RESEARCH MEMORANDUM

The Urban Core and Regional Economic Performance: A Comparative Reference

TO: File
FROM: Gavin Cooley, Director of Strategic Initiatives
DATE: May 27, 2026
RE: Comparative data on cities that have lost their urban cores, and the regional consequences

I. Purpose

This memorandum compiles a comparative dataset of American cities whose urban cores have experienced substantial population loss, economic decline, and physical disinvestment over the past 75 years. Its purpose is to document the relationship between the health of a region's central city and the long-term economic performance of its surrounding metropolitan area, and to make available a working reference set for SBA member communications, op-ed development, and policy discussions concerning downtown Spokane.

II. Central Thesis

There is no example in modern American urban history of a metropolitan region thriving long-term while permitting its core city to fail. Suburban and exurban areas may experience short-term gains as residents and businesses flee a distressed core, but regional economies that lose their downtown anchor consistently underperform peer metros over multi-decade horizons. The recoveries that have occurred—Pittsburgh most prominently—were driven by deliberate reinvestment in the core, not by accommodation of decentralization. The underlying economic mechanism is *agglomeration*: the productivity premium that arises from density, proximity, and the network effects of a functioning downtown. When the core fails, the region loses the headquarters, professional services, anchor institutions, cultural amenities, and fiscal capacity on which sustained metropolitan growth depends.[1]

III. Organization of the Data

The dataset below is organized in three sections: (1) cautionary cases, in which the failure of the core has produced demonstrable regional underperformance; (2) resurrection cases, in which regional recovery has required deliberate recovery of the core; and (3) affirmative cases, in which governance structures or sustained policy choices have preserved the core and produced superior regional outcomes. Population figures are drawn from the U.S. Census Bureau decennial census and Population Estimates Program; peaks reflect the highest decennial census count recorded for each city, lowest figures reflect the lowest decennial census count, and current figures reflect the most recent Census Bureau estimate available. Where a city's population continues to decline, the lowest and current figures will be the same or nearly so; where a city has begun to recover, the gap between the two columns documents the magnitude of the rebound.

[1] On agglomeration and metropolitan productivity, see generally Edward L. Glaeser, *Triumph of the City* (Penguin Press 2011); Bruce Katz & Jennifer Bradley, *The Metropolitan Revolution* (Brookings 2013); research publications of the Federal Reserve Banks of Cleveland and Minneapolis on regional economic performance.

IV. Comparative Data Table[2]

City / Region	Peak Population	Lowest Population	% Change Peak → Low	Current Population	% Change Peak → Current	Narrative & Regional Implications
Section 1 — Cautionary Cases: Core Failure and Regional Underperformance						
Detroit, MI	1,849,568 *(1950)*	~633,000 *(2023 est.)*	**−65.8%**	~633,000 *(2023 est.)*	**−65.8%**	**The textbook case.** Detroit suburbs initially boomed from flight, but metro Detroit underperformed peer Midwest metros for half a century on income growth, job creation, and corporate retention. Oakland County is wealthy, yet the region as a whole lost ground to Chicago, Minneapolis, and Columbus. The lowest and current figures are essentially the same: the city continues to decline. **Regional implication:** Wealthy suburbs alone do not produce a competitive region. The metro narrative finally turned only after downtown began to recover under Bedrock and the major-employer recommitment around 2010 forward—a recovery visible at the downtown level but not yet in the city-wide population data.
Cleveland, OH	914,808 *(1950)*	~362,000 *(2023 est.)*	**−60.4%**	~362,000 *(2023 est.)*	**−60.4%**	**Decades of regional drag.** Cuyahoga County and Greater Cleveland have consistently underperformed neighboring Columbus and Cincinnati, both of which preserved healthier downtown cores. City population continues to decline. **Recovery vector:** The Cleveland Clinic and downtown / University Circle reinvestment are now pulling the region back—again, the recovery is core-led, not suburb-led, though it has not yet reversed the population trend.
St. Louis, MO	856,796 *(1950)*	~281,000 *(2023 est.)*	**−67.2%**	~281,000 *(2023 est.)*	**−67.2%**	**The steepest peak-to-current decline of any major U.S. city.** The St. Louis MSA has been among the slowest-growing large metros for half a century, even as the broader Midwest produced bright spots. St. Louis is the clearest illustration that core collapse and regional stagnation are bound together, and the decline is ongoing.
Buffalo, NY	580,132 *(1950)*	261,310 *(2010)*	**−55.0%**	~274,000 *(2023 est.)*	**−52.8%**	**Western New York stagnated for generations** after the steel and grain-trade collapse. The 2020 census recorded the city's first decennial population increase in 70 years, reflecting downtown and waterfront reinvestment—an early indicator of the same core-led recovery dynamic visible in Pittsburgh. The modest gap between the lowest and current columns documents that early-stage rebound.
Baltimore, MD	949,708 *(1950)*	~568,000 *(2023 est.)*	**−40.2%**	~568,000 *(2023 est.)*	**−40.2%**	**The most damning case geographically.** Baltimore sits in one of the wealthiest corridors in America (Washington, D.C.–Philadelphia–New York). The metro should be booming. Instead, the failed core has held the entire region back relative to its geographic potential—a wealthy ring around a hollow core is not a sustainable equilibrium. Decline is ongoing.

[2]Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, decennial census counts (1930–2020), for historical population peaks and lowest points; U.S. Census Bureau Population Estimates Program (Vintage 2023) for current population figures. Percentages computed from peak to lowest decennial count and from peak to most recent estimate, respectively. Where peak years vary (Youngstown 1930; Gary 1960; most others 1950), the table cites the year of the peak. Narrative observations on regional economic performance draw on Brookings Metro Monitor reporting, Federal Reserve regional research, and longitudinal coverage in established business and urban-affairs press.

City / Region	Peak Population	Lowest Population	% Change Peak → Low	Current Population	% Change Peak → Current	Narrative & Regional Implications
Hartford, CT	177,397 *(1950)*	~121,000 *(2023 est.)*	**−31.8%**	~121,000 *(2023 est.)*	**−31.8%**	**Wealthy suburbs, hollow center.** Greater Hartford has very wealthy surrounding towns and a globally significant insurance industry, yet the regional economy has stagnated and the metro has lost insurance company headquarters to other regions. A reminder that even smaller-percentage core losses produce major regional drag when concentrated wealth surrounds a distressed downtown.
Camden, NJ	124,555 *(1950)*	~71,000 *(2023 est.)*	**−43.0%**	~71,000 *(2023 est.)*	**−43.0%**	**An extreme case.** Camden fell so far that it became a regional liability rather than an economic engine—a structural drag on South Jersey. Useful as an illustration of what "rock bottom" actually looks like and how it affects the surrounding region's competitive position relative to Philadelphia.
Gary, IN	178,320 *(1960)*	~67,000 *(2023 est.)*	**−62.4%**	~67,000 *(2023 est.)*	**−62.4%**	**Northwest Indiana parallel.** Where Camden burdens South Jersey, Gary burdens Northwest Indiana—lost tax base, deferred infrastructure, and reputational damage that extends far beyond the city's footprint. The Chicago metro shoulders the externalities.
Youngstown, OH	170,002 *(1930)*	~59,000 *(2023 est.)*	**−65.3%**	~59,000 *(2023 est.)*	**−65.3%**	**When a regional core fails completely,** the surrounding county does not merely slow—it depopulates with it. The Mahoning Valley never recovered. Youngstown is the cleanest empirical answer to anyone who argues that suburbs can carry a region after the center is lost.
Section 2 — Resurrection Cases: Recovery Required Reinvestment in the Core						
Pittsburgh, PA	676,806 *(1950)*	302,971 *(2020)*	**−55.2%**	~302,000 *(2023 est.)*	**−55.4%**	**The strongest single comparable—but read carefully.** Pittsburgh's city population has not meaningfully recovered (the lowest and current columns are essentially identical). The resurrection occurred at the metro and downtown level, not in raw city headcount, and was anchored by "Eds & Meds"—the University of Pittsburgh, Carnegie Mellon, and UPMC—concentrated downtown and in adjacent Oakland. **The lesson:** If those institutions had been allowed to disperse to office parks, there is no Pittsburgh resurrection story. The recovery was downtown-led, not suburb-led—and crucially, it was a recovery in regional output, talent attraction, and reputation rather than in city population. That distinction matters for how Spokane frames its own goals.
Detroit, MI (downtown)	n/a	n/a	—	n/a	—	**The Bedrock / Gilbert investment thesis** has begun to demonstrate that Detroit's region can only recover when the core recovers. Neighborhoods remain in distress, but the metro narrative has finally turned—because downtown turned. Listed separately here because the resurrection case applies specifically to the downtown, not to the city as a whole (see Section 1 for city-wide figures).

City / Region	Peak Population	Lowest Population	% Change Peak → Low	Current Population	% Change Peak → Current	Narrative & Regional Implications
Section 3 — Affirmative Cases: Governance and Policy Choices That Preserved the Core						
Minneapolis–St. Paul, MN	521,718 *(1950, Mpls)*	368,383 *(1990)*	**–29.4%**	~427,000 *(2023 est.)*	**–18.2%**	**The numbers in this row tell the affirmative story directly.** Minneapolis bottomed out in 1990 at roughly 29 percent below peak, then rebounded to within 18 percent of peak by 2023—a meaningful city-population recovery driven by sustained downtown and Mississippi riverfront investment. **Underlying governance:** Metropolitan tax-base sharing (the Met Council and the 1971 Fiscal Disparities Act) kept the regional fabric intact and prevented the suburb-vs-city zero-sum dynamic that wrecked peer Midwest metros. A model worth studying for any regional approach to homelessness, transit, or housing in the Spokane region.
Indianapolis, IN	— *Unigov (1970)*	— *no decline*	—	~880,000 *(2023 est.)*	—	**City–county consolidation in 1970 (Unigov)** prevented the suburban-flight collapse pattern entirely by aligning the city's boundaries with regional growth. The Indianapolis metro has consistently outperformed peer Midwest metros that retained fragmented governance. Because the city absorbed its suburbs, a meaningful peak-to-low comparison is not available.
Columbus, OH	— *annexation strategy*	— *no decline*	—	~913,000 *(2023 est.)*	—	**Aggressive annexation since the 1950s** kept the urban tax base healthy and the core politically integrated with its growth areas, while peer Ohio cities (Cleveland, Cincinnati, Youngstown) hollowed out. Columbus now significantly outperforms the rest of the state—same labor pool, same geography, dramatically different outcome traceable to governance choices.
Nashville, TN	— *Metro consol. (1963)*	— *no decline*	—	~687,000 *(2023 est.)*	—	**Metropolitan government consolidation** combined with deliberate downtown investment has made Nashville one of the fastest-growing Sun Belt metros. Demonstrates that the affirmative model is not regional or partisan—it works across geographies when leadership commits to it.

V. Application to Spokane

The empirical record across the cases catalogued above supports a single, defensible regional argument: Spokane Valley, Liberty Lake, and the North Side cannot indefinitely carry the regional economy if downtown Spokane continues to decline along the trajectories observed in Section 1. Short-term flight benefits to outlying areas are real—and they are also precisely what every failed region experienced on the way down. The recoveries documented in Section 2 occurred only where civic and business leadership made a deliberate decision to recommit to the core; the affirmative cases in Section 3 illustrate the further point that the strongest-performing regions are those that structurally aligned governance, taxation, and investment with the health of the central city.

For SBA messaging and member engagement, the comparative frame is straightforward: the question is not whether downtown Spokane's distress affects the region—the historical record establishes that it will—but whether Spokane chooses the trajectory of Pittsburgh or the trajectory of Youngstown.

VI. Recommended Further Development

1. Develop the Pittsburgh case into a longer treatment for op-ed use, paying particular attention to the distinction between city population (still flat) and metro/downtown recovery (substantial). That distinction is exactly the framework Spokane needs.
2. Pull metropolitan-level GDP and per-capita income data for the Section 1 metros against peer benchmarks (Columbus vs. Cleveland; Minneapolis vs. St. Louis) to quantify the regional underperformance now described narratively.
3. Source Brookings Metropolitan Policy Program work (Bruce Katz, *The Metropolitan Revolution*) and Edward Glaeser's *Triumph of the City* for academically credible framing of agglomeration economics—useful when the audience is skeptical of fiscal arguments alone.
4. Consider whether the Minneapolis–St. Paul Met Council framework offers any transferable lessons for Spokane regional approaches to homelessness, public safety, and transit—an angle that connects this memorandum to ongoing SBA work.