

The Suburbanization of American Poverty

A Q&A with Elizabeth Kneebone, senior research analyst at the Metropolitan Policy Program and co-author of the report, “The Suburbanization of Poverty: Trends in Metropolitan America, 2000 to 2008”

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Q: What do the trends of the last decade tell us about poverty?

Elizabeth Kneebone: The poverty trends we’ve seen since 2000 reinforce the role the economy plays in alleviating, or exacerbating, poverty. More so than the national economy, these trends tell a story about the health of regional economies over this decade. Since 2000, the country has struggled with not one but two economic downturns, and as a result we’ve seen poverty rise significantly overall. But not all regions bore the brunt of these downturns equally, so while poverty rose in some parts of the country, it fell in others.

The other big takeaway is that the notion of poverty as primarily an “urban” problem is officially outdated. About one-third of all poor people in the United States live in the suburbs of large metropolitan areas, more than live in big cities, smaller metro areas, or non-metropolitan communities. That noted, city and suburban poverty rates within individual regions tended to rise and fall together over the decade, reinforcing the fact that the economic well-being of these places and their residents is ultimately linked to resilience of their broader metropolitan economy.

Q: What is driving this growth in the suburban poor population?

Elizabeth Kneebone: These increases could be the result of a number of factors, depending on the region. For one, suburbs are generally gaining population faster than other community types, so as suburbs add more people overall, they are seeing the number of poor increase at a faster pace as well. However, poverty in the suburbs is growing at an even greater rate than the total population, so there is more at play here. While increasing suburban poverty may be the result of more low-income residents moving to the suburbs—whether due to immigration dynamics, the availability of affordable housing, or the decentralization of jobs that pay lower wages—it may also reflect changes in the economic status of long-time residents as they deal with the fallout of two economic downturns this decade.

Q: What metropolitan areas are most impacted?

Elizabeth Kneebone: The long-term trends show the toll that the economic challenges of the 2000s have taken on Midwestern metro areas. Auto manufacturing metro areas in particular have seen the greatest upticks in both city and suburban poverty, most likely reflecting the increasing stress on this sector over the course of the decade. More recently, Sun Belt metro areas are showing signs of struggling with the effects of the

latest downturn. Cities in Western metro areas—like Los Angeles, Riverside, and Phoenix—and suburbs in Florida metro areas—like Miami, Tampa, and Palm Bay—topped the list for significant poverty rate increases between 2007 and 2008, and our estimates predict even greater poverty increases in the Sun Belt in 2009.

Q: How has the “Great Recession” shaped the suburbanization of poverty?

Elizabeth Kneebone: The first year of the recession has already translated into significant poverty increases nationally, with suburbs once again showing the fastest growth rate in the number of poor. Looking at the unemployment numbers for 2009, we can expect even greater poverty increases to materialize in metro areas across the board. We have also seen unemployment grow at a faster pace in suburbs than cities over this time period, and more suburbanized industries—like real estate, retail, construction, and manufacturing—have borne some of the greatest job losses during the downturn. Taken together, these factors suggest that the trend of suburbanizing poverty is likely only to continue, if not accelerate, in coming years.

Q: What are the implications of this research for policymakers nationally and regionally?

Elizabeth Kneebone: Urban and rural poverty remain ongoing challenges for policymakers and service providers, but today the largest share of American poor—almost one-third—now lives in the suburbs. This signals a remarkable shift in the geography of American poverty that will ultimately affect the way we think about and approach poverty alleviation strategies. Addressing the needs of a poor population that is increasingly suburban calls for policies that foster more balanced and sustainable regional growth in the long term. This kind of growth means linking up planning decisions around transportation, affordable housing, and job creation in order to help low-income residents connect to job opportunities throughout the region. At the same time, service providers and government agencies must step up their collaborative efforts at the regional level to align existing services in order to effectively meet the needs of both the city and suburban poor in increasingly difficult economic times.