

CALL FOR ARTICLES

RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences

Issue on:

Suburban Inequality in the United States

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Introduction

Scholars and policy makers have explored the challenges faced by city residents and governments, and the role that cities have played in shaping contemporary American society. This grand attention to the city has meant that the study of suburbs has been neglected. The suburbs, most commonly defined in contemporary social science as, “the physical space beyond a city’s boundaries, yet still within the metropolitan area,” (Lacy 2016, p. 370) typically invokes images of cookie cutter single family homes, manicured lawns, and residents who commute to the nearest city. This image captures only a small portion of suburban life and has limited the attention scholars have paid to the places where most Americans live today.

Recent changes in who lives in suburbs, particularly their racial and ethnic diversification and the suburbanization of poverty, have focused attention on suburbs (for example, see Anacker 2015; Allard 2017). Still, there is much more that demands exploration, especially related to processes of inequality (Lobao, Hooks, and Tickamyer 2007). To take two timely examples, the emergence of COVID-19 and the ongoing extrajudicial killing of Black citizens are highly influenced by suburban place and space. COVID-19 spread from suburban New York on to New York City. The resulting coordinated efforts to contain the spread of COVID-19 and to manage its impact relied heavily on economic and racial segregation (Lewis-McCoy, Forthcoming). The Black Lives Matter movement first emerged following the extra-judicial killing of multiple unarmed Black people in the suburbs (Lung-Amam and Schafran 2019). Since 2014, an increasing share of extrajudicial killings occur in suburbs, while police shootings and killings in the city have continued to fall (Sinyangwe 2020). The evolution of these social problems remains unclear, but it is clear that social scientists are in a unique position to examine inequality in suburban areas and to consider what can be done to address them. In this volume, we focus on suburban inequality related to *race and ethnicity, immigration, social class, and other forms of difference*, with cross-cutting themes drawing on everyday experiences and outcomes in the salient societal domains of *education, political economy, housing and community, and health*.

This issue of *RSF* will bring together scholars who study diverse aspects of suburban inequality, to develop a deeper understanding of how suburban inequality is both distinct from and similar to urban inequality. In doing so, we hope to bring scattered literatures together to assert the contemporary relevance of suburban inequality, and thereby lay a foundation for the emerging field of suburban inequality. We aim to avoid the pitfalls of previous scholarship on urban inequality, which has been critiqued for assuming homogeneity and developing theories of universal urban problems despite diversity in urban environments (Small, Manduca, and Johnston 2018). Instead, we seek to develop a greater understanding of the diverse array of suburban arrangements and how inequalities function within and between them. We are interested in inequality in suburban contexts not only as it shapes experiences of disadvantage, but also as it shapes privilege and advantage.

This volume will advance academic knowledge on United States suburbs, with a particular focus on inequality, both within and between suburbs, and other places. Of course, suburbs are embedded in larger geographic territories and have been shown to vary in their functional ties with central cities; that is, there has been a symbiotic relationship between urban growth, suburban development, and migratory patterns (Rusk 1993; Florida 2017). This means that some

questions about suburban inequality will necessitate consideration of the larger geographic context, while others may examine issues within the boundaries of the municipality. Further, while we focus on suburbs we also recognize vast differences between suburbs, related to social and economic resources, patterns of settlement and immigration, access to the urban metro, and more, making broad characterizations of suburban inequality challenging. Finally, we recognize the intersectional nature of questions of race and ethnicity, immigration, social class, and other forms of difference and as such, look forward to submissions that cut across these categories, in addition to other forms of difference.

Background

Some early scholars of the suburbs attempted to dispel notions of homogeneity (for example, Douglass 1925), highlighting the ways that the expansion of uniform housing in the post-war period did not mean uniform social relations (Gans 1967). Despite these attempts, the rapid expansion of suburbs helped to solidify the image of the suburbs as homogenous, rigid, and antithetical to the city, which in contrast was viewed as diverse and cosmopolitan.

Histories of suburban expansion carefully document the ways that government funding, transportation technologies, and the desire to escape the troubles of the city facilitated mass suburbanization (Jackson 1985). Unequal lending practices coupled with interpersonal clashes helped to shape suburbs as racially and socioeconomically segregated across the United States (Freund 2007; Rothstein 2017; Sugrue 2009). These practices of segregation, however, did not stop non-Whites from creating suburban communities that have been overlooked in public conversations and scholarship of suburban space (for exceptions, see Agius Vallejo 2012; Haynes 2001; Jiménez 2017; Lacy 2007; Li 2009; Lung-Amam 2017; Nicolaides 2002; Saito 1998; Wiese 2004). Ethnic suburbs historically housed working-class communities as well as middle class communities (Haynes 2001) and, compared to predominantly White suburbs, were more socioeconomically diverse and had lower incomes on average (Li 2009; Saito 1998). Historiographies of diverse suburban communities in the past two decades (for example, see Kruse and Sugrue, 2006) have successfully complicated dominant narratives of suburbs. However, the social sciences have yet to fully engage these historical accounts.

To summarize, this journal issue will feature papers on inequality related to *race and ethnicity, immigration, social class, and other forms of difference*, with cross-cutting themes drawing on everyday experiences and outcomes in the salient societal domains of *education, political economy, housing and community, and health*. We conceptualize inequality both within suburbs and between suburbs and other places.

Race and Ethnicity in the Suburbs

Post-war suburbanization occurred along racial lines, allowing White families access to better residential options while simultaneously limiting access for Black families via measures ranging from restrictive covenants, to segregated lending, to interracial antagonisms (Freund 2007). These processes allowed Whites with economic means to solidify racial rewards, hoard

opportunities and solidify racial identities (Geismer 2015; Kruse 2007; Lassiter 2013). This history paired with popular images of suburban space demarcated the suburbs as Whites spaces in the American imagination (Coon 2014).

An emphasis on suburban spaces as historically and predominantly White remains a central feature of studies of suburbs (Wiese 2004). However, these discussions miss the longstanding diversity that has been present in suburbia as well as the newly emerged racial and ethnic diversity present since the turn of the 21st century (Frey 2018). In multiple arenas, such as education (Lewis and Diamond 2015; Lewis-McCoy 2014; Posey-Maddox 2017), real estate (Besbris and Faber 2017), public health (Johnson, et al. 2019; Ray 2017), political economy (Geismer 2015), politics (Frasure-Yokley 2015; Smith and Greer 2018) and criminal justice (Boyles 2015), the importance of place has been noted as it intersects with race. Studies of Black suburban experiences have ranged from working class communities in small cities (for example, Haynes 2001) to sprawling communities of affluence (for example, Lacy 2007). Black suburban communities also feature regional variation. For example, recent patterns of reverse migration are helping reshape the landscape of the South of the United States. Additionally, the wide range of Black suburban communities is further complicated and enriched by the presence of Black immigrants and their children, who have established themselves as a part of the cultural fabric in historically White and historically African American suburban communities (Clerge 2019).

Suburbs are at the leading edge of American diversification and integration (Rastogi 2019); today, over one-third of residents in American suburbs are people of color. Diverse suburbs are increasing in number—William Frey (2018) describes suburbs with significant numbers of multiple race groups as “melting pot” suburbs. The growth of these suburbs is driven by Asian Americans and Latinos living in suburban communities in significant numbers for decades. Both Asian Americans and Latinos experience significantly less housing discrimination than do Black Americans, providing greater access to suburban communities (Logan, Alba, and Leung 1996; Pew Research Center 2012). Still, suburban whites tend to move from diverse places to less diverse places, and the exodus of whites is significantly lower in predominantly white suburbs than in places with racially diverse populations (Fowler, Lee, and Matthews 2016; Lichter, Parisi, and Taquino 2015; Parisi, Lichter and Taquino 2019). For some, suburban ethnic enclaves enable class mobility alongside ethnic attachment, an alternative to traditional ethnic assimilation (Logan, Zhang, and Alba 2002). Research on upper middle-class Latino, Black, and Asian Americans shows that suburban living no longer requires assimilation into a “white” identity (Agius Vallejo 2012; Clerge 2014; Imoagene 2012). Further, recent research in upper middle class suburbs with growing numbers of Asian Americans has revealed new forms of ethnic conflict related to feelings of group threat among whites as they watch Asian American neighbors attain academic and socioeconomic success (Jiménez 2017; Lung-Amam 2017; Warikoo, Forthcoming).

Sample questions:

- *Education*: How have suburban school boards and schools adjusted to changes in the size and composition of the local population?
- *Political Economy*: How do political leaders and bureaucrats make decisions and social policies in melting pot suburbs? Whose interests get prioritized, and whose get left behind?

- *Housing and Community*: In suburban portions of metropolitan areas, how have discrimination in lending and racial steering shaped uneven residential patterns (by race and/or income)? What does racial segregation in suburbs look like today, and how does it compare to racial segregation in central cities?
- *Health*: How do urban race-related problems such as racial profiling, food apartheid, and gentrification map onto suburban landscapes which have different histories and topographies?

Immigration and Immigrant Incorporation in the Suburbs

Immigrants and their descendants have made homes in suburbs for decades, despite the racialized nature of post-war suburbanization (Singer 2008; Walker 2018). Since 2000, a majority of immigrants reside in suburbs, most frequently suburbs of major cities (Hardwick, 2008; Wilson and Singer 2011). In fact, suburbs are increasingly the place of arrival for immigrants rather than a destination after achieving socio-economic mobility. Still, major studies of immigrant assimilation have focused on cities (for example, see Kasinitz, Mollenkopf, and Waters 2004; Portes, Fernandez-Kelly, and Haller 2009; Rumbaut 2008), leaving a lacuna in our understanding of immigrant incorporation.

Early theories of immigrant assimilation suggested movement to middle and upper middle class suburbs as the ultimate measure of assimilation, based on the intergenerational mobility and movement of eastern and southern European migrants of the early twentieth century (Portes, Fernández-Kelly, and Haller 2005; Portes and Zhou 1993). These theories of spatial or segmented assimilation took for granted an image of suburbs as well-off and predominantly white middle class. However, the increasing diversity of suburbs in terms of immigration, race, and class mean that these theories need updating. For example, “ethnoburbs” or ethnic enclaves outside central cities (Alba et al. 1999; Li 2009), have existed for decades. Immigrants living in suburbs also tend to live not in stereotypical single-family homes with a nuclear family; for example, one in five immigrants in suburban communities lives in a multi-family home (Hardwick 2008). Further, ethnographies of immigrants in suburban communities show that strong ethnic ties frequently persist alongside socioeconomic mobility (for example, see Agius Vallejo 2012). Overall, the geographic landscape in suburbs where immigrants tend to live has also changed, leading Audrey Singer to coin the term “suburban metropolises-- decidedly not cities, but for the most part large, loosely bounded, lower density, sprawling , auto-dependent metropolitan areas,” (Singer 2008).

Previously predominantly white upper middle-class suburbs are also growing in diversity, especially through increasing numbers of Asian American professionals arriving in search of highly-reputed schools and with the means to buy or rent property in those suburbs. Chakravorty and colleagues (2017) describe suburbs with high numbers of immigrants who arrived at the United States through H1-B visas as “ethno-techno-suburbs,” where parents often move both for proximity to suburban technology firms as well as for highly reputed schools. These changes sometimes lead to tensions over shifting cultural practices for getting ahead (Warikoo, Forthcoming).

Immigration also shapes suburban political processes. Scholars have documented the political processes that ensue when immigrants arrive in large numbers to suburban communities, with politics shaping processes of incorporation and resource allocation (for example, see Jones-Correa 2008; Lung-Amam 2017). Other work documents the impact of this migration on non-immigrant communities (Jiménez 2017).

Sample questions:

- *Education*: How have suburban schools responded to the needs of immigrant students, and how are the experiences of immigrants and their children in suburban schools different from those in central cities? What are the implications for inequality?
- *Political Economy*: What are the implications of the growth of immigrants residing in suburbs for support for redistribution policies, policymaking, shifting party affiliations, citizenship and voting, and more?
- *Housing and Community*: How is immigration-related change in suburbs shaping policy-making related to zoning? How are immigrants and their children developing new forms of belonging in suburban communities?
- *Health*: How do health outcomes for immigrants and their descendants shift over time in suburban communities?

Social Class in the Suburbs

The iconography of suburbia often suggests its residents are middle class and home owners. In reality, suburbs have significant class variation. Increasing attention is being paid to suburban poverty. Since 2010 more poor people live in suburbs than in central cities (Kneebone and Berube 2013). Whereas urban poverty is concentrated, suburban poverty tends to be more scattered, though clustering still occurs. Between 2010–2014, 41 percent of poor suburban residents lived in a neighborhood where neighborhood poverty exceeded 20 percent (Berube 2019). Suburban poverty also coincides with less access to organizations that facilitate social mobility compared to urban poverty (Murphy and Wallace 2010) and less access to healthcare (Schnake-Mahl and Sommers 2017).

More research on the co-mingling of wealth and poverty is needed. Wealth is positively associated with homeownership, educational attainment, and a host of other indicators (Killewald, Pfeffer, and Schachner 2017). However, racial and ethnic inequality in wealth shows stark differences in accumulation (Oliver and Shapiro 2006; Maroto 2016) and in the ability to leverage wealth via homeownership (Conley 1999; Killenwald and Bryan 2016). Few of these studies have interrogated the dynamics of suburban poverty and wealth in relationship to each other and the myriad ways these relational inequalities are complicated by race, gender, age, family structure, and other forms of difference.

Sample questions:

- *Education*: How do suburban schools further (and attenuate) class inequality in educational outcomes?

- *Political Economy*: How does local policy-making shape access to suburban housing and class segregation in suburbs? Where does the tax base in different suburbs come from, how does that vary by class-makeup, and what are the implications for suburban schools across class lines?
- *Housing and Community*: How do home and car ownership alter the activity spaces that suburban residents frequent and resources they encounter? How do commute times in suburbs vary by social class?
- *Health*: How is access to healthcare and other social services shaped by the suburban landscape, and to what extent does demographic change in suburbs shape access to healthcare and other social services?

Anticipated Timeline

Prospective contributors should submit a CV and an abstract (up to two pages in length, single or double spaced) of their study along with up to two pages of supporting material (e.g., tables, figures, pictures, etc.) no later than **5 PM EST on December 7, 2020** to:

<https://rsf.fluxx.io>

NOTE that if you wish to submit an abstract and do not yet have an account with us, it can take up to 48 hours to get credentials, so please start your application at least two days before the deadline. All submissions must be original work that has not been previously published in part or in full. Only abstracts submitted to <https://rsf.fluxx.io> will be considered. Each paper will receive a \$1,000 honorarium when the issue is published. All questions regarding this issue should be directed to Suzanne Nichols, Director of Publications, at journal@rsage.org and **not** to the email addresses of the editors of the issue.

A conference will take place at the Russell Sage Foundation in New York City on **November 5, 2021** (with a group dinner the night before). The selected contributors will gather for a one-day workshop to present draft papers (due a month prior to the conference **on 10/1/21**) and receive feedback from the other contributors and editors. Travel costs, food, and lodging for one author per paper will be covered by the foundation. Papers will be circulated before the conference. After the conference, the authors will submit their revised drafts by 1/13/22. The papers will then be sent out to three additional scholars for formal peer review. Having received feedback from reviewers and the RSF board, authors will revise their papers by 7/11/22. The full and final issue will be published in the spring of 2023. Papers will be published open access on the RSF website as well as in several digital repositories, including JSTOR and UPCC/Muse.

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