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By Brian Sharp

Rochester, suburbs witness painful increase in number of poor



Indicative of the city's poverty, a man sleeps in the rain outside the Open Door Mission downtown. In the suburbs, the number of poor people increased from 24,500 in 2000 to 34,500 in 2009 — a rise of 40 percent.

On the city's west side, Susan Morehouse has watched houses in her neighborhood slowly fall apart and go vacant through foreclosure.

Not all the houses, she is quick to add. But as poverty has tightened its grip on this pocket of Rochester in recent years, people have been forced to choose between fixing the roof and paying the mortgage, or buying groceries.

Their annual block party used to include a children's bike giveaway — bikes that were donated when money wasn't so tight.

"Last summer, we didn't have any bikes to give out," she said. "There are a lot of kids in our neighborhood who don't own a bike. That might seem like a small thing, but ..."

Over the past decade, poverty rate in this Arnett Boulevard neighborhood has doubled. Forty-four percent of Morehouse's neighbors now live below the poverty line, census figures show, and 59 percent of them are children. And total population has increased.

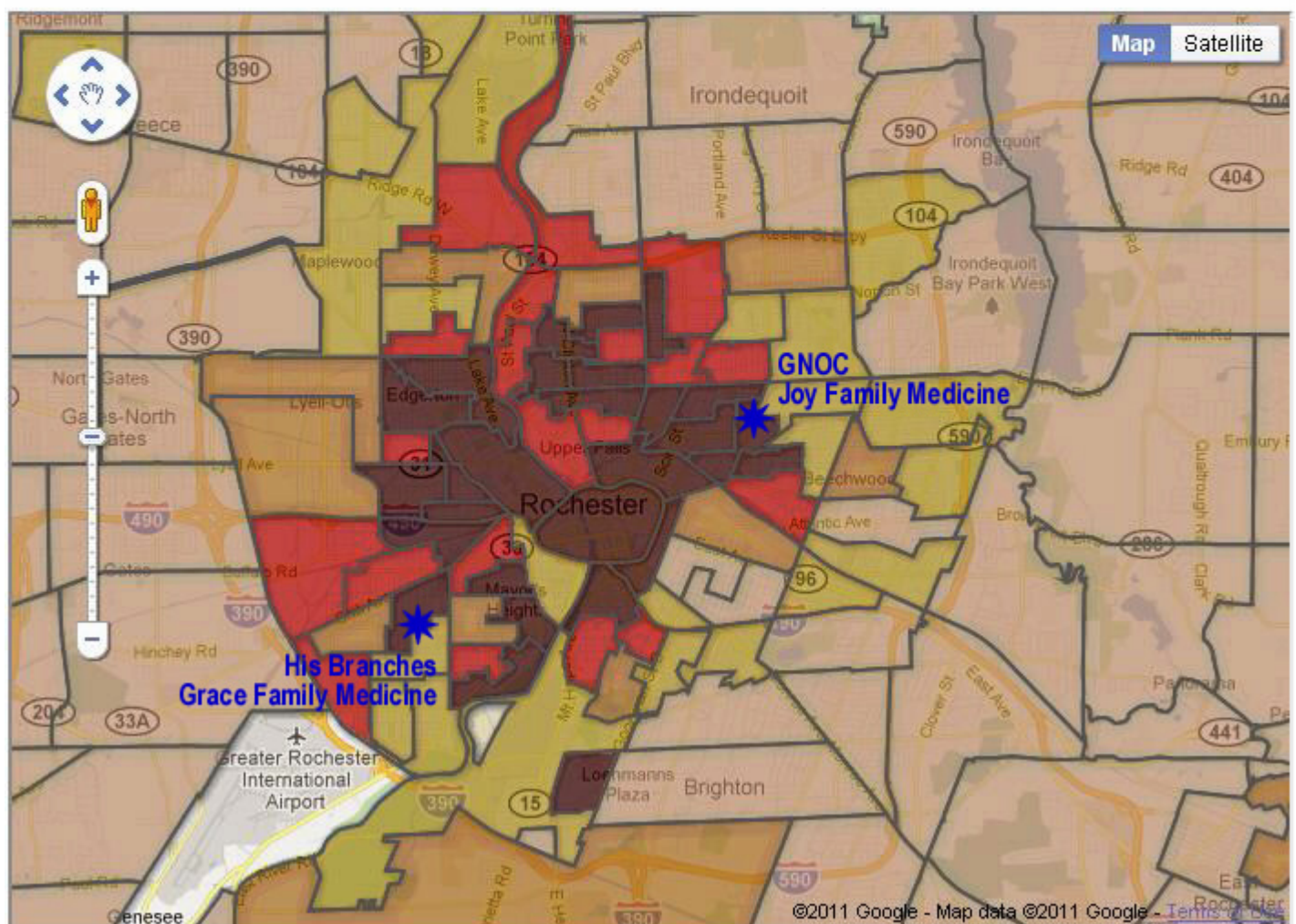
Poverty is becoming more concentrated and enveloping more of Rochester and other U.S. cities. The number of people living in neighborhoods in which 40 percent or more of residents are below the poverty line increased by one-third nationally in the past decade, according to a Brookings Institution report released last week.

At least 10.5 percent of poor people nationwide live in such neighborhoods. In Rochester, it is 47 percent — third-highest among the nation's largest cities. For the metro area, defined by the Census Bureau as including Monroe, Livingston, Ontario, Orleans and Wayne counties, it's 22 percent, ranking 13th nationally. The federal poverty line is drawn at \$22,314 a year for a family of four.

Concentration of Poverty

Rochester's most disadvantaged, high-poverty neighborhoods were clustered around downtown a decade ago in what became known as the crescent. Roughly one-third of the city's poor lived there. In the past decade that footprint has radiated outward to encompass 47 percent of the city's poorest residents. The degree of concentration far exceeds the national average.

The map below shows the current poverty rate for each neighborhood in the Rochester metro area (which includes Monroe, Ontario, Wayne, Livingston, and Orleans counties). Darker colors indicate a higher percentage of residents in poverty. Click on an area to compare to the 2000 poverty rate. Poverty rate is not calculated for areas that have very few residents or whose residents are almost entirely comprised of students living in college housing.



In the report, "The Re-Emergence of Concentrated Poverty: Metropolitan Trends in the 2000s," Brookings used census data to show how economic downturns and recession in the 2000s have largely undone gains from a decade ago. Brookings is a nonprofit public policy research group based in Washington, D.C.

Where poverty concentrates, schools struggle, crime rates tend to be higher and physical and mental health worsens. A more transient population, less private investment and limited access to basic goods and services, coupled with a broader spectrum of need, are part of it. All end up costing governments more.

The depth of poverty, and the rate of its increase locally, would seem to run counter to other indicators of the region's economy. Job loss has been less severe than in cities elsewhere, and even rebounded in some sectors. The housing market has been stronger. Vacancy, foreclosures, the rate of population loss, violent crime — all are down.

No doubt, areas of the city are improving.

"In terms of the general headline indicators, Rochester looks pretty good," said Alan Berube, a senior fellow and research director of the Brookings Metropolitan Policy Program. "But then, when you look at poverty and what is going on in the city, not the metro area, it is a really worrisome trend.

"People living in the city, on the fringes, aren't really part of the good things going on."

Poverty's reach

To be sure, poverty is not confined to those highly impoverished city neighborhoods. In the Monroe County suburbs, for instance, the number of people living below the poverty line went from about 24,500 to about 34,500 — an increase of 40 percent — between 2000 and 2009, when the collection of Brookings' data was completed.

The total number of people living below the poverty line in the city rose from 54,700 to 57,900, or 6 percent.

During that same period, 76 percent of suburban census tracts saw an increase in their poverty rates, versus 71 percent of city districts.

Suburban poverty, however, is more diffuse. In the city, there are more than a dozen neighborhoods where more than half the residents live in poverty, and many of them are contiguous. In the suburbs, the highest poverty rate was 26 percent, in a neighborhood in southern Irondequoit. Ranked next were parts of Pittsford-East Rochester, Brighton, Sweden, Henrietta, Greece and Hamlin.

Greece was the only town with more than one census tract among the most impoverished; it had five of the first 11 on that list.

Brookings urges a regional approach to housing, zoning, land use and workforce and economic development. The city argues that the solution is not for the suburbs to start building affordable housing but for the city to attract people of moderate to medium income back to its neighborhoods.

That is starting to happen along the historically impoverished Genesee River corridor south of downtown.

"We have a very long history of concentration of poverty here," creating a population especially vulnerable to economic declines, said Bret Garwood, director of business and housing development for the city.

"(But) part of the reason not everything is making sense when we line up all the statistics we tend to track ... is that we are in a period of substantial transition. The way that plays out is different statistics start moving in different directions ... telling different stories."

City struggles

A decade ago, Rochester's high-poverty areas clustered around downtown in what became known as the crescent. One-third of the city's poor lived there.

While the nation had seen a sharp increase in concentrated poverty through the 1970s and '80s, then a sharp decline in the 1990s, Rochester continued to struggle. Then came the recession.

"Household incomes have dropped, especially for poor people," said Michael Hanley, a senior housing attorney for the Empire Justice Center in Rochester. "People are becoming poorer in the (census) tracts that were already marginal."

Morehouse's neighborhood is among those that since have slid into the crescent's expanding footprint.

Most of the city neighborhoods that slid below the poverty line, unlike Morehouse's, lost population.

Rochester ranks behind Youngstown, Ohio, and Hartford, Conn., and just ahead of Syracuse in concentrated poverty, the Brookings report found. Those cities' rate of decline, in the proportion of the poor living in highly distressed neighborhoods, has been more dramatic.

Because Rochester already had such a chronic and high level of concentrated poverty, however, the poor population now living in extreme poverty neighborhoods grew by 8,500 people, a 47 percent spike three times the national average.

"It certainly creates a huge problem for city schools," Hanley said. "The poverty population in the school district is one of the hardest things for them to deal with."

Eighty percent of city school students are eligible for the free or reduced lunch program.

In a separate report last week, the Children's Agenda, a local think tank focused on youth issues, found that, while the number of children living in poverty has risen over the past decade, so, too, has infant mortality, child abuse and neglect, and hospitalizations from assaults.

The good news was that child lead poisoning declined and participation in universal prekindergarten increased.

Moving forward

For its part, the city has steered its programs and funding toward reducing poverty concentrations.

The city has increased funding for affordable housing, and made those programs more flexible to encourage mixed-income projects in all areas of the city. Any new affordable housing project now must fit into a larger plan of neighborhood improvement. Four focused investment areas are in neighborhoods with a poverty rate of 30 percent or higher.

Grants and loans are available to help property owners keep up with repairs or make improvements.

But Garwood said the city's resources only are enough to help about 1 percent of those who need it. And those funds are shrinking.

More homeless and special needs housing is being developed, and long-term planning for homeless facilities and services is under way. The Open Door Mission, finding its shelter filled by those who are chronically homeless, this summer began a "First Step" program that limits a person's stay to 14 days unless the person is making progress on employment and housing.

But shelter needs outpace beds by about 20 percent, officials say, with glaring shortages for women and children.

Food pantries report increased demand. Soup kitchens have gone mobile to meet the increasing need.

The Rev. Tony Martorana became the senior pastor at Joy Community Church at North Goodman and Bay streets eight years ago.

Next door was a burned-out Laundromat that was home to squatters, drug dealers and prostitutes. The church renovated the building for a youth center, a food pantry, pregnancy counseling service, and medical and dental offices for use by congregants and the needy in the neighborhood. Poverty has grown more severe since his arrival, he said.

"I've been here eight years and I've never seen poverty like this," Martorana said. "There's a tremendous need in the area."

Back along Arnett Boulevard, neighbors have worked in recent years to push back a resurgence of drug houses and gangs. That is what got Morehouse, who moved to this neighborhood in the 1970s, and her neighbors to start a block club.

They planted a garden and organized an annual Easter egg hunt — basics of community that people take for granted.

Every Sunday, she and her husband, Bill Morehouse, attend Joy Community Church. He is a doctor and splits his time between the church clinic and another faith-based clinic on Arnett.

"It's improving, I think. Right here, I see some improvement," she said of neighborhood safety and stability. "But not with the poverty."

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Includes reporting by staff writers Steve Orr and David Andreatta.

Additional Facts

Findings

Rochester ranks third among the largest U.S. cities with 47 percent of poor people living in neighborhoods in which at least 40 percent of residents are below the poverty line.

Democrat and Chronicle Opinion

A new approach to fighting poverty is needed

As experts haggle over how best to assess poverty in America, by any measure it's an indisputable problem in the Rochester region that's worsening.

Locally, there needs to be a new, better-focused approach to helping the poor and the growing numbers of those hard-hit by the current economic climate.

It's long been accepted that there will always be those who are disadvantaged. Scripture even points that out. But there is still a societal obligation to address the problem.

It's not as if those who are better off have been negligent. Statistics showing that poverty rates are higher now than 40 years ago are being questioned by experts, who point out that billions of dollars spent on food stamps, tax credits and other safety-net programs aren't being sufficiently acknowledged. Too, based on United Way giving, this community is among the most generous in the nation.

Nonetheless, statistics such as those in a recent report by the Children's Agenda showing that 43 percent of Rochester's children live in poverty are startling any way you slice them. And while this situation doesn't excuse poor academic performance by city students, it can't be treated like a headache.

It's disturbing, too, that the Children's Agenda report showed 22 percent of all Monroe children are living in poverty, and that figure is rising.

The region must begin to rethink the way it addresses poverty. As plans move forward for collaborative efforts in Rochester, such as the Strive program and a federal Promise Neighborhoods designation, it's a good time to include nonprofits and government agencies in a conversation about improved delivery of vital social services. This community simply can't stay on the same path.