

PENNSTATE



Center for Economic and Community Development

*Exploring Juniata County's Economy
through the Stories of Residents*



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Introduction

Citizens of rural counties across Pennsylvania are faced with adapting to a newly globalized economy that requires much different skills than historically required to successfully live 'The American Dream'. The days of abundant local manufacturing and resource extraction jobs are over, as many of these positions have become automated with the development of new technology, or moved overseas due to lower production costs. Rural residents must now learn to adapt to this new technological era by gaining diversified skills and knowledge or by creating different economic opportunities to support themselves and their families. Local political and business leaders are equally challenged to develop a new vision for their counties, asking themselves, "How do they envision their local county and what economic opportunities are possible?" This is not an easy task, as many rural counties have struggled with adapting to a globalized economy. With a lack of job opportunities in many rural counties, new generations have been forced to migrate to urban areas with diverse opportunities. If social ties to the county are strong, and an urban area is in close proximity to a rural county, some residents have chosen to remain in rural communities and commute outside of the county for employment opportunities or remain in the community and accept lower wages. Yet, this still leaves many residents who either lack the necessary skills or the ability to travel, with a lack of job opportunities. How can this be combated?

The goal of this report is to explore these issues in the context of one rural Pennsylvania county. The residents and leaders of rural counties are faced with many challenges that are often interconnected and require collaboration between various groups to solve. This report intends to shed light on some of these challenges and provide people with a platform to discuss these issues with the hopes of one day solving them.

Our original research question was: "How are workers affected by low wages in Juniata County? Specifically, how are workers, who are earning minimum or near minimum wage, daily decisions affected by their wages?" Throughout the course of our interviews with local leaders and workers, we heard consistent comments on the overall state of the economy in Juniata. It became clear that minimum and near minimum wages were not the only important aspect of the economic environment of the county, and therefore required us to refocus our research to include other aspects of the economy. We then changed our research question to: "How are workers lives affected by the local economy? Are workers most affected by low

wages, lack of employment opportunities, or other factors? How are people's daily decisions affected by their wages?"

It is important to recognize the macroeconomic issues that affect rural residents. As previously mentioned, globalization has played a large role in the changing economies of rural counties. The industrial composition of many counties has changed, moving from manufacturing to technological or 'knowledge' based or service-based economies.. Local school systems are forced to adapt to this change by preparing students with different skills and knowledge than previously needed. This requires investment in new technologies and curriculum that is difficult to maintain with educational budget cuts. As well, rural to urban migration has posed a threat to rural economic growth and the stability of the tax base as new generations leave their home communities to pursue job opportunities and increased access to services in urban areas.

Many of the challenges identified throughout this report are interconnected. These challenges range from macroeconomic to social issues. While it is easy to identify one or two of these issues as the most important or the answer to the problem, this is an incorrect assumption and devalues the complexity of rural counties. This report aims to explore the 'greyness' of the issues. That is, to show that they are not black and white with easy solutions. Rather the challenges identified by local leaders and citizens are complex and interwoven into many grey areas. Likewise, the solutions to these challenges are also complex and require discussion and collaboration between many different groups to begin to solve them.

The following is a map of Pennsylvania that shows the location of Juniata County:



Methods

We chose Juniata County due to its rural environment, geographical location, and existing connections with people familiar with the county. The rural nature of the county is very similar to other rural counties in Pennsylvania. The similarity in environment and demographics was one of the main factors in our decision to study Juniata County.

The counties' population, according to the U.S. Census Bureau 2013 Population Estimates, is 24,768 with 97.7% of the county classified as white (Census). The mean travel time to work for residents is 26 minutes. This reflects the common commute to Harrisburg, State College, Lewistown, or Selinsgrove.

Driving through the county, you are surrounded by farms and fields, with a few convenience stores scattered throughout. Off the main highway that connects the county to two major urban areas, State College and Harrisburg, is the counties' industrial park which houses several local businesses. There are a few major employers in the county, with the largest being Empire Kosher Poultry, Inc. (Labor and Industry). The median household income is \$44,991. The unemployment rate is 4.1% as of September 2014 (Bureau of Labor Statistics).

Because we had a connection with someone who has extensive work experience in the county, we were able to identify and informally speak with six local leaders in the county. These leaders identified a range of challenges in the county that expanded our research focus. After speaking with local leaders, we utilized one leader's connections within the community to identify and interview residents. While our initial focus was minimum wage workers, we were unable to identify local residents working for minimum wage. Therefore, we expanded our sample frame to include other low income residents. We struggled with identifying people who were willing to be interviewed. This could be due to the sensitive nature of the topic we were researching.

Twenty five people were contacted by phone and letter, while only five agreed and participated in an interview that lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. Our interview questions were designed to identify perspectives on specific issues, however they remained fluid enough to allow interviewees the ability to identify other topics related to the local economy and their experiences that they found relevant.

What we ultimately ended up exploring was much broader than our initial research question. By speaking with workers, community leaders, unemployed residents,

and stay at home mothers we were able to gain a rich pool of perspectives and stories. We wanted to gather stories and perspectives from various groups of people in the county in order to illuminate issues that other rural counties may identify with. The gathering and analyzing of stories is an effective strategy for leaders in communities to showcase issues that can be affected at the policy level. Additionally, this strategy is not only useful for community leaders but also community residents. The engagement of people for potential change is not possible without effective identification and discussion of the issues. By giving residents a platform to speak openly and freely they were able to identify issues of concern without fear of backlash.

Findings and Interpretation

We identified several consistent themes related to the economy throughout our interviews with citizens. We expanded our research focus to include questions about these themes, as they proved to be an important part of the county story that we as outsiders had not initially identified.

We spoke with local leaders in the county who were very familiar with the economy and local citizens. The workers we interviewed could all be classified as low to middle income. Their occupations varied, and some were not currently employed due to disability or personal reasons. All of the workers we spoke with were women. This was because women were more likely than men to answer the home phone when we called, and were willing to participate in an interview. Only one woman we spoke with did not have children, however she did have extended family and their children living with her.

Three major themes were identified and are the focus of this report. These themes are:

1. Historical and personal experiences
2. The local education system
3. Employment opportunities

It is important to remember when examining these three themes, that they are all interconnected in some way. A person's historical experience is generally not independent of their environment. Likewise, the employment opportunities that people have in the county are often not independent of citizen's social and personal experiences both in childhood and the present. These themes can be viewed as one

grey area. That is, they are not independent variables. Rather, they are all interconnected and create a grey area that is difficult to change.

1. Personal Experience

Peoples' past experiences (or memories of those experiences) play a major role in their future choices. Several people that we spoke with identified personal experiences that continue to influence their daily decisions and overall economic well-being.

One person said (in reference to the job opportunities in Juniata County) "There are some job opportunities...there's so many things that I would have to do in order to be able to go to work, I didn't graduate...I don't have a license or a vehicle..." Unfortunately, this is not a unique situation for many residents of rural counties. Although job opportunities may be available, there are many outside factors that affect gaining employment. The lack of a high school diploma is frequently a major impediment to employment. Approximately 82.5% of people age 25+ in Juniata County are a high school graduate or higher (U.S. Census). However, only 11.2% of people in the county age 25+ have a Bachelor's degree or higher (U.S. Census). Even if employment is gained, the lack of transportation is a critical issue that can prevent maintaining steady employment.

Social ties in communities are a safety net for most people. We often rely on family members for support and assistance in difficult times. When people do not have that support economic decisions are affected. One person we interviewed was facing economic difficulties due to her lack of social ties in the community as well as employment opportunities. She had previously been a commuter, but after going through a divorce with her husband, she made the choice not to commute outside of the county for work to be there for her children. She made a profound statement regarding her current situation: "I chose it right now, and some people don't choose." "I know I'm choosing right now...I mean I could do it, but right now my kids know that if there's a school issue or helping in school they can count on mom to be there." This person was faced with personal choices for her family, as well as economic choices that she knew would also influence her family as well. Instead of leaving the county for a higher paying job, she chose to work for a lower wage in the county so she was able to be there for her children on a consistent basis. These choices are not easy, and people do not take them lightly. When trying to understand the present situation of people it is important to recognize how these personal decisions that people are forced to make affect their economic well-being.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Juniata County has a 2.9% Hispanic or Latino population. This group comes from differing countries including but not limited to: Honduras, El Salvador, and Chile. While 2.9% may not seem like a large amount, when you put it into the context of the county's population, which is 97.7% White, this group is the second largest race in the county. Many individuals from the Hispanic community work for the county's largest employer, Empire Kosher. Many have moved here to escape poverty and violence in their home countries, and work difficult jobs with long hours. This is not only to support their immediate family, but also to send remittances to their families in their home countries. This influx of new people has diversified the otherwise traditional rural community. Despite moving here for better living circumstances, cultural assimilation is not always easy. Language barriers and cultural differences can be difficult challenges to overcome. One woman's story reflects this and how these challenges influence her economic opportunities: "I don't write...I read, I understand mostly 75%/80% everything I read in English, but I don't write anything. I tried to go to school but by the time that I tried to go to school I have a full job...my two little son and daughter were too little at that time and I'm working..." This experience is not limited to the Hispanic community. It is not uncommon for parents to want to further their education but not have the ability to because of child care. This is especially true for single mothers, like this woman, who is the primary care giver for her children. Being faced with the dilemma of needing additional education to support your family but not being able to pursue this because of child care is a difficult decision that is not black and white.

2. Employment Opportunities

We initially intended to research the minimum wage sector of Juniata County. However, after speaking with several local leaders, we realized that the employment sector of Juniata and its effects on residents included other areas of importance, therefore we broadened our research. Residents of the county face several challenges in gaining employment with some being: a lack of diversity of employers, the need to commute for higher wages and benefits, and an overall lack of employment opportunities.

When we asked residents about the employment opportunities in Juniata, we received similar answers from all people. One person commented (in response to the job opportunities in Juniata): "Not that much...it's only like Empire Kosher, Weis, or Burger King" And in fact, according to The Pennsylvania Department of

Labor and Industry's top 50 employers in Juniata County, Empire Kosher Poultry, Inc. ranks #1 and Weis Markets, Inc. ranks #6 (Labor and Industry).

The lack of diverse employment opportunities is a challenge for residents. If residents decide to pursue employment within the county they often are forced to accept a lower wage than if they commuted outside of the county. One person said: "Don't get me wrong Juniata is a really nice place...in order to really get a good paying job you pretty much either have to go to Harrisburg or State College or Selinsgrove area." This alludes to the fact that it's not just jobs that are important for Juniata, but the quality of jobs. If residents are forced to travel outside of the county for a 'good paying job', then simply adding jobs to the county will not solve the problem of low paying jobs and cyclical poverty. Rather, the quality of jobs, that is their wage in respect to cost of living, is an important aspect to consider.

"I'm not 100% sure what all the opportunities are. I know there's a lot of farming and there's the school, but I do know that with the school district that with the budgets I've noticed a lot of cuts with the school district...but a lot more people do go out of the county and drive for the better paying jobs." Agriculture is a prominent employment opportunity in Juniata County, along with the school district which is ranked as the third largest employer in the county. However, this individual points out two important facts. First, while the school district may employ a large percent of the population, it suffers from budget cuts which can limit its capabilities. This will be discussed further in the Education System section. Second, commuters are prevalent. Some people chose to live in the county, but are forced to commute outside for better paying jobs.

Juniata is often referred to as a "bedroom community" due to the large share of the population that lives there but commutes elsewhere for work. According to the U.S. Census 2006-2010 commuting data, 11,156 residents commuted, with 48% of commuters leaving the county for work. Juniata is situated in the middle of State College and Harrisburg, with both offering more employment opportunities than Juniata County. For this reason, residents will often commute to these areas even for minimum wage jobs. One person we spoke with had travelled to Harrisburg for most of her life for employment through temporary agencies.

One person commented: "To make the amount of money that you need for your income you have to commute and then it's like does it really balance out with gas prices and everything else on top of it." These are decisions that residents are faced

with when trying to acquire employment. Commuting requires resources like a vehicle, money for gas, maintenance, and childcare. The poor often don't have these resources, therefore they're required to make difficult decisions that affect their economic wellbeing.

"I live paycheck to paycheck... There are challenges...it's my car insurance, paying off a credit card, cell phone, cable and internet, rent, and trying to save up a little bit to make sure I can get something if my kids need it.." Living paycheck to paycheck is a common challenge. If you have the ability to pay for your daily expenses like food and bills, then saving becomes the next challenge, something that is often considered a luxury in the world of the poor. While this particular person was choosing to work inside the county for less money than if they commuted, their choice is a reflection of the personal and historical factors that influence economic choices. "I left a job that I really loved for my child because I didn't want to put him through that (commuting to Harrisburg)." When asked if there is the opportunity for advancement in her current position she said: "There really is no advancement, but I'd like to stay where I'm at as long as I can while my kids are young and in school. So I don't mind the hardship on myself, I'm putting my kids above me. As long as they're happy and their dad and I can provide for them."

3. Education System

The education system in Juniata County was identified as an important aspect to consider when studying the economic opportunities in the county. In the county there are eight elementary schools, one junior high school, and two high schools. This does not include private schools in the county. Greenwood School district lies in neighboring Perry County and serves students from Greenwood Township in Juniata, along with other students from Perry County. According to the District PSSA results for Grade 11, 51% of students are proficient or above in mathematics, compared to 59% at the state level. In science, 62% are proficient or above compared to 67% at the state level. The district has a 90% graduation measure compared to 83% at the state level (District Report Card).

"I think the local school system could definitely be improved. I just don't think that they really have the criteria that kids need now a days to go out into the electronic world." Many leaders and residents referenced the need for an improved curriculum in the school district. The skills demanded by the job market in today's world are different than they were in the past, therefore for students to be

competitive in the job market they will need to be prepared with these skills. However, one question we developed while speaking with various people in the county was, “Is the local school system preparing students to work in Juniata County or to leave the county and work elsewhere?” The implications of this are vast, as the skills and knowledge that students have affect their employability and also what job market they will enter.

We received a mix of answers when we asked this question. Some local leaders believe that the school district is “feeding the outside employment market”. That is, they are preparing students to take jobs outside of the county. These leaders also recognized that Juniata lacks the job opportunities for graduates, and thus they are forced to leave the county for more employment choices.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, it was also said by a leader in the county that there is a desire in the local school system to keep students in the county, thus they are not preparing student for higher education and outside employment opportunities. This directly contributes to the cyclical nature of poverty and the job opportunities in the county. If students are not prepared to pursue high skill occupations then these young adults will not be able to create high skill, and thus high paying, jobs in the county in the future. If students are not prepared for high skills jobs then they will be forced to accept low pay, low skill jobs in the county or commute for low paying jobs in outside areas, thus continuing the cycle of poverty in the county.

Budget cuts are a real challenge that school districts all across Pennsylvania are faced with. Without funding, school districts are unable to update or improve curriculums, diversify classes, purchase technology, or pay teachers and staff competitive wages. All of these factors influence student's educational quality and their level of preparedness for employment or higher education after high school.

An additional area of challenge that Juniata, like many other rural Pennsylvania counties, faces is the remoteness of certain areas in the county and how this affects student's learning. Some children can live as far as an hour away from the nearest school. Dial-up internet is common in remote areas and presents a challenge to student learning due to the extra time needed for studying. Participation in extra-curricular activities is often limited by student's remote location. The Juniata school district is faced with difficult choices when determining how to best meet the needs of students who live in rural areas.

While it is understandable for Juniata leaders and officials to fear brain drain and try to keep young adults in the county, it is also important to evaluate whether keeping young adults directly out of high school in the county improves Juniata's economy and standard of living or does the opposite. Are a lack of job opportunities pushing students out of the county? Or are job opportunities absent because of a lack of skilled workers? What will incentivize businesses to come to, or start in this region and what types of businesses are the most likely to succeed and provide residents with a living wage? If the county can manage to attract new industry and businesses, are the citizens of Juniata adequately prepared to fill these new positions? It's a difficult analysis and the answers are not black and white. Rather, it is likely a mix of all of these variables and further collaboration by various stakeholders in the county is necessary to develop solutions.

Limitations

The findings of our research have their limitations. Our sample frame was limited due to time and resources. We had difficulty finding people willing to be interviewed. We concluded that this could be due to the sensitive nature of the topic we were researching, as well as our inability to provide an incentive to participate. We had one primary researcher conducting the interviews, and limited funds to support more extensive research. While we did not interview a representative sample of the county, we heard similar thoughts from multiple participants and therefore can conclude that those themes would likely also be identified by other residents.

Additionally, we did not speak with any school district employees or business leaders in the county due to limited resources and the focus of our research question. It is likely that these groups would hold differing insights and opinions than the ones identified here. It would be valuable for further research to include these groups in the discussion. Further interviews with a range of stakeholders in the community would provide valuable insights that we were unable to gather in this report.

Conclusion

The challenges faced in Juniata County are not unique to the county. Other rural Pennsylvania counties face similar challenges and opportunities. There are a variety of positive features in Juniata County that could provide economic development if capitalized upon. The geographical location of the county between

State College and Harrisburg could provide positive opportunities for economic development and tourism. The social ties in Juniata are strong, and people are quick to help each other in times of need. These social ties are important for economic development and should be considered by local officials when making decisions.

The challenges identified by the interviewees in Juniata County are interconnected. People's personal and historical experiences influence their present and future decisions and their economic opportunities. The economic opportunities and challenges in Juniata affect people's personal decisions and their families. The education system does not simply serve as a place of learning, but as a determinant of people's futures. The opportunities students have available to them can determine their success and future choices. These variables are all interconnected and create a grey area that is difficult to understand. By understanding how these areas are interconnected workers, employers, public officials, and community leaders will be better prepared to solve the challenges the county faces.

This report does not include all challenges, opportunities, or perspectives in Juniata. However, it attempts to shed light on some of these areas to promote discussion and further research. Our hope is that by publicizing these stories, citizens will feel empowered to further discuss these stories and take action to create change and improve the lives of their fellow community members.

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