AMERICA'S LEGACY CITIES: BUILDING AN EQUITABLE RENAISSANCE

By Jessie Grogan

Legacy cities have been at the center of some of America's most historic achievements, and they possess a strong civic spirit and culture of innovation at a time when these qualities are most needed. These cities offer growth potential not only for families, businesses, and communities seeking a stable future—but also for the country as a whole. Once drivers of industry and prosperity, legacy cities lost millions of residents and jobs in the 20th century due to a changing economy—but many of them are now on a path toward revitalization.[1] Home today to nearly 17 million people and a collective economy of $430 billion, legacy cities share the potential for an inclusive, prosperous future.

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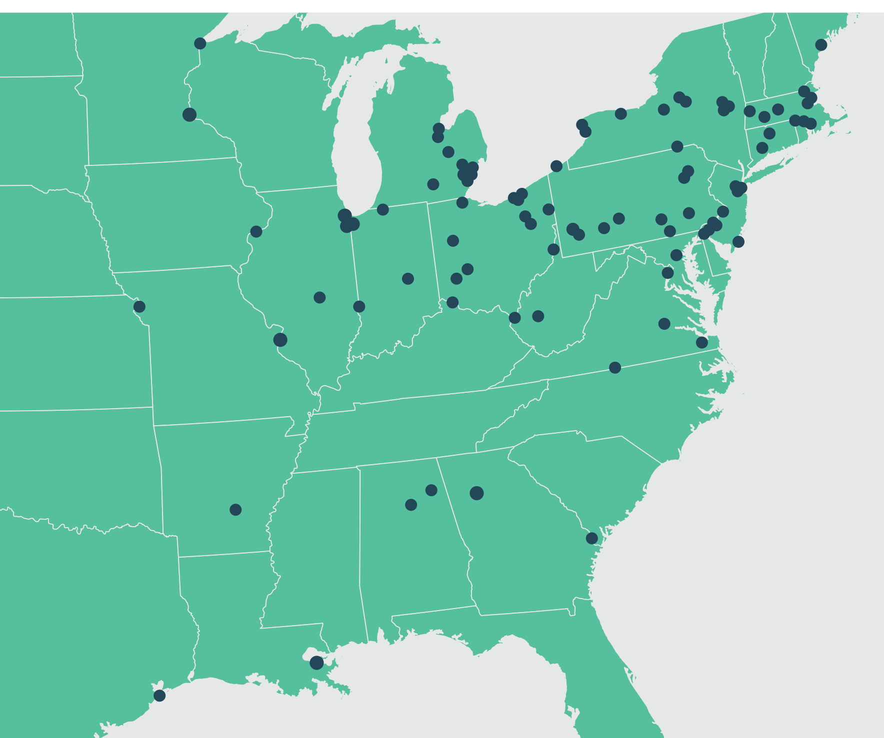

The challenges faced by legacy cities—spatial inequality, economic decline, population loss, divisive gentrification, and more—reflect a national struggle that too often leaves disadvantaged groups behind.[2] Yet legacy cities are also poised to seize many similar opportunities. They are affordable places to live and create businesses at a time when rising costs of city living make larger metropolises inaccessible to all but the highest-income households.[3] Their existing infrastructure and density mean that interventions can be small, targeted, and inexpensive—with an outsized impact. And they can each capitalize on rich histories, cultures, and unique assets not found in many newer suburbs or Sun Belt cities.

Though the national conversation often focuses on larger legacy cities like Detroit, Michigan, and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, smaller urban centers such as Akron, Ohio; Birmingham, Alabama; and Buffalo, New York, face comparable challenges—but lack access to resources and solutions.[4] Nevertheless, with the right strategies, smaller postindustrial cities can take steps to regenerate and follow in the footsteps of their larger counterparts on the rebound. In fact, their smaller size can even be an asset, allowing them to move quickly and experiment in ways that are challenging for larger cities.

Regardless of size, these places will revitalize only with deliberate, concentrated effort from new coalitions of civic actors. As dozens of legacy cities have already proven, this type of change is possible: with strategic and timely support, reinvigorated cities can again become beacons of industry and culture.

Most legacy cities are located in the upper Midwest, Rust Belt, New England, and Southeast. However, cities around the country share many of the same assets and challenges.

LINCOLN INSTITUTE OF LAND POLICY

Revitalization Strategies

By definition, legacy cities already have many of the assets they need for regeneration, including vibrant cultural scenes, historic neighborhoods, multimodal transit networks, and underutilized workforces. Their challenge is to capitalize on those resources—and to mobilize collaboration among local leaders in politics, business, and other sectors. As cities evolve and redevelop, they can act not as victims of their past successes but rather as investors with foresight, vision, and faith in their communities.

Cities can learn from each other and adapt key strategies to their specific assets, locations, and needs. Variations in size, housing markets, anchor industries, immigration patterns, and other demographic trends will demand different policy interventions, but a core set of scalable, adaptable strategies has already emerged from the experiences of diverse communities.

Implement Inclusive Economic Development

Legacy cities must proactively expand economic opportunity and access to capital to low- and middle-income residents. Cities that lose population tend also to experience heightened unemployment and reduced household income; by ensuring that success is shared by all residents, leaders can entice current residents to stay and bring newcomers to the community as well.

Lima, Ohio, has created an umbrella organization to coordinate workforce development efforts.

Lowell, Massachusetts, has an accelerator program that helps early-stage entrepreneurs develop small businesses and nonprofit organizations.

Tailor Neighborhood Strategies to Market Conditions

Cities must stabilize distressed neighborhoods and encourage reinvestment in order to rebuild local housing markets, strengthen community, and preserve home affordability. Local governments and community development corporations should act methodically and use data to help make decisions about where to deploy resources while incorporating input from community members.

Youngstown, Ohio, collects data to pinpoint struggling neighborhoods and prioritize funding to address housing in poor condition.

Cleveland, Ohio, stabilizes middle-income neighborhoods by providing technical assistance and low-interest financing to help homeowners improve and maintain the value of older homes.

Build on a Community's Unique Strengths

By leveraging existing assets to bring in and retain residents, consumers, and talent, an individual city can stand out and claim a singular identity. Cities with "anchor" institutions—such as hospitals, universities, and major corporations—can use these assets to attract workers and consumers from across the region. Diversity is also a proven benefit, given that rebounding legacy cities tend to have significantly higher immigrant and nonwhite populations than still-faltering ones.

In **Lancaster, Pennsylvania,** the private sector led the deployment of a plan that reimagined the city as a tourist hub.

Scranton, Pennsylvania, encourages former residents who had moved to New York and other large cities to return home, emphasizing the local quality of life.

Build Local Government and Civic Capacity

Elected officials, public servants, and civic leaders should work together to expand and align capacity and to strengthen municipal finances. Change begins with leadership, and leadership starts with local government. By bringing fresh voices, ideas, energies, and perspectives into city hall and to community development agencies, a city can put itself in the position to attract new businesses and residents.

South Bend, Indiana, offers fellowships that place talented young workers in management-level positions in the private and public sectors.

Hamilton, Ohio, recruited a city manager from out of town to change city hall culture.

Engage in Community and Strategic Planning

Leaders of all sectors must participate in developing a shared vision for the future and take responsibility for executing complex revitalization strategies. Through planning processes that deeply engage residents, cities must wrestle with different future scenarios and shape a vision for the future they seek. They must then develop a plan that aligns with that vision.

Grand Rapids, Michigan, encourages neighborhoods to create plans to guide new development, while its business leaders created an organization that revitalized the central business district.

Dayton, Ohio, and **Flint, Michigan,** have engaged residents in tough conversations about future land use after extreme population losses.

Strategically Leverage State and Federal Policy

Cities must forge partnerships at all levels of government to expand funding, programs, and policies dedicated to the equitable revitalization of urban centers. No city exists in a vacuum, and increasing coordination among governments at the local, regional, and state levels can lead to reduced regulatory pressures and increased support for local priorities. A more streamlined government presence can also be attractive to businesses and individuals looking to relocate.

Massachusetts authorized counties to create local land banks in response to the foreclosure and vacancy crises. The commonwealth also collaborates with a statewide think tank to direct resources to targeted legacy cities.

New York has awarded selected communities $400 million over four years to develop downtown strategic investment plans and implement key catalytic projects.

Focus Regional Efforts on a Strong Urban Core

To spur sustainable growth and build inclusive and prosperous communities for all, legacy cities must concentrate investments in their urban cores. With fewer people come vacant properties; changing a city's physical form to recycle, recreate, or otherwise contend with disused buildings, lots, and infrastructure is critical for avoiding widespread vacancies and the risk of blight.

The regional chamber of commerce in **Syracuse, New York,** tied a redevelopment project to high-paying jobs and skills training, and the city prioritized downtown revitalization efforts to help create jobs and attract talented workers.

York, Pennsylvania, created a business improvement district to reestablish the downtown as a retail center.

Bustling Elmwood Avenue in Buffalo, New York, shows the results of targeted strategies like eliminating parking minimums. Credit: Andre Carrotflower.

THE LEGACY CITIES INITIATIVE: SUPPORTING IDEAS, NETWORKS, AND ACTION

The Legacy Cities Initiative is a national network of community and government leaders working to create shared prosperity and bring attention to the common needs and collective importance of legacy cities.

A project of the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, the initiative promotes sustainable and equitable revitalization by convening networks, facilitating the exchange of ideas and practices, and researching and advancing new policy approaches.

Visit **legacycities.org** to learn more and to access strategies, resources, and a searchable map charting nearly 100 legacy cities and their pathways to growth.

Strategies in Practice: Legacy City Case Studies

As legacy cities are increasingly able to shape their own futures, they prove that, with the right approach, every city has the potential to build upon its historical legacy and generate sustainable new growth that improves conditions for all residents.[5]

Looking ahead, an individual legacy city's continued success depends on its ability to rebuild civic capacity for making and implementing plans for the future across disciplines and sectors. A few representative samples of cities on paths to growth follow.

LOTS OF GREEN (YOUNGSTOWN, OHIO)

Youngstown, Ohio, demonstrates the power of incremental action. The city's 2005 plan to rethink itself as a smaller city led to little action until 2009, when a local foundation created the Youngstown Neighborhood Development Corporation (YNDC) to pursue strategies consistent with that plan's vision. YNDC decided to focus on the Idora neighborhood in the city's southwest, with the Lots of Green program as a central strategy. The program repurposes vacant land as green space to reduce blight and make the neighborhood more healthy, productive, and safe.[6] In the first two years, over 115 vacant lots in the Idora neighborhood were reused for purposes including the expansion of an adjacent regional park, community gardens, an urban farm and training center, and side yard expansions.

GARY COUNTS (GARY, INDIANA)

Facing pervasive blighted properties, the City of Gary, Indiana, partnered with the University of Chicago Harris School of Public Policy in 2012 to strategize on how best to demolish abandoned buildings. About 300 volunteers and students ultimately surveyed some 58,000 parcels. With grants from the U.S. Department of the Treasury, the Center for Community Progress, and others, the Gary Counts team developed software that uses real-time parcel-level data and mapping to provide an accurate inventory of vacant and abandoned properties and guide Gary's efforts to stabilize its neighborhoods. The city has since strategically deployed $500,000 for demolition and redevelopment, reducing the number of vacant buildings by 18.5 percent in just six years.[7]

NEIGHBORWORKS ROCHESTER (ROCHESTER, NEW YORK)

An early leader in tailoring place-based strategies to middle neighborhoods, NeighborWorks Rochester launched an innovative neighborhood marketing project in 2015. Working with residents and a local marketing team, NeighborWorks helped develop an official community name—the Triangle of North Winton Village—as well as a logo, branding strategy, advertising materials, and more. The two-year program increased the sale price of homes by about $10,000, making them more likely to be purchased by owner-occupants, rather than investors.[8] The project complemented other work to stabilize weak-market neighborhoods and it proved how modest, targeted, and time-limited investments can achieve results.

This Policy Brief is based in part on Policy Focus Reports by Alan Mallach and Lavea Brachman, *Regenerating America's Legacy Cities* (Cambridge, MA: Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, 2013), and by Torey Hollingsworth and Alison Goebel, *Revitalizing America's Smaller Legacy Cities: Strategies for Postindustrial Success from Gary to Lowell* (Cambridge, MA: Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, 2017).

1 Alan Mallach and Lavea Brachman, *Regenerating America's Legacy Cities* (Cambridge, MA: Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, 2013), 4–7.

2 Alan Berube, *Small and Midsized Legacy Communities: Trends, Assets, and Principles for Action* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institute Metropolitan Policy Program, 2019), 20.

3 Alan Berube and Cecile Murray, *Renewing America's Economic Promise through Older Industrial Cities* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institute Metropolitan Policy Program, 2018), 7–8.

4 Torey Hollingsworth and Alison Goebel, *Revitalizing America's Smaller Legacy Cities: Strategies for Postindustrial Success from Gary to Lowell* (Cambridge, MA: Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, 2017), 13.

5 Erika C. Poethig, Solomon Greene, Christina Plerhoples Stacy, Tanaya Srini, and Brady Meixell, *Inclusive Recovery in US Cities* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2018), 7.

6 YNDC (Youngstown Neighborhood Development Corporation), *Lots of Green 2010 Impact Statement* (Youngstown, OH: YNDC, 2010), www.yndc.org/sites/default/files/Lots%20of%20Green%20Impact%20Statement_small_1.pdf.

7 Joseph Van Dyk (former executive director, Gary Redevelopment Commission), phone interview by Nicholas Hamilton, February 21, 2019.

8 NeighborWorks Community Partners Rochester, "What and Where, Is Healthy Blocks?" (Rochester, NY: NeighborWorks Community Partners Rochester, 2017), https://nwcprochester.org/what-and-where-is-healthy-blocks.