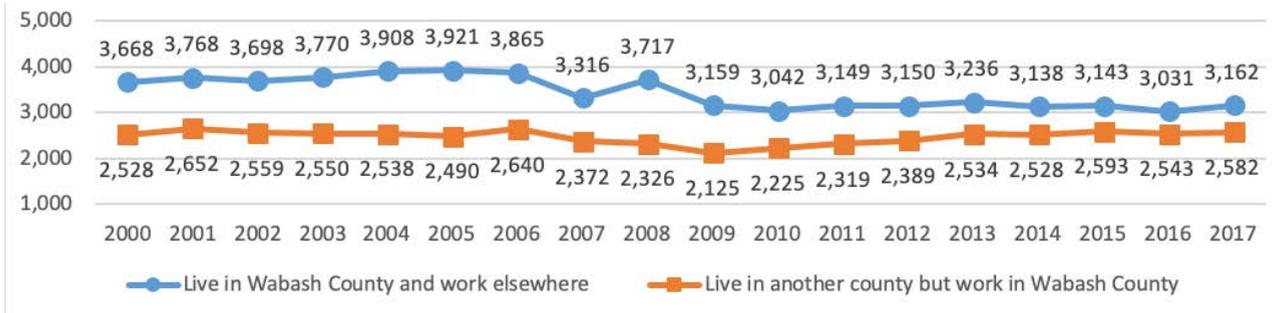
NAICS Code	Description	2018 GRP	2018 LQ	2018 average earnings
3221	Pulp, Paper, and Paperboard Mills	\$59,384,291	22.51	\$66,021
3241	Petroleum and Coal Products Manufacturing	\$19,102,761	1.57	\$95,314
3262	Rubber Product Manufacturing	\$38,757,196	29.37	\$56,524
3279	Other Nonmetallic Mineral Product Manufacturing	\$19,478,652	17.94	\$63,241
3313	Alumina and Aluminum Production and Processing	\$33,765,960	42.04	\$59,756
3315	Foundries	\$40,624,844	28.56	\$58,045
3344	Semiconductor and Other Electronic Component Manufacturing	\$20,815,045	8.10	\$45,884
3345	Navigational, Measuring, Electromedical, and Control Instruments Manufacturing	\$86,822,772	9.39	\$77,165
3359	Other Electrical Equipment and Component Manufacturing	\$12,021,726	5.91	\$66,017
3363	Motor Vehicle Parts Manufacturing	\$15,826,944	5.20	\$36,952
4247	Petroleum and Petroleum Products Merchant Wholesalers	\$16,493,827	1.86	\$44,012
4249	Miscellaneous Nondurable Goods Merchant Wholesalers	\$11,646,916	2.57	\$49,467
5221	Depository Credit Intermediation	\$26,047,469	1.62	\$40,296
9036	Education and Hospitals (Local Government)	\$60,082,290	1.57	\$42,969

Source: Emsi 2019.2

## COMMUTING PATTERNS

For two decades, Wabash County has had more people leaving the county for employment than people entering. The margin has narrowed over the years due to fewer residents leaving the county. Residents leaving for employment elsewhere peaked in 2005 and reduced 22.7 percent by 2016, the lowest year in this data set. Using information from Indiana state tax returns, the number of workers commuting to Wabash County has stayed relatively even around 2,500 workers.

FIGURE 10: Workers Commuting Into and Out of Wabash County, 2000-2017



Source: STATS Indiana, Indiana Department of Workforce Development

## INCOME

Per capita personal income (PCPI) is a measure used in northeast Indiana to understand economic trends compared to national figures. PCPI is calculated by dividing all the income – employment earnings, government transfer payments, and investment income – by all the people within a defined geography. PCPI counts all residents, regardless of age. Thus locations with a large number of children will have lower PCPI. The following chart shows Wabash County residents' steady upward trend for PCPI from 1978 through 2017, without adjustments for inflation.

FIGURE 11: Per Capita Personal Income (not adjusted for inflation), Wabash County, 1978-2017

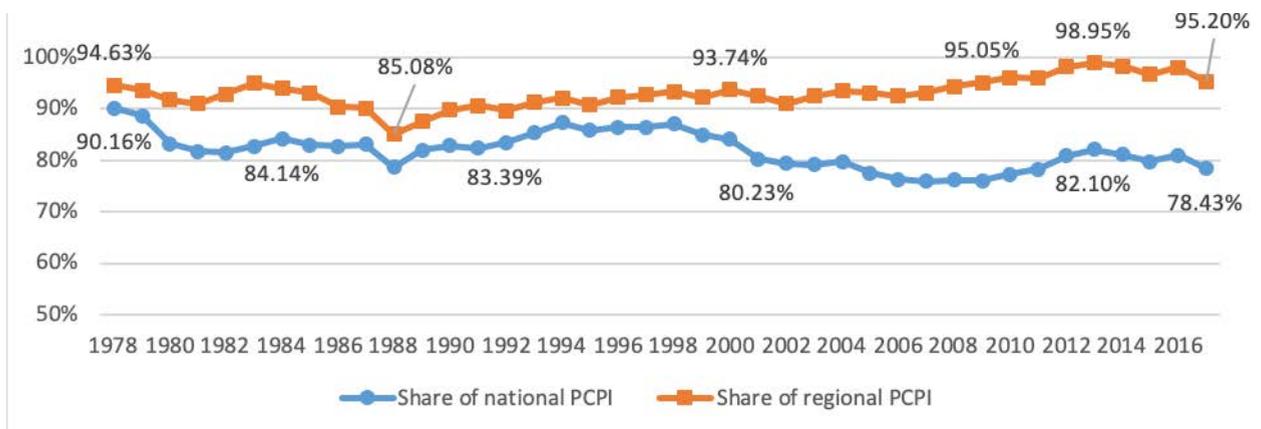


Source: U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis

The Northeast Indiana Regional Partnership has made increasing NEI-11's PCPI to 90.00 percent of the national calculation as one of its Vision 2030 goals. Therefore the accelerating graph in the previous chart does not tell the full story because it lacks the context of inflation.

Wabash County's PCPI has never exceeded the nation's PCPI since the measure has been tracked, starting in 1969. It peaked in 1973 at 93.72 percent. In 2017, it was 78.48 percent. The low point was 75.88 percent in 2007, just before the Great Recession. Wabash County tracked with NEI-11 against the national PCPI through about 2000. From there, Wabash County's regional PCPI share went up. Wabash County's regional share percentage peaked in 2013 at 98.95 percent.

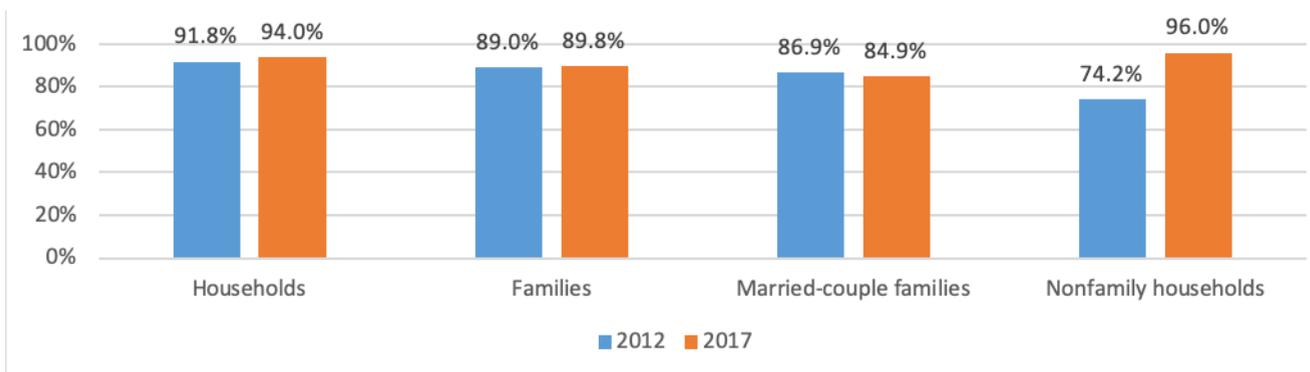
FIGURE 11: Percentage Share of Per Capita Personal Income, Wabash County, 1997-2017



Source: Percentages calculated by CRI using U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis data

The following chart's income measure is median household income – the midpoint where half the households are above and half are below – compared to the state's share for the same household type. The total has improved in the past 10 years, however it shrank for married-couple households while jumping significantly for nonfamily households, which tend to be people living alone.

FIGURE 12: Wabash County's Share of Indiana Median Household Income by Household Type, 2012 and 2017



Source: Percentages calculated by CRI using data from Table S1901, U.S. Census Bureau

## SCHOOL ENROLLMENT

School enrollment data helps a community to understand what is happening with the population of its youngest residents. Not shown here since the chart below reflects the start and endpoints, but corporation enrollment varied between school years 2005-2006 and 2018-2019. MSD of Wabash County, the largest of the three districts, has experienced a persistent decline in enrollment – 19.02 percent – from 2005-2006 to 2018-2019. Wabash City Schools and Manchester Community Schools had slight yearly variations but generally remained even.

McKibben Demographics issued a report in June 2017 for the three local school corporations with enrollment projections for school years 2017-2018 to 2026-2027. Like the historic trends, MSD of Wabash County's enrollment was projected to experience the greatest numeric decline. Manchester Community Schools is slated to lose students while Wabash City Schools could see a slight bump.

FIGURE 13: Wabash County School Enrollment (Past & Forecasted)

	Past School Enrollment (2005-2006 – 2018-2019)		Forecasted School Enrollment (2017-2018 – 2026-2027)	
	Numeric change	Percentage change	Numeric change	Percentage change
Manchester Community Schools	-4	-0.24%	-172	-10.93%
MSD of Wabash County	-497	-19.02%	-197	-9.83%
Wabash City Schools	100	6.75%	64	4.19%
Total	-401	-7.00%	-305	-5.97%

Source: Calculated by CRI using data from Indiana Department of Education and 2016-17 Demographic Study for Manchester Community Schools, Wabash City Schools and MSD of Wabash County, McKibben Demographics

Interestingly, the actual enrollment is outpacing the forecasts, which could be due, at least in part, to the districts enrolling students from outside their boundaries. Since some of the surrounding counties are also projected to have population declines, actual enrollments outpacing forecasts may not continue for the remainder of the report's forecasts. The following chart looks at the actual enrollments against the forecast.

FIGURE 14: Wabash County School Enrollment (Actual vs. Forecast)

	2017-18			2018-19		
	Actual	Forecast	Difference	Actual	Forecast	Difference
Manchester Community Schools	1,616	1,574	42	1,629	1,546	83
MSD of Wabash County	2,172	2,005	167	2,116	1,954	162
Wabash City Schools	1,539	1,526	13	1,581	1,558	23
Total	5,327	5,105	222	5,326	5,058	268

Source: Indiana Department of Education and McKibben Demographics report, with calculations performed by CRI

# QUALITATIVE ASSESSMENT

In addition to numerical data, this project included qualitative information from Transform Consulting Group (TCG) to understand why people, especially Millennials with ties to Wabash County, do and do not live there. TCG also reached out to “transplants” – individuals who did not grow up in Wabash County and have moved there as well as individuals who work in Wabash County but don’t live there. Lastly, to understand historical events that may have contributed to population loss, John Stafford and Mark Becker conducted interviews with some key stakeholders.

The key findings from TCG's work included:

- Lack of jobs for people with bachelor's degree and limited quality-of-place features were consistent answers about why people didn't (re)locate to Wabash County
  - Quality-of-place includes: social and cultural offerings, physical amenities, and availability of retail outlets
- Sub-issues identified by those who have considered moving to Wabash County but have not: Lack of available housing and perceived quality of K-12 schools
- Family living in Wabash County is a driving factor in staying in or coming back to Wabash County
  - Job opportunities are also key in attracting or retaining people

## **Low cost of living may be an attractive feature for transplants**

Wabash County's challenges are part of larger national trends that are playing out locally, namely a loss of manufacturing jobs that have been replaced with low-skill, low-wage service-sector jobs. However the local legacy of corporate and private philanthropy continues to benefit the community.

During those conversations, Stafford and Becker identified four key points that are still playing out today:

1. The 2007 closing of GDX, formerly General Tire and Rubber, was the “wake-up call” that the loss of manufacturing jobs was a critical issue. No other economic event in the past 20-plus years left such a significant and lasting impression.
2. The historic relational divide between the North Manchester and Wabash communities has been substantially removed, providing new opportunities to work together as a county.
3. The public sector in Wabash County was viewed as a well-functioning asset and not a liability, showing local leadership is ready to move the community forward.
4. The upgrade of U.S. 24 from two to four lanes was seen as having both positive and negative impacts. The improvements better connected Wabash County residents and businesses to the greater Fort Wayne area. It also made it much easier for residents to shop and access resources offered in a larger city, often perceived to be at the expense of local Wabash County businesses.

# IMPLICATIONS

## WHY POPULATION LOSS MATTERS

Continued population decline should be of concern to those invested in Wabash County. It impacts K-12 school enrollment and, given the way Indiana funds public education, a concurrent loss in financial support for local school districts. Population loss results in a declining consumer base for local retail and professional service providers. Continued population loss, particularly in the working-age cohorts results in a shrinking workforce for current and prospective employers. Lastly, population loss results in a loss of community leadership depth.

## IMPLICATIONS OF THESE FINDINGS

Notwithstanding local assets, reversing what amounts to 40 years of population decline is a very ambitious goal. Wabash County's demographic, economic and locational factors are all working in ways that can lead to further population loss. This is not the fault of past or current leadership or residents. Rather it is a national, macro trend playing out at the local level.

Demographic projections indicate that the segment of Wabash County's population expected to experience growth between now and 2030 are Older Adults (45-64) and Seniors (65+). These cohorts are not likely to result in new family formulation. In addition, the current population is ethnically concentrated in categories with low birth rates. As the 2016-17 McKibben School Demographic Study notes, "in the absence of migration, fertility alone would be insufficient to maintain the current level of population and enrollment within all three of the Wabash County school districts ...".

Wabash County's economy remains concentrated in manufacturing – a sector for which nationally employment is, over the long term, not expected to grow. Wabash County did not experience the rebound in manufacturing employment that has occurred statewide since 2009.

As pointed out in Ball State University's 2017 "How Vulnerable Are American Communities to Automation, Trade, & Urbanization?" study, the Wabash County manufacturing base, along with that of nearly all Midwestern rural counties, is vulnerable to downsizing due to automation and/or moving production to other countries. Secondly, the Financial and Professional Services sectors are significantly underrepresented in the number and growth of jobs, both of which are growing nationally and tend to represent higher skill and higher wage positions. Kosciusko County provides an example of how a different employer mix has positively impacted job and population growth.

Wabash County's geographically isolated location works against it in the 21st Century. It is neither on the federal interstate highway system nor a county immediately adjacent to a growing metropolitan area.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

The following includes baseline recommendations to build community capacity and strengthen the fundamental ways that Wabash County leaders operate to get things done and transformational recommendations focused on projects that can serve as a catalyst for private investment. These recommendations recognize that there are certain programs and commitments being supported today in the community that must be sustained, at least in the short-term - but that these commitments may be influenced or impacted as work on various recommendations proceeds. The challenge for the community is to be open to the new ideas and approaches that will emerge through action on these proposals!

The first recommendation serves as a foundation for everything that follows, as a renewed commitment to community engagement and collaboration is a requirement for success. The other recommendations are grouped by category.

## 1. OVERALL

- a. **Implement a civic-engagement model.** Fundamental to the Community's ability to advance a bold agenda is a commitment to engage Wabash County's diversity – everyone – in key decisions.

## 2. LOCAL GOVERNMENT

- a. **Develop one plan!** Leverage the collaboration among North Manchester, Wabash and Wabash County to create one countywide comprehensive plan with a shared vision and shared goals for the growth of the entire community, incorporating the Stellar Community work in Wabash. A countywide plan can honor and respect the county's unique attributes yet provide a common language and consistency across jurisdictions.
- b. **Undertake a countywide fiscal policy analysis.** One of the primary responsibilities of local government is to maintain infrastructure capacities to support growth. Too often, however, competing demands for limited resources require infrastructure investments to be deferred. The goal should be to “pay as you go” to stay ahead of growth versus managing an increasing back-log of maintenance. This recommendation requires the projection of infrastructure needs, an assessment of costs required to meet those needs, an analysis of current resources available to fund maintenance and expansion and, if needed, an analysis of appropriate options to increase financial resources to stay ahead of growth and maintenance cycles and anticipate future trends. Infrastructure is more than streets, sidewalks, and water and sewer lines. It includes parks, trails, industrial sites, and internet access too.

### 3. COLLABORATION AND LEADERSHIP

- a. **Align with regional partners.** Wabash County cannot afford to be a fringe player. It must aggressively engage and leverage regional programs and resources. Formal regional alignment is with NEI-11 within the structure of the Northeast Indiana Regional Partnership. Membership within the region containing the State's second- largest city cannot be dismissed. However with Wabash County's "edge" location within the 11-county region and looking at commuting patterns with Miami and Grant counties, additional regional opportunities may exist (and should be leveraged) with all surrounding counties.
- b. **Develop leadership and create ways for leaders to engage and impact the community.** Wabash County is blessed with strong leadership, but new leaders must be continually developed, mentored and encouraged to sustain the advancement of community goals. Particular attention should be paid to engaging diversity, especially young professionals and youth.
- c. **Welcome newcomers, particularly from diverse cultures.** Make an amazing first impression but recognize the first impression is just that; ongoing inclusion strategies will be needed. One exciting opportunity is the development of engagement programs focused on international students enrolled at Manchester University.
- d. **Initiate an inter-community visitation program.** Visit and model the best practices of cities and counties that have made progress in areas of interest to Wabash County. These visits enable leaders to experience and learn best practices, develop stronger relationships with other participants and accelerate progress toward goals after returning home.

### 4. COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

- a. **Strengthen the resources and role of the Community Foundation of Wabash County.** Wabash County has a unique and strong history of philanthropic investment in catalytic assets. The Community Foundation of Wabash County is respected among its peers for its alignment of funding with community goals. Going forward, the Foundation is in a unique position to play a leadership role in growing, coordinating and focusing local philanthropy to be a strong partner in achieving bold community goals.
- b. **Leverage Wabash County's unique assets and work to strengthen the synergy between them.** Initiate a "deep dive" analysis to understand the exceptional attributes and potential of the Honeywell Center and Manchester University (individually and together). When combined with other community assets, including the Charley Creek Inn, farmers markets, historic architecture, expanding downtown retail, restaurants and other unique features, Wabash County has the potential to establish itself as a unique destination for arts, culture and education with a rich and unique quality of place.
- c. **Focus resources on continued downtown revitalization in Wabash and North Manchester.** Active, vibrant downtowns appeal to people of all ages, especially when they incorporate mixed uses of live, work, and play. Know the market and build on momentum to incorporate riverfront access and development.

- d. Advance housing strategies in Wabash and North Manchester.** Know the market! Target in-fill sites and downtowns, leveraging the unique nature and quality of North Manchester and Wabash urban neighborhoods. The goal is to reduce the number of people who choose to live outside Wabash County only because housing choices are limited inside Wabash County.
- e. Near-Term Focus on quality-of-place assets.** With the unique combination of arts and cultural assets, historic architecture, a boutique hotel, retail and restaurants, focus on the opportunity to make Wabash a regional evening/weekend destination for arts, entertainment, dining and shopping. As the momentum for downtown revitalization continues to build and more people visit and experience Wabash, there will be increased demand for retail, dining, and ultimately business investment and housing. For North Manchester, Manchester University is the unique asset to be leveraged. The Hawkins Family Farm's Fridays on the Farm pizza nights are also an opportunity within unincorporated Wabash County.

## **5. ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**

- a. Be aggressive in support of existing business and employers.** Job attraction should remain part of a balanced economic development effort, but new jobs are more likely to come from companies that already have operations in Wabash County. This work could include incentives to celebrate innovation and should pay particular attention to companies headquartered in Wabash County.
- b. Establish Wabash County as a benchmark for entrepreneurial support and innovation.** Entrepreneurship can be a critical component to grow the local economy, especially for underrepresented industries or new employment in existing sectors. Wabash County leaders need to establish a culture of risk-taking and innovation for local entrepreneurs. Leverage the efforts at Innovate @ INGUARD, the collaboration with Wabash City Schools and its Uncharted Learning curriculum and the regional resources of the Indiana Small Business Development Center (SBDC), the NIIC, and Elevate Northeast Indiana.
- c. Long-term focus to identify, understand, and leverage Wabash County's core economic strengths.** Grow Wabash, the County's new single point of contact for economic development, has an aggressive agenda focused on business retention and attraction - including attraction of foreign investment. These programs need to continue. This recommendation seeks to intensify existing efforts by understanding, focusing and innovating with the economic strengths unique to Wabash County. For example, leveraging the County's strength in agriculture, there may be opportunities to diversify employment outside of manufacturing including production agriculture and ag-supporting industries, especially opportunities requiring postsecondary degrees. With the number of workers commuting to Kosciusko County, opportunities may also exist to align with those industry sectors.

## 6. EDUCATION

- a. **Maintain a competitive public K-12 education system.** Engage the community to undertake an assessment to understand the competitive position of Wabash County school districts, with the goal of establishing an action agenda that positions schools in Wabash County as schools of choice in the region. This assessment should include options for early childhood education and care that would increase readiness for school and help differentiate Wabash County from competing communities.
- b. **Develop programs to inform K-12 students about local job opportunities and related skill requirements.** Expand the understanding young people have regarding exciting career opportunities that exist at home in Wabash County.
- c. **Create sustainable incentives for young adults to start their careers in Wabash County.** Assess best practices for retaining young talent at home, including investigation of student loan forgiveness programs, corporate partnerships and other proven methods for influencing the career location choices of Wabash County's young talent.
- d. **Develop programming that encourages community, family and student school engagement and distinguishes Wabash County as a community that prioritizes educational attainment.**

## 7. MARKETING/BRANDING

**Build Wabash County's brand.** With a unique grouping of assets, Wabash County is becoming a destination for visitors from Fort Wayne, South Bend, Lafayette and Indianapolis and its northern suburbs. This can be a challenging exercise to do well, but recognizing Wabash County's features can be a great way to build a tourism industry. A successful branding campaign will also build local pride.

## FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

For additional information about Wabash County's population, economic, and demographic trends, visit the Community Foundation of Wabash County's website at [www.cfwabash.org](http://www.cfwabash.org).



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

**Mark Becker** of Becker Consulting is a consultant in community development and strategic planning for economic development and community development organizations. Becker also serves as President and CEO of Greater Fort Wayne Inc., which serves as the single point of contact for economic development in Allen County, Indiana. In the last fifteen years, he has served Mayors Graham Richard and Tom Henry as Deputy Mayor. Becker also served as executive director to the Northeast Indiana Fund, supporting community development and capacity building efforts in each of the communities served by the Northeast Indiana Regional Partnership for Economic Development. Mark is a graduate of the University of Cincinnati, College of Design, Architecture, Art, and Planning.

**Rachel Blakeman** is the director of the Purdue University Fort Wayne Community Research Institute. CRI provides contract-based research and analysis for public- and private-sector and non-profit clients to help leaders make informed decisions. Her experience includes local government project management, regulatory compliance, communications and legislative affairs with an emphasis on state legislation. Rachel is a member of the Allen County Bar Association and a graduate of the Indiana University Robert H. McKinney School of Law. Her research has focused on state government's role in economic development, specifically advanced manufacturing.

**Amanda Lopez** is President of Transform Consulting Group, a woman-owned, strategic and data-driven consulting firm focused on serving nonprofits, education, government and communities. Founded in 2008, TCG has helped organizations across the nation with board development, evaluation, fundraising, procurement and contract management, program development, project management, research and analysis and strategic planning along with ongoing counsel to organizations in order to accelerate impact. Lopez is a graduate of Purdue University and the University of Michigan with an MSW in Social Policy and Program Evaluation.

**John Stafford** of the financial consulting business called Make No Small Plans, LLC, is currently a Special Projects Associate at the Community Research Institute at IPFW. Before retirement Stafford served as the institute's director for almost ten years. From 1988 to 2000, Stafford served as the Chief of Staff in the Fort Wayne Mayor's office. Stafford has degrees in urban planning from Ball State University and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign-Urbana.