

2019 MEMPHIS POVERTY FACT SHEET

The 2019 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 2018 American
Community Survey Released in September 2019.

*Memphis and
Shelby County*



2019 Memphis Poverty Fact Sheet (Data from 2018 ACS)

Who are the Memphis Poor?

The city of Memphis has a poverty rate of 27.8%. Child poverty is 44.9%, while the poverty rate for people over age 65 is the lowest of any age group at 15.8%. Poverty in Memphis has increased markedly for all ages and for non-Hispanic Blacks as a whole, while decreasing for non-Hispanic Whites and for Latinos. The City of Memphis poverty rate for non-Hispanic Blacks is 33.8% returning to the same high level seen in 2016. At the same time, the poverty rate for non-Hispanic Whites in the city of Memphis has continued to decrease to 11.8%. In the Memphis Statistical Metropolitan Area (MSA), which includes parts of Tennessee, Arkansas, and Mississippi, the overall poverty is 18.8%, child poverty is 29.3%, poverty for people over age 65 is 11.4%, non-Hispanic Black poverty is 27.6%, non-Hispanic White poverty is 8.9%, and Hispanic or Latino poverty is 23.5%.

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 exception of Shelby County non-Hispanic Whites. Tennessee poverty rates have fallen to being, in general, lower than U.S. poverty rates. The exceptions to this are the poverty rates for non-Hispanic Whites and for Latinos, which are higher in Tennessee than in the U.S. as a whole. The poverty rate for non-Hispanic Whites in the MSA has increased to 8.9%, placing it squarely within the range of non-Hispanic White poverty in Tennessee or the United States.

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

2018 Poverty Rate	Overall	Under 18	18-64	Over 65	Non-Hispanic White	Non-Hispanic Black	Latino	Asian
United States	12.3%	17.5%	11.2%	9.2%	8.7%	21.0%	18.3%	10.0%
Tennessee	11.5%	16.0%	11.0%	7.5%	9.3%	18.6%	24.4%	7.7%
Shelby County	21.7%	34.6%	18.6%	12.1%	8.6%	30.5%	24.0%	N/A
Memphis city, Tennessee	27.8%	44.9%	23.4%	15.8%	11.8%	33.8%	28.8%	N/A
Memphis, TN-MS-AR Metro	18.8%	29.3%	16.2%	11.4%	8.9%	27.6%	23.5%	N/A

New in 2019

The poverty rates for Memphis and Shelby County have increased for all categories of people, and this is contrary to what is happening in the United States overall and in Tennessee. It appears that Memphis is again moving in the opposite and undesirable direction from the rest of the country, with increasing poverty rates for all groups, including non-Hispanic whites. This year, poverty has also increased for non-Hispanic whites in Shelby County. The exception to the increase in poverty is Hispanics or Latinx people. The poverty rates for Hispanics/Latinx in both the city of Memphis and Shelby County have decreased in almost 20%.

Not-So-New in 2019

Again, Memphis and Shelby County remain very poor. What is clear is that poverty that affects Memphis affects all communities within the Memphis area, and as a result, we see that Shelby County is affected by the poverty in Memphis. Solving poverty will require regional solutions and regional investments, such as public transportation that serves the entire community.

Bad News Overall

Poverty in the U.S. continues to drop, but it appears that the Memphis area is going in the opposite direction in poverty. It continues to be true that the minimum wage has not increased since 2009, and that has important implications for poverty. A worker making the minimum wage of \$7.25 an hour, if working 40 hours a week year-round (52 weeks), will earn \$15,080 before taxes. The poverty threshold for a family of two was \$16,460 in 2018, thus rendering even a small family of a mother and child under poverty.

Figure 1 – Percent of the Population in Poverty

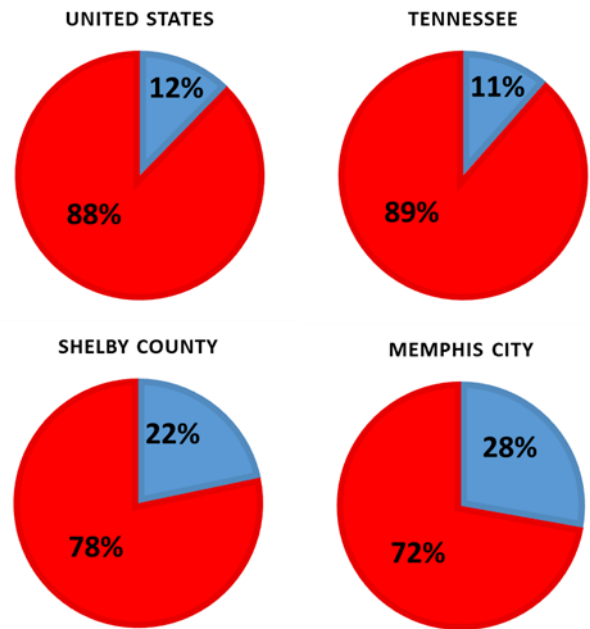


Figure 2 – Poverty Rates in 2017 and 2018 in Memphis and Shelby County

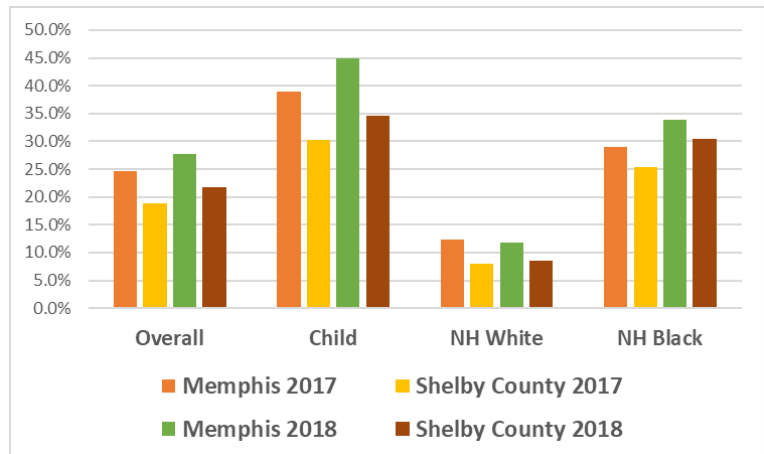


Table 2 – Percent Change in Poverty Rates in Memphis and Shelby County

	Overall			Non-Hispanic White			Non-Hispanic Black			Hispanic		
	2017	2018	% Change	2017	2018	% Change	2017	2018	% Change	2017	2018	% Change
Memphis	24.6%	27.8%	13%	12.3%	11.8%	-4%	28.9%	33.8%	17%	33.3%	28.8%	-14%
Shelby County	18.8%	21.7%	15%	8.0%	8.6%	7%	25.4%	30.5%	20%	30.1%	24.0%	-20%

	Overall			Child			Over 65		
	2017	2018	% Change	2017	2018	% Change	2017	2018	% Change
Memphis	24.6%	27.8%	13%	39.0%	44.9%	15%	14.2%	15.8%	11%
Shelby County	18.8%	21.7%	15%	30.2%	34.6%	15%	10.5%	12.1%	15%

DETAILED POVERTY TABLES

Table 3 – The Poverty Intersection of Race and Age: United States

United States						
2018	Overall	Non-Hispanic White	Non-Hispanic Black	Hispanic or Latino	Asian	Native American
Population Size (In Thousands)	323,156	195,530	39,714	59,227	18,857	2,510
Median Household Income	\$ 74,130	\$ 83,013	\$ 50,023	\$ 60,000	\$ 95,568	\$ 50,002
Mean Household Income	\$ 99,236	\$ 108,940	\$ 70,456	\$ 78,444	\$ 127,521	\$ 73,388
Percent Mean Household Income Larger than Median Household Income	34%	31%	41%	31%	33%	47%
Overall Poverty Rate	12.3%	8.7%	21.0%	18.3%	10.0%	22.6%
Child (Under 18) Poverty Rate	17.5%	10.9%	28.7%	25.0%	11.4%	31.1%
Poverty Rate for People 18 to 64	11.2%	8.6%	18.3%	15.0%	9.6%	20.4%
Poverty Rate for People 65+	9.2%	7.0%	19.0%	17.0%	10.7%	16.3%

Memphis is not “number 1” in poverty in 2019, in either overall or child poverty. However, this is not cause for optimism, as Memphis is in worse shape than a year ago.

Table 4 – The Poverty Intersection of Race and Age: Tennessee

Tennessee					
2018	Overall	Non-Hispanic White	Non-Hispanic Black	Hispanic or Latino	Asian
Population Size (In Thousands)	6,707	5,005	1,062	336	128
Median Household Income	\$ 66,000	\$ 72,200	\$ 44,350	\$ 48,008	\$ 70,003
Mean Household Income	\$ 90,441	\$ 99,395	\$ 61,042	\$ 59,672	\$ 95,925
Percent Mean Household Income Larger than Median Household Income	37%	38%	38%	24%	37%
Overall Poverty Rate	11.5%	9.3%	18.6%	24.4%	7.7%
Child (Under 18) Poverty Rate	16.0%	11.6%	21.1%	37.5%	15.9%
Poverty Rate for People 18 to 64	11.0%	9.2%	18.7%	15.3%	3.9%
Poverty Rate for People 65+	7.5%	7.3%	12.1%	N/A	N/A

Tables 5 – The Poverty Intersection of Race and Age: Shelby County

Shelby County				
2018	Overall	Non-Hispanic White	Non-Hispanic Black	Hispanic or Latino
Population Size	919,075	324,007	497,813	60,062
Median Household Income	\$ 47,500	\$ 73,559	\$ 33,474	38,102
Mean Household Income	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Percent Mean Household Income Larger than Median Household Income	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Overall Poverty Rate	21.7%	8.6%	30.5%	24.0%
Child (Under 18) Poverty Rate	34.6%	8.6%	47.6%	30.7%
Poverty Rate for People 18 to 59	19.2%	9.8%	25.4%	19.3%
Poverty Rate for People 60+	12.7%	6.4%	19.8%	15.2%

Table 6 – The Poverty Intersection of Race and Age: Memphis city

Memphis city				
2018	Overall	Non-Hispanic White	Black	Hispanic or Latino
Population Size	635,844	153,217	420,403	44,008
Median Household Income	\$ 37,199	\$ 60,044	\$ 30,666	\$ 35,213
Mean Household Income	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Percent Mean Household Income Larger than Median Household Income	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Overall Poverty Rate	27.80%	11.80%	33.80%	28.80%
Child (Under 18) Poverty Rate	44.90%	10.4%	52.4%	38.9%
Poverty Rate for People 18 to 64	23.40%	13.2%	27.6%	21.2%
Poverty Rate for People 65+	15.80%	8.7%	20.6%	36.2%

Table 7 – The Poverty Intersection of Race and Age: Memphis Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA)

Memphis, TN-MS-AR MSA				
2018	Overall	Non-Hispanic White	Non-Hispanic Black	Hispanic or Latino
Population Size	1,323,445	569,950	626,263	75,837
Median Household Income	\$ 50,338	\$ 70,206	\$ 35,559	\$ 39,372
Mean Household Income	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Percent Mean Household Income Larger than Median Household Income	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Overall Poverty Rate	18.8%	8.9%	27.6%	23.5%
Child (Under 18) Poverty Rate	29.3%	10.5%	42.0%	30.4%
Poverty Rate for People 18 to 64	16.2%	9.0%	22.8%	18.4%
Poverty Rate for People 65+	11.4%	7.1%	18.7%	18.6%

Hispanics/Latinx

The exception to the increase in poverty is Hispanics or Latinx people. The poverty rates for Hispanics/Latinx in both the city of Memphis and Shelby County have decreased in almost 20%. This has been suggested to be the result of last year’s raids against immigrants, resulting in a low response rate to the Census by this population. However, a closer examination reveals that the total number of Hispanics has actually increased in Shelby County, while the Hispanic population in poverty has decreased. The largest percent of Hispanics is not in the city of Memphis proper, however, but in Shelby County. The authors take this to mean that Hispanics overall are doing better financially in the Memphis area, but they are moving to the suburban areas (such as Germantown and Collierville) when their income increases. Alternatively, more educated Hispanics may be moving into the area.

Why are Hispanics moving to the suburban areas of Memphis (outside of the city)? One speculation has to do with education. The authors have observed over years of research and experience that Hispanic families are very interested in education, very involved with schools, and very invested in providing a good education to their children. As a result, Hispanic families are more likely to move to areas with good schools, particularly as their incomes increase and they are able to afford to do so.

Table 8 – Hispanics by the Numbers

Hispanic Population	Memphis City		Shelby County	
	2017	2018	2017	2018
Total	49,317	44,008	58,418	60,062
Above Poverty	32,908	31,317	40,814	45,625
Below Poverty	16,409	12,691	17,604	14,437

COMPARING MEMPHIS

Poverty Rankings

In 2018, Memphis continued in second place in both overall poverty and child poverty among large cities with populations greater than 500,000. This, however, does not mean that Memphis is doing well or even “less bad” as the poverty rate increased for most groups in Memphis and in Shelby County. More concerning, the increase in poverty in Memphis bucks the national trend of declining poverty. Is Memphis the “canary in the coal mine”?

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 Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSA) 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 MSA 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.

Rankings provide the necessary context to understand poverty rates. A low poverty rate that is still higher than other similar populations is not necessarily a good thing; and a high poverty rate when examined in the context of other populations may indicate that the city is performing better than others. In 2019 (from the 2018 Census), Memphis does not appear to have moved vis-à-vis other cities, suggesting the intractable nature of Memphis poverty.

Note: Rankings for MSAs are not provided this year due to Census constraints. Last year, there were 53 MSAs with populations over 1,000,000 and 107 MSAs with populations over 500,000. This year, the authors include 36 cities with populations greater than 500,000, and 120 cities with populations greater than 200,000, to roughly correspond to the largest MSA’s. While this is far from exact, it does allow for comparisons.

Table 9 – Memphis’ Rank in Poverty Rates

Memphis		2017		2018		
		Poverty Rate	Poverty Rank	Poverty Rate	Poverty Rank	Rank Change
Among Cities with Populations Greater than 500,000 (36 Cities)	Overall	24.6%	4 th	27.8%	2 nd	-2
	Under 18	39.0%	2 nd	44.9%	2 nd	---
Among Cities with Populations Greater than 200,000 (120 Cities)	Overall	17.1%	6 th	27.8%	5 th	-1
	Under 18	27.1%	6 th	44.9%	4 th	-2

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

Highest Poverty Rates Rank 1		2017		2018	
		Rank 1	Poverty Rate	Rank 1	Poverty Rate
Among Cities with Populations Greater than 500,000 (34 Cities)	Overall	Detroit City, Michigan	34.5%	Detroit City, Michigan	33.4%
	Under 18	Detroit City, Michigan	48.2%	Detroit City, Michigan	47.35
Among Cities with Populations Greater than 200,000 (120 Cities)	Overall	Detroit City, Michigan	34.5%	Detroit City, Michigan	33.4%
	Under 18	Detroit City, Michigan	48.2%	Detroit City, Michigan	47.35

Table 11 – Top Ten Large Cities in Overall Poverty

Cities with Populations Greater than 500,000 (36 Cities) 2018	2018 Overall Poverty Rank	2018 Overall Poverty Rate
Detroit city, Michigan	1	33.4%
Memphis city, Tennessee	2	27.8%
Milwaukee city, Wisconsin	3	24.9%
Philadelphia city, Pennsylvania	4	24.5%
Fresno city, California	5	24.1%
Tucson city, Arizona	6	21.9%
Houston city, Texas	7	20.4%
El Paso city, Texas	8	20.1%
San Antonio city, Texas	9	20.0%
Columbus city, Ohio	10	19.9%

Table 12 – Top Ten Large Cities in Child Poverty

Cities with Populations Greater than 500,000 (36 Cities) 2018	2018 Child Poverty Rank	2018 Child Poverty Rate
Detroit city, Michigan	1	47.3%
Memphis city, Tennessee	2	44.9%
Milwaukee city, Wisconsin	3	35.5%
Philadelphia city, Pennsylvania	4	34.6%
Fresno city, California	5	34.3%
Houston city, Texas	6	32.7%
Columbus city, Ohio	7	29.9%
El Paso city, Texas	8	29.8%
San Antonio city, Texas	9	29.5%
Nashville-Davidson metropolitan government (balance), Tennessee	10	27.9%

THE RACIALIZATION OF POVERTY

The Relationship between Poverty and Race

It has now been observed for several years that the poverty rate among non-Hispanic Whites is lower in Shelby County than in Tennessee or the nation as a whole. Poverty among non-Hispanic Whites is not as high as for all other groups. The poor in Memphis tend to be minorities. The poverty rates for Blacks and Latinos (although decreasing for Latinos) are higher than the overall poverty rate, and poverty rates for minorities are higher in every age category than poverty rates for non-Hispanic Whites.

The Poverty Rate and Rank for Non-Hispanic Whites

It is very interesting to note that while Memphis ranks second in poverty among large cities (population greater than 500,000) and 5th when including cities with over 200,000 population, when the rate for non-Hispanic Whites is considered by itself, Memphis is positioned much lower in the list, ranking 49th among 120 cities with over 200,000 people metro areas. The differences between the poverty rates of minority groups and non-Hispanic Whites are striking. Even though poverty rates increased for most every group in Memphis (except Hispanics), the rank of non-Hispanic white poverty in Memphis actually improved. Memphis will not be able to become the first-class city it could become while racial disparities continue.

Table 13 – Comparison of Poverty Rates and Poverty Trends for non-Hispanic Whites Only and Blacks Only

Memphis non-Hispanic Whites Only	2018			
	Overall Poverty Rate	Overall Poverty Rank	non-Hispanic White Poverty Rate	non-Hispanic White Poverty Rank
Among Cities with Populations Greater than 500,000 (36 Cities)	27.8%	2 th	13.4%	15 th
Among Cities with Populations Greater than 200,000 (120 Cities)	27.8%	5 th	13.4%	49th

Figures 3-4 – Comparison of Poverty Rates and Poverty Trends for non-Hispanic Whites Only and Blacks Only

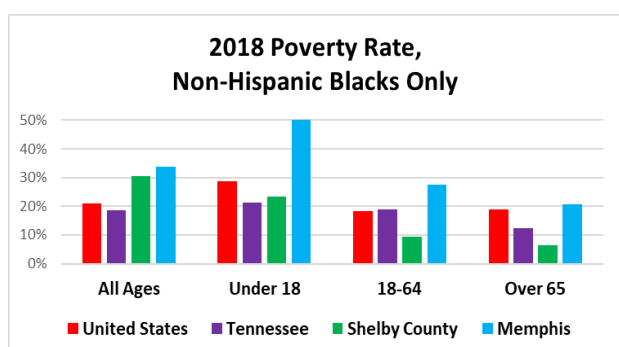
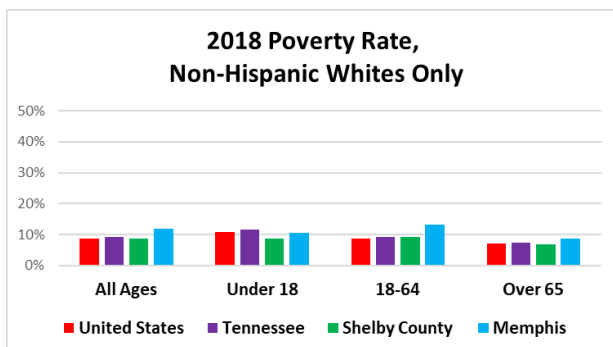
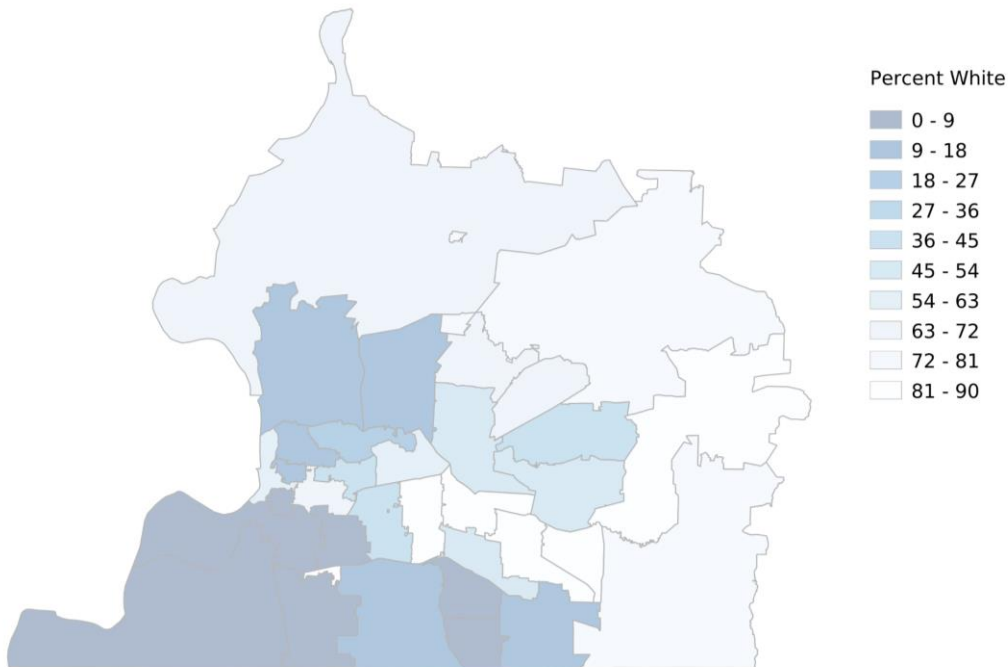
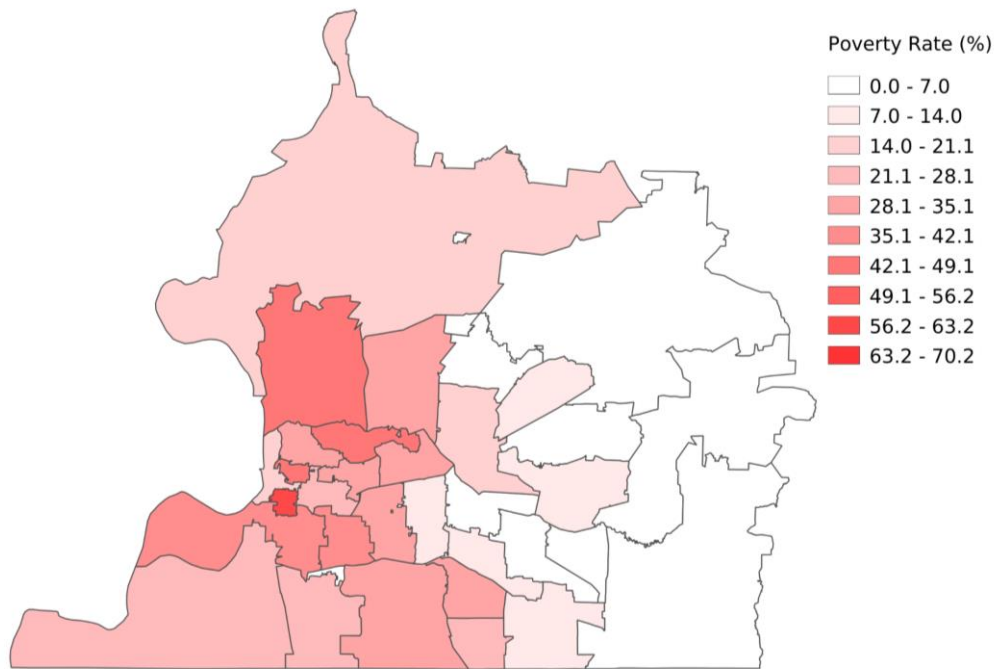


Table 14 – Poverty Rates and Racial Composition of Memphis Zip Codes

Zip Code	Percent White	Percent Minority	Poverty Rate	Poverty Rank
38002	73.0%	27.0%	5.1%	28
38016	44.6%	55.5%	5.8%	26
38017	74.4%	25.6%	4.4%	31
38018	53.0%	47.0%	9.9%	22
38028	87.9%	12.1%	2.8%	32
38053	70.7%	29.3%	15.3%	20
38054	72.3%	27.7%	0.0%	34
38103	57.4%	42.6%	17.7%	18
38104	67.8%	32.2%	22.4%	16
38105	12.7%	87.3%	48.1%	2
38106	3.2%	96.8%	41.9%	5
38107	16.2%	83.8%	32.1%	9
38108	26.8%	73.2%	45.3%	3
38109	2.4%	97.6%	25.6%	15
38111	43.2%	56.8%	28.3%	13
38112	38.0%	62.0%	28.6%	12
38114	5.8%	94.2%	37.1%	6
38115	8.4%	91.6%	31.4%	10
38116	4.4%	95.6%	27.8%	14
38117	84.8%	15.2%	9.2%	24
38118	11.1%	88.9%	34.6%	7
38119	51.0%	49.0%	10.5%	21
38120	86.7%	13.3%	5.3%	27
38122	59.5%	40.5%	32.2%	8
38125	16.8%	83.2%	9.6%	23
38126	4.0%	96.0%	61.0%	1
38127	10.5%	89.5%	43.2%	4
38128	16.5%	83.5%	29.4%	11
38133	69.4%	30.6%	8.1%	25
38134	45.7%	54.3%	15.8%	19
38135	65.6%	34.4%	5.1%	29
38138	87.4%	12.6%	2.8%	33
38139	90.2%	9.8%	5.0%	30
38141	7.6%	92.4%	22.3%	17

Figures 5-6 – Mapping the Racialization of Poverty in Memphis



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

Minorities suffer greater rates of poverty than non-Hispanic Whites in Memphis and Shelby County.

Trends in Poverty Rates

The poverty rates for non-Hispanic Whites are better in Shelby County than for the same group in Tennessee or the United States, while the rates for Blacks are generally 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 population in the state (in contrast to the city of Memphis) is White, it is clear that the driver for poverty in the state is White poverty.

Poverty Trends – Has Poverty Gotten Better?

Since 2005, poverty rates in Memphis rose steadily and the 2008 economic crisis resulted in increased poverty rates for all racial and age groups at that time, and although declining last year, have increased again. It is important to note that some groups were able to recover much sooner and are doing better overall, clearly an indicator of the pervasive disparities in the region. The general picture in Memphis in 2018, from the 2017 Census estimate, is not encouraging, but it is too soon to tell whether this is a statistical anomaly or it is a trend. 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 very 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 very 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.

The child poverty rate is still so high that almost half the children live in poverty and racial disparities continue glaringly

Figure 7 – Trends in Poverty Rates by Age, Memphis

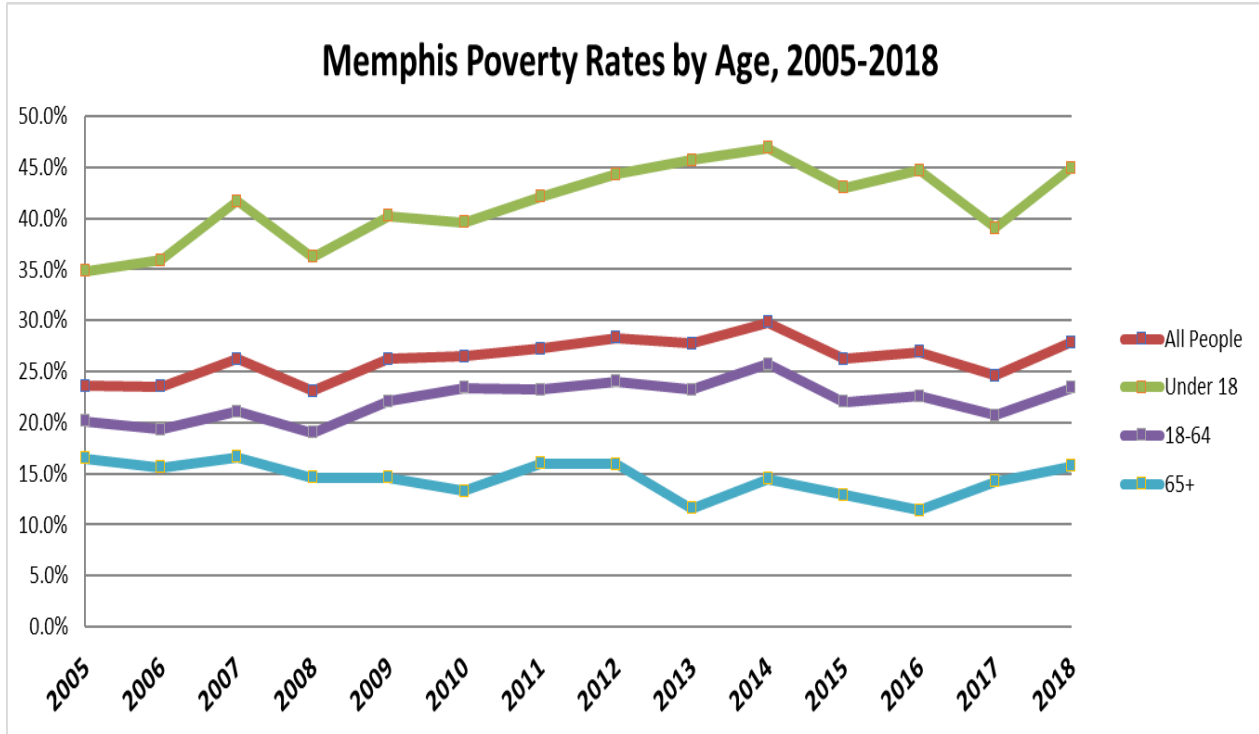


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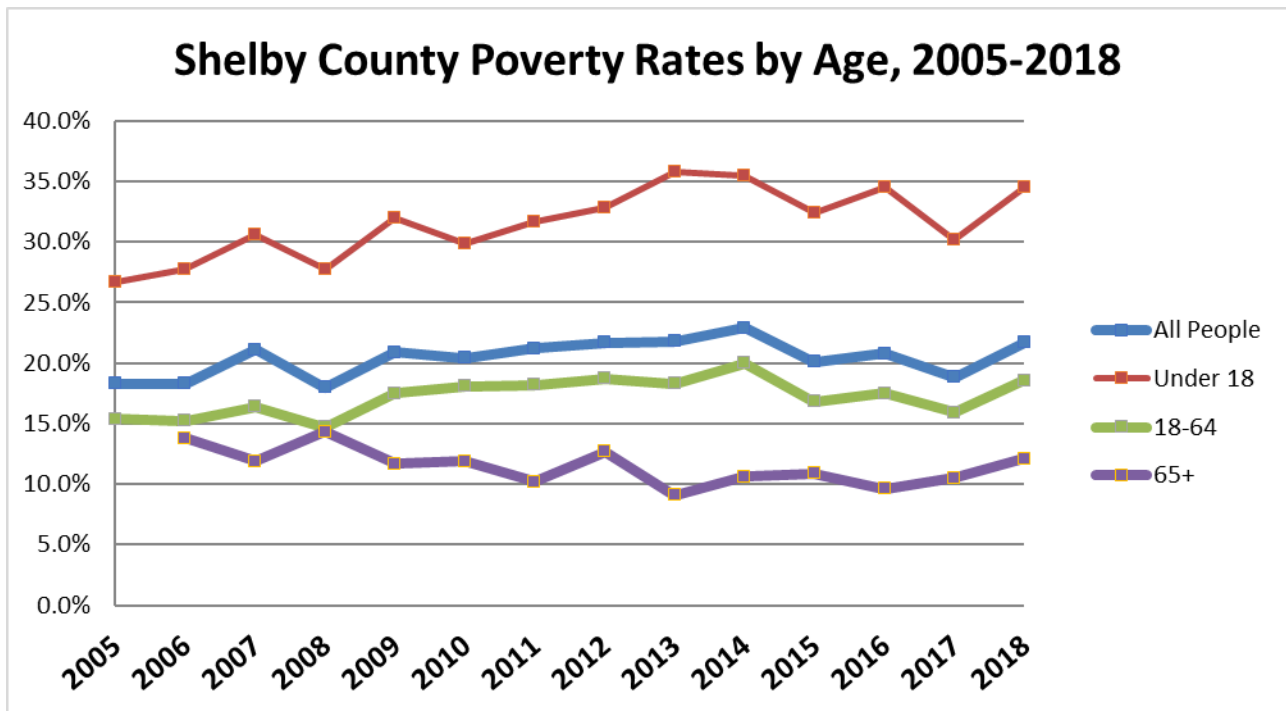


Figure 9 – Trends in Poverty Rates by Race, Memphis

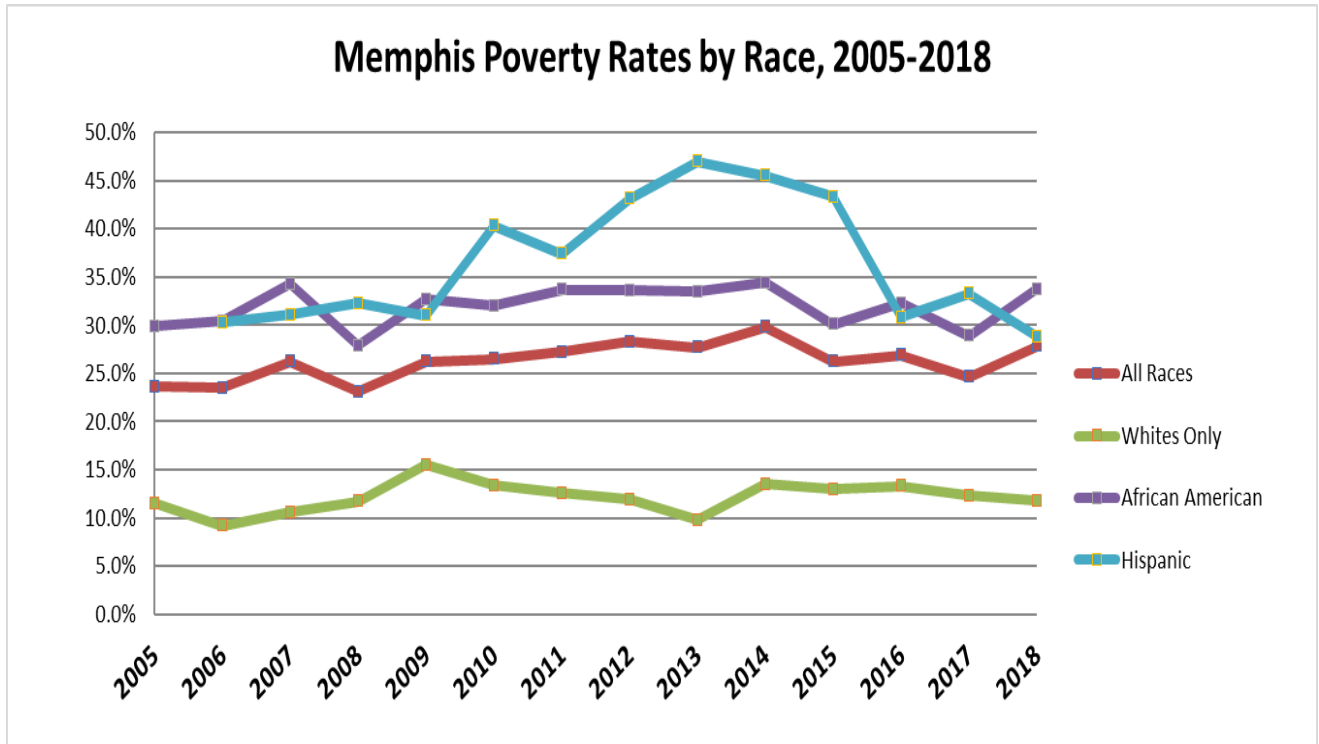
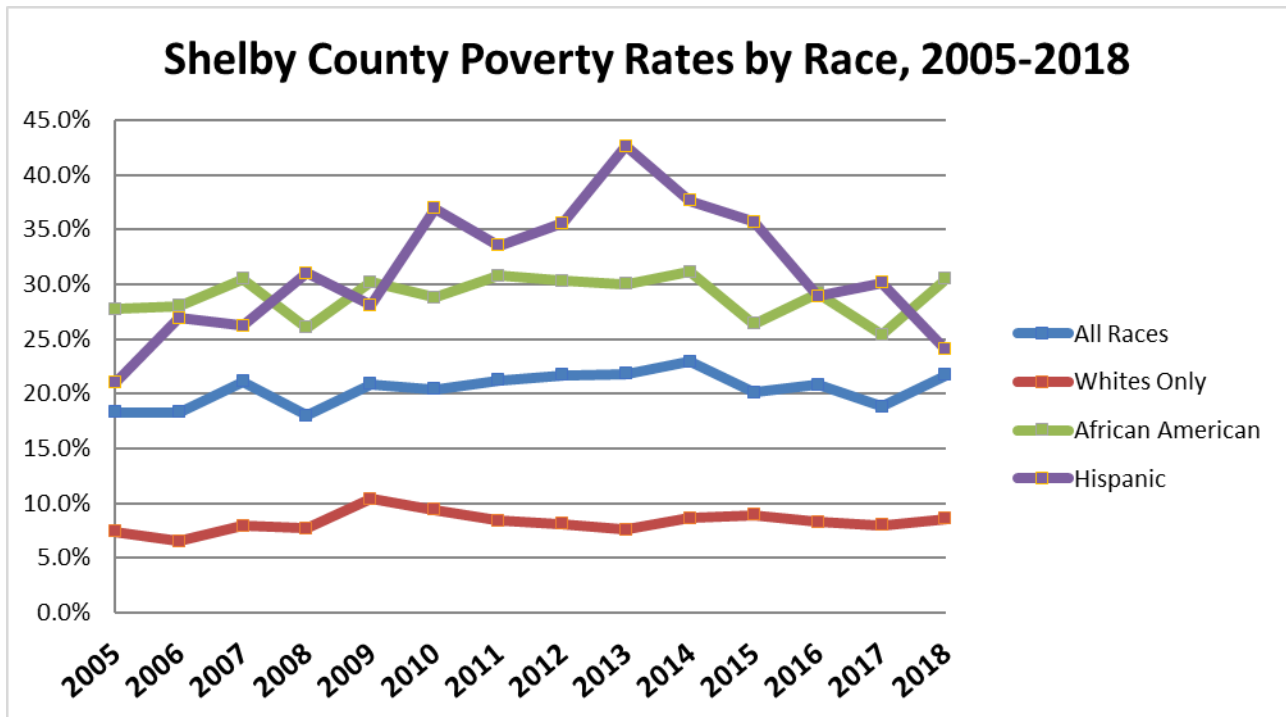


Figure 10 – Trends in Poverty Rates by Race, Shelby County



A community cannot have such high percent of people in poverty without affecting everyone. The data point to this fact very clearly: 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 Associate Professor of Social Work at the University of Memphis, where she teaches Social Welfare Policy, Evaluative Research, and Poverty. Dr. Delavega is an advisor to the Memphis Interfaith Coalition for Action and Hope (MICAHA), Slingshot Memphis, and the Pink Palace Museum. She also serves on the board of JustCity, Inc., an organization dedicated to bringing justice to those accused of crimes in Shelby County, and served as Associate Director of the Hooks Institute for Social Change at the University of Memphis from 2015 to 2019. She is the author of 22 peer reviewed articles and of the Memphis Poverty Fact Sheet, updated yearly. In collaboration with the National Civil Rights Museum, she is the author of the 2018 Memphis Poverty Report: Memphis Since MLK. She is the 2016 recipient of the Early Career Research Award (ECRA) from the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Memphis, the 2018 Influencing Social Policy' Faculty Research Award, and the 2019 recipient of the University of Memphis' Excellence in Engaged Scholarship Award.

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, serving as a member of the Temple Israel delegation to Memphis Interfaith Coalition for Action and Hope (MICAHA), and as a technical lead for the Economic Equity Workgroup. During his few moments of free time, he volunteers with CodeCrew, teaching disadvantaged youth the magic of technical expertise.

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

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Sources:

Data obtained from the US Bureau of the Census, September 26, 27, and 28, 2019.

All Data except Latino (Hispanic): 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, and 2018 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 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates (US Bureau of the Census); DP05, 2018 1-Year Estimates (US Bureau of the Census); B17001, 2018 1-Year Estimates (US Bureau of the Census); B01003, 2018 1-Year Estimates (US Bureau of the Census); US24PR, 2018 1-Year Estimates (US Bureau of the Census); Latino (Hispanic) Data: 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, & 2011 American Community Survey 3-Year Estimates and 2016 5-Year Estimates (US Bureau of the Census).