

OPINION - VIEWPOINT

September 25, 2014

The Power of Poverty

Public policy must change if we are to reduce Memphis' child-poverty rate.

by WENDI THOMAS

Memphis is still the nation's poorest large metro area, and the share of children who live in poverty is climbing. The news, delivered via 2013 Census data released last week, is not a reason to surrender the so-called, half-hearted war against poverty. It is a call to use different weapons and to transform the public policies that conspire to keep people poor.

[click to enlarge](#)



It is time to take up the mission for which Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. died in Memphis: economic justice.

"If the society changes its concepts by placing the responsibility on its system, not on the individual, and guarantees secure employment or a minimum income, dignity will come within reach of all," wrote King in his last book, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*

As a city, we have been mindful of, if not obedient to, King's call for racial harmony.

We are fond of the aesthetics of integration — witness our civic pride at the sight of interracial crowds at Grizzlies playoffs games — but blasé about the execution of equality.

The overall poverty rate in the Memphis metro area — which stretches to the nearest parts of Arkansas and Mississippi — is 19.8 percent. The disgrace is in the details: The poverty rate is 29.2 percent for blacks, 38.3 percent for Hispanics, and 8.4 percent for whites. A staggering 52.4 percent of Hispanic children and 43.2 percent of black children live in poverty, compared to 9.8 percent of white kids.

From 2012 to 2013, the child-poverty rate rose by 3 percent. Forty-two percent of Memphis' poor live in female-headed households.

"To reduce child poverty, we need to reduce mothers' poverty," said M. Elena Delavega, assistant professor of social work at the University of Memphis.

To do so requires three things: universal childcare, an increase in the minimum wage, and efficient public transportation.

If we could only do one of those, I asked, which one should it be? Delavega sighed. "It's like if you asked what's better — to feed a person or give them something to drink," she said.

"Well, if you don't do both, they'll die anyway. We should do those three things, and we should do them at the same time."

Memphis is rich with experiments in education reform, many funded by generous benefactors and nonprofit foundations.

"Philanthropy is commendable," King said, "but it must not cause the philanthropist to overlook the circumstances of economic injustice which make philanthropy necessary."

The circumstances are dire: "Cuba is better than we are in terms of the investment in education," Delavega said. It's true, the communist nation spends more of its GDP on education than the United States, the state of Tennessee, or the city of Memphis.

But King's rhetoric suggests that millions spent to fix classrooms may be misdirected, if well-intentioned. "We are likely to find that the problems of housing and education, instead of preceding the elimination of poverty, will themselves be affected if poverty is first abolished," King wrote in 1967.

In 2013, Shelby County's poverty rate was 21.8 percent — higher than it was in 1970, 20.6 percent.

"It is clear," states Mayor A C Wharton's Blueprint for Prosperity, "that Memphis cannot reduce poverty by pursuing the same strategies that have been prevalent for the past 40 years."

Taken as a whole, Wharton's anti-poverty initiative claims it can shrink the poverty rate by 1 percent every year for the next 10 years.

Better childcare is one part of Wharton's plan, but virtually none of it relies on cooperation from other elected bodies.

But Delavega's road to economic security for all requires significant investment by the state. In a recent report, the Corporation for Enterprise Development identified 67 policies that states can employ to boost financial security and create opportunities for all residents.

Of those, Tennessee has adopted 18, earning it a rank of 43rd for policies adopted and 44th for outcomes for family economic security.

This is not cause to abandon King's dream.

It's time for a revolution. "A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies," King said. "A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth."

Wendi C. Thomas is a columnist, journalist, and founder of Common Ground: Conversations on Race, Communities in Action. Visit her blog at wendithomas.com,

and follow her on Twitter @wendi_c_thomas.

RELATED STORIES



Captain Underpants and Other Scary Stuff

We could all learn a few things from the American Library Association's "Banned Book Week."

by Bruce VanWyngarden

Sep 25, 2014



Remembering Martin Luther King Jr.

Tavis Smiley's book about the final year of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s life offers lessons for us all.

by Les Smith

Sep 18, 2014



Tavis Smiley on the Death of a King

A new book looks into the final year of Martin Luther King Jr.

by Leonard Gill

Sep 18, 2014

SPEAKING OF...

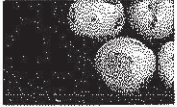
Wendi Thomas to Become Flyer Columnist

Sep 19, 2014



Learning From Ferguson
Aug 21, 2014

#Fresh green bruised apples on
hurry up its this is the last 4 but
alot more back in ware house.



The World of Memphis Twitter
Jul 31, 2014

[More »](#)