

VOLUME 13 MEMPHIS POVERTY FACT SHEET 2024

The 2024 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 2023 American Community Survey Released in September 2024, and previous datasets.

*Memphis and
Shelby County*



2024 Memphis Poverty Fact Sheet (Data from 2023 and previous ACS)

Who are the Memphis Poor?

The city of Memphis has a poverty rate of 22.6%. Child poverty is 36.3%, while the poverty rate for people over age 65 is still the lowest of any age group at 16.1%. The poverty rate for older adults has increased since last year. The poverty rate in the City of Memphis for Blacks is 27.1%, for Hispanics/Latinos is 26.0%, and for Whites 8.9%. These represent increases in poverty for Blacks and for Hispanics/Latinos, but a decrease in poverty for Whites. In the Memphis Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA), which includes parts of Tennessee, Arkansas, and Mississippi, the overall poverty rate is 16.5%, child poverty is 25.8%, poverty for people over age 65 is 12.9%, Black poverty is 24.3%, White poverty is 8.1%, and Hispanic or Latino poverty is 18.4%. Poverty rates for almost all groups are increasing, except for non-Hispanic Whites.

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

2023 Poverty Rate	Overall	Under 18	18-64	Over 65	Non-Hispanic White	Black	Hispanic/Latino	Asian
United States	12.5%	16.0%	11.5%	11.3%	9.4%	20.8%	16.6%	9.9%
Tennessee	14.0%	19.7%	12.5%	12.2%	11.5%	22.6%	20.5%	7.7%
Shelby County	17.7%	28.0%	14.5%	12.9%	6.7%	24.4%	20.8%	10.1%
Memphis city, Tennessee	22.6%	36.3%	18.3%	16.1%	8.9%	27.1%	26.0%	17.8%
Memphis, TN-MS-AR Metro	16.5%	25.8%	13.6%	12.9%	8.1%	24.3%	18.4%	9.0%

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 non-Hispanic Whites, for whom poverty rates are higher in Tennessee than in the United States, Shelby County, and the Memphis MSA. Poverty rates in Memphis are higher in 2023 than in the United States and in Tennessee, which is usual. 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.

New in 2023

Poverty has increased since last year. This is true for most groups, including children and minorities, but not for Whites in Memphis or Shelby County. Poverty for Non-Hispanic Whites have fallen since 2022. It also appears that the population size of Non-Hispanic Whites in the city of Memphis has dropped more than for other groups, suggesting that those Non-Hispanic Whites who left were those in poverty.

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. Structural disparities based on race seemed to have accelerated in 2023, and this is particularly egregious for minority children.

Figure 1 – Percent of the Population in Poverty

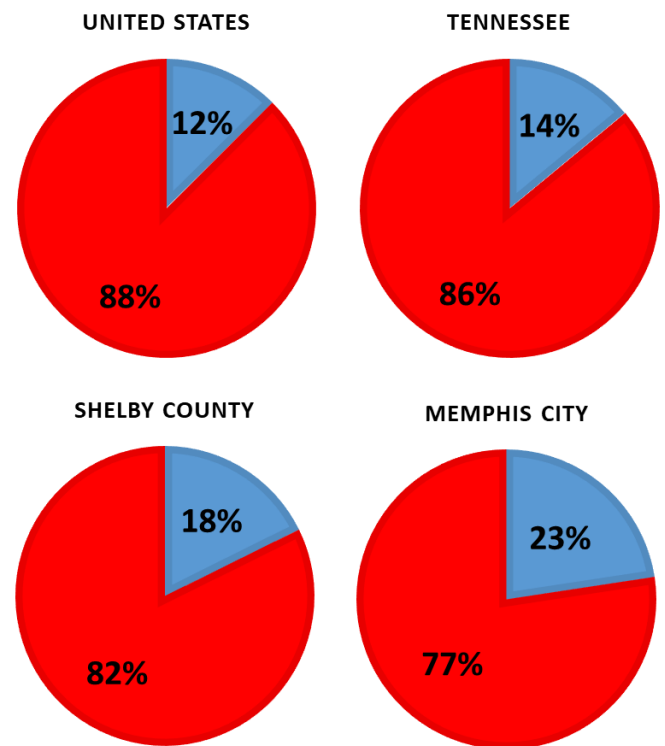


Table 2 – Percent Change in Poverty Rates in Memphis and Shelby County

	Overall			White			Black			Hispanic		
	2022	2023	% Change	2022	2023	% Change	2022	2023	% Change	2022	2023	% Change
Memphis	21.4%	22.6%	5.6%	12.2%	8.9%	-27.0%	24.7%	27.1%	9.7%	22.7%	26.0%	14.5%
Shelby County	16.5%	17.7%	7.3%	8.1%	6.7%	-17.3%	21.7%	24.4%	12.4%	19.4%	20.8%	7.2%

	Overall			Child			Over 65		
	2022	2023	% Change	2022	2023	% Change	2022	2023	% Change
Memphis	21.4%	22.6%	5.6%	32.7%	36.3%	11.0%	15.7%	16.1%	2.5%
Shelby County	16.5%	17.7%	7.3%	23.7%	28.0%	18.1%	12.8%	12.9%	0.8%

Figure 2 – Percent Change in Poverty Rates in Memphis and Shelby County 2022-2023

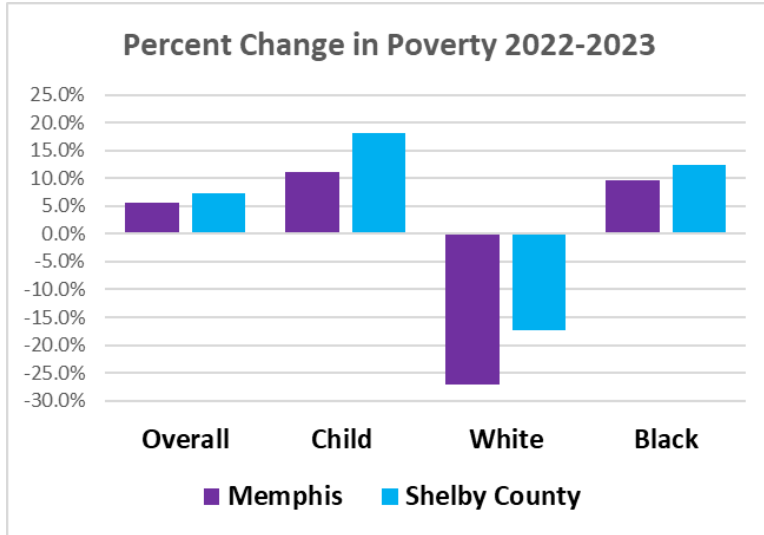
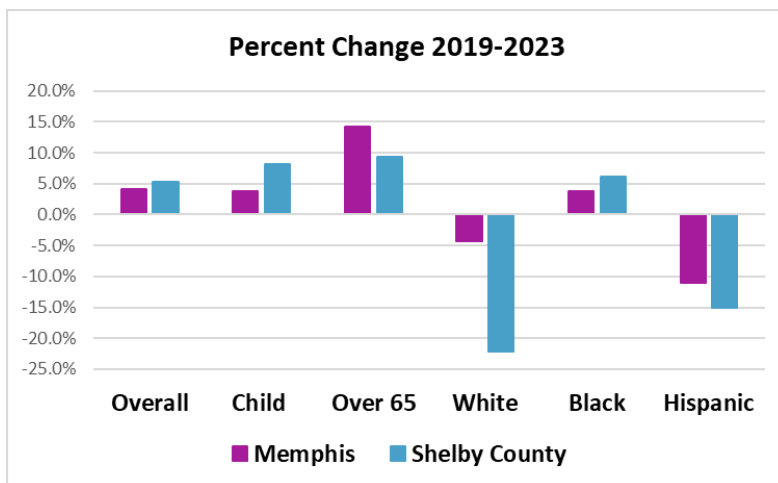


Table 3 – Percent Change in Poverty Rates in Memphis and Shelby County, 2019-2023

	Overall			White			Black			Hispanic		
	2019	2023	% Change	2019	2023	% Change	2019	2023	% Change	2019	2023	% Change
Memphis	21.7%	22.6%	4.1%	9.3%	8.9%	-4.3%	26.1%	27.1%	3.8%	29.2%	26.0%	-11.0%
Shelby County	16.8%	17.7%	5.4%	8.6%	6.7%	-22.1%	23.0%	24.4%	6.1%	24.5%	20.8%	-15.1%

	Overall			Child			Over 65		
	2019	2023	% Change	2019	2023	% Change	2019	2023	% Change
Memphis	21.7%	22.6%	4.1%	35.0%	36.3%	3.7%	14.1%	16.1%	14.2%
Shelby County	16.8%	17.7%	5.4%	25.9%	28.0%	8.1%	11.8%	12.9%	9.3%

Figure 3 – Percent Change in Poverty 2019-2023



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

Memphis and Shelby County are doing worse than in 2019 for the most part, with the unsurprising exception of Non-Hispanic White poverty, which has decreased significantly, and the encouraging exception of Hispanics, who have also seen their poverty rates fall both in Memphis and in Shelby County since before the COVID-19 Pandemic.

DETAILED POVERTY TABLES

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

United States						
2023	Overall	Non-Hispanic White	Black	Latino or Hispanic	Asian	Native American
Population Size	327,076,658	187,103,200	39,083,010	63,927,863	19,639,711	3,241,972
Median Household Income	\$77,719	\$83,121	\$53,927	\$69,467	\$111,817	\$61,061
Overall Poverty Rate	12.5%	9.4%	20.8%	16.6%	9.9%	20.6%
Child (Under 18) Poverty Rate	16.0%	10.0%	29.3%	21.6%	10.0%	26.7%
Poverty Rate for People 18-64	11.5%	9.4%	17.9%	14.1%	9.1%	18.6%
Poverty Rate for People 65+	11.3%	9.1%	19.3%	18.2%	13.5%	18.3%

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

Tennessee					
2023	Overall	Non-Hispanic White	Black	Latino or Hispanic	Asian
Population Size	6,969,478	4,967,916	1,050,385	520,805	127,513
Median Household Income	\$67,631	\$72,268	\$50,060	\$63,574	\$101,642
Overall Poverty Rate	14.0%	11.5%	22.6%	20.5%	7.7%
Child (Under 18) Poverty Rate	19.7%	14.3%	34.8%	27.7%	5.6%
Poverty Rate for People 18-64	12.5%	10.8%	18.2%	16.5%	8.6%
Poverty Rate for People 65+	12.2%	10.9%	20.6%	15.0%	5.7%

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

Shelby County, Tennessee					
2023	Overall	Non-Hispanic White	Black	Latino or Hispanic	Asian
Population Size	894,598	291,385	468,191	78,744	24,358
Median Household Income	\$62,413	\$90,183	\$48,205	\$63,503	\$103,532
Overall Poverty Rate	17.7%	6.7%	24.4%	20.8%	10.1%
Child (Under 18) Poverty Rate	28.0%	5.2%	39.2%	25.7%	N/A
Poverty Rate for People 18-64	14.5%	6.7%	19.2%	17.8%	N/A
Poverty Rate for People 65+	12.9%	8.1%	18.8%	11.0%	N/A

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

City of Memphis, Tennessee					
2023	Overall	Non-Hispanic White	Black	Latino or Hispanic	Asian
Population Size	605,856	130,127	383,357	58,712	13,427
Median Household Income	\$51,399	\$68,961	\$42,329	\$54,880	\$81,525
Overall Poverty Rate	22.6%	8.9%	27.1%	26.0%	17.8%
Child (Under 18) Poverty Rate	36.3%	10.4%	43.0%	33.1%	N/A
Poverty Rate for People 18-64	18.3%	12.3%	21.4%	21.7%	N/A
Poverty Rate for People 65+	16.1%	11.3%	20.2%	9.0%	N/A

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

Memphis, TN-MS-AR Metro Area					
2023	Overall	Non-Hispanic White	Black	Latino or Hispanic	Asian
Population Size	1,314,150	526,918	601,319	98,503	27,230
Median Household Income	\$64,025	\$84,865	\$48,633	\$60,543	\$103,014
Overall Poverty Rate	16.5%	8.1%	24.3%	18.4%	9.0%
Child (Under 18) Poverty Rate	25.8%	7.6%	39.7%	22.2%	N/A
Poverty Rate for People 18-64	13.6%	8.0%	18.8%	16.5%	N/A
Poverty Rate for People 65+	12.9%	8.0%	19.7%	8.0%	N/A

Child Poverty is up again, and it is higher than it was in 2019. Memphis seems stuck in a cycle that hurts children the most.

COMPARING MEMPHIS

Poverty Rankings

In 2023, the Memphis Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) was edged out of first place in overall poverty by Fresno, CA, and was first place in child poverty among large MSAs with populations greater than 1,000,000. The city of Memphis had an unfortunate change in ranking among cities with populations greater than 500,000, where it is 2nd in overall poverty and 2nd in child poverty in 2023. This unfortunate change in rank also occurred among MSAs with populations greater than 500,000, where Memphis is 8th in overall poverty and 2nd in child poverty in 2023. This is a dramatic change from 2022. 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. Support for families is fundamental for a thriving community. Memphis needs the infrastructure to support all people, including affordable, dependable, and efficient public transportation.

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.

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		2022		2023			
		Poverty Rate	Poverty Rank	Poverty Rate	Poverty Rank	Rank Change	% Change
Among Cities with Populations Greater than 500,000 (37 Cities)	Overall	21.40%	5	22.6%	2	3	5.6%
	Under 18	32.70%	3	36.3%	2	1	11.0%
Among MSA with Populations Greater than 500,000 (109 MSA)	Overall	15.70%	11	16.5%	8	3	5.1%
	Under 18	22.40%	9	25.8%	2	7	15.2%
Among MSA with Populations Greater than 1,000,000 (54 MSA)	Overall	15.70%	1	16.5%	2	-1	5.1%
	Under 18	22.40%	1	25.8%	1	0	15.2%

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

Highest Poverty Rates		2022		2023	
Rank 1		Rank 1	Poverty Rate	Rank 1	Poverty Rate
Among Cities with Populations Greater than 500,000 (36 Cities)	Overall	Detroit City, Michigan	33.8%	Detroit City, Michigan	31.9%
	Under 18	Detroit City, Michigan	49.3%	Detroit City, Michigan	44.2%
Among MSA with Populations Greater than 500,000 (108 MSA)	Overall	McAllen-Edinburg-Mission, TX Metro Area	27.6%	McAllen-Edinburg-Mission, TX Metro Area	27.2%
	Under 18	McAllen-Edinburg-Mission, TX Metro Area	38.1%	McAllen-Edinburg-Mission, TX Metro Area	38.5%
Among MSA with Populations Greater than 1,000,000 (53 MSA)	Overall - TIE	New Orleans-Metairie, LA Metro Area	15.7%	Fresno, CA Metro Area	17.9%
		Memphis, TN-MS-AR Metro Area	15.7%		
	Under 18	Memphis, TN-MS-AR Metro Area	22.4%	Memphis, TN-MS-AR Metro Area	25.8%

Structural disparities based on race seemed to have accelerated in 2023, and this is particularly egregious for minority children.

Table 11 – Top Ten Large MSAs with Over 1,000,000 Population in Overall Poverty

MSA Over 1,000,000 Population (54 MSA)	Overall Poverty Rank	Percent Under Poverty, Overall
Fresno, CA Metro Area	1	17.9%
Memphis, TN-MS-AR Metro Area	2	16.5%
Tulsa, OK Metro Area	3	14.4%
Buffalo-Cheektowaga, NY Metro Area	4	14.2%
Oklahoma City, OK Metro Area	5	14.1%
Houston-Pasadena-The Woodlands, TX Metro Area	6	13.9%
Birmingham, AL Metro Area	6	13.9%
Tucson, AZ Metro Area	8	13.7%
Detroit-Warren-Dearborn, MI Metro Area	9/10	13.6%
San Antonio-New Braunfels, TX Metro Area	9/10	13.6%

Table 12 – Top Ten Large MSAs with Over 1,000,000 Population in Child Poverty

MSA Over 1,000,000 Population (54 MSA)	Child Poverty Rank	Percent Under Poverty, Child
Memphis, TN-MS-AR Metro Area	1	25.8%
Fresno, CA Metro Area	2	24.1%
Cleveland, OH Metro Area	3	19.9%
Houston-Pasadena-The Woodlands, TX Metro Area	4	19.3%
Detroit-Warren-Dearborn, MI Metro Area	4	19.3%
Buffalo-Cheektowaga, NY Metro Area	6	19.0%
Tulsa, OK Metro Area	7	18.9%
Oklahoma City, OK Metro Area	8	18.7%
Birmingham, AL Metro Area	9	18.5%
Louisville/Jefferson County, KY-IN Metro Area	10	18.4%

Note that the Memphis MSA is again first in child poverty among large MSA.

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

MSA Over 500,000 Population (109 MSA)	Overall Poverty Rank	Percent Under Poverty, Overall
McAllen-Edinburg-Mission, TX Metro Area	1	27.2%
Bakersfield-Delano, CA Metro Area	2	19.2%
El Paso, TX Metro Area	3	18.5%
New Orleans-Metairie, LA Metro Area	3	18.5%
Fresno, CA Metro Area	5	17.9%
Scranton--Wilkes-Barre, PA Metro Area	6	17.1%
Baton Rouge, LA Metro Area	6	17.1%
Memphis, TN-MS-AR Metro Area	8	16.5%
Jackson, MS Metro Area	9	15.8%
Toledo, OH Metro Area	10	15.6%

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

MSA Over 500,000 Population (109 MSA)	Child Poverty Rank	Percent Under Poverty, Child
McAllen-Edinburg-Mission, TX Metro Area	1	38.5%
Memphis, TN-MS-AR Metro Area	2	25.8%
Bakersfield-Delano, CA Metro Area	3	25.6%
New Orleans-Metairie, LA Metro Area	4	25.3%
Scranton--Wilkes-Barre, PA Metro Area	5	24.6%
El Paso, TX Metro Area	6	24.2%
Fresno, CA Metro Area	7	24.1%
Winston-Salem, NC Metro Area	8	23.8%
Albuquerque, NM Metro Area	9	21.4%
Jackson, MS Metro Area	10	21.0%
Greensboro-High Point, NC Metro Area	10	21.0%

Among MSA with more than 500,000 population, Memphis has moved up the rank, which is a terrible thing.

Table 15 – Top Ten Large Cities in Overall Poverty

Cities over 500,000 People (37 Cities)	Overall Poverty Rank	Percent Under Poverty, Overall
Detroit city, Michigan	1	31.9%
Memphis city, Tennessee	2	22.6%
Milwaukee city, Wisconsin	3	22.1%
Philadelphia city, Pennsylvania	4	20.3%
Baltimore city, Maryland	5	20.2%
Houston city, Texas	6	19.5%
Fresno city, California	6	19.5%
Tucson city, Arizona	8	18.6%
Columbus city, Ohio	9	18.3%
New York city, New York	10	18.2%

Table 16 – Top Ten Large Cities in Child Poverty

Cities over 500,000 People (37 Cities)	Child Poverty Rank	Percent Under Poverty, Child
Detroit city, Michigan	1	44.2%
Memphis city, Tennessee	2	36.3%
Milwaukee city, Wisconsin	3	32.3%
Houston city, Texas	4	28.8%
Fresno city, California	5	27.7%
Baltimore city, Maryland	6	27.2%
Louisville/Jefferson County metro government (balance), Kentucky	7	26.6%
Columbus city, Ohio	8	26.0%
Tucson city, Arizona	9	25.7%
Philadelphia city, Pennsylvania	10	25.0%

THE RACIALIZATION OF POVERTY

The Relationship between Poverty and Race

A consistent aspect to poverty in Memphis is the racial disparity that exists. Poverty 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 Latino/Hispanic (although decreasing for Latino/Hispanic) are higher than the overall poverty rate, and

poverty rates for minorities are higher in every age category than poverty rates for Whites. In 2023, even in the city of Memphis the poverty rate among non-Hispanic Whites is lower than at any other geographical level.

Figure 4 – Comparison of Overall Poverty Rates for non-Hispanic Whites Only and Blacks Only

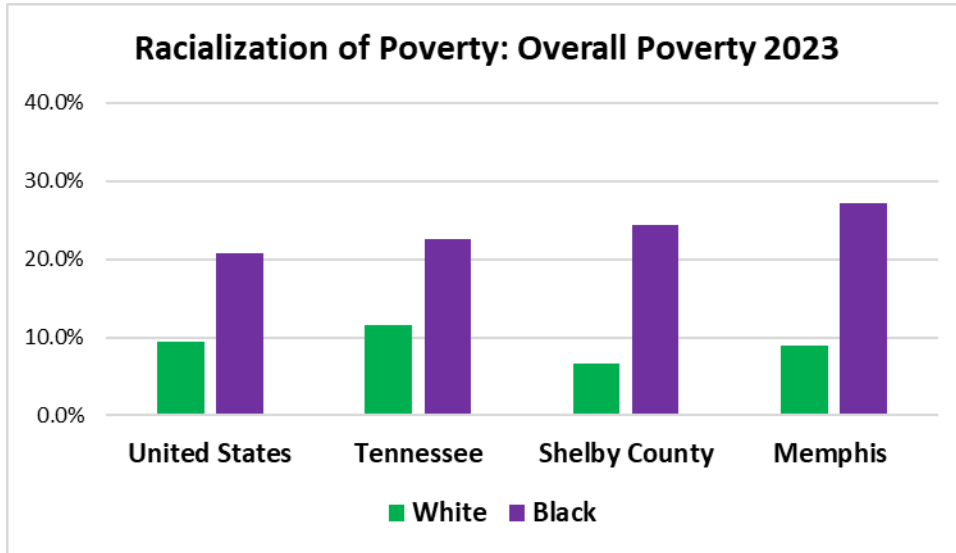
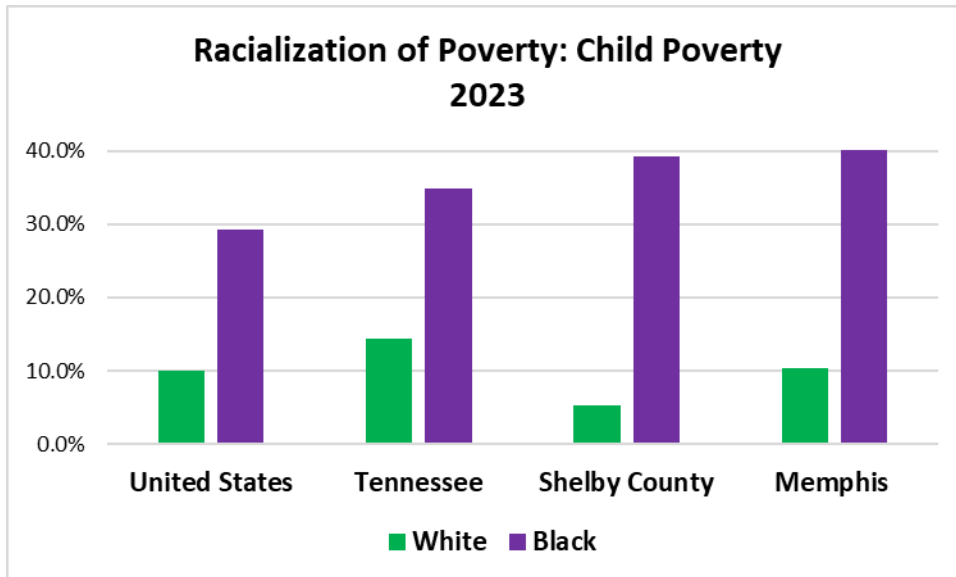


Figure 5 – Comparison of Child Poverty Rates for non-Hispanic Whites Only and Blacks Only



The Poverty Rate and Rank for Non-Hispanic Whites

It is interesting to note that while Memphis ranks second in overall poverty and first in child poverty among large MSAs (population greater than 1,000,000) and second in overall poverty and child poverty among 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 25th among 54 large MSA (population greater than 1,000,000) and 61st 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, particularly in Shelby County, are much more severe than nationally, and this is cause for great concern

Table 17– Comparison of Poverty Rates and Rankings Whites Only

Memphis	White Only					
	2021 Poverty Rate	2021 Poverty Rank	2022 Poverty Rate	2022 Poverty Rank	2023 Poverty Rate	2023 Poverty Rank
Among Cities 500,00+ Population for which data are provided (37 Cities,)	10.3%	17	12.2%	9	8.9%	22
Among MSA 500,000+ Population for which data are provided (109 MSA)	N/A	N/A	8.2%	72	8.1%	61
Among MSA 1,000,000+ Population for which data are provided (54 MSA)	N/A	N/A	8.2%	31	8.1%	25

Table 18 – Comparison of Poverty Rates for Non-Hispanic Whites and Blacks for Various Demographics and Locations

2023	All Ages		Under 18		18-64		Over 65	
	Non-Hispanic Whites Only	Blacks Only	Non-Hispanic Whites Only	Blacks Only	Non-Hispanic Whites Only	Blacks Only	Non-Hispanic Whites Only	Blacks Only
United States	9.4%	20.8%	10.0%	29.3%	9.4%	17.9%	9.1%	19.3%
Tennessee	11.5%	22.6%	14.3%	34.8%	10.8%	18.2%	10.9%	20.6%
Shelby County	6.7%	24.4%	5.2%	39.2%	6.7%	19.2%	8.1%	18.8%
Memphis	8.9%	27.1%	10.4%	43.0%	12.3%	21.4%	11.3%	20.2%

MEMPHIS ZIP CODES

The maps in Figures 9 and 10 illustrate the segregated nature of Shelby County, and the association between race and poverty. Note that Memphis Zip Code data and maps come from the 2022 Census. This is the result of U.S. Bureau of the Census release schedule. For the purposes of the Memphis Poverty Fact Sheet, Zip Code data and maps are a year behind larger geographies.

Figure 6 – Mapping the Racialization of Poverty in Memphis – Percent Poverty in Memphis Zip Codes

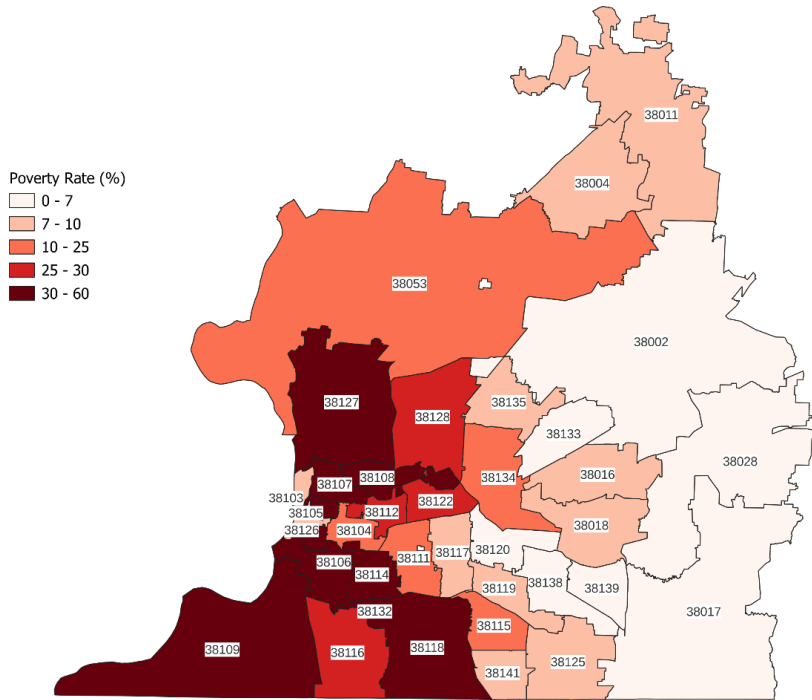


Figure 7 – Mapping the Racialization of Poverty in Memphis – Percent White in Memphis Zip Codes

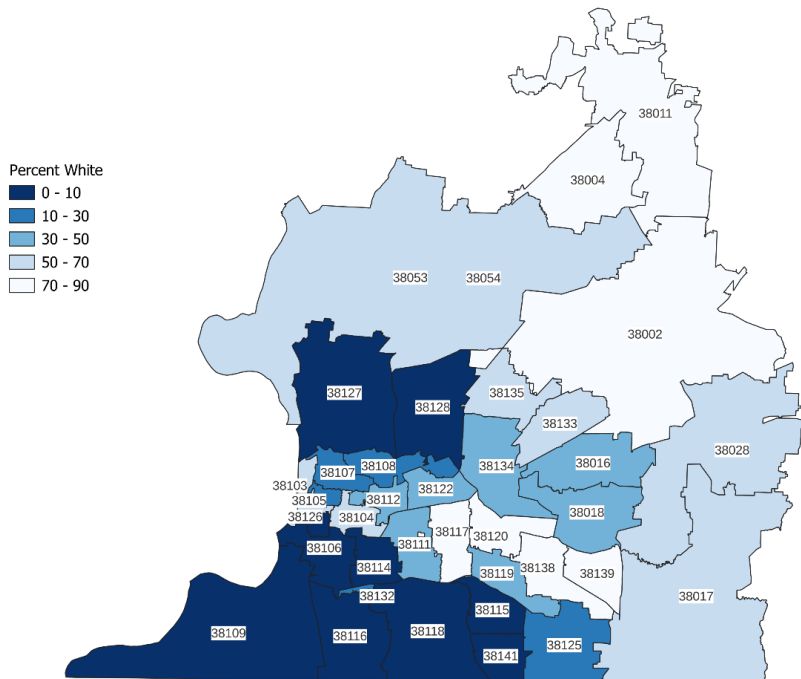


Table 19 – Poverty Rates and Racial Composition of Memphis Zip Codes

ZIP CODE	Population	Percent White	Percent Black	Percent Hispanic/Latino	Overall Poverty	Poverty Rank	Child Poverty	Child Poverty Rank
38002	42797	73.0%	18.7%	3.7%	5.6%	30	5.0%	31
38004	11604	81.2%	11.5%	3.1%	7.5%	27	10.4%	24
38011	10337	80.0%	11.1%	5.0%	8.7%	23	9.0%	27
38016	46394	33.0%	52.2%	5.1%	9.3%	21	11.0%	22
38017	55570	70.0%	10.4%	4.2%	2.7%	34	1.9%	33
38018	38338	40.1%	46.0%	6.2%	9.9%	19	14.4%	18
38028	7576	67.7%	25.4%	4.4%	5.3%	32	3.8%	32
38053	25556	62.6%	25.1%	7.5%	13.1%	18	14.9%	17
38103	13981	58.5%	28.1%	3.9%	9.8%	20	5.8%	30
38104	23408	61.2%	28.7%	4.0%	15.0%	16	8.2%	28
38105	5215	15.0%	77.4%	2.3%	32.7%	5	42.3%	9
38106	23140	2.1%	96.1%	1.2%	40.1%	2	61.6%	2
38107	14509	17.2%	76.0%	4.1%	30.5%	9	41.6%	10
38108	17629	17.4%	60.2%	21.0%	35.7%	4	51.4%	6
38109	45204	2.4%	95.0%	1.0%	30.7%	8	49.7%	7
38111	42322	35.6%	50.2%	9.4%	23.9%	15	34.1%	15
38112	16334	34.7%	50.1%	9.9%	29.6%	10	51.8%	5
38114	22112	4.8%	91.4%	3.1%	32.3%	6	40.0%	11
38115	36574	5.1%	83.6%	10.3%	25.0%	14	39.9%	12
38116	40212	4.7%	92.0%	2.3%	28.4%	11	44.5%	8
38117	26430	80.2%	10.8%	5.3%	8.8%	22	14.1%	19
38118	39373	5.5%	75.9%	16.3%	32.1%	7	53.4%	4
38119	22990	48.3%	41.6%	3.8%	7.5%	28	9.1%	26
38120	13554	81.3%	8.1%	3.1%	6.5%	29	14.1%	20
38122	24014	43.5%	17.6%	30.3%	27.1%	12	37.9%	13
38125	43305	10.7%	78.3%	5.1%	8.3%	24	11.2%	21
38126	6034	6.9%	90.7%	0.6%	52.4%	1	72.1%	1
38127	40565	9.2%	84.8%	3.1%	37.4%	3	55.2%	3
38128	44400	9.3%	80.8%	6.4%	26.1%	13	37.4%	14
38133	21383	50.6%	27.3%	14.0%	5.3%	31	5.9%	29
38134	42789	39.3%	43.4%	13.1%	13.1%	17	15.5%	16
38135	30917	55.2%	36.6%	3.4%	8.2%	25	9.7%	25
38138	25465	84.1%	6.6%	2.4%	3.6%	33	1.7%	34
38139	16627	86.4%	2.1%	1.6%	0.8%	35	0.6%	35
38141	23123	4.4%	86.6%	8.2%	8.1%	26	11.0%	23

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 a permanent, significant impact on Memphis poverty cycles. 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. See the section on Measuring Poverty for a fuller explanation of the formula used.

While the long-term poverty trend provides evidence of the structural nature of poverty in Memphis, the five-year trend graphs suggest that disparities are increasing along racial lines, at least in the medium-term.

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. An emerging problem has been that of external firms acquiring Memphis housing stock and renting it to Memphians at inflated prices, which makes it almost impossible for local families to afford housing. 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.

Figure 8 – Trends in Poverty Rates by Age, Memphis

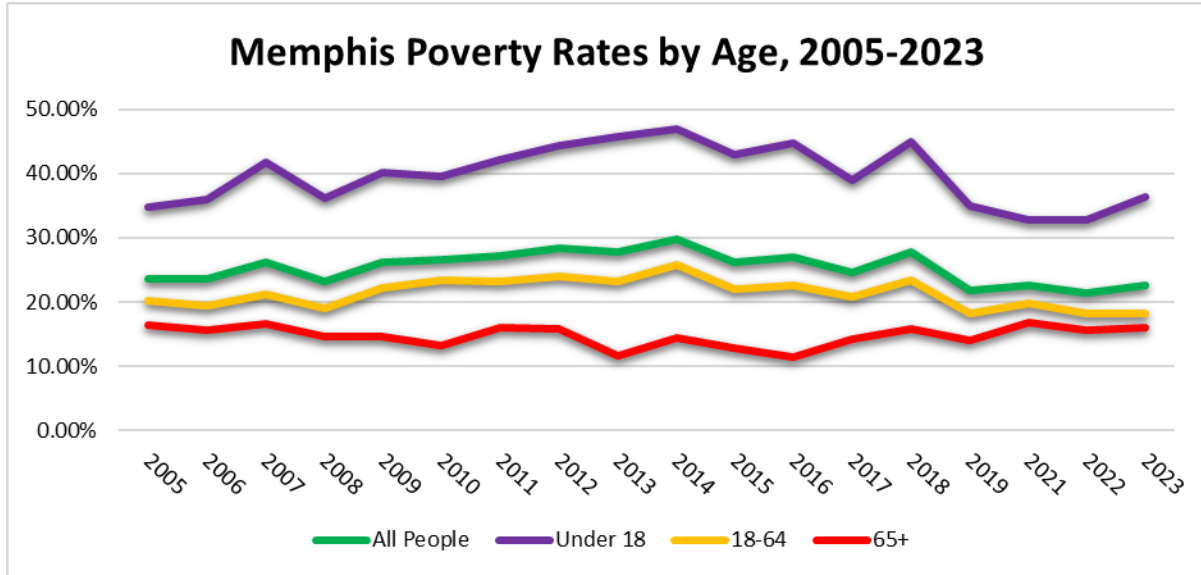


Figure 9 – Trends in Poverty Rates by Age, Shelby County

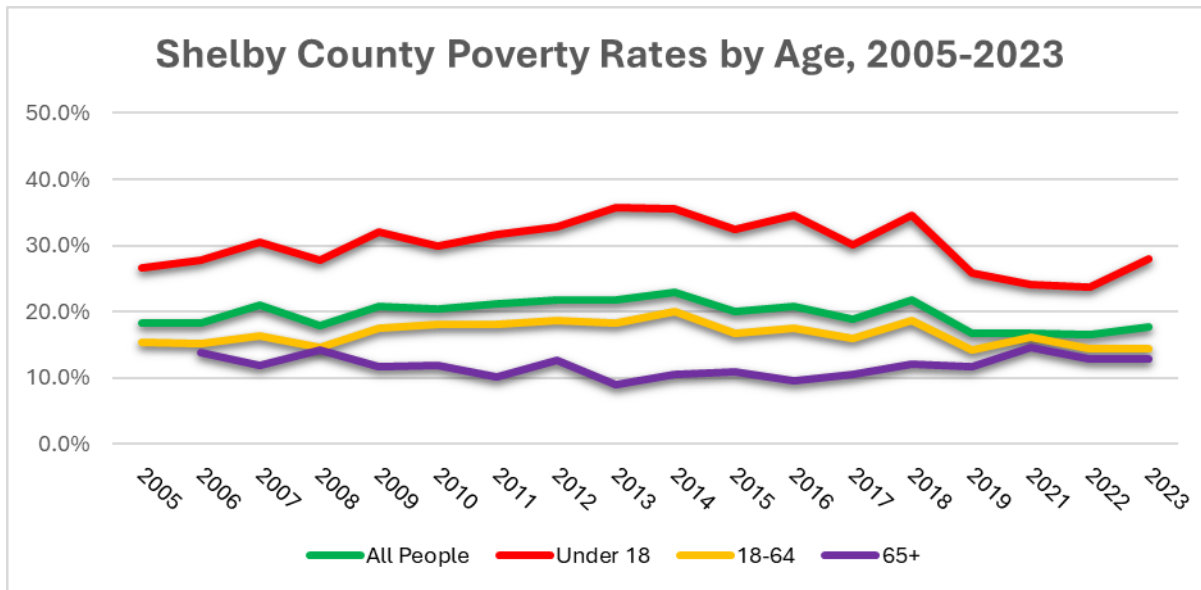


Figure 10 – Trends in Poverty Rates by Race, Memphis

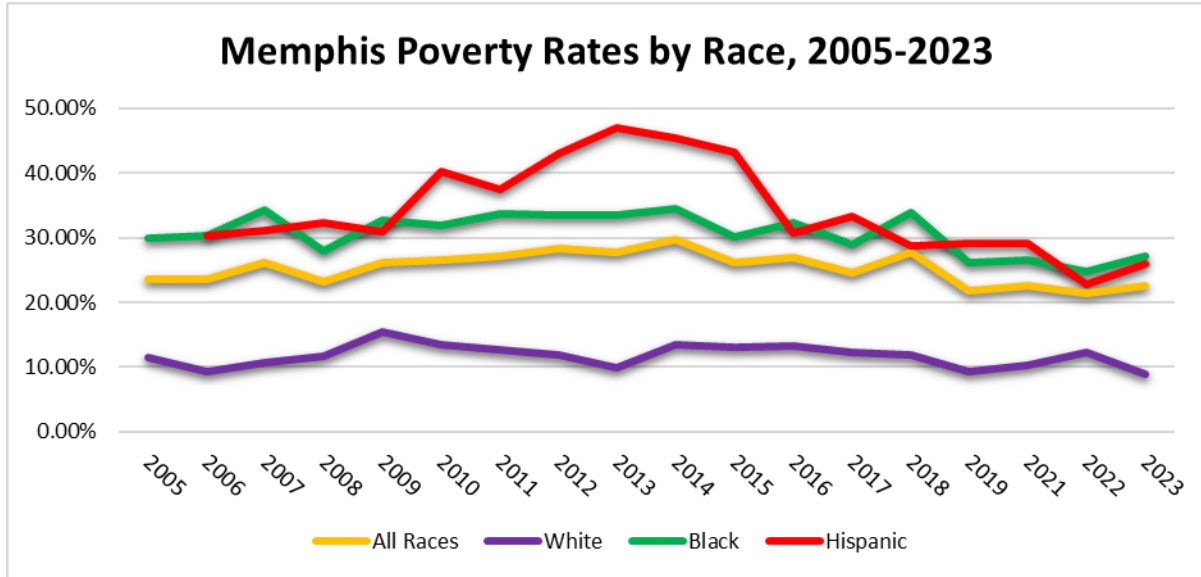
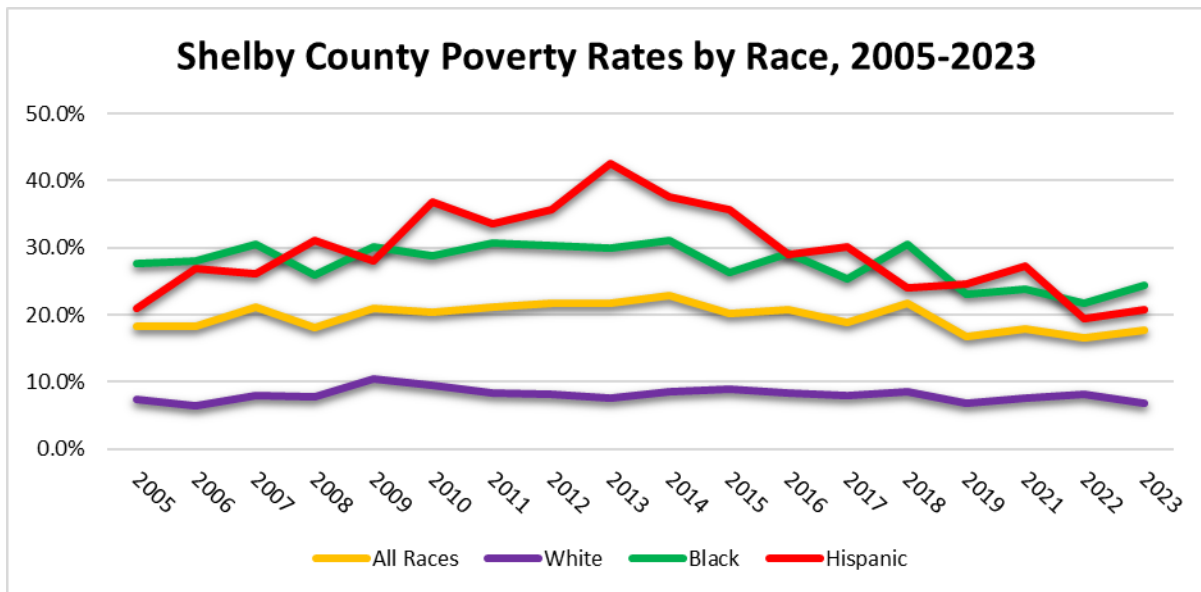
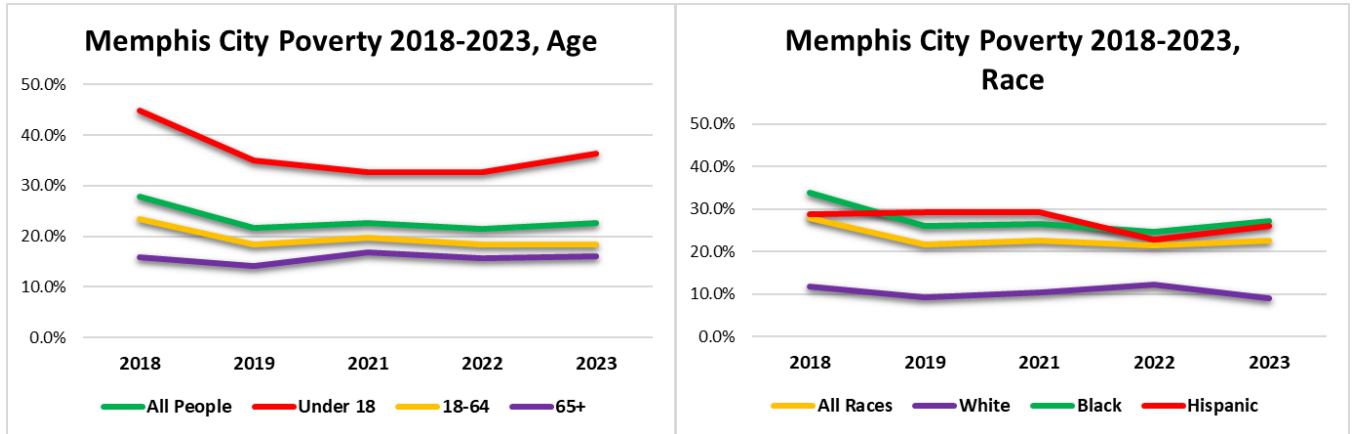


Figure 11 – Trends in Poverty Rates by Race, Shelby County

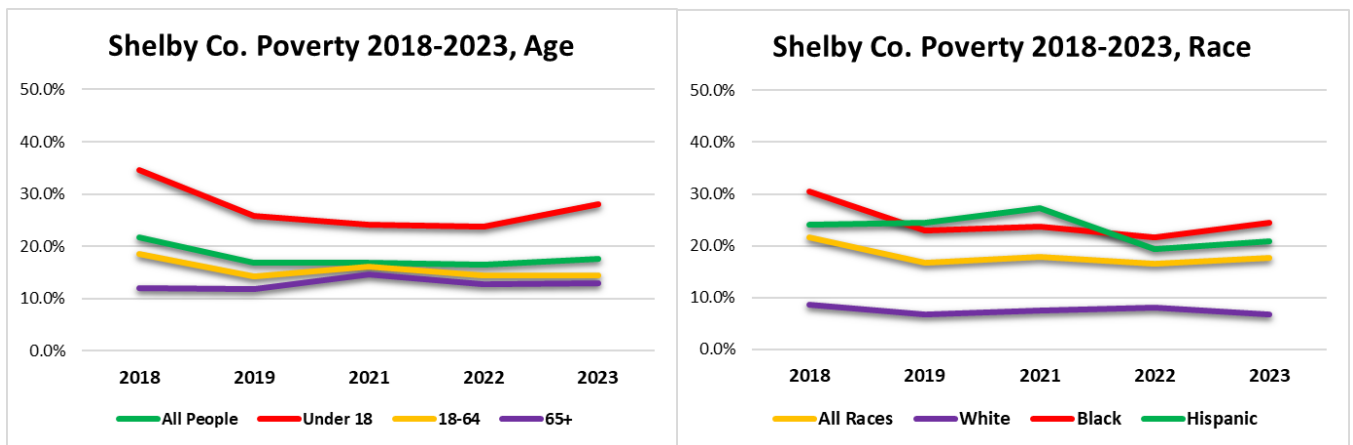


The Last Five Years in Poverty Trends

Figures 12-13 – Memphis Poverty



Figures 14-15 – 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”. 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 2022, the Department of Agriculture raised their estimate of the cost of the Thrifty Food Plan to \$971.20 per month for a family of four (two adults and two children). Multiplied by 12, this estimate is \$11,654.40 per year for a family of four, and thus the poverty threshold should be \$34,963.20. However, this is not the level at which we are measuring poverty. The 2023 Federal Poverty Threshold is \$30,000. 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. Additionally, there are families not considered to be in poverty who are unable to meet their basic needs.

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. By increasing the poverty threshold only by adjusting for inflation with the Consumer Price Index (CPI), the federal government is ignoring the reality of food prices, rents, and energy prices for families at the bottom of the economic spectrum.

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 38 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 to IX 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 12, 2024.

For tables:(except ZIP codes): 2023 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates (US Bureau of the Census) S1701, B17001B, B17001C, B17001D, B17001H, B17001I, S1903, DP05.

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. 2022 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates (US Bureau of the Census) DP05, S1701, S1903, B17001(B, C, D, H, I)

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).