

The Landscape of Recession: Unemployment and Safety Net Services Across Urban and Suburban America

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“More than a year after the recession, demand for jobs and safety net services remains high, and will necessitate metropolitan-scale collaboration as the recovery progresses.”

Findings

An analysis of unemployment and SNAP (formerly known as food stamps) receipt in urban and suburban communities in the three years following the beginning of the Great Recession reveals that:

■ **Between December 2007 and December 2010, 99 large metro areas accounted for more than two-thirds of the net increase nationwide in the unemployed population, with the bulk of those increases concentrated in suburbs.** During that time, the number of unemployed in suburbs rose by 3.1 million, compared to 1.5 million in cities. By December 2010, the suburban unemployment rate trailed the city rate by less than one percentage point (8.9 percent in suburbs versus 9.8 percent in cities).

■ **Metro areas in the interior West like Las Vegas, Stockton, Fresno, and Riverside experienced the highest increases in unemployment in the three-year period since the recession began.** In these metro areas, unemployment rates in both cities and suburbs increased by more than 7 percentage points. In the year from December 2009 to December 2010, metropolitan unemployment rates fell in every broad U.S. region except the West.

■ **Among suburban communities, higher-density and mature suburbs experienced the greatest growth in their unemployed populations.** Older, denser suburbs saw their jobless populations more than double in the three years following the start of the recession. By December 2010, the unemployment rate in mature suburbs had surpassed the traditionally higher rates in low-density exurban communities (9.0 versus 8.9 percent).

■ **Suburban counties were home to a growing share of the nation’s SNAP recipients between July 2007 and July 2010, but urban counties still account for more than 60 percent of metropolitan SNAP receipt.** Suburban counties added 3.2 million SNAP recipients—an increase of 73 percent compared to 61 percent in urban counties. Faster enrollment gains in suburbs raised their share of metropolitan SNAP recipients from 36 percent in 2007 to 38 percent in 2010.

Twenty months following the official start of economic recovery, metropolitan communities across the country find themselves still struggling with high levels of unemployment and relying increasingly on services like SNAP. The demand for jobs and a social safety net—evident across cities and suburbs alike—is widespread, and will necessitate metropolitan-scale coordination to balance social and economic needs as the recovery progresses.

I. Introduction

Three years after the Great Recession began in December 2007, 6.6 million people have been added to the ranks of the unemployed, and demand for assistance through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as food stamps) is at a record high. Although the U.S. economy officially entered its recovery nearly twenty months ago, in July of 2009, job growth continues to be slow and uneven. The unemployment rate remains high at nearly 9 percent—though this rate varies considerably across the country.

This report, the third and final analysis in the *Landscape of Recession* series, tracks leading indicators of poverty and need across cities and their surrounding suburbs.¹ Specifically, this edition assesses unemployment trends by community type from the beginning of the recession (officially December 2007) through December 2010. It also analyzes trends among food stamp recipients, between July 2007 and July 2010, the most recent county-level data available. These indicators offer an initial glimpse of how poverty might trend in 2010, following two years of widespread, but uneven, increases in poverty across city and suburban communities.²

II. Methodology

This edition of *Landscape of Recession* analyzes two key indicators across different types of metropolitan communities: unemployment and participation in the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program.

Unemployment

Monthly data on unemployment come from the Local Area Unemployment Statistics (LAUS) program at the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. The preliminary December 2010 estimates represent the most recent local-level data available at the time of writing. Monthly data at the city and county level are not seasonally adjusted, so are only compared to the same month in prior years.

This analysis uses the U.S. Office of Management and Budget's 2007 definitions of metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs) for comparisons over time. Of the 100 largest metropolitan areas—based on revised 2007 population estimates—99 are included in the city and suburban analysis. *Primary cities* include the first city that appears in the official Office of Management and Budget metropolitan statistical area (MSA) name, and any other city in the MSA name with a population of 100,000 or more.³ *Suburbs* represent the remainder of the MSA outside of the city or cities. In addition to city and suburban designations, suburban counties are further categorized into four suburban types—high density, mature, emerging, and exurban—based on the share of the county (net of primary city or cities) that is urbanized according to Census 2000 (i.e. the share of the population living in urbanized areas).⁴

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Receipt

Data on SNAP participants come from the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Every six months FNS compiles state-reported data on SNAP recipients at the project area level, which is generally the county. Project areas that do not conform to county boundaries, or that do not have consistent data across time periods, are excluded from the analysis, leaving 76 of the top 100 metro areas with comparable data.

Because city data are not available for this portion of the analysis, “urban” counties are designated and compared to their suburban counterparts.⁵

III. Findings

A. Between December 2007 and December 2010, 99 large metro areas accounted for more than two-thirds of the net increase nationwide in the unemployed population, with the bulk of those increases concentrated in suburbs.

The number of unemployed nationwide increased by 6.6 million people, or 90 percent, between December 2007 and December 2010. Sixty-nine percent of this unemployment growth occurred in the 99 large metro areas analyzed in this report, even though these metro areas account for only 65 percent of the population.⁶ The growth of the jobless population in these areas led their unemployment rate—the share of the labor force looking for work, but not finding it—to rise even faster than the nation as a whole (4.5 versus 4.3 percentage points, respectively) over the course of the recession and recovery (Table 1).

Table 1. City and Suburban Unemployment in 99 Metro Areas, December 2007, 2008, 2009, and 2010

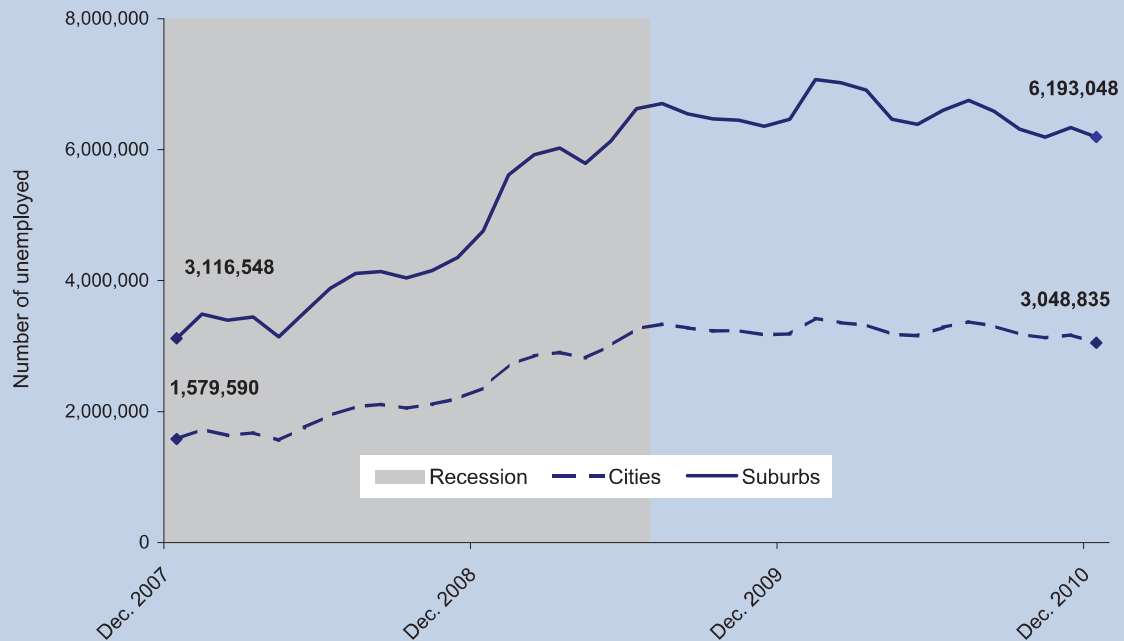
	Unemployment Rate				Percentage Point Change			
	Dec. 2007	Dec. 2008	Dec. 2009	Dec. 2010	2007-2010	Year 1 ('07-'08)	Year 2 ('08-'09)	Year 3 ('09-'10)
Nation	4.8%	7.1%	9.7%	9.1%	4.3	2.3	2.6	-0.6
99 Metros	4.7%	7.0%	9.6%	9.2%	4.5	2.4	2.6	-0.5
Cities	5.1%	7.6%	10.3%	9.8%	4.7	2.4	2.7	-0.5
Suburbs	4.5%	6.8%	9.3%	8.9%	4.4	2.3	2.5	-0.4
	Unemployment Levels				Percent Change			
	Dec. 2007	Dec. 2008	Dec. 2009	Dec. 2010	2007-2010	Year 1 ('07-'08)	Year 2 ('08-'09)	Year 3 ('09-'10)
Nation	7,371,000	10,999,000	14,740,000	13,997,000	89.9%	49.2%	34.0%	-5.0%
99 Metros	4,696,138	7,117,921	9,649,342	9,241,883	96.8%	51.6%	35.6%	-4.2%
Cities	1,579,590	2,358,590	3,184,668	3,048,835	93.0%	49.3%	35.0%	-4.3%
Suburbs	3,116,548	4,759,331	6,464,674	6,193,048	98.7%	52.7%	35.8%	-4.2%

Source: Brookings analysis of Bureau of Labor Statistics data

Much of the metropolitan increase was driven by the suburbs, which gained more than 3 million additional unemployed people over this time period and accounted for two-thirds of the net increase in the metropolitan unemployed population. By December 2010, the number of suburban unemployed had grown by 99 percent and totaled 6.2 million people (Figure 1). This increase outpaced both large cities (93 percent) and the rest of the country (78 percent).

Because of the pace of rising unemployment in the suburbs, by December 2010, suburban unemployment trailed city unemployment by less than one percentage point (9.8 percent in cities and 8.9 percent in suburbs)—a much narrower margin than seen in previous recessions.⁷

Figure 1. City and Suburban Unemployed Population in 99 Metro Areas, December 2007 to December 2010



Source: Brookings analysis of Bureau of Labor Statistics data

Although rates in both cities and suburbs stabilized in the past year, decreasing slightly between December 2009 and 2010, the unemployment rate declined by a slightly wider margin in cities (0.5 percentage points) than in suburbs (0.4 percentage points).

B. Metro areas in the interior West like Las Vegas, Stockton, Fresno, and Riverside experienced the highest increases in unemployment in the three-year period since the recession began.

Between December 2007 and December 2010, every region of the country saw average unemployment rates in their major metro areas increase by no less than 3 percentage points and the number of unemployed grow by more than half a million. The West experienced the most exceptional growth in unemployment—both in terms of rates (5.9 percentage points) and levels (119 percent)—over the three years since the recession began. It was also the only region to see its largest increase in the first year of the recession, between December 2007 and December 2008, and the only one to see average unemployment in its large metro areas continue to rise from 2009 to 2010. This reflects both the early onset of the recession in these areas and the depth and severity of the downturn following the collapse of the housing market. In December 2010, the 24 metro areas in the West averaged 10.8 percent unemployment, up from 5 percent three years earlier (Table 2).

Metro areas that experienced the greatest increases in city and suburban unemployment were almost exclusively in California and Florida, like Stockton, Fresno, Riverside, and Lakeland—each of which saw their city and suburban rates increase by at least 7 percentage points (Table 3). Las Vegas also joined these regions with city and suburban unemployment increases of more than

Table 2. Metropolitan Unemployment by Region, 100 Metro Areas, December 2007, 2008, 2009, and 2010

Unemployment Rate					Percentage Point Change			
	Dec. 2007	Dec. 2008	Dec. 2009	Dec. 2010	2007-2010	Year 1 ('07-'08)	Year 2 ('08-'09)	Year 3 ('09-'10)
Northeast (19)	4.4%	6.4%	8.9%	8.1%	3.75	2.0	2.5	-0.8
Midwest (19)	5.3%	7.4%	10.0%	8.6%	3.30	2.1	2.6	-1.4
South (38)	4.3%	6.5%	9.1%	8.8%	4.59	2.3	2.5	-0.2
West (24)	5.0%	7.9%	10.6%	10.8%	5.86	2.9	2.7	0.2
Unemployment Levels					Percent Change			
	Dec. 2007	Dec. 2008	Dec. 2009	Dec. 2010	2007-2010	Year 1 ('07-'08)	Year 2 ('08-'09)	Year 3 ('09-'10)
Northeast (19)	995,588	1,454,550	2,024,199	1,848,265	85.6%	46.1%	39.2%	-8.7%
Midwest (19)	1,026,200	1,431,152	1,907,321	1,643,290	60.1%	39.5%	33.3%	-13.8%
South (38)	1,387,755	2,155,119	2,974,691	2,932,568	111.3%	55.3%	38.0%	-1.4%
West (24)	1,297,533	2,096,264	2,766,567	2,839,235	118.8%	61.6%	32.0%	2.6%

Source: Brookings analysis of Bureau of Labor Statistics data

9 percentage points over the three-year period. Cities and suburbs in these regions also rank among the highest for jobless shares in December 2010, with double-digit unemployment rates in that month ([Appendix A](#)).

In contrast, metro areas with more stable, below-average unemployment growth over the period (e.g. Omaha, Madison, Portland, ME, and Minneapolis) also posted below-average unemployment rates in December 2010 relative to other metros. Cleveland was the only notable exception, ending the year with an above-average unemployment rate of 10.4 percent, even though it saw one of the smallest city and suburban increases in unemployment over the three-year period.⁸ The large overlap between the city and suburban rankings on both ends of the scale further underscores the regional nature of metropolitan labor markets, with cities and suburbs similarly affected by shifts in the metropolitan economy.

C. Among suburban communities, higher-density and mature suburbs experienced the greatest growth in their unemployed populations.

Only 14 metropolitan areas saw the number of unemployed increase in their primary city or cities more than in their suburbs. Of the remaining metro areas, an average of 73 percent of the net growth in unemployment occurred in the suburbs, with suburbs in metro areas like Poughkeepsie, Youngstown, Bradenton, Atlanta, and Portland, ME accounting for 90 percent or more of the net metropolitan increase. But not all suburbs—even within the same metro area—experienced these trends to the same degree.

Examining changes in suburbs with different levels of population density reveals the variation in and among suburbs themselves. The number of unemployed increased fastest in high density and mature suburbs, which each saw their number of jobless residents more than double over the three-year period (Table 4). Lower density, emerging suburbs lagged slightly behind with a 94 percent increase in their unemployed population. Exurban communities saw slower,

Table 3A. City and Suburban Unemployment Rates, 99 Metro Areas, December 2010

Rank	City Unemployment Rate		Rank	Suburban Unemployment Rate	
1	Omaha, NE-IA	4.3%	1	Omaha, NE-IA	5.1%
2	Madison, WI	4.4%	2	Madison, WI	5.3%
3	Portland, ME	5.5%	3	Washington-Arlington-Alexandria, DC-VA-MD-WV	5.4%
4	Oklahoma City, OK	6.2%	4	Des Moines, IA	5.4%
5	Austin, TX	6.3%	5	Milwaukee, WI	6.1%
6	Raleigh-Cary, NC	6.4%	6	Oklahoma City, OK	6.1%
7	Minneapolis-St. Paul-Bloomington, MN-WI	6.4%	7	New Orleans-Metairie-Kenner, LA	6.3%
8	San Antonio, TX	6.9%	8	Portland-South Portland-Biddeford, ME	6.4%
9	Tulsa, OK	7.0%	9	Ogden-Clearfield, UT	6.4%
10	Washington-Arlington-Alexandria, DC-VA-MD-WV	7.0%	10	Minneapolis-St. Paul-Bloomington, MN-WI	6.5%
...			...		
90	Los Angeles-Long Beach-Santa Ana, CA	14.0%	90	Lakeland-Winter Haven, FL	12.5%
91	Sacramento-Arden-Arcade-Roseville, CA	14.0%	91	Cape Coral-Fort Myers, FL	12.6%
92	Columbia, SC	15.2%	92	McAllen-Edinburg-Mission, TX	13.3%
93	Modesto, CA	15.3%	93	Riverside-San Bernardino-Ontario, CA	13.6%
94	Riverside-San Bernardino-Ontario, CA	15.4%	94	Las Vegas-Paradise, NV	14.7%
95	Las Vegas, NV	15.4%	95	El Paso, TX	14.8%
96	Hartford, CT	15.7%	96	Stockton, CA	15.4%
97	Fresno, CA	16.2%	97	Fresno, CA	18.4%
98	Detroit-Warren, MI	18.2%	98	Modesto, CA	19.4%
99	Stockton, CA	21.5%	99	Bakersfield, CA	19.6%
99 Metro Areas (Cities)		9.8%	99 Metro Areas (Suburbs)		8.9%

Table 3B. Change in City and Suburban Unemployment Rates, 99 Metro Areas, December 2007 to December 2010

Rank	Percentage Point Change in City Unemployment		Rank	Percentage Point Change in Suburban Unemployment	
1	Omaha, NE-IA	1.4	1	Des Moines, IA	1.8
2	Madison, WI	1.5	2	Omaha, NE-IA	2.0
3	Portland, ME	1.9	3	Minneapolis-St. Paul, MN-WI	2.0
4	Minneapolis-St. Paul, MN-WI	2.0	4	Madison, WI	2.1
5	Oklahoma City, OK	2.2	5	Cleveland, OH	2.3
6	Cleveland-Elyria-Mentor, OH	2.4	6	Jackson, MS	2.3
7	Little Rock-North Little Rock-Conway, AR	2.7	7	Buffalo-Niagara Falls, NY	2.5
8	Austin-Round Rock, TX	2.7	8	Portland-South Portland-Biddeford, ME	2.6
9	McAllen-Edinburg-Mission, TX	2.9	9	Rochester, NY	2.6
10	Washington-Arlington-Alexandria, DC-VA-MD-WV	2.9	10	Milwaukee-Waukesha-West Allis, WI	2.6
...			...		
90	Bradenton-Sarasota-Venice, FL	7.2	90	Palm Bay-Melbourne-Titusville, FL	7.2
91	Orlando-Kissimmee, FL	7.2	91	Tampa-St. Petersburg-Clearwater, FL	7.2
92	Fresno, CA	7.2	92	El Paso, TX	7.4
93	Miami-Fort Lauderdale-Pompano Beach, FL	7.4	93	Riverside-San Bernardino-Ontario, CA	7.5
94	Sacramento-Arden-Arcade-Roseville, CA	7.6	94	Lakeland-Winter Haven, FL	7.6
95	Los Angeles-Long Beach-Santa Ana, CA	7.8	95	Stockton, CA	7.7
96	Lakeland-Winter Haven, FL	7.9	96	Fresno, CA	8.1
97	Riverside-San Bernardino-Ontario, CA	8.4	97	Bakersfield, CA	8.4
98	Las Vegas, NV	9.9	98	Modesto, CA	8.7
99	Stockton, CA	10.4	99	Las Vegas, NV	9.5
99 Metro Areas (Cities)		4.7	99 Metro Areas (Suburbs)		4.4

Source: Brookings analysis of Bureau of Labor Statistics data

Table 4. Unemployment by Suburban Type in 99 Metro Areas, December 2007, 2008, 2009, and 2010

	Unemployment Rate				Percentage Point Change			
	Dec. 2007	Dec. 2008	Dec. 2009	Dec. 2010	2007-2010	Year 1 ('07-'08)	Year 2 ('08-'09)	Year 3 ('09-'10)
High Density Suburbs (77)	4.3%	6.6%	9.2%	8.8%	4.5	2.3	2.5	-0.4
Mature Suburbs (114)	4.5%	6.8%	9.4%	9.0%	4.5	2.3	2.6	-0.4
Emerging Suburbs (141)	4.6%	7.0%	9.4%	8.9%	4.3	2.3	2.5	-0.6
Exurbs (223)	4.9%	7.2%	9.5%	8.9%	4.0	2.3	2.3	-0.6
	Unemployment Levels				Percent Change			
	Dec. 2007	Dec. 2008	Dec. 2009	Dec. 2010	2007-2010	Year 1 ('07-'08)	Year 2 ('08-'09)	Year 3 ('09-'10)
High Density Suburbs (77)	1,210,814	1,860,248	2,541,019	2,456,971	102.9%	53.6%	36.6%	-3.3%
Mature Suburbs (114)	1,106,734	1,692,382	2,311,334	2,214,689	100.1%	52.9%	36.6%	-4.2%
Emerging Suburbs (141)	557,551	848,521	1,142,946	1,080,089	93.7%	52.2%	34.7%	-5.5%
Exurbs (223)	241,492	358,254	469,484	441,393	82.8%	48.4%	31.0%	-6.0%

Source: Brookings analysis of Bureau of Labor Statistics data

though still significant, growth in their jobless population over the same period, and experienced the largest drop in the unemployed population in the last year (6 percent).

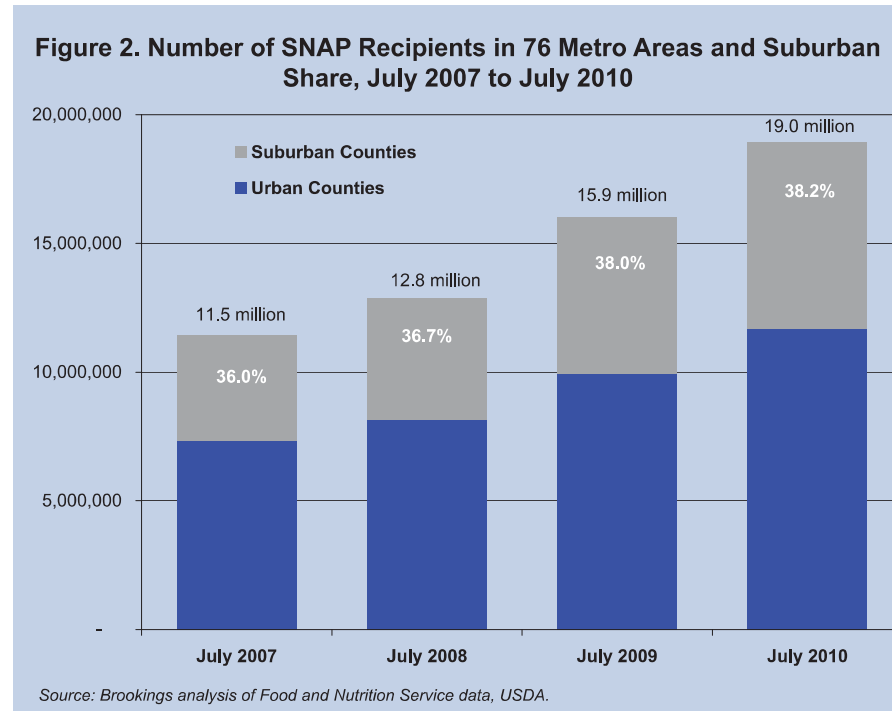
Uneven growth in the jobless population ultimately led to notable shifts in unemployment concentrations in these communities over time. In the first year of the downturn, all types of suburbs saw unemployment rates jump by the same margin (2.3 percentage points). The following year, from December 2008 to December 2009, mature suburbs—those areas that largely developed in the mid-20th century—posted the largest increase in unemployment rate (2.6 percentage points). All suburbs experienced a modest decline in their unemployment rates in the third year, with slightly larger declines in emerging and exurban communities than in closer-in high-density and mature suburbs. By December 2010, unemployment rate differences among suburban community types, particularly between higher- and lower-density communities, were smaller than at the start of the recession.

D. Suburban counties were home to a growing share of the nation's SNAP recipients between July 2007 and July 2010, but urban counties still account for more than 60 percent of metropolitan SNAP receipt.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is the largest nutrition assistance program administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, enrolling a record one in seven Americans (43.5 million) as of November 2010.

The nation's largest metro areas have also experienced unprecedented increases in SNAP enrollment in recent years. Taken together, the 76 metro areas included in this analysis saw SNAP receipt increase 66 percent, adding 7.5 million recipients between July 2007 and July 2010 ([Appendix B](#)). Yet participation gaps remain and large variations in enrollment levels exist across different types of communities.⁹

In each year since July 2007, SNAP receipt in suburban counties increased at a faster pace than in urban counties (73 percent versus 61 percent). However, suburban counties remain home to a significantly smaller share of food stamp recipients than their urban counterparts (Figure 2). It should be noted, however, that the gap between urban and suburban SNAP receipt has narrowed over the course of the downturn and recovery: by July 2010, suburban recipients accounted for 38.2 percent of metropolitan SNAP recipients compared to 36 percent three years earlier.



Across community types, the biggest increases occurred between 2008 and 2009, similar to patterns seen in unemployment. Higher-density suburban counties drove the rise in SNAP enrollment, with a 76 percent increase in recipients over the three-year period, compared to 70 percent in lower-density communities. Variable rates of enrollment across urban and suburban counties—and within the suburbs themselves—may be attributable in some part to differences in eligibility, but also to differences in access, knowledge of the program, and perceptions of stigma in these communities (the last of which may be muted in the wake of increasing need for emergency assistance).

IV. Conclusion

As the landscape of recession turns slowly to a landscape of recovery, unemployment and SNAP data illustrate that the strength of regional labor markets is being tested, as are the safety nets meant to serve people in times of greatest need.

For both indicators, unemployment and SNAP receipt, the sheer magnitude of increases in the suburbs over the recession and post-recession period raises questions about the capacity and infrastructure to connect people to jobs and social services. As public officials expend time, money, and effort on job creation strategies, they must also keep in mind job connection strategies like public transportation, education, and social service provision as a new geography of poverty emerges. Indeed, almost a third of the nation's poor now live in large metropolitan suburbs.¹⁰ Findings in this report signal an increasing and longer-run need in suburban communities given the long road to full economic recovery.

This series has also underscored the need for consistent, reliable, and timely data across local areas. For example, as people drop out of the labor force, standard unemployment measures fail to capture the *underemployed* segment of the population: part-time workers who would prefer to work full time and those marginally attached to the labor force. Although underemployment data was recently made available at the state level, sub-state estimates would greatly benefit local policymakers and service providers alike. Furthermore, data on initial unemployment insurance claims, a valuable leading indicator of unemployment and job loss, is not reported in a standardized format at the sub-state level and is difficult to access save through individual state agencies. Standardizing reporting requirements and making comparable sub-state data publicly available on a timely basis will give policymakers and service providers the information they need to more accurately and efficiently target assistance to people who need it most.

Endnotes

1. An analysis of initial unemployment insurance claims is omitted from this edition of the series due to lack of easily accessible standardized initial claims data at the sub-state level, as well as its diminishing significance as a leading indicator of need as the number of initial claimants drops in response to improved economic conditions.
2. See Elizabeth Kneebone, "The Great Recession and Poverty in Metropolitan America" (Washington: Brookings Institution, 2010).
3. As in the last publication of the series, Honolulu is omitted from the city and suburban analysis of the 100 largest metropolitan areas because BLS does not report city data separate from the county. Within the remaining 99 metro areas, 136 primary cities are identified.
4. "High density" suburbs are those with more than 95 percent of the population in urbanized areas, "mature suburbs" are 75 to 95 percent urbanized, "emerging suburbs" are 25 to 75 percent urbanized, and "exurbs" have an urbanization rate under 25 percent.
5. Urban counties are those that had an urbanization rate of at least 95 percent in 2000. We identify 98 urban counties in the 76 metro areas selected, such as San Francisco County, CA; Cook County, IL; and Harris County, TX. Suburban counties are identified by type, based on the share of the county that is urbanized according to Census 2000. "Higher-density" suburbs have urbanization rates between 75 and 95 percent, while "lower-density" suburbs are less than 75 percent urbanized.
6. Brookings analysis of 2009 Population Estimates.
7. Elizabeth Kneebone and Emily Garr, "The Landscape of Recession: Unemployment and Safety Net Services Across Urban and Suburban America" (Washington: Brookings Institution, March 2010).
8. Cleveland's employment peaked relatively early, in the second quarter of 2006; thus its 2010 levels are being compared to an already-high base by the time the Recession began in 2007. See Howard Wial and Richard Shearer, "Metro Monitor: Tracking Economic Recession and Recovery in America's 100 Largest Metro Areas" (Washington: Brookings Institution, December 2010).
9. These estimates likely fall short of the entire eligible population. A recent study by the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC) found that in December 2008, only 76 percent of eligible people in a selection of 22 large U.S. cities participated in the program, though rates of participation varied considerably between cities. See "SNAP Access in Urban America: A City-by-City Snapshot", January 2011.
10. See Elizabeth Kneebone and Emily Garr, "The Suburbanization of Poverty: Trends in Metropolitan America 2000 to 2008" (Washington: Brookings Institution, 2006); and more recently, Elizabeth Kneebone, "The Great Recession and Poverty in Metropolitan America" (Washington: Brookings Institution, 2010).

Acknowledgments

The author thanks Elizabeth Kneebone and Alan Berube for their superb intellectual guidance on this paper, and throughout this project. The author would also like to recognize the USDA Food and Nutrition Service for providing data on county-level SNAP participation.

The Metropolitan Policy Program at Brookings thanks the Ford Foundation for its generous support of the program's research on city and suburban poverty, the Annie E. Casey Foundation for its support of the program's research on low-income working families, and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the George Gund Foundation, the Heinz Endowments, and the F.B. Heron Foundation for their general support of the program.

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Support for this publication was generously provided by the Ford Foundation, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the George Gund Foundation, the Heinz Endowments, and the F.B. Heron Foundation.

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