Poverty has a new address: Suburbia

**There are now 2.7 million more poor households in the suburbs than in cities, thanks to long-term trends that have accelerated in the current economic downturn.**

For years, the food pantry in Crystal Lake, Ill., a bedroom community 50 miles west of [**Chicago**](http://www.bing.com/search?q=chicago&form=MSMONY), has catered to the suburban area's poor, homeless and unemployed. But Cate Williams, the head of the pantry, said earlier this year that she has noticed a striking change in the makeup of the needy over the past year or two.

Some families that once pulled down six-figure incomes and drove flashy cars are turning to the pantry for help. A few of them donated food and money to the pantry before their luck soured, according to Williams.

"People will shyly say to me, 'You know, I used to give money and food to you guys. Now I need your help,'" Williams told The Fiscal Times. "Most of the folks we see now are people who never took a handout before. They were comfortable, able to feed themselves, to keep gas in the car and keep a nice roof over their head."

Suburbia always had its share of low-income families and the poor, but the sharp surge in suburban poverty is beginning to grab the attention of demographers, government officials and social service advocates.

The past decade has marked the most significant rise in poverty in modern times. One in six people in the U.S. is poor, according to the latest census data, compared with one in 10 Americans in 2004. This surge in the percentage of the poor is fueling concerns about a growing disparity between the rich and poor -- the 99% versus the 1%, in the parlance of the [**Occupy Wall Street movement**](http://www.bing.com/search?q=Occupy+Wall+Street+movement&form=MSMONY).

But contrary to stereotypes that the worst of poverty is centered in urban areas or isolated rural areas and Appalachia, the suburbs have been hit hardest in recent years, an analysis of census data reveals. "If you take a drive through the suburbs and look at the strip mall vacancies, the 'For Sale' signs, and the growing lines at unemployment offices and social services providers, you'd have to be blind not to see the economic crisis is hitting home in a way these areas have never experienced," said Donna Cooper, a senior fellow at the [**Center for American Progress**](http://www.bing.com/search?q=Center+for+American+Progress&form=MSMONY), a progressive think tank.

In the wake of the Great Recession, poverty rolls are rising at a more rapid pace in the suburbs than in cities or rural communities. From 2000 to 2010, the number of suburban households below the poverty line increased by 53%, compared with a 23% increase in poor households in urban areas, according to a Brookings Institution analysis of census data.

In 2010, there were 2.7 million more suburban households than urban households below the federal poverty level, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. That was the first time on record that America's cities didn't contain the highest absolute number of households living in poverty. There are many reasons for the dramatic turnabout in the geographic profile of poverty.

While many once-depressed urban areas have benefited from revitalization efforts, drawing in more affluent residents, suburban areas now attract lower-income families who move there in search of more-affordable housing and better schools. This shift in low-income families to the suburbs coincided with a move of low-wage, low-skilled jobs to those same suburban areas from the 1970s to the early 2000s, experts say. Meanwhile, the introduction of new commerce and high-cost housing in urban neighborhoods has pushed overall prices upward, providing added incentive for low-income people to head for the suburbs.

"These are families that were living on the edge in the city, but in many cases over the last 20 to 30 years, regained some stability when they found affordable housing in the suburbs," said Cooper. "Now, the economy tanks, they lose their jobs, they're poor, and they're out in the suburbs on the edge once again."

Both urban and suburban America were badly hammered by the financial meltdown and recession, which has led to stubbornly high unemployment, widespread foreclosures and "underwater" homes, high food and gas prices, and sharp cutbacks in government and private social services. But the overall impact has been worse in suburban areas, because many low-skilled jobs disappeared along with the plants and businesses that once provided employment. Other companies shifted their business strategy toward developing a high-skill, high-tech labor force.

To be sure, the picture of poverty in U.S. suburbs is an uneven one. According to the census analysis, some suburban regions took bigger economic hits than others. Poverty rolls increased 121.8% in the Atlanta suburbs from 2000 to 2010, compared with a 6.8% increase in the city. Chicago and Seattle saw similarly large suburban/urban splits in poverty during that period. The poverty rate increased by 76.3% in the Chicago suburbs, compared with only 9.7% in the city. In Seattle, the number of people living below the poverty line rose 74.4% in the suburbs versus 26.1% in the city proper.

The 10-year surge in suburban poverty is putting enormous budgetary pressure on county and local governments and nonprofits, which are struggling to meet a rising demand for social services, counseling and financial assistance. The number of students qualifying for subsidized lunches in Conyers, an Atlanta suburb, grew by 63% in 2011, compared with a 46% increase in 2006. Many suburban areas of Columbus, Ohio, have seen their subsidized lunch enrollment more than double over the past five years, the Columbus Dispatch reported last year.

According to a separate 2010 census analysis from the Brookings Institution, the typical suburban nonprofit in the Los Angeles, Chicago or Washington, D.C., region reported an increase of about 30% in demand for its services from 2008 to 2009, as well as a substantial increase in the number of clients with no previous connection to social service programs. Adding further pressure, nearly half of the nonprofit organizations reported a loss in key revenue in that time.

"This is a shift that's happened over time, steadily over the last 10 years, and for reasons in addition to the recession," said Elizabeth Kneebone, a senior research associate at Brookings who compiled the data. "Even if the recovery were to take hold tomorrow, I wouldn't expect this to reverse."

In Gwinnett County, another Atlanta suburb, a ballooning foreclosure crisis is forcing once middle- and upper-income residents into poverty. One in 183 housing units received a foreclosure filing in November, compared with a national average of one in 579 units, according to RealtyTrac.

A nonprofit called [**The Impact! Group**](http://www.theimpactgroup.org/) handles about 60% of the county's cases of homeless individuals in need of temporary housing to help them get back on their feet. Five years ago, Tom Merkel, the president and CEO, and the group's 10 staffers almost exclusively served individuals with four- and low-five-figure salaries. By this year, Merkel says, his caseload has doubled. It has also climbed the socioeconomic ladder, with an ever-increasing number of once middle- and upper-middle class families seeking aid, he adds.

"We have people that were making six-figure salaries, doctors and lawyers who lived in nice homes on golf courses, knocking on our door," Merkel told The Fiscal Times. "People spent beyond their means without learning to save, so when everything came crashing down, there was no reserve."

In the Seattle suburbs, the challenges of a burgeoning refugee and immigrant population are compounding economic pressures. In King County, which encompasses both Seattle and neighboring suburbs, half of the population growth over the last two decades has come from immigrants and refugees, said Chandler Felt, King County's demographer. The vast majority of those foreign-born new residents have settled into South King County suburbs, including Kent, rather than Seattle, as they seek to take advantage of more affordable housing, Felt said.

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The surge in refugees and immigrants from East Africa, Eastern Europe and Southeast Asia settling in Kent has made the community more culturally diverse, but it has also helped push the poverty rate to 25%, compared with 9% 10 years ago, said Katherin Johnson, Kent's housing and human services manager.

"All of a sudden, the resettlement agency's finished with you six or eight months after you arrive, you're not able to find a job, and you're just starting to learn the language and assimilate," Johnson said. "The next thing that happens is you have eviction notices, your utilities are turned off, and you have no finances to speak of." The city has seen thousands of cases like that, she said. "The food pantry here is a very popular place."

For Williams in Crystal Lake, the pantry's growing traffic has meant food vanishes more quickly. Two or three years ago, a food drive's proceeds would last four or five months, but now that food is gone in two to three months. The rising demand has led Williams and her board to dip into their savings to keep dispensing basic food items like butter, cheese, milk and eggs.

"Every day, it gets just a little clearer that people's ideas of who a hungry or poor person is should be changing," Williams said. "It's not just people pushing shopping carts along the street in a place like Crystal Lake. . . . Sure, people may still have their Lexus, but what lots of people don't realize is that in lots of cases, (the car) is one step away from being repossessed."