

VOLUME 12 MEMPHIS POVERTY FACT SHEET 2023

The 2023 Update of the Memphis Poverty Fact Sheet, Produced Annually by Dr. Elena Delavega of the School of Social Work at the University of Memphis, and Dr. Gregory M. Blumenthal. Data from the 2022 American Community Survey Released in September 2023, and previous datasets.

*Memphis and
Shelby County*



2023 Memphis Poverty Fact Sheet **(Data from 2022 and previous ACS)**

Who are the Memphis Poor?

The city of Memphis has a poverty rate of 21.4%. Child poverty is 32.7%, while the poverty rate for people over age 65 is still the lowest of any age group at 15.7%. The poverty rate for older adults has increased since 2019 but decreased since last year. The City of Memphis poverty rate for Blacks is 24.7%, for Hispanics/Latinx is 22.7%, but the poverty rate for Whites in the city of Memphis has continued to increase to 12.2%. In the Memphis Statistical Metropolitan Area (MSA), which includes parts of Tennessee, Arkansas, and Mississippi, the overall poverty rate is 15.7%, child poverty is 22.4%, poverty for people over age 65 is 12.2%, Black poverty is 22.4%, White poverty is 8.2%, and Hispanic or Latinx poverty is 17.5%. It is noted this year that Black and Hispanic/Latinx poverty rates are falling in Memphis and poverty rates for Whites are increasing.

The Poverty Rate in Memphis and Shelby County Compared to National Rates

In general, poverty rates for the City of Memphis continue to be higher than poverty rates in Shelby County for every category. Both are higher than poverty rates in Tennessee, with the notable exception of Whites, for whom poverty rates are higher in Tennessee than in the United States, Shelby County, and the Memphis MSA. While poverty rates in Memphis are higher in 2022 than in the United States and in Tennessee, which is unusual. However, in both Shelby County and the Memphis MSA, the poverty rate for Whites is lower than in the United States and in the state of Tennessee. This, together with the overall decline in the White population in Memphis, suggests that Whites with higher incomes are leaving the core city of Memphis and moving to the surrounding suburban communities associated with Memphis but not to the rural areas.

Table 1 – Diverse Poverty Rates in Memphis, Shelby County, Tennessee, and the United States

2022 Poverty Rate	Overall	Under 18	18-64	Over 65	White	Black	Latino	Asian
United States	12.6%	16.3%	11.7%	10.9%	9.9%	21.3%	16.8%	10.1%
Tennessee	13.3%	17.6%	12.4%	11.0%	10.9%	21.0%	20.0%	8.7%
Shelby County	16.5%	23.7%	14.5%	12.8%	8.1%	21.7%	19.4%	N/A
Memphis city, Tennessee	21.4%	32.7%	18.3%	15.7%	12.2%	24.7%	22.7%	N/A
Memphis, TN-MS-AR Metro	15.7%	22.4%	13.8%	12.2%	8.0%	18.3%	17.0%	N/A

New in 2023

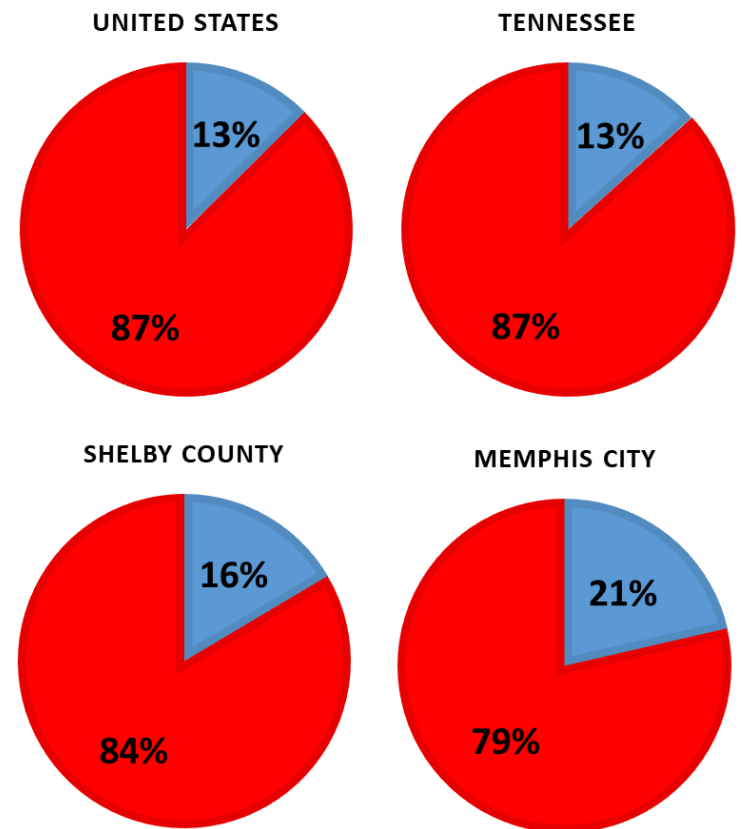
Overall, the nation, the state, and the Memphis area are in a remarkably similar place to where they were in 2019. In general, poverty rates differ by a few tenths of a percentile point. This is true except for Whites in the city of Memphis and for older adults for whom poverty rates have increased (see 2020 Memphis Poverty Fact Sheet:

https://www.memphis.edu/socialwork/research/files/documents/2020povertyfactsheet_correct.pdf). At all levels, poverty among older adults seems to be what is driving the increase in poverty rates.

Not-So-New in 2023

It is not a surprise to anyone familiar with the Memphis Poverty Fact Sheet that the poverty rate in the City of Memphis is higher than in Shelby County, Tennessee, and the United States. It is also not a surprise that the poverty rate among minorities is higher than among Whites. Structural disparities remain and will require deliberate efforts to dismantle. Solving poverty will require regional solutions and regional investments, such as public transportation that serves the entire community.

Figure 1 – Percent of the Population in Poverty



Surprising News

From 2021 to 2022, the poverty rate seems to have increased in general in the United States while decreasing for the Memphis area. Not only is Memphis at similar levels to those in 2019, but also child poverty continues to decline. We attribute this to the fact that the increase in online shopping has meant a strong job market for Memphis, a distribution hub. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has been strange indeed.

Figure 2 – Poverty Rates in 2021 and 2022 in Memphis and Shelby County

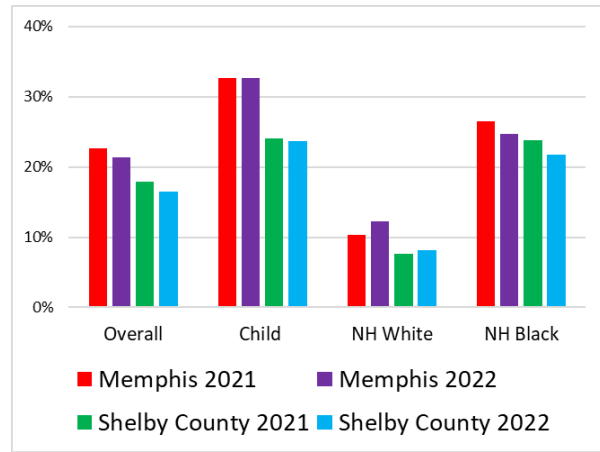
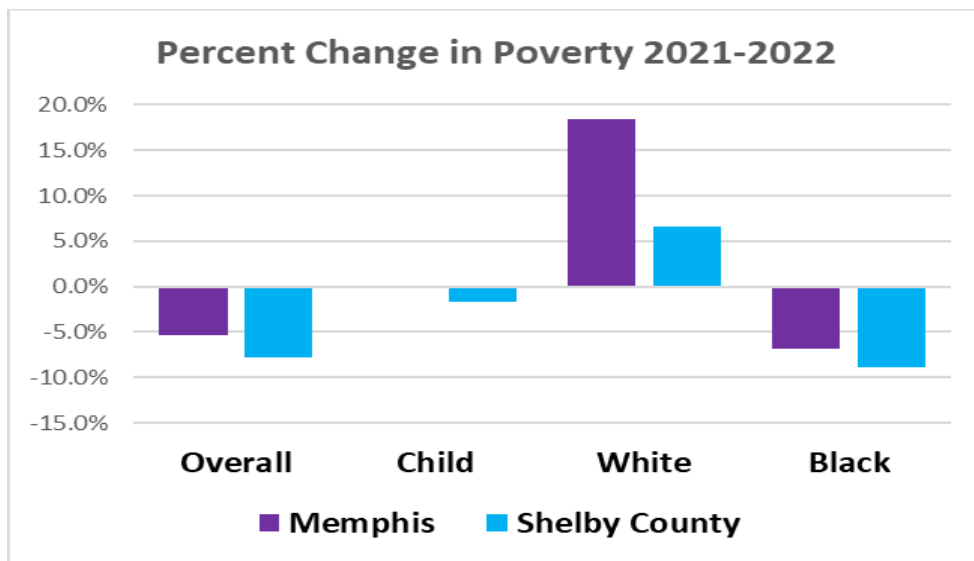


Table 2 – Percent Change in Poverty Rates in Memphis and Shelby County

	Overall			White			Black			Hispanic		
	2021	2022	% Change	2021	2022	% Change	2021	2022	% Change	2021	2022	% Change
Memphis	22.6%	21.4%	-5.3%	10.3%	12.2%	18.4%	26.5%	24.7%	-6.8%	27.5%	22.7%	-17.5%
Shelby County	17.9%	16.5%	-7.8%	7.60%	8.1%	6.6%	23.8%	21.7%	-8.8%	27.2%	19.4%	-28.7%

	Overall			Child			Over 65		
	2021	2022	% Change	2021	2022	% Change	2021	2022	% Change
Memphis	22.6%	21.4%	-5.3%	32.7%	32.7%	0.0%	16.8%	15.7%	-6.5%
Shelby County	17.9%	16.5%	-7.8%	24.1%	23.7%	-1.7%	14.6%	12.8%	-12.3%

Figure 3 – Percent Change in Poverty Rates in Memphis and Shelby County 2-21-2022



Change from 2019, Before the COVID-19 Pandemic, the “Before” Times

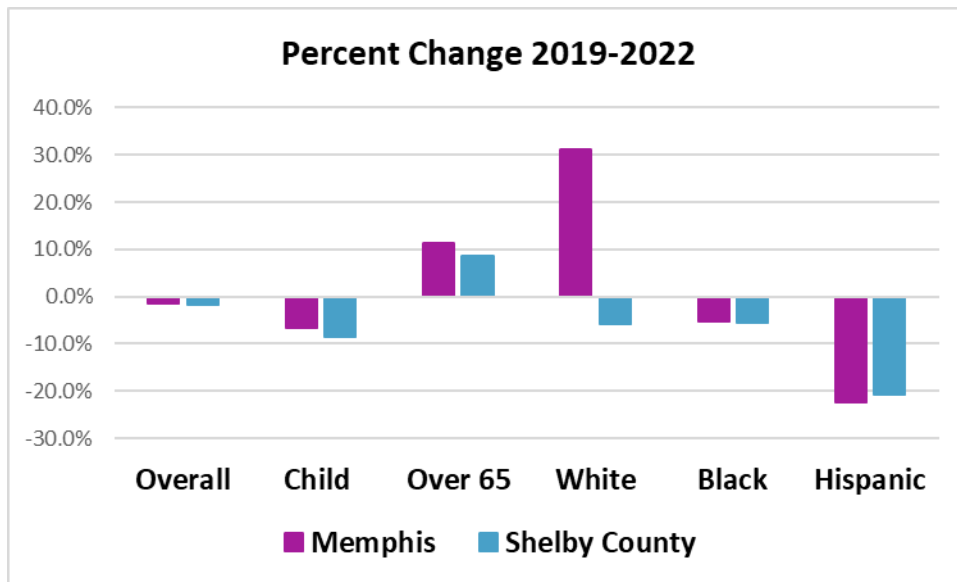
In many ways, it feels as if the COVID-19 pandemic did not happen, at least economically. Memphis and Shelby County seem to be on track to where they were in 2019. Overall poverty numbers are quite similar. In the 2019 and previous Poverty Fact Sheets we had already observed and noted increases in poverty among Whites in Memphis and decreases in child poverty and among Latinx/Hispanics, so these are not surprising. The increases in elder (over 65) poverty are surprising and saddening.

Table 3 – Percent Change in Poverty Rates in Memphis and Shelby County, 2019-2022

	Overall			White			Black			Hispanic		
	2019	2022	% Change	2019	2022	% Change	2019	2022	% Change	2019	2022	% Change
Memphis	21.7%	21.4%	-1.4%	9.3%	12.2%	31.2%	26.1%	24.7%	-5.4%	29.2%	22.7%	-22.3%
Shelby County	16.8%	16.5%	-1.8%	8.6%	8.1%	-5.8%	23.0%	21.7%	-5.7%	24.5%	19.4%	-20.8%

	Overall			Child			Over 65		
	2019	2022	% Change	2019	2022	% Change	2019	2022	% Change
Memphis	21.7%	21.4%	-1.4%	35.0%	32.7%	-6.6%	14.1%	15.7%	11.3%
Shelby County	16.8%	16.5%	-1.8%	25.9%	23.7%	-8.5%	11.8%	12.8%	8.5%

Figure 4 – Percent Change in Poverty 2019-2022



Memphis and Shelby County have made important strides in reducing child poverty, but children still bear the brunt of poverty and suffer the consequences.

DETAILED POVERTY TABLES

Table 4 – The Poverty Intersection of Race and Age: United States

United States 2022						
	Overall	White	Black	Latinx/Hispanic	Asian	Native American
Population Size (in thousands)	333,287,562	192,153,076	39,582,961	63,553,639	19,696,980	3,205,331
Median Household Income	\$74,755	\$80,404	\$51,374	\$65,882	\$106,954	\$58,082
Overall Poverty Rate	12.6%	9.9%	21.3%	16.8%	10.1%	21.7%
Child (Under 18) Poverty Rate	16.3%	10.2%	29.8%	22.0%	10.1%	28.7%
Poverty Rate for People 18-64	11.7%	9.5%	18.6%	14.1%	9.3%	19.2%
Poverty Rate for People 65+	10.9%	8.8%	18.6%	18.2%	13.5%	19.8%

Table 5 – The Poverty Intersection of Race and Age: Tennessee

Tennessee 2022					
	Overall	White	Black	Latinx/Hispanic	Asian
Population Size (in thousands)	7,051,339	5,070,026	1,089,738	442,629	133,729
Median Household Income	\$65,254	\$69,743	\$49,531	\$58,385	\$94,814
Overall Poverty Rate	13.3%	10.9%	21.0%	20.0%	8.7%
Child (Under 18) Poverty Rate	17.6%	12.4%	30.2%	25.6%	11.8%
Poverty Rate for People 18-64	12.4%	10.8%	17.9%	16.8%	7.7%
Poverty Rate for People 65+	11.0%	10.0%	18.1%	12.6%	9.5%

Tables 6 – The Poverty Intersection of Race and Age: Shelby County

Shelby County, Tennessee 2022				
	Overall	White	Black	Latinx/Hispanic
Population Size (in thousands)	916,371	309,847	488,741	65,401
Median Household Income	\$61,516	\$90,605	\$47,562	\$63,752
Overall Poverty Rate	16.5%	8.1%	21.7%	19.4%
Child (Under 18) Poverty Rate	23.7%	7.2%	30.3%	25.8%
Poverty Rate for People 18-64	14.5%	7.9%	18.8%	14.1%
Poverty Rate for People 65+	12.8%	8.2%	17.9%	20.9%

Table 7 – The Poverty Intersection of Race and Age: The City of Memphis

City of Memphis, Tennessee 2022				
	Overall	White	Black	Latinx/Hispanic
Population Size (in thousands)	621,050	150,287	389,252	55,333
Median Household Income	\$50,622	\$76,861	\$41,974	\$60,376
Overall Poverty Rate	21.4%	12.2%	24.7%	22.7%
Child (Under 18) Poverty Rate	32.7%	10.4%	36.3%	30.6%
Poverty Rate for People 18-64	18.3%	12.3%	21.2%	16.3%
Poverty Rate for People 65+	15.7%	11.3%	18.3%	23.9%

Table 8 – The Poverty Intersection of Race and Age: Memphis Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA)

Memphis, TN-MS-AR Metro Area 2022				
	Overall	White	Black	Latinx/Hispanic
Population Size (in thousands)	1,330,954	546,069	626,833	83,369
Median Household Income	\$64,008	\$85,067	\$47,557	\$63,146
Overall Poverty Rate	15.7%	8.2%	22.4%	17.5%
Child (Under 18) Poverty Rate	22.4%	7.6%	32.0%	23.7%
Poverty Rate for People 18-64	13.8%	8.0%	19.1%	12.9%
Poverty Rate for People 65+	12.2%	8.0%	18.3%	17.0%

COMPARING MEMPHIS

Poverty Rankings

In 2022, the Memphis Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) tied with the New Orleans MSA in first place in overall poverty and was first place in child poverty among large MSAs with populations greater than 1,000,000. The city of Memphis was third in child poverty and fifth in overall poverty among cities with populations greater than 500,000. However, the Memphis MSA ranked in ninth place in child poverty among MSAs with populations greater than 500,000 and did not even make the top ten in overall poverty among MSAs with populations over 500,000.

While encouraging, this news needs to be evaluated with cautious optimism. Indeed, Memphis may be doing better, but children continue suffering the most egregious poverty levels, and poverty among older adults is increasing at alarming rates. Children are a primary concern. Why is it that poverty hurts minority children worse? This community needs to do more to address the needs of children and of families. Children are poor because their parents are poor. It is as simple as that. Poor families need multiple sources of support, such as low-cost mortgages, subsidized childcare, and city-wide access to the internet. The COVID-19 pandemic showed us the devastating impact of any shock on poor children. When children live in very precarious situations and when schools are the only manner by which families receive any support at all, any disruptions to the school system result in hunger and children who lack access to the most basic services and care.

What the Rankings Mean

The rank number denotes the position of a city or MSA relative to others. The higher the rank number, the higher the poverty rate for that locality. In other words, a higher ranking is not desirable. Note that there are fewer cities with more than a half-million people than MSAs with more than a million people. This is because MSAs comprise a larger territory. As a result, Memphis is both a city with more than 500,000 people and an MSA with a population greater than one million, but not all MSAs with more than 1,000,000 people include cities with more than half a million people. It is important to note that geographies with smaller sizes tend to have greater poverty rates. Poverty can be as high as 100% of the population in certain small rural localities.

Memphis is tied for “number 1” in poverty in 2023, in both overall and child poverty, but poverty has declined for most groups, except older adults and Whites in the city.

Rankings provide the necessary context to understand poverty rates. A lower poverty rate that is still higher than other similar populations is not necessarily a good thing; and a higher poverty rate when examined in the context of other populations may indicate that the city is performing better than others.

Table 9 – Memphis’ Rank in Poverty Rates

Memphis		2021		2022			
		Poverty Rate	Poverty Rank	Poverty Rate	Poverty Rank	Rank Change	% Change
Among Cities with Populations Greater than 500,000 (37 Cities)	Overall	22.6%	5	21.4%	5	—	-5.3%
	Under 18	32.7%	4	32.7%	3	-1	0.0%
Among MSA with Populations Greater than 500,000 (114 MSA)	Overall	16.9%	8	15.7%	11	-3	-7.1%
	Under 18	22.9%	11	22.4%	9	2	-2.2%
Among MSA with Populations Greater than 1,000,000 (54 MSA)	Overall	16.9%	2	15.7%	1	1	-7.1%
	Under 18	22.9%	2	22.4%	1	1	-2.2%

Table 10 – Highest Poverty Rates in Cities in the United States

Highest Poverty Rates		2021		2022	
Rank 1		Rank 1	Poverty Rate	Rank 1	Poverty Rate
Among Cities with Populations Greater than 500,000 (37 Cities)	Overall	Detroit city, Michigan	30.2%	Detroit city, Michigan	33.8%
	Under 18	Detroit city, Michigan	43.1%	Detroit city, Michigan	49.3%
Among MSA with Populations Greater than 500,000 (114 MSA)	Overall	McAllen-Edinburg-Mission, TX Metro Area	29.3%	McAllen-Edinburg-Mission, TX Metro Area	27.6%
	Under 18	McAllen-Edinburg-Mission, TX Metro Area	39.0%	McAllen-Edinburg-Mission, TX Metro Area	38.1%
Among MSA with Populations Greater than 1,000,000 (54 MSA)	Overall - TIE	New Orleans-Metairie, LA Metro Area	18.4%	New Orleans-Metairie, LA Metro Area	15.7%
		Memphis, TN-MS-AR Metro Area		Memphis, TN-MS-AR Metro Area	15.7%
	Under 18	New Orleans-Metairie, LA Metro Area	25.6%	Memphis, TN-MS-AR Metro Area	22.4%

Note that the Memphis MSA has tied with New Orleans for first place in overall poverty.

Table 11 – Top Ten Large MSAs in Overall Poverty

Among MSA with Populations Greater than 1,000,000 (54 MSA)	2022 Rank	Overall Poverty
Memphis, TN-MS-AR Metro Area	1	15.7%
New Orleans-Metairie, LA Metro Area	1	15.7%
Tulsa, OK Metro Area	3	14.6%
Oklahoma City, OK Metro Area	4	14.4%
Tucson, AZ Metro Area	4	14.4%
Houston-The Woodlands-Sugar Land, TX Metro Area	6	14.3%
San Antonio-New Braunfels, TX Metro Area	7	14.2%
Birmingham-Hoover, AL Metro Area	8	13.9%
Detroit-Warren-Dearborn, MI Metro Area	9	13.8%
Cleveland-Elyria, OH Metro Area	10	13.7%

Table 12 – Top Ten Large MSAs in Child Poverty

Among MSA with Populations Greater than 1,000,000 (54 MSA)	2022 Rank	Child Poverty (Under 18)
Memphis, TN-MS-AR Metro Area	1	22.4%
New Orleans-Metairie, LA Metro Area	2	21.9%
Houston-The Woodlands-Sugar Land, TX Metro Area	3	20.8%
Detroit-Warren-Dearborn, MI Metro Area	4	20.5%
San Antonio-New Braunfels, TX Metro Area	5	20.1%
Tulsa, OK Metro Area	6	19.8%
Cleveland-Elyria, OH Metro Area	7	19.7%
Rochester, NY Metro Area	8	18.5%
Oklahoma City, OK Metro Area	9	18.1%
Birmingham-Hoover, AL Metro Area	10	17.9%

Table 13 – Top Ten MSAs with Over 500,000 Population in Overall Poverty

Among MSA with Populations Greater than 500,000 (114 MSA)	2022 Rank	Overall Poverty
McAllen-Edinburg-Mission, TX Metro Area	1	27.6%
El Paso, TX Metro Area	2	21.3%
Fresno, CA Metro Area	3	18.7%
Bakersfield, CA Metro Area	4	17.9%
Jackson, MS Metro Area	5	16.9%
Greensboro-High Point, NC Metro Area	6	16.8%
Youngstown-Warren-Boardman, OH-PA Metro Area	7	16.8%
Lakeland-Winter Haven, FL Metro Area	8	15.9%
Toledo, OH Metro Area	9	15.9%
Little Rock-North Little Rock-Conway, AR Metro Area	10	15.8%

Table 14 – Top Ten MSAs with Over 500,000 Population in Child Poverty

Among MSA with Populations Greater than 500,000 (114 MSA)	2022 Rank	Child Poverty (Under 18)
McAllen-Edinburg-Mission, TX Metro Area	1	38.1%
El Paso, TX Metro Area	2	30.1%
Youngstown-Warren-Boardman, OH-PA Metro Area	3	26.8%
Fresno, CA Metro Area	4	25.7%
Lakeland-Winter Haven, FL Metro Area	5	25.3%
Bakersfield, CA Metro Area	6	23.6%
Jackson, MS Metro Area	7	23.5%
Little Rock-North Little Rock-Conway, AR Metro Area	8	22.4%
Memphis, TN-MS-AR Metro Area	9	22.4%
New Orleans-Metairie, LA Metro Area	10	21.9%

Table 15 – Top Ten Large Cities in Overall Poverty

Among Cities with Populations Greater than 500,000 (37 Cities)	2022 Rank	Overall Poverty
Detroit city, Michigan	1	33.8%
Milwaukee city, Wisconsin	2	22.1%
El Paso city, Texas	3	21.7%
Philadelphia city, Pennsylvania	4	21.7%
Memphis city, Tennessee	5	21.4%
Houston city, Texas	6	20.7%
Fresno city, California	7	20.6%
Tucson city, Arizona	8	19.2%
San Antonio city, Texas	9	18.7%
Baltimore city, Maryland	10	18.5%

Table 16 – Top Ten Large Cities in Child Poverty

Among Cities with Populations Greater than 500,000 (37 Cities)	2022 Rank	Child Poverty (Under 18)
Detroit city, Michigan	1	49.3%
Houston city, Texas	2	34.1%
Memphis city, Tennessee	3	32.7%
El Paso city, Texas	4	31.0%
Milwaukee city, Wisconsin	5	30.2%
Philadelphia city, Pennsylvania	6	28.8%
Fresno city, California	7	28.1%
San Antonio city, Texas	8	27.7%
Columbus city, Ohio	9	26.1%
Chicago city, Illinois	10	26.0%

When compared to MSAs with 500,000 population or more, Memphis is not even in the top ten.

THE RACIALIZATION OF POVERTY

The Relationship between Poverty and Race

It has now been observed for several years that the poverty rate among Whites is lower in Shelby County than in Tennessee or the nation as a whole. Poverty among Whites is much lower than for all other groups. The poor in Memphis tend to be minorities. The poverty rates for Blacks and Latinx/Hispanic (although decreasing for Latinx/Hispanic) are higher than the overall poverty rate, and poverty rates for minorities are higher in every age category than poverty rates for Whites. The exception to this is the poverty rate for Whites in the city of Memphis, which is higher than U.S. or Tennessee rates.

Figure 5 – Comparison of Overall Poverty Rates for non-Hispanic Whites Only and Blacks Only

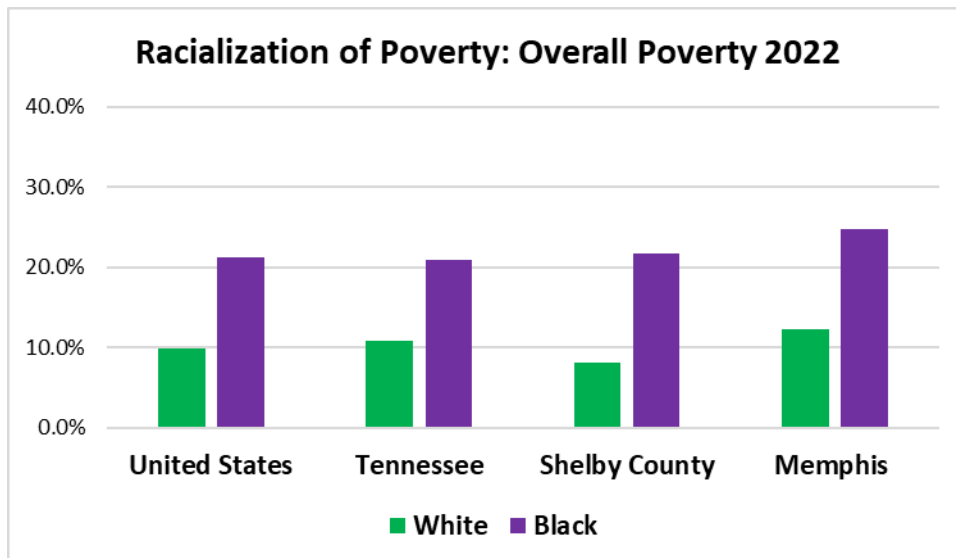
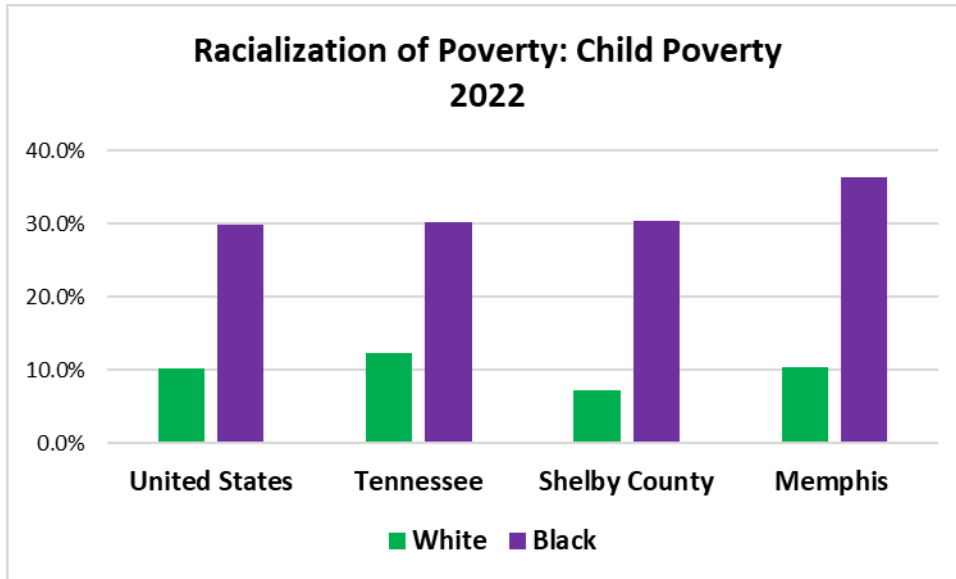


Figure 6 – Comparison of Child Poverty Rates for non-Hispanic Whites Only and Blacks Only



The Poverty Rate and Rank for Non-Hispanic Whites

It is interesting to note that while Memphis ranks first in poverty among large MSAs (population greater than 1,000,000) and fifth when including cities with over 500,000 population, it ranks significantly better when only Whites are included. For this population, Memphis is positioned significantly lower in the list, ranking 31st among 54 large MSA (population greater than 1,000,000) and 72nd among 114 MSA with populations greater than 500,000. The differences between the poverty rates of minority groups and non-Hispanic Whites are striking. The disparities between Whites and Blacks are much more severe than nationally, and this is cause for great concern. However, it is noted that in 2022, the poverty rate among Whites in the city of Memphis is greater than for the United States, Tennessee, or Shelby County, which will bear watching in the next few years.

Table 17– Comparison of Poverty Rates and Rankings Whites Only

Memphis Whites Only	2022			
	Overall Poverty Rate	Overall Poverty Rank	White Poverty Rate	White Poverty Rank
Among MSA for which data are provided (114 MSA, 500,00+ Population)	15.7%	11	8.2%	72
Among MSA for which data are provided (54 MSA, 1,000,000+ Population)	15.7%	1	8.2%	31

Table 18 – City of Memphis White Poverty and Rank in 2019, 2021, and 2022

City of Memphis	White Only					
	2019 Poverty Rate	2019 Poverty Rank	2021 Poverty Rate	2021 Poverty Rank	2022 Poverty Rate	2022 Poverty Rank
Among Cities for which data are provided (37 Cities, 500,00+ Population)	9.3%	20	10.3%	17	12.2%	9

The City of Memphis appears to be losing its middle-class White population. As poverty rates decline in general, the poverty rate among Whites in the City of Memphis is increasing. At the same time, the median household income in the City of Memphis (\$76,861) remains the highest for any racial group in the city, and higher than the national median income (\$74,755) and the median income for Whites in Tennessee (\$79,743).

Table 19 – Comparison of Poverty Rates for Non-Hispanic Whites and Blacks for Various Demographics and Locations

2022	All Ages		Under 18		18-64		Over 65	
	White	Black	White	Black	White	Black	White	Black
United States	9.9%	21.3%	10.2%	29.8%	9.5%	18.6%	8.8%	18.6%
Tennessee	10.9%	21.0%	12.4%	30.2%	10.8%	17.9%	10.0%	18.1%
Shelby County	8.1%	21.7%	7.2%	30.3%	7.9%	18.8%	8.2%	17.9%
Memphis	12.2%	24.7%	10.4%	36.3%	12.3%	21.2%	11.3%	18.3%

The poverty rates for Whites are better in Shelby County than for the same group in Tennessee or the United States, while the rates for Blacks are, in general, worse in Memphis and Shelby County than Tennessee or the nation. It is also interesting to note that for non-Hispanic Whites, the worst poverty rates are at the state and the city level. Given that the majority of the population in Tennessee (in contrast to the City of Memphis) is White, it is clear that the driver for poverty in the State is White poverty. However, the rate of White poverty is much greater for the city of Memphis in 2022 while the median income for Whites in the city of Memphis remaining larger (\$76,861) than the median income for Whites in the state of Tennessee (\$69,743), suggesting increasing disparities among Whites in the city of Memphis. Of note is the fact that in Shelby County Whites have a lower poverty rate than in Tennessee and a higher median income (\$90,605).

The City of Memphis is experiencing disparities among Whites.

These maps illustrate the segregated nature of Shelby County, and the association between race and poverty.

Figure 7– Mapping the Racialization of Poverty in Memphis – Percent Poverty in Memphis

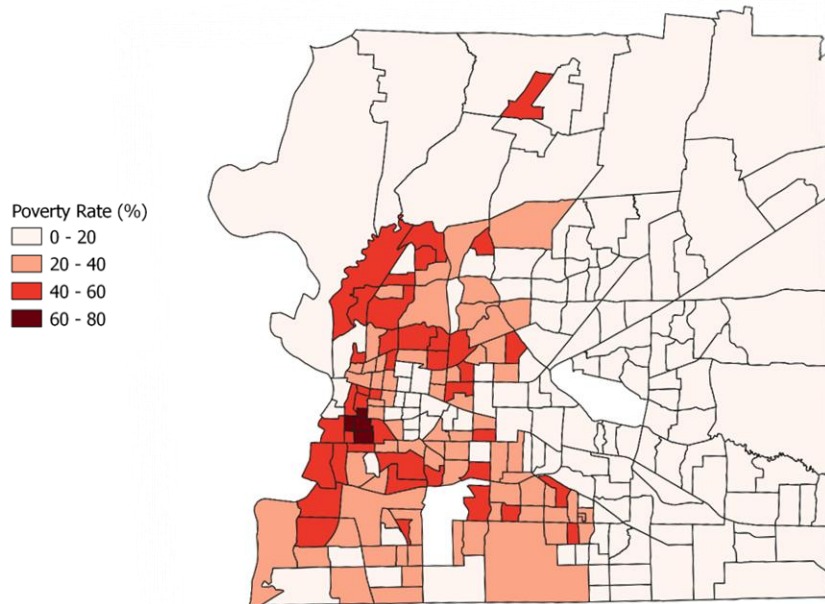


Figure 8 – Mapping the Racialization of Poverty in Memphis – Percent White in Memphis

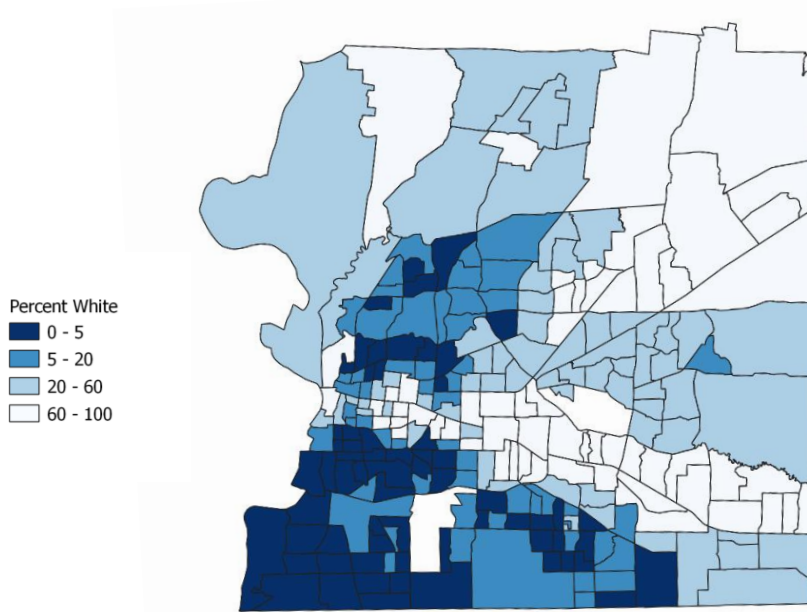


Table 20 – Poverty Rates and Racial Composition of Memphis Zip Codes

ZIP CODE	Population	Percent White	Percent Black	Percent Hispanic/Latino	Overall Poverty	Poverty Rank	Child Poverty	Child Poverty Rank
38002	43,098	72.0	19.3	4.3	6.5	30	7.3	29
38004	11,282	84.3	10.0	3.0	4.5	32	7.0	30
38011	9,666	83.6	11.1	1.9	10.2	20	12.7	24
38016	45,170	31.9	53.9	4.8	10.0	21	13.1	21
38017	55,161	72.9	10.1	3.9	2.9	34	2.6	32
38018	38,789	39.5	47.0	5.7	7.6	27	10.1	27
38028	7,782	72.3	21.5	4.7	5.2	31	0.7	34
38053	26,135	65.1	23.4	6.7	14.7	17	18.6	16
38054	200	45.5	11.0	12.0	-	-	-	-
38103	14,243	59.7	28.4	3.9	10.9	19	4.1	31
38104	22,900	63.2	26.4	4.3	16.7	16	7.3	28
38105	5,437	15.4	78.4	1.9	36.8	4	39.9	10
38106	23,745	2.0	95.7	1.8	41.2	2	61.1	2
38107	15,071	18.9	75.2	2.5	27.6	11	36.8	13
38108	17,300	18.2	62.6	18.2	38.4	3	59.9	3
38109	44,899	2.0	95.4	1.3	30.6	8	49.7	6
38111	40,947	37.3	48.2	9.6	25.2	15	33.5	15
38112	16,437	34.1	52.1	9.0	29.7	9	47.0	7
38114	22,580	4.2	93.2	1.8	32.8	7	39.0	11
38115	37,626	5.6	83.7	9.9	26.6	13	42.9	9
38116	40,854	4.1	93.8	1.2	28.8	10	46.6	8
38117	26,584	79.4	11.9	5.3	7.9	26	13.1	22
38118	38,931	5.6	76.6	15.5	34.0	6	55.0	5
38119	24,027	47.8	41.9	3.4	8.6	23	15.4	18
38120	14,724	82.4	5.5	3.2	7.0	29	12.3	25
38122	22,961	42.6	16.3	32.3	27.2	12	38.4	12
38125	42,717	11.6	77.1	3.7	7.6	28	11.6	26
38126	5,660	6.2	91.7	1.2	56.4	1	76.7	1
38127	40,820	10.1	84.0	3.0	36.8	5	56.0	4
38128	45,087	9.5	81.2	6.3	25.6	14	36.1	14
38133	21,702	48.4	27.4	16.4	8.3	25	14.1	20
38134	43,991	38.8	44.4	12.4	12.6	18	16.3	17
38135	30,438	57.1	35.2	2.8	8.6	24	12.9	23
38138	25,459	84.0	4.4	4.4	3.6	33	1.5	33
38139	16,265	88.7	1.7	1.3	0.6	35	0.5	35
38141	23,299	5.1	84.4	10.2	9.8	22	14.2	19

The impact of poverty on education, on health, and on social outcomes is relevant to the entire community, regardless of what zip codes have greater levels of poverty. We need community-wide solutions.

Trends in Poverty Rates

Poverty Trends – Has Poverty Gotten Better?

Over the course of our study of poverty in Memphis the rates of poverty have remained resistant to significant change, with minor increases and decreases from one year to the next. It is clear that the economic crash of 2008 had an impact on the poverty rates in Memphis. The COVID-19 pandemic did not appear to have such a large impact, nor does it appear to be long-lasting. However, the controlling trends seem to be structural in nature and not cyclical. It is also possible that the way we measure poverty misses the mark severely. The Orshansky method that is used (three times the cost of a basic but healthy diet for a family of four) has not changed in decades even though the needs of people in the modern world are vastly different.

Why Is Poverty High in Memphis?

One possible explanation is that the labor market in Memphis tends to consist of unskilled workers in the warehouse industry. The lack of comprehensive, effective, and efficient public transportation also makes progress against poverty quite difficult. Finally, the divide between the city and the county, as evidenced by the racial and geographical differences in poverty, tends to deprive the city of Memphis of the funds it needs to support the region.

Why is White Poverty Increasing in Memphis

White poverty is increasing in the City of Memphis, but not in the Memphis MSA or Shelby County. At the same time, Whites in the City of Memphis continue having higher median household incomes than the national median, than the median incomes for Blacks and Hispanics in the City of Memphis, and higher median incomes than Whites in the State of Tennessee. Memphis appears to be losing its White middle class, who is moving to the suburbs. However, the problems in Memphis are regional problems. Moving across the street will not address crime or educational deficits. Memphis poverty will not be solved until the entire community starts thinking regionally.

Figure 11 – Trends in Poverty Rates by Age, Memphis

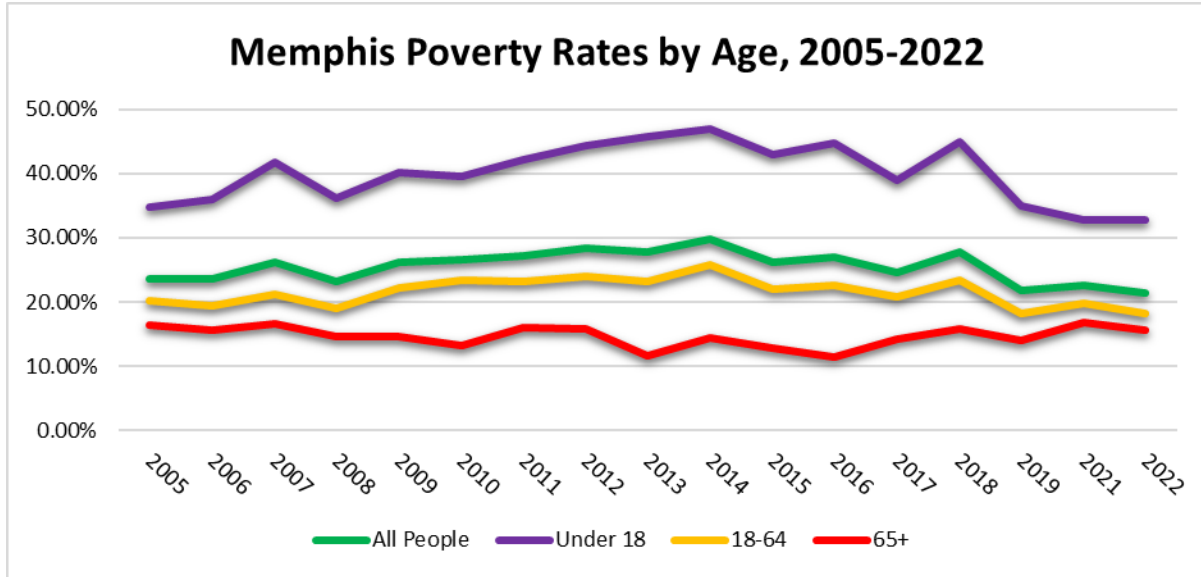


Figure 12 – Trends in Poverty Rates by Age, Shelby County

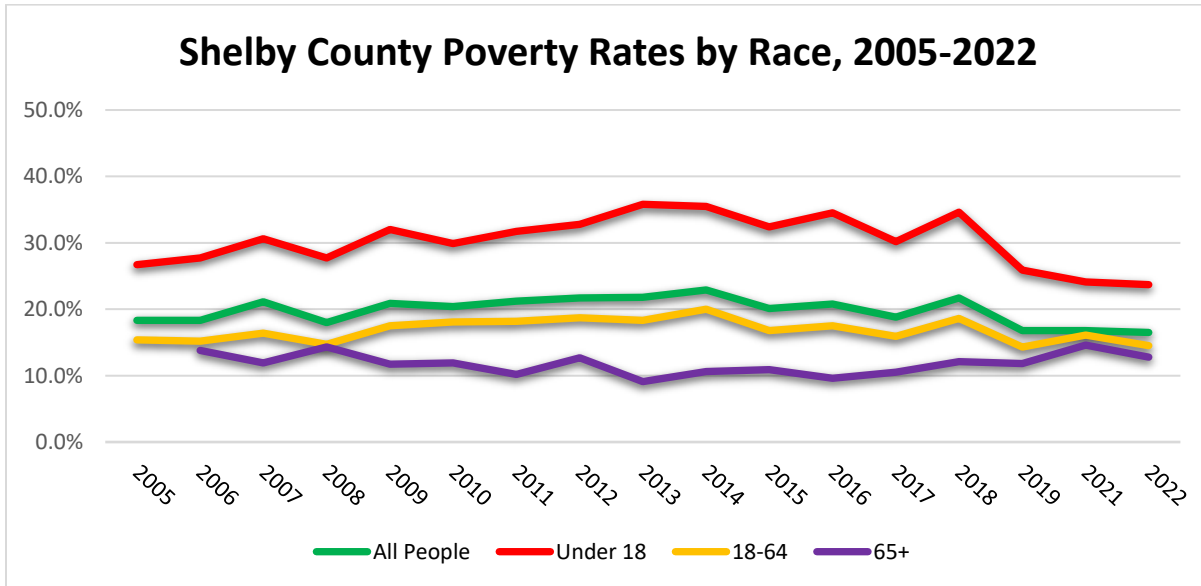


Figure 13 – Trends in Poverty Rates by Race, Memphis

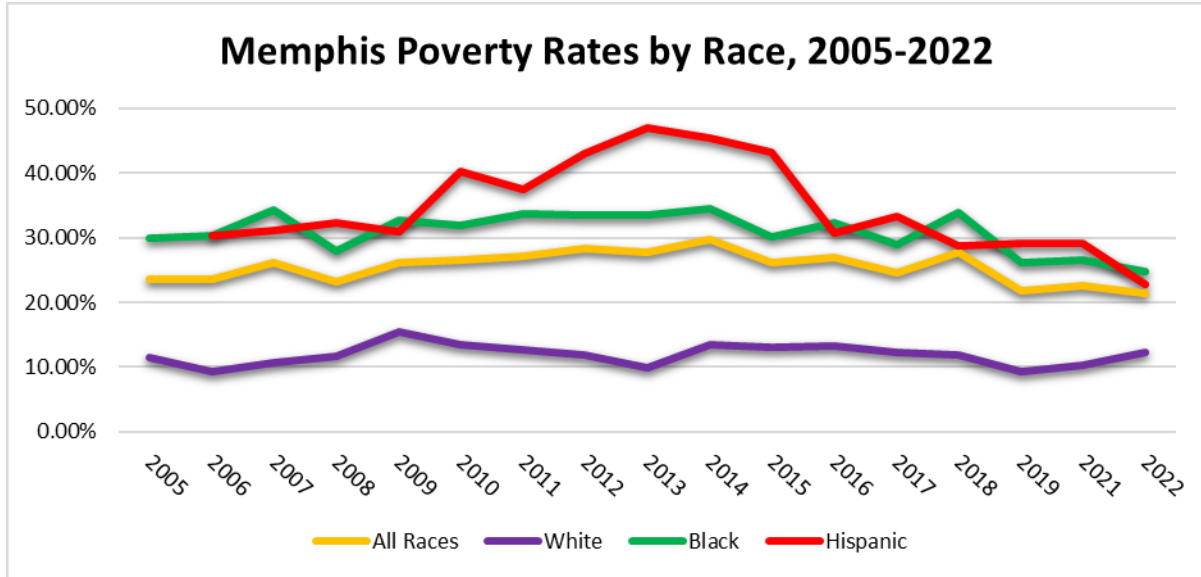
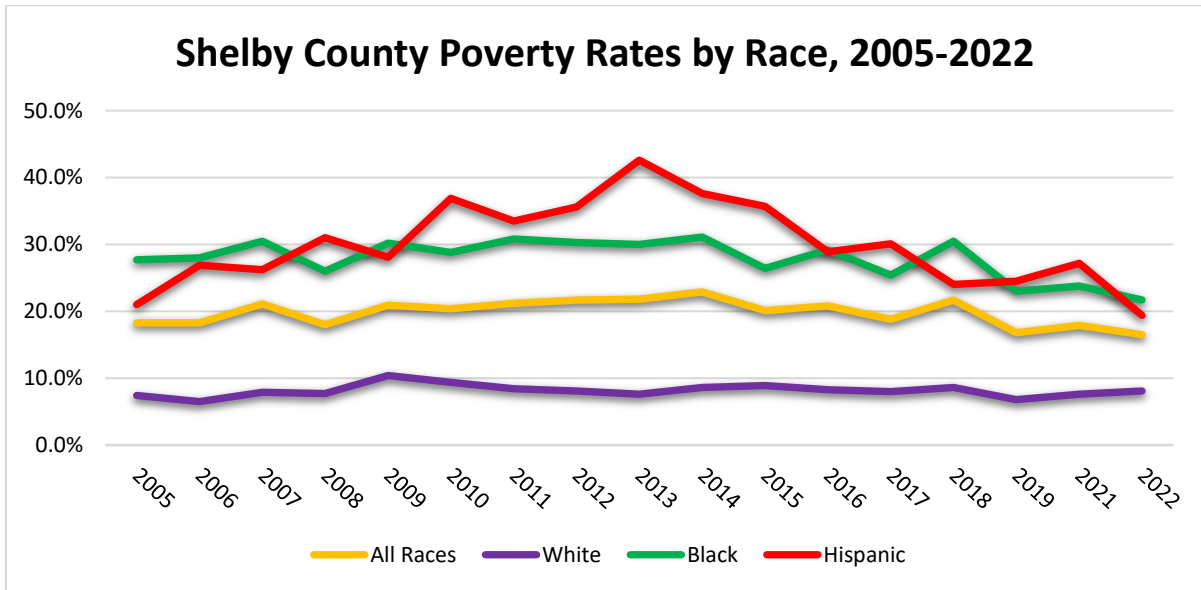
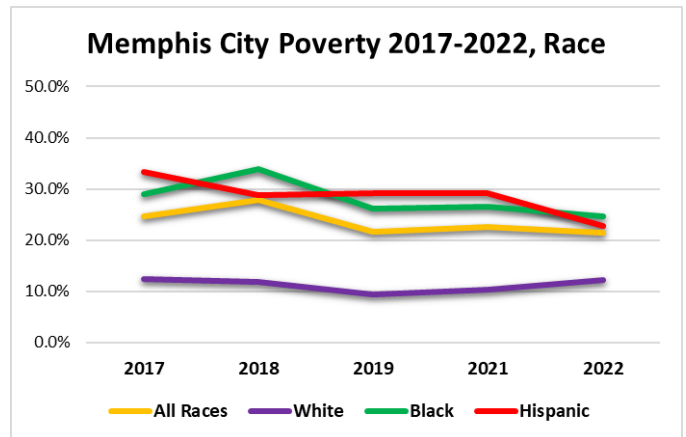
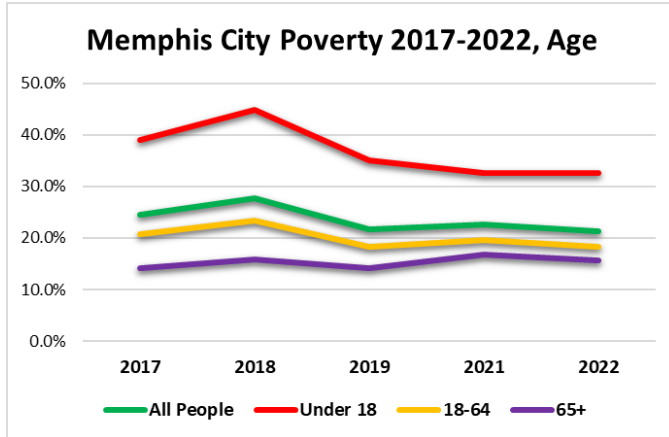


Figure 14 – Trends in Poverty Rates by Race, Shelby County

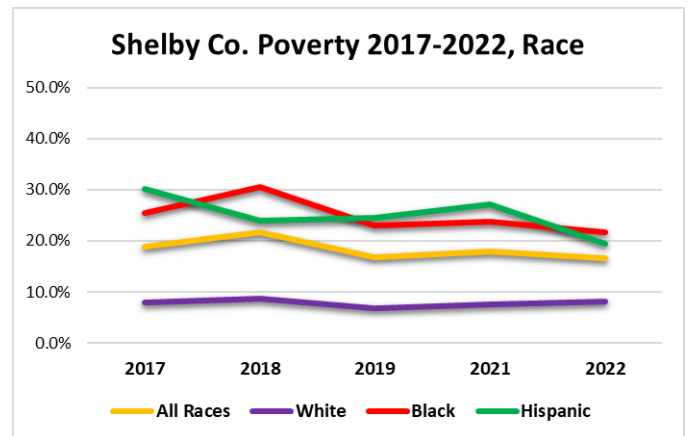
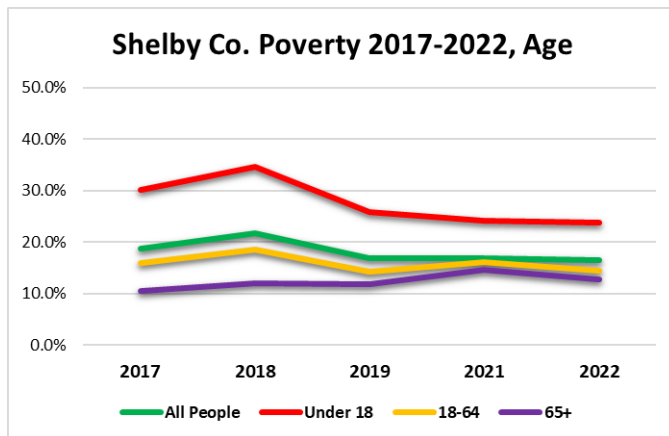


The Last Five Years in Poverty Trends

Figures 15-16 – Memphis Poverty



Figures 17-18 – Shelby County



Measuring Poverty

We still largely use the poverty measure developed by Molly Orshansky in 1963 and 1964. Before that time, poverty was not measured – Census tables do not report poverty before 1970. It was difficult to qualify people for benefits if there was no way to know if they were in poverty, so Orshansky, who was working for the Social Security Administration, tried to find a measure that was logical and straightforward. She considered that all people spend money on food. She knew of the existence of Department of Agriculture food cost tables and estimated that people spent a third of their budget on

food. In essence, the measure took the monthly cost of the most basic diet for a family of four, multiplied by three, and multiplied that by 12 to arrive at the annual poverty threshold. The Johnson Administration really liked the measure for the “War on Poverty”, and the official measure was adopted in 1969.

There are significant problems with this measure. It is difficult to scale up or down for different family sizes. In addition, the economy is vastly different today than in 1969, with families now spending only about one seventh of their budgets on food. More importantly, this measure was never meant to indicate whether families are doing well financially, but rather, the level below which people starve.

Failing to Measure Correctly

In recent years, the measure has become even more inadequate. In December 2021, the Department of Agriculture raised their estimate of the cost of the Thrifty Food Plan to \$863.40 per month for a family of four (two adults and two children). Multiplied by 12, this estimate is \$10,360.80 per year for a family of four, and thus the poverty threshold should be \$31,082.40. However, this is not the level at which we are measuring poverty. The 2022 Federal Poverty Threshold is \$27,750. This number is clearly not three times the cost of the most basic food plan for a family of four, but thousands of dollars below it. Families considered to be in poverty are actually starving.

What this means is that we are no longer measuring what we thought we were measuring. The declines in poverty rates may simply be a function of the inadequacy of the poverty measure and the failure of the government to remain true to the formula as it has been stated. Poverty is therefore likely to be much higher than we assume, and poverty trends are probably much worse than they appear. The way we measure poverty has been rendered invalid.

A community cannot have such a high percent of people in poverty without affecting everyone. Shelby County and suburban areas are not immune to increasing poverty and the accompanying social and economic malaise. We must understand that to eliminate poverty, we need to work together for the benefit of all.

#SharedRiskforSharedProsperity

The School of Social Work at the University of Memphis is dedicated to understanding poverty and its causes through research and engaged scholarship. Our purpose is to identify the most effective ways to eliminate poverty and promote social and economic development for our region.

Elena Delavega, PhD, MSW is Professor of Social Work at the University of Memphis, where she teaches and researches poverty and social welfare policy. Dr. Delavega has created a body of work consisting of over 33 peer-reviewed publications; over 100 reports, newspaper/magazine articles, book chapters, fact sheets, and translations; close to 200 presentations, including international presentations, keynote addresses, and a TEDx Talk focused on the Blame Index, which she developed in 2017 and is the focus of her future interests. She has produced the Memphis Poverty Factsheet, updated yearly, since 2012. She has also given close to 200 media interviews locally, nationally, and worldwide. She served as Associate Director of the Benjamin L. Hooks Institute for Social Change at the University of Memphis from 2015 to 2019 and continues as research collaborator. She has edited Volumes II, III, IV, V, VI, and VII of the Hooks Policy Papers. In 2018, she collaborated with the National Civil Rights Museum to produce the report on the state of Black Shelby County, Memphis Poverty Report: Memphis Since MLK, in conjunction with the commemorative activities surrounding the 50th anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination.

Gregory Miles Blumenthal, PhD, obtained his B.A. in Chemistry from Vanderbilt University and his doctorate in Pharmacology from Duke University. He has produced a body of work of enormous depth and breadth, encompassing research in toxicology, risk analysis, secure financial web applications, and other data science projects for such agencies as NIH, EPA, the VA, and NASA (from whom he received an award in 2014). His presentation developing objective criteria for PBPK models was expanded into the 2006 US EPA criteria for application of PBPK models to risk assessment. His specific contributions to the realm of statistical analysis continue to influence scientific analysis to this day. The August 2018 US FDA Guidance for acceptance of PBPK models in support of drug evaluations was based upon this US EPA document. Dr. Blumenthal's strongest area of expertise is data science and data analysis, to which he has dedicated his life, but he is also strongly committed to the Memphis community, both as an evaluation consultant for local nonprofit organizations and as a political strategist for local candidates.

If you would like more information on Memphis poverty, please contact Dr. Elena Delavega at mdlavega@memphis.edu

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Sources:

Population, poverty, and median income data obtained from the US Bureau of the Census, September 14, 2023.

For tables:(except ZIP codes): 2022 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates (US Bureau of the Census) DP05, S1701, S1903, B17001(B,C,D,H,I)

For ZIP code table and Census Tract maps: 2021 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates (US Bureau of the Census) DP05, S1701

All Previous Data except Latino (Hispanic): 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018 and 2019 ACS 1-Y Estimates (Table S1701: Poverty Status in the Past 12 Months. Other Tables: DP03, C01001); 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2009, 2011, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018 & 2019 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates (US Bureau of the Census); DP05, 2019 1-Year Estimates (US Bureau of the Census); B17001, 2018 1-Year Estimates (US Bureau of the Census); B01003, 2019 1-Year Estimates (US Bureau of the Census); US24PR, 2019 1-Year Estimates (US Bureau of the Census); Tables S1903 and S0601 2019 1-Year Estimates for Tennessee.

Latino (Hispanic) Data: 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, & 2011 American Community Survey 3-Year Estimates and 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019 5-Year Estimates (US Bureau of the Census).