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## Another Voice: Geographic imbalance in Buffalo's workforce raises inequality

By Another Voice  
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**B**y Russell Weaver

According to the most recent data released by the U.S. Census Bureau's employment statistics program, there were 117,669 private-sector jobs in the City of Buffalo in 2017, up from 116,318 in 2010 (plus 1.2% over seven years). Despite this growth, the number of Buffalo's private-sector jobs held by its own residents fell by more than 5%, from 35,266 in 2010 to 33,489 in 2017. Making up the difference, the number of suburban residents working in Buffalo's private sector grew by 3,000, from 81,000 in 2010 to 84,000 in 2017.

During the same interval that the city "imported" these 3,000-plus new private-sector workers from surrounding communities, Buffalo "exported" more than 3,500 workers back to those places – specifically, the number of city residents working in private jobs outside Buffalo grew by roughly 8%, from 45,595 to 49,152. The upshot is that, while the city experienced private-sector growth during the 2010s, new jobs were disproportionately filled by suburban residents. City residents became more likely to work outside of Buffalo.

Although such a result is not problematic by itself, consider that over half of “imported” private-sector workers earned \$3,333 per month or more in wages, while only one-fifth of “exported” private-sector workers received similar wages. The vast majority of “exports” earned below this threshold.

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In plainer terms, it appears that growing numbers of city residents are finding it necessary to take low-wage work beyond city limits, where public transit services run less frequently and to fewer locations, while arguably more accessible and higher-wage jobs in the city are going to suburban workers. (I am part of this trend, as a private employee who works in downtown Buffalo and lives in southern Erie County.)

There are numerous factors at play in these dynamics, including but not limited to household preferences and mismatches between job requirements and job seeker qualifications. Thus, there is no quick and easy fix for counterbalancing the scales.

However, as Buffalo continues to make national “best of” lists and experience new development, it is necessary to start a serious conversation about this growing imbalance. Without intervention, one consequence of these patterns will be more inequality. Traveling farther to lower-wage jobs leaves vulnerable workers with less take-home pay and fewer hours for participating in the personal, household and community matters that are essential to one’s well-being.

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As we approach a new decade with all the excitement of a region in “renaissance,” we cannot ignore forces that tend to make economic recovery a privilege of the few rather than the collective experience of the many. Attaching bolder and more affirmative local hiring provisions to conditions for development projects that receive public subsidies should be a meaningful part of the development conversation in the coming decade. The Public Statement of Principles for High Road Development adopted by the Erie Canal Harbor Development Corp. in 2013 offers a starting point for that conversation. Likewise, the three-part Erasing Red Lines series on spatial inequality published by Cornell University’s ILR Buffalo Co-Lab provides resources for thinking broadly about equitable development in postindustrial cities.

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National spotlights have been shining on the City of Good Neighbors. Instead of responding by building an elaborate stage and showing off our best-known performers during a limited feature event, let's focus on investing in the hands and infrastructure we need to make economic recovery a regularly occurring, democratic show in which all can participate.

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