

Local Voices

What people are saying around Portland about suburban poverty

"We are seeing more and more calls coming to City Hall. Our staff get three to five phone calls a week from people seeking help of various kinds. Prior to the recession we did not get any calls like that. One person called and said she lost her job three years ago after working for a company 13-14 years. Her water was turned off. She thought she had done everything right, gone back to school, gotten her masters and so on. ... It's very frustrating to watch good people suffer. I've never been shy to admit the problem is here in Beaverton.

"Beaverton has the most homeless students in the state: 1840 kids. It defies logic that other cities don't have a similar problem. It's just that the school does a good job in outreach. ... The numbers are staggering and nobody wants to talk about it. Not enough people are talking about because they just don't know."

— Denny Doyle, Beaverton Mayor

"With prayer – that's how I get through this stuff every day. It's so hard. I don't like the situation I'm in. It's not good at all. It's not good for kids at all. It traumatizes them. They need a stable place to call home.

When you only have some much time in a certain place because the next family has to come in, I just get through the day by the grace of God. It's hard, but there is a way."

— LaJaris Spann

Homeless mother living in shelter in Milwaukie with her children, ages 6 and 9.

"The demographics of poverty have changed over time in Multnomah County with the migration of poor people from inner parts of Portland to East County. That shift has definitely prompted us to rethink how we apply our resources for everything from health clinics to the opening last year of the new East County Courthouse. We are constantly evaluating and re-evaluating where the greatest current needs are for our county residents, and prioritizing scarce resources where they can do the most good.

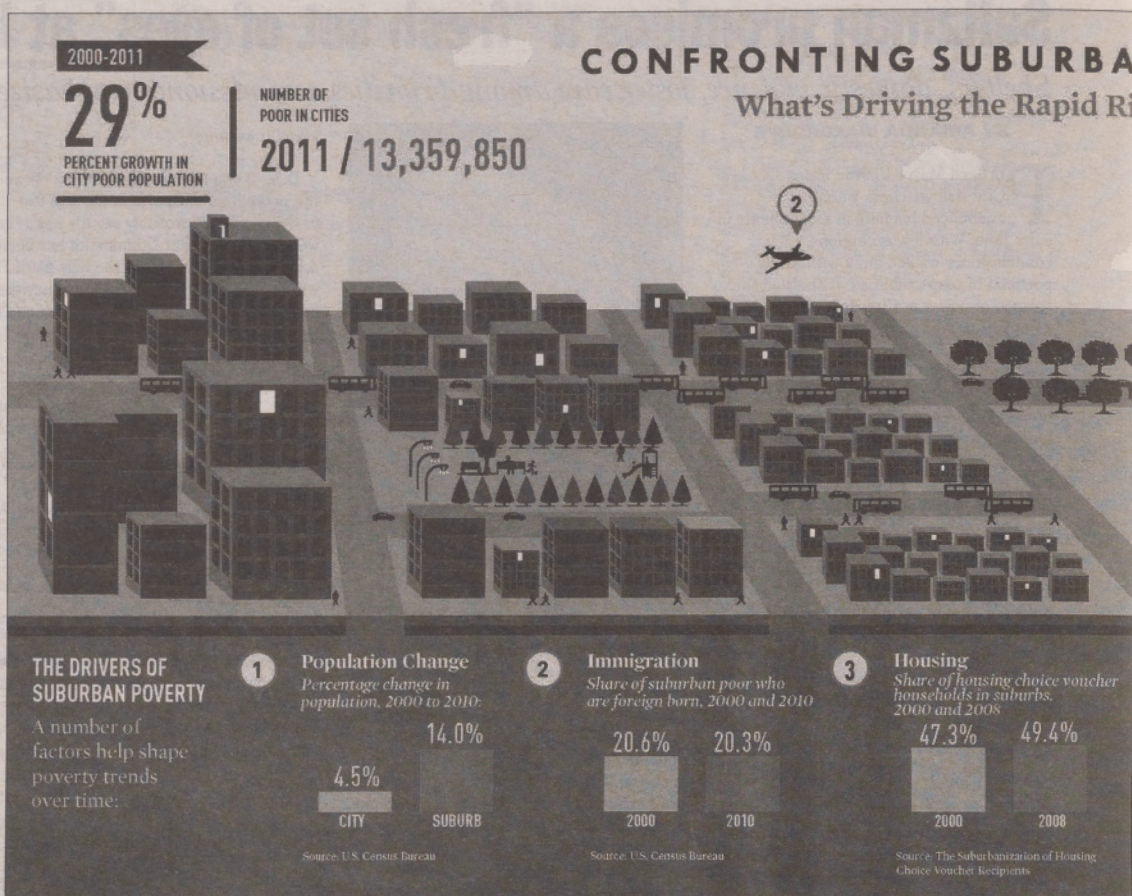
"We need to be communicating regularly with our neighboring counties so we can stay ahead of this trend and be working together to have the most effective response for vulnerable communities who depend on us. When it comes to poverty, all of us can do more to create family-wage jobs throughout our community."

— Jeff Cogen, Multnomah County Chair

"We used to be concerned about the ghettoization of poverty in the central city. ... I just think any concentration like this is not good for any community. But I think you're going to see a greater stress on neighborhoods further out. Greater stress and demand on schools that are overcrowded and whose funding is more compromised or challenged than PPS. These are communities that not long ago were part of that suburban ring that was generally seen as middle class.

— Douglass Alles, Director of Social Services, Catholic Charities

See LOCAL VOICES, page 5



SUBURBS, from page 1

an increasing shift toward Housing Choice (Section 8) vouchers, a portable subsidy, and they have been increasingly used in the suburbs.

And then you have the role of the foreclosure crisis recently. Across our metro areas, about three-quarters of foreclosures that have happened since the collapse of the housing market happened in the suburbs.

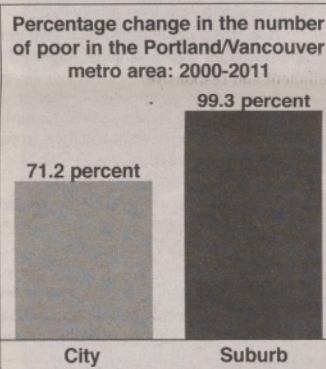
Housing dynamics definitely play a role, but so do jobs. Jobs have continued to suburbanize over the years. And lower-wage jobs tend to be even more suburbanized than higher-wage jobs. Manufacturing tends to be more suburbanized, and that was hit hard over the past decade.

**J.Z.:** Is there a cultural impact to these facts? Is there something not good that this is where it's happening?

**E.K.:** With (Section 8) vouchers, there have been concerted efforts from a policy perspective to de-concentrate poverty, especially in particularly distressed and very poor urban neighborhoods. The idea is you want to offer mobility so that these people can move to higher opportunity areas. Because there are a lot of challenges that come along with living in concentrated poverty. It can make it that much harder to get out of poverty because many of these communities are facing higher crime rates, poorer performing schools, poorer health outcomes – so there is a benefit to de-concentrating poverty. The challenge comes when mobility alone doesn't necessarily ensure that these residents are moving to higher opportunity places. They may not have the counseling services or information about where those opportunities are. So even as the population becomes more suburbanized, in many cases they're ending up in lower-income suburbs that are less jobs-rich than elsewhere in the region and may not have those connections to transit or better schools that one would hope for.

**J.Z.:** Do you think there's anything to the argument that we've become a magnet for services and that's why those numbers are

climbing?



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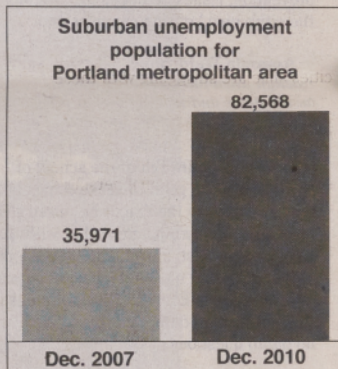
**E.K.:** Looking at the magnitude of these numbers, it's clearly more than just people moving into the region. This is a region that has grown over the decade and the suburbs did grow faster than the city. The suburb grew about 18 percent compared to 11 percent in the city. This is a good pace of growth in the community, but not enough to explain such rapid increases in the poor population.

It's about longer term residents falling behind economically. And you can look to a decade that saw two downturns, including the worst recession since The Great Depression.

There are also structural changes that impact these trends. We've seen some of the fastest job growth occurring in occupations that pay lower wages, that even if a family is working full-time, it may not be enough to keep them above the poverty line.

**J.Z.:** If this trend continues for another 10 years, what are we in for?

**E.K.:** It's so important to not just look at the overall changes in the poor populations, but to understand how these trends are playing out across communities. Suburbs increasingly struggle with these issues alongside cities, yet, our perceptions and policies haven't kept pace with how quickly things have changed. And the challenge there is that we don't really realign programs and policies that are in place to address poverty in communities,

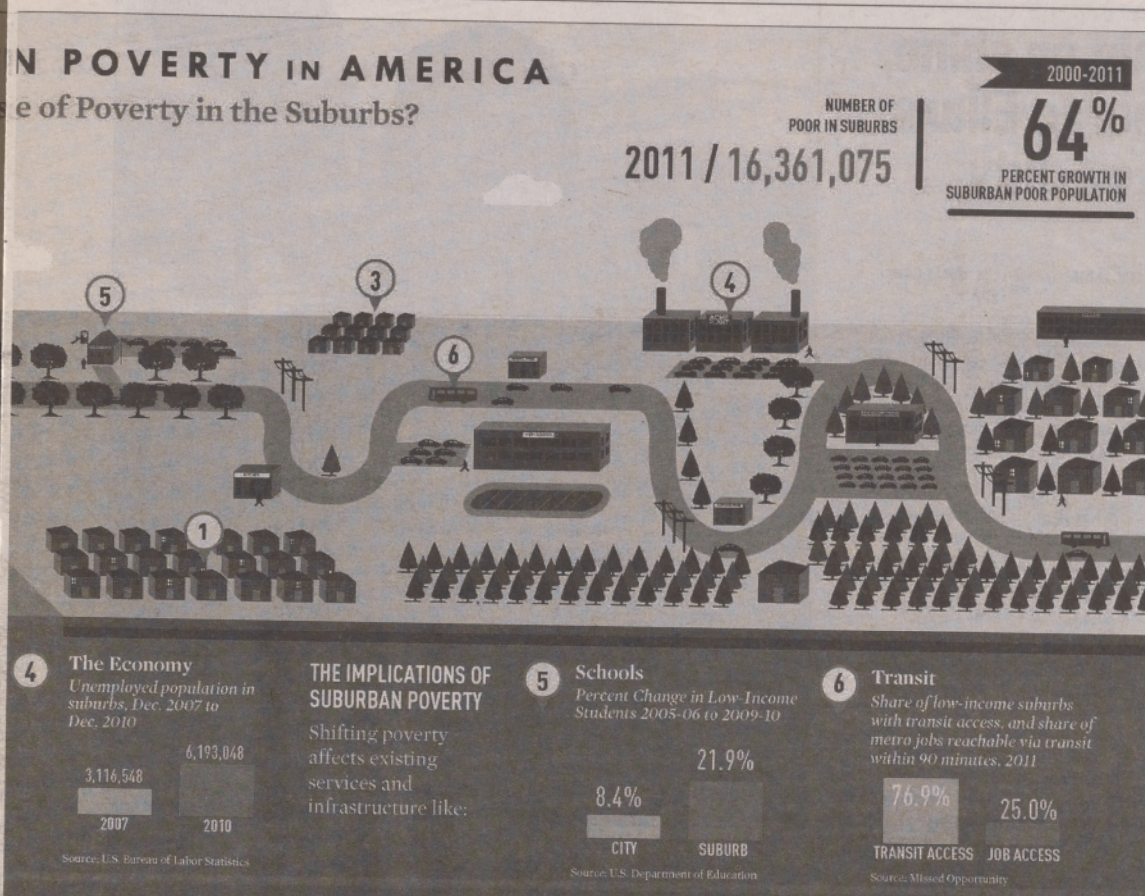


than we risk creating the same kind of challenges in suburban areas that we've been struggling with for decades in urban areas.

We've seen concentrated poverty rise in cities and suburbs. A third of the poor population in suburbs live in neighborhoods where poverty rates are 20 percent or higher. And that's about the level where we see the challenges associated with concentrated poverty begin to accrue. There should be some feeling of urgency here in thinking about how do we better adapt to the new geography of poverty, especially in a narrative of limited resources to better meet the needs of both urban and suburban residents. Thinking regionally how we can connect these residents in these communities to the kinds of opportunities that provide a pathway out of poverty.

**J.Z.:** Do you conclude that our anti-poverty efforts from the federal level have failed us?

**E.K.:** In the 50 years since Lyndon Johnson declared a war on poverty, we've learned a lot, from both the successes and the failures over time, on how to address the challenges of poverty. The challenge is that the systems we've built up over the decade to alleviate the poverty in place have left us with a very fragmented system and one that was built largely to address distressed inner-city neighborhoods. So it can be very difficult to make that system work and adapt to the landscape of poverty in the suburban communities.



LOCAL VOICES, from page 4

"They are working as hard as they can to try to build back their economies to get a job. But the recovery is very slow for those on the lowest end of the job market. It takes a much longer time... people are saying we're in a recovery, but we don't see a recovery for the homeless families we're serving. They look and look and look and they cannot get jobs. I think that is as true in Multnomah County where we have very strong services as it is for Columbia or Clark County. The families that we're seeking never go downtown.

"We're seeing more and more of Clackamas County and Washington County with a growing homeless population, it's just that there are no dollars from the fed government that are increasing. (They) cut both the funding to address homelessness and to address energy assistance and they cut the number of workers. Everybody is tightening their belt, more people are getting laid off and that's only increasing the problem."

— Jean DeMaster, Executive Director, Human Solutions, East Multnomah County

"The dynamic of homelessness is different in the suburbs than in the city. It's about family homelessness. It's taken HUD years to start looking at homeless families as an issue: HUDs focus has been on the more urban form of homelessness and not on the suburban form of homelessness. If you're a mom, homeless with two kids, the answer is not Burnside. The answer is finding someone to double up with, amp in the forest, beg someone who has an outbuilding or an unused RV on the back 40 so I can stay there.

"Their options are fewer. I see more people who have less education, less work experience, more disability than I use to. It is about who is able to cling to a job. We see more of the three kids, no GED, unemployed for six months or longer and harder to place.

"When you look at just the effect of trauma on children and homelessness on children, it's not good. Their lives are measurably changed and it creates burdens in the communities in which those kids grow up. We're looking at dynamics going forward that are not good.

"Will there be a moment when we say this is too much poverty as a society and we're going to make an investment to stop it?"

— Martha McLennan, Executive Director Northwest Alternatives, Clackamas County

"Fundamentally, I think that we have this incredible quality of life in Portland that we all love and makes it unique and different and a place where we all want to live. But there are people who are not able to access that economic opportunity or that quality of life. That's an indicator that we're not getting the job done. We have to have a regional strategy to make sure we are investing in the kind of jobs that provide access for people who are disadvantaged in different ways. We have to make sure that we are investing our transportation and open space dollars in ways that serve our lowest income communities; that we are regionally looking at strategies so that people can live in places appropriate for their families and the region."

— Sam Chase, Metro Council, Clackamas, Multnomah and Washington counties

This is not about how the problem has shifted. Really this is showing that these are regional challenges – that suburbs and cities alike are struggling with these issues, and the resources have not grown to keep pace with the need. So how do we better deploy those resources to try and overcome the challenges of a fragmented system? From the regional perspective and ending the poverty silo.

It's not just about finding stable housing for a family, it's also about housing near good education opportunities and growing job opportunities so workers can connect to the kind of employment that would help them work their way out of poverty. If not nearby is there transportation? All of these things relate to each other. I think the most promising models we've seen in addressing this are ones that try to overcome the fragmentation of the system to create a more scaled approach that cuts across jurisdictional boundaries but also these policy silos to really address this at the scale at which these challenges play out.

**"The geography of poverty has changed, but our perceptions haven't kept pace. That can be a barrier, in both understanding where the need is but who we are talking about. And in some communities, there can be real tensions that come out because a community is changing. People can marginalize the issue or turn away from the issue."**

costs to working this way, but their scale allows them to do this and navigate those barriers so that they're more effective, efficient and responsive.

In Chicago, it's municipalities that came together after the foreclosure crisis and instead of competing with each other, they worked together to attract federal funding and have continued to work as a collaborative around things such as neighborhood stabilization and housing, transit development and long-term planning in how to revitalize their community in balanced ways.

In Seattle, southern suburban districts came together with the Seattle School District to address achievement gaps, and did so with a cradle-to-career collective impact model, where they're working together and agreeing to the same set of metrics and the same set of goals to close the achievement gaps.

The program just recently won a Race to the Top award.

The most promising models find ways to work at a better scale. They're working across jurisdictional and policy silos to make limited funding stretch further and more strategically address the issues of the residents they're serving.

**J.Z.:** Why was it important for you and your co-author to create the Action Toolkit?

**E.K.:** It's intended to help people in these communities engage in these issues. It's really trying to give people the tools to start the conversation in their community and think about creating change to more effectively address the needs of people.

**J.Z.:** I'm assuming you're talking about bringing not just government officials, but nonprofits and organizations around the

table. How much of this involves bringing people who are experiencing poverty to the table?

**E.K.:** I think having that community engagement is very important. Given the scale and scope of need today, this is not something that's going to be solved just by government, or nonprofits or even the private sector. It's really going to take collaborative and integrated solutions. And for those solutions to be really effective it is important to have the voice of the residents and the community that's really struggling with these issues at the table.

**J.Z.:** How much do stereotypes become an issue or obstacle in dealing with this?

**E.K.:** That's a really important point. The geography of poverty has changed, but our perceptions haven't kept pace. That can be a barrier, in both understanding where the need is but who we are talking about. And in some communities, there can be real tensions that come out because a community is changing. People can marginalize the issue or turn away from the issue. Whereas when you really look at the numbers of who is struggling, this is happening in all communities, including places people often thought of as immune to these trends. And it can be invisible in these communities to a certain extent. And no one place can really tackle this on its own.

This is a shift that has been playing out over decades, and the tip that we've seen toward the suburbs happened even before the Great Recession. So even as we hope to see the poverty numbers move in the right direction as the recovery numbers begin to take hold, the idea that this is a regional challenge will persist.

Learn more about suburban poverty and the Action Toolkit at [www.confrontingsuburbanpoverty.org](http://www.confrontingsuburbanpoverty.org)

This feature is part of our ongoing coverage exploring poverty in our suburbs. Look for more in upcoming editions of Street Roots.