

MME 2025 Summer Workshop



Michigan
Municipal
Executives

City Managers: The Ultimate Pragmatists

Stephanie Leiser, Director, Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy (CLOSUP) University of Michigan

Presenters:

Stephanie Leiser

Director, Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy
Lecturer, Ford School of Public Policy
University of Michigan



- **Rebecca Fleury**, ICMA Senior Advisor, Contractor SGR, Alliance for Innovation, and Civic Marketplace
- **James Freed**, City Manager, Port Huron
- **Joseph Gacioch**, City Manager, City of Royal Oak
- **Laura Lam**, Chief Operating Officer, City of Kalamazoo

Our Research Question:

How do city managers understand and deal with the stresses of population stagnation and decline?

“Responding to decline: The perspective of city managers in shrinking cities in the United States”

- Daniel Hummel, University of Louisiana at Monroe
- Stephanie Leiser, University of Michigan
- James M. Bourey, Seattle Architecture Foundation (and retired city manager)

Published in:

Journal of Urban Affairs (2025)

Why did we do this study?

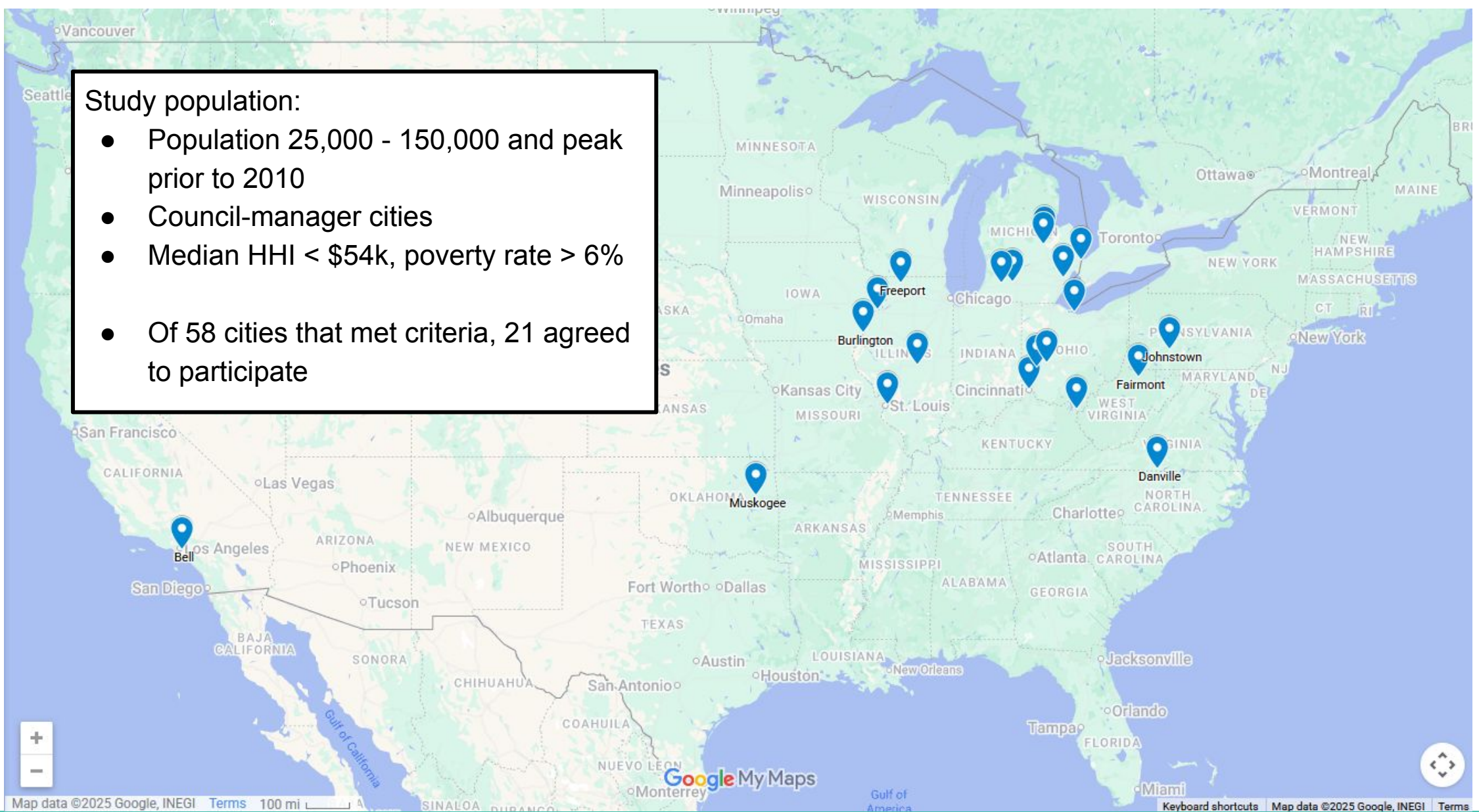
- Narratives of decline are dominated by large cities and extreme cases
- Recent evidence on the unique concerns of smaller cities
- So much focus on causes, not enough on what to do
- No “playbook” for population decline



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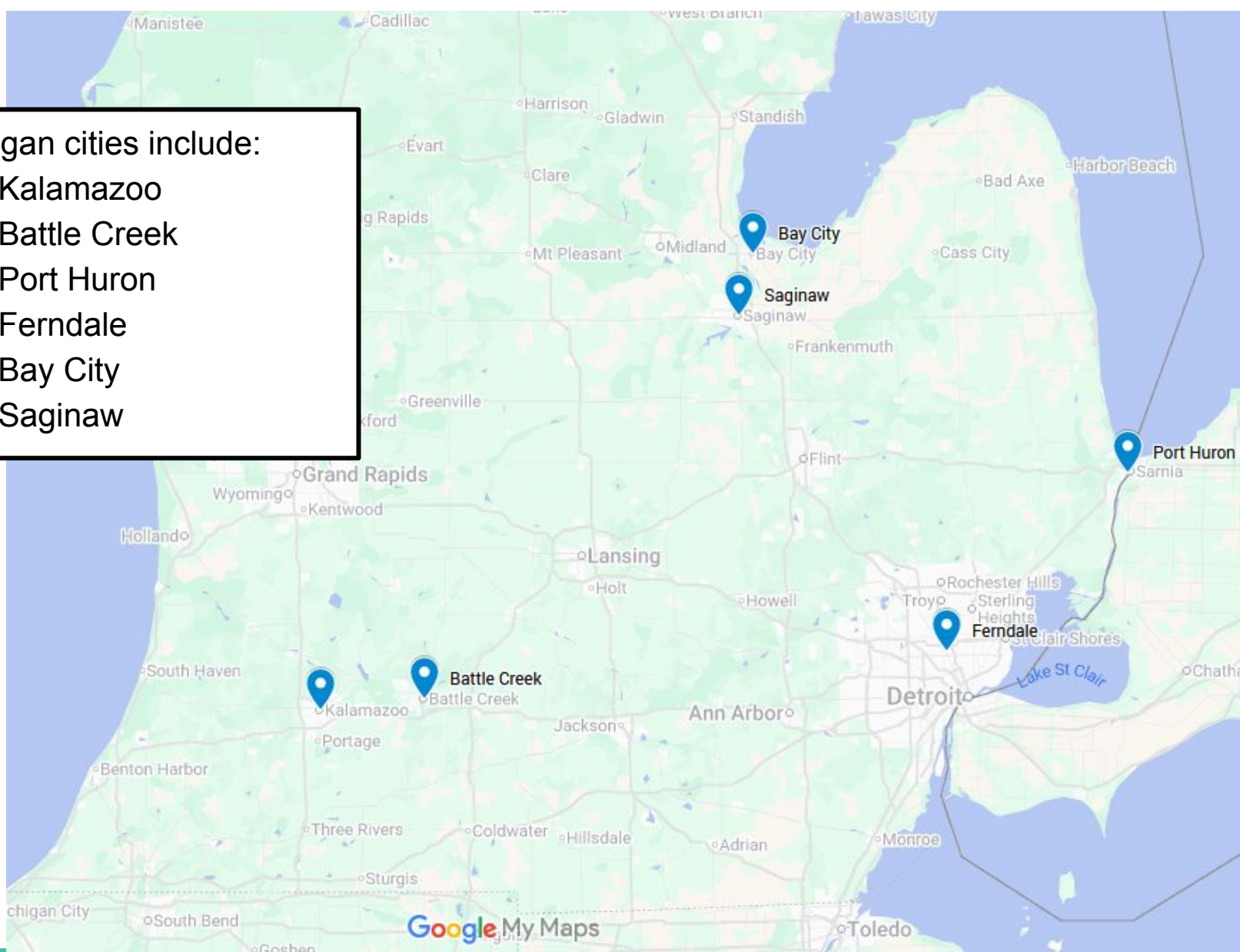
Study population:

- Population 25,000 - 150,000 and peak prior to 2010
- Council-manager cities
- Median HHI < \$54k, poverty rate > 6%
- Of 58 cities that met criteria, 21 agreed to participate



Michigan cities include:

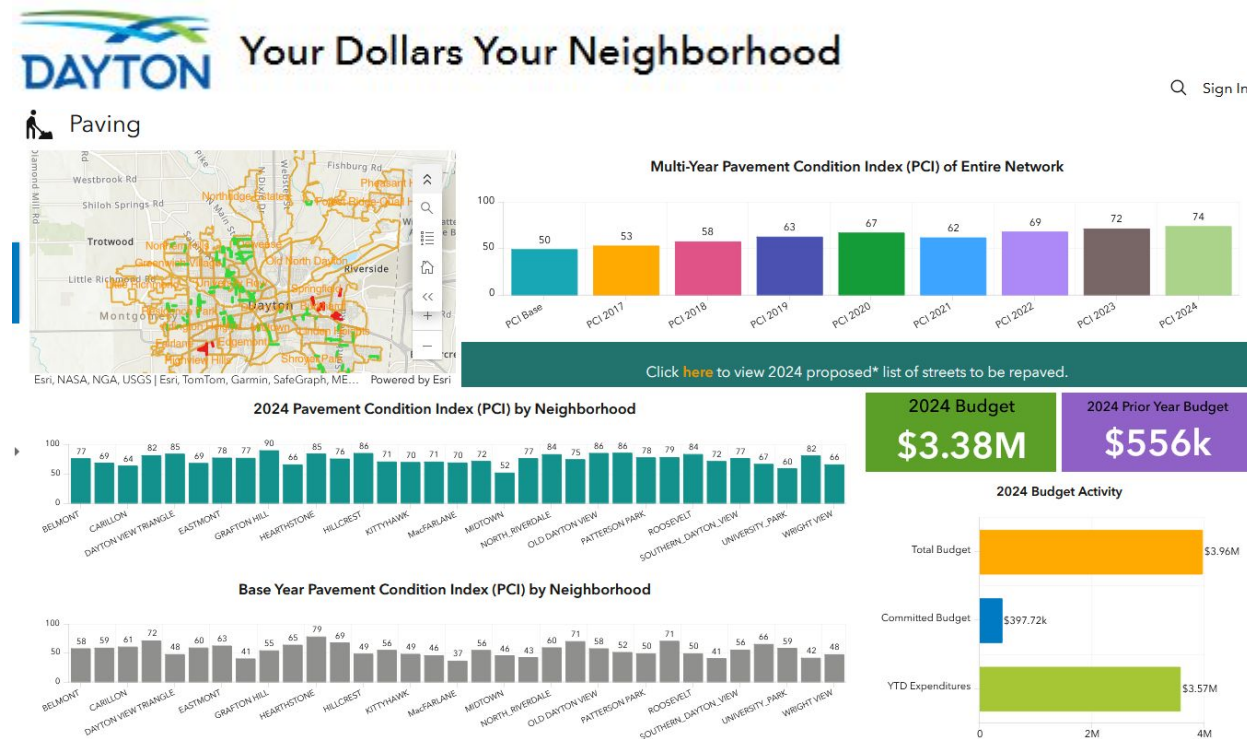
- Kalamazoo
- Battle Creek
- Port Huron
- Ferndale
- Bay City
- Saginaw



Takeaway #1:

“Data-driven” is great but not a panacea

- Performance measurement, right-sizing, and other rationalist data-driven initiatives are valuable, but not because they replace small-p politics.
- The shared facts of data and evidence can help smooth disagreements and lower the temperature of politics.
- Managers prioritize protecting services, so strategies like right-sizing are often non-starters.

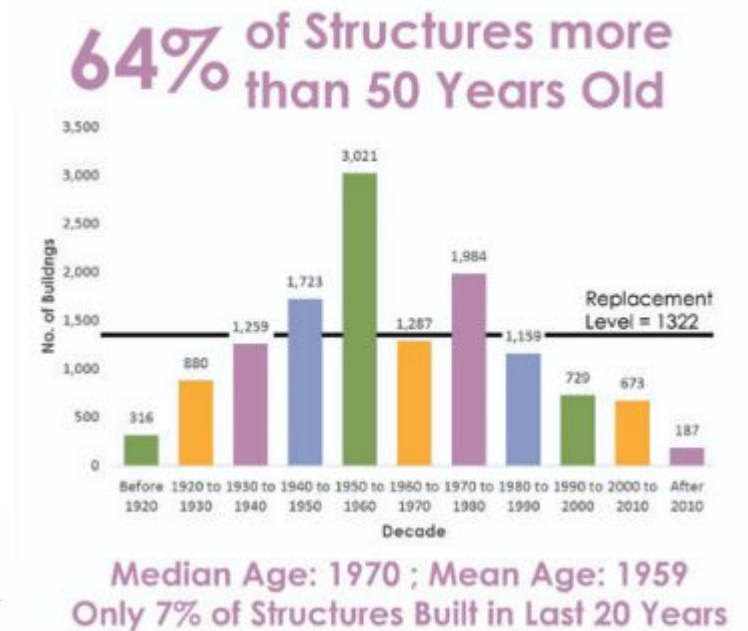


Takeaway #2:

There's no substitute for on-the-ground knowledge

Unlike in newer, growing cities, where economic development is a blank slate, in cities with stagnant populations, you need to deeply understand existing community characteristics:

- Community demographics
- Workforce characteristics and needs
- Housing stock, infill opportunities, strategies for vacant property
- Geography and land use patterns
- Infrastructure and excess capacity
- Stakeholders - e.g. longtime residents & businesses
- Cultivating positive community identity and morale



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Takeaway #3:

Professionalism and pragmatism weather the storm

Pragmatism recognizes the importance of the process, not just the outcome.

- Iterative problem-solving
- Acknowledge uncertainty and complexity - more information does not ensure better prediction or control
- Willingness to experiment to make incremental progress
- Pluralist and inclusive
- Prioritize trust and relationships
- Can't "manage fear with facts"



Welcome panelists!

- **Rebecca Fleury**, ICMA Senior Advisor, Contractor SGR, Alliance for Innovation, and Civic Marketplace, ICMA, SGR, AFI, CM
- **James Freed**, City Manager, Port Huron
- **Joseph Gacioch**, City Manager, City of Royal Oak
- **Laura Lam**, Chief Operating Officer, City of Kalamazoo



Thank you!

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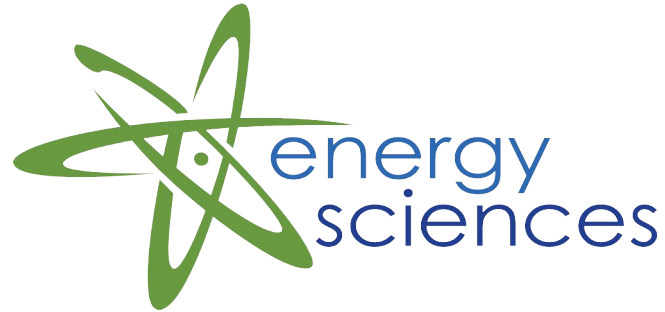
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