



## **“Roads Less Traveled”**

*Analyzing the spatial disconnection between employment opportunities in Northeast Ohio and unemployed residents in distressed urban core communities*



March 2016

### **Community Engagement and Opinion Research Report**

Response to the “Geography of Jobs” Report

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## INTRODUCTION

Northeast Ohio is a region in transition. Relatedly, the people who live and work in Northeast Ohio are experiencing many conditions that have a direct (and often negative) impact on their overall quality of lives. This point is important because existing conditions do not only impact the quality of lives for those individuals who live and work in Northeast Ohio, they also affect the institutions, organizations, systems and structures that support the region's quality of living and contribute to its overall vitality.

The region is growing generally high-paying jobs, entrepreneurship is thriving, new industries are being created and old ones are being reinvented. But, in recent years, Northeast Ohio has lost population; has had a consistently high level of poverty in the region's urban central cities; has maintained slightly better than stagnant economic growth; has underperformed in the area of job creation; and has increased income inequality in distressed and economically polarized neighborhoods. Racial and ethnic minorities, especially those who reside in distressed and economically polarized urban central cities in Northeast Ohio, are for the most part not included in Northeast Ohio's prosperity.

One of the most difficult conditions the region is experiencing is the increasing distance between where jobs are located and where people live in Northeast Ohio (Garr Pacetti, Murray, and Hartman 2015). Proximity to jobs has declined significantly for all Northeast Ohio residents over the past decade (Kneebone and Holmes 2015, Murray 2015). But the decline is especially acute for residents in distressed and polarized neighborhoods—arguably those who need jobs the most. The Fund for Our Economic Future (the Fund) looked at this issue in more depth in "The Geography of Jobs"<sup>1</sup> report released in September 2015. Job access may be the most important issue no one is talking about, the Fund concluded, and that needs to change (Garr Pacetti, Murray, and Hartman 2015). If the spatial access to jobs issue in Northeast Ohio is not resolved, it will undermine the region's economic vitality and prosperity.

After the completion of the report, the Fund wanted to stimulate conversations among regional thought leaders to gain their insights and solicit feedback on how to address the spatial access to jobs issue in Northeast Ohio. The Fund commissioned PolicyBridge to conduct community engagement and opinion research from a select group of Northeast Ohio civic leaders and community stakeholders. The Fund provided a grant to PolicyBridge to conduct qualitative research and then develop policy recommendations and cross-sector strategies focused on improving economic inclusion and regional economic competitiveness by addressing the spatial access to jobs issue in Northeast, Ohio.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.thefundneo.org/site/default/files/content-media/Geography%20of%20Jobs.pdf>

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PolicyBridge, founded in 2005, is a non-partisan 501 (c) 3 research and advocacy think tank. The mission of PolicyBridge is "To create and sustain high-quality discourse addressing public policy issues affecting African-Americans and other underserved communities, to enlighten citizens and catalyze action.

## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT FINDINGS

Community engagement interview and focus group participants offered a wide range of responses during conversations with PolicyBridge about “The Geography of Jobs” research. Five overarching themes emerged from participants’ feedback. The thematic findings that follow are not in a ranked order:

### FINDING #1 The Spatial Access to Jobs Issue in Northeast Ohio is Not Surprising or New

The regional thought leaders and community stakeholders were “not surprised” by “The Geography of Jobs” findings. They acknowledged that issues of sprawl and spatial access to jobs are not new problems, but indeed, they do not seem to be a civic priority. They also acknowledged that the region’s spatial access to jobs issue is impacting the performance of the region’s economy and is also disproportionately affecting people living in economically distressed and polarized urban core cities, especially, racial and ethnic minorities.

*Source: thefundneo.org*



### FINDING #2 Cross-Sector Leadership is required to Create a Sense of Urgency

There was also broad consensus among community engagement participants that the spatial access to jobs issue is a “priority of significant importance” that must be addressed if the region is to improve Northeast Ohio’s competitiveness. There was agreement that leaders from various sectors and segments of the community must work together to create awareness and a sense of urgency related to the spatial access to jobs issue to dramatically improve economic and social conditions across the whole region.



**FINDING #3**

Flexible and Innovative Solutions are Necessary to Make Change

There was significant agreement among respondents that there are current federal, state and local policies, systems and structures that present barriers when attempting to solve the spatial access to jobs issue in Northeast Ohio. These challenges created by inflexible and ineffective governmental and institutional policies, systems and structures prevent opportunities for new, creative and innovative solutions to resolve the issue and increase economic competitiveness. These impediments must be addressed in an environment that facilitates and initiates economic inclusion, imagination and innovation as opposed to the restrictive “can’t do” environment that currently exists.

**FINDING #4**

Short-Term Transit Options are a Critical Component of the Solution

There is an urgent need to create short-term, transit options that get workers to where jobs in the region are located. The transit options offered as short-term solutions by respondents were: employer-provided transit for workers to their locations; supplementing public transit options with both for-profit and nonprofit transit options; providing low-interest loans for workers to purchase vehicles for work opportunities in outlying job hubs; allowing inter-county transit options; and including transit organizations when businesses and business site locators make decisions about where to locate businesses in Northeast Ohio.

**FINDING #5**

Focus on Economic/Business Redevelopment and Reinvestment in Urban Core Cities

It was broadly stated that the current way of operating in the economic development arena must be reassessed so that the region’s business attraction, retention and expansion efforts expand to intentionally include the redevelopment and reinvestment of urban core cities in the region where economic disadvantage and polarization exists.

In conjunction with the need to create an urban core city economic/business redevelopment and reinvestment initiative, it was widely suggested that the populations targeted for impact by this initiative must be people living in economically disadvantaged and polarized neighborhoods in the region, especially racial and ethnic minorities who are disproportionately impacted. Northeast Ohio leaders and community stakeholders must begin to view economically disadvantaged and polarized neighborhoods, including both people and places, as developable assets where opportunities are abundant and success is possible.



# Northeast Ohio Growth & Opportunity

Community Stakeholders  
Civic Leaders  
Institutions  
Organizations  
Individuals

*Challenges and opportunities related to spatial job access are critical to Northeast Ohio's ability to achieve "Growth and Opportunity." Addressing these challenges and opportunities is not the job of any single organization or entity. Rather, organizations, institutions and individuals from all sectors need to assume shared responsibility.*



## Recommendations for Improving the Spatial Access to Jobs Issue In Northeast Ohio

Northeast Ohio's economic performance data paints a picture that illustrates both the strengths and weaknesses of its economy. What is evident is that people living in economically disadvantaged and polarized neighborhoods, especially racial and ethnic minorities, are falling further behind. As income inequality increases, these individuals are less connected to job opportunities that for the most part, are concentrated in job hubs located in suburban and exurban areas.

To remedy this situation, there must be systemic and structural reforms and targeted strategies designed to improve participation in the economic prosperity many in this region enjoy. As Dr. Harry S. Green, a Systems Change Theorist at the University of Chicago has written, "every system is exquisitely designed to produce the result it gets." So if we are to believe Dr. Green's theory, Northeast Ohio designed an economic eco-system that excluded segments of its total population. **THIS MUST CHANGE.**

All stakeholders living and working in Northeast Ohio must band together to establish a new vision that significantly transforms conditions for economically disadvantaged and polarized people living in central city neighborhoods. To achieve this transformation of perspective, leaders and community stakeholders must first begin to think differently about this population and the environments where they reside, and to thereafter act differently. Thinking and acting differently about the spatial access to jobs issues in Northeast Ohio will create opportunities and resources for economic inclusion and innovation, ultimately enhancing the region's competitiveness.

### CALL TO ACTION

## Recommendation #1

### Cross-Sector Leadership

Challenges and opportunities related to spatial job access are critical to Northeast Ohio's ability to achieve "Growth and Opportunity."<sup>2</sup> Addressing these challenges and opportunities is not the job of any single organization or entity. Rather, organizations, institutions and individuals from all sectors need to assume shared responsibility. Shared responsibility only emerges when leadership is exercised by civic leaders. And leadership is exercised when leaders understand the challenges and opportunities, recognize the urgency and refuse to tolerate the status quo.

To that end, successfully addressing this complex issue will require multi-and-cross-sector analysis and action that includes representatives from sectors other than the traditional economic development and business sectors. Connecting growth and opportunity requires a significant shift in how communities work together to design and implement their economic and community development strategies (Garr Pacetti 2014).

The engagement of Northeast Ohio leaders should include "metropolitan planning organizations, regional transit authorities, county and municipal governments, chambers of commerce, workforce preparation agencies and employer councils (including workforce investment boards), community-based human service organizations and community residents in addition to community development and economic development organizations. The goals of these entities would be to make the entire region aware of the urgency and immediacy of the spatial access to jobs issue. Once the region has become aware and consensus is reached regarding the need for action on the spatial access to jobs issue, cross-sector policies, systems and structures can be redesigned and/or created to improve the regions' economic competitiveness. These strategies should be adopted by all aforementioned organizations and institutions and reviewed and revised annually to ensure that cross-sector collaboration efforts are kept on track.

## Recommendation #2

### Culture Change

The systems, structures and policies that shape "spatial job access" are the product of our region's culture. Accordingly, bold efforts to significantly change our systems, structures and policies will be required to improve spatial job access, as systems and structures do not change without a change in our values. With an understanding of this need for a cultural shift, advocates of improved "spatial job access" will need to focus on what is deeply imbedded in our region's values and culture that led to today's troubling job access challenges and outcomes, and decide what kind of movement is necessary to change that culture.

In Northeast Ohio, a culture has emerged over time that supports the out-migration of businesses to locations outside the core of urban cities. This out-migration has led to sprawl. The current economics of sprawl are not true costs, but are the reflection of systems that are the reflection of policies that are the reflection of our culture.

<sup>2</sup> For more on the Growth & Opportunity framework, please see:  
[http://www.thefundneo/site/default/files/content-media/Framing%20Paper\\_Final%20hi%20res%20hyperlinks\\_0.pdf](http://www.thefundneo/site/default/files/content-media/Framing%20Paper_Final%20hi%20res%20hyperlinks_0.pdf)



## Recommendation #2 Culture Change Cont.

Organizational and institutional leaders and residents throughout the region must work together to intentionally foster economic inclusion and equity in all economic and community development policies, plans and practices. This will entail broadening the region’s current thinking about where economic development creativity and innovation occurs and how it looks in economically disadvantaged and polarized urban core neighborhoods as compared to traditional economic development cluster approaches. This will also require broad acceptance of the notion that not all growth is equal.

PolicyBridge believes that the current method for determining the value of economic and business development projects uses factors such as financial effectiveness, efficiency and the likelihood of political support to define the feasibility for project success. PolicyBridge argues that there are other factors that should be included when considering project success, with economic equity (fairness) being the single-most critical determinant. The addition and elevation of this factor when conducting an analysis to determine value would provide a wider array of options for economic and business development projects that are inclusive, and would clearly lead to different decisions and outcomes.

PolicyBridge also believes the old adage that “culture eats strategy for lunch everyday” and that cultural and paradigm shifts only happen when government, business, civic and non-profit leaders show the courage and commitment to change course. Further, decades of disinvestment and political gamesmanship can only be corrected by transparent and progressive approaches to making the urban core more vibrant and productive. To address these grim realities, PolicyBridge recommends that all participants in the business/economic development ecosystem should incorporate “culture audits” into any and all evaluations of organizational effectiveness and program impact. The results of those audits should be made public at annual convenings and in annual reports.





### Recommendation #3 People to Jobs

The region needs to use existing and new resources to create affordable and sustainable ways to help residents, particularly residents living within distressed and polarized neighborhoods, travel to their jobs. As noted in “The Geography of Jobs” research report, “Job growth over the past 20 years in Northeast Ohio occurred predominately in suburbs and the conversion of rural areas, continuing a long-term trend since the 1950s.”

Jobs have become more dispersed and harder to get to, with regional job growth declining within and around Northeast Ohio’s central business districts more so than other places in the country, as jobs became more disperse and harder to get to (Garr Pacetti, Murray, and Hartman 2015). “From 1994 to 2013, job growth outside of city centers in Northeast Ohio increased 4 percent, while job growth in city centers declined – 28 percent (Garr Pacetti, Murray, and Hartman 2015).

These job growth patterns have major implications for commuters, specifically the costs in the time it takes to get to work and the distance between workers and their jobs (Garr Pacetti, Murray, and Hartman 2015). Between 2000 and 2012, the number of jobs within the typical commute distance of Northeast Ohio residents declined by 22 percent meaning one in five jobs disappeared within the typical commute range (Garr Pacetti, Murray, and Hartman 2015). And the nearest job hub (defined as census tracts with twice as many jobs as residents) for the average resident is 75 minutes away by public transit versus 20 minutes by car. Only a quarter of Northeast Ohio can connect to the nearest job hub by public transit in less than 45 minutes (Murray 2015).

In the near-term, non-traditional transit options should be considered to move people to the jobs that are located farther away from our region’s city centers. Focus group and interview participants' identified various strategies that included: coordinating employer-sponsored and/or other for-profit and nonprofit transit options; offering people living in economically disadvantaged and polarized neighborhoods low-interest car loans to facilitate purchasing vehicles; creating ride-share programs throughout Northeast Ohio similar to the ride-share program started in Wayne County; and working with public transit organizations before business owners and business site selectors make decisions on business locations to ensure that worker transit issues are understood and integrated into business location decisions. Addressing budgetary and home rule issues that prevent counties from efficiently offering regional transit service should also be considered

Chambers of Commerce in the respective municipalities would be logical conveners to bring private sector and transportation officials together to create solutions to these challenges.

*“The average resident is 75 minutes away by public transit versus 20 minutes by car.”*





## Recommendation #4 Prepare People for Jobs

Job preparation (workforce development) strategies should be aligned with job creation (economic development) strategies and be designed in ways that measurably improve the opportunity of residents living within distressed and polarized neighborhoods. There is still a significant need to prepare the region's workforce for the jobs that are being created and that will be created in the future in the region (Garr Pacetti 2014).

During community engagement discussion sessions, it was clear that regional and local job preparation organizations and the public workforce development systems must work more closely with the economic development eco-system to create comprehensive strategic approaches that meet the needs of all parties. It is also critically important that we continue and expand job preparation training and skills development activities for current and future jobs in the region.

One critically important partner in this endeavor is the education system, which should be included in all regional discussions that aim to design and implement a job preparation system that is connected to regional economic/business development aspirations. The overall proficiency of students needs to increase, especially those residing in economically distressed and polarized communities, so that they have the basic skills and knowledge to qualify for the jobs of today and tomorrow.

One strategy to increase student proficiency is to expose them to a wide range of job options to improve the likelihood of sparking their ambitions (McShepard, Batson 2008). This could be accomplished by increasing mentoring and internship programs that focus on STEM and STEAM educational and entrepreneurial activities exposing students to real-world career opportunities. A particular focus on employment opportunities most prevalent in Northeast Ohio would be a cogent approach to ensure that students are best positioned for available jobs in their respective communities.

The public workforce and education systems should take responsibility for tracking and reporting best practice approaches to job preparation so that successful models can be expanded and replicated.

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to view economically disadvantaged and polarized neighborhoods,  
including both people and places, as developable assets where  
opportunities are abundant and success is possible.”*



## Recommendation #5

### Jobs to People

Business development strategies, including strategies that address business location decisions, should be structured in ways that encourage job creation proximate and accessible to residents living within distressed and polarized neighborhoods in regional central cities. Lower skilled jobs are harder to access than higher skill jobs that tend to be centrally located and better served by transit (Tomer et al. 2011, Marlay and Gardner 2010, Murray 2015: 36).

As identified in “The Geography of Jobs” report, a three-year-long regional planning process, led by the Northeast Ohio Sustainable Communities Consortium (NEOSCC) culminated in their Vibrant NEO 2040 framework, which adopted “aggressive yet feasible” targets the region should work towards as it approaches the year 2040. Among the targets: at least 55 percent of the jobs should be near frequent transit service (currently 50 percent) and 38 percent of residents should be near frequent transit service (currently 33 percent). Regional leaders and community stakeholders must collectively pursue NEOSCC’s “aggressive yet feasible” targets. PolicyBridge believes that cross-sector attention and resources should be allocated to help reach these worthy targets. Furthermore, PolicyBridge would like to see expanded target goals for distressed urban core communities that would call for 60 percent of jobs near frequent transit service and 65 percent of residents near frequent transit services by the year 2020.

To underscore the need to develop and focus on economic/business development in urban core cities, the recent rise in Northeast Ohio personal income serves as a helpful reminder. “Personal income in Northeast Ohio, as measured in 2013, grew faster when compared to personal income nationally.” From 2010 to 2013, Northeast Ohio’s per capita personal income increased 7.8 percent compared to 5.7 percent for the U.S (Garr Pacetti 2014). But as the region’s personal income was rising, divergence between those at the top of the income ladder and those on the lower rungs has grown considerably wider in Northeast Ohio resulting in stark inequities in income levels and economic benefits associated with economic growth in the region” (Garr Pacetti 2014). So for those living in economically distressed and polarized urban core city neighborhoods, economic opportunities and prosperity are only a dream. As such, developing and implementing economic/business development initiatives that target urban core cities in the region have to be a leading strategy to reverse this negative trend. This should include incentivizing business creation and attraction in urban corridors, which should be organized and led by municipal and county government leaders.





## CONCLUSION

Northeast Ohio is at a crossroads. As the sputtering regional economy continues to show modest gains at best, it has become abundantly clear that residents at all levels of community, especially those from distressed urban core communities, have to contribute to the solution. Many regional residents have a sincere interest and willingness to work but cannot find employment opportunities in their communities. Conversely, many employers in surrounding suburbs and exurbs tout large numbers of available jobs, but express frustration with the low numbers of qualified candidates that they can identify and recruit. A central strategy in serving the needs of unemployed residents in the urban core as well as employers seeking qualified workers rests on limited transportation options, which if addressed, could connect the two parties.

PolicyBridge’s community engagement process confirmed that of the Fund’s three-tiered “Growth & Opportunity framework, the area receiving the least amount of attention is job access, especially the issue of spatial access to jobs. Northeast Ohio can no longer afford to give the spatial access to jobs issue little or no attention. The region must elevate this issue to significantly improve its overall competitiveness. Multi-and-cross sector representation will be required to successfully advocate with public officials at the federal, state, regional and local levels to revise existing policies and develop new policies, strategies and practices to improve the spatial access to jobs issues in Northeast Ohio. The time is **NOW** to address the jobs spatial mismatch that is hampering Northeast Ohio’s growth and prosperity.



## APPENDIX A

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The Fund is a collaborative of funders dedicated to advancing economic growth and equitable access to opportunity for the people in Northeast Ohio through research, civic engagement and grant making. The Fund is working to transform Northeast Ohio's economy.

The Fund's 2015 "Geography of Jobs" research report is an analysis of job growth patterns and the spatial access to jobs in Northeast Ohio. The Fund conducted research to synthesize existing evidence on where jobs are located in Northeast Ohio, who has access to them and how current trends may affect future growth (Garr Pacetti, Murray, Hartman, 2015).

When considering the Fund's "Growth and Opportunity" framework, which calls for integrated, cross-sector strategies that advance job creation, job preparation and job access, the job creation and job preparation areas have received the lion's-share of attention by those in the region's economic development eco-system. The area of the framework that has received the least amount of attention is spatial access to jobs and its effects on the region's economic performance.

The Fund's "Geography of Jobs" report identified three general findings:

- **Job growth over the last 20 years occurred predominately in suburbs and the conversion of rural areas, continuing a long-term trend since the 1950's.** Between 2000 and 2010 alone, regional job growth declined within and around Northeast Ohio central business districts more so than other places in the country as job growth became more dispersed and harder to get to (Murray 2015; Kneebone 2013). Implications of this outward growth are particularly acute given a stagnant population.
- **Outward job growth affects all Northeast Ohio residents regardless of where you live.** Since 2000, jobs within a typical commute distance in Northeast Ohio declined significantly compared to other large metropolitan areas (Kneebone and Holmes 2015), lengthening residents commute times, limiting employment opportunities and increasing long-term fiscal burdens on outlying municipalities. No more than a quarter of jobs in Northeast Ohio are reachable by public transit in 90 minutes or less (Tomer 2012).
- **Outward job growth disproportionately affects people who need jobs most; particularly the 200,000 residents living in the region's economically distressed neighborhoods.** Commutes by public transit are "substantially longer" than commutes by car, affecting low-income people who may not have access to a vehicle. Commuters by transit spend almost two hours more per day (55 more minutes there, 55 minutes back) to get to the nearest job hub. Limited or lack of access for employees makes it harder for workers to hold a steady, full-time position, particularly if workers are already disadvantaged economically (Anderson 2014).

Understanding and addressing the spatial jobs access issue through actionable policy recommendations and programmatic strategies will ensure that all Northeast Ohio residents become connected to the labor market, and by doing so increase the region's economic competitiveness.



## APPENDIX B

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The Fund's "Geography of Jobs" report used a quantitative approach to understand "where jobs in Northeast Ohio are locating and the skills they require," as a way to determine specific barriers to employment in these areas, especially for populations in urban core cities in the region. The Fund's working hypothesis was that "mid-skill jobs continue to locate further outside urban central core cities across Northeast Ohio, creating barriers for workers living in the urban core city who may not have access to a car or the educational credentials to obtain jobs closer to where they live."

To test the Fund's working hypothesis and to seek insights and impressions about "The Geography of Jobs" research report, PolicyBridge facilitated five focus group sessions in four Northeast Ohio counties. Two sessions were held in Cuyahoga County, and one session was held in Lorain, Stark and Summit Counties. PolicyBridge also conducted eleven interviews with individual thought leaders and community stakeholders representing various sectors across the region.

The feedback received from these community stakeholders identified several public policies, structural and systematic practices that serve as barriers when discussing ways to remedy the Northeast Ohio spatial access to jobs issue. Participants shared examples of current federal, state and local transit, housing, land use, and economic and community development policies that do not support new and innovative solutions to the spatial access to jobs issue. Some of these examples include:

- Federal policy that limits transit agencies from developing and implementing flexible solutions;
- Federal, state and local policies that prioritize or incentivize green field redevelopment instead of brown field redevelopment;
- Federal, state and local policies that give priority and incentivize the continued out-migration of businesses and jobs away from urban core cities;
- Federal, state and local public transit funding that is insufficient to meet the expanding needs of public transit users;
- State policy that does not allow inter-county transit options to increase access and efficiency; and
- The lack of affordable housing options in suburban and outlying areas where job hubs are located.

Interviewees believed that understanding the complexity of the spatial access to jobs issue was very important because the issue is influenced by multiple sectors. It is the culture of economic development and business eco-systems to rarely include participants outside of that realm in problem-solving, which limits their understanding of the complexities of issues like job access. This disconnection also limits access to much needed resources that could increase the probability for successful resolution of this issue.

Though PolicyBridge was able to speak with representatives from the business sector, we believe that the perspectives of the business sector were underrepresented in the overall feedback used to craft this research report.



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