

Poverty in the suburbs looks different than urban models

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WACO—When poverty moves to the suburbs, it looks different than urban poverty and requires different ministry strategies, the cofounders of Mission Cy-Fair in northwest Houston told a Christian community development conference.

Elliott Scott, pastor of Lifepath Church, and Susan Nichols, executive director of Mission Cy-Fair, led a workshop on poverty in the suburbs as part of the No Need Among You conference in Waco.

Training for volunteers at The Bridge, a ministry of Mission Cy-Fair in Houston. Nichols worked 18 years in urban ministry before she moved to Cy-Fair, a mostly unincorporated area in northwest Houston where 750,000 people live, and 50 percent of the students in the school district qualify for free or reduced lunches.

She noted key differences between urban and suburban poverty:

- **Expectations.** Urban poverty is expected; suburban poverty is unexpected. “In the inner-city, perception is reality. In the suburbs, perception is disbelief,” she said. People expect a certain amount of poverty and homelessness in urban areas, but affluent suburban-dwellers may be shocked to learn large pockets of poverty exist just a few miles from where they live.
- **IMBY vs. NIMBY.** Urban poverty is “in my back yard by definition,”

Nichols noted. On the other hand, many suburban-dwellers mistakenly believe poverty and its attendant problems are “not in my back yard.” Signs of poverty that appear clearly visible in blighted urban areas may exist just beneath the surface in suburbia.

- **Distance.** In urban areas, poverty exists in concentrated areas, but in the suburbs, it is spread out. That makes suburban poverty more difficult to target.

- **Transportation.** The urban poor often can access services through public transportation if someone provides them with the fare required. In the suburbs, public transportation typically is limited or nonexistent.

- **Services.** Longstanding nonprofit organizations and ministries serve urban areas. Many suburban areas lack these nonprofit agencies, and if they are unincorporated areas, they also lack municipal services.

- **Diversity.** Urban areas are known for their cultural diversity. Young suburban-dwellers typically know about their community’s cultural diversity, but older residents may still think of their areas as almost exclusively Anglo. For instance, the Cy-Fair schools were 90 percent Anglo in the mid-1970s. Today, they are 28 percent Anglo, and there are 97 languages and dialects spoken in students’ homes, but older residents may not understand that.

- **Homelessness.** In contrast to the clearly visible chronically homeless who live on the streets and in the shelters of urban areas, the suburbs have an invisible transitionally homeless population who move frequently.

- **Old vs. new.** Poor people in cities generally live in run-down, dilapidated buildings. The homes of suburban poor typically are less than 30 years old, and they may not immediately appear to be in disrepair. However, some lack utilities, and many soon will begin to show the effects of deferred

maintenance.

- **Multihousing.** In the inner-cities, multihousing typically means tenements or government projects. In the suburbs, multihousing means multiple families—or at least multiple generations of extended families—living together in single-family dwellings.

As communities change socio-economically, churches typically respond in one of three ways, Elliott observed. They may try to ignore the change, they may relocate to an area away from perceived problems, or they may try to engage the community.

Lifepath Church chose the latter option by meeting in a school in the area of greatest need, he noted. The church also is seeking to partner with the school and other groups in the community to raise awareness, equip volunteers and mobilize workers.