Behind the Numbers

For a look at more data and discussion, go to pages 29, 58 and 67.

The Suburbanization of Poverty

Past reports in this series have included discussions about place and poverty, about the fact that opportunity in our society has an uneven geographic distribution, and about the importance of recognizing the strengths of each neighborhood, especially those that are sometimes too easily characterized as distressed.[1]

The introduction of the annual American Community Survey in 2005 has given researchers a new tool for analyzing trends in the population and their impact on these issues. This has proven especially timely because of changes in the nation's economy in the past decade. 2000, the year of the last decennial Census, turns out to have been a peak year, followed by a recession in the early years of the new century. The economy grew from 2005 to 2007, but then entered a very steep recession.

Researchers at the Brookings Institution have recently examined how these changes have affected the number and distribution of poor Americans.[2] In brief, the number of poor people in America has grown by 5.2 million, an increase of 15.4% from 2000 to 2008, a rate that is almost double the overall population growth rate (8.1%) over that period.

Just under 89% of this increase has happened in the suburbs, small metropolitan areas and non-metropolitan areas of the country, i.e., outside of the nation's largest cities, with the suburbs experiencing the fastest growth. In fact, there are now 1.5 million more poor people living in America's suburbs than in its primary cities, meaning that the suburbs have now become home for the largest proportion of poor people – a "tipping point" in the words of the report.

The Brookings researchers included the Dayton Metropolitan Area for which, of course, Dayton is the primary city. The remaining parts of the Metropolitan Area – the rest of Montgomery County and all of Greene, Miami and Preble Counties – are classified as suburbs in their analysis. They found that the Dayton area had already reached this tipping point by 2000, when just over 56% of the region's poor people lived in the suburbs. (See Figure 1.)

All of these data use the official federal poverty thresholds which are updated annually but which use guidelines developed in the 1960's. Based on the current cost structures in our society for things such as food, housing, transportation and healthcare, the Brookings researchers also looked at an alternate definition of "low income", twice the federal poverty line.

Using this broader definition, 68,958 individuals in Dayton – or 51.7 percent of the population – were considered "low income" in 2008, compared to 170,170 (25.3 percent) in the suburbs. (See Figure 2.)

By any measure, poverty is growing in our region, both in the numbers of people involved and in the number of neighborhoods that are affected.

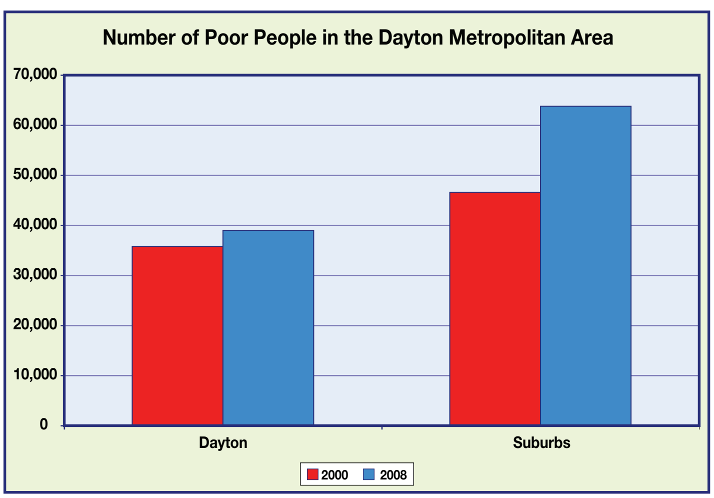

Figure 1. *In 2008, 38,936 people in Dayton lived below the poverty level ($21,834 for a family of four), compared to 63,771 poor in the surrounding suburbs. This represents a less than 9% increase for the city compared to 2000, and over a 36% increase for the suburbs.*

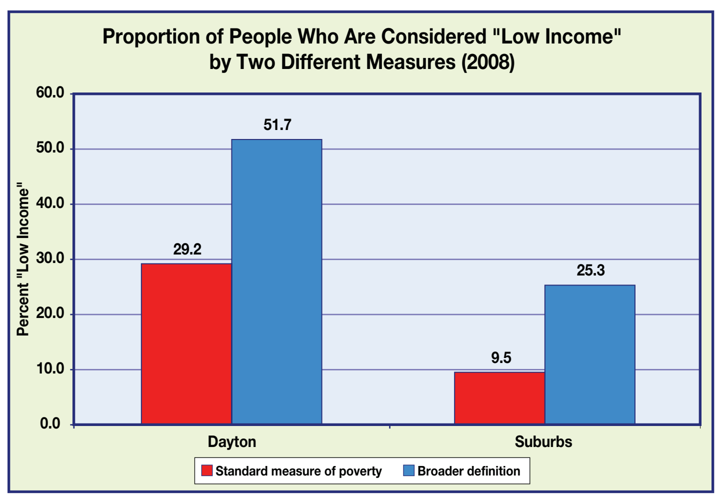

Figure 2. *The broader definition (200% of the poverty line) includes people who are often described as "struggling to make ends meet." This measure leads to a 177% increase in the proportion of Dayton residents who are considered "low income" (51.7 / 29.2 = 1.77) but a 266% increase for suburban residents (25.3 / 9.5 = 2.66).*

[1] See, for example, "Neighborhood Indicators," *2006 Progress Report on Community Outcomes, Indicators and Strategies*, pgs. 59-61; and "The Geography of Opportunity," *2007 Progress Report on Community Outcomes, Indicators and Strategies*, pgs. 55-57.

[2] Elizabeth Kneebone and Emily Garr, "The Suburbanization of Poverty: Trends in Metropolitan America, 2000 to 2008" (Washington: Brookings Institution, 2009).