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Low-Income Suburban Residents in the San Francisco Bay Area Face Significant Housing and Transportation Issues

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Issue

Growing poverty in America's suburbs challenges their image as single-family residential communities for middle class, predominantly white families. Research shows that suburban areas now have the largest share of households under the poverty line. Since these areas have lower density development and lower levels of public transit service compared to urban areas, living in the suburbs may pose accessibility challenges for low-income households, particularly those without a personal vehicle.

To explore housing and transportation issues associated with the suburbanization of poverty, we



Figure 1. Single-family home in Richmond, CA. Photo by Alexandra Pan

combined U.S. Census data from Contra Costa County, which has the highest rates of suburban poverty in the San Francisco Bay Area, and online and in-person surveys with individuals who earn less than 80% of the Area Median Income (AMI), around \$75,000. This research identifies demographic and external factors that lead low- and moderate-income households to move to suburban areas, accessibility barriers faced by low- and moderate-income suburban households, and how transportation use and transportation and housing costs differ between urban and suburban low-income residents in the Bay Area.

Key Research Findings

Rising housing costs are not the sole cause of low- and moderate-income urban households moving to suburban areas. It is also driven by strict requirements for renting, such as credit score checks and income requirements. Other factors include lower housing costs per bedroom, and a desire for home ownership and a better environment for their children. Still, housing costs are also beginning to rise in suburban areas where there are fewer tenant protections in place, particularly for those renting single-family homes. Localities could consider expanding rent control to include single-family homes and establish rent control and just cause for evictions.

Transportation costs are often higher for low- and moderate- income suburban residents than for urban residents. Suburban residents travel longer distances for work and rely more on personal vehicles. Car ownership is unstable for low- and moderate-income individuals due to the higher maintenance needs of used or older vehicles, inability to make car payments, or inconsistent insurance, registration, and driver’s licenses. To address this, public agencies could develop travel training programs and other educational outreach in multiple languages to increase awareness and familiarity with public transit.

Many low- and moderate-income suburban residents need a personal vehicle for non-work trips, such as grocery shopping and visiting friends and family. Interviewees who relied on public transit said that running simple errands would often take hours waiting for public transit connections. Some reported using grocery and other shopping delivery services despite the additional cost due to the convenience and the ability to buy from stores that are inaccessible without a car. To address this, transit agencies could focus on serving these non-commute trips during off-peak periods or weekends. Examples include programs to subsidize transportation network companies (like Uber and Lyft) and taxis in Dublin, CA, and microtransit programs in Antioch and Richmond.



Figure 2. Microtransit and electric carsharing vehicles parked outside city hall in Richmond, CA. Photo by Alexandra Pan.

More Information

This policy brief is drawn from the report “Struggling to Connect: Housing and Transportation Challenges of Low-Income Suburban Residents in the San Francisco Bay Area” prepared by Alexandra Pan, Elizabeth Deakin, and Susan Shaheen with the University of California, Berkeley. The report can be found here: www.ucits.org/research-project/2022-32. For more information about findings presented in this brief, please contact Alexandra Pan at alexpan33@berkeley.edu.

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