

MPIP Focus Reports appear several times a year and examine issues of public and policy interest.

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youth
suburban children
at risk

Suburban stereotypes have traditionally held that youngsters who grow up outside the city are shielded from the harsh social environments that many inner-city children must confront. But that assumption is at odds with the reality experienced by many suburban youths. Increasingly, the social risks associated with economic disadvantage are appearing in some suburban communities, including the suburbs of metropolitan Philadelphia.

In December 2006, the Brookings Institution reported that for the first time in U.S. history, the number of suburban poor people now exceeds the number of urban poor, by at least a million persons. Furthermore, between 1999

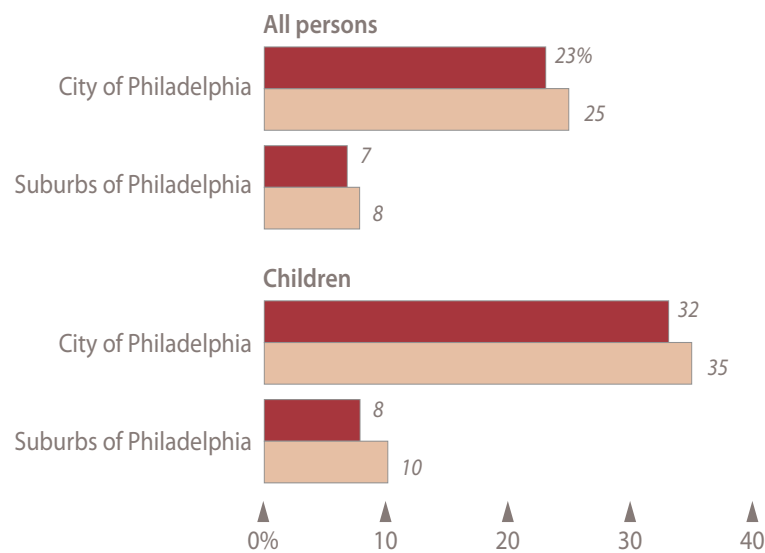


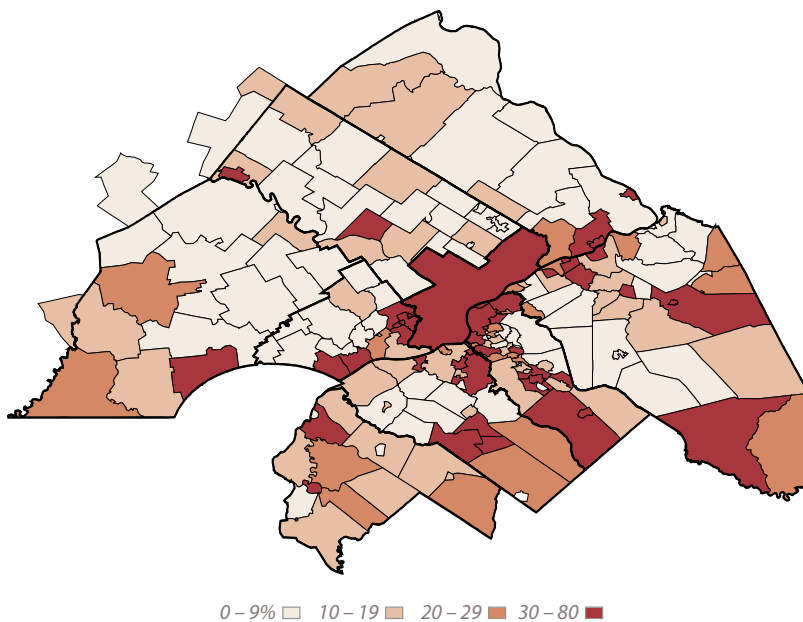
FIGURE 1: Percent Living in Poverty, 1999 and 2005

Source: Alan Berube and Elizabeth Kneebone, "Two Steps Back: City and Suburban Poverty Trends 1999-2005," *Brookings Institution Living Cities Census Series*, December 2006.

and 2005, rates of poverty rose faster for children than for the population as a whole. As Figure 1 shows, the Philadelphia metropolitan area reflected the national trend charted in that research.

Conditions affecting children are continuously monitored in the city of Philadelphia by the annual Report Card published by Philadelphia Safe and Sound, a nonprofit organization dedicated to children and youth. However, the region has no similar tracking system to monitor systematically the conditions affecting suburban children and youth. This report, which is the product of MPIP's collaboration with Philadelphia Citizens for Children and Youth, seeks to fill a part of that gap, focusing particularly on indicators describing educational outcomes, teen births, and school violence, and capturing both city and suburban patterns.

Taken together, the four indicators presented in this report demonstrate that the risks facing suburban youths, while they are most prevalent in a handful of especially disadvantaged places, are not confined only to those towns. We find significant levels of risk spread across dozens of suburban communities, not all of which have low-income populations. The maps in this series challenge the popular concept that "inner ring" suburbs are the ones whose children are most likely to face risks in their social environment. A good many of the places with problems are located far from the inner ring adjacent to the region's urban core.



Map 1: Average percent of children eligible for free or reduced lunch, 2002 to 2004

Sources: NJ and PA Departments of Education, 2002–2004.

Children Eligible for Free or Reduced Lunch

In each school district, the percentage of children who are eligible for free or reduced price lunches is an indicator of the extent to which schools are serving low-income youngsters. Students whose family income is up to 130 percent of the poverty line are eligible for free lunches, and those whose families earn between 130 percent and 185 percent of the poverty line may buy their lunches at reduced prices. (In 2004 this meant that a child from a 4-person household with an annual income up to \$24,500 qualified for free lunches, while incomes up to \$35,000 qualified for reduced-price lunches.)

Map 1 shows that the school districts with the highest share of students getting lunch assistance include Philadelphia and other older communities along the Delaware River like Bristol in lower Bucks County, and a number of communities in Delaware County, including Chester, Chichester, and Upper Darby. A few other older communities like Norristown and Pottstown in Montgomery County also ranked among the highest in percentage of children receiving lunch assistance.

However, the striking thing about Map 1 is how widespread across the suburbs is the presence of students qualifying for lunch assistance. This is particularly striking for the school districts in New Jersey, a majority of which serve at least 10% or more of children eligible for subsidized lunch. On the Pennsylvania side, the map shows low-income students

present even in the communities located at the intersection of Montgomery, Chester, and Delaware Counties—surrounding Valley Forge/King of Prussia—which are widely perceived as affluent. However, several school districts serving those communities, including Phoenixville, Upper Merion, and the Colonial district, have between 10 and 19 percent of their students eligible for lunch assistance. Marple-Newtown in Delaware County is another district that is generally regarded as serving affluent families, yet more than ten percent of its pupils qualify for lunch assistance.

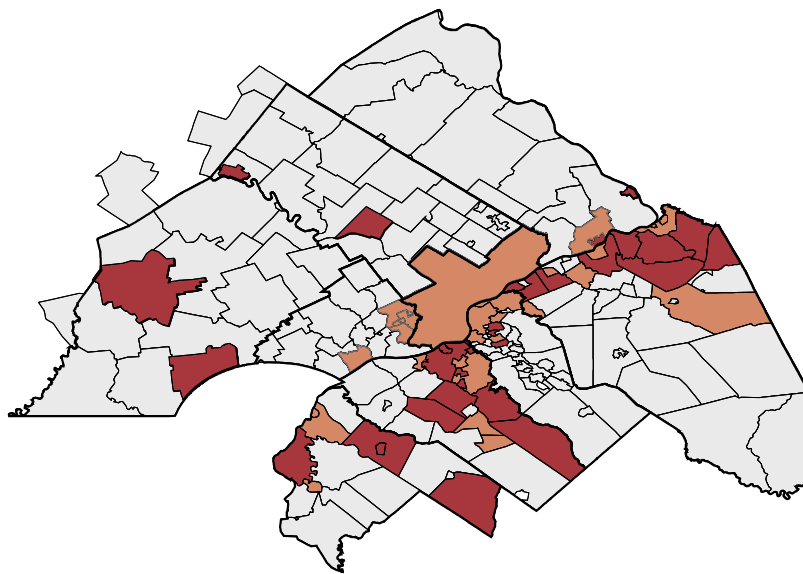
Lower-income students are not confined to the inner suburbs of the region, but appear even in schools districts located at a distance from the urban core, for example, the Upper Perkiomen district at the northeastern edge of Montgomery County, the Quakertown and Pennridge districts at the northern end of Bucks County, the cluster of districts located at the western edge of Chester County, and the districts ranged along the south-

eastern edges of Burlington, Camden, Gloucester, and Salem counties.

Children Failing 8th Grade Reading and Math Tests

For many youths, the middle grades determine subsequent academic opportunities and even life chances. Either children acquire the academic knowledge and skills they will need to achieve in high school and subsequently in college, or they fall behind, increasing their chances of dropping out or drifting through high school with diminished academic and job prospects. So it is especially important to monitor student performance in middle schools. Unfortunately, national data show that although elementary school students have made perceptible gains in reading and math during the past five years, middle school students have made smaller gains in math and virtually no gains in reading.

Because of the testing systems established by states to comply with the federal No Child Left Behind policy, all public schools annually publish in-



MCD's where 25% or more are testing below basic in BOTH math and reading ■
 MCD's where 25% or more are testing below basic in math ■

MAP 2: Failure rate on eighth grade standardized tests, 2002–2004

Sources: NJ and PA Departments of Education, 2002–2004.

formation about the scores achieved by their students. While New Jersey and Pennsylvania administer different tests, both attempt to determine whether pupils are achieving at appropriate grade levels.

Map 2 shows the school districts in which 25% or more of 8th grade students have test scores below expectations for the 8th grade. In Pennsylvania, the map shows the percent falling “below basic,” indicating inadequate performance that reflects little understanding and minimal display of skills included in the Pennsylvania Academic Content Standards. The comparable performance category in New Jersey is “partially proficient.” To make sure the numerical averages were not reflecting only one-year aberrations for individual school districts, we averaged student performance over several years.

A dozen Pennsylvania districts show up on Map 2 as having disproportionately high failure rates at the eighth grade level. More than twice that many districts in New Jersey exhibit high failure rates, a pattern that shows up particularly in Gloucester County, and at the northern edge of Burlington County. Virtually all of these districts are ones that showed up previously on Map 1 as having at least 20% of students qualifying for lunch assistance. That illustrates the well-documented connection between income level and student achievement level in schools.

Most of the districts where at least a quarter of students are failing both math and reading tests are located along the Delaware River in the older communities like Bristol in lower Bucks County, Camden and Pennsauken in Camden County, Burlington City and Bordentown in Burlington County, and a number of communities in Delaware County, including Chester, Chichester, and Upper Darby. Other suburban districts, which show high failure rates only on math tests, also serve students in older boroughs -for example, Coatesville, Pottstown, and Norristown. (No separate color is shown to indicate a high failure rate on reading tests alone because every district with over 25% failing reading also had over 25% failing math.)

Teen Mothers

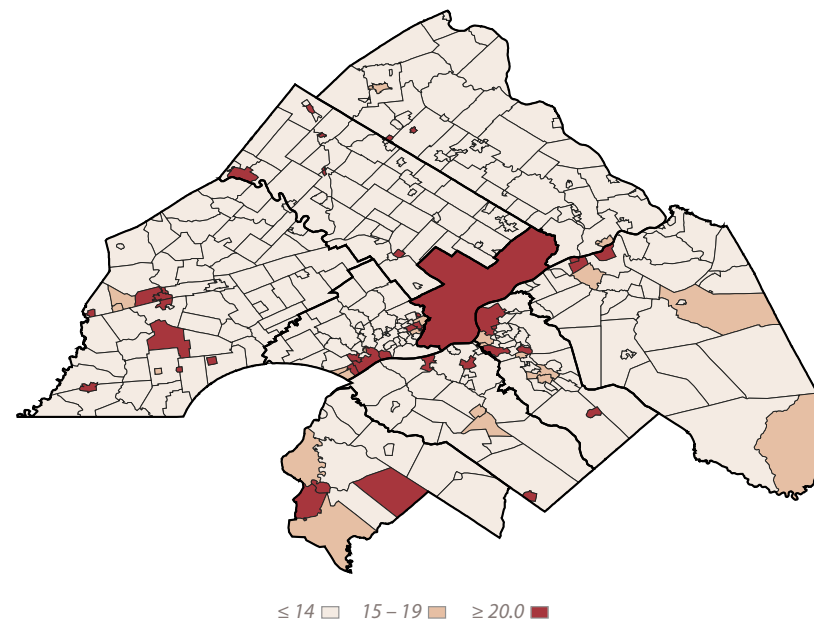
Teenagers who bear children are at greater risk than their peers of dropping out of school. They are less likely to complete the education they

need in order to get a well-paid job, and therefore more likely to become financially dependent on their families or on public assistance. Research shows that teen mothers are far more likely than their peers to end up on welfare (National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, Not Just Another Single Issue: Teen Pregnancy's Link to Other Critical Social Issues. Washington, DC: 2002).

Furthermore, teen motherhood is associated with problems for the children born to adolescent girls. Those children are more likely than other babies to suffer from low birth weights and nutritional problems. Babies born to teen mothers -along with their mothers -are at greater risk than others of living in poverty, and they are likely to achieve at lower-than-average levels in school.

Map 3 shows that high rates of teen births occur disproportionately in older boroughs of the region. As we have noted in Maps 1 and 2 above, many of these older towns are arrayed along the banks of the Delaware River, including Chester City, Camden, and Burlington City. However, many other areas containing teen mothers are scattered throughout the region, in small boroughs like Kennett Square, Oxford, Pottstown, or Schwenksville on the Pennsylvania side, and older towns like Chesilhurst, Woodbury, or Bellmawr on the New Jersey side.

What do these towns have in common that makes them home to teen mothers? Although we do not have survey data to confirm it, we suspect that the housing markets in older boroughs and towns contain affordable rental units in which young parents can set up households. All of the communities listed above fall into a category of suburban towns that we have classified as “Stable Working Communities.” Compared to other suburban communities, a higher-than-average share of housing units in these Stable Working Communities was built before 1940, with relatively little new construction in the past decades. Female-headed families, while they comprise a smaller percentage of the population than in Philadelphia and Camden, exceed the proportion of such households in other suburban communities.



MAP 3: Births per 1,000 females aged 17 or younger, 2002–2004

Sources: NJ and PA Departments of Health, 2002–2004.

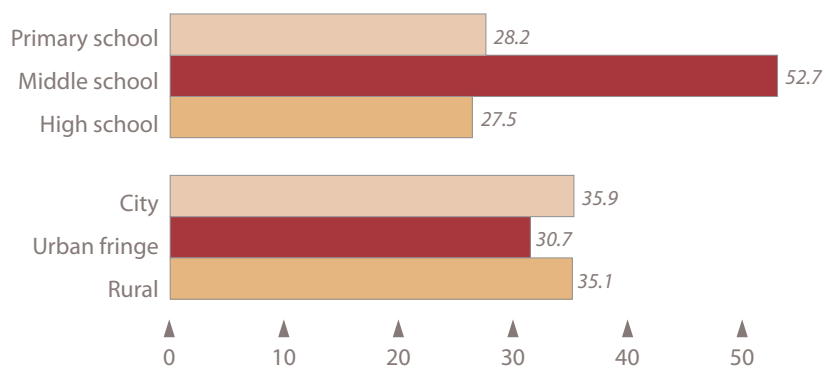


FIGURE 2: Violent incidents* per 1000 students in U.S. public schools, 2003–2004

*Violent incidents include rape, sexual battery other than rape, physical attack or fight with or without a weapon, threat of physical attack with or without a weapon, and robbery with or without a weapon.

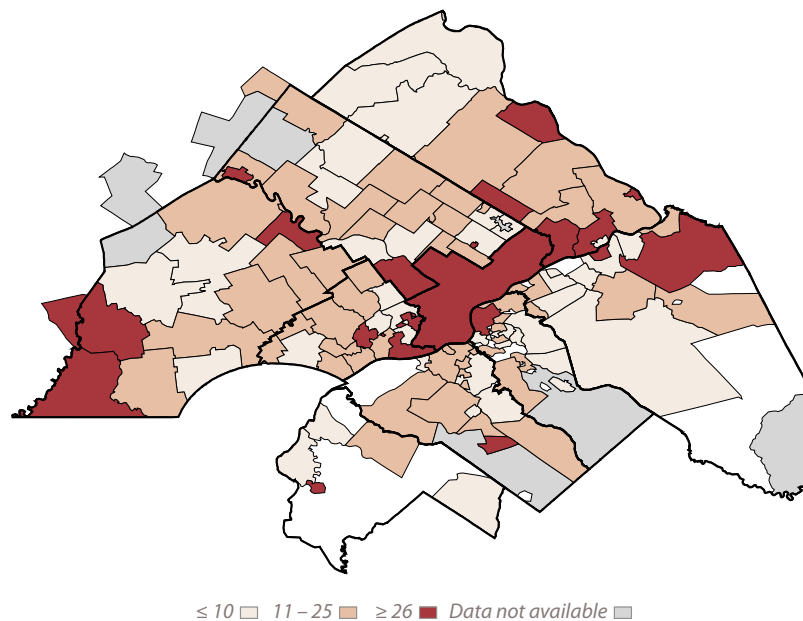
Source: Guerino, P. et al, "Crime, Violence, Discipline and Safety in U.S. Public Schools," U.S. Dept. of Education National Center for Education Statistics, 2006.

School Violence

If there is one place we expect children to be free from risk, it is at school. Yet media reports have made us increasingly aware that violence occurs in and around school buildings. Responding to the so-called "summers of violence" in 1993 and 1994, the U.S. Congress became involved in insuring that schools provide a safe haven for youngsters. In 1994, national legislation setting goals for public schools included this sweeping objective: "by the year 2000, all schools in America will be free of drugs and violence" (National Education Goals, 1994). While that lofty goal has not been met, the federal legislation has at least meant that laws have been enacted around the nation to supply timely, accurate reporting of school-based crime.

Those reports tell us that school safety varies substantially across different types of schools. Middle schools, especially large ones, have documented far higher levels of violence than primary schools or high schools (Figure 2). And the numbers collected across the country tell us that children who attend school in urban districts with lower household incomes and lower education levels are more likely to be victims of violence than youngsters in the suburbs (classified as the "Urban Fringe" in national reports).

Map 4 confirms that the urbanized communities along the Delaware River—particularly those on the Pennsylvania side—show higher rates of school violence than most other school districts in the region. However, Map 4 also suggests that high levels of school violence can show up in schools districts where it is unexpected—for example, in New Hope-Solebury (Bucks County), Jenkintown and Lower Merion (both in Montgomery County), and Wallingford-Swarthmore (Delaware County), all of which rank among the highest performing suburban districts on scholastic measures. Like each of the three preceding maps in this report, Map 4 illustrates the point that it is inaccurate to visualize an “inner ring” of communities where children are disproportionately at risk. A significant number of the places where children are at high risk of school violence are located at a distance from the region’s urban core.



MAP 4: Violent incidents per 1,000 students, 2003–2004

Sources: NJ and PA Departments of Education, 2003–2004.