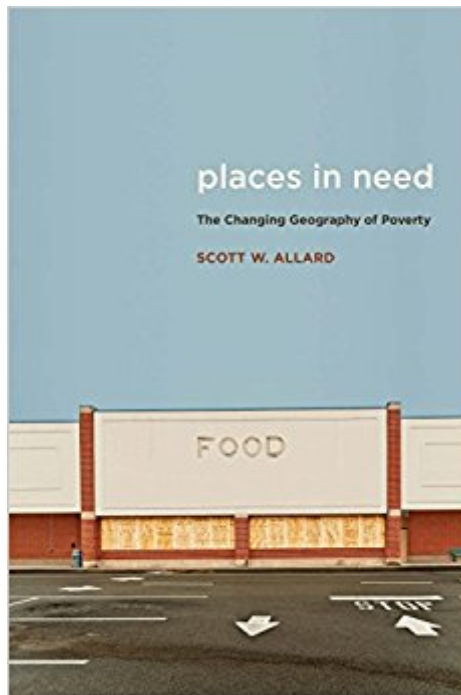




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Places In Need: The Changing Geography Of Poverty



Synopsis

Americans think of suburbs as prosperous areas that are relatively free from poverty and unemployment. Yet, today more poor people live in the suburbs than in cities themselves. In *Places in Need*, social policy expert Scott W. Allard tracks how the number of poor people living in suburbs has more than doubled over the last 25 years, with little attention from either academics or policymakers. Rising suburban poverty has not coincided with a decrease in urban poverty, meaning that solutions for reducing poverty must work in both cities and suburbs. Allard notes that because the suburban social safety net is less-developed than the urban safety net, a better understanding of suburban communities is critical for understanding and alleviating poverty in metropolitan areas. Using census data, administrative data from safety net programs, and interviews with nonprofit leaders in the Chicago, Los Angeles, and Washington, D.C. metropolitan areas, Allard shows that poor suburban households resemble their urban counterparts in terms of labor force participation, family structure, and educational attainment. In the last few decades, suburbs have seen increases in single-parent households, decreases in the number of college graduates, and higher unemployment rates. As a result, suburban demand for safety net assistance has increased. Concerning is evidence suburban social service providers—which serve clients spread out over large geographical areas, and often lack the political and philanthropic support that urban nonprofit organizations can command—do not have sufficient resources to meet the demand. To strengthen local safety nets, Allard argues for expanding funding and eligibility to federal programs such as SNAP and the Earned Income Tax Credit, which have proven effective in urban and suburban communities alike. He also proposes to increase the capabilities of community-based service providers through a mix of new funding and capacity-building efforts. *Places in Need* demonstrates why researchers, policymakers, and nonprofit leaders should focus more on the shared fate of poor urban and suburban communities. This account of suburban vulnerability amidst persistent urban poverty provides a valuable foundation for developing more effective antipoverty strategies.

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Customer Reviews

Scott W. Allard is professor of public policy at the University of Washington's Daniel J. Evans School of Public Policy and Governance.

I came to this book because I do research on the behavioral geography of drug addiction among people who attend an urban clinic. For years, I've been looking at my data through the lens of theories and methods that emerged from studies of concentrated poverty in cities. That lens has seemed increasingly incomplete to me--but only incomplete, not incorrect. Having read Allard's book, I think I have a better handle on the reasons for that. First, Allard shows that the suburbanization of poverty is not a redistribution--it's a spread. To talk about concentrated, racially segregated poverty in inner cities is not outdated; that poverty is still there and possibly worse than ever. It's just not alone. Second, Allard says what only a thorough scholar can say with authority: that we don't know something. We don't know how the daily lived experience of deep poverty in a suburb differs from the daily lived experience of deep poverty in a city, and what the consequences of those differences might be. Most available answers are just informed guesses. There's no intellectual infrastructure for the study of this kind of poverty--few or no theories, minimal data. (Tidbit from the book: the only visible sign of new poverty in a suburb may be that some houses have five or six cars parked in front, indicating that families have had to double or triple up. What's going on inside those houses, harder to say.) Third (and this surprised me), the most efficient, flexible responses to the expanding geography of poverty have come from centralized/federal mechanisms such as SNAP (the food stamps), not from locally coordinated mechanisms. That's partly because social-service providers in the suburbs don't have the urban providers' decades of experience in grantwriting or fundraising. But it's also because municipalities are incentivized to be no more generous to the poor than their neighboring municipalities are--lest the poor be drawn to them. Result: the more local discretion a program has, the worse it does in providing help to the suburban poor! Allard points to some creative ways of

addressing these problems. *Places in Need* is an academic work, and the prose doesn't go out of its way to be snappy. But it's always clear, never dense. The only places I wished for a lighter touch were the beginnings of the last few chapters, each of which needlessly recapitulated prior material before getting on with the exposition. But that's a minor flaw in an important book. If you have any reason to care about how people increasingly cannot thrive in the suburban US, long considered a haven of affluence, then you've got a good reason to read this.

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