

Feds see poverty rising in Atlanta's suburban school districts



U.S. youth census data finds poverty rose in Atlanta's suburbs during the pandemic. The federal government assists with some direct funding and with school meal subsidies.

Poverty rates are rising among young people in many of Atlanta's suburbs, according to new federal data, creating an array of challenges for teachers and school district administrators.

From 2019 to 2021, the rate of poverty among residents aged 5-17 climbed nearly 7 percentage points in DeKalb County and more than 2 points in Clayton and Gwinnett counties. They and Cherokee County, up 1.4 percentage points, exceeded the average state increase of 1 point, according to the [new youth census data](#), which is for residents within school districts whether or not they attend those schools.

Atlanta Public Schools was the only major metro Atlanta school district to see a sizable drop, falling a net 4.7 percentage points by 2021 after plummeting nearly 9 points the year before.

Educators say they've seen students suffer academically when worried about meals or shelter. The changes may create pressure on suburban schools to deal with poverty, since they tend to be in communities with less organizational support for food and housing assistance. Some school employees, and students, have embarked on efforts to [help impoverished students](#) in recent years by creating spaces in schools to distribute free food or clothes.



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Jennifer Henn (left) and Jennifer Frisco Bartl are two of the three co-founders of COR, an Atlanta nonprofit that assists high school students living in poverty and experiencing trauma. (Alyssa Pointer / AJC file photo)

Whether this sudden shift is a long-term trend or a short-term deviation is unclear at this point.

Ken Zeff, executive director of Learn4Life, an organization that helps metro systems boost achievement, said it could be the result of the temporary increase in the federal child tax credit. Stephen Owens, an expert on education funding, said it could be a “data integrity” issue related to census work during the pandemic.

But Owens, education director at the Georgia Budget and Policy Institute, wondered if it might also be a sign that poverty, once chiefly an urban issue, is beginning to spread to the suburbs: “Is it gentrification? Is it housing prices in Atlanta growing faster than in metro Atlanta?”

The shift could also influence how federal assistance is divvied between schools. Most of the cost of public education is borne by state and local taxpayers, but the federal government offers some help, especially in areas with high poverty.

It could take a while for any big funding shifts though: Atlanta officials say 70 of their schools still qualify for the federal poverty program known as Title I. (The district has about 90 schools, counting those operating under charters.)

Still, people in the suburbs have noticed a change.

“We have an increasing number of people who are experiencing houselessness,” said Marlyn Tillman, co-founder and executive director of Gwinnett SToPP, an advocacy organization. “Our hotels are filling up with people living there.”

Lisa Morgan, president of the Georgia Association of Educators, said most of the suburban educators she knows have had students who lived in extended-stay hotels. Such transience affects learning, she said.

Vocabulary can suffer when books are not a priority, and they typically aren’t for families on the move, she said. “When you’re carrying your clothes around in a garbage bag ... you’re carrying the essentials.”

Explore [Working families resort to hotels for homes](#)

In Gwinnett County, home of the state’s largest school district, former school board member Everton Blair recalls signs of growing poverty over the years. Before he graduated from Shiloh High School over a decade ago, there were kids on the school bus who were constantly changing addresses and students who’d missed kindergarten.

Blair, the district’s first Black board member who [recently left office](#) after one term, said averages on academic measures such as test scores can mask pockets of low performance.

“You kind of have a tale of two schools within a school,” he said, “and maybe even in the aggregate, a tale of two or three districts within one district.”

Tillman thinks the system should budget for smaller class sizes in high-poverty areas, so teachers have more time to find and fill learning gaps where struggling parents cannot. “They’re dealing with life and may not have that opportunity to provide some extra learning support at home,” she said, “so we have to be the extra support.”

Gwinnett school officials say they have noticed an increase in their youth poverty rate since the start of the pandemic.

The system said officials are planning “to ensure that students throughout the district, particularly students of poverty, have access to school and community resources as we seek to remove any barriers to students’ success.”

Metro Atlanta child poverty rates

Here are the youth poverty rates and the number of youths in families in poverty for some metro Atlanta school districts in 2021.

District Rate Number

Clayton 26.9% 16,187

Atlanta 26.6% 16,112

DeKalb 23.7% 26,648

Marietta 16.6% 1,396

Gwinnett 14.9% 28,625

Fulton 14.6% 16,063

Buford 13.5% 529

Henry 12.2% 5,846

Coweta 11.6% 3,101

Cobb 10.8% 13,190

Source: U.S. Census Bureau