

# Suburbs take hit as US poverty climbs in downturn

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Thu Oct 7, 6:04 pm ET

WASHINGTON – The American suburb is no longer a refuge from poverty in cities.

A pair of analyses by the nonprofit Brookings Institution paints a bleak economic picture for the 100 largest metropolitan areas over the past decade and in coming years, and finds that suburbs now are home to one-third of the nation's poor, and rising.

The study of census data finds that since 2000, the number of poor people in the suburbs jumped by 37.4 percent to 13.7 million. The growth rate of suburban poverty is more than double that of cities and higher than the national rate of 26.5 percent.

At the same time, social service providers are spread thin in many suburban areas, according to a detailed Brookings survey of groups in representative metropolitan areas of Chicago, Los Angeles and the District of Columbia. That has forced providers to turn away many poor people due to scarce aid that typically goes to cities first.

"Millions of Americans at all income levels moved to the suburbs looking for better schools, better jobs, affordable housing, and a sense of security, but in recent years, as incomes have fallen, people had a harder and harder time making ends meet," said Scott Allard, a University of Chicago professor who co-wrote one of the reports.

"As a result, Americans who never imagined becoming poor are now asking for assistance, and many are not getting the help they need."

After the recession began in 2007, the suburbs continued to post larger increases in the number of poor — adding 1.8 million, compared with 1.4 million in the cities.

The findings come weeks before the Nov. 2 congressional elections in which voters anxious over the economy will decide whether to keep Democrats in power. Made up of both cities and surrounding suburbs, the large metro areas represent two-thirds of the U.S. population and are home to battlegrounds that helped lift Democrat Barack Obama to victory in 2008.

Cities still have higher poverty rates — about 19.5 percent, compared with 10.4 percent in the suburbs. But the gap has been steadily narrowing. In a reversal from 2000, the number of poor people living in the suburbs now exceeds those in cities by roughly 1.6 million.

Analysts attribute the shift largely to years of middle-class flight and substantial shares of minorities and immigrants leaving cities in the early part of the decade for affordable housing and job opportunities in the suburbs. After the housing bust, their fortunes changed, throwing millions out of work.

More than half, or 57, of the 100 largest U.S. metro areas had substantial increases in poverty. They were most evident in Sun Belt suburban areas including Modesto and Riverside, both in California, as well as the Florida cities of Lakeland, Orlando, Miami and Tampa, which had seen large population gains during the housing boom.

Also hit hard were Rust Belt manufacturing regions such as Detroit, Cleveland and Allentown, Pa., where the poverty rate soared to 29 percent from 19 percent.

Nationally, the government reported last month that 14.3 percent of people in the U.S., or 1 in 7, now live below the poverty line, which is \$21,954 for a family of four. Among the working-age population, poverty is at 12.9 percent, the highest since the 1960s, when the government launched a campaign against poverty.

Based on unemployment rates that remain near 10 percent, many analysts predict increases in the U.S. poverty rate for at least two more years, with suburbs continuing to struggle.

Additional findings:

\_Poor people's requests to nonprofit groups for help buying food, paying bills and making housing payments generally jumped 30 percent between 2008 and 2009. About 3 out of 4 nonprofit groups reported more requests from people who had never sought help before.

\_Almost half of the nonprofit groups serving the suburban poor reported they had lost substantial government or private-sector aid in the last year. Many of them were expecting additional cuts in 2011.

\_Suburban nonprofit groups were often spread across multiple counties, cities or townships. That made it difficult to coordinate services across sprawling areas or obtain money, compared with cities where poverty was more concentrated.

\_Private philanthropic support for nonprofit social service groups more often helped the poor in cities than in suburbs, due partly to a belief that cities needed more help.

Elizabeth Kneebone, a senior research associate at the Brookings Institution, said the numbers highlighted a need for local governments to develop regional approaches to tackling poverty that encompass both city and suburb.

While suburban poverty is a growing problem, Kneebone noted that city poverty also rose significantly in the last year as the downturn spread from construction and manufacturing to other

sectors. She said future poverty increases will be partly determined by the pace of economic recovery as well as government policy decisions promoting job growth, affordable housing and transportation.

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