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Poverty begins to lose its grip on some cities Studies show that the poor are less concentrated in urban areas

By Dennis Cauchon
USA TODAY

COLUMBUS, Ohio -- Mayor Michael Coleman points to a vacant lot at the corner of Cleveland and 11th avenues. "A couple people got shot and killed there," he says.

He points to his left. An abandoned school, destroyed by fire, was a hangout for drug users. He points to his right. That was a liquor and convenience store "that sold more than milk to kids."

Ten years ago, this gateway into a working-class black neighborhood in the nation's 15th-largest city "was the definition of urban decay, blight and poverty," Coleman says.

Today, the corner is remarkable for its ordinariness. There's a State Farm insurance office, a bank, a restaurant, a dry cleaner and a barbershop. Seven new homes, built a block away, sold quickly.

In the past decade, things have gotten a lot better in many of the nation's inner cities. Two studies released Sunday show remarkable declines in the concentration of poverty in urban slums. In Detroit alone, the number of people living in high-poverty neighborhoods declined 74%.

"We've had huge improvements, much more than anyone expected," says Paul Jargowsky, author of a study by the Brookings Institution, a public policy research group in Washington, D.C.

Jargowsky's study defined high-poverty neighborhoods as those where at least 40% of the people lived in poverty. In 2000, the federal government defined poverty as a family of four with an annual income of \$17,050 or less. Across the nation, the number of people living in such neighborhoods fell from 10.4 million to 7.9 million from 1990 to 2000, a 24% drop.

The Urban Institute, a non-partisan research organization in Washington, D.C., confirmed the pattern in a separate study.

Far-reaching impact

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The reports reveal a sharp reversal in the nature of poverty in America. From 1970 through 1990, poverty had become increasingly concentrated in the nation's inner cities. "This shows that nothing is inevitable," says G. Thomas Kingsley, co-author of the Urban Institute study. "The cycle of poverty can be reversed."

The consequences could be far-reaching. Already, crime is down and more people are working and paying taxes. In the future, healthier cities could strengthen black families, foster new immigrant communities and diminish the pressure for suburban sprawl.

The reasons for the lessening of inner-city poverty are complex. But researchers agree that most important was the strong economy of the 1990s.

"Nothing helps low-income people more than a robust economy and a 4% unemployment rate," Jargowsky says.

Other factors in improving the health of inner cities:

* **Welfare reform.** Pushing people from welfare to jobs was not a disaster for the poor, as some had predicted. In fact, the researchers say, the studies add to growing evidence that the changes helped reduce poverty.

* **Tearing down housing projects.** The federal government has moved away from an idea, popular in the 1960s and 1970s, that encouraged construction of huge public housing projects. The theory had been that social services were easier to provide when the poor were brought together. But the concentration of poverty and crime destroyed neighborhoods where the poor and working class had once been mixed. About 175 public housing projects have been demolished nationwide.

* **Slowing industrial decline.** "The industrial base of inner cities -- from cars to steel -- shrank and went away from 1970 to 1990," says economist Stephen Adams, head of the Center for Urban Entrepreneurship in Boston. That painful process has largely played itself out, allowing inner-city economies to stabilize.

Moving closer to jobs

The decrease in the concentration of urban poverty has been caused by a combination of poor people moving out, wealthier people moving in and remaining residents earning more.

"If you move from welfare poor to working poor, one issue becomes, 'How can I get to my job that may be mowing grass or working at McDonald's in the suburbs?'" Jargowsky says. "People follow jobs."

Despite the decline in the concentration of poverty, the level of poverty changed little. "Overall, poverty stayed in roughly the 11% to 12% range (of the total population)," Kingsley says. "What changed is where the poor live."

The Census, upon which the studies were based, was taken at the peak of economic prosperity in 2000. The subsequent economic downturn may have brought some changes.

Los Angeles, San Diego and Washington, D.C., were among cities where the percentage of people in high-poverty areas increased.

Most researchers say that it's better for poverty to be spread out than concentrated.

High-poverty neighborhoods are a magnet for social ills such as crime and bad schools, they say. The poor have a better chance when they live near jobs and in neighborhoods where working is the norm.

In Columbus, the mayor is putting the theory into practice -- and it seems to be working. The number of high-poverty neighborhoods in the city of 632,000 fell from 24 in 1990 to 13 in 2000.

At the corner of Cleveland and 11th avenues, the city built a bus station to help ferry inner-city residents to Easton, an affluent new shopping district. It includes a private day care center and the first bank the neighborhood has had in many years. "Before, there was nothing within walking distance except trouble," Coleman says.

Howard Tyler, a State Farm agent who is African-American, once had an office in a predominantly white area. With the neighborhood on the upswing, he returned to the inner city. "We're back to our roots," says his wife, Gloria Tyler. "Our business has increased, too."

"Life is so much better now," says Twila Caslin, standing near her new neighbor's house, with her daughter, Velsha, 7, and son, Shaquille, 9. "Trouble is moving away. They don't have anywhere to hang anymore. The kids are happier just walking down the street."



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