

Chicago Tribune

More poor are living in suburbs, Brookings study says

Chicago ranks fourth in the nation among cities that have seen a large shift of poor to the suburbs.

By Kristen Mack, Tribune reporter

January 22, 2010

Melissa Smith moved from the South Side to the suburbs in search of a cheaper, easier, idyllic way of life.

Her Naperville apartment had the added appeal of a pool, gym and free October rent. But her suburban fantasy didn't last long.

Smith's nursing assistant hours at Sunrise Senior Living were cut in November. Then an emergency appendectomy two months into her pregnancy put her on bed rest until February.

Now her boyfriend, Jeffrey Andrzejewski, has to shoulder the household finances on \$8.50 an hour. The couple are behind on rent and facing eviction.

"It's very stressful with her being out of work," Andrzejewski said. "We're scrambling for help, just like everyone else."

Smith and Andrzejewski reflect a national trend that makes suburbia home to the largest and fastest growing population of people who live below the poverty line. There are 1.5 million more poor people living in suburbs than in big cities, according to a new Brookings Institution study, evidence that the balance of metropolitan poverty has passed a tipping point.

Chicago ranks fourth in the nation among cities that have seen a large shift of poor to the suburbs, according to the study released last week, "The Suburbanization of Poverty: Trends in Metropolitan America, 2000 to 2008."

Nearly half of the Chicago area's poor live in the suburbs, the study shows. In 2008, 48.1 percent of the area's poor lived in a 13-county region around Chicago compared to 38.9 percent living in the same region in 2000. Only New Orleans, Cleveland and Baltimore saw a larger increase in their share of suburban poor.

"This trend toward the suburbanization of poverty is only likely to continue in the wake of the most recent recession," said Elizabeth Kneebone, a Brookings senior research analyst and co-

author of the report.

Based on increases in unemployment throughout 2009, Brookings projects the Chicago metro area may experience another 2.3 point increase in its poverty rate.

Many social services providers and scholars are trying to get a handle on who the suburban poor are. They say the dismantling of Chicago's public housing complexes contributed to the population growth in some suburbs, but it's not the largest factor in the overall trend.

More than likely, experts said, the suburban poor are people who have lived there all along and are grappling with job loss, reduced pay and a flailing economy where one unexpected expense can send them into a tailspin.

Nationwide, the poor population increased by 15.4 percent from 2000 to 2008, according to Brookings. The greatest increases in the poverty rate occurred in Midwestern metro areas — particularly auto manufacturing regions — with Grand Rapids and Youngstown leading the list for increases in both city and suburban poverty rates.

While city residents remain almost twice as likely to live in poverty as their suburban counterparts, the pace of poverty growth in the suburbs has significant implications, the Brookings report concludes.

"The map of American poverty is changing and there's increasing demand for social services in the suburbs," Kneebone said. "It underscores the need for policies that foster balanced growth across metropolitan regions and labor markets, and that link up affordable housing, transit, workforce, and economic development."

The Greater Chicago Food Depository has seen some of the largest increases in demand in the last two years at pantries in the northwest and south suburbs, according to spokesman Bob Dolgan.

Scott Allard, a professor at the University of Chicago's school of social service administration, is working with Brookings to help policymakers, service providers, and other stakeholders address the new needs. The popular perception that suburbanites are well-off makes outreach and fundraising difficult for suburban nonprofits, Allard said.

"The face of poverty is often different in suburbs than it is in cities. The recession is starting to show this," he said. "This is the new poor who have never had a connection to a safety net before."

After Smith's surgery, her boss allowed her to use vacation and sick time to help make ends meet.

"For me, being home is nerve-racking. I don't know how not to work," said Smith, 33, who has tried to make payment arrangements with her landlords, but has been rebuffed.

Smith and Andrzejewski owe nearly \$3,000. They turned to Naperville CARES for help.

But with a \$13,000 monthly budget, the nonprofit has less than \$1,000 to get through the end of this month, and can't help them financially, said Janet Derrick, the executive director. Last year the agency saw an 18 percent increase in requests for help, Derrick said.

"We are seeing more clients who are underemployed, who have gone through savings. Their unemployment isn't keeping up and they have run out of options," she said. "It's not, 'I need \$200 to keep my utilities on,' but 'I need \$1,000 to stay housed.'"

The organization negotiates with landlords and utility companies to reduce fees. And it evaluates which services clients are eligible for and connects them to other agencies.

"We try to do anything we can without spending money," Derrick said. Although Naperville is considered affluent, roughly 4,600 families there live at or below the federal poverty guidelines, she said.

"People told us everything is cheaper and easier in suburbs, from the sales tax to clothes and apartments," said Smith. "Here the Dominick's is right up the street and go another two blocks and there's a Jewel. In the city you had to go 20 blocks before you saw a grocery store."

She and Andrzejewski want to make their new living situation work. They've pawned jewelry and video game systems to put money toward the rent. Their last hope is that their W-2s arrive soon so they can get an advance on income tax returns and pay off the balance.

"We're doing what we need to do, yet it's not enough," Smith said. "I thought everything would be better in the suburbs, but it's the same."