This talk examines how changes in the Hartford Metro area during the period from 1980 to 2000 compare with national trends. Census data show the quite extreme contrast between Hartford and its suburbs, that is, the 57 towns that surround the city. In large measure this city/suburban divide is related to the long-term “inelasticity” of the Hartford’s boundaries – the inability of the city to extend outwards and encompass the growing and prospering suburbs. A key development in recent decades has been increased African American and Hispanic suburbanization. I will be looking at the consequences of this greater permeability of urban/suburban divide.

I am going to begin by describing **five** important demographic and economic characteristics of the Hartford metro area that make it stand out from most other metro areas in the US. These characteristics all relate to aspects of inequality in the region.

1. **First**, the city of Hartford has experienced a **precipitous population decline** – a telling indicator of the city’s faltering economic vitality.

   Hartford’s population dropped from 177 thousand in 1950 to 140 thousand in 1990. Between 1990 and 2000 the city experienced a further 13 percent decline. Among all medium-sized cities of the United States (that is, cities comparable in size to Hartford), there was a 13%
increase in population between 1990 and 2000. Indeed, the percentage drop in Hartford in the 1990s was larger than any of the other 195 cities in the US with populations in excess of 100,000.

A second important characteristic is exceptionally low representation of non-Hispanic whites in Hartford’s population. (For the sake of brevity, I will hereafter refer to non-Hispanic whites as simply “whites”.)

White flight contributed heavily to population decline. Though similar racial/ethnic changes have occurred in other cities, Hartford stands out as extreme.

In 1990 the population of medium-sized cities of the Northeast were nearly two-thirds white. In the decade that followed Asians and Hispanics more than doubled; by 2000 whites comprised just half the population. The Northeast was the only region where whites no longer comprised the majority in medium-sized cities.

In Hartford, whites comprised just 18% of the population in the year 2000; this was down from 44% in 1980. The number of whites had dropped from 61,000 to 22,000 in the two decades. The decline in percentage white in Hartford between 1990 and 2000 was higher than in any other central city in the 102 largest metropolitan areas of the country.

3: A third characteristic is the extreme poverty in Hartford.

In 2000, among all U.S. cities with population over 100,000, Hartford was second only to Brownsville, Texas in the percentage below poverty.

4. The fourth characteristic concerns the economic divide between Hartford and its suburbs.
A comparison of the 50 largest metro areas in the United States shows that in both 1980 and 2000 the Hartford metro area had the largest gap between the per capita income of city residents and the per capita income of suburban residents.

Interestingly, the economic inequality across Hartford suburban towns is among the very lowest in the 50 metro areas. When the poor are largely contained in the central city, suburbs tend to be more economically and ethnically homogenous.

The fifth characteristic concerns the national origin of the metro area Hispanics.

Three-quarters of Hispanics in the Hartford metro area are Puerto Rican, while Mexicans comprise just 5 percent of Hispanics. In the United States as a whole, two-thirds of Hispanics in the United States are Mexican, and just one in 10 Hispanics in the US are Puerto Rican.

Only three metro areas in the United States had a higher percentage Puerto Rican among Hispanics than did the Hartford region in 2000. Two of these are close-by: Springfield, Massachusetts and Waterbury, Connecticut. (Bridgeport was close at 67% Puerto Rican).

These five characteristics of the city and suburbs of the Hartford metro area have surely shaped the changes in the suburbs now taking place as the once rigid divide between city and suburb erodes. The increasing economic and racial/ethnic diversity in the suburbs may be promoting new forms of suburban segregation due in part to the extreme city/suburban contrasts that have long characterized this metro area.

In both the Hartford metro area and the nation as a whole, the poor are increasingly dispersed across metro areas, and racial/ethnic minority groups are a growing share of the
suburban population.

Mass suburbanization in the United States began in the 1940s and was overwhelmingly white. Initially, African Americans were moving primarily to cities. However, the black suburban population doubled between 1980 and 2000. By 2000 one-third of all blacks lived in the suburbs. Immigration of Hispanics and Asians greatly increased since the 1970s, and these groups have generally faced fewer barriers to suburban entry than have blacks. During the 1990s, racial and ethnic minorities increased from 19% to 27% of the suburban population of the 102 largest metro areas.

Until recently, poverty has grown most rapidly in cities. “In 1959, less than one-third of the poverty population in the United States lived in metropolitan central cities. By 1991, the central cities included close to half of the nation’s poor” (Wilson 1997, p. 11). There had also been increased “concentration of poverty”, that is, more and more of the poor were located in census tracts where at least 40% were living below the poverty line. In the 1990s, this changed: Suburban poverty increased more than urban poverty, and secondly, poverty dispersed: The number of poor people living in concentrated poverty dropped from 10 million to 8 million.

How do the national trends compare with change in Hartford’s suburbs?

Racial and ethnic minorities comprised just 6 percent of Hartford’s suburban population in 1980; this rose to 16 percent by 2000.

Between 1980 and 2000, the population of Hartford’s suburbs grew by 117,000 and came to pass the 1 million mark, but only 2.3% of the increase could be attributed to whites. Suburban growth was nearly entirely due to increased numbers of African Americans,
Hispanics and Asians.

In 1990, the majority of African Americans and Hispanics in the metro area resided in Hartford. In 2000, the majority were suburban. We know from census tract data, however, that this movement into the suburbs did not change the degree of residential segregation of whites from Hispanics or of white from African Americans.

One unusual aspect of segregation in the Hartford area was that African Americans and Hispanics were about equally segregated from whites. Elsewhere Hispanic-white segregation was typically lower than Black-white segregation. Hartford area Puerto Rican predominance among Hispanics may be factor here. The high level of Hispanic-white segregation shows up in several other metro areas with Puerto Rican predominance among Hispanics. The severity of prejudice toward Puerto Ricans may play a role here. Also important is the especially high poverty of Puerto Ricans in the Northeast compared to other Hispanic groups.

The form of racial/ethnic separation in the suburbs can be seen more clearly by looking at population change across Hartford’s suburban towns.

The white population has been sprawling outward, away from the relatively large, older and more densely settled towns close to or bordering Hartford. The larger the town, the smaller the white population growth. The pattern for African Americans and Hispanics was also very clear and very strong, but in just the opposite direction. The larger the town, the larger the growth of African Americans and Hispanics.

Age differences between whites and especially Hispanics had profound consequences. In the Hartford metro area in 2000, the median age of Hispanics was 24; among whites
it was age 40. The very youthful age structure of Hispanics is a product of the fact that younger people are more likely to migrate, and the fact that Hispanics have a relatively high birth rate.

The impact of Hispanic suburbanization is greatly heightened by the heavy concentration of children in the population. This is evident if we consider the combined population of three large towns that had high Hispanic population growth: East Hartford, Bristol and Manchester. In the 2000 the combined total population of the three towns was 164,000, having risen only 1% since 1990. The Hispanic population, however, had increased from 6 thousand to 14 thousand during the 1990s.

All of the decline in the white population between 1990 and 2000 was among those under age 40. These were predominantly families of baby boomers and their children. By 2000 the white population was much older, and the number of white children was much lower than in 1990.

Nearly all the increase among Hispanics was in young age groups. Population growth brought more families with children.

In the three towns, particularly striking was change in the ethnic composition of children under age 5. 84% of these children were white in 1900. 63% were white in 2000. Change was surely most visible in schools and playgrounds, and white families appeared to be responding by flight to wealthier and more ethnically homogenous suburbs.

Given the overlap between income and ethnicity, it is difficult to know how much each factor plays a role here. In 2000, the median household income of Hispanics in the Hartford metro area was 27 thousand dollars; the income of whites was 30 thousand dollars higher. Between 1990 and 2000, white increase was most in those towns with the lowest poverty. Hispanics were growing in towns with higher poverty.
In the 1990s Hispanic poor became far less concentrated in suburbs with the most poverty (that is, New Britain, Windham, Bristol and Middletown). The primary towns to which Hispanic poor were going, however, appear to have been adversely affected: Hispanic arrival increased the poverty among the Hispanics in those towns. White outmigration from these poorer towns left even relatively well-off Hispanics in closer contact with persons in poverty and more segregated from whites.

As a result of the dispersion of the poverty, more of the suburban poor were African American and Hispanic. This may have served to reinforce ethnic stereotypes. In 1990, whites had comprised 81% of Hartford suburbanites who were poor or near poor (that is, below twice the poverty level). By 2000 whites were only 67% of this group.

CONCLUSION

Hartford in 1980 was predominantly Hispanic and African American, and the suburbs were overwhelmingly white. By 2000 Hartford was far less white. In the suburbs, racial/ethnic divisions were redrawn, not erased. Metro area poverty moved. Far from being removed, poverty worsened.

An early city/suburb divide may have contributed to these negative developments. The inelastic boundaries of the city made moving to the suburbs a way of leaving urban problems behind rather than solving them. Important also are the many ways that federal, state and local government policy promoted suburban development at the expense of cities. Now the escape – what Robert Reich has called the “secession of the successful” – is accomplished by moving to the right suburb rather than just moving to the suburbs.

The city/suburb divide may have contributed to less tolerance for living in heterogenous neighborhoods and made entry of racial/ethnic minority groups into the suburbs more visible
and more likely to provoke white flight.

Alternatively, the wealth of Hartford’s suburbs may provide better opportunities for upward mobility for the poor than exists in metro areas with less prosperous suburbs. The outmigration of whites from the city enhanced opportunities for Hispanic and African American political leadership. Hartford, for example, elected the first black mayor in New England in 1981.

The dispersion of metro area poverty may, however, be having adverse political consequences. The shift of metro area poor from the city to economically precarious suburbs may undermine the visibility of poverty and, thus, the attention of policy makers. Economic problems since 2000 are surely making the problem even worse.