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Study Shows Poverty in U.S. Less Concentrated

By ROBERT PEAR

WASHINGTON, May 17 — Poverty in the United States became far less concentrated in the 1990's as public housing projects were torn down and millions of poor people left urban slums for other neighborhoods, a new study of Census Bureau data says.

The number of people living in high-poverty neighborhoods declined by 2.5 million, or 24 percent, to 7.9 million in 2000 from 10.4 million in 1990, the researchers said.

The author of the study, Paul A. Jargowsky, an associate professor of political economy at the University of Texas at Dallas, described this as "a significant turnaround from the 1970-1990 period, during which the population in high-poverty neighborhoods doubled."

In 1990, 15 percent of all poor people lived in high-poverty neighborhoods. By 2000, the proportion had declined to 10 percent, according to the study, issued today by the Brookings Institution.

"Concentrated poverty — the share of the poor living in high-poverty neighborhoods — declined among all racial and ethnic groups, especially African-Americans," Mr. Jargowsky said.

In 1990, 30 percent of poor blacks lived in high-poverty neighborhoods. Ten years later, the proportion was 19 percent.

Mr. Jargowsky said the changes were generally beneficial.

"Concentrations of poor people lead to a concentration of the social ills that cause or are caused by poverty," Mr. Jargowsky said. "School districts are often organized geographically, so the residential concentration of the poor frequently results in low-performing schools."

The Census Bureau has not issued any studies on the concentration of poverty based on the 2000 census. But Mr. Jargowsky used census data to analyze high-poverty neighborhoods,

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which he defined as those where at least 40 percent of the residents had incomes below the official poverty level. A family of four was classified as poor in 2000 if it had cash income less than \$17,603.

The study defined a neighborhood as a census tract. The population of tracts varies widely, but averages 4,000 people. The number of high-poverty census tracts declined to 2,510 in 2000 from 3,417 in 1990, Mr. Jargowsky said.

The economy was expanding for most of the 1990's, but that alone does not explain what Mr. Jargowsky described as the "deconcentration of poverty." Despite the strong economy, the number of people classified as poor in the 2000 census was slightly higher than the number counted a decade earlier.

Bruce Katz, director of the Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy at the Brookings Institution, said, "The decline in concentrated poverty represents, in part, the triumph of smart federal policies that demolished failed public housing, rewarded work and overhauled welfare."

A separate study, by G. Thomas Kingsley and Kathryn L. S. Pettit of the Urban Institute, found that conditions in high-poverty neighborhoods generally improved in the 1990's. Adult education levels rose, the share of families headed by women declined and the number of households receiving public assistance fell sharply, the study said.

Margery A. Turner, a researcher at the Urban Institute, said the findings showed that "improvements are possible, even in severely distressed neighborhoods."

In his study, Mr. Jargowsky reported these findings:

¶The number of blacks living in high-poverty neighborhoods declined by more than one-third, to 3.1 million in 2000 from 4.9 million in 1990.

¶Two regions accounted for most of the change in the concentration of poverty. The population of high-poverty neighborhoods declined by 1.6 million people, or 35 percent, in the South and by 1.2 million people, or 46 percent, in the Midwest.

¶In the Northeast, the population of high-poverty neighborhoods was virtually unchanged. In the West, it increased by 344,000, or 26 percent.

¶From 1990 to 2000, the number of people living in high-poverty neighborhoods fell by 313,000, or 74 percent, in Detroit; by 177,900, or 43 percent, in Chicago; and by 107,000, or 70 percent, in San Antonio.

But poverty remained highly concentrated in the New York metropolitan area, Mr. Jargowsky said. The population of high-poverty neighborhoods there declined only 15,000, or 1.6 percent, he said.

Across the country, Mr. Jargowsky found "a bull's-eye pattern: improvements in the central city and increasing poverty in the inner ring of suburbs." Poverty increased in older suburbs of Detroit, Chicago, Cleveland and Dallas, he said.

Trends in the West were dominated by California, which showed a large increase in the population of high-poverty neighborhoods. One reason, Mr. Jargowsky suggested, was the influx of low-income Latin Americans. Such poverty, though cause for concern, may be different from poverty elsewhere, he said.

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"Western inner-city barrios may be more of a gateway than inner-city ghettos in other areas of the country," Mr. Jargowsky said. "Immigrants are moving into the barrios for opportunity, as part of an assimilation process that may channel many of them into jobs."

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