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An Overview of Key Trends



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Introduction

Erie Vital Signs is a leadership initiative of The Erie Community Foundation. Located in Erie, PA, the foundation is a collection of more than 700 charitable endowments operating under the administrative umbrella of a single public charity. Our mission is to improve the quality of life for all in our region by evaluating and addressing community issues, building permanent charitable endowments and promoting philanthropic and community leadership. Erie Vital Signs is aimed at deepening our knowledge and understanding of our County. The data and analysis will serve as a common source of information on critical topics that affect the health and progress of Erie County and inform community stakeholders, spur discussion and collaboration, and monitor our quality of life.

Community indicators are measurements of social, environmental and economic factors that affect quality of life. In a community indicator project, these factors are gathered and analyzed over time to monitor the community's well-being and whether it's improving, declining, or staying the same. These metrics help us decide how to focus our resources to improve our community, and then to monitor the impact of our collective efforts.

Our overview report will be updated annually, and the online data will be updated more frequently to allow for continual monitoring of the community's evolving needs.

Erie Vital Signs encourages our community to create a shared vision for the future, built on data. The Erie Community Foundation supports Erie Vital Signs by encouraging substantial "champions" for projects with the capacity to make a difference, by providing significant resources through our Shaping Tomorrow grant making program, and through other community leadership efforts. To promote partnerships and collaborations, The Erie Community Foundation will also help educate donors, policymakers, nonprofits and grant makers on community needs and solutions.

Erie Vital Signs was developed with assistance from the Center for Governmental Research (CGR), based in Rochester, New York. CGR is a nonprofit research and consulting firm that has created several community indicator projects in New York State, Tennessee, Florida, and other locations.

Overview

Erie County is a community making progress in key areas of residents' needs (such as education and early-childhood health) even as it continues to face challenges in the economic arena. The county has seen a mix of demographic trends, with a slight decline in total population, less "graying" than the nation as a whole, and increasing diversity, particularly in Asian and Hispanic populations (the Asian American population more than doubled and the Hispanic population increased 77%).

Areas in which Erie County has seen progress include education and early childhood health. The county has had a huge increase in the number of 3- and 4-year olds enrolled in pre-kindergarten, and the rate of pre-kindergarten enrollment is now higher than that of Pennsylvania. Additionally, Erie County students have made improvements on grade 3 English and Mathematics exams. And overall education levels of adults in Erie County have been rising, which can contribute to a more attractive workforce better prepared for long-term growth. In early health, Erie had a higher rate of early prenatal care than the state and nation, and the rate of teenage births is down 60% from the early 2000s.

Other areas of success include a high level of tourism spending and lower rates of drug arrests and violent crimes when compared with Pennsylvania (though Erie City residents face these challenges at higher rates). Additionally, access to healthcare has improved, and Erie County residents benefit from responsible environmental management. The county's air quality has improved three years in a row, and nearly everyone who lives here has access to clean drinking water.

Erie County also continues to have challenges, particularly in the economic arena. The county has not fully recovered from the national recession of 2008-09. Since 2000, household income has declined, the unemployment rate is up, and poverty has increased. These trends have been even stronger for Erie City. In 2012-16, about a quarter of children under 18 in Erie lived in households below the poverty line, up 9 percentage points since 2000 and higher than the state and nation. Erie's 2016 level of public assistance income per resident was double the level in 2000 and higher than Pennsylvania and the U.S. Other areas where Erie has room to improve include Erie's high rates of childhood obesity and the county's recycling rate, which has been declining steadily for 10 years.

Erie is also not immune from the racial and ethnic disparities that plague the nation as a whole. Education and income levels are lower, while poverty and unemployment are higher among African American and Hispanic residents of the community, showing the lasting effects of a history of unequal opportunity and systemic racism.

This project is aimed at re-engaging county residents in a conversation about the overall quality of life in Erie County and how to work together to address issues and build on strengths. We hope this study provides a foundation for that process. Below are our key data findings in each of the seven focus areas covered by this project: Arts, Entertainment and Recreation; Community and Civic Engagement; Demographics; Economy; Education; Health; and Environment.

Arts, Entertainment & Recreation

Arts and cultural activities create vitality and add to a community's character. They also can be sources of distinction and prestige that draw visitors, helping to fuel the local economy with tourism spending. The Arts, Entertainment and Recreation sector in Erie County appears relatively healthy, with slightly more establishments, jobs and related spending here than at the state level or in similar counties.

In 2015, there were 4 jobs in the Arts, Entertainment and Recreation sector per 10,000 residents in Erie County. This was slightly higher than the state rate of 3.5, and slightly lower than the U.S. rate of 4.2. Compared to Erie, the rate in Broome County, NY was similar, while rates were lower in Luzerne County, PA (2.6) and Stark County, OH (3.2). In 2015, the rate in Erie County was 9% higher than in 2000.

The Arts, Entertainment and Recreation sector represented 2.6% of all jobs in Erie County in 2015, or 2,900 people. This was a higher share of jobs than the state (2%) and the U.S. (1.8%). Since 2000, the county had a larger increase in this sector (1.2 percentage points) than the state (0.7 points) and national (0.3 points) levels during the same period.

Tourism spending, which brings external money into a community's economy, represented \$3,370 per resident in Erie County in 2014. This was higher than Pennsylvania (\$3,110) and increased 6% in real terms since 2005. Tourism spending in similar counties was much less than in Erie.

Community and Civic Engagement

There are many ways to measure quality of life in a community. These include indicators of basic public safety, such as crime and drug activity, as well as voter participation and others signs of whether citizens are active in civic life.

Erie County's drug arrest and violent crime rates are lower than Pennsylvania and similar counties. While Erie's property crime rate is higher than the statewide rate, it is lower than or similar to the comparison counties. Crime rates in the City of Erie, however, are much higher than the county as a whole, an indication that city

residents disproportionately face the negative effects of criminal activity. Meanwhile, there is a higher proportion of people registered to vote in Erie County than the state average, but the county's underlying voting-age population is increasing at a slower rate than both Pennsylvania and the nation.

Crime affects quality of life for those who directly experience and witness it, sometimes resulting in long-lasting trauma, and can indirectly influence the stability and perceived attractiveness of a community. In 2015, there were two violent crimes reported per 1,000 residents in Erie County, less than the state rate of 3 and the national rate of 7. In the City of Erie, however, the 2015 violent crime rate was 9, more than four times higher than the county as a whole. The 2015 rate was slightly higher than Erie County in Broome, Luzerne and Stark counties, all at 3.

In 2015, there were 21 property crimes reported per 1,000 residents in Erie County, higher than the state rate of 18, but less than the national rate of 25. From 2005 to 2015, the county's property crime rate rose to a peak of 27 in 2011, and then declined back to its 2005 level. The City of Erie's property crime rate was 50 in 2015, more than double the county rate; however, the city rate had declined 32% since 2011.

Drug arrests can be a sign of illegal drug use and sales, which can cause immediate and long-term harm to individuals, neighborhoods and communities. At the same time, there are racial and socioeconomic disparities in drug-related arrests at the national level, which suggests that enforcement is sometimes uneven. In 2015, the drug abuse arrest rate in Erie County was 2 per 1,000 residents, half the statewide rate.

It is important to note that overall, Erie County's voting-age population has increased by only 3% since 2000. The state, in contrast, experienced steady increases in its voting-age population throughout this time, resulting in an 8% increase overall. The nation increased its voting-age population by 19% in this period. If the population in Erie County continues to grow at a slower pace than the state and nation, it could eventually mean less representation for Erie County in the Pennsylvania Legislature and the U.S. Congress.

Voter registration among adults 18 and older indicates the citizenry's interest, commitment and belief in the value of participating in the political process. In 2016, 88% of voting-age Erie County residents were registered to vote, slightly more than the statewide rate of 86%. From 2000 to 2016, the county's voter registration rate fluctuated, peaking in presidential election years and declining afterward.

In terms of actual voter participation, 57% of voting-age people in Erie County went to the polls to vote in the 2016 presidential election. This was lower than the statewide rate of 60%, but slightly higher than the national rate of 55%. Participation at the

county level was lowest during the 2014 midterm elections (33%) and highest in the 2004 and 2008 presidential elections (60%).

Demographics

Erie County has a mix of demographic trends, with a slight decline in total population, less “graying” than the nation as a whole, and increasing diversity, particularly in Asian and Hispanic populations.

Contrary to the state and nation, Erie County lost population from 2000 to 2016, declining 1.7% to 276,200 residents. The City of Erie’s population declined 5% to 98,600.

The fastest growing age bracket in Erie County was those 60 to 84, which increased 26% from 2000 to 2016, below the 50% experienced at the national level. The number of people 20-39 and 40-59 decreased, by 6% and 4%, respectively. But people 20-39 were the largest group in the county at 71,400, followed by 71,000 who were 40-59.

In 2012-16, Erie County’s median age was 38.9, lower than the state’s median of 40.6 and slightly higher than the nation’s median of 37.7. Since 2000, the county’s median age increased 7.5%, a bit more than the state and national increases of 6.8%. The City of Erie’s median age in 2012-16 was lower than the county, at 34.2 years.

In terms of its racial and ethnic make-up, Erie remains majority white at 88%. But its Asian American and Hispanic populations have had tremendous growth – the Asian American population more than doubled from about 1,900 to 4,300, and the Hispanic population increased 77%, from 6,100 to 10,900. The African American population grew at a slower pace, or 15%, from 17,200 to 19,900. The white population decreased 4%, from 255,300 to 244,000.

The make-up of Erie County’s households has also changed, with a 27% decline since 2000 in married couples with children, a larger decrease than those seen in the state and nation. In 2012-16, people living alone and married couples without children each comprised about 30% of the households in the county. Married couples with children were the next largest group (17%), followed by single people with children (12%) and people living with either relatives or non-relatives (6-7% each).

Erie County’s average household size dropped slightly from 2000 to 2012-16, from 2.5 to 2.4. The state’s average household size was 2.5 and the nation’s was 2.6, both essentially flat since 2000. In the City of Erie, the average household size was 2.3, down from 2.4 in 2000.

Since 2000, Erie County has seen a 10 percentage point increase in the share of families headed by single parents. In 2012-16, single parents headed 41% of all families in the county, higher than Pennsylvania or the nation, both at 35%. In the City of Erie, single parents headed 56% of all families in 2012-16.

Erie has a relatively small share of residents who were born outside the country, at 4.5% in 2012-16, but the share is higher in the City of Erie, at 7.3%, and that's nearly double what it was in 2000.

Economy

Erie County has not fully recovered from the national recession of 2008-09. Since 2000, household income declined, the unemployment rate rose and poverty increased. However, there are some positive trends, including job gains in key industries and relatively affordable home prices.

Median household income is a gauge of the county's overall economic health and the financial resources of its households. In 2012-16, Erie's median income was \$47,000, down 11% from \$52,800 in 2000 (after inflation). This was a steeper decline than Pennsylvania, but similar to the U.S.

Salaries also are a gauge of economic health and the degree to which employees are sharing in their community's prosperity. Erie's average salary in 2015 was \$40,890, up 5% from 2000 (after inflation). This was a smaller increase in salaries than at the state and national levels.

Unemployment rates are a timely indicator of changes in the local employment landscape. Erie's unemployment rate in 2016 was 6.6%, up 2.1 percentage points since 2000, but down from a post-recession peak of 9.3% in 2010. Erie's unemployment rate was higher than the state and nation had large disparities by race and ethnic group.

Job changes by sector paint a more mixed picture of Erie's economic vitality. Total jobs in Erie were down less than 1% from 2001 to 2016, but there was significant variation among sectors. Health Care and Social Assistance jobs increased 38%, for example, while Manufacturing jobs were down 35%.

Poverty is a measure of Erie's overall economic health and need for social supports. In 2012-16, 17% of Erie residents had incomes below the poverty level, up from 12% in 2000. Erie County's poverty rate was higher than Pennsylvania and the nation. Disparities in poverty by race and ethnicity were large, with 44% of Hispanics and 39% of African American residents having incomes below the poverty level, in comparison to just 14% of whites. These disparities in income level were larger than those at the state and national level.

Children living in poverty are at higher risk for a wide variety of health and social problems, which can diminish their chances for successful adult lives. In 2012-16, about a quarter of children under 18 in Erie lived in households below the poverty line, up 9 percentage points since 2000. This was a higher percentage than the state and nation. Like with poverty overall, child poverty also had large disparities by race and ethnicity, with 50% of African American and 49% of Hispanic children growing up in poverty in comparison to 17% of white children. Additionally, white and Hispanic child poverty rates in Erie increased by more from 2000 to 2012-16 than the state or nation.

Tracking people who live in poverty by education level measures the ability of people with different education levels to find work and earn a living wage. In 2012-16, 31% of Erie County residents who lacked a high school diploma lived in poverty, a higher percentage than the state or nation.

Public assistance is a measure of a region's overall poverty and shows to what extent residents need and receive help from the government to meet basic needs. In 2016, Erie received \$3,700 in public assistance income per resident, double the level in 2000 and higher than Pennsylvania and the U.S.

Homeownership is a vital financial asset for a family and an investment in the community. In 2012-16, Erie's homeownership rate was 66%, slightly lower than the state, at 69%, but slightly higher than the nation, at 64%. Erie had great racial and ethnic disparities in homeownership rates than the state or nation, with 69% of whites owning homes in 2012-16 and only 31% of African American and Hispanic residents doing the same. Homeownership rates among African American and Hispanic residents were lower in Erie County than at the state or national level.

Home affordability provides a rough estimate of the cost of homes in a community by dividing the median home value by the median household income. Homes in Erie were fairly affordable in 2012-16, with an affordability ratio of 1.9 – a more favorable environment than the state or nation.

Median rent shows the cost of rental properties, which can affect the amount of money that individuals and families have available to spend on other necessary expenses. Erie's median rent in 2012-16 was \$700, below the median for the state and nation.

Education

Access to quality education is critical to a community's future. Good schools can provide children with the skills and knowledge they need to get into college, succeed in their careers as adults, contribute to their communities and lead fulfilling lives.

When a quality education is not available to everyone in a community, not all children have equal opportunities to succeed.

There are many ways to measure educational success, including pre-kindergarten enrollment, the adequacy of school funding, performance on early reading and math assessments, and on-time graduation rates. Overall, these indicators suggest that Erie County is preparing many children well for the future. Promising measures include a prekindergarten enrollment rate much higher than the state overall, improvements in math and reading scores, and a four-year graduation rate that compares well to Pennsylvania. Yet, like many other parts of the U.S., there are deep disparities in outcomes among school districts within the same county -- particularly between Erie City and the surrounding townships and boroughs. This suggests that not all students in Erie County have access to the same educational opportunities.

Pre-kindergarten places an early emphasis on reading, numeracy and social skills, laying a foundation for success throughout a child's educational career. In 2016, 34% of 3- and 4-year-olds in Erie County were enrolled in a pre-kindergarten program. This was more than double the county's 2007 rate, and 14 percentage points higher than the Pennsylvania rate of 20%.

While not always a decisive factor in educational success, higher spending per student can mean better facilities and programs for students. It also can signal community support for quality education and the capacity to fund it. Per-student spending in Erie County schools was \$13,700 in 2014, less than the state level of \$15,700. After adjusting for inflation, Erie County's spending has increased 9% since 2000, while Pennsylvania experienced a much larger increase (22%) during the same period. Within the county, per-student spending in 2014 was highest in the Wattsburg Area School District, at \$15,900, and lowest at General McLane, at \$12,200. Erie City was one of the higher-spending districts at \$14,800.

Erie County students are showing overall improvement on the state's Grade 3 English Language Arts exam, an important milestone in reading proficiency. In 2017, 62% of students in Erie County scored as proficient or advanced on the exam, up from 57% in 2015. Erie's rate in 2017 was slightly lower than the statewide rate of 65% and the City of Erie schools had lowest passing rate at 38%, up from 34% in 2015.

Students in Erie County also made progress on the state Grade 3 Math exam, an important foundation for math and science-related subjects. In 2017, 56% of county students scored as proficient or advanced, up from 49% in 2015. Erie increased its proficiency rates by slightly more than the state, which was at 54% proficiency in 2017 (Pennsylvania was also at 49% in 2015). The Erie City School District had the lowest rate in 2017, at 30%, an improvement from its 24% rate in 2015. Overall, more Erie

County third-graders scored proficient or advanced on both the reading and math exams than their counterparts Luzerne County, PA.

High school graduation, measured as the number of students completing four years of high school on time, is the culmination of a successful K-12 education and a gateway to college or employment. About 86% of the 2016 high school cohort in Erie County graduated on time, similar to Pennsylvania as a whole. Most districts in the county had 2016 cohort graduation rates close to or above 90%, except Erie City, which had a graduation rate of 74%. Erie City has seen its graduation rate decline by 8 percentage points since 2011.

Overall, the education levels of adults have been rising in Erie County, which can contribute to a more attractive workforce better prepared for long-term growth. In 2012-16, 91% of Erie County residents had a high school diploma or higher (up from 85% in 2000), while 27% had earned a college degree. This represented a decline in residents who lacked a high school diploma since 2000 (from 15% to 9% in 2012-16), as well as an increase in college graduates (up from 21% in 2000). Both the state and nation saw similar trends in educational attainment. Still, Erie's share of residents with only a high school diploma in 2012-16 (40%) was higher than Pennsylvania (36%) and the U.S. (28%). The City of Erie had lower adult education levels than the county as a whole (87% with a high school diploma or higher), though it, like the county, has improved since 2000.

Education levels differed by race and ethnicity, with 38% of Asian Americans in Erie County holding a bachelor's degree in 2012-16, compared to 28% of whites, 14% of African Americans, and 11% of Hispanic residents. Since 2000, the share of residents without a high school degree declined among most racial and ethnic groups in Erie County. The share of Asians without a high school degree, however, increased by almost 20 points in the same time frame.

Health

Erie County shares many of the health challenges across the nation, such as obesity, use of substances like tobacco and alcohol, and chronic diseases such as hypertension. Yet some of those challenges are being successfully addressed, and Erie County residents have good access to affordable care.

Mortality rates are on the decline due to medical advances and people living longer. Erie County's mortality rate has declined 9% since 2000, but this is less than the declines at the state and national levels (14% and 16%, respectively). The county's overall mortality rate of 801 per 100,000 people was a bit higher than the state (768) and nation (733).

Heart disease and cancer are two of the biggest causes of death, and both have declined in Erie. Deaths due the heart disease were down 34% since 2000, in line with the state and nation, and due to cancer, 16%, somewhat less than the state and nation.

Stroke and chronic lower respiratory disease are two lesser causes of death. Erie mortality rate due to stroke fell 40% since 2000, while the CLRD mortality rate has fluctuated. All of these mortality rates were roughly in line with state and national rates.

Hypertension, diabetes and asthma are chronic diseases that can cause early mortality or degrade quality of life. Erie's rates for these are similar to the state and nation, with 35% of adults in the county diagnosed with hypertension (a bit higher than the state's 33% and nation's 31%), 12% diagnosed with diabetes and 9% with asthma. The prevalence of hypertension and asthma in Erie has increased somewhat in recent years, while the diabetes rate has fluctuated.

Access to affordable care is important to health. In 2017, 7% of Erie County residents were uninsured, down from 14% in 2011. Yet 10% of Erie County residents in 2017 had been unable to afford medical care within the past year. That was also a decrease, from 13% in 2011.

Most people in Erie County have a primary care physician and receive checkups. In 2017, just 11% had no primary physician and 88% had received a check within the last two years. These rates compare favorably with the state and nation and are moving in the right direction.

Being overweight or obese brings major health risks. Erie has similar rates of obesity for adults as the state and nation, but high rates among children. In 2017, 66% of Erie County adults were either overweight or obese, similar to Pennsylvania and the U.S. (both 65%) in 2016, the most recent year for which comparison data were available. The county rate increased by 10 percentage points between 2000 and 2015.

In 2013, the latest year for which data were available, 54% of Erie County students in K-6 were either overweight or obese, and 48% of students in grade 7-12 were. While a data reporting anomaly might be to blame for part of the high rate for K-6, we do not see data issues in the 7-12 figures. These are higher than state rates for obesity among children and youth.

Health behaviors play an important role in our well-being. Erie County shares problems related to smoking, drinking and inactivity that plague our nation. In 2017, 18% of Erie County residents were smokers, down from 27% in 2012. Recent declines in smoking haven't been as strong in Erie as the state and nation.

In 2017, 23% of Erie County residents had been physically inactive in the past month. From 2011 to 2015, the county rate decreased 6 percentage points. In 2017, 19% of adults in Erie County binge drank within the past 30 days, little changed since 2011.

A healthy start in life is important to children's future success. Erie has some successes and areas to work on in this realm.

Erie's infant mortality rate was similar to the state and nation at 6.4 per 1,000 live births in 2015. The county's share of babies born with low birth weights, which puts them at risk of health problems and developmental delays, was a bit lower than the state and nation at 7.5% in 2015.

Erie had a lower share of non-smoking pregnancies than the state and nation, with 80% of births in 2015 to women who hadn't smoked, compared to 88% in Pennsylvania and 93% in the nation. Yet Erie's rate of early prenatal care was higher, 78%, up 7 points since 2007 and higher than the 72% in the state and nation.

In 2015, 1.7% of teenage girls in Erie County gave birth, slightly higher than the state and nation but down 60% since the early 2000s, a bit larger of a decline than decreases at the state and national level.

Environment

Natural resources are among a community's most valuable assets. Their benefits are easy to take for granted, but critical to our well-being, including clean air and water. Caring for the environment protects public health and ensures that unspoiled natural resources will remain available to future generations.

Overall, Erie County residents benefit from responsible environmental management. The county's air quality has improved three years in a row, and nearly everyone who lives here has access to clean drinking water. County residents also are taking steps – albeit small ones – to reduce their carbon footprints by buying alternative-fuel vehicles in slightly larger numbers. There is, however, room to improve. While Erie generates less waste per person than the state average, the county's recycling rate has been declining steadily for 10 years.

Air quality ratings measure levels of pollutants that can cause short-term respiratory distress and worsen existing medical conditions such as asthma and heart disease. In 2016, 81% of days with air quality measurements in Erie County were rated as good, the highest percentage recorded since 2000 and the third consecutive year of improvement since 2013. By comparison, Luzerne County, PA has had consistently higher air quality ratings since 2006 than Erie.

In 2016, 100% of the population in Erie County had access to community water systems compliant with state standards for safe drinking water. This percentage has been consistent (at 99%-100%) since 2012.

Relatively few vehicles registered in Erie County (less than 1%) use fuel sources other than gasoline or diesel, such as electric, hybrid, flex fuel and natural gas. This is, however, slightly higher than the state's share (0.5%). While Erie's percentage has changed little since 2014, the raw number of alternative-fuel vehicles registered here increased 21%, from 912 in 2014 to 1,104 in 2016.

Recycling conserves raw materials, keeps waste out of landfills, and conserves energy compared with new material production. In 2014, 0.2 tons of waste per capita were recycled in Erie County, down from 0.6 in 2006. This means Erie County recycled 110,000 thousand fewer tons of waste than it did in 2006. The recycling rate in Luzerne County, PA in 2016 was significantly higher, at 0.6 tons per person.

Solid waste that is not recycled is typically disposed of in landfills or waste-to-energy facilities. Erie County generated 0.9 tons of solid waste per capita in 2016 – the same rate as five years earlier, but lower than the statewide rate of 1.1.