

Children in Persistently Poor Neighborhoods

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March 2009

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This research was funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. We thank them for their support but acknowledge that the findings and conclusions presented in this report are those of the authors alone, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Foundation.

Executive Summary

In the United States, neighborhood poverty rates fluctuate over time in response to migration patterns and the changing economic circumstances of families and communities. The number of children living in poor neighborhoods increased dramatically during the 1980s and then fell during the 1990s.¹ However, there is a subset of “persistently poor” neighborhoods that have had high poverty rates in each decennial census from 1980 to 2000. These neighborhoods are particularly important because they are home to some of the country’s most vulnerable children and families.

Research has shown that “concentrations of poor people lead to a concentration of the social ills that cause or are caused by poverty.”² Children growing up in poor neighborhoods are at a higher risk of health problems, teen pregnancy, dropping out of school, and other social and economic problems than are children living in more affluent communities.³ Neighborhood characteristics shape children’s lives during childhood and adolescence through the presence (or absence) of role models and the quality and availability of educational, recreational, and child care services. High-poverty neighborhoods are also associated with racial segregation and high proportions of single-parent families, which could limit resources available to children and families.⁴ Many of these neighborhood effects persist even after controlling for family economic resources and parental characteristics.⁵ Children living in persistently poor areas may face the biggest challenges because these unfavorable economic conditions have continued for decades, often spanning generations.

The goal of this paper is to improve our understanding of the 8.3 million children living in persistently poor neighborhoods, to describe the unique social, economic, and demographic characteristics of these communities, and to provide a first look at how these neighborhoods may have changed since 2000.

Here are some of the key findings:

- In 2000, there were 8.3 million children living in persistently poor neighborhoods—defined here as neighborhoods with poverty rates of at least 20 percent in 1980, 1990, and 2000.
- Neighborhood poverty shifts from decade to decade in response to migration patterns and the changing economic circumstances of families and communities. More than 7 million children lived in neighborhoods that were poor in 2000, but were not poor in 1980 and 1990. Another 7.8 million children lived in neighborhoods that were poor in 1980 and 1990, but not in 2000.
- Together, black and Latino children made up three-fourths of the child population in persistently poor communities in 2000. Since 2000, the share of black children living in these neighborhoods has dropped, while the share of Latino children has increased, so that black and Latino children are now roughly equally represented in the poorest communities.
- In 2000, female-headed families made up more than one-third of all households in persistently poor neighborhoods, more than twice their share of households at the national level. Persistently poor neighborhoods also had relatively high proportions of high school dropouts and working-age men who were not attached to the labor force.
- In 2000, the South was home to 35 percent of all children under age 18 but accounted for 41 percent of children in poor neighborhoods and 46 percent of children in neighborhoods with persistent poverty.
- Together, California and Texas accounted for more than one-fourth of all children living in persistently poor neighborhoods in 2000.
- Between 2000 and 2006, the number of children in persistently poor neighborhoods dropped from 8.3 million to 7.6 million. The rapid population decline in persistently poor neighborhoods likely reflects the out-migration of families with children combined with low levels of in-migration to these distressed communities.
- In 2000, 31 percent of poor children lived in persistently poor communities, but by 2006 the share of poor children in these neighborhoods had dropped to 26 percent, suggesting that concentrated poverty has decreased since 2000.
- In 2000, metropolitan areas accounted for more than three-fourths of children living in persistently poor neighborhoods. However, children in rural counties were more likely to live in persistently poor neighborhoods (15 percent) than were their metropolitan counterparts (11 percent).

Background

Most previous research on persistent poverty has focused on county-level data from the decennial census. The U.S. Department of Agriculture considers counties to be persistently poor if they had poverty rates of 20 percent or more in each of the past four decennial censuses (1970, 1980, 1990, and 2000).⁶ Demographer Kenneth Johnson used a similar typology to look at counties with persistent child poverty (areas where at least 20 percent of children were poor in each of the last four census years). He identified 730 counties that experienced persistent child poverty each decade from 1970 to 2000. Over 80 percent of counties with persistent child poverty were located in rural (nonmetropolitan) areas.⁷

In this report, we take a slightly different approach, focusing on poverty at the neighborhood level—as measured by census tracts—to provide a more detailed look at the communities where children live. Counties vary in population size and can include populations with very different circumstances and needs. Census tracts, in contrast, are designed to be relatively homogeneous in their demographic, economic, and housing characteristics. At the time of the 2000 Census, there were about 65,000 census tracts nationwide.

We classified neighborhoods as persistently poor if their corresponding census tracts had poverty rates of at least 20 percent in 1980, 1990, and 2000.⁸ Because tract boundaries change after each decennial census, we applied the 2000 Census tract boundaries to the 1980 and 1990 data to accurately assess poverty trends over time.

Post-2000 data are drawn from the 2006 American Community Survey (ACS). The ACS sample is not large enough to reliably identify poor neighborhoods, but can be used to assess the 2006 number and characteristics of people living in the aggregate of neighborhoods identified as

persistently poor in 2000.⁹ All of the 2006 data are based on the Population Reference Bureau’s analysis of the Census Bureau’s internal ACS microdata files.

Persistently poor neighborhoods have several characteristics that distinguish them from other communities, including high rates of unemployment, a preponderance of single-parent families, and low average levels of educational attainment. In 2000, female-headed families made up more than 36 percent of households in persistently poor neighborhoods but only 15 percent of households in neighborhoods outside of poor areas. Persistently poor neighborhoods also had relatively high proportions of adult high school dropouts and working-age men who were not attached to the labor force. In 2000, more than two-fifths of people ages 25 and older in persistently poor communities were high school dropouts, twice the national average.

Children in persistently poor neighborhoods

In 2000, 14.7 million children lived in neighborhoods with poverty rates of 20 percent or more. Of these children, more than half (8.3 million) lived in neighborhoods with persistent poverty—areas that were also identified as poor in 1980 and 1990 (see Table 1). The share of children in persistently poor neighborhoods, at 11.5 percent, is slightly higher than the share of adults in those neighborhoods (9.9 percent).

Table 1: Children and Adults Living in Persistently Poor Neighborhoods,* 2000

Characteristic	Total (000s)	Total in Persistently Poor Neighborhoods* (000s)	Percent in Persistently Poor Neighborhoods
All ages	281,422	29,036	10.3
children under age 18	72,143	8,330	11.5
Adults ages 18 and older	209,279	20,705	9.9

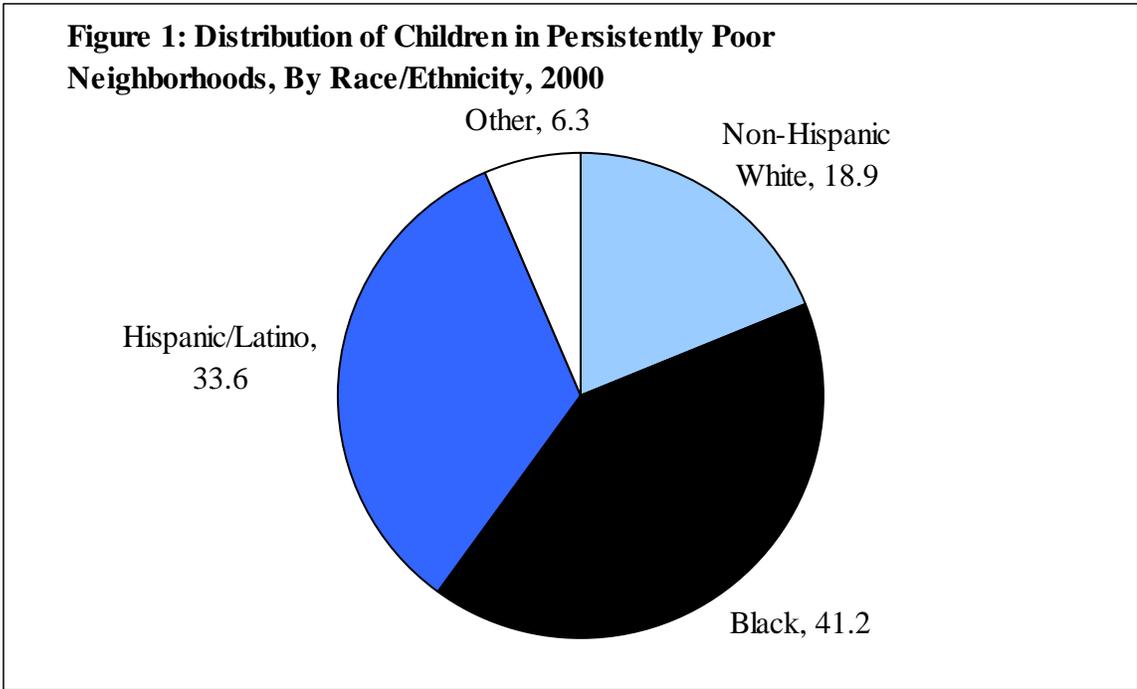
*Neighborhoods with poverty rates of 20 percent or more in 1980, 1990, and 2000.

Source: PRB analysis of census data.

Neighborhood poverty rates fluctuate over time. There were more than 7 million children who lived in neighborhoods that were poor in 2000, but were not poor in 1980 and 1990. Another 7.8 million children lived in neighborhoods that were poor in 1980 and 1990, but not in 2000. These economic reversals can result from changing economic opportunities for families as well as the movement of people with varying characteristics into and out of poor places. In some cases, poverty rates increase as higher-income families move out of poor communities to live closer to job opportunities, better schools, and safer communities. In other cases, neighborhood poverty may drop as housing costs rise and lower-income families are displaced by higher-income families.

Differences by race/ethnicity

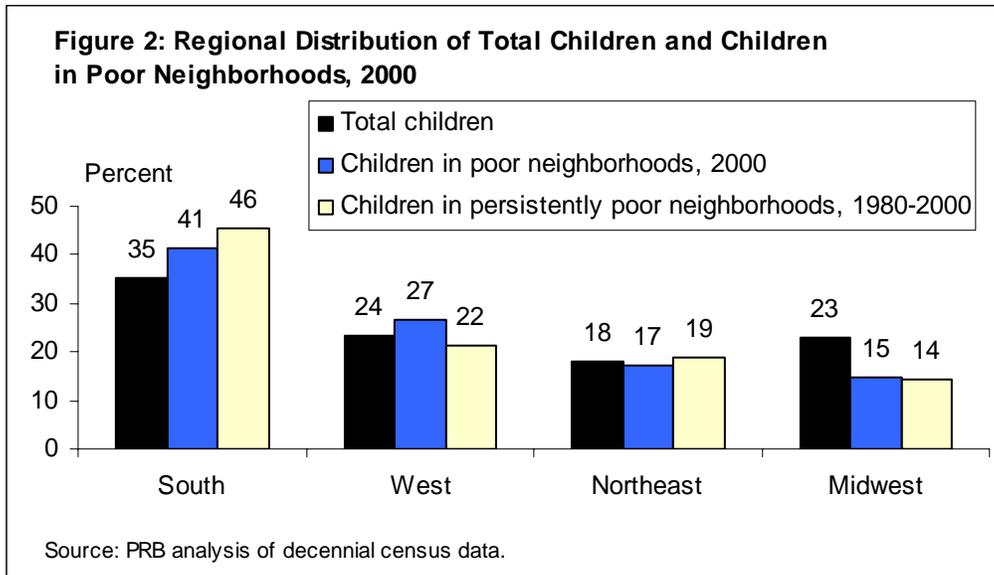
In 2000, African American and Latino children together accounted for just under a third of the total population under age 18, but they made up three-fourths of the child population in persistently poor communities (see Figure 1). On average, African American children are nine times more likely to live in persistently poor neighborhoods than white children. In 2000, nearly a third of African American and American Indian children and nearly a fourth of Latino children lived in persistently poor neighborhoods, compared with 4 percent of non-Hispanic white children. Given the rapid growth of the Hispanic population, Latinos are expected to make up a growing share of the population living in poor neighborhoods,¹⁰ a possibility that is explored later in the report. These racial disparities in neighborhood composition are disquieting because chronic and prolonged poverty have been linked to social, economic, psychological, and behavioral problems for children.¹¹



Source: PRB analysis of decennial census data.

Geographic patterns

Census results show that children in persistently poor neighborhoods are disproportionately concentrated in the southern United States (see Figure 2). In 2000, the South was home to 35 percent of all children under age 18 but accounted for 41 percent of children in poor neighborhoods and 46 percent of children in neighborhoods with persistent poverty in 1980, 1990, and 2000. The West, in contrast, had a disproportionate share of children living in poor neighborhoods in 2000 (27 percent) but a relatively small number of children in persistently poor communities (22 percent). Conditions for children were markedly better in the Midwest compared with other regions.



State- and county-level census data help explain these regional patterns. In 2000, Louisiana, Mississippi, and New Mexico had the highest proportions of children living in persistently poor neighborhoods (see Table 2). Iowa, Nebraska, New Hampshire, Vermont, and Wyoming had among the lowest proportions of children in these neighborhoods, just 1 percent each. In the District of Columbia, which is not ranked against the states, 39 percent of children lived in persistently poor neighborhoods in 2000. Nevada fared better than most states in terms of persistent poverty since 1980, but had a relatively high proportion of children living in high-poverty neighborhoods in 2000 (10 percent), suggesting that neighborhood conditions have deteriorated over time.

In terms of absolute numbers, California and Texas had the most children in persistently poor neighborhoods—more than a million in each state. Together, California and Texas accounted for more than one-fourth of all children living in persistently poor neighborhoods in 2000 (Appendix 1 provides data on children in persistently poor neighborhoods for each of the 50 states and the District of Columbia.)

Table 2: States with the Highest and Lowest Percent of Children in Persistently Poor Neighborhoods,* 2000

	Total Children Under 18	Total in Persistently Poor Neighborhoods	Percent in Persistently Poor Neighborhoods
States with the Highest Rates			
Mississippi	774,404	287,480	37
Louisiana	1,218,453	362,353	30
New Mexico	507,568	143,045	28
Kentucky	993,841	229,438	23
New York	4,674,191	918,540	20
Alabama	1,122,612	212,446	19
Texas	5,873,930	1,015,599	17
States with the Lowest Rates			
Nevada	509,731	8,659	2
Idaho	368,131	6,018	2
Iowa	732,334	9,873	1
Vermont	147,579	1,486	1
Nebraska	449,615	3,108	1
New Hampshire	308,901	1,561	1
Wyoming	128,097	629	1

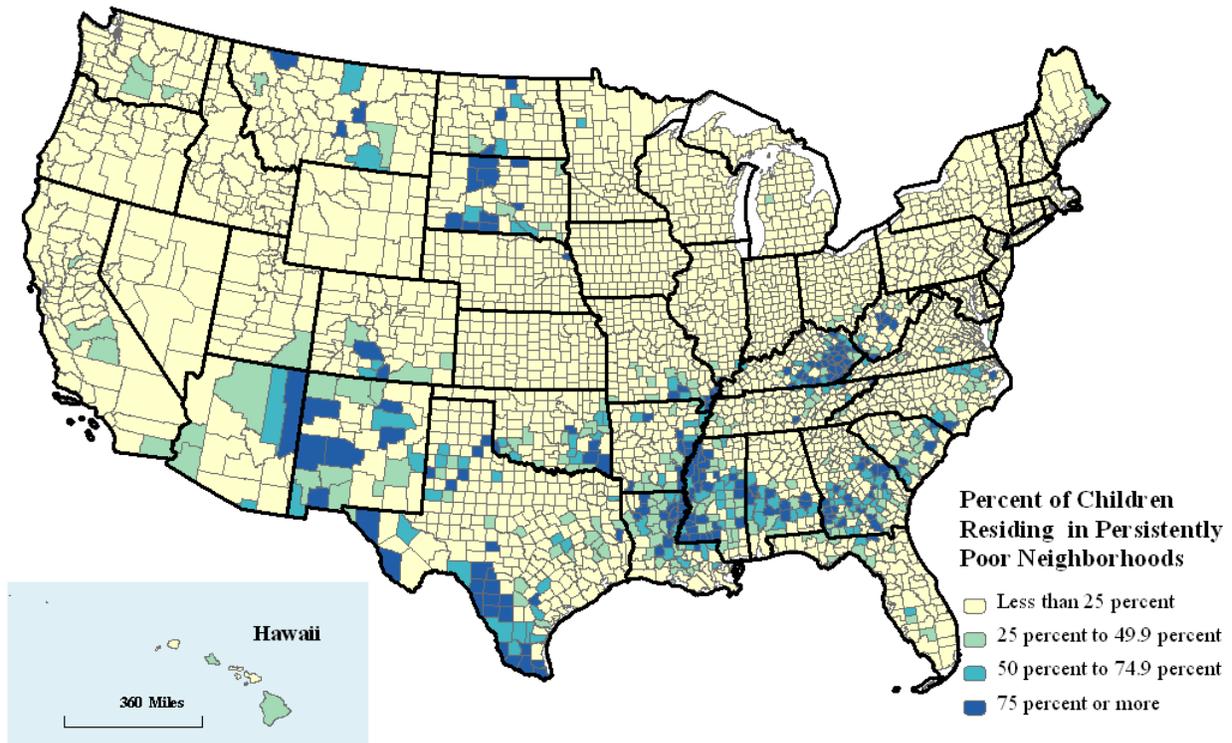
*Neighborhoods with poverty rates of 20 percent or more in 1980, 1990, and 2000.

Source: PRB analysis of decennial census data.

County-level results show that persistent poverty is most common in the rural “black belt” region that stretches from North Carolina to Louisiana (see Figure 3). In the Southwest, immigration of low-skilled workers from Latin America has contributed to a rise in persistently poor neighborhoods in Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas. Persistent poverty is also a serious problem in parts of central Appalachia and for children living on American Indian reservations in Montana, the Dakotas, and Oklahoma.



Figure 3. Children in Persistently Poor Neighborhoods By County, 2000

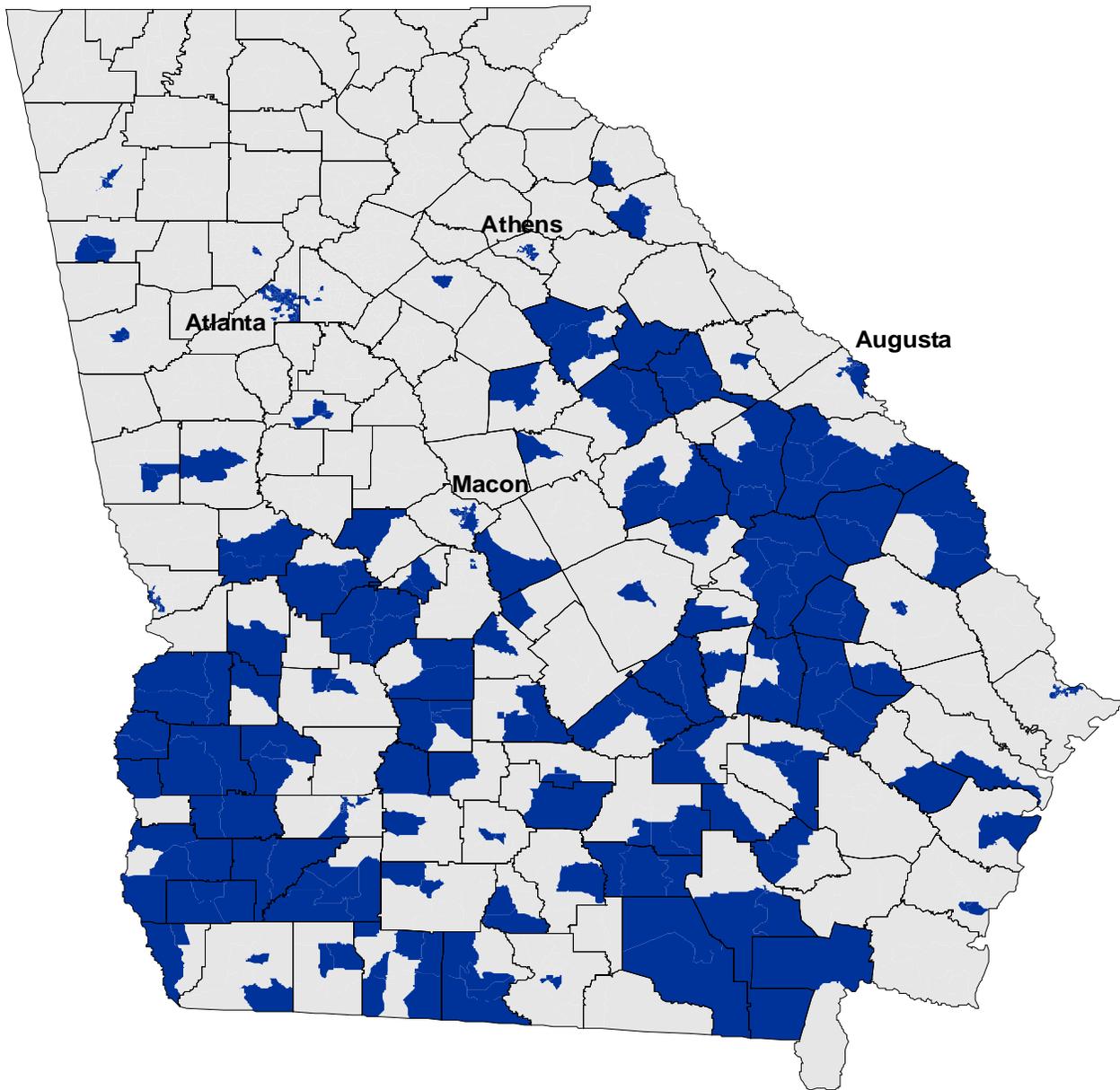


Note: Persistently poor neighborhoods had poverty rates of 20 percent or more in 1980, 1990, and 2000.
 Source: PRB analysis of decennial census data.

Persistent poverty is often associated with inner cities, but it is also a problem in many rural areas. In 2000, metropolitan areas accounted for more than three-fourths of children living in persistently poor neighborhoods. However, children in rural (nonmetropolitan) counties were more likely to live in persistently poor neighborhoods (15 percent) than were their metropolitan counterparts (11 percent). Georgia provides a good example of the geographic distribution of persistently poor neighborhoods (see Figure 4). Persistent poverty is widespread in the southern, predominantly rural portions of the state. There are also pockets of persistent poverty in more populous urban areas, including Athens, Atlanta, Augusta, and Macon. These findings are

consistent with previous research showing that poverty is most entrenched in rural counties and inner city areas.¹² Poverty rates have also increased in suburban areas, but this is a relatively new phenomenon.¹³

Figure 4. Persistently Poor Neighborhoods in Georgia, 2000



Note: Persistently poor neighborhoods are shown in blue on the map. These areas had poverty rates of 20 percent or more in 1980, 1990, and 2000.

Source: PRB analysis of decennial census data.

Trends since 2000

We looked at poverty trends since the 2000 Census using the 2006 American Community Survey (ACS). Because of current sample size restrictions in ACS, we cannot assess new areas of neighborhood poverty that may have emerged since 2000. However, ACS data do give us information on the current (2006) characteristics of people living in neighborhoods that were classified as persistently poor in 2000. It is likely that some of these neighborhoods are no longer poor, but given the long-term economic problems in these communities, they provide a reasonable, post-2000 snapshot of America's poorest neighborhoods.

Between 2000 and 2006, the population living in persistently poor neighborhoods dropped by nearly a million people, 85 percent of whom were children under age 18 (see Table 3). The rapid population decline in persistently poor neighborhoods likely reflects the out-migration among families with children, combined with low levels of in-migration to these distressed communities. The results suggest that it's mostly parents with children—or young adults planning to start families—who are moving away from distressed communities to live closer to job opportunities, better schools, or safer communities. Previous research has shown that it's not just white families, but also minorities who are increasingly drawn to the amenities and jobs that are often available in higher-income suburban neighborhoods.¹⁴ A drop in teen births during the 1990s, particularly among African Americans, has also contributed to fewer children being born in distressed neighborhoods. The birth rate among black teens dropped from 113 births per 1,000 females in 1990 to 77 births in 2000, a 31 percent decrease.¹⁵

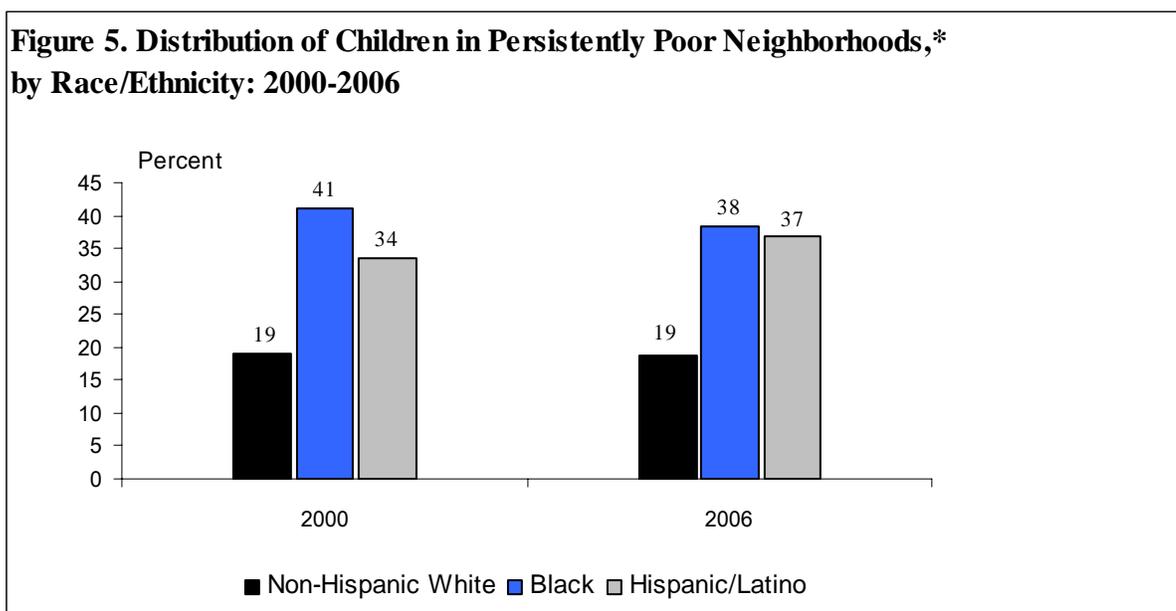
Table 3: Children and Adults Living in Persistently Poor Neighborhoods,* 2000 and 2006

Age group	2000			2006		
	Total (000s)	In Persistently Poor Neighborhoods* (000s)	Percent	Total (000s)	In Persistently Poor Neighborhoods* (000s)	Percent
All ages	281,422	29,036	10.3	298,287	28,156	9.4
Children under age 18	72,143	8,330	11.5	73,545	7,581	10.3
Adults ages 18 and older	209,279	20,705	9.9	224,742	20,575	9.2

*Neighborhoods with poverty rates of 20 percent or more in 1980, 1990, and 2000.

Source: PRB analysis of census and ACS data.

Between 2000 and 2006, the number of children in persistently poor communities dropped from 8.3 million to 7.6 million. Although this seems like a positive trend, it is important to look at those who are still living in these distressed neighborhoods, since they may be the most vulnerable. Trends since 2000 suggest that recent immigration to the United States is reshaping the race and ethnic distribution of children living in America’s most disadvantaged neighborhoods. Since 2000, the share of black children living in persistently poor neighborhoods has dropped, while the share of Latino children has increased: Black and Latino children are now roughly equally represented in persistently poor communities (see Figure 5).



*Neighborhoods with poverty rates of 20 percent or more in 1980, 1990, and 2000.

Source: PRB analysis of decennial census and ACS data.

Although the results show a growing concentration of Latino children in distressed neighborhoods, the Latino share of the child population living outside of persistently poor neighborhoods has also increased, from 15 percent in 2000 to 18 percent in 2006. Therefore, the same demographic shifts that are contributing to Hispanic population growth nationwide are contributing to higher concentrations of Latinos in America's poorest neighborhoods.

Child poverty in persistently poor neighborhoods

Concentrated poverty—the share of poor people living in high-poverty neighborhoods—declined dramatically during the 1990s¹⁶ and our results suggest that those declines continued after 2000. Between 2000 and 2006, child poverty rates increased nationwide but increased faster in areas outside of persistently poor neighborhoods. Between 2000 and 2006, the child poverty rate in persistently poor neighborhoods increased slightly from 43 percent to 45 percent, while the child poverty rate outside of those areas increased from 13 percent to 15 percent.

Trends in family structure mirror those for child poverty: Although the share of female-headed households increased by 3 percent in persistently poor neighborhoods, the share of such households increased faster in neighborhoods that were not persistently poor (by 10 percent).

This diffusion of poverty has led to a declining share of poor children living in persistently poor areas. In 2000, 31 percent of poor children lived in persistently poor communities, but by 2006, the share of poor children in persistently poor areas had dropped to 26 percent.

These results have important implications for policymakers and others trying to improve children's lives in poor neighborhoods. Increasingly, child poverty is not just a problem for children in inner cities or remote rural areas, but also in higher-income communities, including

many suburban and exurban areas. This suburbanization of poverty was evident during the 1990s¹⁷ and results here suggest that it may have continued after 2000.

State trends

Since 2000, the number and share of children living in persistently poor neighborhoods has dropped in most states. Illinois had the biggest drop in numbers (74,000), followed closely by Louisiana (69,000) and Ohio (66,000). The population exodus from New Orleans during hurricane Katrina is an extreme case, but shows how migration can play an important role in these declines.

Five states (Hawaii, Idaho, Maine, Nevada, and Texas) and the District of Columbia saw the number of children in persistently poor neighborhoods increase between 2000 and 2006. The number increased by more than 14,000 in Texas—more than in any other state.

Another way to track these changes is to look at the *proportions* of children living in persistently poor neighborhoods in 2000 and 2006. During this period, five states reduced the share of children residing in persistently poor neighborhoods by 25 percent or more: Arizona, Delaware, Indiana, Maryland, and Wyoming. Delaware experienced the largest decrease in the share of children living in persistently poor neighborhoods, at 51 percent, while Maine experienced the largest increase (17 percent).

Conclusions

In 2000, there were more than 8 million children living in neighborhoods that had high poverty rates each year in 1980, 1990, and 2000. Persistently poor neighborhoods are geographically dispersed but we find the highest concentrations in parts of the rural South and

Southwestern United States. Previous research has shown that poverty is most entrenched in America's inner city areas and in remote, rural counties. However, our research suggests that poverty is becoming less concentrated as families continue to move out of distressed areas and into higher-income areas. Since 2000, the number of children living in persistently poor neighborhoods has dropped. This may represent a positive step for families who have found better places to live, but it has potentially negative effects on the families and children who are left behind. The migration of relatively poor families into higher-income neighborhoods—as occurred during Hurricane Katrina—could also contribute to a rise in poverty in suburban areas.¹⁸

Historically, African American children were the most likely to live in high-poverty neighborhoods. However, recent immigration trends are changing the race/ethnic composition of poor neighborhoods, which are increasingly populated by Hispanic/Latino families. Policymakers need to take these racial/ethnic and spatial variations into account when designing programs to reduce neighborhood poverty. Programs designed to help African American children may not be as effective for Latino children in immigrant families, who face unique economic, cultural, and language barriers.

The current economic and housing crises have created new challenges for low-income families and for the organizations that provide support to them. Additional research is needed to see how recent economic events may have affected children in America's poorest communities.

Appendix 1: Children Living in Persistently Poor Neighborhoods,* by State, 2000

	Total Children < 18	Total Living in Persistently Poor Neighborhoods*	Percent Living in Persistently Poor Neighborhoods
United States	72,142,757	8,330,444	11.5
Alabama	1,122,612	212,446	18.9
Alaska	190,507	15,116	7.9
Arizona	1,362,701	192,875	14.2
Arkansas	680,058	110,825	16.3
California	9,221,463	1,209,257	13.1
Colorado	1,096,790	55,993	5.1
Connecticut	839,574	55,667	6.6
Delaware	193,962	8,379	4.3
District of Columbia	114,332	44,379	38.8
Florida	3,634,572	351,504	9.7
Georgia	2,165,774	307,077	14.2
Hawaii	294,325	16,205	5.5
Idaho	368,131	6,018	1.6
Illinois	3,239,229	321,282	9.9
Indiana	1,572,806	73,138	4.7
Iowa	732,334	9,873	1.3
Kansas	711,220	24,059	3.4
Kentucky	993,841	229,438	23.1
Louisiana	1,218,453	362,353	29.7
Maine	300,978	10,690	3.6
Maryland	1,353,419	72,057	5.3
Massachusetts	1,495,967	118,260	7.9
Michigan	2,592,595	213,743	8.2
Minnesota	1,286,539	42,720	3.3
Mississippi	774,404	287,480	37.1
Missouri	1,426,102	127,716	9.0
Montana	229,944	19,504	8.5
Nebraska	449,615	3,108	0.7
Nevada	509,731	8,659	1.7
New Hampshire	308,901	1,561	0.5
New Jersey	2,081,474	173,398	8.3
New Mexico	507,568	143,045	28.2
New York	4,674,191	918,540	19.7
North Carolina	1,961,317	188,814	9.6
North Dakota	160,899	9,100	5.7
Ohio	2,885,141	264,339	9.2
Oklahoma	890,264	114,025	12.8
Oregon	844,270	22,604	2.7
Pennsylvania	2,918,988	255,743	8.8
Rhode Island	247,509	29,261	11.8
South Carolina	1,009,093	158,609	15.7
South Dakota	202,726	26,053	12.9
Tennessee	1,397,236	179,701	12.9
Texas	5,873,930	1,015,599	17.3
Utah	716,831	27,403	3.8
Vermont	147,579	1,486	1.0
Virginia	1,735,824	97,061	5.6
Washington	1,509,780	74,480	4.9
West Virginia	401,775	53,504	13.3
Wisconsin	1,367,386	65,668	4.8
Wyoming	128,097	629	0.5

*Neighborhoods with poverty rates of (20 percent or more) in 1980, 1990, and 2000.

Source: Population Reference Bureau, analysis of the 2000 decennial census and 2006 American Community Survey microdata.

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