

# PREFACE

My childhood in the 1970s and 80s was spent in the Diamond Lake neighborhood of Minneapolis, the southernmost neighborhood in the city. During most of those years, my family rented a two-bedroom duplex on a busy through street largely composed of similar rental units for young adults, single parents, and retirees. The side streets were a mix of modest-sized prewar starter homes on small lots. Homes were nicer in some tucked-away areas, a bit more basic in others. The neighborhood was predominantly white and middle-class, with relatively little residential turnover. It had a few basic amenities: a couple of gas stations, a drugstore, an ice cream shop, a hardware store, and a small chain supermarket. The most exciting features of this sleepy neighborhood were a record store and a fish-and-chips restaurant owned by a Minnesota North Stars hockey player.

Immediately bordering my neighborhood to the south was the suburb of Richfield. The local historical society touts Richfield as “Proudly Suburban Since 1854.” South Minneapolis and Richfield are separated by Minnesota State Highway 62, built in the 1960s and locally known as “the Crosstown” freeway. Apart from driving over a bridge spanning the Crosstown, it could be difficult to know when you had left Diamond Lake and entered Richfield. As in all municipalities in the Twin Cities metropolitan area at that time, there was a large green sign on a main local thoroughfare stating that you had entered Richfield and providing you with the most recent decennial census population count. The housing stock was built roughly at the same time as Diamond Lake’s and shared many of the same features. Richfield too was a predominantly

white, middle-class community. Street signs and sidewalks were only negligibly different from Diamond Lake's. Both communities shared the ignominious distinction of being immediately underneath the landing flight path for much of the air traffic into Minneapolis–St. Paul International Airport. Planes flew over Diamond Lake and Richfield so close to the ground that most children growing up there in the 1970s would remember seeing the heads of passengers in the windows of noisy DC-10s roaring over the treetops of local parks.

Yet there were differences between Diamond Lake and Richfield that might not have caught the casual eye. Richfield was zoned like a suburb, with postwar ranch homes on large lots. Big-box stores and fast-food restaurants populated several strip malls. My family did most of its shopping at “the Hub,” which was the largest shopping center in the Twin Cities when it opened in 1954. Richfield offered the typical teenager many more employment opportunities than Diamond Lake. In high school, I took a minimum-wage job as a dishwasher at a hamburger grill in Richfield patterned after the TV show *Happy Days*. Richfield's school system did not appear to have budget and class size problems comparable to those in my South Minneapolis schools. As an adolescent, I was acutely aware that Richfield's high school sports teams were better than those of the local Minneapolis public high schools—particularly in hockey, the first sport of Minnesotans. Richfield's hockey history was rich with future college, Olympic, and professional hockey players.

About ten years ago, my brother and his wife began to look for a house back in our old neighborhood. After much searching, they decided to buy a house in Richfield instead, just across the Crosstown Freeway from our childhood home. Property values in Richfield were more affordable. Now, when I visit my brother, I can see the somewhat divergent socioeconomic paths the two communities have taken. Diamond Lake's increasing appeal to higher-income families and professionals has pushed up house prices. My old neighborhood grocery store has been rebranded as a high-end retailer. A sushi restaurant—unthinkable in the 1970s and 1980s—is a popular local dining spot. The community association calls Diamond Lake a “hidden jewel” in the city.

Meanwhile, after the population growth of the 1960s and early 1970s, Richfield's population fell by about 25 percent, and median real-dollar

income has stayed flat since I was in high school. My old hamburger grill is now a tanning salon with a payday loan business next door. Facing diminished student interest in the sport, Richfield High School has closed its hockey program. Richfield is now home, however, to one of the best taquerias in the Upper Midwest—a reflection of its growing Mexican American community. I go for lunch or dinner every time I visit home.

Around the same time my brother and sister-in-law bought their house in Richfield, I was finishing the initial manuscript for my first book, *Out of Reach: Place, Poverty, and the New American Welfare State*, which was about the spatial mismatches between low-income neighborhoods in cities and the social service organizations that help the poor. The book was based on telephone surveys with nearly 1,500 social service organizations in Chicago, Los Angeles, and Washington, D.C., and I decided that it would be wise to visit some of the organizations that had participated. One of my goals was to continue to hone my feel for the context in which these organizations were operating. These visits ensured that my interpretations and analysis reflected the local story and experience.

During one trip, I visited a food pantry outside of Los Angeles that had reported large caseload increases in the previous years. The morning of the visit I typed the food pantry's address into my laptop to get directions. It seemed far away on the map, but I didn't think too much of it as I headed out to beat rush hour traffic. Soon I found myself leaving the city and entering a fairly exclusive suburban area. I pulled over. *There must be a mistake*, I thought. *I must have grabbed the wrong address or typed it incorrectly*. Why would a food pantry be busting at the seams in this community during a period of relatively high economic growth? I double-checked the details, but they were correct. I continued on.

The pantry's executive director met me when I arrived. We promptly began talking about how the need was quickly outpacing the pantry's capacity to provide food. Caseloads had increased by at least 10 percent each month for the previous year. On that day, most of the shelves were empty as the organization was waiting for shipments and donations to arrive. In the lobby were several makeshift stations set up with old PCs. The executive director explained that the work stations were used to help clients learn about public programs for which they were eligible.

Food stamps caseworkers had recently been out to assist with eligibility and enrollment on-site. A visit the next day with a homeless services nonprofit in a nearby community revealed a very similar story: rising need, rising demand, and not enough resources. As an urban poverty researcher, I found myself puzzling over what to make of these findings. I hadn't been making urban-suburban comparisons to that point.

These visits and interviews coincided with a report by Alan Berube and Elizabeth Kneebone of the Metropolitan Policy Program at the Brookings Institution entitled "Two Steps Back: City and Suburban Poverty Trends 1999–2005."<sup>1</sup> Berube and Kneebone documented the rise of poverty in the suburbs of the one hundred largest metropolitan areas. Their most striking finding was that the suburban poor now outnumbered the urban poor for the first time in modern history. Although some of this increase was due to the sluggish economy of the early 2000s, it was clear that a major demographic change had occurred, with relatively little notice, right under our noses. This report was among the first of many research papers issued by the Brookings Metro Program that began to change the media's and the research community's conversations about poverty in metropolitan America.

By the time I submitted the final proofs for *Out of Reach* in early 2008, it was clear that these trends in suburban poverty were not short-term. I began to weigh the question of how much of the research, debate, and policy surrounding poverty in America was predicated on poverty being an urban phenomenon. It became clear that suburban poverty challenged many of our assumptions about need in the United States and about how the safety net provides help. Yet, apart from the Brookings research, relatively little scholarly work had focused on the changing spatial distribution of poverty between cities and suburbs.

My own inquiry into the changing geography of poverty and its origins took shape in late 2008, with a project for the Metropolitan Policy Program exploring the social service implications of rising poverty in suburbs. Working with Benjamin Roth, a University of Chicago doctoral student, I interviewed about one hundred suburban social service providers again in metropolitan Chicago, Los Angeles, and Washington, D.C. Those interviews and some analysis of census data culminated in our 2010 Brookings Metro Program report "Strained Suburbs: The Social Service Challenges of Rising Suburban Poverty."<sup>2</sup> The report highlighted many challenges for suburban safety nets: historic caseload increases, shifts in the kinds of families seeking help, a

lack of public or private program funding, and the political obstacles to responding to rising poverty.

Subsequently, I spent time volunteering in suburban food pantries in the Chicago suburbs to gain better insight into the nature of suburban poverty and local safety net responses. My volunteer work followed the formal end of the Great Recession. Nevertheless, I was immediately struck by the level of demand for assistance in these suburban pantries and saw that it rivaled demand at the food pantries in the city with which I was most familiar. Suburban food pantries, however, seemed to struggle more than city food pantries to find adequate financial support and in-kind donations to meet the need and also found it more difficult to find affordable and suitable space to provide services. Suburban providers had to grapple with the long distances that clients, donors, and volunteers had to cover to reach their facilities.

I was moved by the will and sacrifices of staff to meet the rising need, as well as the efforts of community champions and allies to strengthen the resource base of these organizations. Yet too often it felt as if these committed individuals were pushing uphill against limited awareness of poverty in their suburban communities, an association of poverty or hunger with the city and thus with charities located in the city, and a lack of local political will to do more. Spending time with these and other suburban safety net providers over the next few years allowed me to see how the familiar discourse around place, poverty, and race evokes misleading impressions about poverty for many urban and suburban actors. These misperceptions, in turn, powerfully shape local understandings of poverty problems and efforts to help those in need. My experiences in these suburban food pantries would be repeated through interviews with executives and staff from many dozens of social service organizations located in the three focal metropolitan areas of my study and the numerous suburban contexts therein.

This book, then, is an extension of my Brookings report, with additional data from firsthand observations and my discussions in several dozen suburban communities. My primary goal in expanding my 2010 report is to provide an updated examination of the geography of poverty in the United States and to consider more systematically the consequences for the safety net of changes in that geography. The 2016 election has given the central issues of this book even greater relevance, as race, class, and place are evoked in many analyses of the electoral outcomes. Policy changes that follow also will powerfully shape how

our country responds to need in the coming years. I hope this book can help foster more productive and inclusive conversations about the contemporary realities of place and poverty in municipalities, counties, and statehouses and also at the federal level—conversations that I hope will help society better serve and support low-income families in ways that will improve their well-being.

The writing of this book was supported by a number of individuals and organizations to whom I am deeply thankful. Initial support for the project came from the Metropolitan Policy Program at the Brookings Institution, which provided me with a seed grant and the opportunity to begin collecting information from suburban nonprofit organizations for this project. Many thanks to Alan Berube, Elizabeth Kneebone, and Bruce Katz for their support. This project also received support from the School of Social Service Administration (SSA) and the Population Research Center (PRC), both at the University of Chicago. I thank the former dean of SSA, Jeanne Marsh, as well as Kate Cagney and Kathleen Parks, who oversaw the PRC's operations. Much of the effort to build the census and administrative data sets used in this book was funded through the Russell Sage Foundation's initiative "The Social and Economic Effects of the Great Recession." The New York Community Trust's Silberman Research Program also provided critical research resources that enabled the completion of the case studies and in-depth interviews. Thanks to the National Poverty Center at the University of Michigan, Sheldon Danziger, and Sandy Danziger for providing me with space to write and develop proposals for funding this work. The PRC also provided space to develop the ideas and arguments presented here. Many thanks to the Whiteley Center at the University of Washington's Friday Harbor Labs for providing a quiet place to do so much writing of the initial manuscript. And thank you to the Evans School of Public Policy and Governance, where I spent the most time revising and editing the manuscript.

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One final note about Richfield. In 2014 the city voted to erect a new sign along the major street you take when you cross over the Crosstown Freeway, leaving South Minneapolis for its south suburban neighbor. The sign now has a Richfield logo that reads, “RICHFIELD, THE URBAN HOMETOWN.” The first time I drove by the sign I did a double-take. Clearly this was evidence of the shifting dynamics between cities and suburbs. After a little digging, I discovered that the Richfield city council had debated what to put on the welcome sign. The initial plan was to use the phrase “Minnesota’s first suburb,” reflecting the town’s historic suburban status. But after discussion, it was decided that “urban hometown” was less likely to invoke a legal challenge from another local suburban municipality also seeking to claim first suburb status. As one city council member put it, “We won’t have to rally the militia to fight that first suburb thing.”

Recently, Richfield commissioned an updated logo that incorporates cityscape elements “to communicate the personality of Richfield” as having “an urban, neighborhood feel.” Although there are a few multi-story buildings on the horizon, Richfield’s updated “urban” logo—depicting single-family homes, wide streets, a water tower, and cattails growing in a pond—still feels very suburban. The blurring of the lines between what is urban and what is suburban very much reflects the demographic changes in Richfield and many other suburban communities, the tensions that result, the challenges to common perceptions of urban and suburban places posed by those tensions, and the ways in which suburban communities are struggling to address these demographic changes.