

America's shifting suburban battlegrounds



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America is defined by its suburbs. Since the mid-20th century — when highways, the GI Bill and the Federal Housing Administration opened up a new residential frontier for the Baby Boom generation — suburbs have served as the backdrop for the middle-class American dream.

Not surprisingly, suburbs define our politics, too. While city dwellers overwhelmingly vote Democratic, and residents of small towns and rural areas vote for Republicans by large margins, suburbs are the quintessential political battlegrounds. In the 113th Congress, nearly half of all House districts, 199 of 435, are essentially suburban — a majority of their populations live in the suburbs of one of the nation's 100 largest metro areas. They are represented almost equally by Republicans (101 districts) and Democrats (98 districts). As the suburbs go, so goes political control of Congress.

But now suburbs are helping define another American phenomenon: poverty. Over the past decade, America's major suburbs have become home to the largest and fastest-growing poor population in the country. Between 2000 and 2011, the number of poor residents in suburbia grew by almost two-thirds, or 64 percent — more than double the

pace of poverty growth in the large cities that anchor these regions. For the first time, more poor people in America live in suburbs than in big cities.

A number of factors converged to drive this shift. The collapse of the housing market in the late 2000s pummeled many metropolitan economies across the country, particularly those in the Sun Belt, like Phoenix, Las Vegas and much of central Florida, where the housing market had boomed the most. At the same time, many Rust Belt metro areas suffered greatly from the decline of manufacturing jobs throughout the 2000s.

The Great Recession is only one piece of the story, however. Although the downturn pushed the poor population to record levels and accelerated the shift of poverty toward suburbia, more poor people lived in suburbs than cities even before the market crashed. In fact, poverty began growing faster in suburbs than in cities as early as the 1980s. Suburbia was increasingly home to more low-wage jobs, more new immigrants and more aging housing, all of which led to growth in its poor population, too.

The rapid rise in suburban poverty during the 2000s cut across the blue and red political divide. More than 80 percent of districts represented by Democrats and more than 90 percent of those represented by Republicans experienced an increase in their poor populations across the decade. Some of the fastest growth occurred in Republican districts in Sun Belt regions hit hard by the housing market collapse, including Phoenix (AZ-5), Las Vegas (NV-3) and Atlanta (GA-7). At the same time, the biggest increases in suburban poverty rates occurred in Democratic districts in Midwestern manufacturing regions, like Indianapolis (IN-7) and Detroit (MI-13).

Despite poverty's increasing suburbanization and bipartisan character, it is not exactly catching fire as a key issue on Capitol Hill. One recent debate in which poverty has surfaced most prominently concerns the reauthorization of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, with the House GOP leadership advancing a proposal to cut \$40 billion in spending over 10 years. The burden of those cuts would fall more squarely on suburbs than ever now that 55 percent of SNAP participants in major metro areas live in suburbs. Programs like SNAP, the Earned Income Tax Credit and Medicaid already deliver the majority of their benefits to suburban communities, many of which are squarely in the GOP column.

As we approach the 50th anniversary of the War on Poverty in 2014, however, both sides should admit that the federal anti-poverty infrastructure from that era is outdated. Much of the \$82 billion Washington spends annually to address poverty through "place-based" policies and programs originally was designed largely to assist the inner-city and remote rural locations that defined American poverty in the 1960s. The ways in which the current system approaches initiatives such as neighborhood economic development, community health centers and affordable housing construction are often a poor fit for suburban areas where poverty is more spread out, public and nonprofit capacity is thin and hundreds of small municipalities routinely compete with one another rather than collaborate to address shared challenges like growing poverty.

Fortunately, innovative organizations in both red and blue areas of the country are working around the current system to address poverty in smarter ways across urban and suburban lines. In the Houston area, Neighborhood Centers helps more than 400,000 residents per year — particularly new American citizens — access training, transportation and support that advance the well-being of families and the Houston regional economy. In the Seattle area, the Road Map Project brings together six suburban school districts with schools in south Seattle to close the achievement gap and help prepare all students in the region for college and career success. In our recent book, we recommend that federal policymakers repurpose a fraction of existing anti-poverty spending to support these types of strategies through a Metropolitan Opportunity Challenge. This program would award funding to states through a competitive process for regional initiatives that increase access to opportunity for low-income residents and places.

Challenging states and regions to adopt these broader, cross-jurisdictional models for poverty alleviation won't address the full scale of the poverty problem in America today, but it could help stretch limited resources much further. For Republicans, it would represent an opportunity to move away from outdated formulas and legacy programs toward more outcome-driven strategies that improve efficiency and cut bureaucratic red tape. For Democrats, it's a chance to use scarce federal dollars to get local and state governments, as well as the private sector and philanthropy, to put more of their own resources behind poverty-fighting initiatives.

Over the past few decades, poverty has become an increasingly structural feature of the American economy. In all likelihood, suburban poverty is here to stay. The battleground character of suburbs could set the stage for more ideological trench warfare and gridlock over federal anti-poverty policy and a suburban replay of the challenges that have beleaguered our inner cities over the last few decades. Or it could spur a bipartisan effort to convert top-down federal programs of old into support for new bottom-up solutions to urban and suburban poverty alike. The future of suburbs — as an American ideal and political keystone — may hang in the balance.
