

VOLUME 14 MEMPHIS POVERTY FACT SHEET 2025

The 2025 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 2024 American Community Survey Released in September 2025, and previous datasets.

*Memphis and
Shelby County*



THE UNIVERSITY OF
MEMPHIS®

Driven by doing.

2025 Memphis Poverty Fact Sheet

(Data from 2024 and previous ACS)

Who are the Memphis Poor?

The city of Memphis has a poverty rate of 24.0%. Child poverty is 38.8%, while the poverty rate for people over age 65 is still the lowest of any age group at 16.6%. The poverty rate for older adults has decreased slightly in Shelby County and the Memphis MSA, but increased in the city of Memphis since last year. The poverty rate in the City of Memphis for Blacks is 27.9%, for Hispanics/Latinos is 34.2%, and for Whites 10.8%. These represent increases in poverty for Blacks and for Hispanics/Latinos, as well as for Whites in the city of Memphis. In the Memphis Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA), which includes parts of Tennessee, Arkansas, and Mississippi, the overall poverty rate is 17.4%, child poverty is 27.8%, poverty for people over age 65 is 12.6%, Black poverty is 25.2%, White poverty is 7.9%, and Hispanic or Latino poverty is 24.2%. Poverty rates for almost all groups are increasing, except for non-Hispanic Whites.

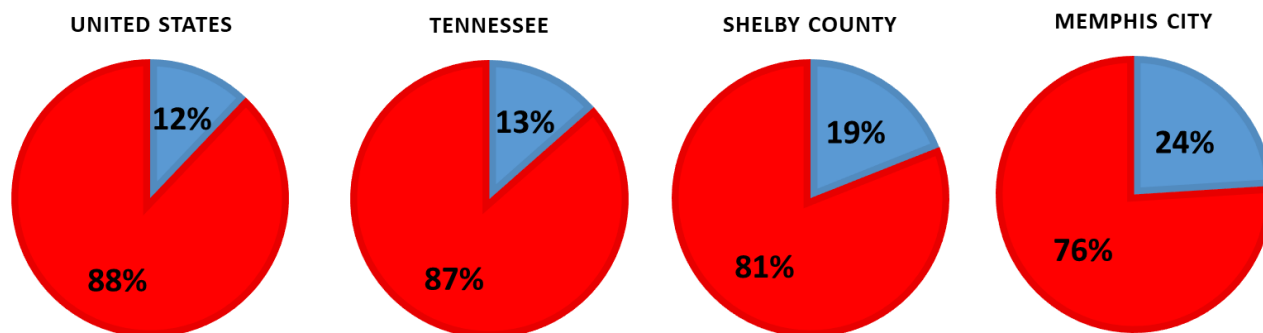
The Poverty Rate in Memphis and Shelby County Compared to National Rates

From 2023 to 2024, overall poverty and child poverty in the United States and Tennessee decreased, but both of these rates increased in Shelby County, in the city of Memphis, and in the Memphis metro area. For minorities, poverty rates in the United States decreased, but they increased in Tennessee, Shelby County, the city of Memphis, and the Memphis metro area. 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. Not surprisingly for 2024, 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.

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

2024 Poverty Rate	Overall	Under 18	18-64	Over 65	Non-Hispanic White	Black	Hispanic/Latino	Asian
United States	12.1%	15.5%	11.2%	11.2%	9.1%	20.3%	16.2%	9.7%
Tennessee	13.5%	19.1%	12.2%	10.7%	10.7%	22.7%	20.6%	9.0%
Shelby County	19.0%	31.3%	15.4%	12.8%	8.0%	25.0%	28.2%	10.9%
Memphis city, Tennessee	24.0%	38.8%	19.6%	16.6%	10.8%	27.9%	34.2%	22.6%
Memphis, TN-MS-AR Metro	17.4%	27.8%	14.4%	12.6%	7.9%	25.2%	24.2%	10.4%

Figure 1 – Percent of the Population in Poverty

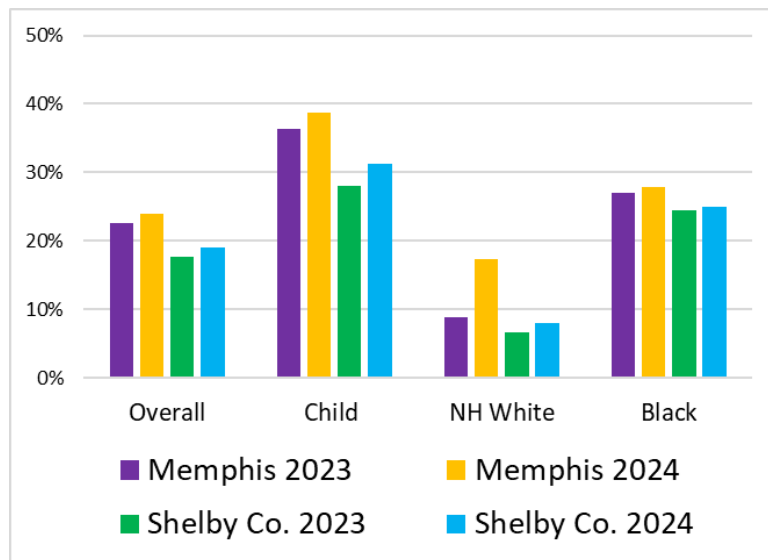


New in 2024

Poverty in Memphis has increased since last year. This is true for most groups, including children and minorities, but not for non-Hispanic Whites in Shelby County, although the poverty rate for non-Hispanic Whites in the city of Memphis and in Shelby County increased significantly. It bears repeating that once again, the poverty in Memphis has increased even as the poverty rate in the United States has fallen.

Poverty in Memphis has increased.

Figure 2 – One-Year Change in Poverty from 2023 to 2024 in Memphis and Shelby County



Not-So-New in 2024

The Memphis Poverty Fact Sheet confirms what many already know: the City of Memphis continues to suffer from higher poverty rates than Shelby County and the nation as a whole. Predictably, minority communities bear a disproportionate burden of this poverty. These aren't accidental disparities; they are the result of deep-seated structural problems that demand aggressive dismantling. To truly combat poverty, we need bold regional solutions and investments – like a comprehensive public transportation system that serves everyone in the community, not just a select few. Implementing a living wage for Memphis is another policy solution that is long overdue (the minimum wage has not increased since 2009, and Tennessee does not have a minimum wage; the state depends on the federal minimum wage).

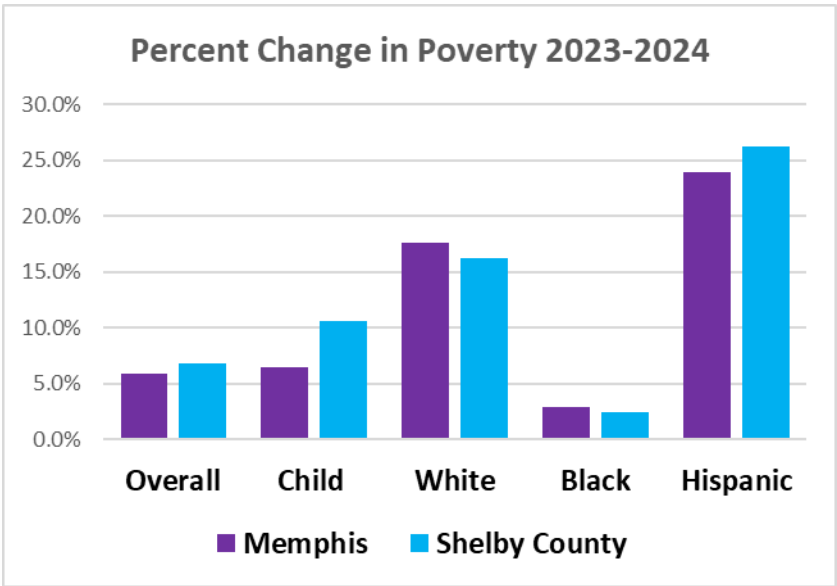
WOULD YOU LIKE A SPEAKER AT YOUR EVENT?
DO YOU NEED REPORTS AND OR DATA ANALYSIS?
CONTACT THE AUTHORS AT
mdlavega@memphis.edu
greg@gmbs-consulting.com

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

	Overall			White			Black			Hispanic		
	2023	2024	% Change	2023	2024	% Change	2023	2024	% Change	2023	2024	% Change
Memphis	22.6%	24.0%	5.8%	8.9%	10.8%	17.6%	27.1%	27.9%	2.9%	26.0%	34.2%	24.0%
Shelby County	17.7%	19.0%	6.8%	6.7%	8.0%	16.3%	24.4%	25.0%	2.4%	20.8%	28.2%	26.2%

	Overall			Child			Over 65		
	2023	2024	% Change	2023	2024	% Change	2023	2024	% Change
Memphis	22.6%	24.0%	5.8%	36.3%	38.8%	6.4%	16.1%	16.6%	3.0%
Shelby County	17.7%	19.0%	6.8%	28.0%	31.3%	10.5%	12.9%	12.8%	-0.8%

Figure 3 – Percent Change in Poverty Rates in Memphis and Shelby County 2023-2024



The poverty in Memphis highlights a systemic failure to address racial inequalities.

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

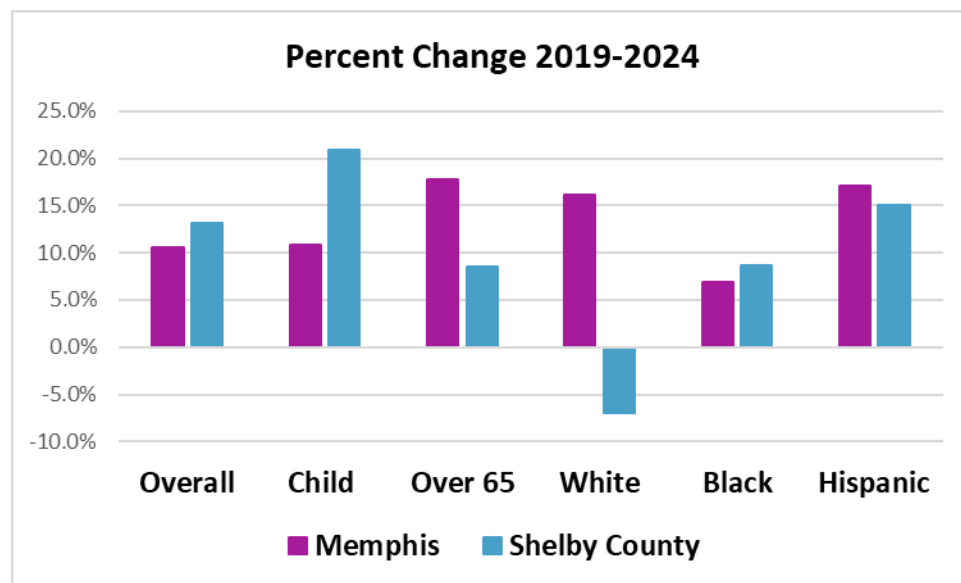
Memphis and Shelby County continue to fare worse than in 2019 for the most part, with the unsurprising exception of Non-Hispanic White poverty in Shelby County, which has decreased significantly.

Table 3 – Percent Change in Poverty Rates in Memphis and Shelby County, 2019-2024

	Overall			White			Black			Hispanic		
	2019	2024	% Change	2019	2024	% Change	2019	2024	% Change	2019	2024	% Change
Memphis	21.7%	24.0%	10.6%	9.3%	10.8%	16.1%	26.1%	27.9%	6.9%	29.2%	34.2%	17.1%
Shelby County	16.8%	19.0%	13.1%	8.6%	8.0%	-7.0%	23.0%	25.0%	8.7%	24.5%	28.2%	15.1%

	Overall			Child			Over 65		
	2019	2024	% Change	2019	2024	% Change	2019	2024	% Change
Memphis	21.7%	24.0%	10.6%	35.0%	38.8%	10.9%	14.1%	16.6%	17.7%
Shelby County	16.8%	19.0%	13.1%	25.9%	31.3%	20.8%	11.8%	12.8%	8.5%

Figure 4 – Percent Change in Poverty 2019-2024



Since the COVID-19 Pandemic, poverty has generally become worse.

DETAILED POVERTY TABLES

The following tables provide a detailed look at all the different geographies impacting Memphis. An important element in the detailed tables is the inclusion of the median household income, an indication of how those not under poverty fare generally. Note that median income for non-Hispanic Whites is higher in Shelby County and the Memphis MSA than in the United States or Tennessee.

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

United States						
2024	Overall	Non-Hispanic White	Black	Latino or Hispanic	Asian	Native American
Population Size (in thousands)	332,143	187,178	39,539	66,725	20,892	3,326
Median Household Income	\$81,604	\$87,572	\$56,706	\$72,574	\$117,289	\$63,627
Overall Poverty Rate	12.1%	9.1%	20.3%	16.2%	9.7%	19.6%
Child (Under 18) Poverty Rate	15.5%	9.6%	28.5%	20.9%	9.8%	25.7%
Poverty Rate for People 18-64	11.2%	9.1%	17.4%	13.7%	9.1%	17.5%
Poverty Rate for People 65+	11.2%	9.0%	19.3%	18.1%	12.6%	18.3%

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

Tennessee					
2024	Overall	Non-Hispanic White	Non-Hispanic Black	Latino or Hispanic	Asian
Population Size	7,068,204	4,998,094	1,044,107	556,599	141,872
Median Household Income	\$71,997	\$77,889	\$49,959	\$63,286	\$105,611
Overall Poverty Rate	13.5%	10.7%	22.7%	20.6%	9.0%
Child (Under 18) Poverty Rate	19.1%	12.9%	35.5%	29.6%	10.6%
Poverty Rate for People 18-64	12.2%	10.4%	18.6%	15.5%	8.2%
Poverty Rate for People 65+	10.7%	9.3%	18.7%	15.7%	11.6%

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

Shelby County, Tennessee					
2024	Overall	Non-Hispanic White	Non-Hispanic Black	Latino or Hispanic	Asian
Population Size	894,567	283,859	468,255	85,766	27,552
Median Household Income	\$64,995	\$94,971	\$47,180	\$57,180	\$112,285
Overall Poverty Rate	19.0%	8.0%	25.0%	28.2%	10.9%
Child (Under 18) Poverty Rate	31.3%	9.3%	39.5%	42.7%	4.1%
Poverty Rate for People 18-64	15.4%	7.9%	20.0%	18.5%	11.2%
Poverty Rate for People 65+	12.8%	7.2%	18.7%	5.3%	19.8%

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

City of Memphis, Tennessee				
2024	Overall	Non-Hispanic White	Non-Hispanic Black	Latino or Hispanic
Population Size	598,148	137,457	372,398	61,365
Median Household Income	\$52,679	\$75,485	\$42,269	\$55,790
Overall Poverty Rate	24.0%	10.8%	27.9%	34.2%
Child (Under 18) Poverty Rate	38.8%	9.6%	42.7%	53.7%
Poverty Rate for People 18-64	19.6%	11.4%	22.9%	21.7%
Poverty Rate for People 65+	16.6%	10.3%	20.6%	4.9%

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

Memphis, TN-MS-AR Metro Area					
2024	Overall	Non-Hispanic White	Non-Hispanic Black	Latino or Hispanic	Asian
Population Size	1,314,128	520,664	610,667	105,216	31,788
Median Household Income	\$68,124	\$90,706	\$47,453	\$61,573	\$114,148
Overall Poverty Rate	17.4%	7.9%	25.2%	24.2%	10.4%
Child (Under 18) Poverty Rate	27.8%	8.3%	39.4%	38.2%	5.3%
Poverty Rate for People 18-64	14.4%	7.7%	20.5%	15.7%	10.5%
Poverty Rate for People 65+	12.6%	8.1%	19.3%	5.1%	17.4%

COMPARING MEMPHIS

Poverty Rankings

In 2024, the Memphis Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) remains in second place in overall poverty after Fresno, CA, and also remains in first place in child poverty among large MSAs with populations greater than 1,000,000. There was no change in overall poverty for Memphis from 2023 to 2024 among cities with populations greater than 500,000, where it is 2nd in overall poverty. There was no change in ranking for Memphis in child poverty from 2023 to 2024 among Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSAs) with populations greater than 500,000. From 2023 to 2024, Memphis moved one spot closer to the top in child poverty among cities with populations greater than 500,000 (from 3rd to 2nd), and in overall poverty among MSAs with populations greater than 500,000 (from 8th to 7th). Regardless of ranking, the fact that poverty increased is extremely worrisome. Child poverty continues being a tremendous challenge for Memphis. One question the authors are asked all the time is “why is poverty so high among children?” The simple answer is that children are poor because they have poor parents. The solutions to end child poverty are the solutions that help families thrive. Families need to be able to afford housing, and that often means programs to help low-income families buy their first home with a low interest rate; it means childcare support so families can afford to find and keep jobs; it means adequate public transportation that allows people arrive to work on time in a reasonable manner; it means funding education at adequate levels and insuring that all schools have what they need to succeed. Ending child poverty needs, above all, that parents receive adequate wages that allow them to meet all their family’s needs. The minimum wage has not increased from \$7.25 per hour since 2009, sixteen years ago, and since the minimum serves as an anchor wage for all other wages, many people receive inadequate wages even when they have an education. When wages are insufficient to meet a family’s needs, is it any wonder that our community is suffering from such high levels of poverty and trauma?

What the Rankings Mean

The rank number denotes the position of a city or MSA relative to others. The lower the rank number, the higher the poverty rate for that locality. In other words, a lower ranking is not desirable. Being #1 in the ranking for poverty is not a good thing. 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 (see section on Tennessee counties). 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 under difficult economic conditions.

Table 9 – Memphis’ Rank in Poverty Rates

Memphis		2023		2024			
		Poverty Rate	Poverty Rank	Poverty Rate	Poverty Rank	Rank Change	% Change
Among Cities with Populations Greater than 500,000 (37 Cities)	Overall	22.6%	2	24.0%	2	0	6.2%
	Under 18	36.3%	3	38.8%	2	1	6.9%
Among MSA with Populations Greater than 500,000 (109 MSA)	Overall	16.5%	8	17.4%	7	1	5.5%
	Under 18	25.8%	2	27.8%	2	0	7.8%
Among MSA with Populations Greater than 1,000,000 (54 MSA)	Overall	16.5%	2	17.4%	2	0	5.5%
	Under 18	25.8%	1	27.8%	1	0	7.8%

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

Highest Poverty Rates Rank 1		2023		2024	
		Rank 1	Poverty Rate	Rank 1	Poverty Rate
Among Cities with Populations Greater than 500,000 (37 Cities)	Overall	Detroit city, Michigan	31.9%	Detroit city, Michigan	34.5%
	Under 18	Detroit city, Michigan	44.2%	Detroit city, Michigan	51.1%
Among MSA with Populations Greater than 500,000 (112 MSA)	Overall	McAllen-Edinburg-Mission, TX Metro Area	27.2%	McAllen-Edinburg-Mission, TX Metro Area	24.4%
	Under 18	McAllen-Edinburg-Mission, TX Metro Area	38.5%	McAllen-Edinburg-Mission, TX Metro Area	33.4%
Among MSA with Populations Greater than 1,000,000 54 MSA)	Overall	Fresno, CA Metro Area	17.9%	Fresno, CA Metro Area	18.2%
	Under 18	Memphis, TN-MS-AR Metro Area	25.8%	Memphis, TN-MS-AR Metro Area	27.8%

Nationwide, poverty declined in 2024, but in Memphis poverty increased from 2023 to 2024.

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	18.2%
Memphis, TN-MS-AR Metro Area	2	17.4%
Houston-Pasadena-The Woodlands, TX Metro Area	3	14.3%
Detroit-Warren-Dearborn, MI Metro Area	4	14.1%
Oklahoma City, OK Metro Area	5	13.6%
Tucson, AZ Metro Area	6	13.5%
San Antonio-New Braunfels, TX Metro Area	7	13.1%
Rochester, NY Metro Area	8	13.0%
Buffalo-Cheektowaga, NY Metro Area	9	12.9%
Tulsa, OK Metro Area	9	12.9%

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	27.8%
Fresno, CA Metro Area	2	26.2%
Detroit-Warren-Dearborn, MI Metro Area	3	21.0%
Houston-Pasadena-The Woodlands, TX Metro Area	4	20.0%
Oklahoma City, OK Metro Area	5	17.7%
Cleveland, OH Metro Area	6	17.5%
Tucson, AZ Metro Area	7	17.3%
Louisville/Jefferson County, KY-IN Metro Area	8	16.9%
Milwaukee-Waukesha, WI Metro Area	8	16.9%
Buffalo-Cheektowaga, NY Metro Area	10	16.7%

It is devastating that Memphis is again #1 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	24.4
Bakersfield-Delano, CA Metro Area	2	18.9
Fresno, CA Metro Area	3	18.2
El Paso, TX Metro Area	4	18.2
New Orleans-Metairie, LA Metro Area	5	18.1
Baton Rouge, LA Metro Area	6	17.8
Memphis, TN-MS-AR Metro Area	7	17.4
Jackson, MS Metro Area	8	15.3
Toledo, OH Metro Area	9	15.1
Little Rock-North Little Rock-Conway, AR Metro Area	10	14.5

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	33.4
Memphis, TN-MS-AR Metro Area	2	27.8
Fresno, CA Metro Area	3	26.2
New Orleans-Metairie, LA Metro Area	4	26
Bakersfield-Delano, CA Metro Area	5	24.8
El Paso, TX Metro Area	6	24
Baton Rouge, LA Metro Area	7	23.4
Jackson, MS Metro Area	8	22.5
Chattanooga, TN-GA Metro Area	9	22.3
Augusta-Richmond County, GA-SC Metro Area	10	21.3

***Being #1 in the ranking for poverty is
not a good 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	34.5%
Memphis city, Tennessee	2	24.0%
Houston city, Texas	3	21.2%
Milwaukee city, Wisconsin	3	21.2%
Philadelphia city, Pennsylvania	5	19.7%
Fresno city, California	6	18.7%
El Paso city, Texas	7	18.3%
Tucson city, Arizona	8	18.1%
New York city, New York	9	18.0%
Baltimore city, Maryland	10	17.7%

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	51.1%
Memphis city, Tennessee	2	38.8%
Houston city, Texas	3	31.1%
Milwaukee city, Wisconsin	4	30.3%
Washington city, District of Columbia	5	28.3%
Philadelphia city, Pennsylvania	6	27.1%
Fresno city, California	7	26.7%
El Paso city, Texas	8	24.4%
New York city, New York	9	24.2%
Boston city, Massachusetts	10	23.5%

Being #2 in the ranking for poverty is not a good thing either.

THE RACIALIZATION OF POVERTY

The Relationship between Poverty and Race

In Memphis, the deeply entrenched racial disparity in poverty is an ongoing reality. While White residents in Shelby County enjoy lower poverty rates than both Tennessee and the nation, these rates are also significantly lower compared to other racial and ethnic groups. It's undeniable that minorities are disproportionately burdened by poverty in Memphis. Poverty rates for both Black and Latino/Hispanic populations remain unacceptably high, far exceeding the overall poverty rate. Across all age brackets, minorities are consistently trapped in poverty at rates far surpassing those of their White counterparts. Even in 2024, this injustice continues to plague Memphis, where the poverty rate among non-Hispanic White residents remains the lowest of any demographic group, highlighting a systemic failure to address racial inequalities.

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

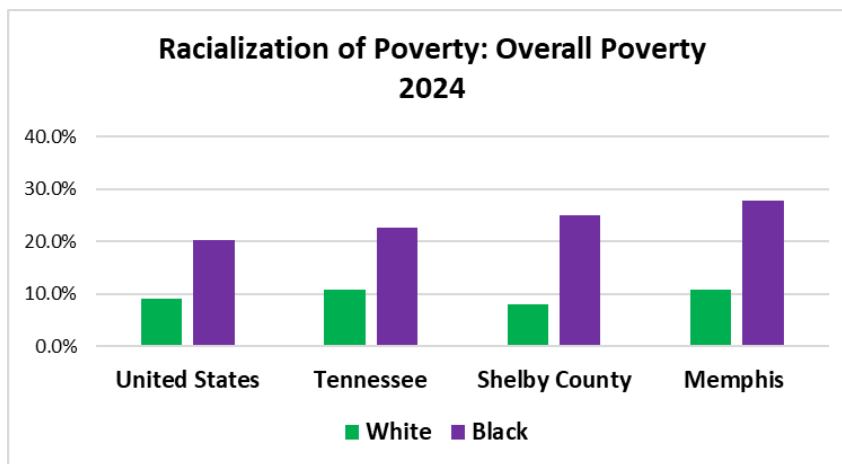
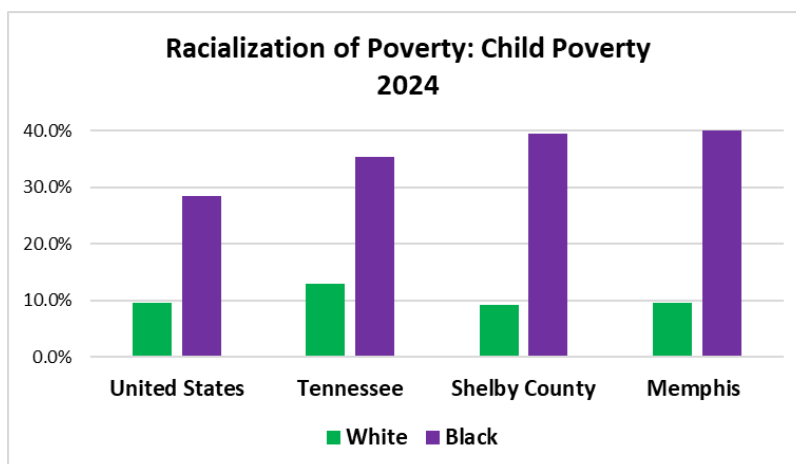


Figure 6 – Comparison of Child Poverty Rates for non-Hispanic Whites Only and Blacks Only



The Poverty Rate and Rank for Non-Hispanic Whites

It is interesting to note that while Memphis ranks 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 and better in the list, ranking 21st among 54 large MSA (population greater than 1,000,000) and 58th among 109 MSA with populations greater than 500,000. However, while the differences between the poverty rates of minority groups and non-Hispanic Whites are great, high poverty rates in a community ultimately affect the economic outlook for every group. Table 17 shows the worsening outcomes for non-Hispanic Whites in Memphis over the last few years.

Table 17– Comparison of Poverty Rates and Rankings Whites Only

Memphis	White Only					
	2022 Poverty Rate	2022 Poverty Rank	2023 Poverty Rate	2023 Poverty Rank	2024 Poverty Rate	2024 Poverty Rank
Among Cities 500,00+ Population for which data are provided (37 Cities,)	12.2%	9	8.9%	22	10.80%	12
Among MSA 500,000+ Population for which data are provided (109 MSA)	8.2%	72	8.1%	61	7.90%	58
Among MSA 1,000,000+ Population for which data are provided (54 MSA)	8.2%	31	8.1%	25	7.90%	21

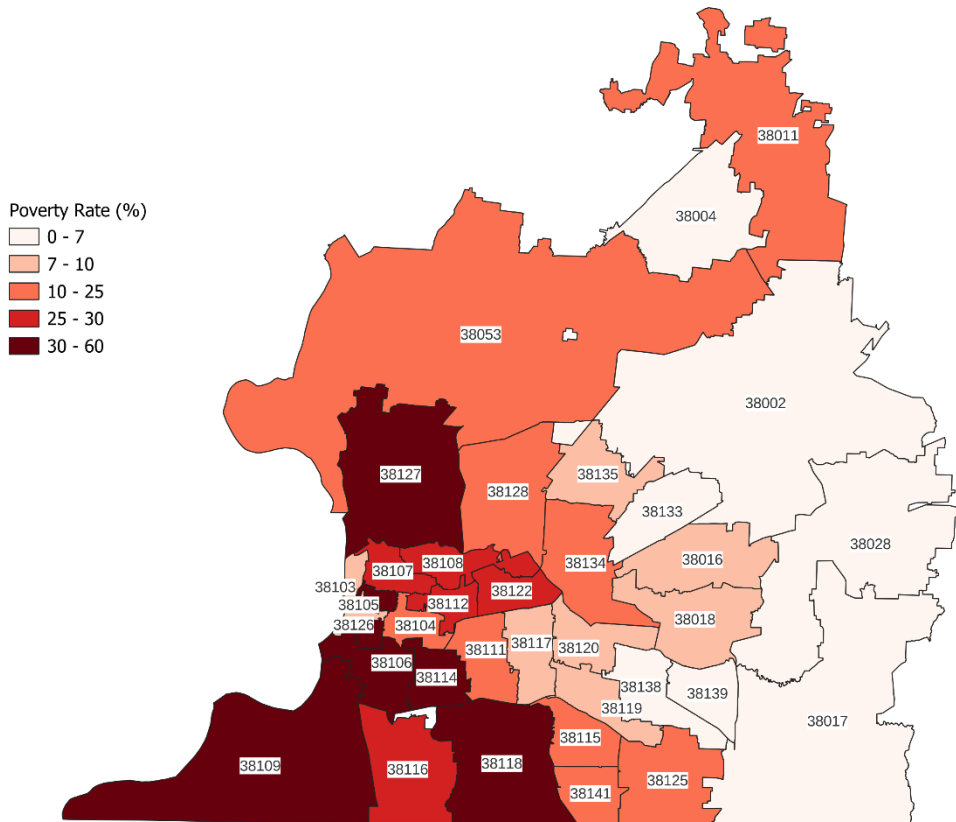
Table 18 – Comparison of Poverty Rates for Non-Hispanic Whites and Blacks for Various Demographics and Locations

2024	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	9.1%	20.3%	9.6%	28.5%	9.1%	17.4%	9.0%	19.3%
Tennessee	10.7%	22.7%	12.9%	35.5%	10.4%	18.6%	9.3%	18.7%
Shelby County	8.0%	25.0%	9.3%	39.5%	7.9%	20.0%	7.2%	18.7%
Memphis	10.8%	27.9%	9.6%	42.7%	11.4%	22.9%	10.3%	20.6%

MEMPHIS ZIP CODES

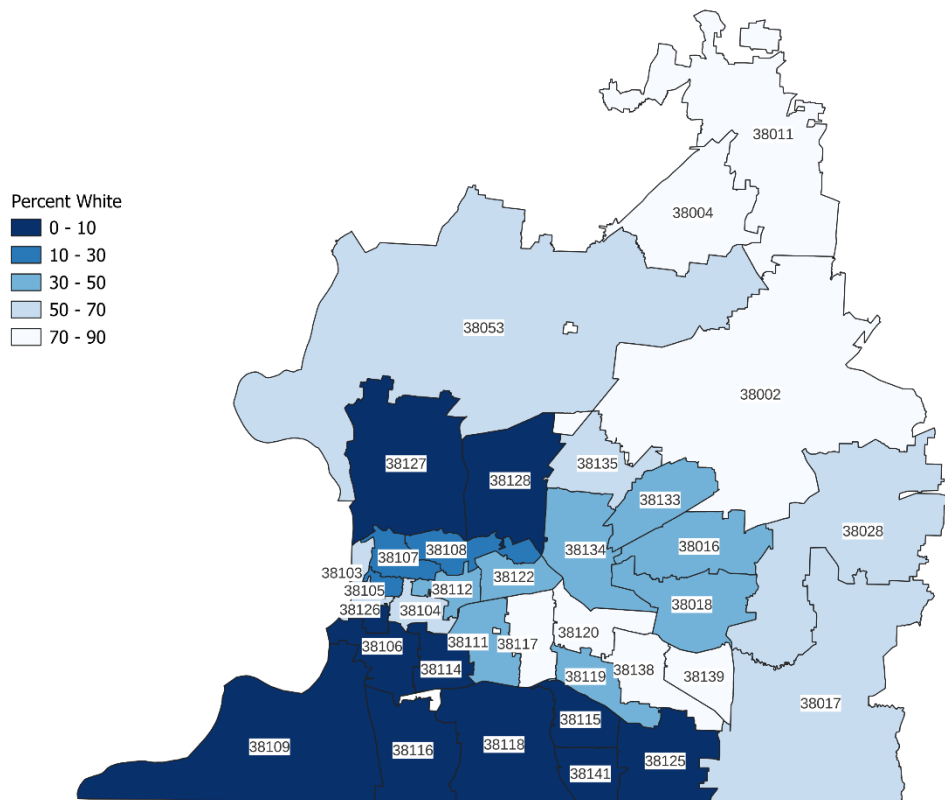
The maps in Figures 7 and 8 illustrate the segregated nature of Shelby County, and the association between race and poverty. Note that Memphis Zip Code data and maps come from the 2023 Census. This is the result of U.S. Bureau of the Census release schedule. For the purposes of the Memphis Poverty Fact Sheet, Zip Code data and maps are a year behind larger geographies.

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



*Poverty is not evenly distributed in
Memphis.*

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



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.

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	43,868	72.5%	19.0%	3.2%	4.3%	32	3.6%	31
38004	11,696	81.1%	11.5%	3.2%	5.6%	30	6.3%	30
38011	9,493	81.5%	9.4%	4.8%	11.0%	21	12.0%	23
38016	44,390	30.8%	53.2%	7.0%	9.9%	22	11.1%	25
38017	56,427	68.5%	11.3%	4.6%	2.8%	34	2.1%	33
38018	38,357	36.7%	47.3%	8.2%	7.1%	27	8.8%	27
38028	7,699	65.5%	27.3%	4.4%	5.3%	31	1.3%	34
38053	25,352	57.2%	27.0%	10.2%	12.8%	18	14.3%	21
38103	14,025	56.3%	29.9%	4.5%	8.1%	25	6.9%	28
38104	22,925	59.5%	28.6%	5.8%	14.1%	17	13.6%	22
38105	5,151	16.0%	74.6%	2.5%	31.4%	7	35.3%	11
38106	21,827	2.4%	94.7%	2.1%	41.5%	2	66.3%	1
38107	14,254	18.3%	76.1%	4.5%	28.6%	9	37.1%	10
38108	18,501	16.6%	51.9%	30.3%	28.0%	10	31.4%	13
38109	43,764	2.1%	95.0%	0.9%	31.6%	6	55.7%	3
38111	43,308	33.3%	48.6%	12.7%	23.5%	13	32.3%	12
38112	16,798	34.8%	46.4%	14.2%	27.6%	11	39.5%	8
38114	20,440	5.6%	90.5%	3.3%	32.0%	5	43.6%	7
38115	36,878	5.5%	82.3%	11.8%	19.5%	15	26.2%	15
38116	41,393	4.0%	91.1%	3.8%	29.7%	8	45.8%	6
38117	26,327	75.6%	12.1%	8.4%	9.5%	23	15.0%	20
38118	39,162	5.0%	73.4%	19.6%	32.5%	4	52.9%	4
38119	22,332	48.4%	39.2%	5.5%	7.7%	26	11.2%	24
38120	13,249	81.0%	7.1%	4.0%	7.1%	28	15.2%	19
38122	25,310	34.3%	20.1%	37.4%	27.2%	12	37.8%	9
38125	42,793	9.3%	77.7%	4.3%	11.1%	20	18.0%	17
38126	5,723	6.3%	88.9%	1.6%	45.3%	1	57.9%	2
38127	39,553	7.9%	86.8%	3.4%	34.7%	3	51.7%	5
38128	44,027	8.6%	79.0%	8.9%	22.6%	14	29.7%	14
38133	21,153	48.0%	28.7%	15.0%	6.0%	29	6.4%	29
38134	42,500	37.8%	40.9%	15.2%	11.9%	19	16.3%	18
38135	30,490	56.5%	36.3%	2.4%	8.3%	24	9.5%	26
38138	25,368	84.5%	5.8%	2.4%	4.1%	33	2.6%	32
38139	16,298	83.7%	1.3%	4.8%	0.9%	35	0.1%	35
38141	23,768	4.2%	85.4%	9.0%	14.6%	16	23.3%	16

TENNESSEE COUNTIES

Memphis has a reputation as “the poorest city”, but that is only true if most cities are excluded and the only included cities have more than one million people. In general, rural areas and small communities tend to have much greater poverty rates. Society does not usually pay attention to rural and small-city poverty rates because they aren’t impressive or glamorous, and because there are too many small communities suffering from extremely high poverty rates. This year for the first time, the Memphis Poverty Fact Sheet includes the poverty rates of all Tennessee counties, as well as maps for overall and child poverty in Tennessee counties.

NOTE: Due to the difficulty in accessing the U.S. Bureau of the Census in October 2025, the dataset used for Tennessee counties is the 5-Year estimate. Therefore, the numbers are not the same as in the rest of this poverty factsheet, which utilizes 1-Year estimates whenever possible.

Figure 9 – Mapping Overall Poverty in Tennessee Counties

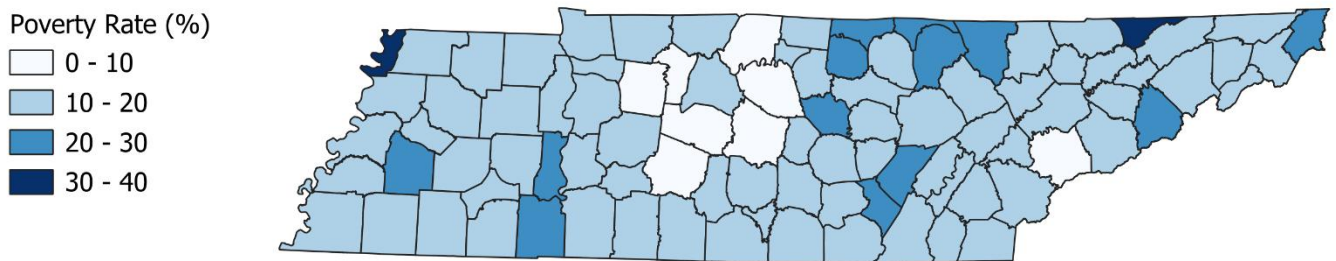


Figure 10 – Mapping Child Poverty in Tennessee Counties

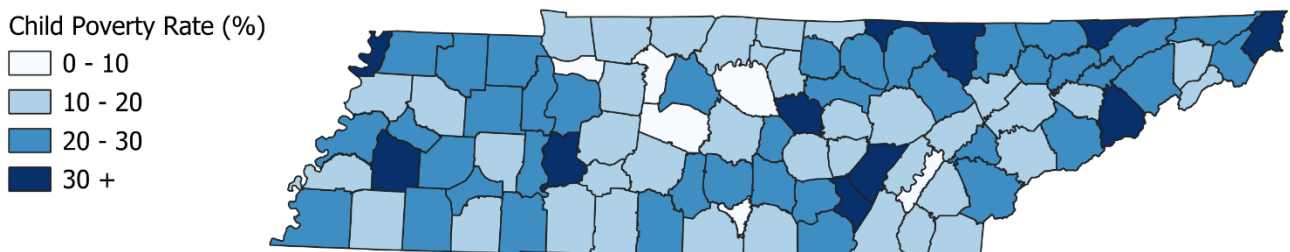


Table 20 – Poverty Rates in Tennessee Counties

Tennessee County	Overall Poverty Rate	Rank	Child Poverty Rate	Rank	Tennessee County	Overall Poverty Rate	Rank	Child Poverty Rate	Rank
Anderson	14.8%	53	18.5%	60	Lauderdale	18.7%	20	24.2%	25
Bedford	13.6%	66	22.8%	33	Lawrence	15.3%	47	17.9%	65
Benton	18.5%	22	25.2%	22	Lewis	15.9%	44	12.1%	86
Bledsoe	25.0%	4	39.0%	4	Lincoln	12.4%	78	15.8%	75
Blount	8.9%	92	11.2%	87	Loudon	12.6%	76	23.5%	29
Bradley	13.1%	73	15.7%	76	Macon	15.2%	51	19.8%	54
Campbell	19.2%	17	21.2%	40	Madison	18.6%	21	29.7%	12
Cannon	16.5%	38	23.2%	30	Marion	16.9%	35	20.8%	45
Carroll	16.4%	39	20.9%	44	Marshall	14.2%	58	22.9%	32
Carter	18.0%	26	25.6%	21	Maury	9.9%	89	14.1%	81
Ceatham	8.1%	93	8.4%	93	McMinn	13.3%	70	18.3%	63
Chester	15.6%	46	21.1%	42	McNairy	16.1%	42	17.6%	67
Claiborne	18.2%	25	21.4%	37	Meigs	14.3%	57	9.6%	90
Clay	21.7%	9	17.8%	66	Monroe	16.1%	43	23.0%	31
Cocke	20.3%	15	35.3%	7	Montgomery	11.6%	81	14.8%	79
Coffee	16.1%	41	20.8%	46	Moore	11.3%	84	6.6%	94
Crockett	14.8%	54	27.1%	15	Morgan	18.8%	19	25.9%	18
Cumberland	13.4%	68	18.5%	61	Obion	17.0%	34	21.2%	41
Davidson	13.9%	61	20.7%	47	Overton	18.0%	27	21.3%	39
Decatur	21.6%	10	25.8%	19	Perry	17.7%	29	33.7%	8
DeKalb	21.4%	11	31.5%	11	Pickett	25.8%	3	38.4%	5
Dickson	9.9%	88	11.0%	88	Polk	13.3%	71	16.3%	73
Dyer	17.9%	28	20.0%	51	Putnam	16.9%	36	21.4%	38
Fayette	10.8%	85	18.4%	62	Rhea	15.3%	48	19.5%	56
Fentress	20.9%	12	29.3%	14	Roane	12.7%	75	16.5%	72
Franklin	12.7%	74	19.9%	53	Robertson	10.2%	87	13.5%	83
Gibson	13.4%	69	14.5%	80	Rutherford	9.2%	90	10.6%	89
Giles	14.3%	56	20.4%	49	Scott	24.9%	5	33.0%	9
Grainger	16.4%	40	24.2%	26	Sequatchie	23.6%	6	39.8%	3
Greene	15.2%	50	20.4%	48	Sevier	13.6%	67	20.3%	50
Grundy	19.2%	18	21.0%	43	Shelby	17.5%	30	25.8%	20
Hamblen	17.2%	32	23.7%	27	Smith	13.3%	72	17.2%	71
Hamilton	12.5%	77	19.0%	58	Stewart	12.0%	80	15.4%	77
Hancock	31.5%	2	37.9%	6	Sullivan	14.9%	52	24.5%	23
Hardeman	17.3%	31	26.8%	16	Sumner	9.0%	91	12.9%	85
Hardin	20.8%	13	24.2%	24	Tipton	11.6%	82	17.3%	70
Hawkins	17.1%	33	23.6%	28	Trousdale	10.3%	86	12.9%	84
Haywood	22.8%	7	32.6%	10	Unicoi	14.2%	59	17.3%	69
Henderson	16.8%	37	19.9%	52	Union	13.9%	62	21.5%	36
Henry	18.3%	24	29.4%	13	Van	13.8%	64	15.0%	78
Hickman	14.1%	60	18.8%	59	Warren	15.3%	49	19.1%	57
Houston	13.8%	63	9.1%	91	Washington	15.8%	45	17.3%	68
Humphreys	13.7%	65	22.4%	34	Wayne	18.5%	23	19.7%	55
Jackson	20.7%	14	21.8%	35	Weakley	19.3%	16	26.0%	17
Jefferson	11.5%	83	16.3%	74	White	14.7%	55	18.1%	64
Johnson	22.1%	8	43.3%	1	Williamson	4.5%	95	4.4%	95
Knox	12.2%	79	13.7%	82	Wilson	7.6%	94	9.1%	92
Lake	32.3%	1	41.1%	2					

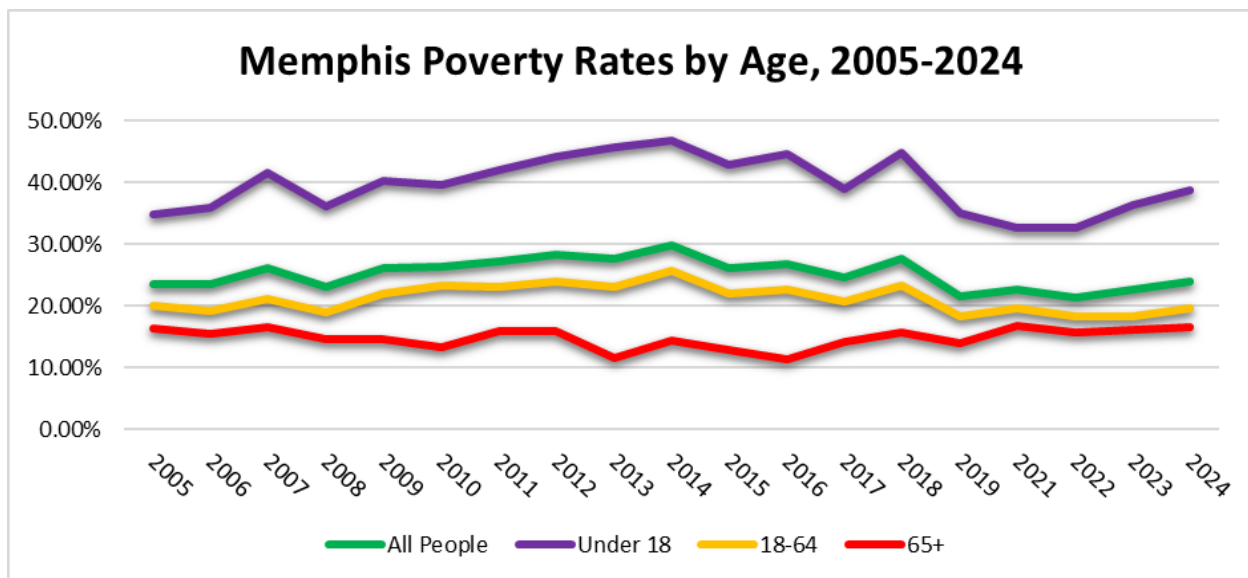
TRENDS IN MEMPHIS POVERTY RATES

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.

An interesting aspect of Memphis poverty is that it does not appear to be in sync with the rest of the nation. In 2024 poverty declined in the United States but it increased in Memphis. Why? It is clear from the data that poverty in Memphis is structural and that economic development is lagging in this community. While many states and cities have increased their minimum wages (the anchor wage for a locality), Memphis has not been able to do so, thus impacting the wages most Memphians earn.

Figure 11 – Trends in Poverty Rates by Age, Memphis



Other Possible Explanations

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 12 – Trends in Poverty Rates by Age, Shelby County

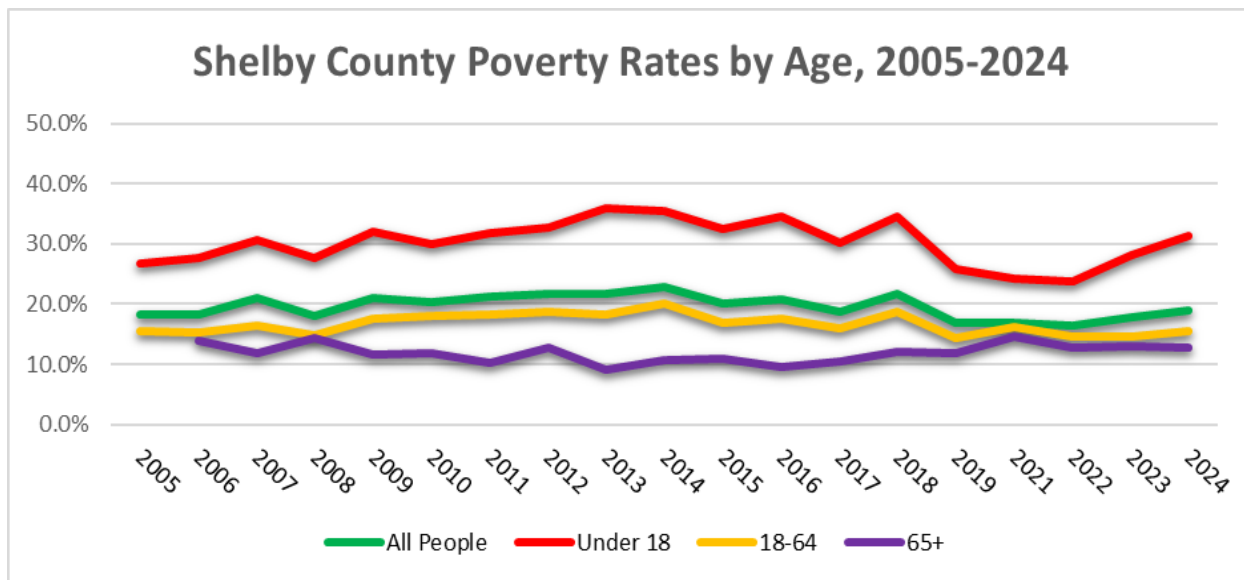


Figure 10 – Trends in Poverty Rates by Race, Memphis

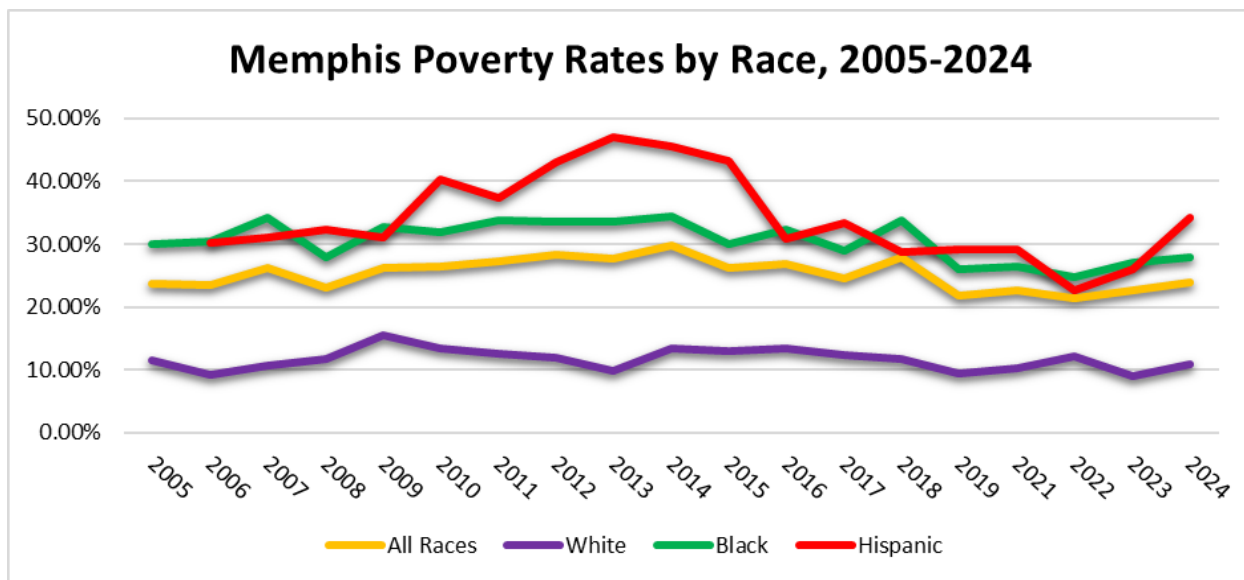
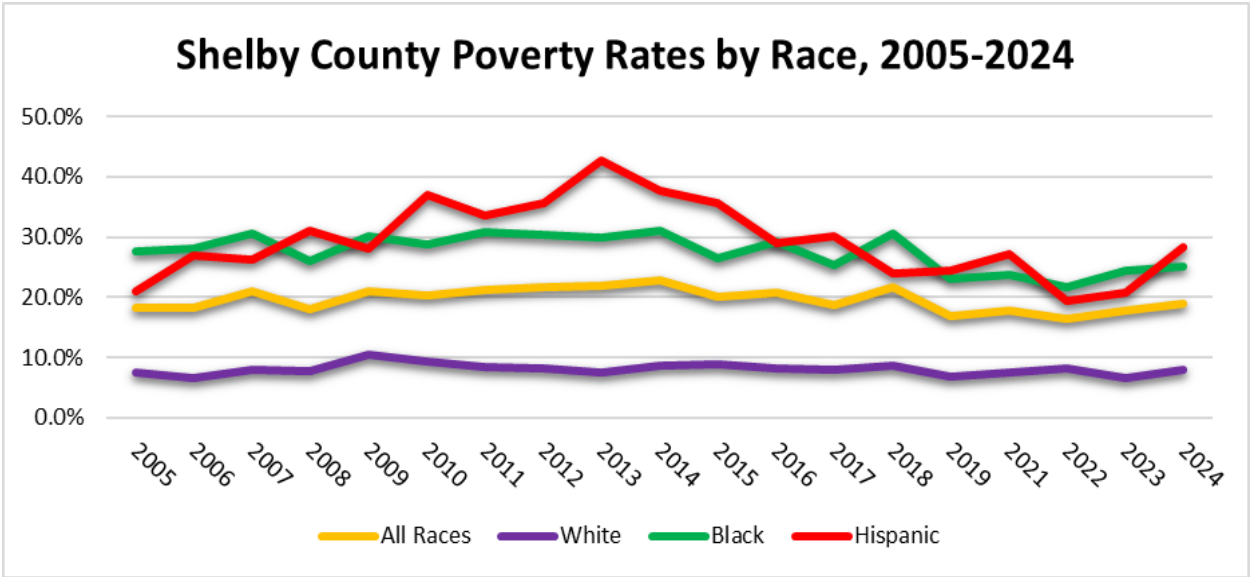
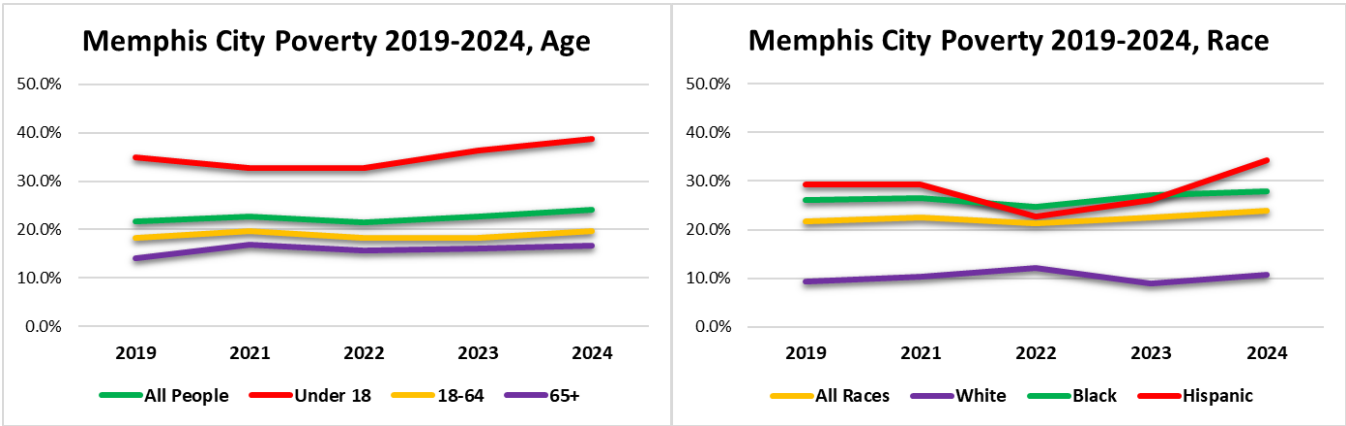


Figure 13 – Trends in Poverty Rates by Race, Shelby County

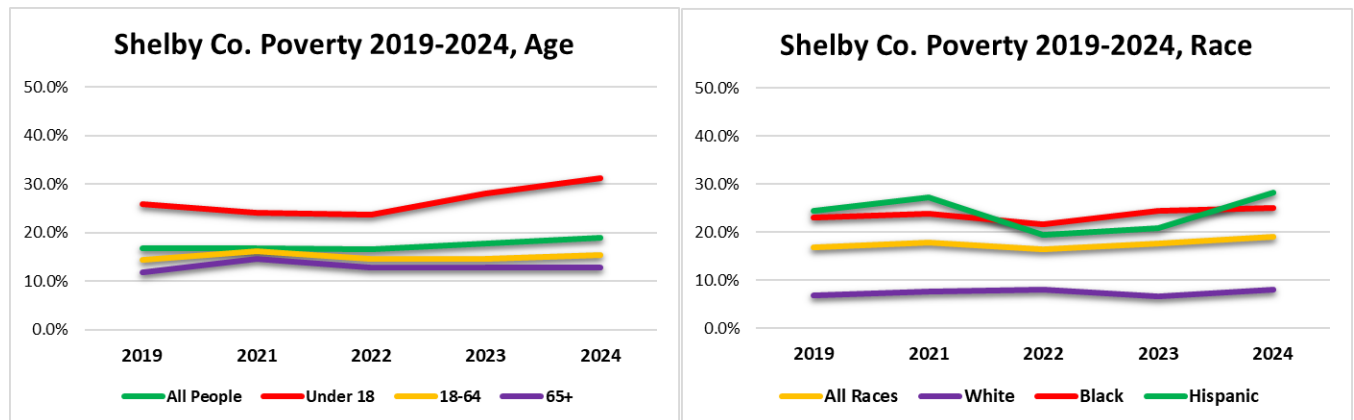


The Last Five Years in Poverty Trends

Figures 14-15 – 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.

The current methods of measuring poverty are flawed and outdated, potentially masking the true extent of the problem.

Table 21 – Official Poverty Thresholds in 2024

Number of people in household	Income below which household considered to be in poverty
1	\$15,940.00
2	\$20,220.00
3	\$24,950.00
4	\$32,130.00
5	\$38,110.00
6	\$43,130.00
7	\$48,970.00
8	\$54,740.00

(<https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/income-poverty/historical-poverty-thresholds.html>)

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). In December 2023 the cost of the Thrifty Food Plan for a family of four was \$988.00 per month ([https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/resource-files/Cost Of Food Thrifty Food Plan December 2024.pdf](https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/resource-files/Cost%20Of%20Food%20Thrifty%20Food%20Plan%20December%202024.pdf)). Multiplied by 12, this estimate is \$11,856.00 per year for a family of four, and thus the poverty threshold should be \$35,568.00. However, as it can be seen in the above table, this is not the poverty threshold that is used to measure poverty. The 2024 Federal Poverty Threshold is \$32,130 for a family of four, number well below three times the cost of the most basic food plan for a family of four. 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. According to the Ludwig Institute for Shared Economic Prosperity, 60% of American families are not able to meet their basic needs (<https://www.lisep.org/content/majority-of-americans-cant-achieve-a-minimal-quality-of-life-according-to-new-ludwig-institute-research>).

As prices continue to rise and governmental supports decline, more and more people will be unable to meet their basic needs even when poverty rates appear low or decline. The current methods of measuring poverty are flawed and outdated, potentially masking the true extent of the problem. Reported decreases in poverty may simply reflect the shortcomings of how poverty is defined and inconsistencies in how the government applies the established formula. Consequently, the actual poverty levels are likely higher than official figures suggest, and the trends are probably more negative than they appear. Our poverty measurements have become unreliable because the government only increases the poverty line to account for general inflation using the Consumer Price Index. This neglects the real costs of essential goods and services like food, housing, and energy that disproportionately affect low-income families.

#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 a Fulbright Scholar (2024-2025) and 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 40 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 X 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

All maps, tables, and graphs by the authors. All rights reserved.

Sources:

Population, poverty, and median income data obtained from the US Bureau of the Census, September 11, 2025.

For tables:(except ZIP codes and TN counties): 2024 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates (US Bureau of the Census) S1701, B17001B, B17001C, B17001D, B17001H, B17001I, S1903, DP05.

For ZIP code table, Census Tract maps and TN counties: 2023 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates (US Bureau of the Census) DP05, S1701

All Previous Data except Latino (Hispanic): 2011-2023ACS 1-Y Estimates (Table S1701: Poverty Status in the Past 12 Months. Other Tables: DP03, C01001); 2005-2024 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 2016-2023-Year Estimates (US Bureau of the Census).