



The Rising Challenge of Poverty in the Suburbs

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Cities have long been pictured as filled with underemployed poor people sitting on the stoops of dilapidated apartments, while suburbs are romanticized as preserves for middle-class families with houses, steady jobs, and access to good schools. The notion of suburbs without any poor people was always mythical – but now it is seriously out of date. *Today, more than forty percent of America's poor live in suburbs and declining cities near metropolises.* We need a fresh look at these people and the new challenges faced by their communities.

Who are America's Poor and Where Do They Live?

In 2010, 15.2 percent of all Americans – 46.6 million people – lived in poverty, according to the restrictive official measure that the federal government uses. Another ten to fifteen percent of Americans hovered just above the official poverty line, barely getting by from paycheck to paycheck. Here we focus on those who are officially poor: families of four earning \$23,050 or less in 2012. But the near-poor find themselves in similar circumstances.

- Of all impoverished Americans, more than 80 percent reside in metropolitan areas, not rural places. Half of the urban poor are found in central cities; the other half in suburbs.
- **What kind of suburbs?** A smattering of the suburban poor live in “affordable housing” located in affluent communities. But most of the suburban poor find themselves in low-income communities with older, cheaper housing. And some live in declining industrial towns on the far fringes of metropolitan areas.
- **Why is suburban poverty on the rise?** Partly because longtime suburban residents have been hit with rising unemployment and stagnant wages. In addition, many immigrants to the United States now go directly to the suburbs rather than cities, and they have higher rates of poverty. Finally, in many metropolitan areas rising rents have led the urban poor to the suburbs in search of affordable housing, safer neighborhoods, and better schools.

New Challenges for Low-Income Suburbs

The growing numbers of poor and near poor people living in U.S. suburbs have strained existing public facilities. And the daily dilemmas faced by low-income people in new locales highlight the need to rethink transportation networks and the location of vital services.

- Most suburbs lack adequate services such as child-care and medical clinics that make it easier for low-income residents to work; and they also lack supports such as free tax preparation assistance that protect low-wage earners from predatory practices that can drain pocketbooks. Many services proven

to help the poor are delivered by nonprofit organizations that have long histories in cities. Only recently have nonprofits serving the poor begun to establish a presence in suburbs.

- Declining industrial cities and poor inner ring suburbs may entice low-income residents with cheaper housing, but the newcomers are hit with high transportation costs. Suburbs often have no reliable way for people to get around without cars, and a poor worker may not have a car, or may end up in a fix if the car breaks down.
- Poor suburbs and declining cities have limited fiscal and administrative capacities. If the local tax base is weak, fundamental services such as schools and police can falter when many new poor residents arrive. Yet low-income suburbs may not even have the trained staff to apply for federal and state grants or request extra help from nonprofits.

What Can be Done?

Poor people in suburbs want to work for the American Dream, but they need a refurbished infrastructure of opportunity. Specific steps can be taken to remedy shortfalls.

- If transportation and affordable housing are planned together, some poor people can stay in cities alongside newly arrived urban professionals, while low-income suburbanites could have better access to buses or trains to take them to work. The concept of “transit oriented development” – planning communities and neighborhoods where people can walk to stores and get around without cars – has become more attractive to many suburban leaders as well as to urban and national officials.
- The federal government and the states can help nonprofits survey regional social service needs and locate service delivery in areas where low-income people can get easy access.
- Basic government capabilities need to be strengthened in poor suburbs. Suburbs can cooperate in consortia. In addition, the Department of Housing and Urban Development has a promising pilot program called “Strong Cities, Strong Communities” that sends teams from federal agencies to help local governments build administrative capacities and tap available resources.

With updated statistics, this brief develops findings and recommendations from Margaret Weir, “Creating Justice for the Poor in the New Metropolis,” in *Justice and the American Metropolis*, edited by Clarissa Rile Hayward and Todd Swanstrom (University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 237-256.

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