

Guest column: Memphis must get grip on childhood poverty

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Shame on America. And shame on Memphis.

As though the 2012 national childhood poverty rate of 22.6 percent for families with children under 18 wasn't outrageous enough, the rate in Memphis is almost double at 44.3 percent — the highest in the United States. Three times as many African-American children in the city are poor than white children.

At least half of these children are actually living in extreme poverty. Moreover, in the category of female-headed households with children under age 5 and no husband present, almost 60 percent of families are in poverty.

While Memphis Mayor A C Wharton is to be commended for pursuing his “Blueprint for Prosperity” for the city’s future, there has been little to no mention of this tragedy.

What can be done about this problem? Many might believe that nothing will solve this challenge, or worse yet, will blame the victims. In reality, things can be done.

First, amazingly, the U.S. is one of only three countries (the other two being Somalia and South Sudan) that have not ratified the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child. This must be done immediately, as it would put international focus and pressure on our country to finally deal with this issue.

Second, the Academic Pediatric Association now recognizes childhood poverty as a “childhood disease,” with “toxic stress” causing problems with children’s physical and mental health. As a result, so many children in the U.S. do not reach their full potential as citizens. By rectifying the problem, we will unleash untold potential in our society, and help each child who reaches adulthood to fulfill his or her purpose in life.

Finally, we must fund education properly. The U.S. ranks 43rd worldwide in the percentage of GDP spent on education, and Tennessee ranks 45th among the states in per-pupil expenditures.

Not too long ago, the elderly were one of the groups most at risk for poverty. With the advent of Social Security and Medicare, the national poverty rate among the elderly is now around 9 percent, well below the average for all Americans. A similar effort must now be undertaken with childhood poverty, if for no other reason than local and national self-interest. Poverty is associated with crime and terrorism, and high-poverty areas limit economic opportunities.

There is ample evidence that social programs are effective in reducing poverty. In 1999, when Tony Blair was the prime minister of the United Kingdom, he pledged to cut the rate of childhood poverty in half. The U.K. achieved this goal through a combination of programs.

To do the same in the U.S. would take a similar federal effort, but here in Memphis our local leaders could take steps to begin this process. One important component of Blair's efforts were preschool programs for every child under age 5. Preschool education places children on a path to prosperity through academic achievement, and thus middle- and upper-income families utilize it extensively.

Improvements in education and educational opportunities are crucial to economic and social development. They are an important first step in local efforts to reduce childhood poverty. Also essential are increased and comprehensive social and health services, such as expansion of the Medicaid program, greater participation in the Earned Income Tax Credit program, a higher minimum wage, subsidized child care programs, and an extensive and accessible public transportation system.

Regardless of the federal government's action or inaction, Memphis must begin to address the issue of childhood poverty on its own. Whatever the municipal government can do must be done. There is no question that with a concerted local effort, Memphis can significantly cut its childhood poverty rates.

And there is no other choice — unless we want to condemn another generation to the deleterious effects of toxic poverty and plunge our community into an economic depression from which we will never recover.

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