

NEW CENSUS DATA SHOW METRO POVERTY'S PERSISTENCE IN 2012

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Though the Great Recession officially ended in early 2009, the subsequent economic recovery has proven slow to take hold and narrow in its reach. The release of the [2012 American Community Survey](#) (ACS) data on poverty and income underscores the effects of a sluggish recovery that has played out unevenly across the nation's major metropolitan economies and, even amid improving employment numbers, has left millions of Americans behind.

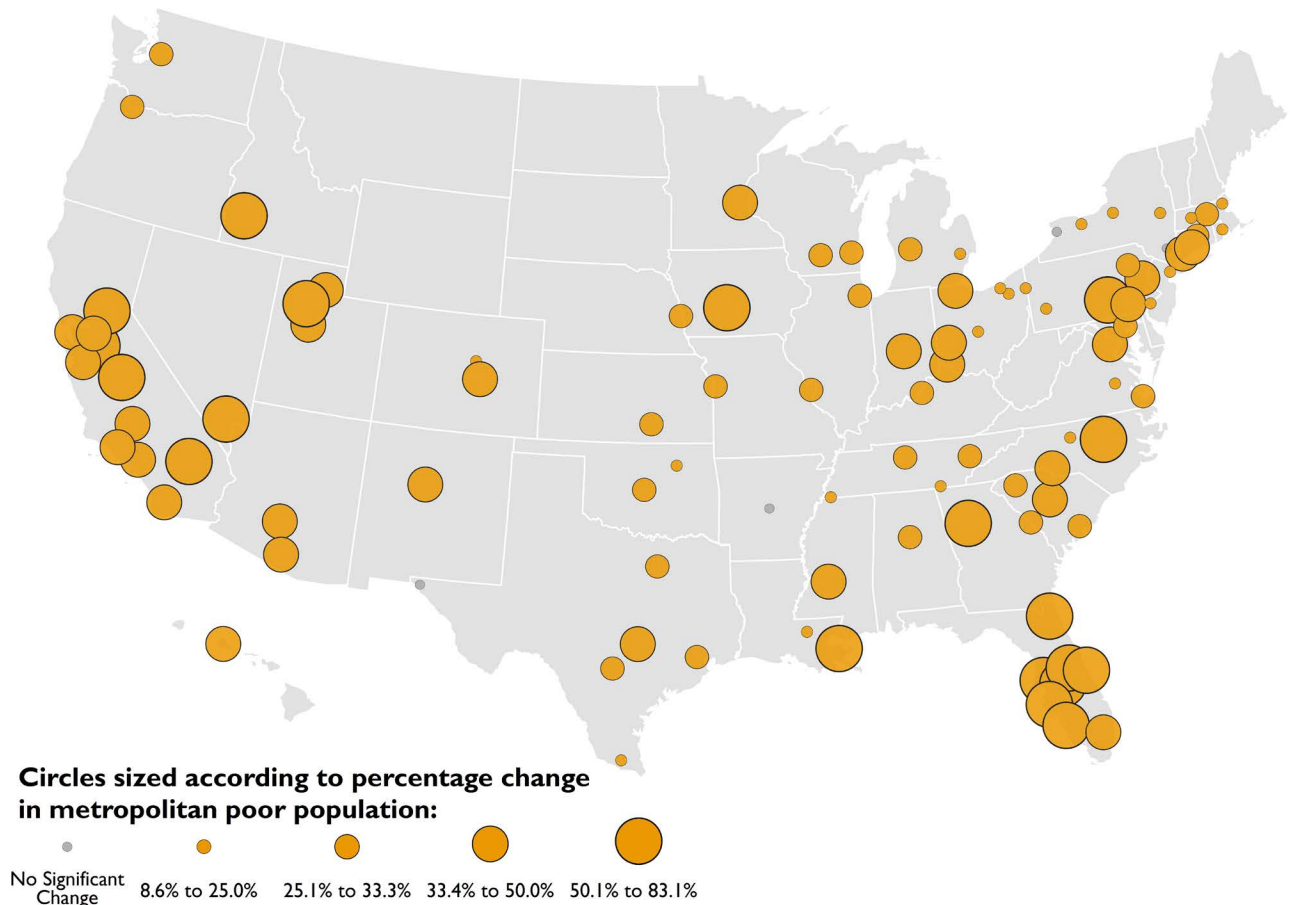
Using ACS data on individuals living below the federal poverty level (e.g., \$23,492 for a family of four in 2012), our analysis across and within the nation's 100 largest metropolitan areas finds that:

- **For the fifth year in a row since the onset of the Great Recession, the number of poor residents in the nation's 100 largest metro areas grew between 2011 and 2012, edging upward by 1.1 percent or 320,000 people.** Though the smallest year over year change since the recession began, the increase in the metropolitan poor population diverged from the [national trend](#), which remained flat from 2011 to 2012.
- **The 2012 poverty rate for major metro areas stalled at 15.1 percent, matching the post-recession high in 2011.** Most large metro areas (84) saw their poverty rates stuck at 2011 levels. However, poverty rates continued to climb in nine regions, led by Jackson, Knoxville, Fresno, and Grand Rapids (Table 1). These poverty rate increases occurred even though unemployment rates fell in eight of the nine metro areas on this list. At the same time, poverty rates fell in seven regions, with the biggest decreases in Modesto, McAllen, and Albuquerque.
- **By 2012, poor populations in 96 of the 100 largest metro areas remained above levels recorded before recession struck.** In Sun Belt metro areas on the front lines of the housing market collapse—including Palm Bay, Orlando, Riverside, and Las Vegas—poor populations remained at least 50 percent higher in 2012 than in 2007 (Map 1). Only four regions saw their poor population return to 2007 levels by 2012, including, Buffalo, El Paso, Little Rock, and Poughkeepsie.
- **Within the nation's largest metro areas, suburbs remained home to 55 percent of poor residents in 2012.** The poor population in cities ticked up by just over one percent between 2011 and 2012, while the suburban poor population held statistically steady. Both city and suburban poverty rates (21.7 and 12.1, respectively) remained unchanged from 2011, and suburbs continued to house 3 million more poor residents than their primary cities.
- **Between 2011 and 2012, some cities began to show signs of recovery, but no major metro area registered significant progress against suburban poverty.** City poverty rates fell in seven metro areas, led by Chattanooga, Allentown, Boise, and Rochester, while two metro areas—Cincinnati and San Antonio—registered significant increases in their city poverty rates (Table 2). Similarly, two metro areas—Jackson and Riverside-San Bernardino-Ontario—continued to see their suburban poverty rates grow. However, no major metro area experienced a significant decrease in the suburban poverty rate in 2012.

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- **Manufacturing-oriented metro areas in the Midwest and Northeast continued to rank highest for urban poverty rates in 2012, while metro areas in the West and South posted the highest suburban poverty rates.** Among the metro areas ranked in the top 10 for city poverty rates, at least one-third of urban residents lived in poverty in 2012, and that share reached as high as 39 percent in Youngstown and Detroit-Warren (Table 3). More than half of this list joined the top 10 during the course of the 2000s, as the effects of two downturns and longer-run employment losses in manufacturing pushed poverty rates up. In contrast, Southern and Western regions dominate the list of metro areas with the highest suburban poverty rates in 2012, with McAllen, El Paso, Bakersfield, and Fresno registering between one-quarter and one-third of their suburban residents in poverty (Table 4). Even with the boom and bust of the housing markets in these regions, all but two metro areas that ranked in the top 10 for suburban poverty rates in 2000 remained on that list in 2012.

MAP 1. PERCENTAGE CHANGE IN THE METROPOLITAN POOR POPULATION, 2007 TO 2012



Source: Brookings Institution analysis of American Community Survey data

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Taken together, the 2012 ACS data reveal the stubborn persistence of economic hardship in the wake of the Great Recession. Rather than mirroring the national trend, the collective poor population in the nation's largest metro areas continued to creep up, and all but four of those regions continued to grapple with larger poor populations than before the collapse of the housing market. There are signs of easing, and even some silver linings as regions like Albuquerque, Allentown, and Modesto began to make progress against poverty. But on the whole, the latest numbers paint a discouraging picture of a recovery that has left many places and people behind.

Yet even in an era of strained budgets, limited capacity, and high need, leaders across the country are finding innovative ways to increase access to the types of opportunities that give people a path out of poverty. Rather than waiting for change to come from Washington, regional and local leaders are finding ways to stretch limited resources to improve outcomes for urban and suburban residents, alike. Learning from these models, in [Confronting Suburban Poverty in America](#) we outline [a number of steps](#) that policymakers, funders, and practitioners can take to more effectively address the increasingly regional reach of poverty.

But those steps alone cannot overcome broad-based economic challenges like rising inequality and the growing prevalence of jobs that pay wages too low to boost a full-time worker and her family above the poverty line. That is where critical programs like the Earned Income Tax Credit and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) come in. The official poverty numbers do not capture the anti-poverty effects of these programs, but [alternative measures](#) clearly illustrate the effectiveness of these policies in alleviating poverty for millions of Americans. As policymakers in Washington consider deep cuts to anti-poverty programs like SNAP, the 2012 ACS poverty numbers should serve as a stark reminder that the economic recovery has failed to materialize for millions of struggling Americans, and, in an economy where declining unemployment has yet to translate into falling poverty numbers, need for critical safety net supports remains high.

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TABLE 1. METRO AREAS WITH SIGNIFICANT CHANGES IN POVERTY RATES BETWEEN 2011 AND 2012

Metropolitan Area	Percentage Point Change
Increases	
Jackson, MS	3.7
Fresno, CA	2.7
Knoxville, TN	2.3
Harrisburg-Carlisle, PA	1.9
Grand Rapids-Wyoming, MI	1.8
Virginia Beach-Norfolk-Newport News, VA-NC	1.4
Riverside-San Bernardino-Ontario, CA	1.1
Los Angeles-Long Beach-Santa Ana, CA	0.6
New York-Northern New Jersey-Long Island, NY-NJ-PA	0.4
Decreases	
Modesto, CA	-3.5
McAllen-Edinburg-Mission, TX	-3.3
Albuquerque, NM	-1.9
Allentown-Bethlehem-Easton, PA-NJ	-1.4
Portland-Vancouver-Beaverton, OR-WA	-1.0
Houston-Sugar Land-Baytown, TX	-1.0
Dallas-Fort Worth-Arlington, TX	-0.8

TABLE 2. CITIES AND SUBURBS WITH SIGNIFICANT CHANGES IN POVERTY RATES BETWEEN 2011 AND 2012

Metropolitan Area	Percentage Point Change
Cities	
Cincinnati-Middletown, OH-KY-IN	4.6
San Antonio, TX	1.7
Dallas-Fort Worth-Arlington, TX	-2.1
Portland-Vancouver-Beaverton, OR-WA	-2.5
Pittsburgh, PA	-2.7
Rochester, NY	-3.8
Boise City-Nampa, ID	-4.5
Allentown-Bethlehem-Easton, PA-NJ	-6.1
Chattanooga, TN-GA	-7.5
Suburbs	
Jackson, MS	4.7
Riverside-San Bernardino-Ontario, CA	1.7

*Changes significant at the 90 percent confidence level

Source: Brookings Institution analysis of American Community Survey data

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TABLE 3. TOP METRO AREAS FOR CITY POVERTY RATES IN 2012

Metropolitan Area	2012 City Poverty Rate (%)	Rank in 2012	Rank in 2007	Rank in 2000
Youngstown-Warren-Boardman, OH-PA	38.9	1	1	11
Detroit-Warren-Livonia, MI	38.5	2	4	19
Syracuse, NY	38.2	3	3	4
Hartford-West Hartford-East Hartford, CT	38.0	4	2	1
Dayton, OH	37.3	5	6	22
Cleveland-Elyria-Mentor, OH	36.1	6	7	7
Cincinnati-Middletown, OH-KY-IN	34.1	7	23	28
Springfield, MA	33.3	8	15	21
Jackson, MS	32.5	9	11	20
Provo-Orem, UT	32.5	10	5	5

TABLE 4. TOP METRO AREAS FOR SUBURBAN POVERTY RATES IN 2012

Metropolitan Area	2012 Suburban Poverty Rate (%)	Rank in 2012	Rank in 2007	Rank in 2000
McAllen-Edinburg-Mission, TX	35.8	1	1	1
El Paso, TX	29.4	2	2	2
Bakersfield, CA	26.3	3	3	3
Fresno, CA	25.0	4	4	4
Modesto, CA	19.8	5	13	5
Albuquerque, NM	19.3	6	9	6
Riverside-San Bernardino-Ontario, CA	18.4	7	23	7
Lakeland-Winter Haven, FL	17.5	8	8	16
Jackson, MS	17.4	9	28	9
Augusta-Richmond County, GA-SC	16.9	10	6	15

Source: Brookings Institution analysis of decennial Census and American Community Survey data