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Why solving 'hidden' suburban poverty is trickier than helping cities

A new book, Places in Need, explores how preconceptions make harder to combat suburban poverty

BY **PATRICK SISSON** | JUL 5, 2017, 12:05PM EDT

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Lake County, Illinois, located north of Chicago, is considered one of the wealthier parts of the large belt of suburbs that surround the Midwestern metropolis. It's long been seen, by itself and others, as well-off, successful section of suburbia, popularized in John Hughes films such as *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, and filled with good school districts and cozy culs-de-sac.

It's also, in many ways, a poster child for the under-examined rise in suburban poverty chronicled in a new book, *Places in Need*. Despite its reputation, the county has seen the number of people in deep poverty (incomes less than half the federal poverty threshold) double since 1990. It's one of many stretches of suburbia that, especially in the wake of the Great Recession, has been grappling with a growing poverty issues without the benefit of the same social safety net set up in cities.

"Suburbs are set up to be more exclusive communities," says Scott Allard, a professor at the University of Washington, a Brookings Institute fellow, and the author of this new look at shifts in U.S. poverty. "They're smaller in nature, people don't spend as much time in different regions of the suburbs, and the living experience is very different than cities. This all makes it much easier for people to live their daily lives unaware of the concentrated poverty in their areas."

Allard spent years studying Census data and speaking with social service providers across the country, and discovered that while concentrated poverty is still a stubborn issue in cities, it's also becoming a much larger issue in suburbs. In 1990, there were 8.6 million poor people in the suburbs and 9.5 million in the city. In 2014, the numbers had shifted; 17 million poor Americans living in the suburbs, while 13 million poor were in cities. And it's not just in the inner-ring suburbs; roughly two-thirds of poor suburbanites live in communities built after 1970, and poverty is growing fastest in suburbs built after 1990.

"Suburbs weren't created to be inclusive places" | Shutterestock

That under-the-radar shift is a big problem, Allard argues, because suburban areas don't have the same social safety programs and resources as cities, where many assume poverty is prevalent. Since populations aren't as concentrated, assistance is harder to deliver.

That's one reason why between 2000 and 2010, suburban poverty grew by more than 25 percent, but the number of suburban recipients of TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) decreased by nearly 17 percent.

Curbed spoke with Allard about why suburban poverty is so challenging, why the Great Recession was such a catalyst for the problem, and how we can better address the issue.

"Suburbs weren't created to be inclusive places," he says. "They were built for residential exclusivity and competing for taxpayers and jobs. We think of poverty being an urban problem, it's for other people, not our suburban community. That's how the suburbs are hard-wired."

The definition of suburban is slippery

One problem Allard discovered during his research was one of definition. What is a suburb? The traditional idea of a suburb, residential enclaves similar to the ones that became booming parts of the landscape in the '50s and '60s, doesn't quite gel with the varied terrain we see between urban and rural today.

"There's a real gray area out there," he says. "We now sort of have these urban pockets, and there are real gray areas between what's urban and suburban, as well as suburban and rural. It's tricky and there aren't any easy calls."

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In addition to the muddled geography of defining a suburb, the demographic definition is also becoming more and more fluid, as suburbs become more diverse. And that's an issue, as the public imagination of the suburbs as a mostly white, mostly middle class area means it's not seen as a place that needs increased social services. That perception has a real impact. According to Allard, per low-income person, suburban counties spend roughly 10 cents on the dollar for nonprofit human services compared to urban counties.

The suburban landscape is built in a way that hides poverty

In the popular imagination, suburbs symbolize success, so it can be hard to reconcile visions of cookie-cutter homes with growing poverty and income inequality. But beyond social stereotypes, the physical landscape of the suburbs makes seeing poverty more difficult.

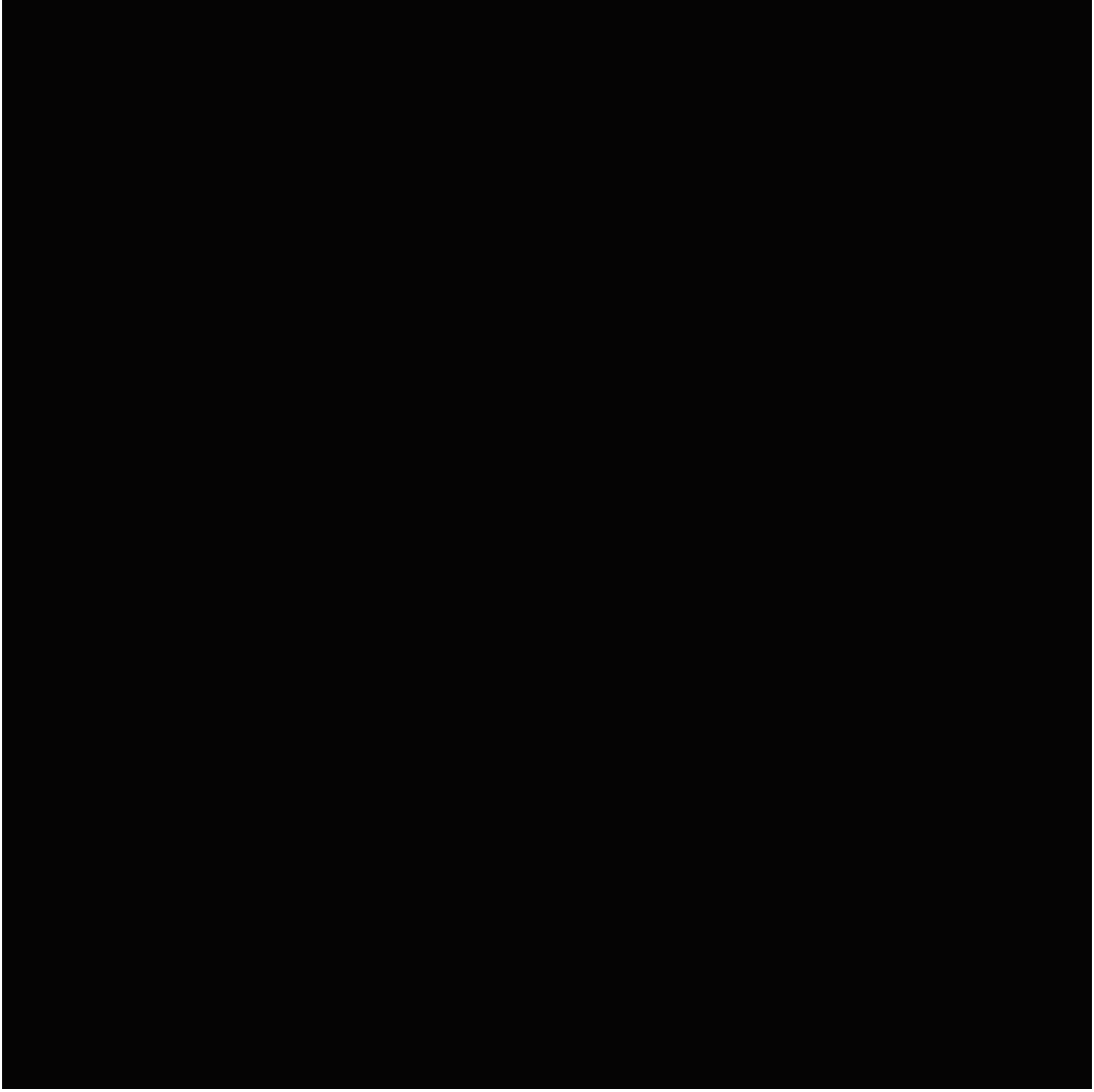
Poorer areas can be tucked away in neighborhoods and culs-de-sac, away from major roadways and thoroughfares. Apartment complexes may be clustered near on-ramps or industrial zones. Like one finds in cities, poor areas are segregated in the suburbs. But they simply aren't as visible, and due to the disconnection, their residents have poor access to amenities and community services.

"Poor areas in the suburbs have this hidden quality," says Allard. "They're more marginalized than most people even expect."

Allard wants to make clear that suburban poverty isn't a new phenomena. There was nearly as much poverty in the Chicago suburbs in the '90s as there was in the city, and it was dispersed throughout the greater metropolitan region. And urban poverty isn't disappearing, stubbornly staying at the same levels it has for decades.

"We think of the suburbs as this place of affluence and homogeneity," Allard says.

Allard also found that concentrated poverty was on the rise in the suburbs. He looked at areas with a 20 percent poverty rate, lower than the traditional 30 to 40 percent poverty rate used in many studies, and found many more people in traditional suburban areas falling into this threshold. At that point, there are serious problems, such as discrimination from labor market opportunities, public safety issues, and access to quality housing.



The Great Recession and the “New Poor”

Allard says that sometimes, people mistakenly assume that the poor in suburbs have come from elsewhere and are new arrivals to the neighborhood, a preconception that has made it harder for suburban regions to find the political support to tackle poverty issues.

His research shows the opposite, especially since the Great Recession, which he says hit the suburbs much harder than the rest of the country. The housing crisis hit the mortgage and real estate industry as well as the home improvement business, and the changes in poverty actually became more severe in the suburbs after the larger national recovery started. Grocery markets and retail shops were having a harder time staying afloat in hard-hit suburban regions. The impact inspired the book's cover image: a strip mall filled with closed or vacated commercial space.

Allard says social service providers used the term "new poor" to describe some of the Americans who suffered during the fallout from the Great Recession, and the resulting shifts in the labor market, and whom had never had an interaction with the social safety net. Many weren't sure what to do, or didn't know where to turn, and many, feeling nervous and ashamed, approached these services too late to get the help they needed.

"Prior to the Great Recession, this group had always been able to make ends meet, but when things became harder and less predictable, they didn't know where to turn," he says.

Federal help can patch holes in local safety nets

Allard says that while local communities are responding to the issue, when poverty grows and moves, it can be harder for local communities to quickly respond, which creates a lag effect. Cities, as well as nonprofits that operate within cities, tend to get the lion's share of anti-poverty funding because that's where we expect poverty to be found. When it appears elsewhere, the organizations and funding simply aren't around.

"Building a nonprofit is a time-consuming endeavor," he says. "And preconceptions of where poverty should be mean that organizations that are operating in the suburbs can be challenged to find funding and volunteers."

In addition to cultivating and growing more local leaders, Allard advocates a more robust federal response to growing suburban poverty. Programs such as TANF and SNAP can move easily across city and county boundaries, and be accessed more quickly.

“We need stronger federal commitment to the earned-income tax credit (EITC), SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), and Medicaid,” he says. “If we don’t maintain more of a federal responsibility, it helps encourage a fragmented safety net. Relying on local groups takes too long to build up infrastructure.”

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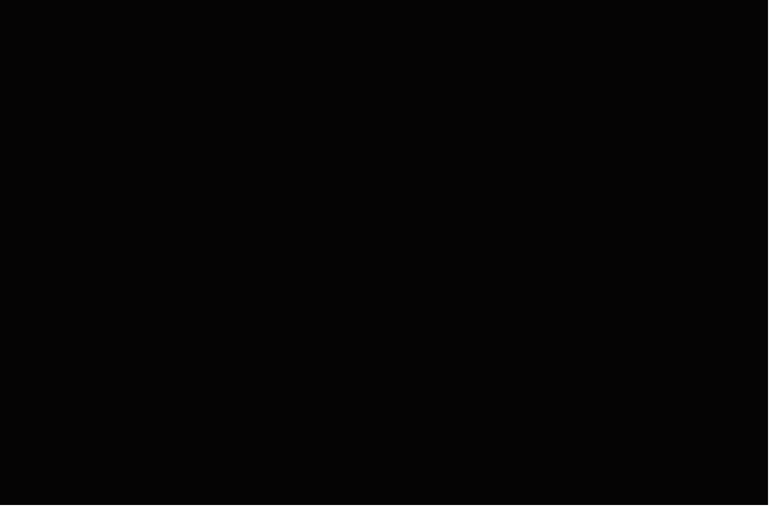

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