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The New Suburban Poverty

By *LISA MCGIRR*

In a development in the Cleveland suburb of Warrensville Heights, seven of 14 homes were in foreclosure and boarded up last fall.

In many of America's once pristine suburbs, harbingers of inner-city blight — overgrown lots, boarded up windows, abandoned residences — are the new eyesores. From the Midwestern rust-belt to the burst housing bubbles of Nevada, California and Florida, even in small pockets of still affluent regions like Du Page County, Ill., the nation's soaring poverty rates are visibly reclaiming last century's triumphal "crabgrass frontier." In well-heeled Illinois towns like Glen Ellyn and Elgin, unkempt, weedy lawns blot the formerly manicured, uniform and tidy landscape.

The Brookings Institution reported two years ago that "by 2008 suburbs were home to the largest and fastest growing poor population in the country." In the previous eight years, major metropolitan suburbs had seen poverty rates climb by 25 percent, almost five times faster than cities. Nationwide, 55 percent of the poor living in the nation's metropolitan regions lived in suburbs.

To add insult to injury, a new measure to calculate poverty — introduced by the Census Bureau just last year — darkens an already bleak picture: nationally, 51 million households had incomes less than 50 percent above the official poverty line, and nearly half of these households were in suburbs.

Why is poverty soaring in the suburbs? Part of the answer, according to the Brookings Institution, is simple demographics: More Americans live in the suburbs, so there are more poor people there, too. But the recent downturn has also had an outsize impact on suburbs, with the decline in certain categories of jobs and an end to the housing boom that drew many urbanites and immigrants to the suburbs in the first place.

Could the rising tide of suburban poverty threaten the core assumptions of suburban life?

While suburbs have always been more diverse economically and culturally than popular imagination would have it, soaring poverty rates threaten the very foundations of suburban identities, suburban politics and the suburb's place in the nation's self-image. "Keeping up with the Joneses," the midcentury caricature of suburban conformity, materialism and consumption has given way to a new suburban normal of making ends meet, with many formerly middle-class

families in detached single-family homes struggling to pay mortgages and utility bills, and to repair aging cars.

As these residents increasingly turn for help to packed local food pantries and crowded county welfare offices, their sense of their own identity and that of the suburbs where they live is itself being transformed. It won't be long before the politics of suburban living change too.

The climbing rates of suburban poverty mark a definitive end to the Fordist model of mass production and consumption, and its most internationally recognized poster child: homogeneous middle class families cradled safely in ever expanding suburban developments. To be sure, this now quintessential form of American living — tract subdivisions distant from work, shopping and urban amenities — was itself once an American novelty.

The public infrastructure built during the New Deal, World War II and the cold war transformed the nation's built environment. That part of the story is familiar. Government highway programs significantly shortened travel times from surrounding urban centers. Developers leveraged cheap mass-building techniques, G.I. loans to returning veterans, and Federal Housing Authority programs to conjure subdivisions in farm fields from Levittown, N.Y. to Anaheim, Calif. Working-class men and women could purchase homes with government-backed low-interest mortgages; loans to veterans required no down payments.

These subsidized opportunities increased the number of American homeowners from 40 percent in 1940 to 62 percent in 1960. The suburban share of the nation's population grew from a mere 7 percent in 1910 to 32 percent by 1960. By 1970, the Census Bureau declared that the United States had "become a nation of suburbs." By then, suburbs in metropolitan areas surpassed central cities and non-metro areas in population.

The rapid growth, particularly coupled with the population shift to the Sun Belt in the last third of the 20th century, had weighty political implications. It incubated a distinctive variant of conservative politics and built a class of middle-income voters that has tended to favor the Republican Party.

America's postwar identity was deeply rooted in this upwardly striving suburban idyll. In reality, of course, American suburbs never realized this golden vision. These communities have always been socio-economically diverse, socially stratified and sites of downward as well as upward mobility. Still, during the economic expansion of the half-century after World War II, poverty, at least so it seemed, was somebody else's problem — and that someone was perceived as urban and non-white.

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Indeed, in 1962 Michael Harrington argued in "The Other America" that poverty survived amid broad prosperity precisely because it was invisible to most Americans. "Living out in the suburbs," Harrington declared, in what now seems like quaint nostalgia, "it is easy to assume that ours is, indeed, an affluent society." Americans, he suggested, no longer saw poverty just "on the

other side of the tracks” in their towns and small cities, but as a distant problem of the inner city, glimpsed only fleetingly from commuter trains or highway traffic.

The conceit that poverty is a problem suffered by other — often less deserving — people was an essential part of suburban self-identity that was reflected in its politics. Better-heeled suburban schools, sports teams and private recreation contributed to an ethos that emphasized family residential security, individual meritocracy and private life. Its inhabitants conveniently forgot that their cherished neighborhoods were in fact dependent on the programs of the New Deal state, not to mention the federal residential security maps that privileged white Americans.

Out of this unusual cocktail of state welfare and private speculation emerged a status-quo reinforcing preservationist politics caught in the acronym, Nimby (Not in My Backyard.) The California tax revolt in the 1970s was the quintessential expression of this, an effort to contain city, county and state spending deemed parasitical on suburban tax bases. Never mind that California’s Proposition 13 crippled municipalities’ abilities to raise property taxes and the state’s capacity to raise income to finance essential public services. Proposition 13 and its ilk won widespread support nationally because suburbanites self-identified as producers, not recipients, of services.

In 1980, Ronald Reagan rode this ethos to the presidency and launched a broader attack on the New Deal state itself. Despite the many signs that the golden age of suburbs has passed, its political legacy continues to animate elements of popular conservatism, especially through the anti-tax elements of the Tea Party.

Could the rising tide of suburban poverty threaten the core assumptions of suburban life? Many suburbanites will no longer be able to insulate themselves from problems they used to associate with the inner city: poverty, social disorder, drugs and violence. What will this mean for the new suburban poor, for suburban municipalities and for the United States?

At the most basic level, poor people living in suburbs face challenges gaining access to services they need, because the municipalities they live in are unaccustomed or even hostile to providing them, or are simply unable to do so. Suburbs, with their thin safety nets, are not well equipped to handle the rising demands for help. Local food pantries in suburbs across the nation are stretched beyond capacity to meet the needs of the new poor. The Parma Heights Food Pantry in Ohio served thirty-six families in 2007 and now must meet the needs of 260 families. In El Paso, Colo., county workers have taken to working nights and Saturdays to meet exploding demands for aid.

The suburban poor also face the geographic challenges of decentralized living. Car ownership is a costly, brittle lifeline in suburbs with weak public transport networks. Budget cuts often target public transportation first, hindering access to jobs, as well as services. Suburban poverty also throws into bold relief the environmental burden of the suburbs; poor people are faced with the challenge of heating and lighting spacious but energy-inefficient single-family homes.

Chances are, however, that suburbs facing the highest burdens of the new poverty will be least able to meet them because of the economic recession and the spatial retreat of the better off. Just

as many white Americans fled the cities for the suburbs in the 1960s, leaving the cities behind with declining tax revenues and fewer job opportunities, there is new cycle of exodus of the well-to-do from inner-ring metropolitan suburbs. As the better-off retreat, the provision of amenities and essentials from parks to schools to garbage pickup, heavily funded by property taxes, are bound to flounder for those left-behind.

One recent study conducted by Sean Reardon and Kendra Bischoff of Stanford University documented the spatial sorting by income that is going on, with the wealthy flocking together in new exurbs as well as gentrifying pockets of urban centers. In 1970 — the high-water mark of a more homogeneous suburban America — only 15 percent of families in metropolitan areas lived in socio-economically segregated neighborhoods categorized as affluent or poor. In 2007, that figure was 31.7 percent.

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The replacement of America's middle-class suburbs, however flawed, by wealthier exurbs and secondhand suburban remnants is a leading symptom of America's 21st-century reinvention as a society of stark class divisions, spatial segregation and inherited social status. It will take bold politics to reverse trends like these, including higher taxes on the national, state and local levels to meet the needs of the poor spread out in these fractured, isolated communities.

It is not likely that the 2012 election will be the terrain of the bold, although President Obama's proposal for tax increases on the wealthy is a step in the right direction. At this point, the festering pain in suburbia may not translate into suburban support for increased public revenues and spending. But as suburbs redefine themselves to grapple with the reality of poverty in their midst, public solutions will likely find growing appeal in places whose voters have historically favored fiscal conservatism.

Generally speaking, the suburban voter of the past has tended to vote Republican in national elections. The new suburban poverty may well remake those politics. A recent survey by the National Center for Suburban Studies found that 59 percent of suburbanites, while skeptical of Obama's performance and deeply dissatisfied with their personal economic circumstances, favored raising taxes on the wealthy. Obama's recent pledges to build a "fairer" nation and to level the playing field in favor of poor and middling Americans may resonate with struggling suburban residents.

The new poverty may well loosen the suburbs' historic ties to the Republican Party with its emphasis on individualist solutions. Looking toward the future, the new suburban poverty should sound an alarm bell that the suburban "way of life" itself may be better suited to an era now past. It suggests that we should rethink public policies that have long favored homeowners and decentralized living.

Though politically difficult, in the long term public policy should seek to reshape the national landscape to prioritize denser forms of living. Many metropolitan centers, from New York to Atlanta to San Francisco, have fared better in this downturn. This may hold the key to future

economic growth. We should take the opportunity afforded by our new consciousness of suburban poverty and push policy makers to encourage the efficient use of sustainable energy, better integration of public and private transportation, and to offer alternatives to home ownership as the signal achievement of the American way of life by taking the dramatic and long overdue step of abolishing the federal mortgage interest deduction. The American dream of suburban domestic bliss has been fostered by sixty years of public policy; a new American dream of sustainable community and solidarity in urban life is also within reach, if public policy once again lends a hand.

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