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Distressed Older Suburbs Can Be Revitalized, New Study Finds

Problems of poverty, unemployment and foreclosure, typically associated with inner cities, have made their way to distressed, older suburbs across the country. The Maxine Goodman Levin College of Urban Affairs at Cleveland State University was called upon to help understand the new realities of such suburbs and explore opportunities to improve living conditions for their residents.

“Regionalize, repurpose, or restructure” are recommended strategies for revitalizing distressed older suburbs and improving living conditions for residents in a new report by the Maxine Goodman Levin College of Urban Affairs at Cleveland State University for the national Urban Institute’s What Works Collaborative.

Revitalizing Distressed Older Suburbs focuses on predominantly minority suburbs of older, large industrial cities, communities that once thrived but now have increasing needs and limited resources. The report identifies 168 most-distressed suburbs in the United States and provides in-depth case studies of four: East Cleveland, OH, and Inkster, MI located in declining economic regions, and Chester, PA, and Prichard, AL, located in growing economic regions.

Using census data, literature review, fiscal analysis and four in-depth case studies, the authors provide a detailed portrait of the underlying forces shaping distressed suburbs and highlight a range of best practices.

Case Study Example: East Cleveland

East Cleveland was one of the first and, once, one of the most prestigious suburbs of Cleveland. Today, most of its tax-generating industries are gone; large pockets of housing stock are substandard, abandoned, and vandalized; and the school system earns a low grade in the state ranking system. Of its nearly 18,000 residents, 37% had incomes below the federal poverty level in 2010. But the authors point to signs of hope. For example, the city’s leaders are working to restore trust and are reaching out to neighboring communities to help revitalization efforts. Regional agreements regarding water and sewer systems are underway, and other service delivery options are under discussion.

“We hope that understanding what does and does not work in these four case study cities will help inform the federal policy discussion about how best to position distressed suburbs for the future,” said Kathryn Wertheim Hexter, director of Levin College’s Center for Community Planning and Development and project manager.

The report may be found at <http://www.urban.org/publications/412461.html>.

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