

Original URL: <http://www.jsonline.com/news/editorials/nov05/373245.asp>

## Editorial: Discovering downtown 'life'

From the Journal Sentinel


*Posted: Nov. 25, 2005*

For most Milwaukeeans, finding "life" in the city's downtown is not akin to uncovering proof of extraterrestrial existence. Nonetheless, news that Milwaukee's downtown is on the "edge of takeoff" does warrant more than just minor elation. Some backslapping is in order.

The news is contained in a study of 44 representative American cities, written about by reporter John Schmid in Friday's Journal Sentinel.

In that article, graduate students in New York were reportedly "flabbergasted" to learn that Milwaukee could be so designated in the study, whose findings were reported this month by the Metropolitan Policy Program at The Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C.

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But folks closer to the situation have seen the evidence for a while now in vacant buildings turned into more and more living spaces and a downtown vibrancy that often hums even after 5 p.m. - *on weekdays*. Now, city leaders must make sure downtown goes from the "edge of takeoff" to "we have liftoff." And the best way to make that happen is to continue seeking creative ways to expand the city's economy and apprising regional neighbors of certain facts. Namely, that downtown is safe, clean and happening and has been for a while. The study just highlights that.

More housing downtown fills one part of the equation. The other, however, is making the city a magnet for those most likely to be downtown dwellers - highly educated, urban professionals in the 25- to 34-year-old range. That means jobs that will make people in this group choose Milwaukee from the many options available.

The study, done by Eugenie L. Birch of the University of Pennsylvania, put Milwaukee in the mid-tier of selected cities. Some, like Boston and Chicago, were deemed "fully developed." A step below were those cities, like Atlanta and Seattle, viewed as "emerging." Milwaukee is in the tier below, better positioned than Indianapolis, labeled "slow-growing," or Minneapolis, "declining."

Some of the data used in the study is now dated, but the anecdotal evidence on the ground validates it. The key to making sure the city's downtown continues to improve lies in turning brain drain into job creation.

From the Nov. 26, 2005, editions of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel  
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Original URL: <http://www.jsonline.com/bym/news/nov05/373069.asp>

## Downtown ready to soar, report says

### Study analyzes quality of urban living in 44 U.S. cities

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Posted: Nov. 24, 2005

In a Columbia University lecture hall in Manhattan last week, a visiting professor showed a slide of a misty cityscape with docked yachts, a riverfront row of rehabbed loft buildings and outdoor café tables. Without naming the city, the professor said U.S. Census data suggests that the fetching downtown is poised to add new residents and the commerce and urban life that they bring.

The graduate students, who come from around the world, could not name the city when asked. But they were "flabbergasted" to learn it was Milwaukee.

The professor, Eugenie L. Birch of the University of Pennsylvania, found other signs of life in downtown Milwaukee in a recently completed study of 44 representative American cities.

Milwaukee ranks as one of a handful of cities with a "downtown on the edge of takeoff," according to her report published this month by the Metropolitan Policy Program at The Brookings Institution in Washington.

Milwaukee showed a 13% increase in the number of downtown residents from 1990 to 2000. The city's downtown denizens are largely college educated and boast a high share of a "coveted group" of 25- to 34-year-olds who are considered key to the post-industrial development of America's cities, the report found.

The findings doubtlessly will cheer the myriad developers who have been rushing to convert old warehouses and factories into condominiums and anyone who's impatient to see more life on the city's streets. The findings also could prove prescient if Manpower Inc., a Fortune 500 temporary staffing concern, moves its international headquarters from suburban Glendale to downtown Milwaukee. It expects to announce a decision within weeks.

"There are huge economic and psychological benefits" to cities with growing numbers of those who live downtown, Birch said in a telephone interview this week.

Such urban pioneers, who often like to stroll to work, create a "built-in population" to support culture and keep the sidewalks from rolling up at night. They inhabit once-vacant commercial buildings that wouldn't generate taxes without conversion into residential spaces. And the bustle on formerly empty streets sends a positive signal to anyone interested in investing in a city's economy, "creating a virtuous cycle of economic growth and development to the city as a whole."

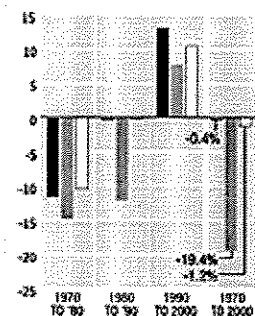
### Downtown Development

#### POPULATION DOWNTOWN DEVELOPMENT

A new study analyzes the population trends of 44 downtown areas, including Milwaukee, from 1970 to 2000.

#### POPULATION GROWTH BY REGION

■ MILWAUKEE ■ MIDWEST  
 □ UNITED STATES



Source: The Brookings Institution, Restriction Journal Sentinel

Graphic/Journal Sentinel

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Milwaukee entered the 21st century with an emphasis on urban glamour and downtown aesthetics. Those were the hallmarks of former Mayor John O. Norquist, who held the office from 1988 to 2003. While Norquist's critics say he failed to create an urgently needed industrial retention policy, they credit him with a strong focus on downtown élan.

### **3 decades of census data**

Birch is the chairwoman of the Department of City and Regional Planning at the Philadelphia-based University of Pennsylvania and co-director of the Penn Institute for Urban Research. The 44 cities she chose for the study are meant to represent the nation's regions and population - with 10 from the Midwest and the rest spread across the Northeast, South and West. Most are large - such as Manhattan, Chicago and Washington - but a few are smaller, such as Chattanooga, Tenn. and Boise, Idaho.

The research takes a long-term view of the evolution of American city life that spans from 1970 to 2000 and uses data that the U.S. Census Bureau collects every 10 years.

In those 30 years, America's cities underwent tumultuous change. Between 1970 and 2000, the downtowns in the 44 cities registered a net gain of 35,000 housing units, a gain of 8%. But that's a relatively small increase compared to the 13 million households that those cities added in their suburbs for a surge of 100%.

The long-term trend obscures very different decade-by-decade changes, which shows a more recent awakening of interest in city life.

From 1970 to 1980, most cities hemorrhaged downtown population, with the 44 cities showing a 10.4% average decline. Those early days harken back to the fading era of pre-suburban metropolitan glamour.

By the '80s, most cities stagnated on average. In the '90s, the average downtown in the study showed a 10.4% surge in business-district residential life and a more meaningful alternative to suburban existence.

The trends were hardly consistent, with seven cities losing downtown residents in all three decades and four downtowns that gained in population during that time.

### **5 classes of downtowns**

Milwaukee tracked the national trends. Its downtown lost 11.6% of its residents in the '70s; stagnated in the '80s (a drop of 0.4%); and showed an above-average 13.1% rise in the '90s. In the 2000 census, Milwaukee ranked sixth of the 44 in terms of well-educated downtown residents (with 46.2% who hold a bachelor's or higher degree). It came in No. 10 in terms of cities with residents aged 25 to 34, which some call the "creative class" that is a driving force of the entrepreneurial economy.

Based on trends that entrenched themselves in the '90s solidly enough to extrapolate them forward, Birch selected Milwaukee as one of the downtowns poised for "takeoff." Of the 44, the other cities in that category were Washington D.C., Miami, Dallas and Chattanooga.

Milwaukee's ready-for-takeoff classification falls midway into a five-tier system of classifying the 44 cities.

The hottest downtowns are those that Birch deemed "fully developed" - downtowns that grew in the number of households in each of the three decades. Those include Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia and both Lower Manhattan and Midtown Manhattan (the study counts two "downtowns" in Manhattan). Next on her scale come the 13 "emerging downtowns" - including Atlanta, Portland, San Francisco and Seattle - which registered strong growth in many of the demographic components that Birch measured but not in each of the three decades.

Next come the "edge of takeoff" cities, followed by the 10 "slow-growing downtowns" (such as Indianapolis, Pittsburgh, Salt Lake City), which are less densely populated and have less-educated residents. At the bottom of

the scale are 12 "declining downtowns," which lost households in each of the three decades. Surprisingly, Minneapolis appears as a "declining downtown" along with Detroit, St. Louis and Orlando.

## Defining downtown

The professor freely admits that nobody ever created a consistent definition of a downtown. For each city, she asked several local planners for their boundaries and created a consensus.

In Milwaukee, she uses 10 census tracts that cover 1,376 acres. It covers the main business district, stretching as far west as 12th St., as well as the rapidly gentrifying Third Ward and part of the east side as far north as Brady St. By 2000, Milwaukee's downtown had 16,359 residents, just below its 1970 population of 16,427.

Chicago, by contrast, has a downtown with 21 census tracts, 2,700 acres and 72,843 households.

The study also relies on census data that stops in 2000, which was the peak of the '90s economic boom. The five years since the data was gathered saw a period of rapid economic change such as widespread outsourcing of jobs overseas and a recession, which may have distorted some of the findings.

Virginia Carlson, an associate professor of Urban Planning at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, said the methodology has merit.

And the findings also confirm other demographic studies around the nation that show a resurgence of 25- to 34-year-olds moving into newly residential downtown areas. As Birch's study shows, many of these new denizens are single.

"The question is," Carlson said, "are they sticking around after they have kids?"

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