

## Confronting Suburban Poverty in the Greater New York Area

**Alan Berube**, with the Brookings's Institute, presents on Confronting Suburban Poverty:

- Alan and Elizabeth Kneebone travelled around 25 cities in the U.S. to understand the changing geography of poverty in the suburban part of metropolitan areas
- His and Elizabeth's book, *Confronting Suburban Poverty in America*, attempts to provide a narrative of the changing geography of poverty and opportunity
- The two 'punch-lines' of the presentation are: the geography of poverty and opportunity has changed, and we need a new agenda for metropolitan opportunity; we are viewing these things from a nation-wide and NYC perspective
- In regards to NY Metro area, philanthropic investment typically focuses on the largest cities in the surrounding areas with the most mature anti-poverty infrastructures (NYC, Newark, Jersey City)
- Statistics from Suffolk County, NY demonstrate that the poverty wage (\$7.00) is four times less than what is needed for a living wage (\$28.60) because of the high cost of living; the magnitude of this disparity is even larger in the suburbs because of a limited social safety net and poorly planned land development patterns.
- While concentrated poverty rate remains highest in big cities, nationally, suburbs are home to the largest and fastest growing poor population. Between 2000 and 2008-2012, the number of suburban poor living in distressed neighborhoods grew by 139 percent—almost three times the pace of growth in cities.
- The poor population rose significantly in most NYC suburbs over the last decade, but has declined in Manhattan and Brooklyn
- There are five major factors that have been identified as causes for the increase in suburban poverty rates:
  1. Population Change
    - a. Suburbs used to be homogeneous, middle class, and white; now, it is more reflective of wider America
    - b. Suburbs are growing faster in population than cities are
  2. Immigration
    - a. New immigrants are no longer going into city portals, but straight to the suburbs as they are seen as more affordable
  3. Housing
    - a. Housing is now more affordable in the suburbs than in the cities because of aging homes and aging areas within the suburbs
    - b. Housing costs have risen faster in NYC than in surrounding suburban areas; affordability is shifting towards housing in the suburbs
    - c. However, affordable housing built for low and moderate income households is very limited in suburban locations. Furthermore housing

segregation can be stronger in suburban communities and there are generally fewer rental apartment buildings. Long Island is a good example of the latter.

#### 4. Job Location

- a. Many jobs have drifted closer to the suburbs, such as retail and hospitality

#### 5. Regional Economic Change

There has been a lot of downward mobility in American families overall

- Region-wide, poverty is increasing the fastest among U.S. born suburban residents; this figure also reflects the children of immigrants
- Suburban poverty brings challenges, such as:
  1. Limited transit access
    - a. Effectiveness of transit from poor suburbs to urban areas is low
    - b. Residents can reach far fewer jobs via transit than city residents
  2. Strained local services
    - a. Anti-poverty programs that have been developed over decades were set up to address the geography of poverty; 50 years ago that geography was in the inner city and rural areas
    - b. There is a dearth of anti-poverty programs specific to suburban poverty
  3. Limited philanthropic resources - In 2011, barely 8 percent of anti-poverty funding from top foundations went to suburban-based organizations.
  4. Change in school population
    - a. Decreasing share of students with free-and-reduced lunch in the city, and increase of that population in the suburbs
    - b. Districts lack resources and experience with serving low-income student populations
- Organizations around the country are finding creative ways to address these problems; philanthropy can play an active part by enabling these organizations
- This can be achieved through funding organizations strategically, working across jurisdictional and programmatic boundaries to address regional issues, and helping to provide more than one type of service in more than one place
- IFF, The Road Map Project, and Latin American Youth Center are all organizations that have taken an innovative approach towards addressing poverty across boundaries and geography
- [www.ConfrontingSuburbanPoverty.org](http://www.ConfrontingSuburbanPoverty.org) engages with a lot of this material and gives more information about suburban poverty in the U.S.

**Donovan Richards, Jr.**, Council Member for District 31, discussed his experience and work with suburban poverty:

- Within Richards' district, there are 8000 public housing units with poor access to transit, poor educational opportunities, no equity, and poor access to fresh foods
- Seniors in his district are facing foreclosures
- Richards and other council members are attempting to look internally at how city council has been, or hasn't been, dealing properly with poverty; "you can't clean up outside until you clean up inside"
- Richards has been trying to engage the public in the government process, seen through the participatory budget; 23 City Council Members have signed up for a participatory budget, which builds trust and engagement with the public
- Richards emphasized the 'Ban the Box' legislation that just passed, arguing that we cannot expect people to not commit crimes when they cannot secure a job
- Richards emphasized the 'Credit Ban' legislation that just passed, as well, arguing that there is no correlation between credit scores and how well someone can perform in a job
- Richards has been working with immigrants to secure IDs for them; this enables this population to open bank accounts, enter government buildings, engage with government, and build trust with the government
- Over 2000 immigrants signed up for IDs within 2 weeks after it was offered
- Richards highlighted the issue of poor transportation, arguing that this is a huge roadblock for residents that are job hunting, and people with jobs are losing them, because of how inconsistent the transit is that is available to them
- Richards argued that "affordable housing is the issue of the day," not just how much of it there is, but the quality of the housing

**Steve Bellone**, County Executive of Suffolk County, discussed his experience and work with suburban poverty:

- Suffolk County is the larger of the two counties on Long Island, and there is a huge disconnect between pockets of wealth, like the Hamptons, and growing areas of poverty
- This issue is evident in Wyandanch, Suffolk County's most economically distressed community, where there are revitalization efforts underway
- Wyandanch was isolated, surrounded by prosperous communities, and it was difficult to connect the community to necessary resources
- Now they are re-opening a train system and rapid bus system there in a larger effort to connect Wyandanch to county resources

- Bellone emphasized leveraging economic development to help people's lives; resource centers have been opened in four high need communities to assist residents with jobs and skills trainings and provide social services and resources
- Bellone spoke about the de-centralized nature of Long Island, which creates hyper-local focuses, but makes it difficult to effect change on a regional level; to this point, transit infrastructure within Long Island has not been built upon in 150 years
- Bellone emphasized that the task at hand is to create an ecosystem where people can move around, and place jobs and housing downtown where people want to be
- **Melanie Hartzog** from Children's Defense Fund – New York, **Adam Barbanel-Fried** from Westchester United, and **Lucas Sanchez** New York Communities for Change all spoke about their organizations' efforts to address poverty from their respective focuses and missions

**Jerry Maldonado**, Program Officer of the Ford Foundation, discussed how to address suburban poverty:

- Shifting demographics in suburban areas allow for new opportunities to mobilize and build coalitions for change
- Maldonado mentions three categories that are important for philanthropies to invest in to move these issues
  1. Investment in stronger local organizing groups
    - a. Mobilize diverse leaders and build agendas to address these issues
    - b. Supporting indigenous organizations and having them collaborate
    - c. Supporting research, data, policy analysis needed to address solutions to problems, like affordable housing, in local and regional contexts
  2. Investment in engagement strategies
    - a. Engage people in the political system and civic engagement
    - b. Support for leadership pipeline for leaders that are representative of the communities they serve
  3. Investment in more permanent collaboration between funders and community organizers
- One venue for continuing this conversation is the New York State Grantmakers for Community Engagement, a funder network of local, regional, and national funders that share information and leverage and align their efforts to advance community participation and leadership across New York State. For more information, please contact: [staff@nysgrantmakers.org](mailto:staff@nysgrantmakers.org)

