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Urban Poverty and Urban/Suburban Disparity Linked to High “Hardship” Rankings

Conditions in America’s largest cities and metropolitan areas improved over the 1990s, with indicators of hardship and “poverty impaction” – the share of residents living in extreme poverty – declining over that decade.

But the disparities in social and economic conditions between cities and surrounding communities are growing. And such inequality is linked to hardship in both central cities and metropolitan regions as a whole.

Those are among the key findings from the latest report on hardship in America’s metropolitan areas from the Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute of Government. The newly released report, *Divided They Fall: Hardship in America’s Cities and Suburbs*, by researchers David J. Wright and Lisa M. Montiel, builds on *An Update on Urban Hardship*, published by the Institute in 2004.

The study also found that poverty impaction and urban/suburban disparity were related to border elasticity – cities’ ability to expand their borders to capture some of the population growth on their suburban peripheries. Urban areas with the flexibility to adjust their borders this way had lower rates of poverty impaction and showed less disparity with their suburbs. Cities with the highest levels of border flexibility were found in the South, and those with the least in the Northeast and Midwest.

That link may be particularly important to policymakers, the study’s authors note, as the findings reinforce previous research showing that metro areas with less separation between city and suburbs fare better.

“The central finding is that disparities in social and economic conditions between cities and their suburbs are growing, and those disparities are related to hardship throughout the metropolitan region,” said Wright, Director of Urban and Metropolitan Studies at the Rockefeller Institute. “Stable and improving metropolitan areas have improving central cities at their core.

“The report underscores the importance of overcoming challenges from governmental fragmentation and sprawl in metropolitan settings,” Wright said.

The report found that growing urban/suburban disparity is linked to narrower improvements in urban hardship. So cities and metro areas that improved most on the hardship index were those with conditions most similar to their surrounding suburbs.

“Limited educational attainment, poverty, and crowded housing drove increasing disparities between central cities and their surrounding metropolitan areas, especially in the Northeast,” said Senior Research Scientist Lisa Montiel. “Places with most notable improvement in urban/suburban disparity levels over the 1990s tended to be from the West, with improvement fed by changes in the share of population under 18 or over 64, educational attainment, and employment.”

Sample of Findings from *Divided They Fall: Hardship in America’s Cities and Suburbs*

- During the 1990s, cities saw improvement in “poverty impaction” – the share of residents living in areas of extreme poverty – in three-quarters of the areas studied. (Areas of extreme poverty are defined as census tracts where 40 percent or more of the residents have incomes below the poverty level.) The city with the most significant improvement in poverty impaction during the 1990s was Arlington, Virginia; the one with the worst increase was Allentown, Pennsylvania.
- The longer-term trend in poverty impaction was less favorable, however, with levels increasing strongly between 1970 and 2000 for nearly half of the cities studied. That was about twice the number of cities that saw decreases in concentrated poverty. The city that showed the most significant improvement in poverty impaction during the 30-year period was San Jose, California; the one with the worst increase was Rochester, New York, followed by nearby Buffalo.
- About half of metropolitan areas had low or very low levels of hardship in 2000. Slightly more than 10 percent had high or very high levels. Metropolitan areas that saw strong decreases (or improvements) in hardship were places where the central city also experienced strong improvements in conditions.
- During the 1990s, about half of the metro areas experienced growing urban/suburban disparity --differences between their central cities and surrounding areas-- while in half the differences narrowed. But from 1970-2000, more than 80 percent of the metro areas saw such differences grow. The city with the strongest increase in urban/suburban disparity in the 30-year period was Allentown, Pennsylvania; the one with the biggest decrease (or improvement) was Columbus, Ohio.