

Changing Contours of Suburban Poverty in Metropolitan Areas: A Demographic Analysis

Theme: Migration and Urbanization

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A large number of Metropolitan areas in United States are in a state of flux. The idea of gentrified suburbs that dominated the urban transformation in the post-war period is gradually changing. The poverty in suburban neighborhoods in America has sharpened significantly in the last decade and is fast growing (Kneebone & Berube, 2013; Bishaw, 2014). This is also accompanied by demographic changes in the composition of suburbs, mostly notably characterized by increases in the size of immigrant and minority populations. As suburban neighborhoods have long been associated with higher quality of life and perceived as the place for the realization of the “(White) American Dream” (Anderson, 2010; Fishman, 1987), decline in these neighborhoods may not only break the suburban ideal precious to many Americans but also intensify intergroup conflict, which has been reflected in the recent incidents like Ferguson, Missouri (Kneebone, 2014). Despite the importance of the suburban communities in the American urban realities, there is little research examining the exact nature of the demographic changes accompanying the increasing trend of suburban poverty.

In this paper, we examine the demographic composition of the poor in the suburb of the top 100 American Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSA) over two decades from 1990 to 2010. Specifically, we attempt to answer two questions: Who are the suburban poor and where do they come from. To answer the first question, we decompose the profile of the suburban poor by age cohort, education level, race/ethnicity, and nativity status. We expect that minorities and Latino

immigrants make up an increasingly larger proportion of the poor population in these regions over time.

With regard to the second question, we posit four pathways to suburban poverty: immigration of the poor to suburban neighborhoods, suburbanization of poverty from central cities, relative decline of wealth in suburban residents, and internal migration of poverty from other regions in the country. Recent years have witnessed an increasing tendency of immigrants to settle in predominantly white suburban neighborhoods either upon their initial arrival in the country or from later suburbanization from inner-city ethnic neighborhoods (Singer, Hardwick, & Brettell, 2008; Massey, 2008). While it is noted that immigrants are more vulnerable to poverty than the native-born and they constitute one fifth of the poverty populations in the suburb, the native-born contribute the most to the growth in suburban poverty (Suro, Wilson, & Singer, 2011). However, it is unclear whether the growth in suburban poverty is more of a consequence of increasing immigrant poor directly settling into suburban communities or a reflection of continuous suburbanization trends of all kinds of residents. It is also ambiguous whether the growth in poverty among the suburban native-born is driven more dominantly by the suburbanization of the native-born poor or by the decline of suburban residents' economic fortunes. We document the migration patterns of the poverty populations at each time point and trace them over the past two decades. This enables us to gain a systematic understanding of where the suburban poor lived 5 years ago and how this composition has evolved over time. We use Decennial Census Microdata from 1990 and 2000 and 5-year combined American Community Survey (ACS) Microdata for 2005 and 2010 (2008-2012 combined). We make use of a variety of mobility variables, nativity status, national origin, and race/ethnicity information to form our analyses.

In addition to the cross-sectional analysis, we conduct a cohort longitudinal analysis to track the trajectories of the poverty populations in terms of their settlement patterns from 1990 to 2010 by different age groups, racial groups, and immigrant arrival groups. This method enables us to identify age cohorts, racial cohorts, and immigrant arrival cohorts of the poor in the initial year of our analysis and repeatedly observe the residential location of those cohorts in successive decades (Myers, 1999). This approach provides a dynamic account of the poor's residential movements.

The preliminary analysis of the pattern reveals that many metropolitan areas in the United States have exhibited substantially higher suburban poverty rates than two decades ago. The economic challenges of the last decades combined with dynamic changes in the suburban housing markets have redrawn the poverty map in a large portion of the country, particularly in the South and Mid-West. The bulk of anti-poverty programs of the federal government and the operation of the non-profit sector are still based on the place-based understanding of poverty and concentrate in central cities, which may not be sufficient for tackling the new challenges that lie ahead.

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