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How The Suburbs Highlight The Divide Between America's Haves And Have-Nots

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Even as many urban areas have experienced a marked resurgence, America's farthest-flung suburbs have been facing deep and substantial challenges, as their rates of growth have slowed and their crime and poverty rates have risen. Alan Ehrenhalt dubbed this reversal of metropolitan fortunes "[the great inversion](#)."

Last spring, a much-touted Brookings Institution [report](#) noted "a closing of the city-suburb growth gap with the small downtick in city growth and an even tinier suburban growth uptick." Seizing on these numbers as a trend, some have heralded a return to suburban normalcy. Writing in [CityLab](#), I made the case that if city growth slowed somewhat between 2010 and 2011, it still outpaced suburban growth in a third of big metros, including high-tech, knowledge economy hubs like Washington, D.C., San Jose, Austin, Raleigh-Cary, Denver, and Seattle.

The urban revival is no flash in the pan, but at the same time, the majority of Americans still live in the suburbs.

The larger point is that the suburbs are far from a catchall. America's crabgrass frontier- like its cities – is divided into haves and have-nots.

Suburban haves live in denser, closer-in communities that feature walkable, mixed-used neighborhoods filled with bustling restaurants and shops, good schools, safe streets, and access to mass transit. Housing in these walkable suburbs is much sought after and commands a substantial premium, according to several recent studies.

Suburban have-nots tend to be the working class and poor who have been priced out of gentrifying cities and closer-in suburbs. As they are being pushed into the exurban fringes, the lack of transit lengthens their commutes, limits their access to jobs, and cuts them off from the thickest professional and knowledge networks.

Great and growing portions of the suburbs are experiencing the kind of economic distress that was once the exclusive province of inner cities. As of 2010, more than one in four suburbanites were poor or near poor—and one in three poor Americans lived in the suburbs. The number of suburban poor living in distressed neighborhoods has grown by 139 percent since 2000, compared with a 50 percent jump in cities, according to a recent [report](#) from the Brookings Institute. One commentator said we are witnessing the rise of "[slumburbia](#)."

The fact is, suburban growth is no longer fueled exclusively by middle class city-dwellers in search of better schools and more square footage. Some new suburbanites are drawn from small towns and rural areas further out; many are immigrants from foreign countries, more than 50 percent of whom bypass cities and settle directly in the suburbs of larger metro areas.

But as Leigh Gallagher notes in her book [*The End of the Suburbs: Where the American Dream is Moving*](#), "the rapid rise in the poor population in the suburbs in the 2000s can't be explained simply by more low-income residents moving there; a wide swath of the new suburban poor are longtime suburban residents who weren't poor in the beginning of the decade but fell below the poverty line as incomes stagnated and home prices increased."

Just as great urban neighborhoods are in short supply, driving real estate prices into the stratosphere in the most desirable sections of New York and San Francisco, there is a huge mismatch between the kinds of walkable transit-served suburbs people, especially young families with school-age children, want to live in and the houses and neighborhoods that are available and affordable on the housing market. America currently has about 30 million more homes on large lots than the market requires, according to research by Arthur Nelson of the Metropolitan Research Center at the University of Utah.

The old hole-in-the-doughnut pattern no longer holds. America's great divide is not between poor cities and affluent suburbs; its great metropolitan areas are patchworks of concentrated advantage and concentrated disadvantage that stretch across both. Some of its suburbs are thriving; others are in a steep decline. In this new, fractured and divvied metropolitan

geography, the traditional juxtaposition between “urban” and suburban” has lost much of its meaning.

The legendary urban designer David Lewis long ago told me that remaking our sprawling exurban communities, with their enormous footprints, shoddy construction, hastily thrown-up infrastructure, and dying malls, will make rebuilding the cores of cities like Philadelphia or even Detroit – with their compact infrastructure, dense neighborhoods, and historic structures – look like a walk in the park.

Renewing our suburbs is our next—and perhaps our most urgent—challenge.

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