

The Seattle Times

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Local News

Originally published May 19, 2013 at 9:06 PM | Page modified May 19, 2013 at 9:20 PM

Poverty hits home in local suburbs like S. King County

For the first time, there are more poor people living in American suburbs than in the nation's big cities, according to new findings by the Brookings Institution. South King County is particularly "eye-opening," the researchers say.

By Lornet Turnbull

Seattle Times staff reporter

The idea of suburban America conjures up images of Ward and June Cleaver, of safe streets and good schools, prosperity and homogeneity.

But new findings released Monday by the Brookings Institution are flipping such conventional thinking about American suburbs on its head: In the past decade and for the first time, the majority of poor people were living not in big cities but in suburbs.

Nowhere is suburbanization of poverty more evident than in South King County, where affordable housing has drawn immigrants and refugees coming here from across the globe as well as low-income families forced from Seattle by skyrocketing housing costs.

The findings are contained in a new book: "*Confronting Suburban Poverty in America*," which examines this trend in the 100 largest metropolitan areas across the country, including the Seattle metro area, where 3.5 million people are spread across King, Snohomish and Pierce counties.

Using the federal benchmark for poverty, which for a family of four in 2010 was an annual income of \$22,300, Brookings researchers found that two out of three Seattle-metro-area residents who were at or below the poverty line were living in the suburbs.

In fact, the number of poor people in the suburbs increased by 80 percent between 2000 and 2011 — with much of that growth concentrated in the cities south of Seattle.

The rate outpaced the nation's and ranked the Puget Sound region as the 23rd fastest growing for suburban poverty among the largest 100 metro areas.

At the same time, in the core cities of Seattle, Everett and Tacoma, poverty grew by 31 percent.

"We spent years going to different parts of the country to see what this looked like on the ground, how people were experiencing it and what the institutions were doing to respond," said Alan Berube, one of the book's authors.

"South King County was for us one of the most eye-opening places ... as it captures in one place a lot of what's going on in suburban America."

Suburban and urban poor are not so very different, the findings suggest, with similar household structures and demographics. But *where* they live influences the kinds of educational and economic opportunities as well as the range of public services available to them.

“Suburbanization of poverty is not a good or bad thing,” Berube said. “It depends on where it is. It makes a difference if there are high-quality schools in a safe neighborhood. If you interview a random poor person in South King and ask if they’d want to live there or on the Eastside, they’d probably say the Eastside, that it’s nice.”

“Incredible diversity”

The Brookings findings fly in the face of the image Americans have long cultivated about suburbs — born of white flight during the mid-20th century, their rise and spread aided in large part by public policies, including federal housing and economic-development subsidies, state and local land-use policies and environmental regulations.

But the findings surprise no one who lives and works with the population across South King County — city managers and city councils, human-service providers, business owners and educators.

Classrooms in schools across South King County teem with a mix of cultures and in many of the area’s school districts, more than 100 languages are spoken.

Cities face increased need for interpreter services, and schools for specialized language classes. Some city leaders bemoan the high costs of diversity and grapple with how to engage this new population.

“You have this incredible refugee population coming from all corners of the earth and landing in Tukwila and communities next door, joining longtime middle-class families that have been there for decades ...” Berube said. “There’s incredible diversity that comes with that and challenges for a small community to assist with integration.”

Some community leaders are trying to understand and address the challenge, Berube said.

But “there are others who might have thought: ‘all these immigrants come into our communities, stressing our schools, they don’t have jobs’ and they worry perhaps if they do anything, they might attract more people.”

Part of the challenge, the findings suggest, is that the best policies for improving neighborhoods and delivering social services were not designed with the suburbs in mind.

Small cities such as SeaTac and Tukwila face challenges because of inadequate and unreliable funding.

Ben Wolters, economic and community development director for the city of Kent, said while cities like his were smart about using the resources they have, those resources are “limited and focused on traditional business recruitment and retention.”

Unlike economic-development offices in cities like Seattle, with large numbers of professionals to tackle these challenges, “I have a staff of two — not 20.”

Some successes

In addition to the influx of new arrivals, Brookings researchers cited a lack of reliable public transportation, thinly spread safety nets designed to help those most in need, and a lack of access to living-wage jobs.

For some job seekers, language remains a barrier to employment.

“What we find is that there have been some successes,” Wolters said. “There are aircraft-component manufacturers who recruit specifically from the immigrant communities through referrals from other immigrant workers.”

Immigrants from the region have also found work in short-haul trucking from the Port of Seattle to destinations in South King, Wolters said.

Asian immigrants operate many small businesses throughout the region, and many are successful property developers and builders active in the local market.

Wolters pointed to a range of programs at local community colleges — Green River, Shoreline and Highline — focused on providing assistance to budding entrepreneurs.

Berube applauds the creation several decades ago of the South King County Council of Human Services, a consortium of all the cities, social-service organizations and the colleges to address common concerns. Berube is speaking at the group’s annual luncheon on June 25.

The researchers also laud a program called the Road Map, launched four years ago. It brings together hundreds of community groups, educators and leaders from the region’s school districts along with agencies and organizations trying to ensure success of all the area’s children.

“There’s a saying, if you’ve seen one poor suburb, you’ve seen one poor suburb,” Berube said.

“We should create and re-create economic opportunities for people in South King County, but we should also be working to give them access to homes and jobs in higher-opportunity parts of the region, like the Eastside.”

Here is the website for the Brookings Institution:

<http://www.brookings.edu/events/2013/05/20-suburban-poverty>

Lornet Turnbull: 206-464-2420 or lturnbull@seattletimes.com. On Twitter @turnbull.

The New York Times

May 20, 2013

Cul-de-Sac Poverty

By ELIZABETH KNEEBONE and ALAN BERUBE

WASHINGTON — LONG before Robert F. Kennedy toured Appalachia and the Mississippi Delta in 1964, before Jimmy Carter walked through the South Bronx in 1977, Americans thought of poverty as synonymous with inner cities and rural hinterlands.

But in the 1990s, poverty in suburbia began to accelerate at a faster rate than poverty in the cities. Sometime after the 2001 recession, more poor people lived in suburbs than in cities for the first time (even though the poverty *rate* remains higher in cities). The Great Recession, set off by a subprime mortgage crisis that began in suburbs and exurbs, accelerated the trend.

In 2011, the suburban poor outnumbered the urban poor by three million; from 2000 to 2011, the number of poor people soared by 64 percent in the suburbs, compared with 29 percent in cities. Today nearly one-third of all Americans are poor or nearly poor. One in three poor Americans live in the suburbs. If you're poor in the Seattle, Atlanta or Chicago regions, you're more likely than not living outside the city limits.

The 10 metropolitan regions that saw the highest increases in suburban poverty between 2000 and 2010 stretched across the nation: Cape Coral, in southwestern Florida; Greensboro, N.C.; Colorado Springs; Atlanta; Grand Rapids, Mich.; Dayton, Ohio; Detroit; Youngstown, Ohio; Boise, Idaho; and Salt Lake City.

The differences between the Midwest, and the South and West, are significant.

In communities like Lakewood, Ohio, west of Cleveland, and Penn Hills, Pa., east of Pittsburgh, the long-run decline of manufacturing jobs lowered income in an already suburbanized work force. Small suburbs south of Chicago, like Harvey and Blue Island, Ill., became home to low-income families pushed out of the central cities by higher housing costs, a pattern also occurring in the Northeast. Restrictive zoning, redlining and limits on annexation reinforced patterns of segregation and blocked struggling cities from absorbing affluent suburbs, as cities did in the 19th century.

Suburban poverty in the South and West is more closely associated with demographic change. South of Seattle, small communities like Tukwila, Wash., were transformed over two decades by the arrival of refugees from the Balkans, East Africa and the Himalayas. The growing job

base east of Houston attracted low-income Latinos to formerly middle-class white suburbs like Pasadena, Tex. In Antioch, Calif., at the eastern edge of the San Francisco Bay Area, lower-income black households used subsidized vouchers to rent homes from owners who were underwater because of the foreclosure crisis.

To be sure, there are some relative benefits to being poor in the suburbs, which, compared with inner cities sometimes offer better schools, greater socioeconomic diversity, safer streets and, if there are jobs nearby, shorter commutes. The Fair Housing Act of 1968, the introduction of Section 8 housing vouchers in the 1980s, and the demolition of distressed public housing in the 1990s were all part of a benign effort to de-concentrate poverty and open suburbia to low-income households, especially members of minority groups, who had been excluded for generations.

But the suburbs haven't kept up with rising demand for services. In Penn Hills, public transportation is modest, and runs in and out of downtown Pittsburgh — not to other suburbs where lower-skilled jobs are more plentiful. In Tukwila, the small school district has struggled to prepare hundreds of non-English-speaking low-income students for state-mandated achievement tests. In Antioch, social services were overwhelmed after the housing market crashed.

Those struggles reflect the fact that policies to help poor places — as opposed to poor people — haven't evolved much beyond the War on Poverty's neighborhood-based solutions. Many federal programs were designed for urban neighborhoods: Head Start and Community Health Centers, in 1965; the Community Development Block Grant, to promote economic development, in 1974; the HOPE VI program, to modernize distressed public housing, in 1992; the Obama administration's Promise Neighborhoods, which is based on the Harlem Children's Zone and tries to coordinate school and family support, in 2010.

These approaches are often ill suited for suburbs, where poverty is more diffuse, where the institutions and expertise to help the poor are lacking, and where local leaders sometimes resist such programs, fearing they will only attract more poor residents.

Moreover, the aid is fragmented. In a new book, we estimate that the federal government spends \$82 billion on place-based efforts to combat poverty, but fragments that effort among more than 80 programs across 10 different agencies. Delivering services across more than one jurisdiction means that nonprofit groups, which provide services under government contracts, must grapple with multiple bureaucracies, regulations and reporting structures.

Innovative organizations are struggling to address suburban poverty. In the Houston area, a

nonprofit agency called Neighborhood Centers blends 35 different federal programs with state, local and private dollars to provide a continuum of education, child care, financial and immigration services to more than 400,000 people a year at over 60 different sites. But federal requirements force the agency to maintain 40 different data systems, and report separately on each program throughout the year to several federal agencies.

Two groups in the Chicago area — the Chicago Southland Housing and Community Development Collaborative and the West Cook County Housing Collaborative — have joined forces to blend public and private money to mitigate the fallout from the foreclosure crisis in the city's southern and western suburbs. But they've encountered bureaucratic roadblocks in using federal grants across more than one jurisdiction.

We need to transform social policy for the age of suburban poverty. But reforming 80-plus programs one by one is neither efficient nor realistic. Instead, we should equip regions with aid that cuts across jurisdictional lines, help them use limited resources more efficiently, and reinvent the system from the ground up.

By carving out just 5 percent of what the federal government now spends on place-based antipoverty efforts (around \$4 billion), we could create a competitive grant program focused on increasing access to economic opportunity. Call it a "Metropolitan Opportunity Challenge." It would give states and localities an incentive to join forces to compete for federal dollars. President Obama's Race to the Top educational program already provides such a model: it gave the Seattle Public Schools and six suburban districts, including Tukwila, an award to reduce achievement gaps and to ensure that high school graduates were prepared for college or entering competitive fields.

Getting Congress to act in this age of gridlock is a tall order. But state and local policy makers can also help, by putting their scarce discretionary antipoverty resources behind organizations that have proved their ability to provide services in both urban and suburban communities.

Americans moved to the suburbs after World War II to escape the problem of poverty in cities. Running away is no longer an option — the cities' traditional woes are now in the suburbs, too. We have to recognize that the face of American poverty is an increasingly suburban one, and act accordingly.

Elizabeth Kneebone and Alan Berube, fellows in the Metropolitan Policy Program at the Brookings Institution, are the authors of "Confronting Suburban Poverty in America."

