

ENTERING Portland Suburbia Population in poverty: 189,515 (and rising)

Our sinking suburbs

STREET ROOTS ILLUSTRATION

Across the nation, suburbs now surpass cities and rural areas in the number of people living in poverty

BY JOANNE ZUHL
STAFF WRITER

If you want to know what homelessness looks like in the 21st century, you have to look beyond the familiar hoods and urban alleys. You have to head out to the 'burbs.

Nationwide, there's been a tipping point: The suburbs are now home to more people experiencing poverty than our nation's cities, with the population increasing at twice the rate. According to a new study by the Brookings Institute, the poor population in our suburbs grew 64 percent between 2000 and 2011, compared to 29 percent in our cities. By 2011, 16.4 million residents in suburbia lived below the poverty line, more than 3 million than the number in living in U.S. cities, according to the study.

For decades now, poverty in Portland and Vancouver's suburbs have outpaced the city proper. Our suburbs are home to 189,515 people living below the poverty line, more than twice the entire population of Beaverton and more than Gresham, Oregon City and Forest Grove combined.

Across the country, poverty grew to record levels in the 2000s ("It's the economy, stupid.") But the numbers of poor amassing in our suburbs was on the rise even before the Great Recession and the sluggish, jobless recovery. Once an icon of America's upwardly mobile, suburbia is grinding against the the weight of economic stagnation, and the dynamics of urban versus suburban poverty is posing a challenge to how we identify who is poor, why they are in need and subsequently what society can do to reverse this trend.



Elizabeth Kneebone

The Brookings Institute's Elizabeth Kneebone, who along with Alan Berube co-authored the new book "Confronting Suburban Poverty in America," says their book is as much about how we got here as it is understanding what needs to be done to get us out.

For decades, programs and agendas have focused on inner city poverty, but that agenda won't work as well with suburban populations where economic opportunities are limited. Kneebone says we have to approach the solution not as a collection of government agendas, but with a more metropolitan approach.

Joanne Zuhl: *What did you learn about our region?*

Elizabeth Kneebone: Both the urban area and the suburbs saw a rapid pace of growth in the poor population over the decade. In the city of Portland and Vancouver, the poor population grew by 71 percent, well above the national average. Yet in the suburbs, the poor population almost doubled in that time period, increasing by 99 percent.

J.Z.: *Is that astounding - do you gasp at those numbers like I just did?*

E.K.: That's what is so striking about the 2000s - it's not just the shift we're seeing and where the poor population is growing, but the magnitude and the pace at which the poor population has grown in recent years. That's part of the challenge for people and places dealing with this issue. In many cases this has happened so quickly, so rapidly, and particularly thinking about suburbs that don't necessarily have the same history of building up infrastructure and safety net supports that can help low-income families, that a lot of communities are playing catch-up. Or maybe don't even appreciate the extent to which their neighbors are struggling because it happened so quickly in so many places in recent years.

J.Z.: *What's causing this?*

E.K.: Big picture, there are two main reasons we see growth of poverty in the suburbs. It's when poor residents or families are moving into suburban communities, or as longer term residents have slipped down the economic ladder. In terms of people moving in, suburbs have grown faster than cities in the 2000s. And as they grew they became more diverse, economically and demographically.

Part of this is due to where affordable housing is in a region, and that can be shaped by a number of factors. Zoning and land use make a difference. But so do things like housing age. As housing becomes older, it becomes more affordable.

There is also the role of subsidies. We've seen

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The 2013 federal poverty line for an individual is an income of \$11,490 or lower. For a family of four, it is \$23,550.

See SUBURBS, page 4

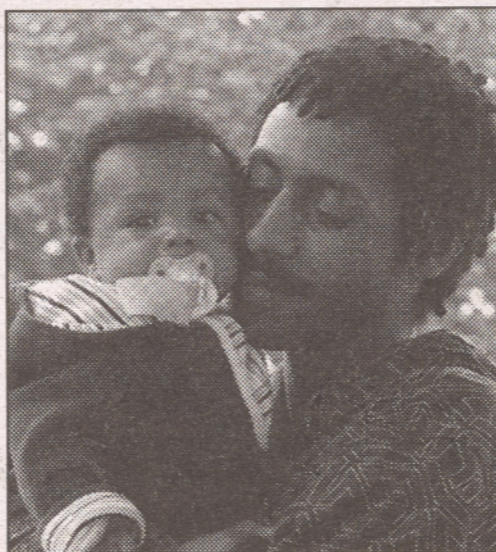
Inside



Dan Saltzman

Portland's new housing commissioner talks priorities for the city's homeless

Page 3



This is Portland

Photographer Intisar Abioto's images capture today's black Portlander

Page 7



Vendor Profile

Rain or shine George Ellars is always a reliable salesman for NW Portland

Page 6