

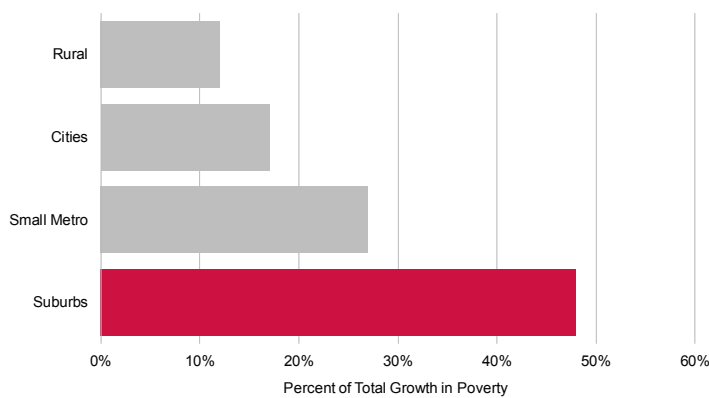
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## Poverty in Unexpected Places

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.<sup>1</sup> 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.

Figure 1. Suburbs accounted for nearly half the overall growth in poverty in the United States from 2000 to 2015.



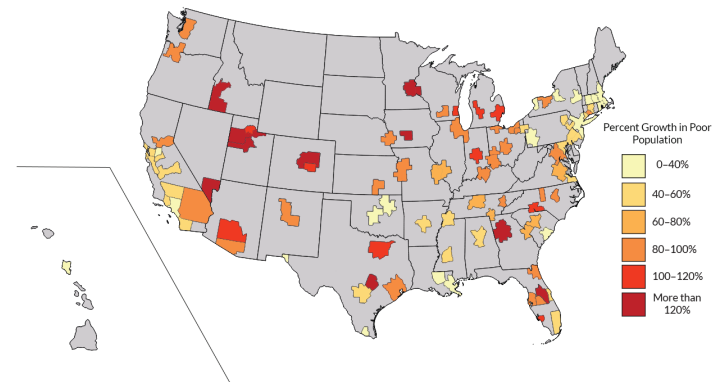
Source: Brookings Institution analysis of decennial census and American Community Survey data.

## Defining Suburban Poverty

Most researchers examining suburban poverty use some variation of the Census Bureau’s official poverty measure to define poverty. The measure is based on a set of thresholds that vary based on household size and the number of children in a household. For example, the 2016 threshold for a family of three with two children was \$19,337. Households with income less than the threshold amount are considered to be in poverty.

The U.S. Census Bureau definition of suburb used by many researchers is a municipality of more than 2,500 people located within a metropolitan area, but not including the area’s main city. The distribution of poverty within suburbs reflects the diversity of suburbs themselves, ranging from impoverished suburban counties, municipalities, and neighborhoods, to poor individuals living in middle class or wealthy areas.<sup>2</sup> Between 2000 and 2012, suburban poverty increased substantially in virtually all the 100 largest U.S. metropolitan areas, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Suburban poverty grew in nearly all the 100 largest U.S. metropolitan areas from 2000 to 2012.



Source: *Confronting Suburban Poverty*. Brookings Institution analysis of decennial census and American Community Survey Data.

## 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.<sup>3</sup>

- 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.

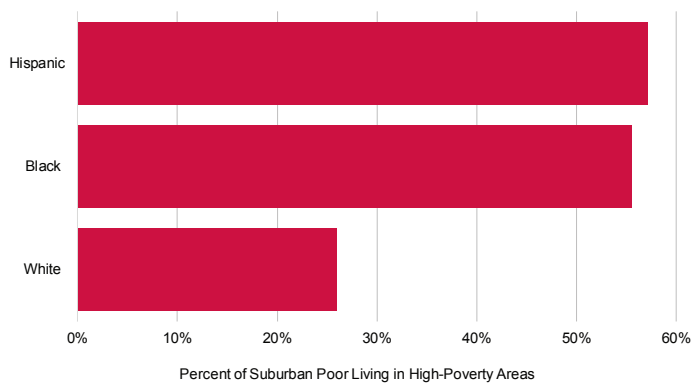
## The Great Recession and the Suburbs

The Great Recession (December 2007–June 2009) hit suburbs especially hard, worsening existing trends.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> Even as the economy has recovered, the number of suburban residents living in poverty or just above the poverty line continues to grow. Low-income but nonpoor individuals and families risk falling below the poverty threshold when faced with illness, job loss, or an accident. A future recession could also push many in this group below the poverty line.<sup>6</sup>

## 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.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup>

**Figure 3.** Among the suburban poor, blacks and Hispanics are more than twice as likely as whites to live in high-poverty areas.



Source: American Community Survey data (2010–2014).

## 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 are also equally common, with roughly one-in-three households headed by a single parent.<sup>10</sup>

### The Safety Net

Rising poverty in the suburbs has led to increased need for safety net services and supports. Federally funded antipoverty 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.<sup>11</sup>

### 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.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup>

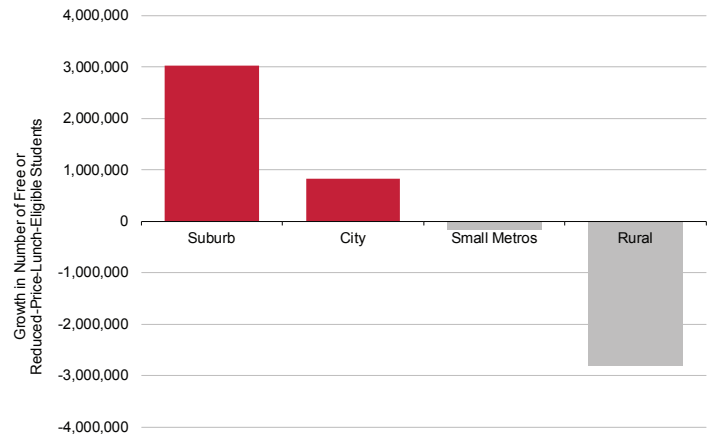
### Challenges for Schools

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.<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup>

### 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

**Figure 4.** From 2010 to 2014, the number of free or reduced-price-lunch-eligible students in suburbs grew by 3 million.



Source: National Center for Education Statistics.

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.<sup>16</sup>

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. ■

<sup>10</sup>E. Kneebone, “The Changing Geography of U.S. Poverty,” Testimony before the House Ways and Means Committee, Subcommittee on Human Resources, February 15, 2017, at <https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/the-changing-geography-of-us-poverty/>; S. W. Allard, *Places in Need: The Changing Geography of Poverty* (New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation, 2017), p. 6.

<sup>11</sup>A. Murphy and S. Allard, “The Changing Geography of Poverty,” *Focus* 32, No. 1D, Institute for Research on Poverty.

<sup>12</sup>Murphy and Allard, “The Changing Geography of Poverty;” A. Singer, R. Suro, and J. H. Wilson, *Immigration and Poverty in America’s Suburbs*, Report, Brookings, 2011, at <https://www.brookings.edu/research/immigration-and-poverty-in-americas-suburbs/>; E. Kneebone and A. Berube, “Frequently Asked Questions,” *Confronting Suburban Poverty in America* (website), 2017, <http://confrontingsuburbanpoverty.org/about/faqs/>

<sup>13</sup>E. Kneebone and E. Garr, “The Landscape of Recession: Unemployment and Safety Net Services Across Urban and Suburban America,” Metropolitan Policy Program at Brookings, July 2009, at [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/0722\\_recession\\_report.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/0722_recession_report.pdf)

<sup>14</sup>J. DeParle and S. Tavernise, “Poor are Still Getting Poorer, but Downturn’s Punch Varies, Census Data show,” *New York Times*, September 15, 2011.

<sup>15</sup>Allard, *Places in Need*, p. 49.

<sup>16</sup>Allard, *Places in Need*, p. 80.

<sup>17</sup>E. Kneebone and N. Holmes, U.S. concentrated poverty in the wake of the Great Recession, Report, Brookings, August 31, 2016, at <https://www.brookings.edu/research/u-s-concentrated-poverty-in-the-wake-of-the-great-recession/>

<sup>18</sup>Kneebone and Holmes, *U.S. concentrated poverty in the wake of the Great Recession*.

<sup>19</sup>Allard, *Places in Need*, pp. 75–77.

<sup>20</sup>Allard, *Places in Need*, p. 145.

<sup>21</sup>S. W. Allard, “The Suburbanization of U.S. Poverty,” Poverty Research and Policy Podcast, Institute for Research on Poverty, University of Wisconsin–Madison, August 2016, at <https://www.irp.wisc.edu/publications/media/podcasts2016.htm>

<sup>22</sup>Allard, *Places in Need*, p. 158.

<sup>23</sup>S. Gill, J. Posamentier, and P. Hill, “Suburban Schools: The Unrecognized Frontier in Public Education,” Center on Reinventing Public Education, May 2016, at [https://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/crpe\\_suburban\\_schools\\_5.2016.pdf](https://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/crpe_suburban_schools_5.2016.pdf)

<sup>24</sup>E. Brown and T. Rees Shapiro, “Schools Face New Challenges as Poverty Grows in Inner Suburbs,” *The Washington Post*, February 27, 2015.

<sup>25</sup>Allard, *Places in Need*, p. 178.