

Poor Suburbia: Rethinking the geography of American poverty

July 12 2010, By Steven Yaccino

(PhysOrg.com) -- For decades, suburban living has been synonymous with America's upper middle class, a stereotype that emerged from the "Leave it to Beaver" era and morphed into today's gated communities, mega-malls, and million-dollar mansions. But even before the recession, which continues to hit every pressure point of the nation's economy, Elizabeth Kneebone, MPP'03, says that idyllic American Dream was only one side of the suburban coin.

"People have this idea that [poverty](#) is this ultra-urban or ultra-rural phenomenon," says Kneebone, a senior research analyst at the Brookings Institution's Metropolitan Policy Program. "They think of inner cities or Appalachia, but in reality American poverty is increasingly suburban."

In April, Kneebone briefed Capitol Hill staffers and stakeholders on this shifting geography of American poverty, citing a paper she published earlier this year as part of Brookings' Metropolitan Opportunity Series. The study, titled [The Suburbanization of Poverty](#), describes how major metropolitan suburbs saw their poor populations increase by 25 percent over the last decade. That's almost five times more than America's largest cities, making them the largest and fastest-growing poverty demographic area in the country.

By 2008, large American suburbs were home to 1.5 million more poor people than their primary cities and housed almost a third of the entire nation's poor, according to the report.

Since post-WWII suburbanization, millions of people have been flocking to the fringe of [metro areas](#). More recently, that trend also has brought an influx of low-income Americans searching for affordable housing, jobs, and schools. This growing presence of poverty has become a hidden problem, says Kneebone, who moved to D.C. in 2006 to work on poverty and tax policy issues. “You might have been living next to somebody who had fallen on hard times and struggling to make ends meet and not even know it.”

The ongoing recession has started to change that. While the trend predates the recent downturn, Kneebone attributes part of recent poverty increases to large employment declines in suburbanized industries like real estate, retail, construction, and manufacturing. The economic fallout, she says, could carry on well into recovery, posing new policy challenges to suburban governments that are not used to such high demand for safety net services.

Given the added stress on these systems and limited capacity, Kneebone has been urging policy-makers to quickly abandon their predisposition to view all suburbs as the same and start crafting effective solutions before things get worse. “If you have an outdated understanding of where poverty is in the country or where the poor populations live, it’s hard to shape an effective response,” she says.

That requires taking a more regional approach in offering safety net services, she explains, so that providers and policy-makers can continue to address ongoing urban needs while adapting to growing suburban demand. It may also mean adjusting traditional urban service models to fit suburban needs.

To receive food stamps or job skills training, for example, a person typically has to travel to an office in order to apply or participate. For suburban residents who can’t afford a car or don’t have access to public

transit, new approaches may be needed to help connect people to services.

Kneebone's newest study, due out next fall, will tackle public transportation and whether low-income residents have access to job centers. It's another step toward understanding the shifting geography of poverty and access to opportunity within the country's largest metropolitan areas.

“There are a lot of questions about why this is happening,” she says. “With this series, we want to tease out the different drivers and implications of the suburbanization of poverty so that policy-makers can make decisions that promote more inclusive and sustainable growth moving forward.”

Provided by University of Chicago

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