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POVERTY IN NEW ENGLAND — It's a Suburban Thing

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When people think of “poverty,” their thoughts might turn to the issues facing poor people and families: hunger, homelessness, low-paid work, or poor health. They might also think of the types of places where the poor live. In New England, the locales could include inner-city neighborhoods in state capitals such as Boston and Hartford, smaller industrial cities like Woonsocket in Rhode Island and Manchester in New Hampshire, and remote rural towns in Vermont and Maine.

But in New England, as in the United States as a whole, poverty is increasingly found in the suburbs. The shift raises critical questions for a growing numbers of communities— not just about what is driving these trends, but also about the implications for local efforts to alleviate poverty. For instance, how connected are the suburban poor to safety-net services and work supports that have traditionally located in urban centers? Do transportation challenges increase burdens on poor suburban residents and limit their access to employment?

National Trends

The 2000s marked a transition point for the geography of American poverty. At the close of the economically prosperous 1990s, the United States enjoyed a near-record low poverty rate (12.4 percent).¹ At that time, primary cities in the country's major metro areas housed the largest share of the poor and were home to 400,000 more poor residents than their surrounding suburbs.² Yet between 1999 and 2008, the number of poor people living in suburbs grew by an astonishing 25 percent—twice the total population growth rate in suburbs, and almost five times faster than the growth in the population of poor city dwellers. By 2008, the suburbs housed 1.5 million more poor than cities.³

Certainly, residents of cities remain more likely to be poor than suburban residents. By 2008, the poverty rate across all cities was nearly twice that of the suburbs (18.2 percent versus 9.5 percent). That gap narrowed over the 2000s, however, as a result of a much faster pace of growth in suburban poverty.

Brookings research indicates that several factors have contributed to city and suburban poverty outcomes, including the health of the metropolitan economy, what kinds of jobs locate in cities, how resistant the local economy was to the decade's first downturn, and how it has fared in the recent, much more severe recession.

Metro New England Trends

New England's seven largest metro areas (those with populations of at least 500,000) exemplify the wide variation in experiences that underlie the nationwide city and suburban poverty trends in the 2000s. (See "Poverty in Large U.S. and New England Metropolitan Areas.")

Though many New Englanders consider themselves residents of small towns, the economic geography of the region differs little from that found in other parts of the country. Big cities constitute New England's economic hubs, anchoring wider metropolitan economies that include many of those small-town, suburban residents. By 2008, only 13 percent of New Englanders lived outside a metropolitan area, whereas 77 percent lived in a large metro area, and 10 percent lived in smaller metropolitan communities.

Suburbs of the region's largest metro areas saw their collective poverty rate rise by nearly one percentage point between 1999 and 2008. Meanwhile, poverty in New England's primary cities remained statistically unchanged since 2000.⁴ Nevertheless, New England cities collectively have a higher overall poverty rate than cities nationwide (20.8 percent versus 18.2 percent) while their surrounding suburbs have a lower-than-average rate (7.9 percent versus 9.5 percent).

This relatively wide disparity between New England's city and suburban poverty

rates reflects the fact that, unlike cities in other parts of the country, the region's cities have had a limited ability to annex higher-income suburbs. It also signals historical patterns of economic (and often racial) segregation that left their mark on regional development over the course of the 20th century.⁵

These factors have made New England's suburbs much larger relative to its cities than in metropolitan areas in some other regions. The ironic result is that even with their much lower poverty rates, New England's suburbs already housed more poor people than its cities did in 2000. Between 1999 and 2008, the suburbs added about 90,000 poor residents to reach 675,000, making them home to two-thirds of the metropolitan poor population in New England. At the same time, the number of poor people living in New England's big cities (333,000) remained statistically unchanged.

Within the seven major New England metro areas, four different patterns emerged. Three metro areas—New Haven, Hartford, and Boston-Cambridge—mirrored the regional experience. Each saw its suburban poverty rate and total number of suburban poor increase significantly, while poverty in the city held steady over the decade. Even with these changes, Hartford and New Haven retained much higher poverty rates than their suburbs. Fully one-third of Hart-

Poverty in Large U.S. and New England Metropolitan Areas

	2008				2000 to 2008			
	Population (thousands)		% of Population		Change in Population (thousands)		Change in % of Population (percentage points)	
	Cities	Suburbs	Cities	Suburbs	Cities	Suburbs	Cities	Suburbs
Largest U.S. Metro Areas (95)	10,969.2	12,491.5	18.2	9.5	581.7 *	2,500.2 *	0.3 *	0.9 *
New England Metro Areas in Largest 95 (7)	333.2	675.8	20.8	7.9	5.8	89.6 *	0.3	0.9 *
Boston-Cambridge-Quincy, MA-NH	120.1	281.5	18.0	7.6	-0.4	39.0 *	-0.6	0.9 *
Bridgeport-Stamford-Norwalk, CT	42.8	31.1	17.0	5.0	8.7 *	5.5	3.4 *	0.8
Hartford-West Hartford-East Hartford, CT	37.3	71.6	33.5	6.9	1.5	16.0 *	2.9	1.3 *
New Haven-Milford, CT	30.9	61.0	27.3	8.6	3.3	12.9 *	2.9	1.6 *
Providence-New Bedford-Fall River, RI-MA	40.6	139.6	25.4	10.1	-6.1 *	13.5 *	-3.8 *	0.9 *
Springfield, MA	39.2	52.1	27.0	10.4	5.5 *	1.6	3.9 *	0.3
Worcester, MA	22.3	38.9	14.8	6.4	-6.8 *	0.9	-3.1 *	-0.3

*Change is significant at the 90 percent level.

Source: Brookings Institution analysis of Census 2000 and 2008 ACS data

ford's population and more than one-quarter of New Haven's lived below the poverty line in 2008.

The three other metro areas registered somewhat different poverty trends. Providence experienced an increase in its suburban poverty rate during the 2000s, but at the same time its city poverty rate fell. This made it the only large New England metro area where city and suburban poverty moved in opposite directions over the decade. In contrast, both the Springfield and Bridgeport-Stamford metro areas experienced considerably above-average increases in their city poverty rates (3.9 and 3.4 percentage points, respectively) and added thousands of new poor residents while suburban poverty remained unchanged.

Worcester was the only large metro area in New England that saw reductions in poverty within the city while suburban poverty held steady. The Worcester-area economy, which includes many jobs in recession-resistant industries like education and health care, performed relatively well over the 2000s.⁶ The poverty rate in both the city of Worcester and its suburbs remained among the lowest compared with their New England peers, though it is unclear if the region continued to resist poverty increases as the recession deepened after 2008.

Looking Ahead

By 2008, the nation was only one year into what proved to be the deepest and longest recession since the Great Depression. The analysis here underscores the shifting geography of poverty over the course of the 2000s, but it does not present the whole picture. While poverty was on the rise and increasingly suburbanized even before the latest downturn, there is no doubt that the first year of the Great Recession reinforced those trends.

Given that even greater and more widespread job losses accompanied the downturn's second year, it is not surprising that estimates forecast even steeper increases in poverty across metro areas for the coming years. In New England, two metro areas in particular—Providence and Worcester—saw their unemployment rates increase faster than the large-metro average (4.9 percentage points) between December 2007 and December 2009 (6.5 and 5.1 percentage points, respectively). The number of unemployed residents more than doubled in each area during that time, with most of the growth occurring in suburban communities.⁷

As the nation's major metro areas move into recovery and work toward building more resilient economies, they also will have to address the needs of a growing poor population that is increasingly suburban. Both goals require working across policy silos at the regional metro level. That means ensuring that decisions about transportation are

Between 1999 and 2008, the number of poor people living in suburbs grew by 25 percent—twice the total population growth rate in suburbs.

linked to decisions about affordable housing, and that decisions about workforce development are connected to strategies for economic development and job creation. More cohesive planning at the regional metro level will help to connect low-income residents to job and education opportunities and to the services that will help them take advantage of those opportunities.

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Endnotes

¹ The poverty rate expresses the share of people in families with incomes below the federal poverty threshold. In 2008, the poverty threshold was \$21,834 for a family of two adults plus two children. In 2000, the threshold was \$17,463. See <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/data/threshld/index.html>.

² In the 100 largest U.S. metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs), per 2007 population estimates, *primary cities* include cities listed first in the official MSA name, and all cities listed second or third in the MSA name that contain a population of 100,000 or more. MSA names have been adjusted to reflect only cities meeting the criteria. *Suburbs* represent the remainder of the MSA, net of primary cities. American Community Survey (ACS) data are not available for the primary cities of five metro areas in the top 100; therefore city and suburban estimates are based on the 95 metro areas with complete data. See Elizabeth

Kneebone and Emily Garr, "The Suburbanization of Poverty: Trends in Metropolitan America, 2000 to 2008" (Washington: Brookings Institution, 2008).

³ The U.S. Census Bureau's 2008 ACS data represent the most recent local-level poverty data available as of this writing.

⁴ New England has eight of the 100 largest metro areas. However, ACS data are not available for Portland-South Portland-Biddeford in Maine.

⁵ Alan Berube and Elizabeth Kneebone, "Two Steps Back: City and Suburban Poverty Trends, 1999-2005" (Washington: Brookings Institution, 2006).

⁶ Brookings Institution, "Metro Monitor: Tracking Economic Recession and Recovery in America's 100 Largest Metro Areas," <http://www.brookings.edu/metro/MetroMonitor.aspx>.

⁷ Brookings analysis of U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics Local Area Unemployment Statistics data.

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