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Suburban Disequilibrium

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A little pocket of Los Angeles County tucked into the foothills of the San Gabriel Mountains reflects a crucial facet of suburban life. There's tiny, wealthy Bradbury, a town that prides itself on having one of the richest ZIP codes in Los Angeles, where a house is on the market for \$68.8 million. A couple of miles to the east is Azusa. This modest suburb is more than two-thirds Latino, a town of working families whose incomes and home values are a sliver of the wealth nearby.

These towns represent extremes of social inequality, but in Los Angeles and other areas, they reflect a defining pattern of contemporary suburban life. Nationwide, rich and poor neighborhoods like these house a growing proportion of Americans, up to 31 percent compared with 15 percent in 1970, according to a recent study by Sean F. Reardon and Kendra Bischoff. Meanwhile, iconic middle-income suburbs are shrinking in numbers and prospects.

Today's suburbs provide a map not just to the different worlds of the rich and the poor, which have always been with us, but to the increase in inequality between economic and social classes.

From the historian's perspective, these patterns also reveal another truth about suburban places: their tendency to sustain and reinforce inequality. Bradbury and Azusa have maintained their spots in the top and bottom tiers of the Los Angeles suburbs for decades. The sociologist John Logan described this "stratifying" feature long ago, noting that localities held on to social advantages and disadvantages over time. Patterns are established, and successive waves of pressure — fiscal, political, social — tend to keep things moving in the same direction.

Some of this is obvious. High property values support high-achieving schools, which in turn increase property values and personal wealth. Racial redlining holds property values down, limiting investment in schools and preventing families from building equity, disadvantages that pass to the next generation like a negative inheritance. The point is not simply that rich and poor people live in different places through a kind of class sorting in the marketplace. The places themselves help to create wealth and poverty. Because of this power of places to fix inequity over time, current patterns are likely to outlive their residents.

Los Angeles embodies these processes in vivid ways, showing how recent trends have

amplified uneven landscapes from the past. At the high end, San Marino, Palos Verdes Estates and La Cañada Flintridge have ranked for decades among the county's top municipalities. All are picturesque suburbs, sited in some of the most visually appealing locales in the Southland. Adding to these natural advantages, each is carefully controlled by land-use restrictions that freeze in place their landscapes of high-end homes and freeze out almost everyone else. In San Marino, these buffers are so strong that home prices actually rose during the recession. At the other end, working-class towns like Azusa, San Fernando and Maywood began and remain in a lower tier. These suburbs started modestly with small homes and slender public investments, and they passed these humble trappings down through time.

Globalization helps drive these patterns to new extremes. Money flows into suburbs like San Marino and Palos Verdes, where Asian immigrants buy up expensive properties and generously donate their time and money to the local schools. Money flows out of poorer suburbs like South Gate, Bell and Huntington Park, all heavily Latino, where disposable income is tight and many families export remittances to a home country. New poverty builds upon old impoverishment. Infrastructure is stretched as renters crowd into dwellings that were modest to begin with. The toxic footprint of departed industries is left behind for new residents to contend with.

Many of Los Angeles's middling suburbs have also slipped, especially those ravaged by plant closures since the 1980s. The southern section of blue-collar suburbs was hit especially hard. Here, suburbia transformed from comfortable communities housing unionized workers with well-paying jobs in local factories that gave them access to a middle-class lifestyle to fiscally strained communities housing immigrants working in low-paying, nonunion jobs.

Outer suburbs have fared little better. As home costs skyrocketed in recent decades, families chased "affordable" housing to the exurbs. They took on outsize mortgages and monster commutes, and they took with them congested roads, smog and sprawl. Compounding these strains, tax revenues lagged behind the cost of schools, roads, parks and libraries — the very infrastructure necessary to sustain middle-class life. This edifice came crashing down in the recession. In the Inland Empire, 60 miles east of Los Angeles, one in six homes entered foreclosure between 2006 and 2009. Billboards on the interstate recite a sad litany of child custody law, foreclosure counseling and addiction hot lines — symbols of the good life turned inside out.

Policies to redress suburban inequality must focus not only on factors like income but also on tax equity across metro areas and regional planning that fairly distributes resources and responsibilities (like affordable housing). We should limit the mortgage-interest deduction for second homes and for values above the regional median. These steps would reduce distortions that inflate housing prices and concentrate wealth in what are already wealthy places.

It is not enough to call for measures that stop suburbanization — the suburbs aren't going

anywhere. If all we do is try to pretend away their radically unequal fortunes, we will just drop a new suburban inequality on top of the old one.

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