

Birmingham poverty declines amid rise

By Jeff Hansen -- The Birmingham News

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The **Brookings Institution** today reports that the poverty rates in the city of **Birmingham** and in the rest of the seven-county metro area declined from 2000 to 2008, by 2.4 and 0.6 percentage points, respectively.

That defied the overall trend seen in the nation's 95 largest metro areas, where the number of American poor increased by 5.2 million, with almost half of that growth occurring in what Brookings calls "the suburbs."

Birmingham's outlier status is an anomaly. The metro region was late in joining the Great Recession: Birmingham metro unemployment averaged 4.5 percent in 2008, but then 9.1 percent through the first 11 months of 2009.

Brookings expects the Birmingham-Hoover metro poverty rate will to climb by 2.4 percentage points from 2008 to 2009, based on that surge of unemployment already seen for 2009. And Brookings expects poverty rates in the other 94 metro areas will also rise.

The Brookings Institution said the trend of more poor people living in suburbs means that "the balance of metropolitan poverty has passed a tipping point."

"The number of poor grew by 25 percent in suburbs from 2000 to 2008 -- almost five times the growth rate in primary cities -- making the suburbs home to the largest and fastest growing poor population in the country," Brookings said in its description of today's report. "There are now 1.5 million more poor people living in suburbs than in primary cities."

Brookings' definition of suburbs for the Birmingham-Hoover metro area is every part of the metro area that lies outside the primary city of Birmingham. In 2008, an estimated 45,717 people lived below poverty in Birmingham, and 86,458 lived below poverty in the suburbs. The poverty level is \$21,834 for a family of four.

"For a long time poverty in Alabama has followed a geographic pattern that has made the problem less visible," said Jim Carnes, communications director for Alabama Arise, a statewide coalition to improve the lives of poor people.

"We tend to become inured to pockets of poverty in the city and in rural areas of the Black Belt," Carnes said. "I would hope that a break in that long-term pattern will create a new awareness of the implications of poverty and that we might awaken to the need for new policies."

Birmingham city's poverty rate in 2008 was 22.3 percent, which is higher than the 18.2 percent average rate for the primary cities of all 95 metros. The poverty rate for the Birmingham metro suburbs was 9.7 percent, compared with a 9.5 percent average rate for suburbs of the 95 metros. Brookings had previously reported that 2005 was the first time more poor people lived in America's suburbs than in its primary cities.

While the poverty rate in primary cities remains about twice that of the suburbs, the pace of poverty growth in the suburbs has significant policy implications, the report says.

America's shifting geography of poverty will require changes in policies to provide links to affordable housing and transit. It will also require changes in strategies for workforce and economic development to help connect low-income residents to job opportunities.

jhansen@bhamnews.com

