Suburban Poverty

A hut standing before long rows of cotton fields at the edge of a road in the Mississippi Delta; a shack balanced precariously on a mountainside in Appalachia; a high rise catacomb in the inner core of a cold rust-belt city. These classic images of poverty continue to dominate in the American mind. However, as living arrangements have changed, so has the nature of poverty in America. Just as there are fewer people living in rural areas such as Appalachia and urban rust-belt cities, so the concentration of poverty in America has also moved. As America suburbanized, poverty has become an increasingly suburban phenomenon—a phenomenon all too familiar in Georgia, a state that has areas with some of the highest concentrations of suburban poverty and some of the fastest growing rates of suburban poverty.

The U.S. in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries witnessed two large and interrelated population shifts. The general trend was that large numbers of people moved from the urban core of major cities to suburban areas. This pattern accelerated in the postwar period and continued into the 2010s. William H. Frey, *Population Growth in Metro America Since 1980: Putting the Volatile 2000s in Perspective*, Brookings Institute, (2012)

http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2012/03/20-population-frey (download the pdf at the bottom of the page). The more specific trend, largely concurrent with the first, was the explosive growth of the Sunbelt region. Beginning in the 1960s and 1970s and continuing to the present day, the lion’s share of U.S. population growth went to the Sunbelt states, which often experienced this growth at the expense of the Northeast and industrial Midwest. Id at 5. These changes in population have affected the nature of poverty in the U.S. in several ways. While the population shift from the urban core to the suburbs has historically been a migration of the relatively white and affluent, this pattern has changed significantly in recent years. As more people moved to the suburbs, suburban communities experienced an increased demand for services, which stimulated the job markets in suburban areas. As job opportunities in suburban areas increased, the demographic composition of suburban areas changed substantially. As a result, suburban communities have become more racially and economically diverse, and one reason for the increase in suburban poverty is simply that a substantial portion of low-skill jobs have moved from urban areas to suburban ones. Stephen Raphael and Michael Stoll, *Job Sprawl and the Suburbanization of Poverty*, Brookings Institute (2010)
The population shift from the rust belt to the Sunbelt has also had a substantial effect on the changing location of poverty, partly because very few cities in the Sunbelt had historically large populations or the infrastructure to support them. For example, of the region’s largest cities, Los Angeles, Dallas, Houston, Miami, and Atlanta; only one, Los Angeles, had a population of 100,000 in 1900, and the population of all of the above metropolitan areas has doubled since 1960. Campbell Gibson, Population of the 100 Largest Cities and Other Urban Places in the United States: 1790-1990, US Census Bureau Population Division (1998)

Since these cities grew much faster than their infrastructure could handle, a large portion of their growth took place in suburban areas, which both contributed to and was mirrored by the trend of suburbanization within the country generally. Invariably, the growth of ever-larger suburban rings around the central cities meant that the number of poor within suburban areas would grow as well. Much of this growth can be attributed to “job sprawl,” which is the geographic decentralization of job opportunities within a metropolitan area. In other words, because the sheer size of many modern metropolitan areas is too large for an individual to take public transportation from a city center to a job in the suburban hinterlands (which was more feasible when the suburban rings around the city were smaller), poor individuals must move to the suburbs to take advantage of the economic opportunities in the suburbs.

While the suburbanization of poverty has attracted more attention recently than it has in the past, it is less a new phenomenon than one that has become so large it is impossible to ignore. For decades, the number of poor in the suburbs has grown faster than the number of poor in big cities and rural areas. In the past decade, the number of “poor people living in the suburbs grew by 64 percent [which is] more than twice the growth rate in cities (29 percent).” Confronting Suburban Poverty in America: 10 Facts About Suburban Poverty, ConfrontingSuburbanPoverty.org, http://confrontingsuburbanpoverty.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Brookings_ToolKit_10-Facts.pdf (last visited Jan 4, 2014). During the same period, the number of poor in the suburbs actually surpassed the number of poor living in big cities or in rural areas, 16.4 million compared to 13.4 million and 7.3 million, respectively. Id. Furthermore, the population of suburban poor increased significantly in eighty-five of the
nation’s ninety-five largest metropolitan areas. Id. And while the suburbanization of poverty is mostly driven by the dispersion of job opportunities in metropolitan areas, the poor are often unable to afford to live in job-rich suburban areas and instead live in low-income suburban communities with poor job markets. Moreover, the general population is actually more statistically responsive to job sprawl, adapting to the changing location of work across a metropolitan area more readily than the poor. This peculiar effect — an imperfect response to a changing labor market — is particularly pronounced among poor blacks and Latinos. Raphael & Stoll, Job Sprawl and the Suburbanization of Poverty, at 15. Nationwide, seven out of ten poor suburban whites reside in job-rich suburban areas, while the proportion is only six in ten for blacks and five in ten for Latinos. Raphael & Stoll, Job Sprawl and the Suburbanization of Poverty, at 14. In communities with higher than average rates of poverty or higher than average populations of racial minorities, this effect is exaggerated.

The Atlanta area has one of the fastest growing rates of suburban poverty in the country. The percentage of housing voucher (section 8) recipients who lived in the suburbs in 2000 was sixty-six percent, but increased to seventy-nine percent by 2008. Confronting Suburban Poverty in America: Atlanta, GA Metro Area Profile, ConfrontingSuburbanPoverty.org, http://confrontingsuburbanpoverty.org/wp-content/uploads/metro-profiles/Atlanta-GA.pdf (last visited Jan 3, 2014). In 2011, the overall rate of suburban poverty in the Atlanta area was sixteen percent, a six-percent increase since 2000. Only three metropolitan areas in the country had a faster increase in the rate of suburban poverty, and of the twenty largest metropolitan areas, Atlanta had the highest increase in the rate of suburban poverty. The actual number of suburban poor in the Atlanta area skyrocketed during the same period, increasing by 159%, while the population of the suburbs as a whole only increased by twenty-six percent. Id. Indeed, eighty-five percent of the region’s poor live outside the city. For purposes of comparison, the city of Atlanta has a poverty rate of twenty-six percent, which is still much higher than the rate of suburban poverty for the metro area, but only experienced an eleven-percent increase in the number of poor from 2000-2010, with a population growth of 0.2%. Id. In accordance with national trends, within the region, the spread of poverty within the various suburbs has not been uniform. The Atlanta Regional Planning Commission’s 2013 snapshot study of poverty divided the area up into four sectors: 1) the “urban core” inside the 285 perimeter; 2) the first ring suburbs, Clayton, Cobb, DeKalb, Fulton, and Gwinnett counties, minus the portions inside the
perimeter; 3) the second ring suburbs, Cherokee, Douglas, Fayette, Henry, and Rockdale counties; 4) the exurban counties, Barrow, Bartow, Carroll, Coweta, Forsyth, Hall, Newton, Paulding, Spalding, and Walton. While the “urban core” had the highest rate of poverty, at 20.7%, it also had the smallest increase in the poverty rate since 2000, at 1.7%. Suburbanization of Poverty: A Look at the Geography of Poverty in the Atlanta Region, Regional Snapshot Atlanta Regional Commission, Feb. 2013, http://news.atlantaregional.com/?p=624 (follow the link for “This Regional Snapshot in the second paragraph). The first ring suburbs had a poverty rate of 12.7%, but had the highest increase in the overall poverty rate, at 5.8%. The second ring suburbs had a poverty rate of 9.5%, and an increase of 3.9%. The exurban counties had a poverty rate of 12.9%, and an increase of 3.2%. The metro areas showing the highest rates of increase were concentrated along the outer perimeter of 285, particularly in Clayton, DeKalb, and Gwinnett counties, in the communities of Forest Park, Stone Mountain, Tucker, Norcross, Doraville, and Suwannee. Id.

The challenges faced both by the suburban poor and by agencies trying to address the problem of suburban poverty are magnified in the Atlanta area. The metro area is divided among twenty different county governments and countless municipal governments which are all tasked with assisting the poor, who pursue their agendas in their own independent and sometimes contradictory ways. Social service agencies in the city of Atlanta receive over $65 in grants for every $1.73 that agencies in the suburbs receive. Rebecca Burns, Atlanta No. 4 for Suburban Poverty Growth, atlantamagazine.com, Jan. 5, 2014, http://www.atlantamagazine.com/agenda/2013/05/21/atlanta-no-4-for-suburban-poverty-growth. The lack of viable public transportation is a classic example of a challenge faced by the suburban poor that lingers unaddressed by the various government agencies tasked with doing so. For example, it takes two hours to take public transportation from Dunwoody, a fairly prosperous suburb north of Atlanta, to Tucker, a city twelve miles away. Only forty-eight percent of low-income metro Atlantans have access to public transportation at all, and only eighteen percent of jobs in the area are accessible within ninety minutes each way via public transportation. Id. At least in the Atlanta area, it is less a question of policymakers trying to fix a problem and failing, than it is an issue that has largely been ignored. And make no mistake; this is an issue where policymakers must take the lead in remedying the deficiencies of the present system. The citizen as a consumer cannot simply buy another bus system or boycott the social service agencies that
are receiving more funding than they should. Funds must be reallocated, zoning ordinances must be modified, train lines need to be laid, and new buses must be put on the road. The adjustments that need to be made can be given an impetus by voters, but the initiative will remain with officeholders, and change will inevitably begin in the halls of city and county councils, and under the capitol domes in Atlanta and Washington.