

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

HOW DID THE LANDSCAPE OF AMERICAN POVERTY CHANGE DURING THE 2000s?

Between 2000 and 2011, the number of people living in poverty in the U.S. grew from 33.9 million to a record 46.2 million. Increasing poverty touched all kinds of communities during the 2000s, but poverty grew fastest in the suburbs. Between 2000 and 2011, the number of poor residents in the suburbs of the nation's largest metropolitan areas grew by 64 percent—more than twice the growth rate in cities. For the first time, suburbs became home to more poor residents than America's big cities. Today, one in three poor Americans—about 16.4 million people—lives in the suburbs.

WHAT IS DRIVING THE RISE IN SUBURBAN POVERTY?

Even before the Great Recession, suburbs were home to the largest and fastest-growing poor population in the country. This shift was driven by a number of factors: rapid population growth, changes in the location of affordable housing, new immigration patterns, the continued outward shift of employment, and the growing prevalence of low-wage jobs. The recession led to millions of lost jobs in manufacturing and construction, which affected suburbs more than other places. Although poverty is still growing in cities and rural areas, it's growing at a significantly slower rate than in the suburbs.

“SUBURBS” ENCOMPASS A DIVERSE ARRAY OF PLACES. WHAT KINDS OF SUBURBS EXPERIENCED GROWING POVERTY?

In prior decades, suburban poverty grew primarily in next-door “inner suburbs” experiencing economic decline, particularly in struggling regions of the Midwest and Northeast. Today, however, growing poverty can be found in all types of suburbs across most major U.S. metro areas, especially in the wake of the Great Recession. By 2010, 60 regions scattered throughout the country found the majority of their poor in suburbs. Poverty rose during the 2000s in fast-growing suburbs of booming regions like Phoenix as well as economically stagnant regions like Chicago. It could also be found in slow-growing and shrinking suburbs south of strong cities like Seattle, and east and west of weak market cities like Cleveland.

WHAT DOES THE RAPID GROWTH IN SUBURBAN POVERTY MEAN FOR RESIDENTS AND COMMUNITIES AFFECTED BY THESE TRENDS?

Suburban communities with growing poverty may face a distinct set of challenges compared to poor communities in cities. They are often more geographically isolated from jobs, and lack the transit connections that can help link residents to employment opportunities. Social services are often less prevalent due to a lack of local public, nonprofit, and philanthropic capacity. Their schools may confront a host of challenges associated with providing the academic and wrap-around supports necessary to help low-income children succeed. And, local perceptions often lag behind rapid demographic and economic change, limiting the public's will to help address the needs of poor families and communities. The growth of suburban poverty thus has implications not just for residents as taxpayers and homeowners, but also for policymakers, real estate investors and financial institutions, school administrators and social service agencies.

HOW IS SUBURBAN POVERTY DIFFERENT FROM URBAN OR RURAL POVERTY?

There's no good place to be poor. Poor families strain to put enough food on the table, keep the lights on, and find decent paying jobs, whether they live in Pittsburgh, PA or Pittsburg, CA. But when you're poor in the suburbs, you face a unique set of challenges. Every suburb is different. While some poor people living in the suburbs enjoy better housing, safer neighborhoods and higher achieving schools than those in cities, others face lengthy, costly commutes to work; a lack of reliable transportation; and an absence of basic health and social services that are often more fully available and established in cities. But, at the same time, poor residents of cities and suburbs share similar demographic and economic traits. Among both groups, a large majority are in working families and have a high school diploma or less; and nearly half live in deep poverty, with incomes less than half of the federal poverty line.

CONFRONTING SUBURBAN POVERTY IN AMERICA

WHAT'S THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE THAT SUBURBAN POVERTY POSES FOR POLICYMAKERS AND PRACTITIONERS?

Despite the rapid growth in suburban poverty, the majority of government, nonprofit, and philanthropic dollars devoted to anti-poverty efforts have been traditionally focused on cities. As a result, the suburbs are home to thin and patchy safety nets of job training, foreclosure counseling, food assistance, and other services to help low-income people. Many suburbs lack the local public and nonprofit capacity to engage in meaningful community economic development or provide high-quality social services on their own, and, given the scale of the challenge and the strain on resources, it's neither practical nor feasible to build that capacity from scratch community by community.

DOES PLACE (WHERE PEOPLE LIVE) REALLY MATTER? WOULD IT BE BETTER TO JUST SUPPLEMENT THE INCOMES OF THE POOR RATHER THAN HELPING POOR PLACES?

Place intersects with poverty in ways that can ease or exacerbate its challenges. Good schools, good jobs, good housing, and good services are not distributed equally across the American landscape. Places thus determine whether poor families have access to the tools, resources, and opportunities that can set them on a path to greater economic stability. Without addressing the lack of investment in infrastructure, failing schools, limited job opportunities, and rising crime in low-income communities, both urban and suburban, we won't improve the long-term opportunities and quality of life for millions of poor Americans.

WE DECLARED A WAR ON POVERTY NEARLY 50 YEARS AGO. DID WE FAIL?

The War on Poverty launched a number of ambitious initiatives to help low-income communities, including Head Start, Job Corps, and Title I support for poor schools. These programs offered real hope for a better life for millions of Americans and have had real impact. But the shifting geography of poverty combined with a legacy system for confronting it has made it more difficult to realize the goals of the War on Poverty. Agencies, programs, and approaches designed years and even decades ago to help cities combat poverty are fundamentally out of step with the regional scale of today's challenges. Many of these strategies focus on neighborhood-level challenges related to concentrated urban poverty, and are a mismatch for suburbs, where poverty is often spread over greater distances and which lack the institutions and expertise that many city neighborhoods have spent decades building.

THIS BOOK HIGHLIGHTS AREAS OF THE COUNTRY THAT ARE EFFECTIVELY ADDRESSING SUBURBAN POVERTY. WHAT ARE THE INGREDIENTS FOR SUCCESS?

Enterprising nonprofits, collaborative organizations, and regional entities around the United States are stepping forward to confront suburban poverty and finding innovative ways to improve neighborhoods, deliver services, and expand opportunities. These organizations share three common characteristics essential to addressing the changing geography of poverty:

- They work at a sufficiently large scale to reach more communities and provide a broad range of services;
- They collaborate effectively to overcome fragmentation across jurisdictions and programs; and
- They deploy public and private dollars in creative ways with a strong focus on achieving specific outcomes.

HOW CAN WE BEST SCALE UP THESE PROMISING MODELS?

In a world of large-scale problems and limited resources, size matters. Small organizations and narrow programs are a fundamental mismatch for the increasingly metropolitan reach of poverty. Solutions that are large enough can bring efficiency, expertise, and entrepreneurialism to the challenge of suburban poverty. A good example is Neighborhood Centers in Houston, TX. With an annual budget of \$275 million from dozens of federal, state and private funding sources, it delivers a range of services to both urban and suburban communities in a largely seamless way. Because of its size, it can invest in critical infrastructure such as updated technology and facilities to increase its administrative efficiency and the

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quality of services it provides. It also benefits from a stable base of public-sector funding, with much coming from multi-year contracts for administering programs.

Although government funding comprises a significant portion of its revenues, it also can draw on a wide range of contracts, agencies, and private sector backers that can mitigate risk associated with only one source of funding. And because of its multiple locations throughout Houston's metro area, it can respond rapidly and fully to regional crises and opportunities. This is one model for the sort of scale necessary to stretch limited public and private resources further in the face of large-scale challenges.

WHY EVEN TALK ABOUT FEDERAL POLICY? CAN WASHINGTON DO ANYTHING CONSTRUCTIVE ABOUT THESE ISSUES ANYTIME SOON?

The federal government now spends \$82 billion a year on at least 80 federal community-based anti-poverty programs across 10 agencies. A solution we're proposing is to have Congress create a competitive grant program for states, similar to the Department of Education's Race to the Top initiative, called a Metropolitan Opportunity Challenge. This would not cost more money. It would deploy a fraction (5 percent) of what is now spent on community-based anti-poverty programs and re-allocate it as a challenge to regions and states to improve low-income residents' access to jobs, transportation, high-quality schools, or affordable housing across urban and suburban lines. We think this would accelerate progress that is already being made by building up what is working, and by helping more places organize their strategies and resources to do more with less.

WHAT'S THE ROLE OF THE PRIVATE SECTOR—NONPROFITS, BUSINESS, FINANCE, PHILANTHROPY?

The private sector can do many smart things to make placed-based antipoverty policies work better for urban and suburban communities. Modest near-term changes can lead to greater scale, enhanced collaboration, and more strategic use of resources. For instance, nonprofits can pursue collaborative solutions and smart consolidations to overcome fragmentation and reduce redundancies. And philanthropy and business can be doing more to support and reward those kinds of integrated and cross-cutting solutions. Foundations in particular should leverage their giving to address gaps in the regional safety net. The share of foundation dollars targeted to organizations serving low-income residents varies widely across regions. However, relatively few of those dollars go to building the much-needed organizational capacity in the suburbs, which often have substantially fewer philanthropic resources than cities.

DO WE HAVE THE RESOURCES TO COMBAT SUBURBAN POVERTY?

The need is great and the pot of money is shrinking. But even with a limited pot—and in fact because of it—government must find ways to give promising programs more flexibility so that they can stretch their dollars further. Government doesn't have to recreate what the community development field has already accomplished. It can build off those successes and add to them. It should take money that is now going in too many different directions and put it behind models that are working in more cost-effective ways to promote economic opportunities for low-income families. And government should remove the barriers to organizational scale, collaboration, and flexible, outcome-driven financing that stand in the way of serving more communities and families with the limited resources at hand.

WILL INVESTMENTS IN ALLEVIATING SUBURBAN POVERTY MEAN LESS FUNDING FOR ANTI-POVERTY PROGRAMS IN CITIES AND RURAL AREAS?

We can't play a zero-sum game by shifting limited resources from poor urban to poor suburban communities. The sum simply is not large enough. Today's landscape of poverty demands new policies and practices that confront barriers to opportunity not just at the community level, but at the regional scale of the economy. Only then can poverty alleviation become more productive, stretching limited dollars further to help more people in more places, and in cities and suburbs alike.

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WHAT HAPPENS IF WE DON'T ADDRESS THE RAPID GROWTH OF SUBURBAN POVERTY?

If policymakers ignore the rapid pace of growth in suburban poverty, they risk re-creating the same problem of entrenched, concentrated poverty in suburbs that we're still working to reverse in America's cities. Those problems—lack of investment, failing schools, limited job opportunities, and inadequate access to supports—dramatically limit the opportunities and quality of life for people who live in those communities. If public and private leaders take on this challenge now, they can make significant progress in reducing barriers to opportunity regardless of where low-income residents live, and update the War on Poverty for a new metropolitan age.

LEARN MORE OR GET THE BOOK:

Confronting Suburban Poverty in America by Elizabeth Kneebone and Alan Berube by visiting www.confrontingsuburbanpoverty.org