“For the First Time, More Poor People Live in the Suburbs than in Cities* : Suburban Poverty in America”

While poverty in general is a huge debate in America – the country of endless opportunities – suburban poverty is a separate issue of its own. Poverty is the state of being extremely poor, which depends on the country’s line of poverty. Poverty is normally experienced in inner cities with dense populations because cities are built to better accommodate the needs of the poor – they provide necessities fairly easy. The suburbs are usually composed of people who have higher socioeconomic statuses and better resources than the poor. But over time, the demographics of those living in suburbs changed and with it, the image of suburban life changed. Poverty in the suburbs has become a problem at a different time and can be resolved distinctly from general poverty.

Immigration may have a lot to do with how suburban poverty came into existence. As many immigrants migrated into the major cities of the United States to find job opportunities and seek higher education, the city limits were not fit for them. Immigrants began to flow into the suburbs. The problem was that the immigrants who lived in the “cheap” cities held the same low-wage jobs as the immigrants who lived in the “expensive” suburbs.1 The jobs were not relocating with the people and the housing. “[A]ffordable new construction pushed farther out into the suburbs….”2 Over a decade’s time, the percentage of immigrants living in the suburbs decreased from roughly thirty percent to seventeen percent. But that was back in the early 2000s.3

A majority of the jobs lost during the recession were the high-wage construction and manufacturing jobs that were found in the suburbs.4 A majority of those living in the suburbs

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2 Id.

3 Id.

4 Id.
were left with lower-wage jobs. This resulted in a long-term shift of low-paying jobs to the suburbs and an increase in the number of people living and working in the suburbs.

If keeping a job was not enough of a challenge, the suburban poor were faced with another challenge in the form of transit access. How were the poor expected to get to and from their jobs in the cities? By car. Could the poor realistically afford cars? No. They found other means, such as carpooling with friends, riding bikes, or taking the bus. “If you don't have a car, it's very hard to get a job or to keep a job…and [i]t’s also hard to access services.” The higher-quality schools were in the suburbs, but the poor could not afford to send their children there. Even though there was access to higher-quality schools, the isolation characteristic of the suburbs made it harder for the suburbanites to access transportation, employment, and social services.

As the suburban population grew, the services needed for survival remained stagnant. The isolation makes it more difficult for public and non-profit service providers to get in contact with those living in the suburbs. “When [they] go to look for the services, they're not funded at a level [they] need now. There was adequate funding when there were a few people, but it's not adequate now. So the money runs out before the need runs out.” According to one non-profit service provider, the “typical middle class suburban residents” are too prideful to ask for help

5 Id.
7 Id. (inner quotation marks omitted).
9 Id.
11 Id.
when they cannot afford the services.\textsuperscript{12} Their pride and shame make them hesitant to seek help and by then it is normally too late because all of their resources have run out. The suburban poverty ends up getting hidden.\textsuperscript{13}

Suburban poverty still is no secret, however. The government knows the problem exists and has made some attempts to remedy it, but those have largely been unsuccessful. The suburban poor and the urban poor share the same demographics – age, marital status, employment, and education.\textsuperscript{14} The main differences between the two populations are that the suburban poor are more likely to own a house and to be white.\textsuperscript{15} The government provides subsidized housing and other federal safety nets to these two populations alike, but the suburbs and cities should try harder to work together.\textsuperscript{16} As two well-known authors highlighted in their book on suburban poverty, collaboration between municipalities has been accomplished.\textsuperscript{17} These collaborations can result in better community development and rental housing rehabilitation.\textsuperscript{18} For example, nearly twenty communities in the Chicago area applied for a Neighborhood Stabilization Grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.\textsuperscript{19} Nine million dollars was awarded to spread amongst the twenty different communities.\textsuperscript{20} While a slight step towards a solution is usually greatly appreciated, it may not be enough when dealing with the suburban poverty issue.

Grants are not always available, though, and municipalities should seek to provide better public transportation for the suburban poverty. Many metro areas have experienced shocking increases in suburban poverty over the past decade. At the top of the list is the city of Atlanta,

\textsuperscript{12} Id.
\textsuperscript{13} Id.
\textsuperscript{14} \textit{As Poverty Grows in the Suburbs, Businesses and Governments Confront New Challenges}, note 8.
\textsuperscript{15} Id.
\textsuperscript{16} Id.
\textsuperscript{17} Id.; see also Elizabeth Kneebone & Alan Berube, \textit{Confronting Suburban Poverty} (2013).
\textsuperscript{18} Id.
\textsuperscript{19} Mooney, \textit{Confronting the Rise of Suburban Poverty}.
\textsuperscript{20} Id.
Georgia, which experienced more than a 150% increase between 2000 and 2011.\textsuperscript{21} The three main causes of this dramatic increase are the “foreclosure crisis; shortage of transit to reach jobs; and housing vouchers that facilitated a move from the inner city to communities with smaller safety nets,” according to the Brookings Institute.\textsuperscript{22} It is ironic that the reason behind the attractiveness of suburbs – housing availability – is now the reason behind the amount of poor people living in the suburbs.

The population change, the economy, immigration, and housing are the leading factors in the poverty trends in Atlanta. There were more than 120,000 people unemployed and living in Atlanta’s suburbs in 2007, and more than 240,000 in 2010.\textsuperscript{23} Statistics show that in 1970, in cities and suburbs combined, there were nearly 250,000 poor people in the metro Atlanta area. Just about 40 years later, in 2011, that number has increased to over 880,000, but the number of poor people living in the cities hardly changed.\textsuperscript{24} That correlates to about a 100% increase in suburban poor each decade! However, the poverty rate in cities still reports to be higher than in the suburbs – twenty-six percent versus sixteen percent, respectively, in 2011.\textsuperscript{25}

Poverty in the suburbs is nowhere near a new phenomenon. It has been around for decades and thousands of people have been affected by it. It emerged from different sociological changes such as the job market and transportation accessibility. The next step is to determine whether there will ever be a solution to this issue. Many scholars and organizations have put their efforts into programs that confront suburban poverty. Their aims are to focus anti-poverty efforts more in suburban areas, to invest in organizations that give people access to economic

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{21} Merten, \textit{Face of U.S. Poverty: These Days More Poor Live in Suburbs than in Cities.}
\item \textsuperscript{22} David Pendered, \textit{Poverty Grows to Atlanta’s Suburbs as Researchers Show How it Taxes the Brain, Saporta Report} (Sept. 8, 2013, 11:20 AM), http://saportareport.com/blog/2013/09/poverty-grows-to-atlantas-suburbs-as-researchers-show-how-it-taxes-the-brain/.
\item \textsuperscript{24} \textit{Id.}
\item \textsuperscript{25} \textit{Id.}
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opportunity, and to create new strategies to use community dollars.\textsuperscript{26} These problem-solving ideas sound easy to implement, but it will take more than a mere idea to solve such a drastic problem. People need to take action collectively.

\textsuperscript{26} See generally, ConfrontingSuburbanPoverty.org, ActionToolKit, available at http://confrontingsuburbanpoverty.org/action-toolkit/.