

# Memphis, Tennessee: A portrait of inequality and social crisis in the southern US

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Memphis, Tennessee bears the dubious distinction of being number one in child poverty among large cities in the United States. In 2017, a staggering 44.7 percent of children were officially living in poverty, up from 44.1 percent in 2016. Prior to the onset of the Great Recession a decade ago, the city's child poverty rate stood at 26.7 percent.

In Memphis and the surrounding Shelby County area, approximately 55,000 kids live in households where they may not get enough to eat, have a stable place to sleep, or have access to essentials like running water, electricity, or transportation.

This is a burden that drags on their health and learning ability, much research has shown. Poverty on such a mass scale reverberates across generations in the form of lack of education, elevated crime rates and other social ills.

Memphis, population 652,000, has long been a city stricken with poverty and inequality. It has regularly ranked among the worst in the nation for child poverty and other metrics of public health. Yet, its ills bear similarity to those plaguing once heavily industrialized cities across the US like Baltimore, Detroit, or St. Louis.

Located along the Mississippi River in far western Tennessee, Memphis is a vital shipping and logistics hub in the central southern US. The city has long served as a critical nexus for air, water, ground and rail transport, with hundreds of billions of dollars' worth of goods shipped through the city each year. Memphis International Airport is the world's second busiest cargo airport after Hong Kong, according to Airports Council International rankings.

As a major logistics hub, many warehousing companies are also located in the city. Global shipping giant FedEx, which posted profits of nearly \$3 billion in 2017, is headquartered in Memphis.

The city's role in rail shipping and trade dates back to before the Civil War, when the slave trade and key agricultural commodities were concentrated there. The city became a flashpoint in the war after Tennessee seceded from the US in 1861; it was captured by Union forces the following year and held until the end of the war.

The city remains prominent in popular memory as playing an important role in the Civil Rights struggles of the 1960s, and as the site of the assassination of the movement's leader, Martin Luther King, Jr. Fifty years after King's death, Memphis is gripped by appalling inequality and the economic segregation of an impoverished mostly African American population in the inner city from relatively better-off suburbs dominated by a tiny wealthy elite in Shelby County.

## Poverty and the public schools

In tandem with the worsening of child poverty is the declining quality of public education in Memphis. Of the 82 schools currently ranked in the bottom 5 percent in Tennessee, 42 of them are in Shelby County. While many schools in the Shelby County Schools district have improved beyond the 5 percent mark, another 38 schools are hovering just above that.

Impoverished children depend on the public schools for basic resources, especially regular meals. Without enough food, students cannot focus in the classroom or do well on tests. Hunger causes behavioral and developmental problems. But the link between poverty and poor school performance goes deeper than hunger. Housing and transportation instability also creates conditions for poorer school attendance, less homework completion, and less family engagement in education.

"This is pretty brutal for children," Elena Delavega, assistant professor of social work at the University of Memphis told the *Commercial Appeal*. "Children who grow up in poverty have increased stress. Stress increases cortisol," a hormone that triggers higher blood-sugar levels, weight gain, sleep problems, and heart disease. Over the long term, stress caused by poverty shortens a person's life.

Schools located in impoverished neighborhoods fare the

worst due to low tax revenue, poor infrastructure, teacher strain, and more vulnerable student populations in need of extra care. These circumstances create a perfect storm for the encroachment of private and charter school operations, which syphon off public funding, and the breakup of the centralized Shelby County Schools district which includes Memphis schools.

Following passage of a state law lifting the ban on establishment of new school districts, the six incorporated suburbs in the county each voted in July 2013 to establish their own independent municipal school district. As a result, as of the start of the 2014 school year, the six incorporated cities in Shelby County (other than Memphis) are each served by separate school districts.

The decimation of the education system poses an immediate problem in terms of poorer graduation rates leading to the explosion of young people who are neither working nor in school. At 21.6 percent, Memphis has the highest percentage of “disconnected youths,” according to a 2017 report from 901 Bloc Squad, an anti-gang intervention program in the city. Many teenagers are left socially isolated by parents who must work night shifts or long hours in low-wage occupations, particularly in the warehousing industry.

According to the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, there are neighborhoods which have homicide rates that are 6 times the national average.

## **Blight and poverty**

In the community of Whitehaven, which consists of 636 single-family homes, 27 duplexes, 29 apartment complexes, and 15 vacant lots, there is an 11 percent blight rate according to the *Memphis Flyer*. In other words, more than one in ten dwellings in the neighborhood are unoccupied.

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While much of the city’s housing stock is distressed, Memphis also bears the distinction of being the worst city in the country for renter evictions. “Of the 50 largest metros in the nation,” states *Apartmentlist.com* in its 2017 Renter Survey, “evictions are most prevalent in Memphis, with 6.1 percent of users reporting a prior eviction.” The survey recorded nearly 13,000 reports of evictions across the city last year.

The rental site noted that factors most strongly correlated with eviction rates were “the rate of foreclosures from 2007 to 2008, during the height of the foreclosure crisis,” and “current poverty rates.”

A 2015 study by the Economic Innovation Group found fully 68 percent of the population was living in economically distressed areas, the worst rate in the country. Memphis ranked worst in Tennessee in 2017 for “crime rates, employment growth, access to restaurants and attractions, educational attainment and housing affordability,” according to the *Commercial Appeal*.

The lack of decent food, or “food deserts,” is a substantial aggravating factor in poor health outcomes for children in poverty. Earlier this year, the supermarket chain Kroger closed two stores in impoverished locations. Large numbers of people in these areas have no reliable transportation and getting to decent food is an arduous task.

Along with child poverty rates, other poverty statistics are out of proportion with the rest of the nation as well. The poverty rate for the black population is 32.3 percent, which is a third higher and the national average. Poverty for the non-Hispanic white population is 13.3 percent, which, while far lower than that of their black counterparts, has risen over the past few years and remains several percentage points higher than the national average.

Taken together, the social situation is a house of cards stacked against the working class. At the other pole of society, however, wealth and power has been increasingly concentrated as corporations in Memphis rake in billions of dollars. If it is a leader in poverty rates, Memphis is also a leader in ever growing levels of social inequality.

Indeed, as schools are underfunded and working class neighborhoods are left to rot, the city has awarded online shopping behemoth Amazon a \$15 million tax abatement meant to entice the company to locate a regional “fulfillment center” shipping facility in Memphis, which would create 600 poverty-wage jobs in Shelby County. Additionally, the city council has offered tens of millions in tax incentives in hopes of luring the company’s second headquarters.



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