

## CHAPTER ONE

# INTRODUCTION

Lake County, Illinois, one of the wealthiest counties in the United States, conforms to the most popular conceptions of the American suburban ideal. Set beside Lake Michigan north of the city of Chicago, Lake County's subdivisions abound with large single-family homes built mostly since 1970. Parks, swimming pools, and recreational spaces dot the landscape. Commuter trains and toll roads ferry workers into Chicago, then back again. Residents are highly reliant on automobile transit for local trips to work, school, or child care stops and to strip malls containing familiar chain stores and restaurants. Officeplexes, megachurches, and well-equipped modern school buildings can be found across the county. In more exclusive residential areas, one can glimpse mansions inhabited at various points in time by iconic Chicago figures, such as Michael Jordan. The county even served as a backdrop for *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* and filmmaker John Hughes's other movies about affluent suburban youth angst in the 1980s.

Less apparent on a casual drive through Lake County, however, are the rising poverty rates—the percentage of residents living in poverty—of most suburban municipalities in the region. The number of people living in Lake County below the federal poverty line (FPL) (\$19,073 for a family of three with two children in 2014) increased by more than 150 percent from 1990 to 2014, from 25,575 people to 64,432.<sup>1</sup> The number of people living in deep poverty—with income less than half of the federal poverty threshold—has more than doubled in Lake County since 1990. Poverty problems in Lake County can be hidden from plain view. Many low-income families live in homes and neighborhoods that

appear very “middle-class” on the surface—single-family homes with attached garages and cars in the driveway. Few salient human service anchor institutions are present to imply the prevalence of poverty in a community.

Closer inspection, however, reveals signs of poverty in all corners of the county. Many Lake County communities are *places in need*. Poverty is experienced by people from all racial and ethnic groups, and poverty rates in the older communities along Lake Michigan, such as Zion or Waukegan, more closely resemble those in the central city. Pockets of concentrated poverty can be found in subdivisions of single-family homes, isolated apartment complexes, and mobile home parks across the county. Poverty also can be found at the outer edges of Lake County in areas that might have been described as rural or recreational thirty to forty years ago, before suburban sprawl brought in new residents and job-seekers. Several once-bustling strip malls are home to discount retailers and empty storefronts. It is not uncommon to observe families at local grocery stores and supermarkets using food stamps or electronic benefit transfer (EBT) cards to pay for part of their bill. Many smaller ranch-style homes have five or six cars in front—a sign that families are doubling and tripling up to afford rent or cope with job loss—and food pantries often report lines down the block before their doors open and client totals that would have been unthinkable fifteen or twenty years ago. Elementary and high schools grapple with social problems more commonly associated with the Chicago Public Schools system (CPS).

The poverty-related challenges confronting Lake County leaders and residents were evident at a regular meeting of local human service, nonprofit, and school leaders that I attended. Even though the Great Recession was long officially over, most of the discussion came back to issues of poverty and joblessness. One speaker raised the issue of basic literacy among working-poor Latino immigrants in the region and the upcoming changes to the General Educational Development (GED) equivalency examination that might make it more difficult for those individuals to complete the test. Another talked about the growing demand for Head Start slots for preschool-age children, but the very limited provision of Head Start slots in the community. Recognizing the challenges of connecting supports in a meaningful way, a human services executive asked the group, “How can we stop working in silos to help our working-poor families?” As the meeting closed a pastor

described his church's emergency assistance program. He noted that the community needed to increase awareness about the challenges faced by the families in the suburbs who were coming to his church for help, including rising demand at the food pantry, housing instability, and difficulties making utility payments. It appeared that his congregation was doing this work on a bit of an island in the county—that is, with relatively few partners or collaborators.

Rising suburban poverty is not confined to Lake County—there are suburban places in need all around the Chicago metro area. Demand at food pantries, shelters, and social service providers has increased in affluent west suburban communities like Naperville and Schaumburg. A large suburban Christian congregation opened a multimillion-dollar, state-of-the-art social assistance center in the middle of these affluent western suburbs in 2013, crowd-funded by congregants from all over the metropolitan area over a span of months. Each day, within minutes of opening its doors, the center receives several hundred working-poor families looking for food assistance, medical care, car repairs, and job search support. The center cannot keep up with demand, despite the generosity of church members and volunteers. As in the northern suburbs, nearly all communities in this part of the suburban ring are grappling with how to best serve the immigrant youth from low-income households who increasingly populate their elementary and high school classrooms.

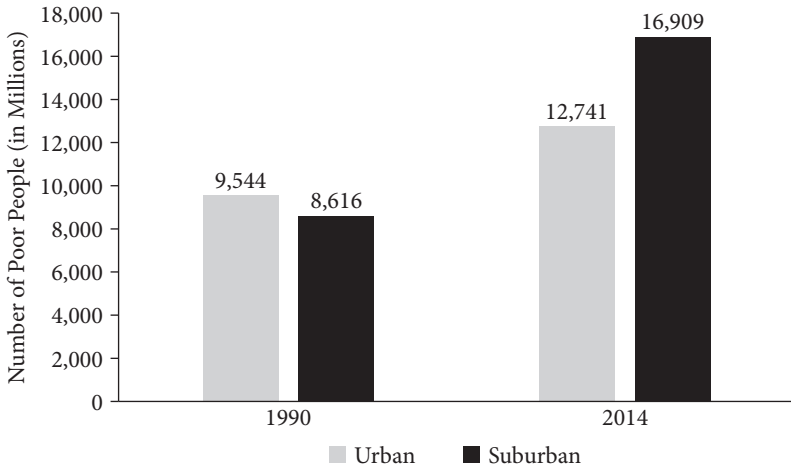
Heading south counterclockwise around the suburban ring, one reaches the Southland, where suburban communities share a demographic and industrial history with the South Side of Chicago and the steel mills of Gary, Indiana. The Southland has a much higher percentage of African Americans than most other suburban areas in Chicago. Need has been prevalent in the Southland region for some time. The loss of manufacturing and industrial jobs that devastated the Chicago economy in the 1970s and 1980s also altered the economic landscape in these suburban communities. Poverty rates that approach or exceed those in the poorest parts of Chicago are nothing new in many south suburban neighborhoods. In contrast to the northern and western suburbs, however, the landscape does not hide these heightened rates of poverty. Abandoned homes line streets in communities such as Harvey and Chicago Heights. At a factory with broken windows and shrouded in overgrown vines, a broken sign—NOW HIRING—dangles in the breeze, a reminder of opportunity long since passed.

Local institutions and community agencies operate in suboptimal office space, coping with shrinking program resources and a sense that society has similarly divested its compassion. Pockets and parcels of affluence exist, but in many ways these racially segregated south suburban communities are hardly distinguishable from the central-city Chicago “underclass” neighborhoods, like Englewood, that William Julius Wilson highlighted in his seminal work about race, class, and white flight in the latter third of the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup>

These observations and impressions of rising need in suburban Chicago are supported by data from the U.S. Census Bureau. The number of poor persons in suburban Chicago eclipsed the number in the city of Chicago in the last decade, and there are no signs of this trend reversing anytime soon. Seven of every ten suburban municipalities outside Chicago saw the number of poor residents at least double from 1990 to 2014. More than 40 percent of Chicago suburbs saw their poverty population more than triple during that time.<sup>3</sup> Poverty rates have roughly doubled in most Chicago suburbs since 1990, and the growth in poverty has outpaced total population growth in most of those suburbs. Unemployment rates have fallen in recent years from post-recession highs, but there is widespread discussion in many suburbs about the scarcity of good-paying jobs.

The reality of poverty in both the city of Chicago and its suburbs can be observed across the American metropolitan landscape. Places in need can be found everywhere. Figure 1.1 places metro Chicago’s experience in national context by comparing the number of poor persons in urban and suburban locations of the one hundred largest metropolitan areas from 1990 to 2014. Although it is commonly presumed that suburbs have only recently developed poverty problems, figure 1.1 shows that poverty has been present in suburban America for some time. In the one hundred largest metropolitan areas in 1990, there were nearly as many poor people living in the suburbs as there were poor people living in the cities—8.6 million versus 9.5 million. Moving across the figure, we see that the number of poor persons living in suburbs almost doubled in the next two decades. By 2014 there were nearly 17 million poor people living in the suburbs of the one hundred largest metropolitan areas, compared to just under 13 million in the cities. The average census tract poverty rate in American suburbs jumped from 8.3 percent in 1990 to 12.2 percent in 2014. Both by the level of poverty and the rate of change,

**Figure 1.1** Number of Poor People in Urban and Suburban Census Tracts, 1990 and 2014



Sources: U.S. Census 1990; ACS, 2010–2014.

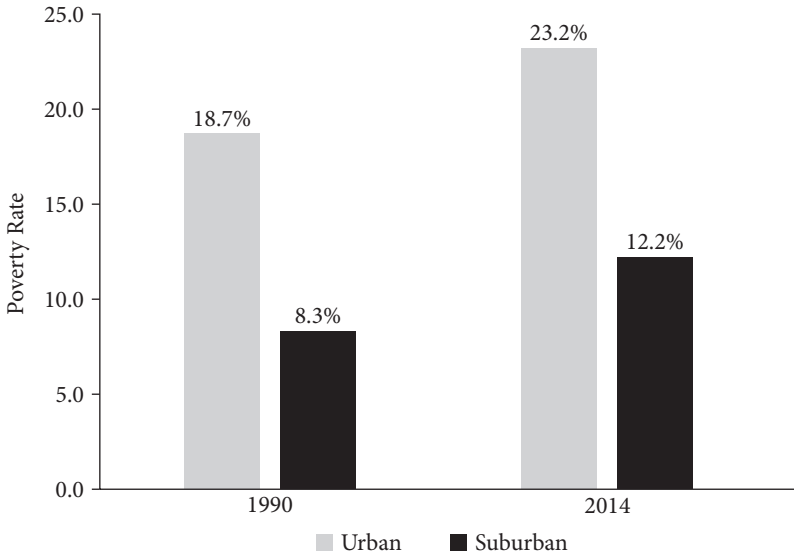
Notes: Data are presented for the one hundred largest U.S. metropolitan areas. Poverty status is defined as household income at or below the federal poverty threshold. Figures for 2014 reflect five-year ACS data from 2010 to 2014. See technical appendix table A.1 for more detail.

therefore, it is clear that suburban America is now coping with rising poverty rates commonly thought to characterize urban reality in the United States.<sup>4</sup> Such spatial realities remain true even as data indicate that some of the reductions in poverty expected post-recession finally emerged between 2014 and 2015.<sup>5</sup>

Rising suburban poverty has not corresponded to a dramatic reduction of poverty in the city of Chicago. In fact, many Chicago neighborhoods remain places in need, struggling with high rates of poverty and joblessness that have persisted relatively unchanged for forty years. In 2014 Chicago had 604,502 poor people, a figure that has not moved appreciably in more than twenty years.<sup>6</sup> Chicago's poverty rate, at 22.3 percent, has stayed at distressing levels for the last several decades. Although the high-rise public housing developments that pierced the city's urban landscape since the 1950s have been torn down, many communities on the West and South Sides remain racially segregated. High-poverty neighborhoods, many also racially segregated, persist throughout the city, and have done so for more than fifty years.

Like Chicago, other major metropolitan areas across America have experienced rising suburban poverty unaccompanied by any significant decreases in urban poverty. In fact, poverty remains a serious problem in most cities: the number of people in poverty increased by 33.5 percent in cities from 1990 to 2014.<sup>7</sup> The climbing poverty rates within cities shown in figure 1.2 provide additional evidence that poverty problems have become more, not less, severe in cities over the last two decades. An average urban census tract in 1990 had a poverty rate of 18.7 percent—more than twice that of suburbs. By 2014, the average urban census tract poverty rate had increased to 23.2 percent—still about twice as high as in the suburbs. More than half of all urban census tracts in the largest metros had poverty rates over 20 percent in 2014, compared to slightly more than one-third in 1990. The percentage of urban tracts with poverty rates over 40 percent increased from 10.8 percent in 1990 to 15.3 percent in 2014 (not shown in figure 1.2).<sup>8</sup>

**Figure 1.2** *Mean Poverty Rates for Urban and Suburban Census Tracts, 1990 and 2014*



Sources: U.S. Census 1990; ACS, 2010–2014.

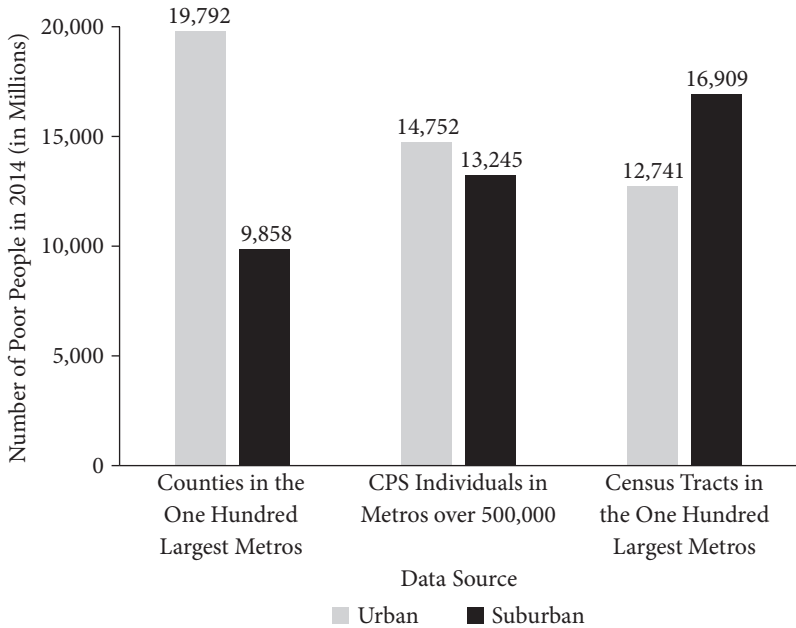
Notes: Data are presented for the one hundred largest U.S. metropolitan areas. Poverty status is defined as household income at or below the federal poverty threshold. Figures for 2014 reflect five-year ACS data from 2010 to 2014. See technical appendix table A.3 for more detail.

The changing geography of poverty in metropolitan areas represents one of the most important—and most overlooked—demographic shifts since the 1970s. The story about place and poverty told in these two figures challenges the well-defined roles of cities and suburbs in research about poverty and inequality in America. Prominent research on issues of poverty and inequality in the United States today has a distinctly urban focus.<sup>9</sup> Typically, we do not think of poverty as a suburban reality. We may recall news coverage during the Great Recession about the housing crisis and suburban poverty, but we do not imagine that poverty problems could be stubbornly present in suburbs. That poverty is growing at a much faster rate in suburbs than in cities goes against our intuition. Moreover, the persistence of poverty in cities also seems surprising given the resurgence of urban centers due to new economic development and gentrification. It is striking to find that urban poverty problems are as bad as they were twenty-five years ago—if not much worse.

Scholars, policymakers, and reporters have overlooked these important changes in the spatial distribution of poverty across metropolitan areas for many reasons. At a very basic level, we have limited data with which to examine poverty across local geographies. The county-level data typically used to compare metropolitan to rural areas are not well suited to examining differences in poverty between cities and suburbs. Take Cook County, Illinois, where Chicago is located. Even though we think of Cook County as highly urbanized, in fact only 52 percent of the population live in the city of Chicago proper—the rest live in suburbs outside the city. But data for Cook County smooth over those urban-suburban distinctions.<sup>10</sup> It also is common to use nationally representative surveys of individuals, or microdata, to study trends in poverty and need. Microdata are advantageous because they often contain detailed information about household demographics, income, and program participation. Yet many of the prominent public use microdata sources used to examine poverty in the United States—such as the Current Population Survey (CPS)—contain limited information about urban or suburban location owing to concern about confidentiality.<sup>11</sup> Even when surveys do make granular geographic information more readily available, they often lack a sample necessary to compare the experiences of the urban versus suburban poor.

Data limitations skew our perception of the severity of poverty in urban versus suburban places. Figure 1.3 presents the number of poor

**Figure 1.3** Number of Poor Urban and Suburban Residents in 2014, by Data Source



Sources: ACS, 2010–2014; CPS, 2014.

Notes: Poverty status is defined as household income at or below the federal poverty threshold. County- and tract-level data are from the 2010–2014 five-year ACS. The population size of metropolitan Modesto, California, the one-hundredth-ranked metro in the 2010–2014 ACS data, is estimated to be 522,794.

persons in urban and suburban areas of the largest metropolitan areas in the United States in 2014, using three different data sources: county-level data across the one hundred largest metropolitan areas; CPS data for survey respondents in metropolitan areas over 500,000 (essentially the one hundred largest metros); and census tract-level data for the one hundred largest metro areas from the American Community Survey (ACS).

The first two bars in figure 1.3 chart the number of poor people in urban versus suburban places using county-level data. These data indicate that there are twice as many poor people in urban counties—those containing the principal city and other large cities in a metropolitan area—than in surrounding suburban counties (19.8 million versus



9.9 million). The middle bars of figure 1.3 show CPS estimates of the number of urban and suburban poor. CPS data improve on county-level data because they contain information about the central-city or suburban status of survey respondents from metropolitan areas. According to the 2014 CPS, there were slightly more poor people in cities than in suburbs (14.8 million versus 13.2 million). Not seen here, however, are the 15 percent of CPS respondents with income below the poverty line for whom data on their central-city or suburban status were missing owing to confidentiality concerns.<sup>12</sup> It is likely that many of these missing respondents resided in smaller suburban municipalities, leading to skewed perceptions about urban versus suburban poverty.

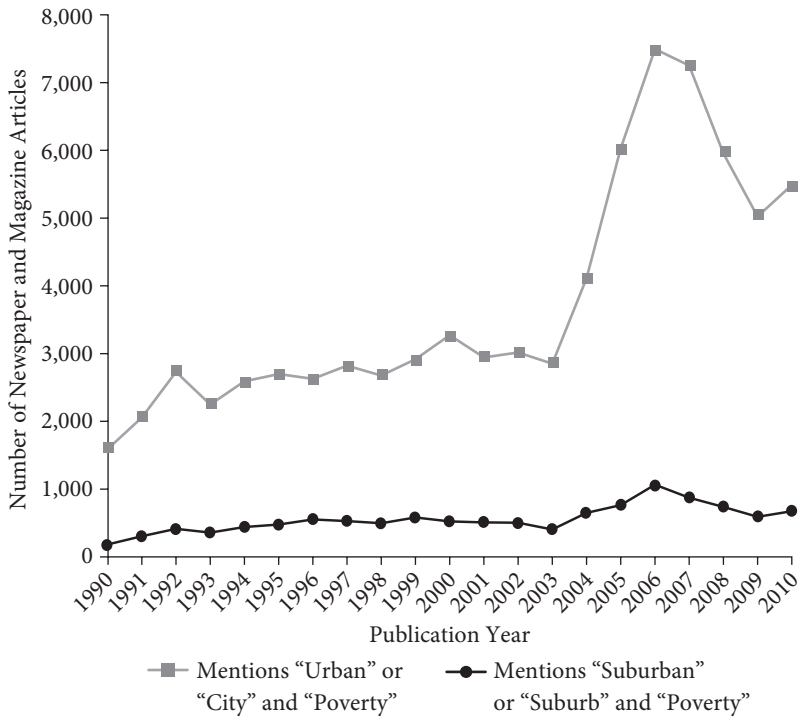
Census tract-level data from the ACS or the decennial census contains more specific counts of poverty across local geography. Census tracts are spatial units within which the Census Bureau collects information about the population, and they often are used as proxies for neighborhood.<sup>13</sup> The last two bars in figure 1.3 report census tract estimates of urban versus suburban poverty in 2014. Tract-level data provide a very different impression about poverty in metropolitan America than county or CPS data. While urban tracts in the largest metros contained 12.7 million poor people in 2014, tract-level data indicate that there were 16.9 million poor people in the suburbs. Very clearly, the data one uses to study issues of place and poverty determine the portrait of urban versus suburban poverty that emerges.

But data limitations are really only part of the story. Our discussion of place and poverty in America—what I refer to as the spatial discourse around poverty—closely associates urban places with poverty and suburban places with opportunity. This form of discourse, in turn, has led many scholars, elected officials, and journalists to overlook the changing nature of poverty within metropolitan areas. For example, Alexandra Murphy describes the different meanings American society commonly has attributed to urban versus suburban spaces throughout the postwar era. “Urbanity was hectic, immoral, unstable, and dangerous,” while suburbs, by contrast, “were havens of the American values of morality, simplicity, and purity.”<sup>14</sup> The imagery surrounding stories of poverty is often linked to features of central-city neighborhoods that play to these stereotypes: dangerous inner-city housing projects, run-down schools, ineffective and deteriorating institutional infrastructure, gang violence and the drug trade, and homelessness. Suburbs are

commonly viewed as homogeneous places of opportunity, work, and affluence. To the extent that suburbs enter into research on or discussion of poverty and inequality, they do so as the sources of economic opportunity or attractive residential locations for low-income urban families seeking to access better jobs, neighborhoods, and schools.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, as Murphy notes, the popular conceptualization of cities as poor and suburbs as prosperous signals that “families could find refuge from the ills of the city in the safety of these suburban enclaves.”<sup>16</sup>

The powerful presence of this spatial discourse portraying poverty as an urban or central-city problem in news media coverage, research, and policy debate can be seen in figure 1.4, which charts the number of stories from 1990 to 2010 in major U.S. newspapers that mention the

**Figure 1.4** *Mentions of Place and Poverty in Newspaper and Magazine Articles, 1990–2010*



Source: Lexis-Nexis Academic.

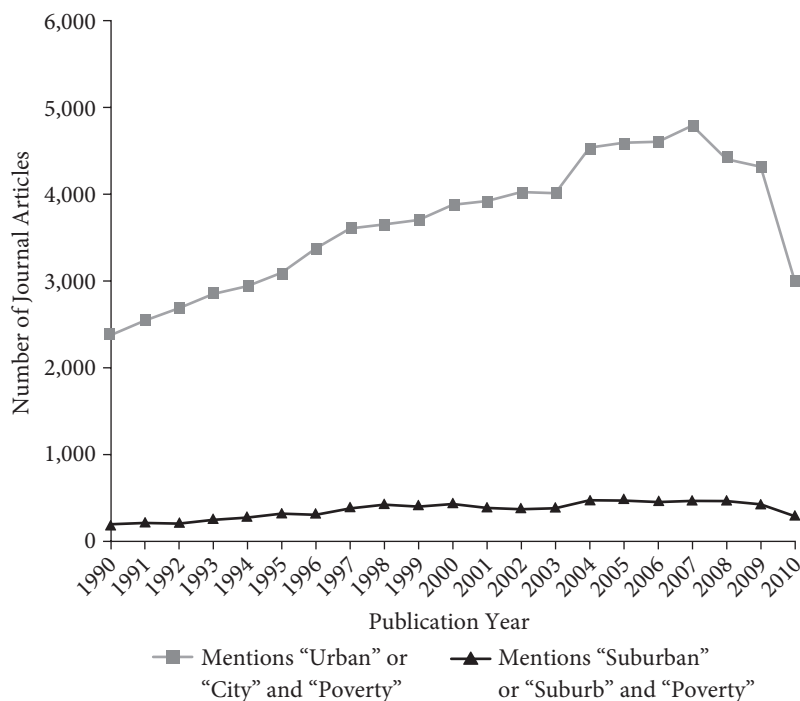
Note: Counts reflect number of major U.S. newspaper and magazine articles in which the search terms appeared in the full text of an article.

word “poverty” as well as the terms “urban,” “city,” “suburban,” or “suburb.” From 1990 to the early 2000s, there were roughly five to six times as many stories that mentioned urban places or cities and poverty as those that mentioned poverty while making any reference to suburban geography. Consistent with emerging research pointing to rising suburban poverty in the mid to late 2000s—particularly a widely cited 2006 research report produced by the Brookings Institution Metropolitan Policy Program—we see a noticeable uptick in the amount of news coverage that mentioned poverty and suburbs in the same article during that period.<sup>17</sup> Yet the years preceding the Great Recession showed an even larger increase in the number of stories that contained the words “poverty” and “urban.” As even this cursory examination of recent news coverage underscores, powerful associations between urban places and poverty persist, despite the “Brookings effect” on news coverage in 2006 and early 2007.

Poverty research in the United States also has a strong urban focus. As with news media, a simple charting of academic journal articles containing the word “poverty” along with any mention of urban or suburban geography underscores the urban focus of poverty research (see figure 1.5). During the same period, academic articles mentioning poverty were far more likely to include the words “urban” or “city” than to mention suburbs.<sup>18</sup> Also consistent with the trend in media coverage, the gap between mentions of poverty and urban terms versus poverty and suburban terms appeared to widen over the course of the 1990s and early 2000s. Scholarly research, however, did not experience an uptick in mentions of poverty and suburbs after 2006. Although this may reflect a lag effect due to the longer production time for published articles, figure 1.5 does suggest that the academy largely frames poverty and place following conventional spatial discourse.

Discourse around place and poverty shapes the expectations of those policymakers and community leaders who should be responsible for providing antipoverty assistance to communities. Popular impressions of poverty as an urban phenomenon direct policymakers, philanthropists, and advocates to expect that cities are the places with poverty problems and thus that cities ought to be responsible for the administration of local solutions to address poverty. They perceive suburbs, by contrast, as places without poverty problems and therefore as having no need for locally administered antipoverty programs. In the

**Figure 1.5** *Mentions of Place and Poverty in Academic Journal Articles, 1990–2010*



Source: JSTOR.

Note: Counts reflect the number of articles in social science journals in which the search terms appeared in the full text of an article.

end, the conventional spatial discourse around poverty, in implying that poverty solutions need not come from suburban locations, helps explain the weakness of the local safety net response observed in many suburban communities.

The conventional spatial discourse, however, is about more than just poverty and place. Discourse around urban poverty also implicates race. Just as popular notions of poverty are commonly associated with urban spaces, popular notions of urban poverty are closely associated with the experiences of nonwhites—particularly the experiences of black Americans. Used as a modifier, the word “urban” can operate as code for persons of color, particularly black Americans, who live in cities. Terms commonly used as synonyms for urban poverty in popular and academic discourse, such as “ghetto poverty” or the

“urban underclass,” also are widely understood to refer to high-poverty, segregated black and Hispanic urban neighborhoods.<sup>19</sup> References to urban poverty, regardless of the intent of the speaker or author, often elicit associations between race or ethnicity and income status without explicitly mentioning race or ethnicity.<sup>20</sup> Again, if we reflect on the popular symbols of urban poverty—images of public housing, underperforming schools, crime, and low-quality infrastructure—we would find that these symbols often are presented by policy elites, academics, or the media in conjunction with black and Hispanic communities, but not white ones.<sup>21</sup> These associations between poverty, place, and race are common even though historically the largest share of the poor in America are white and many poor whites live in cities. Similarly, these links between urban poverty and race exist despite the fact that the vast majority of blacks and Hispanics are not poor and do not live in high-poverty urban neighborhoods.<sup>22</sup>

Political discourse about the relationship between place, race, and poverty matters immensely because it reinforces public attitudes.<sup>23</sup> Media portrayals of poverty have been shown to feature racial and ethnic minorities with far greater frequency than one would expect given the demographic composition of the poor.<sup>24</sup> For example, Martin Gilens provides striking evidence of the widening gap between the racial composition of poor people in the United States and the racial composition of poor people in media coverage over the last fifty years. Although the pattern ebbs and flows over time, the average percentage of stories in key newsmagazines featuring poor black Americans from 1967 to 1992 (57 percent) was roughly double the percentage of the poor population who were black (29 percent).<sup>25</sup> In addition, politicians and policymakers make linkages between place, race, and poverty in a manner that fosters the impression that poverty is a problem for “others,” but not for white Americans. For example, during the 2016 presidential election, then-candidate Donald Trump repeatedly equated the contemporary black experience in America with life in urban areas beset by extremely high rates of poverty, crime, and joblessness.<sup>26</sup> Although such images may capture some aspects of racially segregated poverty in cities, they also can foster implicit racial bias, stoke racial resentment, and validate racially prejudiced attitudes about the poor. To the extent that poverty is thought of as an urban problem experienced by nonwhites, it is easier for society and policymakers to invoke racial stereotypes about

lack of work ethic and personal responsibility to explain urban poverty rather than confront the structural forces that shape opportunity for urban residents of all racial and ethnic identities.<sup>27</sup>

Changes in the geography of poverty thus represent more than just an interesting demographic trend: they have implications for the common discourse around poverty and how society chooses to provide antipoverty assistance. Popular understandings of poverty as an urban problem have resulted in fifty years of safety net policy that channels program resources into cities. Not only do we expect poverty to be located in cities, but much of our public and private capacity to provide assistance to the poor is located in cities. The conventional spatial discourse also implicitly lowers expectations that suburban communities should commit resources to the fight against poverty. Those lowered expectations are consistent with the origins of suburbs as places of class-based and race-based exclusion that favored small government and low taxes and emphasized economic development over anti-poverty assistance.<sup>28</sup> Frames of poverty as an urban rather than a suburban problem reinforce the institutional imperatives in suburbs to prioritize job growth and underprovide safety net supports.

Spatial discourse around poverty also powerfully influences how society thinks about antipoverty solutions by defining who is “deserving” and who is not. Attitudinal linkages between race, poverty, and deservingness directly translate into lower support for safety net programs and investment in high-poverty communities. Support for more generous or accessible antipoverty assistance declines and support for more punitive policies increases when the public imagines the poor to be racial or ethnic minorities, and thus persons living in urban areas.<sup>29</sup> The spatial discourse around poverty may tie into competitive assessments by whites about public and private resource allocation between a deserving “us” versus an undeserving “them.”<sup>30</sup> At its most enlightened, the conventional discourse around place, race, and poverty can draw attention and resources to communities facing striking disadvantage and inequality. But the familiar discourse also can undermine support for the antipoverty safety net by distancing certain types of communities from responsibility to address need, linking poverty to moral failure, and by anchoring policy debate to racial stereotypes.

The spatial discourse around poverty in America is challenged directly, however, by increased poverty in suburban areas and per-

sistently high rates of poverty in urban centers. Only when we are forced to confront the false assumption that poverty is a problem only for racial and ethnic minorities living in cities will we see that poverty is a problem that affects all parts of our metropolitan areas and is experienced by residents of all racial or ethnic identities. Discussing the changing geography of poverty in U.S. metropolitan areas presents a chance to highlight the shared experience with poverty of different populations, to move beyond stereotypes, and to understand that both suburbs and cities share a responsibility to address poverty if we are to make progress within metropolitan areas. Greater clarity about the spatial shifts in poverty also may foster more constructive and inclusive discussions around antipoverty solutions, including a more responsive and effective safety net that reaches people of all places, races, and ethnicities.

With relatively little scholarly work having engaged the connections between geographic changes in the distribution of poor people, society's presumptions about poverty, and spatial variations in safety net responses, this book offers several important original insights into the interconnections between place, poverty, and the safety net in contemporary America. The discussion in the pages that follow revolves around two core questions. First, how has the spatial distribution of poverty shifted within metropolitan areas? Here I present objective descriptive evidence of how poverty has changed across the urban and suburban landscapes of our largest metropolitan areas since 1990, with particular attention to the period following the Great Recession. My analyses, though focused on increases in poverty in suburban communities, also point to persistently high rates of poverty in cities. Moreover, any rethinking of the geography of poverty must look at the changing racial composition of the poor. Whites still compose the largest share of the poor nationally and in suburban communities, but there are important racial and ethnic differences in the degree to which poor people are segregated in high-poverty areas in both cities and suburbs. Further, I consider the association of recent rises in poverty across suburbs and urban centers with spatial changes in labor market opportunity, the skill or training of the workforce, household demographic characteristics, and migration patterns. In the end, many of the same factors driving poverty in cities also appear to be related to rising poverty in the suburbs.

The second question emerges in considering the consequences of these spatial changes in poverty for policy: how has the antipoverty safety net responded to changes in the geography of poverty? In the second half of the book, I describe the American antipoverty safety net as a collection of local safety nets, each tailoring its provision of aid to some degree to reflect local levels of need, understandings of poverty, institutional capacity, and political will. I also outline how much of our investment in local safety net capacity has followed conventional spatial discourse and been targeted at central cities. Understanding the logics that shape local policymaking and safety net provision are key to explaining how programs of assistance have (or have not) expanded to meet rising need. Many suburbs have limited capacity to respond to rising need and are limited in their ability to mobilize resources around new action targeting poverty problems. If we are to successfully address the poverty problems in metropolitan areas, we must find ways to generate new funding and capacity in suburbs. We cannot simply divert resources from cities.

The story about place, poverty, and safety net assistance that follows draws on a unique combination of data (see the technical appendix for details). Much of the analysis is based on data from the Census Bureau, administrative data from state safety net programs, and Internal Revenue Service (IRS) information about local nonprofit human service financing. In addition, I draw on fieldwork and in-depth interviews with 105 executives and senior leaders of suburban public and nonprofit social service organizations in three focal metropolitan areas: Chicago, Los Angeles, and Washington, D.C. Together, these data provide multiple vantage points from which to consider the realities and consequences of the shifting geography of poverty in metropolitan America. With a careful analysis of how poverty has changed across the cities and suburbs of America, this book provides a foundation for future inquiry and policy activity surrounding this changing geography.

### **The Layout of the Book**

Chapter 2 briefly reviews past research on poverty in cities and suburbs, then discusses key conceptual issues we must weigh as we seek to form more accurate impressions of the relationship between poverty and place in America. Chapter 3 extends this literature by using census-tract data in the one hundred largest metropolitan areas to



explore numerous trends in the spatial distribution of poor populations. Narratives from metropolitan Chicago, Los Angeles, and Washington, D.C., complement this analysis of census data and provide context to illuminate the diversity of suburban experiences with poverty. Chapter 4 assesses the geography of the contemporary antipoverty safety net and examines the response of the safety net to the changing geography of poverty over the last decade. My analysis engages administrative data tracking safety net program caseloads and expenditures and cites examples from the three focal metropolitan areas to highlight the response in suburban communities to rising poverty. Besides the materials presented in the text and the technical appendix, additional charts, tables, and maps can be found at the book's website: <https://www.russellsage.org/publications/places-need>.

Chapter 5 examines how rising suburban poverty has changed the playing field for efforts to provide assistance and opportunity to low-income populations. Rather than focusing on data trends, this chapter draws on the insights and narratives of suburban public and nonprofit leaders describing how their suburban communities have responded to rising need. The concluding chapter, chapter 6, draws implications for future safety net policy and research. In addition to reconsidering the features of safety net policy tools that might work best in metropolitan areas, I underscore the importance of increasing our public and private funding commitments to the safety net to match the rising need in recent years. I close by underscoring the need to change the conversation about poverty and place in metropolitan America and to better understand that tackling poverty is the shared fate of all communities.

This is a critical moment for devoting greater scholarly attention and policymaking effort to the shifting geography of poverty in metropolitan areas. Realizing that poverty is not simply an urban phenomenon opens many new questions about the relationships between place, poverty, and the safety net. Just as we have become more aware that economic growth and labor market health are regional in nature, we must also become more aware that poverty is a shared fate of cities and suburbs. If we do not pursue antipoverty policy that relieves the pressure on cities and suburbs, we risk committing ourselves to a path that will leave poor people with too few opportunities and supports regardless of who they are and where they live.

The good news is that it is not too late to act—we can still make changes that will improve the quality of life for working-poor families in all communities, both urban and suburban. Despite efforts to cut federal and state spending for social programs over the last decade, most key public safety net programs receive far more funding today than thirty years ago. We also have a greater understanding of how these safety net investments prevent and reduce poverty. The nonprofit sector in the United States has never been more robust, varied, and innovative than it is today. Americans remain a deeply philanthropic people. A new generation of young Americans are providing innovative leadership in the social sector and are not as tied to the conventions of the past as we might presume. The challenges are great, but our capacity to act has never been greater.