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Poverty in the Suburbs

Hidden in a Census Bureau report on poverty released in late August is a factoid with significant political and social consequences. Poverty has moved to the suburbs.

Peter Dreier September 2, 2004 | This article appeared in the September 20, 2004 edition of *The Nation*.

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Hidden in a Census Bureau report on poverty released in late August is a factoid with significant political and social consequences. Poverty has moved to the suburbs. Or, more accurately, poverty has expanded to the suburbs. Today, 13.8 million poor Americans live in the suburbs--almost as many as the 14.6 million who live in central cities. The suburban poor represent 38.5 percent of the nation's poor, compared with 40.6 percent of the total who live in central cities.

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Peter Dreier and Donald Cohen

has grown steadily, from 23 percent in 1950 to 50 percent in 2000. The 2000 presidential election was the first with a majority of suburban voters. The 1950s TV image of suburbia--shows like *Leave It to Beaver*, *My Three Sons* and *The Donna Reed Show*--reflected reality: Suburbs were lily white and middle class. Men commuted to the city to work. Mothers stayed at home with the kids or worked part time.

The suburban landscape today has changed. More suburbanites now commute to other suburbs than to cities. A growing number of blacks, Latinos and Asians now live in suburbia, although suburbs are still racially segregated. Similarly, the poor are not randomly scattered across the suburban landscape; they are concentrated in inner-ring suburbs close to cities, as well as in the suburban fringe--former rural towns swept up by suburban sprawl.

Like the rest of America, the suburbs are becoming more and more polarized by income. During the past two decades, the number of "poor" suburbs--those whose per capita income is less than three-quarters of the metropolitan area's--has spiraled upward. Most of their residents are not poor, but neither are they well-off. At the same time, the number of "rich"

The headlines about the Census report focused on the increase in overall poverty--from 11.3 percent of all Americans in 2000, a twenty-six-year low, to 12.5 percent in 2003. In the last year alone, 1.3 million people fell below the poverty line, bringing the total to to 35.9 million.

This increase in poverty--along with a significant uptick in the number of Americans without health insurance (15.6 percent of the population)--is surely bad news for George W. Bush, who has been claiming that the economy is improving. The suburbanization of poverty also changes the demographics of elections in ways that are not yet determined but that could result in long-term Democratic growth.

Both the number and proportion of the poor living in suburbs has increased steadily. In 1970 only 20.5 percent of the nation's poor lived in suburbs. By 2000, that had grown to 35.9 percent. And those trends have continued.

After World War II, moving to the suburbs was a key component of the American Dream of upward mobility. Indeed, the proportion of Americans who live in suburbs

suburbs--those with per capita incomes above 125 percent of the region's--has also increased. Rich suburbs use "snob zoning" to exclude poor households (and, increasingly, middle-class families) by zoning out apartments and requiring minimum-lot sizes for large, single-family houses. Meanwhile, the number of middle-class suburbs has declined.

For the poor, in particular, living in suburbia is a mixed bag at best. Research on a federal program that provides the inner-city poor with housing vouchers to move to middle-class suburbs shows that adults get better jobs and kids do better in school. But few of the suburban poor live in such affluent suburbs or attend good schools. Most live in troubled communities beset with problems once associated with big cities: crime, hunger, homelessness, inadequate schools and public services, and chronic fiscal crises.

Especially in the suburbs, where the explosion of low-paying jobs in the service economy is most evident, the poor are the "working poor." Because most suburbs lack decent public transportation, they have a harder time getting to work. Few of the suburban poor have health insurance. There are fewer doctors and health clinics in suburbia that accept Medicaid patients and fewer social services. Few suburbs have any subsidized housing, so poor residents often wind up paying half or more of their incomes just to keep a roof over their heads. Many federal antipoverty programs are targeted to cities, leaving the suburban poor in the lurch (the earned-income tax credit is an important exception). And fiscally troubled suburbs have even fewer taxable resources than big cities to provide money to address the needs of the poor.

The problems facing the troubled suburbs are due in part to the growing fragmentation of our metropolitan areas. Suburbs engage in bidding wars--with each other and with big cities--to attract stores, malls and jobs, undermining the fiscal health of them all. They are also the result of "leapfrog" development: As the affluent move to upscale enclaves, they bring expensive shopping malls with them, leaving behind older retail districts and abandoned industrial parks. The older housing stock in the troubled suburbs--built in the 1950s and '60s--now requires substantial repairs but many residents can't afford them, and many banks won't make loans anyway--a new kind of "redlining."

Although the suburban poor include transplanted city dwellers and newly arrived immigrants, many are home-grown. Among them are families who were once middle class--or the children of the middle class--who can now barely stay afloat in the new economy. They often feel trapped: They can't afford to move to more affluent areas because their incomes are stagnating or declining, their jobs are increasingly insecure and their public schools, libraries and parks are chronically underfunded. They are more likely to buy their clothes at Wal-Mart than at Nordstrom. Many cannot afford to pay for college, as tuitions rise and government scholarships are cut.

For most of the twentieth century, America's suburbs were overwhelmingly Republican, while the big cities were Democrat territory. Today, there is no monolithic suburban vote. Suburbanites are up for grabs politically, because they are now a mirror of the larger society. The largest block of "swing voters"--and most of the swing Congressional districts--are in the suburbs. In 2000, Al Gore and George Bush each won about half the suburban vote. Bush won the majority of suburban men, while Gore captured most of the women.

For the Democrats, these trends present opportunities to recruit new voters but also problems in reaching them. As urban problems have spread to suburbia--especially the lack of health insurance, the shortage of affordable housing, job insecurity and falling incomes--as well as traditional suburban woes like traffic congestion and sprawl, middle-class voters may be more receptive to Democratic approaches that require a more active government. Democrats need to offset Republican appeals to white fears and resentments about the increase of immigrants and blacks in suburban schools and nearby neighborhoods.

While Democrats have a track record of mobilizing the urban poor through unions, civil rights and community groups and inner-city churches, they have limited experience mobilizing the suburban poor and near-poor, who are less likely to be union members or members of community organizations. Unions and progressive community-organizing groups like ACORN, the Industrial Areas Foundation and the Gamaliel Network are just beginning to reach out to the suburban poor.

The latest Census data remind us that stereotypes about the "inner-city poor" and the "suburban middle class" no longer reflect how we live. As we revise our old images of suburbia, America must change its public policies to acknowledge suburban poverty, and the Democratic Party must change its strategies to reach those with good reasons to like what it has to offer.

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