One Million

Can we still idealize American suburbs as oases of opportunity and wealth? Not according to a recent study conducted by the Brookings Institution. In 2005, the number of poor people living in America’s suburbs surpassed the number of poor residents in our nation’s inner cities by 1 million individuals (Berube 4). In a society that has traditionally hailed suburbia as a manifestation of the American dream, this statistic initially seems counterintuitive. However, an examination of the sources and implications of this number reveals much about how the design of our communities influences the social structure.

One must be cautious to view this figure not only as a raw number, but also as a percentage. According to the study, the suburban poor account for roughly 53% of poverty in the metropolitan areas examined (4). Although overall poverty increased across the board, a boost in suburban population allowed the figures for suburbia to overtake those of cities (4). Indeed, this statistic is undoubtedly influenced by the migration of poor individuals from the cities to the suburbs. This does not invalidate the importance of the measurement, however; it implies that opportunities for success in our nation’s cities are declining steadily. As jobs follow the middle and upper classes to the suburbs, eventually so must the poor in order to have a chance at decent living.

But do the poor really find opportunity in the “haven” of the American suburb? Because of their tendency to segregate residents on the basis of income, the suburbs are likely to be a source of additional, intensified poverty. Areas of concentrated poverty are plagued not only by deprived economies and increased crime rates, but also by barriers to adequate education and employment—in short, to the tools vital for upward mobility. Schools in poorer areas, generally plagued by delinquency and a lack of human and financial resources, will not provide the same educational experience as their wealthy counterparts. Furthermore, businesses are usually unwilling to relocate to low-income areas, and poor individuals seeking quality employment must often look beyond their own communities. This pursuit is frustrated, however, by the cost of private transportation and by suburbia’s lack of mass transit options. Without effective education or adequate job opportunities, the concentrated poor are left without the tools necessary to escape poverty.

It is important to realize that exceptions exist. Regional variances occur, and not all suburbs are equal in their treatment of different social groups. However, it is clear that poverty is increasing in the realm once considered to be the ultimate land of opportunity. This statistic implies that the way in which we design our urban environment has dramatic effects on opportunity, inequality, and the overall social structure of our nation.