Poverty skyrockets in US suburbs

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According to a new book published by the Brookings Institution, poverty in American suburbs soared more than 64 percent from 2000 to 2011. The report, titled *Confronting Suburban Poverty in America*, revealed that nearly 16.4 million suburban residents are now living below the federal poverty line, up from roughly 10 million in 2000.

The study reveals that the biggest surge in suburban poverty occurred in the centers of the housing collapse throughout the South and Southwest. Poverty in the suburbs of Phoenix, Arizona rose by 134.2 percent; Las Vegas, Nevada by 139.3 percent; Austin, Texas by 142.5 percent; and Atlanta, Georgia by 158.9 percent. However, there were a number of other cities spread throughout the country, many in former industrial areas, which also saw increases in poverty of 100 percent or more, including Detroit, Michigan (114.7 percent), Minneapolis, Minnesota (127.9 percent), Boise, Idaho (129.7 percent), Denver, Colorado (138.2 percent), and Salt Lake City, Utah (141.7 percent).

Although inner cities still have a greater proportion of their population living in poverty—22 percent, versus 12 percent in the suburbs—the latter's increase in poverty over the last 10 years was more than twice that of US cities—64 percent, versus 29 percent in the cities. The suburbs now hold the largest overall number of people living below the poverty limit, with 3 million more poor people than in the big cities and 9 million more than in rural areas.

As bleak as this portrait is, it nevertheless falls short of a truly accurate picture of the desperate situation facing millions more families. The federal poverty limit—defined as a yearly income at or below $22,314 for a family of four—is a grossly inadequate measure of real social misery. Indeed, shortly after last year's presidential elections a change in the poverty measure worked out by the Census Bureau produced an upward revision of the overall US poverty rate from 15 percent to 16.1 percent—the highest rate since 1965 and comprising nearly 50 million people. Forty-eight percent of the population is now categorized as at or "near poor," meaning they make less than twice the federal poverty limit (see: "The social crisis in America ").

The authors of the study pointed out that the suburbs are in many ways even less capable of providing an adequate safety net for the poor than urban areas. Much of what little social assistance the federal government provides is directed towards larger cities, and high fuel costs and the almost-total lack of public transportation in many suburbs pose significant obstacles to commuting to a job or traveling to social service agencies.

The study partly ascribes the explosive growth of suburban poverty to changing demographic trends. Many impoverished workers and youth from the inner cities have been chased out by gentrification and the destruction of public housing over the preceding decades and were able to find relatively more affordable housing in the suburbs—for a time. In addition, the destruction of manufacturing jobs around Midwestern cities has driven many to seek unskilled, low-wage work in the service industry.

Although suburban poverty has been growing steadily over the last decade, it was given a sharp impetus by the housing market plunge and subsequent economic crisis. According to the authors of the study, nearly 75 percent of home foreclosures have occurred in the suburbs. The steep fall in property values has had devastating effects for working and even middle class families: last year, a Federal Reserve report revealed that the median net worth of US families had plunged nearly 40 percent between 2007 and 2010 (see: "Crisis has thrown US families back 20 years"). By the Brookings Institution's own estimates, the number of those living in poverty in the suburbs increased by 1 million between 2010 and 2011 alone, from 15.4 million to 16.4 million.

As Jennifer Clary, research associate for the Chicago-based non-profit Heartland Alliance, told the *Chicago Tribune*, “It’s really clear that lower incomes combined with the rising cost of pretty much everything in life are really crushing people in the suburbs.” Along with skyrocketing costs for education and health care, workers’ wages, which stagnated throughout 1980s and 1990s, have been under concerted attack since the onset of the financial crisis, even as the stock market has recovered and reached new heights.

Despite the alarming character of the study’s revelations, its authors reach more or less conservative conclusions, stating that their findings “underscore the need to think differently”—as if the financial elite and their political representatives were merely unaware of the devastating impact of their anti-social policies. Reflecting the lie of the political establishment that there is simply not enough money to meet the needs of the population, Elizabeth Kneebone, one of the study’s authors, stated, “There are promising models emerging on how to use limited resources.” Among the book’s proposals is a “competitive” federal grant, in which states or municipalities would apparently be compelled to fight over funds for anti-poverty programs.

Regardless of the ineffectual proposals, the growth of social misery revealed in the report explodes the myth, widely peddled over previous decades that the population living in US suburbs is uniformly complacent and economically secure. As Kneebone admitted, “When people think of poverty in America, they tend to think of inner city neighborhoods or isolated rural communities. But today, suburbs are home to the largest and fastest growing poor population in the country.”

Whether it is in the suburbs or cities, in the US or throughout the world, the impact of the capitalist crisis and the growth of staggering inequality is creating enormous social tensions which will inevitably erupt into open class conflict.