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Poor and Suburban

Suburban poverty is on the rise, and with it comes a unique set of problems and opportunities.

It is 10:05 on an unseasonably warm September morning, and the soaring, sun-lit atrium of the Willow Creek Care Center in South Barrington is filling with a steady stream of people in need.

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Though the doors have been open barely five minutes, about 200 early arrivers already sit in the spacious waiting area. They are an incredibly diverse group—black, white and Latino, men and women, old and young, whole families with children. All are here at this 60,000-square-foot, faith-based food pantry and social service center for help. Some need clothing for their children or groceries. Others seek housing assistance or health services or legal aid.

As the visitors file in, members of the mostly volunteer, T-shirt clad Willow Creek team hand out battery-powered pagers (just like the kind used to summon waiting diners in a crowded restaurant) that will buzz and blink when another volunteer is available to register and assess their needs. Though the waiting time creeps up to 30 minutes, the atmosphere is serene, like the waiting area in any doctor’s office or auto repair shop in anywhere USA.

But South Barrington is not anywhere USA. It is a small, tony village 40 miles northwest of Chicago, composed largely of stately homes situated on leafy, quiet streets, certainly not the sort of town where one would expect to find services for families who live near or below the poverty line. Yet the people who trek daily to the Willow Creek Care Center, an outgrowth of Willow Creek Community Church, the 24,000-member megachurch that rests on a rolling 90-acre plot in South Barrington, come from nearby suburbs where they live and work.

Contributed By:

Abstract:
There are now more people living in poverty in the suburbs today than in our cities. Associate Professor Scott Allard explains the mixture of factors that have influenced this new reality, including demographic shifts in population, structural changes in the American economy and new migration and immigration patterns. Allard also notes that many existing anti-poverty programs and policies struggle to address the demands of poverty in the suburbs. The article explores the impact of poverty and the programs designed to alleviate its effects in Lake County outside of Chicago. Suburban poverty can also differ from its urban counterpart in demographic and geographic patterns, and in Lake County that means pockets of poverty in well-do-do communities, immigrant enclaves and inner-ring suburbs.

Written by Charles Whitaker

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[Scott Allard](#)

The visitors to Willow Creek provide a glimpse of the changing face of poverty in the second decade of the 21st century. Throw out old notions about poverty as a predominantly urban or rural phenomenon. Over the past 20 years, a mix of factors from structural changes in the American economy to new migration and immigration patterns have combined to create a startling fact that seems to go against our most basic understanding of how American society works: There are more people living in poverty in the suburbs today than in our cities. In a mere five years, the number of visitors to the Willow Creek Care Center has grown by more than 300 percent, according to Kellye Fabian, an attorney who serves as the center's volunteers director and long-term services manager. In fact, there is such demand for the care center's services that they have limited service to families who live in specific geographic boundaries and, even so, often have to close their door early due to capacity issues.

"Strained Suburbs: The Social Service Challenges of Rising Suburban Poverty"

Brookings Institution

COOL Ministries

Lake County Community Foundation Research

Mano a Mano

Willow Creek Care Center

At the two food pantries staffed and maintained by Waukegan-based Christian Outreach of Lutherans, a service agency that goes by the acronym COOL Ministries, the number of visitors has grown by 80 percent over the past two years, says Diane Thackston, the executive director. "It's been a steady rise," she says. "It breaks your heart to see how many people are out there who need help."

No one understands the scope of suburban poverty better than Scott W. Allard, an associate professor at SSA, who for the past several years has studied the growth and devastating impact of poverty on many suburban communities. He points to other signs of growing need in suburban communities, including rising rates of children in the federal government's free and reduced lunch programs (one of the standard barometers of poverty), increases in homelessness, and greater income instability.

"You want to be careful not to overstate this, but it really is a fundamentally big deal," Allard says. "It is one of these demographic changes that rivals the Great Migration North. It rivals the suburbanization of our cities in the 1950s and '60s. It's a major change in our population distribution. This change can be seen emerging more recently in more affluent suburbs to the north of Chicago, but we also know that the south suburbs have been grappling with rising poverty rates for some time."

Allard points out that suburban poverty is different in significant ways than its urban counterpart. For example, while poverty can take many forms anywhere, it is particularly heterogeneous in the varied suburban landscape, where the poor can be found in enclaves of immigrant families, more "traditional" poor neighborhoods in some inner-ring suburbs, and cul-de-sacs in tidy subdivisions. Local capacity to support those living in poverty also varies widely in the suburbs.

Because of that fact and others, many anti-poverty programs and policies that have evolved over the years struggle to address the demands of poverty in the suburbs, a phenomenon Allard covered in his 2010 study with then-SSA doctoral student Ben Roth, "Strained Suburbs: The Social Service Challenges of Rising Suburban Poverty," which examined problems posed by rising poverty rates in communities outside of Chicago, Los Angeles and Washington, D.C.

That paper coincided with a landmark report by the Brookings Institution's Metropolitan Policy Program that documented that in 100 of the largest metropolitan areas of the country, more poor people live in the suburbs than in the cities. A more recent Brookings report found that between 2000 and 2010, suburban poverty grew 53 percent, more than twice the rate of urban poverty. Allard has continued working with Brookings, poring over census data and conducting field research to unpack the nuances and gain a greater understanding of this phenomenon.

Allard points to four key reasons for the growth of suburban poverty. One is simply the population shifts from suburban sprawl of the 1960s and '70s. "Poverty has increased in the suburbs partially because the population in the suburbs has increased," he explains. "We have become a plurality suburban nation. There are more people in the suburbs than in cities or rural areas. So there's going to be more poor people, too. In some ways, it's just simply population flows."

A second factor has been economic change. The last decade has seen two recessions, each followed by halting economic recovery. Job loss and lost work earnings have been particularly devastating for low-skilled workers during this time period, who are now just as likely to live in the suburbs as in the city. "Fundamentally, the economy isn't good for low-skill job seekers," Allard says. "So for people with just a high school diploma, who in the '70s or '80s might have been able to find a good job in the suburbs, good jobs are harder to find."

The collapse of the housing market and the recession that followed exacerbated some of the socio-economic fissures in the suburbs that had been growing in suburban communities for some time. "The housing collapse hit the suburbs really hard, amplifying and accelerating economic trends that were already in place as the labor market changed to become a more service-oriented economy as opposed to an economy based on manufacturing," Allard says.



SSA Associate Professor Scott W. Allard says that suburbs have experienced rising rates of children in the federal government's free and reduced lunch program, increases in homelessness and greater income instability.

Finally, Allard says, immigration patterns have changed. Cities are no longer the primary destination for immigrants like they were in the 20th century. Many suburbs are now the destination of choice of immigrants, with new arrivals locating in suburban communities where friends and relatives have established a beachhead and where they believe they can find work.

Despite the significance and scope of the rise of suburban poverty, many scholars and demographers nearly overlooked this dramatic shift, partly, Allard says, because of our inability to let go of 20th century notions about what poverty looks like and where it resides. "We have these powerful narratives about place and poverty where we assume that suburbs are the land of opportunities and jobs," he says. "Even scholars emphasize that

suburbs are better places for job opportunity. But for many low-skilled workers and low-educated people, the suburbs aren't necessarily better than cities."

The patterns of suburban poverty can be seen in sharp relief in Lake County, one of Chicago's "collar counties" north of the city. Lake County covers 444 square miles with 52 municipalities and 18 townships. In the minds of many Chicago-area residents, it is a bastion of wealth, the place where well-compensated professional athletes and business titans are tucked away in multi-million dollar homes in gated estates in towns like Lake Forest. But there is another side to Lake County, a side where the need is tremendous.

"Lake County is a prime example of a place where there are these extremes. You have great wealth, but you also have people living near or below the poverty line. And there isn't always the acknowledgement of that," says Allard, who is currently working on *Places in Need: The Changing Geography of Poverty and the American Safety Net*, a book project that draws upon data and case studies of the north and south suburbs of Chicago.

According to a 2012 report commissioned by the Lake County Community Foundation, a grant-making organization that helps support human service organizations in the area, nearly 40 percent of all residents of Lake County are in rent- or mortgage-burdened homes, and one in 10 has inadequate access to food. "The needs in Lake County are greater than many people realize," says Sylvia Zaldivar-Sykes, the foundation's executive director.

Lake County also illustrates the growth of the immigrant population—particularly the Latino population—in the suburbs. At the time of the 2000 Census, Latinos living in the suburbs of Chicago outnumbered those in the city for the first time: 650,000 to 500,000 respectively. By 2006, that number had risen by more than 300,000 Latinos in the suburbs compared to a loss of 50,000 in the city. By 2010, the suburban Latino population had ballooned to 1.6 million. In Lake County alone, the Latino population increased 25 percent from 1990 to 2000 and another 14 percent from 2000 to 2010.

"Mexican and Central American immigrants, the largest immigrant groups today, are locating to the suburbs in greater numbers now than was the case 20 years ago," says Allard, "and that makes sense given that suburbs contain many low-skilled retail, food service and housing-related jobs that hire immigrant workers."

The fact that many of the suburban newcomers are a mix of documented and undocumented immigrants has led to a tremendous amount of exploitation, particularly in the rental housing market, which Zaldivar-Sykes describes as often being comprised of highly concentrated, substandard living conditions. "What you will see in a lot of these communities is housing that is almost akin to the high-rise housing projects that you used to find in the city," she says.

Closer to Lake Michigan is another type of poverty in Lake County—sections of inner-ring suburbs that are physically and demographically a lot more like low-income communities in Chicago than the suburbs of our conventional imagination. According to the Lake County Community Foundation, nearly 70 percent of the children in communities like Waukegan and Zion qualify for the free and reduced-rate lunch program, and in Zion, nearly 30 percent of the renters use Section 8 housing vouchers.

"The fastest-growing rate of poverty in many of our communities is among children under the age of 6," Zaldivar-Sykes says. "So we have a majority of children in these school districts who are poor, and that's a tremendous challenge. But it's not what people think of when they think of Lake County."

Then again, the suburbs of our conventional imagination have pockets of poverty, too. At any given time, many families may have a tenuous grasp on middle-class status. “Changes in the labor market mean many middle-class families are now hovering near or just above the poverty line. Any shock—like losing a job or a cutback in hours or getting sick—can be devastating,” Allard says. The Lake County Community Foundation confirms that assistance is needed by a broad mix of families. “More than 85 percent of the visitors to local food pantries in our area are employed,” says Zaldivar-Sykes.

A visit to any of the Lake County care facilities illustrates the diversity among the suburban poor. “It’s not like you can tell who may or may not have some need,” says Kellye Fabian, the Willow Creek program manager. She recalls a new care team member who, upon surveying the crowd at waiting for assistance remarked, “They don’t look poor.”

“But the thing we try to emphasize with our volunteers,” says Fabian, “is that everyone has a story. We don’t know what that story is and we’re not here to judge them or fix them. But we are here to honor every single person who comes for help, no matter what their story is.”

At the Willow Creek Care Center, a middleaged woman with graying blonde hair has waited her turn, and she cautiously comes to the garage door at the back, where the auto repair shop is located. She is seeking an attendant to service her Honda Civic, which looks to be about 15 years old.

“They told me I could drive my car around here,” she says tentatively. “Yeah, just bring it back,” the volunteer mechanic on duty says.

She turns and within minutes eases her beat-up brown sedan through the garage door. Auto repair might not be a typical anti-poverty program in most low-income urban neighborhoods, but a broken car is a really big thing when you live in the suburbs. “Think about it. If you don’t have transportation and you live in the suburbs, you can’t do anything,” says Fabian. “You can’t get to work. You can’t get to the store. It really impacts your life. That’s why we started our transportation ministry. There’s just such a huge need out here for so many people who can’t afford to be without a car, but also can’t afford to have theirs serviced or get a new one.”

A transportation ministry is just one example of how services for the poor differ, in ways both big and small, from the anti-poverty infrastructure that has been created and tweaked for urban communities since the War on Poverty in the 1960s. The established safety net in the suburbs has traditionally taken the form of a faith-based food pantry, like the one run by COOL Ministries since 1982 (COOL has also offered a family housing program to provide case management to homeless families since 1988). More than 6,000 people a month come to its two food pantries for free groceries on distribution days. “And they just keep growing,” Diane Thackston says. “We’ve had an increase every single month for the past two years.”

Suburbs are, by and large, catching up to urban communities to build a more comprehensive set of anti-poverty institutions. Helping Latinos living with little resources in the Lake County, for example, is a patchwork of human service agencies, many of which started as grassroots organizations that sprouted up to fill a yearning need.

Even before the Census confirmed the numbers, Bruce Johnson, then chief of the Round Lake Park Police Department, had become aware of the problems affecting the village’s

growing Latino population and sense of helplessness and frustration that many of these low-skilled, poorly educated, non-English-speaking immigrants felt in their new environment. In 2000, he and late Mayor Ila Bauer helped found the Mano a Mano Family Resource Center to take on the task of integration and empowerment for these new residents and their children.

“I felt this was the most important thing we could do,” says Johnson, now CEO of Nicasa Behavioral Health Services, a substance abuse prevention and treatment agency serving Lake County. “There was this growing community that because of the language barrier was separate and walled off and had nowhere to turn, no one to help them. And rather than see them wind up in the criminal justice system out of that desperation, we felt we needed to step in and do something.”

From its humble storefront beginnings, Mano a Mano has grown into an agency with a \$600,000 budget that serves the Latino community throughout Lake County with GED and computer classes, employment services, case management, health education and kindergarten readiness, as well as its longstanding ESL program. “Our growth has been organic,” Mano a Mano Executive Director Carolina Duque says. “There were people in the community who needed a wealth of services—ESL, citizenship, help enrolling their kids in school. We have grown as the needs of the community have spread and grown, and this community has many needs.”

Problems in addressing suburban poverty are exacerbated by the landscape’s patchwork quilt of municipalities, and the challenge in getting government programs and private donors to recognize the depth and breadth of suburban poverty. “In general, we tend to think of poverty as an urban problem, so we target a lot of private and public resources to cities,” Allard says. “For suburban nonprofits it’s really difficult, because to get people to give to a cause, they have to overcome this perception that there’s no poverty in an affluent community, say, like Highland Park.”

For the many elected officials and community leaders who have been engaged in efforts to address the poverty in their midst, the recession has heightened awareness and galvanized support. “We’ve had some tremendous leadership here, people who have for a very long time been having conversations and doing work around the needs in this very affluent community,” says Zaldivar-Sykes. “But what the recession did was really bring some awareness about the chasm—because it isn’t a gap, it’s a chasm—in wealth and opportunity that was already here.”

The challenge facing suburbs as they come to grips with the poverty in their midst is to find creative ways to meet the growing need. They must cobble together more public and private alliances, or redirect resources to accommodate the strain that the influx of poor children and families will have on schools and other government agencies. “Even with increased funds for assistance, suburban poverty is likely to continue to remain at historic levels in the near-term,” Allard says. “But recognizing the problem, using data to understand need, and building partnerships is a good start to helping us develop solutions that will address suburban poverty in the long-term.”

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