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# The Changing Nature of Regional Poverty

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# The changing nature of regional poverty

By John V. Moeser, Dillon Massey and Thomas Shields | Posted: Saturday, March 7, 2015 10:30 pm

We're witnessing a dramatic change in the social geography of greater Richmond. It's becoming more like that of the global south, where wealth is centered in the cities and poverty rings the outskirts of the city.

In 1942, Richmond annexed most of its suburbs. What remained outside the new city boundaries was comprised largely of farms and timber. Poverty was concentrated in the city, though scattered in the countryside.

Over time, however, rural poverty was replaced by subdivisions and shopping malls, while more low-income people found refuge in the city. The term "suburb" became synonymous with upward mobility as more American families moved out of crowded cities into newly built homes. Until the 1968 Fair Housing Act, "suburb" was also shorthand for "middle class whites."

No longer is that the case. Poverty is exploding in the suburbs. Well-paid younger professionals are moving to the city in droves, increasing the city's population and tax base — and dropping the poverty rate!

The downside, however, is that as more city homes are renovated, rising property values in the redeveloped neighborhoods are pushing up apartment rents.

Long-time renters can no longer afford to live in their old neighborhoods and must find cheaper housing elsewhere, either in South Richmond or in the older deteriorating suburbs ringing the city in Chesterfield and Henrico counties.

The poor out-migrants from the city are joining poor in-migrants from all over the world who seek a new life and are finding it primarily in the counties. The combination of both population streams has led to a phenomenon unique in Richmond's long history — a larger percent of the region's poor now live outside the city than in the city, 56 percent to 44 percent. Only a year ago, it was 54 percent to 46 percent.

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**Since 2000**, the number of people living in poverty grew by 70 percent in Henrico, by 41 percent in Chesterfield and by 25 percent in Richmond.

The popular view is that Henrico's poverty is concentrated in the county's East End, but U.S. Census data tell another story. Over the past 20 years, poverty has shifted westward and continues to do so.

Similarly in Chesterfield, poverty is no longer confined along the Jefferson Davis corridor and the eastern side of the county. Now, concentrated poverty parallels Chippenham Parkway in the northeastern quarter of



Main art for Commentary, with MOESER

the county and then swings to the southeast. The poverty line is no longer vertical but diagonal from north to south.

The racial composition of suburban poverty also is a surprise to many. The largest proportion of the poor in Chesterfield is white (44 percent). Blacks make up 43 percent of the poor in Henrico, but whites constitute one third of the poor at 34 percent.

The Latino population has grown dramatically throughout Richmond, Henrico and Chesterfield.

Chesterfield's Latino population in 2000 numbered almost 7,000, with 9 percent living in poverty. By 2013, it had grown to more than 23,000 with 19 percent living in poverty. (Census counts of the Latino population are widely regarded by social scientists and social service workers to be much lower than the actual numbers.)

Similar increases are evident in Henrico, with about 2,000 Latinos counted in 2000, 14 percent of whom were living in poverty — and 15,000 in 2013 with more than 23 percent living in poverty.

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**Closely associated** with increases in suburban poverty are increases in unemployment. Much of the unemployment is correlated with areas of high poverty and generally tracks along the county borders with Richmond, but unemployment is reaching farther and farther into the outer suburbs and even into the rural areas of the two counties, particularly southern Chesterfield.

Households with income below the regional median include thousands of suburbanites who, according to the Census, are not “poor” because their income falls above the poverty line, which itself needs adjusting since the method for determining the line was devised in the early 1960s.

The Weldon Cooper Center at the University of Virginia estimates that a household of four needs double the poverty rate, or around \$44,000, for a self-sufficient annual income. Even then, one calamity — such as a divorce, lost job or serious health crisis — could cause the family to crash financially.

If one looks at four-person households earning \$37,000 or less annually (which is below the amount needed for self-sufficiency), the numbers in the Richmond region are shocking. Almost 20 percent of the households in Henrico and 14 percent in Chesterfield have incomes below self-sufficiency. In Richmond, just over one third of households fall into that category.

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**What does all** this mean for the future of our region?

First, it means accepting the reality that Chesterfield, Henrico and Richmond are more alike demographically than at any time in history.

Second, it means that we should chart a collective response to the region's single most important challenge.

Poverty ignores the boundaries between city and county, and the leaders of the three jurisdictions must act in concert to address the collective challenge and stop grinding old axes.

One place where we could start is pre-K-12 education. Every day teachers, staff and principals from all three jurisdictions work on the front lines of this battle with poverty. They know that children traumatized by the ills of deep-poverty neighborhoods enter kindergarten with challenges not experienced by other children. Unless there are interventions — particularly pre-school and early-year interventions — the children quickly fall behind other students in their schooling.

What if we developed a regional approach to help impoverished children achieve at their highest level so they are ready for college or careers requiring technical skills? Most important, what if the region got serious about addressing educational disparities and developed collective innovations for reducing inequities caused by poverty? Wouldn't it make more sense to engage in solutions that draw from metropolitan Richmond than cling to what is "ours"?

One example is the excellent work of Communities in Schools, which for years has offered wraparound services for impoverished children in the city and is now expanding into the surrounding counties. Other solutions have yet to be started, but could be effective. For example, the development of a regional magnet school could be designed to have a diverse socioeconomic student body.

Studies show repeatedly that the achievement level of children from low-income households are higher when they are part of a diverse student body and that the achievement level of students from high wealth neighborhoods are not affected. What's particularly important is that children in schools like that are far better prepared to live in an increasingly diverse society.

A regional anti-poverty initiative would knock down jurisdictional barriers and begin the long but important process of working for the common good. All three localities must accept the fact that poverty encompasses the entire metropolis and that strong leadership to engage us all must emerge — now!