

SUBURBAN POVERTY TRAVERSES THE RED/BLUE DIVIDE

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Our recent book, [Confronting Suburban Poverty in America](#), revealed that during the 2000s, major metropolitan suburbs became home to the largest and fastest-growing poor population in America. We argue that federal policies that were created to help people in low-income communities are not well matched to this new suburban geography of poverty.

This caused us to ask, which congressional districts are most affected by suburbanizing poverty, creating a stake in a broader agenda to reinvent place-based anti-poverty policy? Using data from Census 2000 and the American Community Survey five-year estimates from 2007 to 2011, we find that:

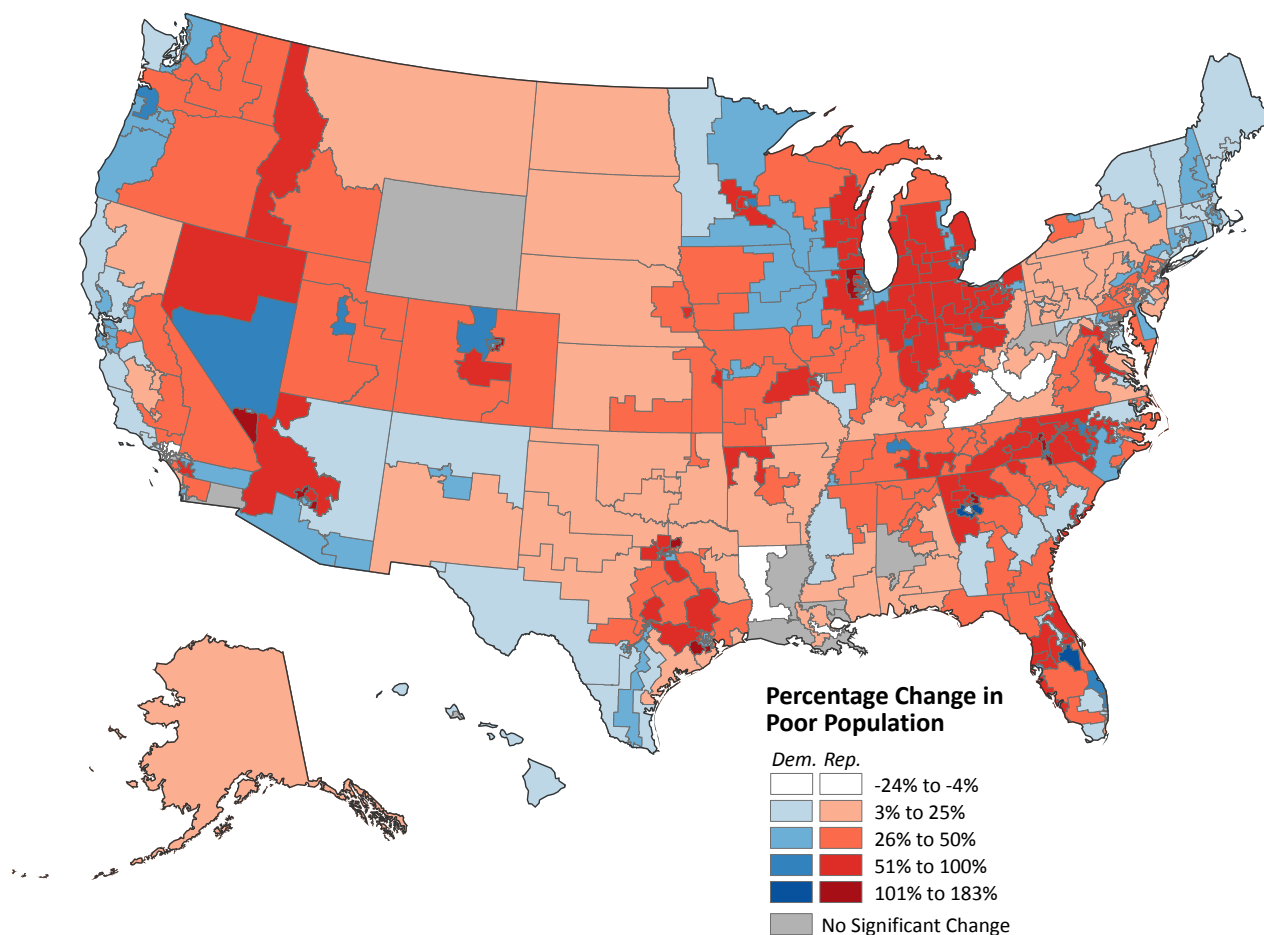
- **Poverty increases in the 2000s reflected broader regional economic struggles, rather than partisan affiliation.**¹ The Great Recession took a toll on Democratic and Republican districts alike, causing poverty to grow in 388 districts overall (see map). In the Midwest, manufacturing job losses hit both blue and red districts around Chicago, Detroit, Indianapolis, and Milwaukee particularly hard. In the Sun Belt, red and blue districts around Atlanta, Charlotte, Las Vegas, and Phoenix were at the epicenter of the housing market crash.
- **More than 80 percent of congressional districts—368 of the nation’s 435—contain at least some portion of the suburbs within the 100 largest metropolitan areas.**² Those districts are battlegrounds, represented nearly equally by Republican (187) and Democratic (181) members.
- **The suburbs of Republican districts were somewhat more likely to experience poverty increases than the suburbs of Democratic districts.** Fully 93 percent of Republican districts experienced an increase in the suburban poor population (173 of 187) compared to 83 percent of Democratic districts (151 of 181) between 2000 and 2007–11. Suburban areas represented by Republicans were also more likely than those represented by Democrats to experience an increase in their poverty rate during that period. Suburban poverty rates increased in 86 percent (160) of the Republican districts from 2000 to 2007–11, versus 71 percent (128) of the Democratic districts.
- **Democrats still represent poorer suburbs than Republicans on average, but the gap has narrowed.** Together, suburban areas in the 181 Democratic districts remain somewhat poorer (11.6 percent poverty rate in 2007–11) than the suburban areas in the 187 Republican-controlled districts (9.4 percent poverty rate in 2007–11). But the combined poverty rate in the Republican areas grew slightly faster in the 2000s (2.1 versus 1.9 percentage points, respectively), and the suburban poor population itself grew by 52 percent in Republican districts, compared to 30 percent in the Democratic areas.
- **Districts with the fastest growth in the suburban poor population over the 2000s lean red.** Of the 10 districts where the suburban poor population expanded most rapidly, seven are currently represented by Republicans, including districts outside of Sun Belt cities like [Dallas](#), [Houston](#), [Phoenix](#), [Las Vegas](#), and [Atlanta](#) (see Table 1).
- **Districts where the share of suburbanites living below poverty rose fastest during the 2000s lean blue.** Seven of the 10 districts with the largest increases in their suburban poverty rates are currently represented by Democrats, including districts in and around [Indianapolis](#), [Atlanta](#), [Detroit](#), [Houston](#), and [Dallas](#) (see Table 2).

¹ To calculate district level poverty estimates for the 113th Congress, we allocate census tract data from the decennial census and American Community Survey to district boundaries based on where the centroid of the tract falls.

² For tracts located in the 100 largest metropolitan areas we identify whether a tract is located in a primary city or suburb based on its centroid. Estimates of “suburban areas” within congressional districts represent only the tract or tracts within the district that have been identified as suburban. For more information on how primary cities and suburbs are defined, see our [data notes](#).

CONFRONTING SUBURBAN POVERTY IN AMERICA

TRENDS IN THE POOR POPULATION BY 113TH CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT, 2000 TO 2007–11



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

Unfortunately, poverty—suburban or otherwise— isn't very high up the congressional agenda right now. Perhaps that reflects, at least in part, a misunderstanding of the partisan character of poverty. Certainly, Democrats are more inclined to see an active role for government in addressing poverty's challenges. But Republicans, too, should want to see scarce federal resources for community economic development, affordable housing, and core educational and health services reach areas of growing poverty. One idea we advance in our book that should have bipartisan appeal would devolve more flexible resources to states and regions in a [Metropolitan Opportunity Challenge](#), helping them harness multiple programs strategically to benefit urban and suburban communities alike.

As the economic recovery continues, suburban poverty will hopefully recede, but it will not disappear. That makes poverty in the United States more of a shared challenge—not just economically and socially, but also politically—than ever before.

CONFRONTING SUBURBAN POVERTY IN AMERICA

TABLE 1. TOP 10 DISTRICTS FOR PERCENTAGE CHANGE IN THE SUBURBAN POOR POPULATION, 2000 TO 2007–11

State	District	Representative	Party	Suburban Poor Population, 2000	Suburban Poor Population, 2007–11	Change (%)
North Carolina	12	Melvin L. Watts	D	621	4,740	663
Texas	17	Bill Flores	R	1,336	6,767	407
Texas	7	John Abney Culberson	R	7,730	25,463	229
Indiana	7	André Carson	D	4,200	12,482	197
Arizona	8	Trent Franks	R	14,590	42,304	190
Arizona	5	Matt Salmon	R	9,793	27,485	181
Nevada	3	Joseph J. Heck	R	17,074	47,874	180
Georgia	7	Rob Woodall	R	28,052	77,520	176
Arizona	7	Ed Pastor	D	2,648	7,301	176
Nebraska	2	Lee Terry	R	4,035	10,337	156

TABLE 2. TOP 10 DISTRICTS FOR INCREASES IN THE SUBURBAN POVERTY RATE, 2000 TO 2007–11

State	District	Representative	Party	Suburban Poverty Rate, 2000 (%)	Suburban Poverty Rate, 2007–11 (%)	Change (% pts.)
Indiana	7	André Carson	D	8.4	21.0	12.6
Texas	17	Bill Flores	R	3.4	11.1	7.6
Georgia	4	Henry C. Johnson	D	8.1	15.7	7.6
Michigan	13	John Conyers	D	10.6	18.1	7.5
North Carolina	2	Renee L. Ellmers	R	7.5	14.5	7.1
Texas	18	Sheila Jackson Lee	D	13.4	20.4	7.0
California	24	Lois Capps	D	6.0	13.0	6.9
Michigan	2	Bill Juizenga	R	8.0	14.7	6.7
Georgia	13	David Scott	D	8.0	14.5	6.5
North Carolina	1	G. K. Butterfield	D	15.5	21.8	6.3

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

Note: Estimates in Tables 1 and 2 represent only the suburban portion of each district.