



# THE BENJAMIN L. HOOKS INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

## Race, Class, and Social Justice in Memphis: A Call to Bridge the Great Divide

Executive Summary ..... 2  
Daphene R. McFerren, J.D.  
Elena Delavega, Ph.D., M.S.W.

Quick Facts:  
Memphis, Tennessee ..... 4

Transportation, Urban Form,  
and Social Justice in Memphis ..... 6  
Charles A. Santo, Ph.D.

The Long Way to a Safer Memphis:  
Local Policies for Crime Prevention  
Need Structural Change..... 12  
Simone Tulumello, Ph.D.

Ideology and Division: How We  
Got Here, How Do We Get Back?  
The Search for Unity..... 22  
Eric Groenendyk, Ph.D.



OCTOBER 2016



# RACE, CLASS, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE IN MEMPHIS: A CALL TO BRIDGE THE GREAT DIVIDE

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|                         |   |
|-------------------------|---|
| Table of Contents ..... | 1 |
|-------------------------|---|

|                         |   |
|-------------------------|---|
| Executive Summary ..... | 2 |
|-------------------------|---|

Daphene R. McFerren, J.D.  
Executive Director  
Benjamin. L. Hooks Institute for Social Change  
University of Memphis

Elena Delavega, Ph.D., M.S.W.  
Associate Director  
Benjamin. L. Hooks Institute for Social Change  
University of Memphis

|                                       |   |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| Quick Facts: Memphis, Tennessee ..... | 4 |
|---------------------------------------|---|

|                                                                 |   |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------|---|
| Transportation, Urban Form, and Social Justice in Memphis ..... | 6 |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------|---|

Charles A. Santo, Ph.D.  
Chair and Associate Professor  
Department of City and Regional Planning  
University of Memphis

|                                                                                                      |    |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| The Long Way to a Safer Memphis:<br>Local Policies for Crime Prevention Need Structural Change ..... | 12 |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|

Simone Tulumello, Ph.D.  
Post-Doctoral Fellow  
Instituto de Ciências Sociais  
Universidade de Lisboa

|                                                                                           |    |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Ideology and Division: How We Got Here,<br>How Do We Get Back? The Search for Unity ..... | 22 |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|

Eric Groenendyk, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor  
Department of Political Science  
University of Memphis



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*Daphene R. McFerren, J.D./ Executive Director*  
*Elena Delavega, Ph.D., M.S.W./ Associate Director*  
*Benjamin. L. Hooks Institute for Social Change at the University of Memphis*

Despite the gains of the Civil Rights Movement to achieve racial equality by dismantling formal legal segregation and Jim Crow practices through the passage of the landmark legislation, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, civil rights activists were under no illusions that these momentous milestones would bring immediate racial and class equality to the nation. Almost 50 years ago, the Kerner Commission appointed by President Lyndon B. Johnson to investigate race riots that had spread across the United States in 1965 (Los Angeles), 1966 (Chicago), and 1967 (Newark) found that “our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal.” Racial divisions continue to exist, and in many ways appear to have intensified in recent years. Today we live in a society where the gaps between people are increasing rather than decreasing. While it is true that we achieved much in terms of civil rights, it is clear that there is still a long road ahead. In the words of Benjamin L. Hooks, “We’ve come a long way but it’s like nibbling at the edge of darkness.”

The Benjamin L. Hooks Institute for Social Change at the University of Memphis addresses deep divisions along racial and class lines that still plague Memphis, Tennessee in policy papers authored by Charles A. Santo, Simone Tulumello, and Eric Groenendyk. These scholars from the University of Memphis and the Universidade de Lisboa have been designated by the Hooks Institute as policy fellows. Daphene R. McFerren, executive director of the Hooks Institute, and Elena Delavega, associate director of the Hooks Institute, are delighted to bring to the community and policy makers in Memphis the second issue of the Hooks policy papers. These thought-provoking analyses examine the causes of deep-rooted racial divisions, and propose solutions for a more unified society in which shared prosperity is possible.

The Hooks Institute is an interdisciplinary center at the University of Memphis whose mission is teaching, studying, and promoting civil rights and social change through academic scholarship and community engagement. The policy papers address the disparities and divisions that negatively impact positive social, educational, and economic outcomes for individuals and the community. The Hooks Institute hopes that these papers will spark meaningful discussion and action among individuals, grassroots activists, community organizers, nonprofits, businesses, and government leaders on how best to bridge the divisions that separate us. These questions are challenging, but are not without solutions.

In “Transportation, Urban Form, and Social Justice in Memphis,” Charles A. Santo, Ph.D., chair and associate professor, University of Memphis Department of City and Regional Planning, introduces the topic of the great divide in Memphis as exemplified in transportation and its relationship to poverty, urban form, geographic stratification, and the inefficiencies inherent in having an inadequate transportation system. Transportation directly affects people’s ability to access employment and to engage in other economic activity within the community. It is thus crucial that Memphis makes transportation central to economic development and urban planning. An approach that addresses public and private transportation needs contributes to a more integrated



community, and results in equitable economic development.

In “The Long Way to a Safer Memphis: Local Policies for Crime Prevention Need Structural Change,” Simone Tulumello, Ph.D., post-doctoral fellow, Universidade de Lisboa Instituto de Ciências Sociais, brings a fresh eye to the topic and delves deeply into the causes and consequences of the great divisions we experience. Tulumello looks at the U.S. from a different cultural perspective, and he observes that crime and poverty in U.S. cities arise from many societal disadvantages, including poverty, inequality, and mental illness. Rather than address the underlying factors leading to crime and social disintegration, police forces are often used as a draconian means of social control, despite evidence that Memphis programs such as Operation: Safe Community, the Jericho Project, Shelby County Drug Court, and the Division of Housing and Community Development (HCD) have proven much more effective in reducing crime and other social ills. A different approach that addresses the underlying causes of crime rather than the symptom (crime itself) is proposed here, including increased funding for education and mental health services.

Finally, in “Ideology and Division: How We Got Here, How Do We Get Back? The Search for Unity,” Eric Groenendyk, Ph.D., associate professor, University of Memphis Department of Political Science, provides an explanation of why ideology, rather than the individual’s personal and community needs, serve as “flash points” for ideological disagreements among voters. Groenendyk contends that if voters determined what best serves their personal and community needs rather than focus on their ideological positions, voters would find more in common with others and be in a better position to make political decisions that better serve all rather than specific interest groups.

As goes Memphis, so goes the nation. Memphis is a crucial epicenter in the struggle for civil rights and social justice. If we can create flourishing and inclusive communities in Memphis for those who now find themselves struggling at the margins of society, Memphis can then lead the nation in creating best practices to ameliorate race, class, and other social justice disparities that now weave themselves throughout American life. This issue of the Hooks Institute’s Policy Papers proposes important policy solutions to bridge the great divide that separates people by race and class with the hope of achieving equity, social justice, and shared prosperity.

Daphene R. McFerren, J.D.

Executive Director, Benjamin L. Hooks Institute for Social Change, University of Memphis

Elena Delavega, Ph.D., M.S.W.

Associate Director, Benjamin L. Hooks Institute for Social Change, Assistant Professor,  
Department of Social Work, University of Memphis

October 6, 2016





# QUICK FACTS: MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE

*Elena Delavega, Ph.D., M.S.W./ Associate Director  
Benjamin. L. Hooks Institute for Social Change at the University of Memphis*

## Poverty

- The African American poverty rate in Memphis, as of 2015, is 30.1%; the overall poverty rate is 26.2%.
- The childhood poverty rate (under age 18) in Memphis, as of 2015, is the highest in the United States for cities with more than a million people at 43.0%, with the rate for African American children more than twice that for white children.
- In African American households headed by females with children under 5 years old, 44.6% live in poverty. In the same group with children under 18 years old, 47% live in poverty.

## Public Transportation

- In Memphis, 81.4% of all workers over age 16 drive alone to work (African American, 79.9%; 86.4%, non-Hispanic white) while 10.4% carpool (African American, 10.9%; 7.0%, non-Hispanic white).
- Only 2.0% of all workers over age 16 use public transportation; however, eight times as many workers over age 16 who use public transportation in Memphis are African American (3.2%) as non-Hispanic white (0.4%).
- On average, Memphians take 21 minutes to commute to work.

## Education

- The number of African Americans over age 25 who have a high school diploma, GED or alternative certificate as their highest level of education in Memphis is 35.6%, which is higher than the percentage of whites and other ethnic groups in Tennessee.
- The overall population in Memphis with a bachelor's degree or higher is 24.9%, while for African Americans it is 14.7% and for non-Hispanic whites it is 44.5%.



- While the high school graduation rates of African Americans in Memphis is encouraging, this data also shows the need for Memphis to focus on increasing college graduation rates of African Americans.

## **Income and Employment**

- In 2014, the overall unemployment rate in Memphis was 11.7%: whites, 6.2%; African American, 15.0%; and for African American men, 15.6%.
- In Memphis, 47.0% of Memphians own their homes. However, twice as many non-Hispanic whites (63.6%) own their homes as African Americans (38.8%).
- Median incomes in 2015 were \$55,775 in the U.S.; \$47,275 in Tennessee; and \$36,908 in Memphis.
- Median incomes in 2015 for non-Hispanic whites were \$61,394 in the U.S., \$50,779 in Tennessee, and \$58,584 in Memphis.
- Median incomes in 2015 for African Americans were \$36,544 in the U.S., \$34,462 in Tennessee, and \$30,464 in Memphis.

## **Works Cited**

- Delavega, E. (2016). 2016 Memphis poverty [Fact Sheet]. University of Memphis' Department of Social Work. Retrieved from <http://www.memphis.edu/socialwork/pdfs/2016povertyfactsheetwebversion.pdf>U.S.
- Census Bureau (2016). 2015 American Community Survey 1-year estimates (S0201). Retrieved September 15, 2016.
- U.S. Table 27: Civilian labor force participation rates, employment-population ratios, and unemployment rates, by gender, age, race, Hispanic or Latino ethnicity, and marital status. Retrieved from [http://www.bls.gov/opub/gp/pdf/gp14\\_27.pdf](http://www.bls.gov/opub/gp/pdf/gp14_27.pdf)



# TRANSPORTATION, URBAN FORM, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE IN MEMPHIS

*Charles A. Santo, Ph.D/Chair & Associate Professor  
University of Memphis Department of City and Regional Planning*

## INTRODUCTION

“Transportation Emerges as Key to Escaping Poverty”

*-New York Times, May 5, 2015*

This recent *New York Times* headline summarizes a common theme among current academic research – and confirms a common sense understanding of urban issues (Bouchard, 2015). The article refers to a Harvard study that concludes that transportation access has a more significant effect on social mobility than factors such as crime, education, and family structure (Chetty & Hendren, 2015). In cities like Memphis, which is both poor and geographically sprawling, this connection between poverty and transportation is magnified.

In Memphis, low-income neighborhoods are dispersed – they are not necessarily proximate to downtown or in high-density areas like they are in older, larger mono-centric cities. Residents in these communities are disconnected from entry-level jobs both by distance and by inadequate transportation systems. In fact, the dispersion of population and jobs makes it more difficult to provide an adequate transit system, and a cyclical problem emerges: Limited municipal investment in transportation options exacerbates household underemployment and degrades quality of life, while continuing poverty and underemployment erodes the ability of local government to make adequate investment in transportation options.

Transportation, as a factor that affects social justice, encompasses both mobility and accessibility. Mobility refers simply to one’s ability to move around (i.e., can I get there? ). Accessibility refers to the ease with which one can reach desired destinations – and therefore considers proximity of destinations to one another and to home (Litman, 2010). For example, a person who has a job close to home and a grocery store along the way to the job might not have better mobility but does have better accessibility. Accessibility is a product of urban form and land use patterns.

In Memphis, the story of the transportation-poverty relationship is the story of urban form, geographic stratification, and spatial inefficiency. And it is conditioned by the geographic size of the city, historical patterns of population and wealth decentralization, and the industrial structure of the



local economy.

## **Current Local Conditions**

The Memphis Area Transit Authority (MATA) is the region's only provider of public transit. The vast majority of its users are transit dependent. MATA buses and trolleys serve an area of 311 square miles located almost entirely in the City of Memphis with almost no access to suburban jobs or amenities. A 2011 analysis by the Brookings Institution (Tomer, Kneebone, Puentes, & Berube) explored how well public transit systems connect residents to jobs across the top 100 metropolitan areas; Memphis ranked 69<sup>th</sup>. The study found that for the typical Memphis commuter, only 26 percent of jobs are reachable by transit in less than 90 minutes, and only five percent are reachable in less than 45 minutes. But these findings are not simply a reflection of a poorly designed transit system – they are also a function of the area's urban form and industrial makeup.

Memphis is a geographically large city (about as large as Boston, Philadelphia, St. Louis, and Cleveland combined) with a thinly spread population. For example, while Memphis has a population of about 656,000 spread over 324 square miles, Boston's similar population, 640,000, fits inside 90 square miles. Due to aggressive annexation and suburban sprawl, Memphis has twice the land area of Detroit, but only half the population density. The lack of density makes efficient (in terms of both time and costs) transit difficult. Without a critical mass of potential riders (people) or destinations (e.g., jobs) along a corridor, it is difficult to provide service that is frequent enough to be convenient.

A decentralization of population mirrored by a decentralization of wealth, has contributed to increasing fiscal burdens and inefficiency, and has driven a growing inequality between parts of the region. Recent data show that the Memphis metropolitan area has the second highest level of income segregation among large metro areas (Florida, 2014). In 2010, the poverty rate of Memphis (27%) was nearly four times as high as that of the rest of Shelby County (7%). The typical household in Germantown, the county's wealthiest suburb, lives on an income three times that of the typical Memphis household.

Memphis is an auto-centric metropolitan area with a high degree of job sprawl. According to the Brookings Institution, only 12 percent of the metro area's jobs are located within three miles of the central business district, and nearly half are located more than 10 miles from downtown (Kneebone, 2013). Simply put, a decentralized population means decentralized jobs and decentralized travel demand patterns.

Memphis' reliance on logistics jobs contributes to the problem. Memphis is home to FedEx and claims the world's second busiest cargo airport and one the country's largest inland ports. Since 1980, 20 percent of the metro area's job growth has been in logistics. The most common Bureau of Labor Statistics occupational category in Memphis is "material mover or hand laborer." Logistics jobs tend to be low-wage and difficult to access, with many located in warehouses that cluster near an intermodal freight transfer facility in the southeast corner of Memphis that is not well served by transit. These jobs also require "off-peak hour" shift times and tend to be coordinated through temp



agencies, factors that make it difficult for potential workers to coordinate transportation.

The sprawl of the Memphis area has contributed to another kind of job growth because it has required new retail and service industry employment. These local-serving industries (which don't bring new money into an economy or drive economic growth) have represented 47 percent of Memphis area job growth since 1980. Two-thirds of those jobs have been in suburban localities. These patterns have contributed to a spatial mismatch between where low-income residents live and where jobs are available.

Part and parcel with sprawl and the current industrial structure, transportation investments in Memphis have been primarily made to facilitate the movement of goods or cars, with little consideration of pedestrian infrastructure. An inadequate pedestrian environment makes it difficult for transit users to get to stops or to get from stops to final destinations. The warehouse jobs that are prevalent in Memphis exacerbate this problem because such facilities are large, located far from the street, and by their nature create low-density environments.

A final impediment to successful transit provision in the context of decentralized jobs is the fact that while MATA is the region's only transit provider, it remains a local transit authority as opposed to a regional transit authority. This means that all of the local funding for transit operation comes from the City of Memphis, and MATA has no capacity to provide service to suburban areas despite the continuing decentralization of jobs.

What all of this means for the relationship between transportation and financial resilience can be summarized in one statistic: the median income for transit users versus that of drivers. National trends show only slight differences in median income for workers who commute via public transportation versus those who drive to work. (The national median income for driving commuters is about \$35,000 compared to \$31,000 for transit users.) But in Memphis, a low density, sprawling city, with a heavy reliance on logistics jobs, the earnings gap between transit riders and drivers is vast. Census data from 2012 shows that in the Memphis metro area, the median income of those who relied on public transportation was \$16,450 – less than half the \$34,200 median income of those who drove to work.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY CHANGE

### Moving Toward Solutions

Here are some general level recommendations that should be considered as starting points for more detailed exploration and/or as referrals to relevant work that is currently underway in this area.

- ***Make Transportation Central to Economic Development Planning and Policy.*** Currently, when we think of transportation as it relates to economic development in Memphis, we think of the logistics industry and the Aerotropolis concept: transportation as a means of moving packages.



But transportation is also what links households to jobs; therefore, improving inadequate mobility and accessibility should be considered essential and central to economic development policy. In fact, the city's economic dependence on logistics contributes to spatial inefficiency and transit-to-work challenges. Large warehouses limit density and make it difficult for transit to provide stops to get users anywhere near the front door, and temp agency work placements and odd shift hours make it difficult for potential workers to plan for transit use.

- ***Pursue Regional Transit Funding.*** As noted above, MATA is a local as opposed to regional transit authority. This means that all of the local funding for transit operation comes from the City of Memphis, and MATA has no capacity to provide service to suburban areas despite the continuing decentralization of jobs. In addition, even within the city, there is no specifically dedicated local funding source for MATA. This is a paralyzing problem. While politically challenging, the creation of a regional, multi-jurisdictional, dedicated funding source for MATA would improve the reach of transit in the Memphis area and open new employment opportunities for transit dependent residents. A state law created by Tennessee Senate Bill 1471 in 2009 allows for the creation of regional transportation authorities and for the development of dedicated revenue streams, subject to voter approval.
- ***Review and Pilot Select Transportation Demand Management (TDM) Approaches.*** Transportation Demand Management actions are designed to reduce (or manage) the number of people who commute by driving alone, and to do so without large infrastructure investments. Implementation of TDM approaches can occur at the local area level, or at the employer level, making area businesses a partner in addressing transportation needs. Examples of employer-level TDM approaches include: employer shuttles, employer-subsidized transit passes, and parking cash-outs (e.g., instead of providing “free parking” to employees, employers can provide a pay incentive to employees who do not require a parking space).
- ***Look Beyond the Bus and Fixed-Route Transit.*** There is a tendency to think that addressing transportation needs for those in poverty means providing better bus service, but the implied notion that the car is for the middle-class and the bus is for the poor is regressive and limits the realm of imagined solutions.

Nationally, about eight percent of metropolitan area workers use transit to get to work. The figure of low-income workers is not much higher, at about 10 percent. Poor workers tend to rely on automobiles for the same reasons that middle class workers do – transit is less convenient. This is especially true in cities like Memphis, where a lack of density limits transit frequency and traffic congestion is minimal (i.e., below the threshold at which driver would consider transit more convenient).

Substantial research indicates that cars are an important piece of the link between transportation and household financial resiliency (Blumenberg & Waller, 2003, pg. 6). The most robust recent research on mobility and poverty was conducted by the Urban Institute, *Driving to Opportunity* (2014). The study examined outcomes among participants who received housing choice vouchers as

part of the Moving to Opportunity Fair Housing program or the Welfare to Work Voucher Program. The findings indicate important differences in residential location and employment outcomes between participants who had access to automobiles and those who were transit dependent.

Suggesting strategies that could put more cars on the road is somewhat antithetical to sound planning ideology. However, past planning practices and development patterns have created a system that privileges those with automobiles. It would be inequitable to suggest that the poor carry the burden of planning principles and work their way out of poverty without the same opportunities available to the middle and upper class.

Strategies that fit this approach would include both car sharing programs and programs designed to put ownership of reliable personal vehicles within reach. Car sharing or short-term rental services such as ZipCar could provide expanded opportunities for low income residents because they require users to pay only for the transportation that they use. Internet access and access to checking accounts and credit cards presents an obstacle for many who might otherwise use car-sharing services. Some services allow paper applications, and some partner with local credit unions to help users get checking accounts.

Suggestions regarding expanding access to personal vehicle ownership will require policy change beyond the local level.

- Researchers with the Urban Institute suggest combining rental housing vouchers with subsidies for automobile purchases as a possible approach to expanding options for low income households.
- Current state “vehicle asset limitation” policies related to safety net programs raise the cost of car ownership for the poor, and must also be addressed. In Tennessee, the vehicle asset limit for federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) benefits is \$4,650. If a household owns a vehicle worth more than this amount, the value above the limit is counted as a liquid financial asset and affects eligibility for benefits. Many states have done away with vehicle asset limitation rules after federal policy changes in 1996 allowed more flexibility.
- The state’s current policy of suspending driver’s licenses for unpaid criminal court debts creates an impassible barrier for many Memphians. If these policies are not changed, solutions that include support, through public or private funds, must be employed to address this issue.
- Finally, programs geared toward supporting personal vehicle ownership must consider issues such as reliability, insurance costs, and lending practices. Low-income car buyers might become subject to predatory lending or face subprime rates.



## Works Cited

- Blumenberg, E., & Waller, M. (2003). *The long journey to work: A federal transportation policy for working families*. Brookings Institution.
- Bouchard, M. (2015, May 15). Transportation Emerges as Key to Escaping Poverty. *The New York Times*, p. A3.
- Florida, R. (2014, March 18). *The U.S. cities with the highest levels of income segregation*. Retrieved May 3, 2014, from Atlantic CITYLAB: <http://www.citylab.com/work/2014/03/us-cities-highest-levels-income-segregation/8632/>
- Jiao, J., & Dillivan, M. (2013). Transit deserts: The gap between demand and supply. *Journal of Public Transportation*, 16 (3), 23-39.
- Kneebone, E. (2013). *Job sprawl stall: The great recession and metropolitan employment location*. Metropolitan Opportunity Series, Brookings Institution.
- Litman, T. (2015). Evaluating transportation equity. *World Transport Policy & Practice*, 8 (2), 50-65.
- Litman, T. (2010). Measuring transportation: Traffic, mobility, and accessibility. *ITE Journal*, 73 (10), 28-32.
- Nelson/Nygaard Consulting Associates. (2013). *Bus Transit to Workplace*.
- Pendall, R., Hayes, C., George, A., McDade, Z., Dawkins, C., Jeon, J., et al. (2014). *Driving to opportunity: Understanding the links among transportation access, residential outcomes, and economic opportunity for housing voucher recipients*. Urban Institute.
- Tomer, A., & Kane, J. (2014). *Car remains kings and barrier to economic opportunity*. Brookings Institution.

# THE LONG WAY TO A SAFER MEMPHIS: LOCAL POLICIES FOR CRIME PREVENTION NEED STRUCTURAL CHANGE<sup>1</sup>

*Simone Tulumello, Ph.D./Post-Doctoral Fellow  
Universidade de Lisboa, Instituto de Ciências Sociais*

## INTRODUCTION

In many places in the United States, the coexistence of “poverty, violence, aggressive police oversight, and incarceration erode[s] public life, compromising the capacity of neighborhood residents to achieve social cohesion and community organization” (Friedson, Sharkey 2015, 343). In these places, a public policy oriented toward repression ends up boosting societal and community divisions, a “great divide” that, in turn, creates the pre-conditions for crime. Memphis is no exception.

This policy paper stems from research on local policies regarding public safety and crime prevention in Memphis.<sup>2</sup> The research uncovers the limitations of the city’s current approach and suggests how policies could be changed. In a nutshell, Memphis, like many other cities, is engaged in a short-sighted and narrow approach to public safety; effective crime prevention needs long-term thinking and broad policy action. This paper presents two main limitations in Memphis’ current strategies.

First, crime and violent crime in U.S. cities are geographically concentrated and stem from many societal disadvantages, including poverty, inequality, and mental illness. That is why improved provision of social services is the best means to improve public safety structurally (Tulumello 2016). However, Memphis has reduced investments in these areas.

Second, there is evidence that aggressive policing tactics such as zero tolerance, massive police presence or stop and frisk barely prevent crime and worsen police-community relationships. Black Lives Matter protests ongoing across the country during the summer of 2016 provide a stark picture of this distrust of law enforcement. However, the Memphis Police Department (MPD) adopts a zero tolerance approach and invests massively in technology rather than community policing. Moreover, the work of MPD is burdened by the political and public expectation to cope with many problems stemming from the absence of other public policies. As such, police officers on patrol, having to

1. This brief stems from the research project “SECURE – Security Examined Critically: Urban planning Explorations,” funded by a Fulbright Research Scholar Grant (US-Italy Commission) and a post-doc grant of the Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia (SFRH/BPD/86394/2012). The author is grateful to Daphene McFerren, Elena Delavega and Charles A. Santo for the feedback on previous versions of the brief.
2. The project was carried out through case study research in 2016 (Jan-Jul). Empirical data were collected from analysis of policy documents; in-depth interviews with key-informants in city government and other agencies; participant observation in Klondike Smokey City in cooperation with the classes held by Antonio Raciti and Laura Saija, assistant professors, City and Regional Planning, University of Memphis; and two focus groups for collaborative discussion of policy reform (in cooperation with University of Memphis Design Collaborative and Livable Memphis). Findings have been compared with outputs from research in Lisbon, Portugal (Tulumello 2014; 2016).





cope with problems that should not be theirs to solve, face increased difficulties and community pushbacks to their work. In other words, local communities and police are, together, the victims of a short-sighted policy approach.

These issues are not exclusive to Memphis and are, in fact, typical of most U.S. cities. The reasons are to be found mainly in the absence of federal, state and metropolitan policies to redistribute wealth from the most affluent to least affluent areas. As a result, inner cities in metropolitan regions such as Memphis, Detroit, Philadelphia, St. Louis, and New Orleans have to take charge of the entire burden of metropolitan and, indeed, national social problems. Memphis could become a trendsetter for a different agenda, reforming its local policies at the same time as advocating change at the federal and state level.

This paper is divided into three sections: First, it examines why changes are needed in social urban policy to reduce crime; second, it discusses Memphis' approach to safety and public policy to highlight what needs reform; and, third, it sets out recommendations for such a reform.

### **Crime, Inequality and Segregation: What Needs to Be Addressed?**

Cities in the U.S. are extremely segregated, economically, socially, ethically, and racially. Many forms of disadvantage, including poverty, low educational attainment or health problems, are concentrated in inner city neighborhoods and among minority households. In 2010, the Memphis metropolitan area ranked 5<sup>th</sup> (of 101) in poverty (19.4%) and 89<sup>th</sup> in median household income (Brookings Institution 2010). Wealth and educational attainment are unequally distributed among races, and between the city and the suburbs. Shelby County has the highest inequality score among large U.S. counties (Economic Innovation Group 2016, 34). Memphis ranks 9<sup>th</sup> for distress score -- which means that the people in Memphis experience some of the highest levels of economic distress -- and it is the 8<sup>th</sup> most unequal in the U.S. (Economic Innovation Group 2016, 26-29) -- revealing that people in Memphis have some of the greatest disparities in the country.

What is the relationship of these challenges to public safety? Most crimes take place in the cities and neighborhoods with the most socio-economic problems. Crime rates are higher in Memphis than in its suburbs<sup>3</sup> (Figure 1) and, within Memphis, they are higher in the poorer, minority-majority neighborhoods (Figure 2). In short, in some places there exists a concentration of socio-economic problems that create the conditions for crime.

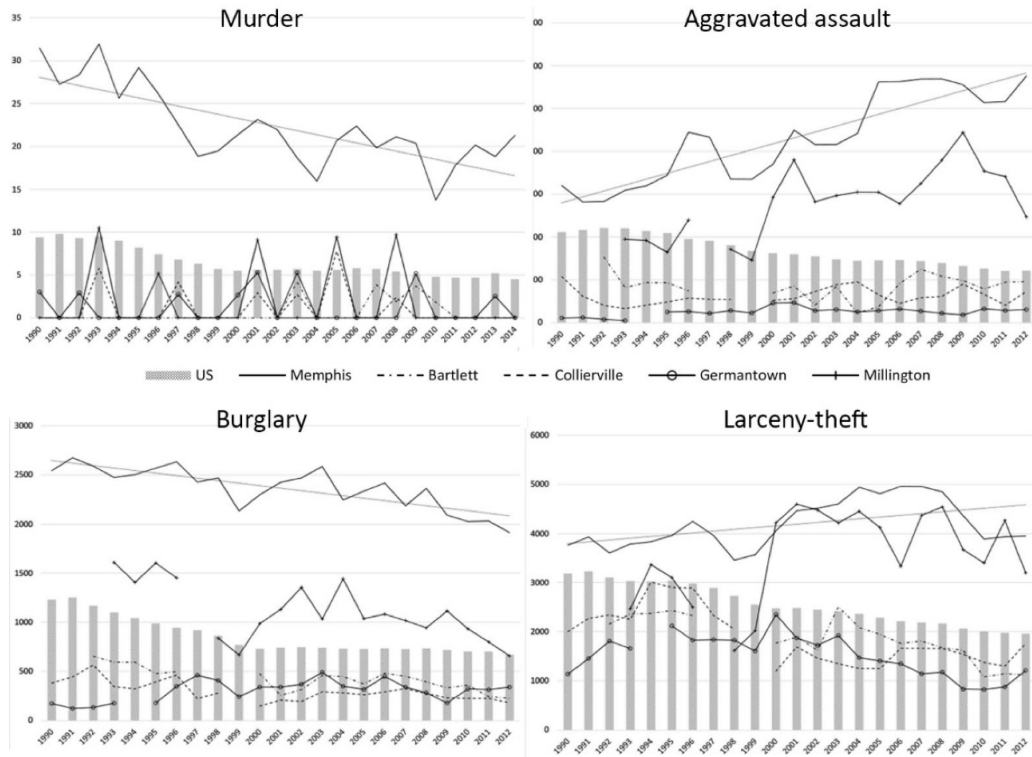
Mental health is a case in point. A paper published in 2014 showed that 50 percent of the young African American males incarcerated in Tennessee suffered from mental health disorders. (Washington 2014, 9). This means that universal mental health care could prevent a huge proportion of crimes committed by youth black males more efficiently (and cheaply) than imprisonment. However, health and mental health are neither considered universal rights nor universally delivered in the U.S. The obvious conclusion is that public safety needs to be fostered by attacking the vast inequality and socio-economic problems of American cities. Indeed, violent crime is much lower in

---

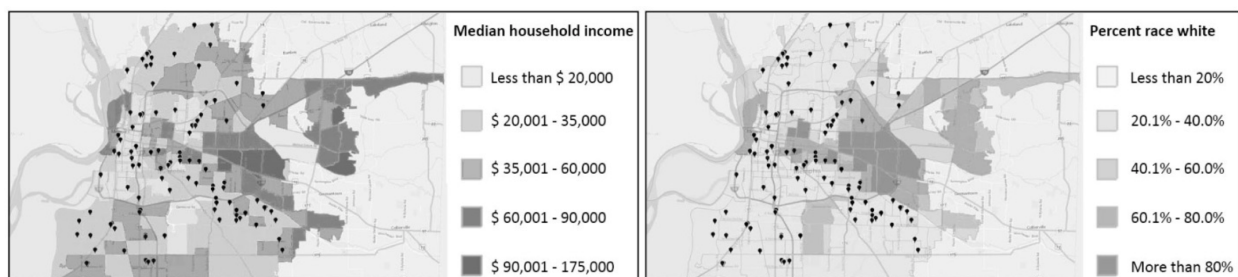
3. Due to the fragmentation of the U.S. law enforcement system, and the varying degrees of reporting among agencies, data in the Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) of the FBI should be compared with caution. With exception of murder, only general trends, and not exact values, should be compared.



European cities, which are not richer overall, but are much less unequal and segregated and, hence, presents lower levels of poverty. Moreover, in European cities, problems such as mental illness and homelessness are dealt with through universal health care and social care services.



**Figure 1.** Crime in perspective: long term trends of rates (per 100,000 inhabitants) of selected violent (above) and property (below) crimes. Graphics compiled by author from U.S. Department of Justice data



**Figure 2.** Crime in context: locations of murders (Jan-Jun 2016) compared to distribution of wealth (left) and race (right). Maps compiled by author from data from City of Memphis and The Commercial Appeal

Since the 1970s, public safety policy in the U.S. has been geared towards suppression and mass incarceration, worsening the situation of the most vulnerable people (Wakefield et al. 2016, 17) when in reality, people living in those neighborhoods most affected by intense policing really need policies designed to provide income and social supports. For instance, previous incarceration affects future employment prospects. Property crime, in turn, is higher in neighborhoods where



unemployment is higher and wages are lower (Chalfin, Raphael 2011).

The complex roots of crime mean that trends need to be assessed in the long-term; weekly, monthly and yearly variation are often insignificant. Crime in the U.S. has dropped steadily since the 1990s (Figure 1). There are many explanations, but economic growth and the reduction of neighborhood disadvantages have been the most important drivers (Arvanites, Devina 2006; Friedson, Sharkey 2015). However, at the same time, socio-economic inequality increased (Piketty 2014) among cities, neighborhoods and social groups. Unsurprisingly then, the crime drop has not been equally distributed and not every place and city in the country has benefitted from these national trends. In general, medium-size cities have experienced slower, if any, drops when compared to national average. In Memphis, crime trends since the early 1990s have been rather unstable (Figure 1). Some Memphis crime rates have converged toward national averages and murder dropped by one third. On the contrary, aggravated assault grew until 2005 and then stabilized.

The growth and incidence of aggravated assault, together with the still high rate of murder, are the main concerns for public safety in Memphis. The fact that these crimes are mainly intra-communal confirms that they should be addressed by reducing inequality and socio-economic segregation of many neighborhoods. However, public policy has had very different priorities.

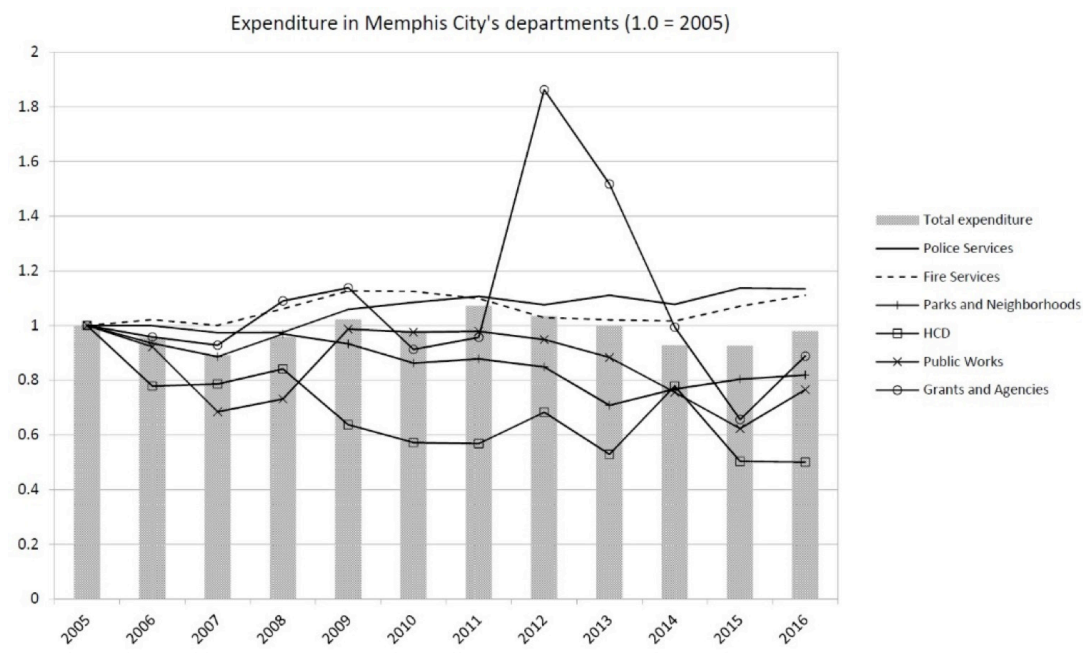
### **Current Local Conditions**

The City of Memphis' governmental action and funding are centered on law enforcement and safety. Police services account for almost 40 percent of the budget and, together with fire services, two thirds of city budget are devoted to safety (Table 1). Since 2005, while city expenditures remained stagnant overall, funding for the Fire and Police Departments has increased (13.4 percent and 11.1 percent) at the expense of all other departments (Figure 3). During that time, for example, funding to Housing and Community Development, the division responsible for community revitalization, was halved.

The Memphis Police Department (MPD) approaches law enforcement with a zero tolerance attitude, which is complemented with some community partnership. This strategy results from the wide discretionary power provided to MPD by the City Charter and Code of Ordinances. For example, police have the discretionary power to detain loosely defined "suspicious persons" without evidence of crimes or misdemeanors. The Code of Ordinances, through the provision for regulation of drug/gang related lingering and loitering, has allowed the MPD to create "safety zones" with massive police presence in "high crime areas." With regards to community partnership, MPD is engaged in a number of programs: Neighborhood Watch; Operation: Safe Community, a partnership among businesses, schools, neighborhoods and others; programs to build trust in the police; and charity programs. In 2011, neighborhood patrols known as Community Action units, or COACT, were replaced by a pilot project of Community Outreach, which is ongoing in three precincts. In Klondike and Smokey City, predominantly African American neighborhoods, the shutting down of COACT is considered a major problem by residents, especially the elderly. Further research should explore whether this is a city-wide concern.

**Table 1.** Expenditure (general fund) of main city departments, 2016 Adopted Budget.

|                                          |             | <b>% of Total Budget</b> |
|------------------------------------------|-------------|--------------------------|
| <b>Police Services</b>                   | 250,476,780 | 38.06                    |
| <b>Fire Services</b>                     | 172,888,782 | 26.27                    |
| <b>Parks and Neighborhoods</b>           | 51,723,673  | 7.86                     |
| <b>Housing and Community Development</b> | 4,486,271   | 0.68                     |
| <b>Public Works</b>                      | 22,441,491  | 3.41                     |
| <b>Grants and Agencies</b>               | 63,404,976  | 9.64                     |
| <i>of which,</i>                         |             |                          |
| <b>Planning and Development</b>          | 1,500,000   | 0.23                     |



**Figure 3.** Expenditure (general fund) of Memphis City's departments (1.0 = expenditure in 2005; adjusted for inflation).  
 Graphs compiled by author from adopted City of Memphis budgets.

Between 2006 and 2011 the City of Memphis invested massively in hot-spot policing. Sworn officers were increased by one fourth (bringing the total number of officers to approximately 2,450) and the program Blue CRUSH (Crime Reduction Utilizing Statistical History) was launched in 2006 and implemented citywide in 2007. Blue CRUSH analyzes real time data from officers' reports and closed-circuit television to forecast where and when crimes are more likely to occur, and where patrols should be targeted. Media and politicians consider Blue CRUSH a success when considering the decrease of most categories of crime in 2011 when compared to 2006 (Table 2).



However, comparing rates with a year characterized by a peak of crimes is misleading. After stark peaks such as the one in 2006, crime tends to drop naturally. Comparing the five years of full implementation of Blue CRUSH (2007-2011) with the previous five years (2002-2006) provides a different picture. Property crimes decreased, but there is no way to discern what was due to Blue CRUSH and what was due to long-term trends (cf. Figure 1). Importantly, rates of aggravated assault, on average, increased. Interviewees among police officials and policy makers admitted that Blue CRUSH is not, and cannot be, designed to affect aggravated assaults and murders. These crimes are mainly the result of domestic violence and intra-communal disputes, have no statistical pattern and/or happen where police cannot patrol.

After 2011, the number of sworn officers dropped to approximately 2000 in 2015, primarily because of attrition and resignations due to controversies over benefits and pensions. Consequently, hot-spot policing, which needs intensive use of human resources, had to be reduced. Data provided by MPD show the number of cleared violent crimes and traffic tickets decreased but, at the same time, violent crime kept going down: this suggests that police presence is useful to repress crime, but has minimal effects in preventing it. Moreover, there are reasons to believe that massive police presence in deprived neighborhoods, despite efforts for community outreach, has contributed to increased distrust in the police among minority and disadvantaged groups. Blue CRUSH also may increase disparities among neighborhoods. For instance, a recent article in The Commercial Appeal revealed that most cameras have been installed in downtown Memphis and the most affluent neighborhoods (Poe 2016), areas where crime was already lower (see above). This contradicts the stated goal of tackling crime where it is more problematic and seems to suggest that cameras are used as a way to reassure tourists, businesses and affluent citizens.

**Table 2.** Variations of main crime categories (rates) during full implementation of Blue CRUSH. Compiled by author from U.S. Department of Justice data.

|                     | 2006    | 2011    | Variation     | Average<br>2002-2006 | Average<br>2007-2011 | Variation     |
|---------------------|---------|---------|---------------|----------------------|----------------------|---------------|
| Robbery             | 780.4   | 472.3   | <b>-39.5%</b> | 662.9                | 606.6                | <b>-8.5%</b>  |
| Aggravated assault  | 1,125.2 | 1,032.3 | <b>-8.3%</b>  | 959.1                | 1,089.1              | <b>+13.6%</b> |
| Burglary            | 2,417.2 | 2,030.6 | <b>-16.0%</b> | 2,410.4              | 2,138.7              | <b>-11.3%</b> |
| Larceny theft       | 4,962   | 3,932.3 | <b>-20.8%</b> | 4,766.3              | 4,397.1              | <b>-7.7%</b>  |
| Motor vehicle theft | 989.1   | 526.1   | <b>-46.9%</b> | 1,207.3              | 699.3                | <b>-42.1%</b> |

The massive investment in a policing program with uncertain and contradictory outputs needs to be reconsidered in light of successful efforts in other city policy areas. For instance, the Operation: Safe Community program focuses on reducing blight and vacant properties, improving the education of youths, providing alternative sentencing for young first offenders and treating drug addiction. The Jericho Project and Shelby County Drug Court have proven to be cheaper and more effective in



reducing recidivism than incarceration. The Department of Housing and Community Development is engaged in community revitalization. The Department of Planning and Development has recently relaunched the comprehensive planning office, which is a first, but critical, step to help support community development.

These efforts, crucial to structurally prevent crime through local development and reduction of recidivism are dramatically underfunded. The departments of Housing and Community Development and Planning and Development, for example, account for less than 1 percent of city expenditures. City government employees interviewed highlighted that the work of these two departments is dependent on external grants, meaning that planning in the long-term is almost impossible and there is no funding flexibility to address topics most relevant locally.

All in all, there seems to be a vicious circle: The basic absence of significant investments impedes urban social policy to affect the inequalities and problems at the root of violent crimes. High crime rates boost public requests for increased government investment in police, which is made through further cuts in social programs. At the same time, the emphasis on law enforcement amplifies the image of danger in the city; the media has a major role in this-hampering the potential for development and local action.

These challenges also have negatively affected the Memphis Police Department and the criminal justice system, which are expected to deal with issues that should be more efficiently addressed through other policy areas. The Crisis Intervention Team (CIT), a partnership led by the MPD with the aim of addressing violent events involving mental health consumers, is a case in point. The CIT has been successful in de-escalating potentially violent events and has become a national model. However, the need itself for the CIT underpins the failure of health and social services in taking care of mental illness and reducing public violent events. In Portugal, with universal health care coverage, such events are almost non-existent. In general, the expectation that law enforcement should handle issues it is not skilled to deal with may also have boosted community mistrust.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY CHANGE**

Because of the multiple dimensions connected with crime, a multi-level collaboration of federal, state, metropolitan and city action is necessary to structurally improve public safety. The main priorities should be:

- redistributive policies to reduce regional and metropolitan disparities;
- removal of the causes of inequities among groups and communities;
- reform of criminal justice to overcome mass incarceration;
- universal access to health and mental health care;
- universal provision of housing and public services.

The role of Memphis could be to promote countrywide networks of cities experiencing similar challenges to push for reform at the federal and state levels.



At the same time, Memphis can take forward important action, starting by acknowledging that there are no “silver bullets” or shortcuts for public safety. For instance, Blue CRUSH and more sworn officers have improved enforcement and produced some noteworthy, but small, preventive effect on property crime.<sup>4</sup> However, Blue CRUSH has had scarce, if any, effect on violent crime.

In short, the core task (and skill) of police is law enforcement; technology and policing cannot structurally attack the causes of crime, let alone provide for the absence of proper social policy. Residents and leaders cannot expect police to be able to do so. Technology should then be used to improve efficiency and free resources for preventive efforts. A less aggressive approach to policing could, however, play a role in improving perceptions of safety and thus support community development.

## **Moving Toward Solutions**

Only through a wide array of efforts will Memphis be able to structurally reduce violent crime. Memphis needs to plan in the long-term, while acting in the short-term to create the conditions for long-term success, becoming a national trend setter for a new, more effective and just approach to crime prevention. A set of recommendations can be set out for actions at the metropolitan, city and neighborhood level.

### **Public safety:**

- overcome zero tolerance and de-emphasize the role of technology in favor of a community approach to policing, creating participatory spaces for co-decision with citizens;
- foster collaboration among metropolitan police agencies and consider consolidation of the metro police departments as a way to redistribute resources in the metro;
- universalize alternative sentencing for minor felonies, youth crimes and non-violent drug crimes;
- affirmatively remove housing and employment barriers for ex-offenders—e.g. remove costs of expungement, prohibit background checks, or, at the very least, for minor and non-violent offenses;
- reform the City Charter and Code of Ordinances, removing provisions that give too much discretionary power to police.

### **Urban social policy:**

- redirect investments from safety toward equality policies;
- negotiate redistributive policies at the metropolitan level: socio-economic disparities halt the development of the entire metro;
- consolidate public spending (reduce agencies and commissions in number and scope) to focus on macro-areas with long-term goals through the implementation of public policy proper-

---

4. In line with what hot-spot policing attained elsewhere (Braga et al. 2014)



that is, substitute grant-funded and short-term projects with wide-encompassing programs planned and implemented by the city departments;

- increase general, flexible funding of departments responsible for urban development and social policy (Parks and Neighborhoods, Planning and Development, Housing and Community Development) to incentivize long-term planning;
- use co-decisional practices (e.g. participatory budgeting or Agenda 21, a global sustainable development initiative of the UN based on citizen participation) and increase accountability of public offices (e.g. make data available online and not just upon citizen request; remove restrictions for media to access City Hall) to increase policy legitimation and community involvement;
- focus on education and public schools, setting short-term, mid-range, and long-term goals to achieve equal educational expenditure and attainments among all metro-communities;
- support networking among existing grassroots organizations to create a critical mass of action that has a measurable and positive impact on creating vibrant communities that will then enable the city to promote a positive image of itself.

#### Planning policy:

- set and foster equal standards for services and amenities, including public transit (see the brief by Charles A. Santo in this volume), social services, community centers, green areas, in all parts of the city and metro;
- increase population density to create critical mass for community development, for example strengthening comprehensive planning and zoning to halt new developments in the metro area, so that population growth will be accommodated by increasing density of urbanized areas;
- launch a mid-term plan of investments for public housing integrated in residential neighborhoods and implement the Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing Rule, a regulation by the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development that requests affordable housing to be provided in all communities throughout metro areas;
- invest to improve public spaces to increase a sense of safety and neighborhood attractiveness in distressed areas by refurbishing public spaces, rezoning to allow mix uses and improving walkability.

#### Works Cited

- Arvanites T.M., Defina R.H. (2006) Business cycles and street crime. *Criminology*, 44(1): 139-164.
- Braga A.A., Papachristos A.W., Hureau D.M. (2014) The effects of hot spots policing on crime: An updated systematic review and meta-analysis. *Justice Quarterly*, 31(4): 633-663.
- Chalfin A., Raphael S. (2011) Work and crime. In Tonry M. (ed.) *The Oxford handbook of crime and criminal justice* (pp. 444-476). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Economic Innovation Group. (2016) The 2016 Distressed Communities Index. An analysis of community well-being across the United States. <http://eig.org/dci/report>.
- Friedson M., Sharkey P. (2015) Violence and neighborhood disadvantage after the crime drop. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences*, 660(1): 341-358.



- Piketty, T. (2014). *Capital in the twenty-first century*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Poe, R. (2016). Memphis' SkyCop cameras leave many neighborhoods in the dark. *The Commercial Appeal*, July 23. Retrieved from [www.commercialappeal.com/news/government/city/memphis-police-cameras-leave-many-neighborhoods-in-the-dark-33ad67cc-da22-5433-e053-0100007f9f387993322.html?d=mobile](http://www.commercialappeal.com/news/government/city/memphis-police-cameras-leave-many-neighborhoods-in-the-dark-33ad67cc-da22-5433-e053-0100007f9f387993322.html?d=mobile).
- The Brookings Institution. (2010) State of metropolitan America indicator map. 9 May. Retrieved from [www.brookings.edu/research/interactives/state-of-metropolitan-america-indicator-map](http://www.brookings.edu/research/interactives/state-of-metropolitan-america-indicator-map).
- The City of Memphis Enterprise. (2016). My map. The Division of Information Services, City of Memphis. Retrieved from <http://memegis.maps.arcgis.com/home/index.html>.
- The Commercial Appeal. (2016). Homicide Tracker. Retrieved from <http://www.commercialappeal.com/news/crime/Memphis-Homicide-Tracker-379656401.html>.
- Tulumello S. (2014) Local policies for urban security and spatial planning in the Lisbon Metropolitan Area: The cases of Lisbon, Cascais and Barreiro municipalities. *Estudos e Relatórios ICS*, 5-2014. Retrieved from [www.ics.ul.pt/publicacoes/workingpapers/wp2014/er2014\\_5.pdf](http://www.ics.ul.pt/publicacoes/workingpapers/wp2014/er2014_5.pdf).
- Tulumello S. (2016) Toward a critical understanding of urban security within the institutional practice of urban planning: The case of the Lisbon Metropolitan Area. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*. Advanced online publication, doi: 10.1177/0739456X16664786.
- U.S. Department of Justice (2016). Uniform crime reporting statistics. Retrieved from [www.ucrdatatool.gov/](http://www.ucrdatatool.gov/).
- Wakefield S., Hedwig L., Wildeman C. (2016) Tough on crime, tough on families? Criminal justice and family life in America. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences*, 665(1): 8-21.
- Washington G. (2014) What are the social conditions that contribute to the disproportionate confinement of young African American males in Memphis? *The Benjamin L. Hooks Institute for Social Change Policy Papers*, October, 7-12. Retrieved from [www.memphis.edu/benhooks/creative-works/pdfs/benhookspolicypapers2014.pdf](http://www.memphis.edu/benhooks/creative-works/pdfs/benhookspolicypapers2014.pdf).

# IDEOLOGY AND DIVISION: HOW WE GOT HERE, HOW DO WE GET BACK? THE SEARCH FOR UNITY

*Eric Groenendyk, Ph.D./ Associate Professor  
University of Memphis Department of Political Science*

## INTRODUCTION

Memphis, like so many cities, faces major challenges in the areas of education, poverty, crime, and racial inequality. And while access to education, housing, and security are widely recognized as human rights, it often seems like little headway is being made. In the Memphis metropolitan area, and around the country, ideological division has become the norm, stifling effective dialog and undercutting legislative progress at all levels of government. In such an environment, one might reasonably ask, what happened to the broad coalition that came together to create the Social Security system and pass numerous bills to provide public assistance during the Great Depression? What became of the bipartisan coalitions that, in the 1960s, passed the Civil Rights Act, Voting Rights Act, Medicare, Medicaid, and landmark legislation designed to fight poverty and increase access to education?

This paper examines why we suddenly seem to have so much trouble agreeing on how to tackle society's biggest challenges. Often this failure is attributed to the actors engaged in politics—"lazy bureaucrats," "corrupt politicians," "apathetic citizens"—but I will argue that the failings of these actors are primarily a symptom rather than a cause of our problem. If we want to improve our political climate and get back to the work of overcoming society's biggest challenges, we must look to the factors that shape people's understanding of politics and the institutions that incentivize their behavior.

I will focus specifically on Americans' recent fixation with ideology and the institutional changes that have promoted this preoccupation. We hear a great deal of talk these days about liberalism versus conservatism, big government versus small government, and the importance of staying true to one's principles. However, ideological principles are not the only way to structure one's belief system. Ideology may seem like an inherent part of politics—especially to those who have come of age in recent decades—but it is not. Ideology is a social construct (Noel 2013)—one of many possible frames through which politics may be viewed. What makes ideology so powerful (and potentially dangerous) is that it reduces politics to a single dimension on which otherwise disparate conflicts are viewed as part of a single clash between worldviews. As a result, simple disagreements that might otherwise be resolved through compromise become moral disputes in which any concession means compromising one's principles (Haidt 2012).





In contrast, interest-based preference formation (i.e. simply considering what will make us better off) may appear less sophisticated, but it is likely to yield a more productive dialog. When viewed through the frame of interests, policy disagreements don't feel like moral clashes, because people understand that others' interests will inevitably differ from their own from time to time. And, they recognize that while they may disagree on a particular issue, they will likely agree on others. Thus, compromise feels less like surrendering one's principles and more like a rational negotiation. If I give a little on this issue, will you give a little on that issue? In fact, absent ideological coloration, individuals might recognize that while they have occasional disagreements they share a community interest, uniting them in pursuit of a common goal.

How did we get to a place where we seem to have lost track of our actual interests in pursuit of ideological goals? As is often the case in politics, our opinions and behavior have been shaped by the institutional framework we have constructed for ourselves. If we desire less ideological polarization and more compromise, we must first recognize that there are alternative frames through which to view politics. Second, we must recognize that our institutions—in particular, the way we chose to elect public officials—promote ideological polarization.

**Contrary to popular belief, the problem with politics is not politicians themselves, but rather the institutions that shape their behavior and the frames through which we view political conflicts.**

## **How We Got Here**

Throughout much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, American political parties were “big tent” coalitions. The logic was simple: To win elections, you need votes, and you don't win votes by alienating potential constituents. It may be hard to imagine today, but parties had little use for ideological rigidity, and few voters even understood what terms like liberal and conservative meant (Converse 1964). In fact, rather than viewing ideological reasoning as an indicator of sophistication, Americans tended to associate ideology with dogmatism, and political extremity. They took pride in American pragmatism in contrast to closed-minded adherence to doctrine displayed within fascist, Nazi, and communist ideological movements abroad (Knight 2006).

Thus, American politics in this era was not about grand philosophical debates, but rather coalition building. Political parties compromised internally to build broad coalitions of diverse interests with the hope of winning control of government. Since the parties were not particularly ideological, people of all sorts of political stripes were welcome to join. And, once in power, they regularly forged bipartisan coalitions to pass landmark legislation. Again, since politics was not viewed as a singular clash between liberal and conservative worldviews, different coalitions could be forged to pass legislation on different issues without people feeling like they were betraying their principles. A large part of what made these diverse coalitions possible and helped to prevent ideological divisions from taking hold was the fact that American politics was organized at the local rather than national level. Voters got most of their news from local papers that informed them about local issues and local government, and this kept them engaged with the issues facing their community. Likewise,



party nominees were chosen during party conventions where local “party bosses” held sway over delegates, ensuring that even candidates for federal office would be attentive to local needs.

### **From Coalition-Building to Ideological Purity**

But by the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century things began to change. Perhaps the clearest indicator of this change was the 1964 presidential election between Lyndon Johnson (D) and Barry Goldwater (R). Despite Goldwater’s resounding defeat, his campaign forever reshaped American politics by bringing ideology to the forefront. During a highly contentious nomination campaign, Goldwater argued that the Republican Party should stand more firmly for conservative principles. From Goldwater’s point of view, this meant that the Republican Party should take up the cause of states’ rights—a position traditionally held by Southern Democrats seeking to defend the institutions of slavery and later segregation. Although he adamantly opposed segregation himself, he believed commitment to ideological principles should come first. Therefore, if Republicans opposed the expansion of federal government authority to regulate the economy, they should also oppose federal legislation outlawing segregation. Both, in Goldwater’s mind, represented federal government overreach, so this was simply the ideologically consistent stance to support. He believed ideological principles must be upheld even if it meant prolonging segregation and widespread disenfranchisement of African Americans.

Unfortunately for Goldwater, most Americans in 1964 still saw politics through the lens of competing interests, so this commitment to ideology seemed dogmatic rather than high-minded. Television was allowing northern whites to see the mistreatment of African Americans in the Jim Crow South for the first time, and ignoring these people’s interests for ideological reasons seemed extreme. As a result, Goldwater lost 44 of the 50 states. What was remarkable, however, was that he won five states in the Deep South: Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina along with his home state of Arizona. Among these states, Louisiana was the only state to have ever voted for a Republican since Reconstruction, nearly 100 years earlier. Therefore, although Goldwater was resoundingly defeated, his campaign provided a roadmap for future Republicans seeking to win the South. If Republicans stood for limited government, and limited government included defense of states’ rights, they could attract Southern votes. And, although most Northern whites opposed segregation in the South, many were attracted to the idea of limiting government authority. Therefore, once the images of segregationists turning fire hoses and attack dogs on peaceful protestors faded from memory, a coalition could be forged on an ideology that prioritized limited government.

### **Deep Divisions**

Today, the South is a Republican stronghold and the parties are divided on the basis of ideology. As a result, Congress is perpetually gridlocked as liberals and conservatives talk past one another with soaring rhetoric about moral obligations. Liberals are understandably horrified by the racial inequality that remains 50 years after the height of the Civil Rights Movement, and they see conservative opposition to policies designed to address these problems as an affront to human rights. Conservatives are understandably upset by government inefficiency, and they see further



expansion of federal authority as an assault on the Constitution and ethos of limited government. In short, it's not that Congress has forgotten about the interests of average Americans, it's that interests have taken a backseat to ideology in contemporary political discourse and compromise has become a bad word. If politics were to once more be viewed through the lens of interests, Americans might realize that they actually agree on quite a lot.

Efforts to “reform” and further “democratize” the electoral process have only exacerbated the effect of ideology on American politics (Masket 2016). In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, parties started to hold primary elections. This allowed voters to have a role in the nomination process, but parties still retained control. However, after Hubert Humphrey won the 1968 Democratic presidential nomination without even competing in a single primary, the Democratic Party drastically increased the proportion of convention delegates chosen through primaries. This removed power from the hands of party bosses, who had previously held sway over delegates, and placed it firmly in the hands of primary voters. Republicans quickly followed suit.

Though these reforms were well-intended, they had an unintended consequence. Only a very small fraction of Americans vote in primary elections (especially when they are not held on the same day as the presidential primary), and those who do vote tend to be the most ideologically minded and extreme segment of the public. Moreover, since most legislative seats are “safe”—meaning the district is either heavily Republican or heavily Democratic—the only real threat to the seat holder is the primary. Thus, most legislators have a stronger incentive to listen to the most ideologically extreme voices in their district rather than the average voter.

Office-seekers had previously been forced to appeal to party bosses who derived their power from the distribution of local government jobs and resources to their constituents. While this arrangement had its downsides, it did keep candidates in tune with local interests and focused government attention on the distribution of resources. Once candidates were forced to appeal directly to primary voters rather than party bosses, focus shifted away from local concerns and resource distribution toward national issues and symbolic gestures designed to signal ideological commitment. Candidates were pressured to sign policy pledges, kowtow to donors, genuflect to ideologically extreme media personalities, and demonstrate their own ideological credentials by defaming party members who dared “compromise their principles.” Some candidates, of course, refused to engage in these practices, arguing that pragmatism is a virtue and the American system is built on the notion of political compromise. But, these candidates were slowly eliminated through the process of natural selection: Those who refused to play the game simply lost their seats to those who would.

**As a result of historical circumstances and intuitional changes, ideology has come to play a far more prominent role in American politics than it did throughout much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This has made compromise harder to come by.**

## IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY CHANGE

### What Can We Do?

In Memphis, and cities like it, many citizens continue to lack access to equal education and safe, affordable housing 50 years after the height of the Civil Rights Movement. Too often we throw up our hands, viewing the problems facing our community as a lost cause. We complain that politicians are all corrupt, or they care more about re-election than their constituents' interests. Much of this pessimism likely comes from the misattribution of our problems to office-seekers rather than the incentives the system and political climate provide them. If we reorient our attention to the true source of the problem, solutions will be far easier to come by.

First, it is important to stop glorifying ideology and refocus attention on what is actually in our interest. Ideological reasoning may seem high-minded and virtuous compared to interest-based reasoning, but this characterization is misleading. When politics is viewed through the lens of ideology, people lose sight of areas where they actually share a common interest—such as ensuring the prosperity of their local community—and see only a clash between competing worldviews. When political compromise feels like moral concession, the whole system breaks down and challenges facing cities like Memphis go unaddressed. On the other hand, compromise and political tolerance still seem like admirable ideas when politics is framed in terms of interests rather than ideology. The other policy papers in this pamphlet serve as a perfect example of this sort of practical problem-focused thinking. Readers may not agree with everything the authors suggest, but when discussion focuses on actual community interests rather than getting bogged down by ideological debates, a productive dialog can ensue.

Second, it's time to stop trying to cure the problems of government with more democracy. The biggest threat to democracy is that it provides citizens little incentive to collect information about candidates or turn out to vote on election day. To “believe in the good judgment of the people” is a popular political refrain, but the people's motivation to make sound judgments only extends so far. It is simply too much to expect citizens to follow campaigns at the local, state, and national level, and turn out to vote in primaries, general elections, and various municipal elections. When their workload is too high, people begin to give up on following politics and leave the task to someone else. Those who are left tend to be people who are intensely ideological, people with higher socioeconomic status, and organized interest groups. These are therefore the people who elected officials are forced to cater to. Those who disengage go unheard. Therefore, if we want public officials to listen to the whole public, we should carefully consider the workload we place on the average voter.

Third, we must depoliticize the congressional redistricting process. When state legislatures draw districts in which one party has a vast numeric majority, “safe seats” are created, virtually guaranteeing that a particular party will win in the general election. Since only a very small and ideologically extreme segment of the public tends to vote in primaries, and primaries are essentially all that matter in these districts, extreme candidates tend to get elected. If legislators were forced



to represent their entire district and not just those individuals who vote in their party's primary, compromise would be much easier to come by and we might be able to get back to the business of addressing society's biggest challenges

### ***Summary of Recommendations***

- Does it feel like people can never agree anymore? Consider that ideology is merely a social construct and certainly not the only lens through which politics can be viewed—but likely the most divisive.
- Does it feel like the system is broken? Consider that the challenges posed by democracy are unlikely to be solved with more democracy. Overburdening citizens with too many elections means lower turnout and less informed voters, which can actually undermine accountability rather than enhancing it.
- Do you feel like your vote doesn't matter because election outcomes are all forgone conclusions? "Safe districts" make general elections virtually irrelevant, leaving elected officials accountable to only the small and unrepresentative fraction of Americans who vote in the primary. To alleviate this problem, we must weigh the value of electoral competitiveness against other competing goals during the redistricting process, and we must take redistricting power out of the hands of state legislatures with partisan motives.
- Are you frustrated with "the government establishment?" If it seems like everyone who gets elected just falls into the same practices no matter what they promised during the campaign, that means the problem is likely with the institutions that govern and incentivize their behavior, not with the character of the individuals. Our problems are more tractable than people tend to realize. We just need to understand the true sources of these problems and place our focus on solutions.

### **Works Cited**

- Converse, Philip E. 1964. "The nature of belief systems in mass publics." In *Ideology and discontent*, ed. D. Apter. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Haidt, Jonathan. 2012. "The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion." New York, NY: Pantheon Books.
- Knight, Kathleen. 2006. "Transformations of the Concept of Ideology in the Twentieth Century." *American Political Science Review* 100(4): 619-626.
- Masket, Seth. 2016. "The inevitable party: Why attempts to kill the party system fail and how they weaken democracy." New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Noel, Hans. 2013. "Political Ideologies and Political Parties in America." New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

## NOTES:







# THE BENJAMIN L. HOOKS INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

[www.memphis.edu/benhooks](http://www.memphis.edu/benhooks)

[bhi@memphis.edu](mailto:bhi@memphis.edu) | (901) 678-3974

