Suburban Poverty

Poverty in Unexpected Places

When many Americans think of poverty, decaying urban areas and neglected rural pockets come to mind. However, in the last 20 years, the geography of American poverty has shifted, with an increasing number of America’s poor people now living in suburbs. Between 2000 and 2015, the overall number of people in poverty in the United States grew by 11.5 million, with suburbs accounting for roughly 5.7 million or 48 percent of that growth, as shown in Figure 1. Today, there are roughly 3 million more poor people in suburbs than in cities. Still, the poverty rate in the average urban census tract remains about twice as high as in the average suburban tract and evidence suggests that urban poverty in the United States has, if anything, become more of a problem in the last 20 years. Nevertheless, the rapid growth in suburban poverty presents unique challenges, both for those living in poverty and for policymakers, municipalities, and nonprofit human services organizations.

What Is Driving the Rise in Suburban Poverty?

While each metropolitan area has a unique set of factors contributing to suburban poverty, there are broad trends that run across most parts of the country. Suburbs house a greater share of America’s total population than in the past, and a larger share of the poor population. Low-wage jobs are more common and more likely to be located in suburbs than in cities. Among longtime suburban residents, aging, job loss, and effects of the Great Recession have contributed to downward mobility.

The Great Recession and the Suburbs

The Great Recession (December 2007–June 2009) hit suburbs especially hard, worsening existing trends. In the Midwest, the recession sped the decline of manufacturing jobs, affecting both suburbs and central cities. Meanwhile, suburbs in the West and Sun Belt bore the brunt of the housing industry’s collapse. Even as the economy has recovered, the number of suburban residents living in poverty or just above the poverty line continues to grow.

High-Poverty Areas in the Suburbs

Many researchers consider an area or neighborhood to be “high poverty” if it has a poverty rate of 20 percent or more. Above this 20 percent threshold, residents tend to face higher crime rates, poorer physical and mental health, and lower-performing schools. Although high-poverty neighborhoods are often considered an urban problem, suburbs experienced a growth in high-poverty areas that was nearly double that of core cities between 2010 and 2014. Additionally, among poor individuals and families living in suburbs, minorities were more than twice as likely as whites to live in high-poverty areas, as shown in Figure 3.
Characteristics of the Suburban Poor

Although the suburban poor are somewhat more likely to be white than the urban poor, the suburban and urban poor populations have similar levels of education and are employed at similar rates; single-parent households as also equally common, with roughly one-in-three households headed by a single parent.¹⁰

The Safety Net

Rising poverty in the suburbs has led to increased need for safety net services and supports. Federally funded anti-poverty programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly Food Stamps) and the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) have been responsive to the rise in suburban poverty, while many state and local programs have been less flexible in addressing rising poverty in the suburbs.¹¹

Nonprofits in the Suburbs

Local, community-based nonprofits provide critical resources like job training, mental health services, and food assistance to individuals or families in need. Although the nonprofit sector has generally been established in cities for decades, suburbs frequently lack a strong nonprofit sector. Human service organizations spend roughly eight times more per poor resident in urban areas than they do in suburbs.¹² For urban nonprofits, expanding operations to nearby suburbs can be difficult because of limited funding, challenges of achieving economies of scale, and limited local support for provision of services.¹³

Challenges for Schools

Suburban school districts across the country have seen a dramatic increase in children who qualify for free or reduced-priced lunch, as shown in Figure 4. In all, about 40 percent of students in suburban districts are now eligible for free or reduced-priced lunch.¹⁴ Many newly poor suburban districts are ill-prepared to meet their current students’ needs, which include high rates of disabilities, language barriers, and inadequate access to nutrition. Additionally, when suburbs become poorer, the school district’s tax base may shrink, threatening school funding.¹⁵

The Future of Suburban Poverty

Despite low unemployment and a relatively strong economy, many low-income Americans have seen few benefits from the recent economic recovery. Lack of affordable housing combined with stagnant earnings in inflation-adjusted dollars is an important reality—particularly for workers in low-wage jobs. Because of these and other factors, substantial suburban poverty is likely to be a long-term trend that will require continued attention.¹⁶

Programs like SNAP and the EITC, which have been responsive to the uptick in suburban poverty, will continue to be important, but programs administered at the state and local levels could be improved, including increasing the capacity of suburban school districts to serve lower-income students. And while the nonprofit sector plays a crucial role in the social safety net, particularly in urban areas, it generally lacks the capacity to address the growing need in suburbs. Improvements to suburban safety nets have the potential to lessen the effects of poverty, but will require buy-in from local, state, and national leaders. However, the persisting notion that poverty does not affect suburbs complicates these efforts.¹⁷

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¹¹Allard, Places in Need, p. 49.

¹²Allard, Places in Need, p. 80.


¹⁴Kneebone and Holmes, U.S. concentrated poverty in the wake of the Great Recession.

¹⁵Allard, Places in Need, pp. 75–77.

¹⁶Allard, Places in Need, p. 145.


¹⁸Allard, Places in Need, p. 158.