

Philanthropy's Neglect of the Suburban Poor Hurts Us All

By Scott Allard



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Poverty in places like Harvey, Ill., a suburb of Chicago, has escalated over the years, but the suburbs have far fewer resources to help the poor than cities do.

When I began work on *Places in Need*, my recent book tracing the rise of poverty in suburban America, I spent hundreds of hours with suburban nonprofit executives. I came to know an executive director of a community foundation in a suburban region where the number of people in poverty has nearly tripled since 1990.

One afternoon while chatting over coffee, she described the lack of awareness among philanthropic and corporate leaders in her county: "I've been working in this community as an executive director for eight years. And the eye-popping reactions that I get to this day

when I talk to people about the statistics in this community just reaffirm that there is not enough knowledge out there about what the real, true needs in this community are."

That was far from a one-off. I would have this very conversation throughout the course of my research, in suburbs of all types, all across the country.

Today, more poor people live in the suburbs of our largest metropolitan areas than in cities. Suburban poverty problems are not a new phenomenon; rather, they have been decades in the making. The number of people living in poverty has doubled in the suburbs nationally since 1990 — almost three times the rate of population growth. Poverty rates in suburbs are at historic highs, and concentrated poverty is becoming entrenched in suburbs. Just as important, the dramatic rise in suburban poverty has not been accompanied by a significant decrease in urban poverty.

Such realities run counter to the popular scripts we use to discuss poverty and place in America. We mistake poverty problems as solely urban problems, primarily affecting racial and ethnic minorities in cities. We incorrectly imagine suburbs to be affluent and racially homogeneous places. These misperceptions powerfully shape how we talk about poverty and how we act to address need.

It is common to think of suburban poverty as just temporary or due to the presence of "others" migrating from cities. In reality, most of the suburban poor are struggling because of diminished job opportunities and work earnings. When it comes to the causes of poverty, suburbs are no different than cities.

Gaps in Perception

There is one critical way that suburbs differ from cities when it comes to poverty. Despite increases in suburban poverty, suburbs lag far

For every dollar spent on human services in urban counties, suburban ones spend

behind cities in the capacity of nonprofits and philanthropy. Nonprofits and donors, **a dime.**

however, are critical elements to any community's response to rising need. They are the glue that holds the safety net together. Nonprofits help serve the millions who fall through the cracks of public-assistance programs, providing help with short-term needs and the kind of long-term, professional support poor people need to overcome more substantial barriers to greater well-being.

Yet my research finds suburban counties spend roughly one dime on nonprofit human services per low-income person for every dollar spent in urban counties. Almost one in four suburban counties lacks a single registered nonprofit human-service organization.

There are familiar scripts in suburbs that explain why nonprofit service capacity lags so far behind need. Perception gaps make it difficult for suburban leaders to admit or call attention to poverty problems. In one community I visited, a nonprofit leader quoted a school-board member's negative reaction to a food-pantry program set up at a local school. The need for help was clearly there — families were lined up around the building. But the school-board member worried that "this is like a soup kitchen; we don't want to give this impression."

Also, because American society perceives poverty to be an urban problem, it is incredibly difficult to secure private donations to support programs that serve the suburban poor. A nonprofit executive expressed this common sentiment: "Philanthropy goes to [the city]. You know, the money goes there. People identify the needs within the city, whereas they're totally lost out here. Philanthropy doesn't think we need any help."

An executive director of a regional suburban service provider noted that grant makers in the nearby city never really reached out to his community: "We don't have the corporate support. We don't have the foundation support."

While writing the book, I was constantly asked and was constantly asking: What can philanthropy do? My work suggests several ways that grant makers and other big donors can make a difference:

Serve as "quarterbacks," leading public discussion about poverty problems and promoting the development of regional antipoverty solutions. Grant makers have significant power to bring people together and are able to encourage them to focus local or regional agendas on difficult social issues. This kind of leadership is critical to closing perception gaps, mobilizing interest, attracting resources, and holding elected officials accountable.

Join regional service providers to identify new resources that will provide money for programs in suburban areas. Foundations in particular should develop ideas and strategies for expanding private giving to suburban human-service charities. Even more crucial, grant makers and other donors need to publicly voice opposition to proposed Republican spending cuts that would devastate SNAP (the program that provides food stamps), Medicaid, and other critical federal sources of support for human-service programs. Cuts in our public obligations to the safety net will set back local nonprofits for years as they seek to keep up with increased demand for food, health care, and other aid.

Cultivate a new generation of leaders that reflects the racial, ethnic, and class diversity of suburban communities today. After noting that there was no local leadership pushing to get community residents involved in devising poverty solutions and healing racial divisions, a nonprofit executive observed, "It needs to be a community effort where we start fostering leadership." Carefully planned efforts to cultivate a new generation of local nonprofit leaders will be key to fighting poverty in cities, suburbs, and rural areas.

One can find good models to copy and expand upon, such as the Rainier Valley Corps in

metropolitan Seattle. Rainier Valley Corps places emerging leaders of color in paid two-year fellowships with community organizations led by people of color. The program supplements on-the-job experience with a leadership curriculum that rounds out each fellow's managerial tool kit. This combination of real-world experience and professional development strengthens the nonprofit world today and creates a pipeline of leaders of color for tomorrow.

Emphasize the shared fate of cities and suburbs. Any successful solutions to reducing poverty must work for cities as well as suburbs. Philanthropy must work to keep metropolitan leaders focused on poverty as a reality for both. We cannot talk about urban poverty as something different or distinct from suburban poverty. We cannot ignore the persistent needs in cities any more than we can the emerging needs of suburbs. We cannot simply reallocate funds from the center to the periphery. If we don't act according to the shared fate that is present, the poverty trends of the past 25 years will only grow more serious and metropolitan-region economies will suffer as a result.

Scott Allard is a professor at the University of Washington's Daniel J. Evans School of Public Policy and Governance. This piece is based on his new book "Places in Need: The Changing Geography of Poverty," published by the Russell Sage Foundation.

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