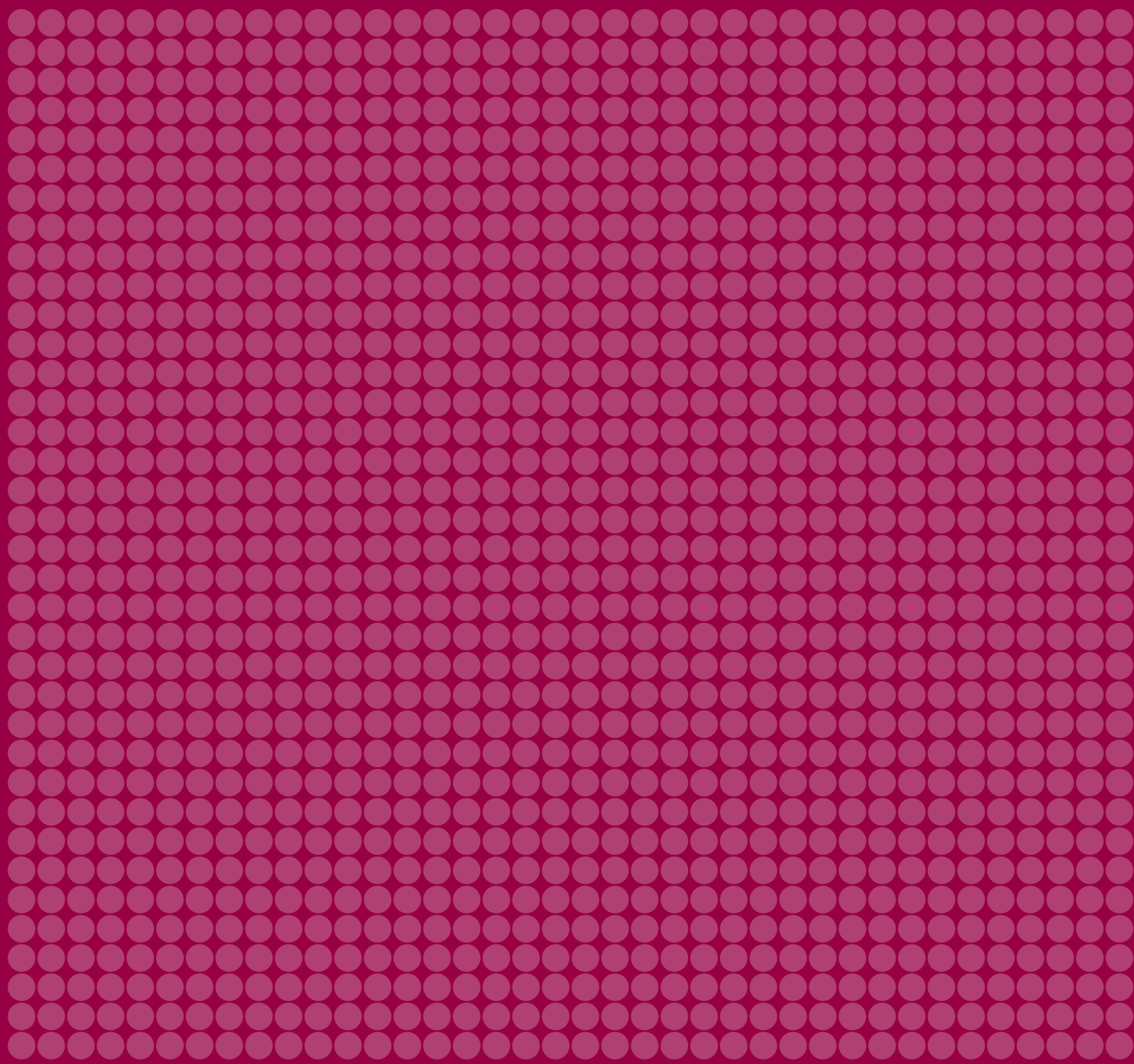


# Community



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## Neighborhoods matter in the development of children.

Neighborhoods can help or hinder parents in their efforts to raise happy and successful children. Living in a crime-ridden, deteriorating community can undermine a family's efforts to create a safe and healthful environment for their children. Living in a safe, close-knit neighborhood, on the other hand, can buffer children from some of the effects of a problematic home environment.<sup>1</sup> Resources like parks, playgrounds, and after-school programs help parents provide their children with enriching experiences, and social connections among adults promote positive parenting by increasing parents' sense of support and well-being.

Risk factors like poverty, unemployment, and crime can reach children by multiple pathways. For example, living in a poor family has been associated with a variety of negative outcomes. But not all poor families live in high-poverty neighborhoods. Those who do may face risks that poor families in higher-income neighborhoods do not face. Research on community-level risk factors shows that unfavorable neighborhood conditions can increase children's risk for adverse experiences early in life, which in turn may interfere with optimal brain development, cognitive growth, and emotional and behavioral adjustment.<sup>2</sup>

## Community influences begin to affect children even in the first three years of life.

Neighborhood characteristics are sometimes assumed to have only minimal effects in early childhood, because young children are supervised by parents and caregivers most of the time. While it is true that parents and family are the strongest influences on a child's development during the first years of life, the community in which a family lives can also have important effects.

A growing body of research shows that the social and economic aspects of neighborhoods are associated with children's outcomes, independent of family resources and income. Neighborhood factors like income, safety, and social cohesion have been linked to cognitive and behavioral development in early childhood—in some cases, as young as age two.<sup>3,5</sup>

## Neighborhood conditions can affect parenting quality.

Neighborhoods tend to affect children by affecting the family environment. Parents are influenced by neighborhood conditions in ways that affect their parenting. A dangerous neighborhood can increase parents' stress and increase their risk for mental health problems like depression.

Emotional distress, in turn, is likely to reduce parental warmth and responsiveness and may lead to parenting that is more harsh and controlling.<sup>2,6</sup> Children in poor neighborhoods tend to have fewer learning experiences at home and lower quality interactions with their parents.<sup>3,5</sup>

## Poverty is on the move in Memphis and Shelby County.

Neighborhood poverty typically means that family, school, and neighborhood assets are limited while risk factors that threaten children's healthy development are abundant. Neighborhood income has been linked to important aspects of children's home environments, including safety, maternal warmth, and learning stimulation.<sup>7</sup> In high-poverty neighborhoods, children are more likely to be exposed to violence, crime, and drug abuse.<sup>2,8</sup>

As a result, neighborhood poverty has negative implications for children, regardless of family characteristics. Children living in poor neighborhoods have more social, behavioral, and academic problems, on average, than children in more affluent neighborhoods, even after accounting for family factors like income.<sup>9,10</sup>

Neighborhood poverty is usually defined as the percentage of families in a given area who have incomes below the Federal Poverty Level. Research suggests that low rates of poverty are not always associated with neighborhood problems. But in neighborhoods with poverty rates of about 20 percent or higher, there is a significant increase in the likelihood of crime, violence, teen pregnancy, and other social problems.<sup>11</sup>

New census data conveys another alarming reality: concentrated neighborhood poverty is increasing in Memphis as poverty spreads to neighborhoods that ten years ago had much lower poverty rates (Figure 1). Communities that were once considered "neighborhoods of opportunity" can no longer make that claim.

- Poverty is now distributed well beyond the traditional inner city neighborhoods north and south of downtown.
- Newly affected areas form an arc from northeast to northwest Memphis and from southwest to southeast Memphis. Raleigh, Frayser, Fox Meadows, Parkway Village, and Hickory Hill have all seen rising rates of poverty.
- This trend is likely to continue: Neighborhoods in the 10-19 percent poverty category are predicted to reach the 20 percent threshold over time.

For child poverty, the numbers are even more grim (Figure 2):

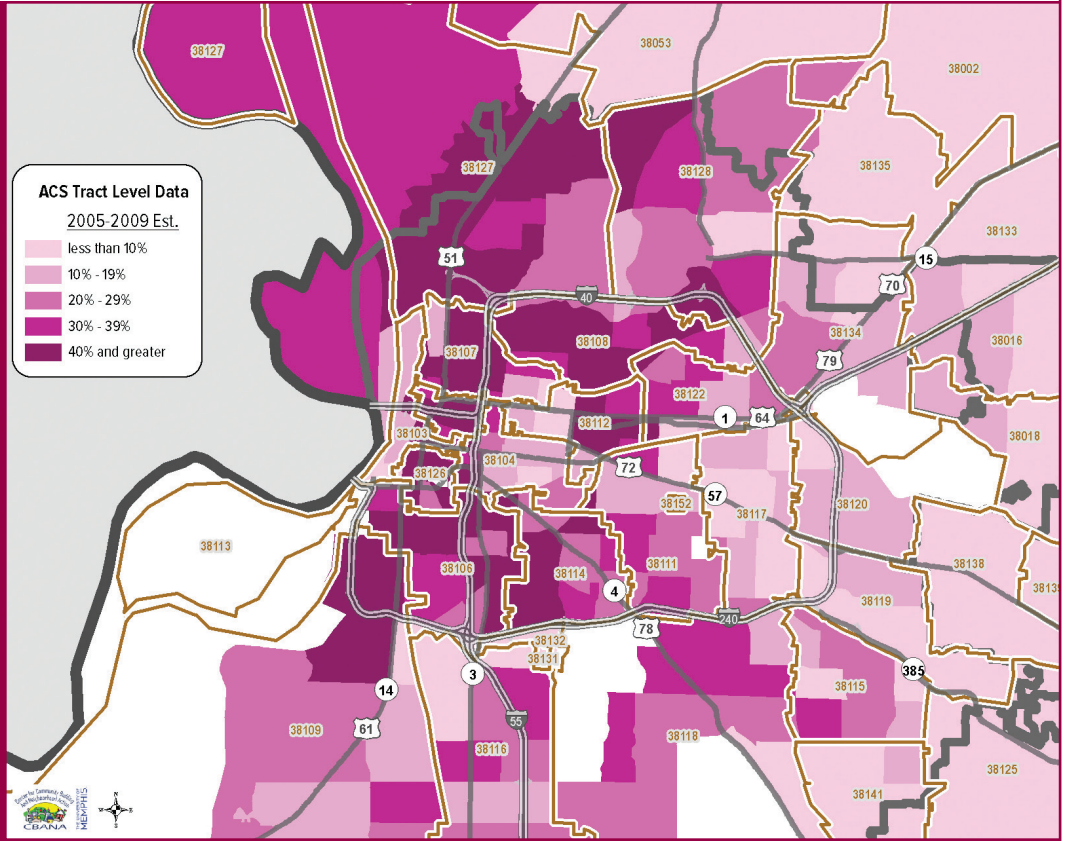
- Four out of five Memphis census tracts have child poverty rates of at least 20 percent.
- Over half of all tracts have child poverty rates of 40 percent or higher.

Outside the city, in suburban Shelby County, all census tracts have poverty rates below 20 percent. In Memphis, however,

- Nearly half of all census tracts have poverty rates of 20 percent or higher.
- Nearly one out of three census tracts have poverty rates of at least 40 percent.

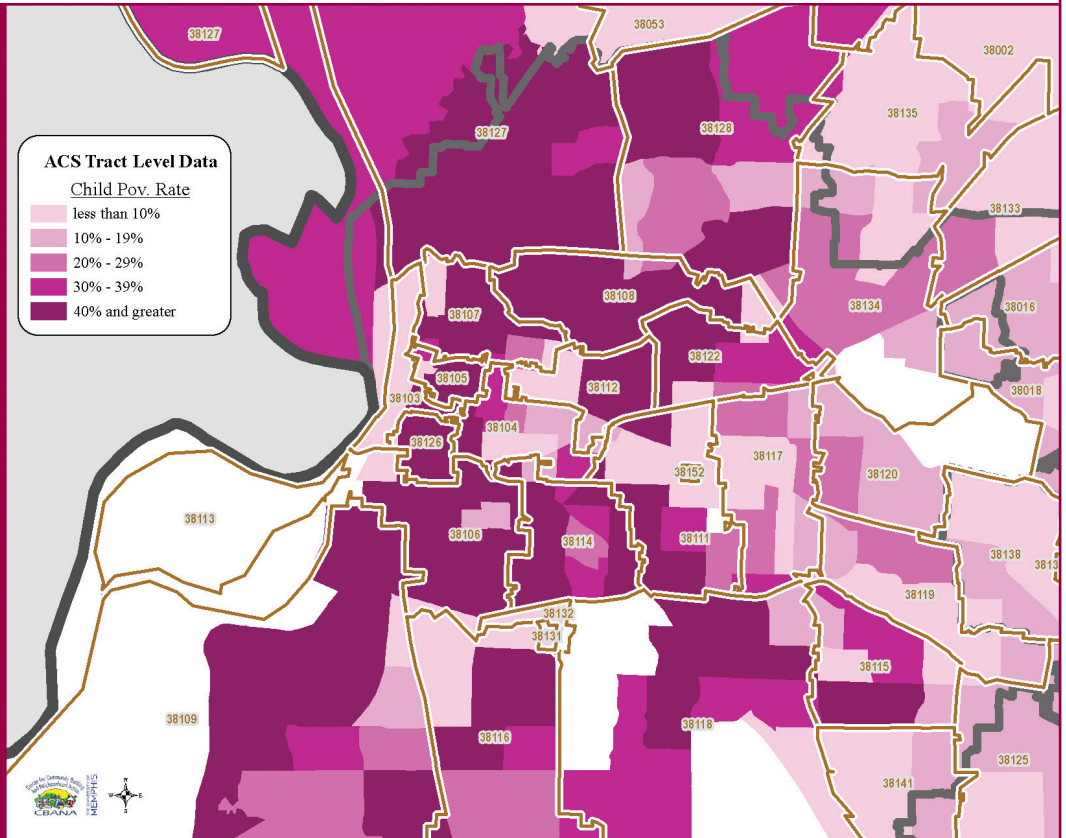
**FIGURE 1:**  
Percent of Total  
Population in  
Poverty by  
Census Tract,  
Shelby County

Source: US Census  
Bureau. American  
Community Survey,  
2005-2009 Estimates



**FIGURE 2:**  
Percent of Children  
in Poverty by  
Census Tract,  
Shelby County

Source: US Census  
Bureau. American  
Community Survey,  
2005-2009 Estimates

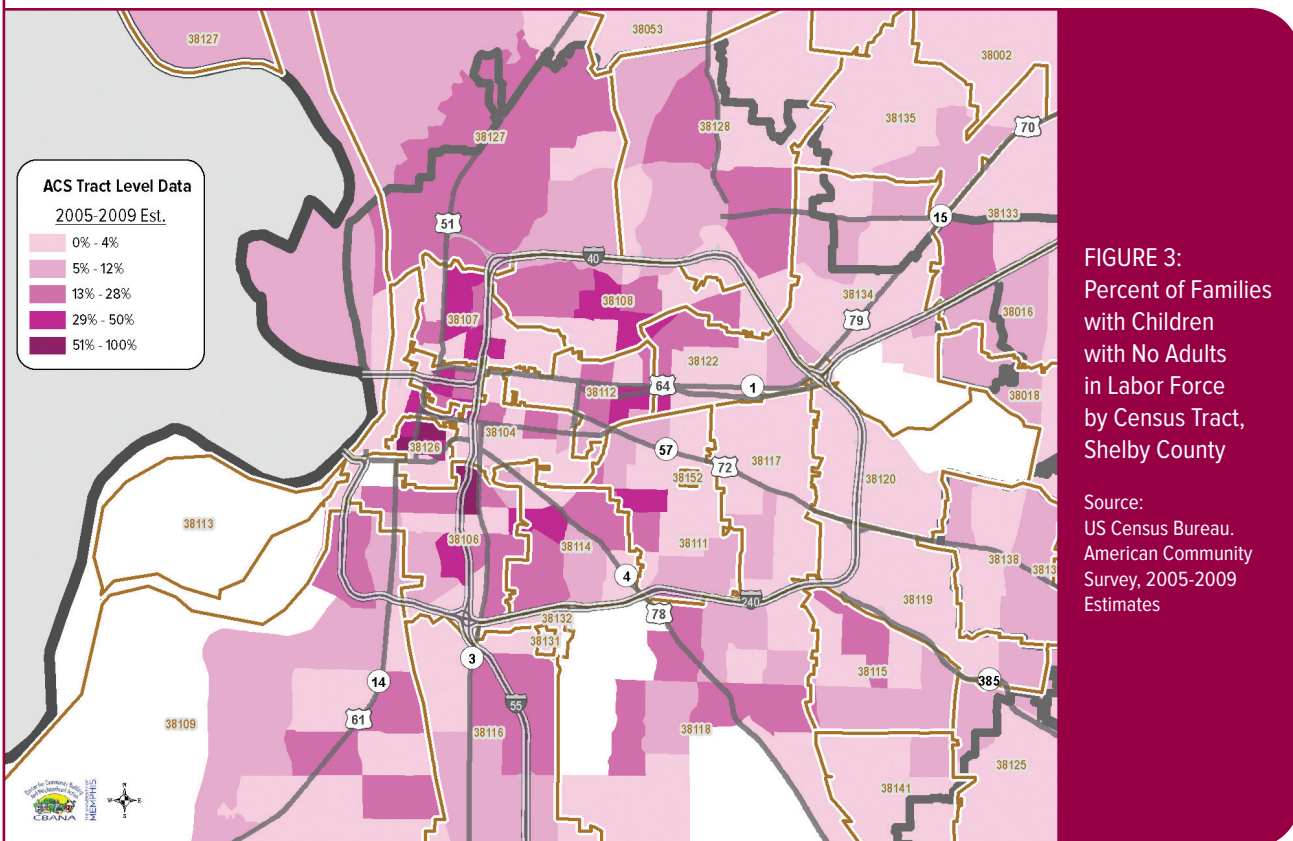


## Widespread unemployment creates an unfavorable environment for children.

Many children live in households where there is no working adult – no parent or grandparent, no aunt or uncle, no older siblings. The likelihood of chronic poverty and other threats to healthy development among children in these families is high. Neighborhood unemployment has been linked to negative birth outcomes like prematurity<sup>12</sup> and to long-term child outcomes including educational attainment and employment.<sup>13</sup>

As Figure 3 shows, unemployment clusters in the same neighborhoods as child poverty. Children in these communities lack working adult role models both in their homes and in their neighborhoods.

- City-wide, about 8 percent of families with children include no working adults.
- In high-poverty areas the figure is likely to be double or even higher.



## School and residential instability can interfere with children’s development.

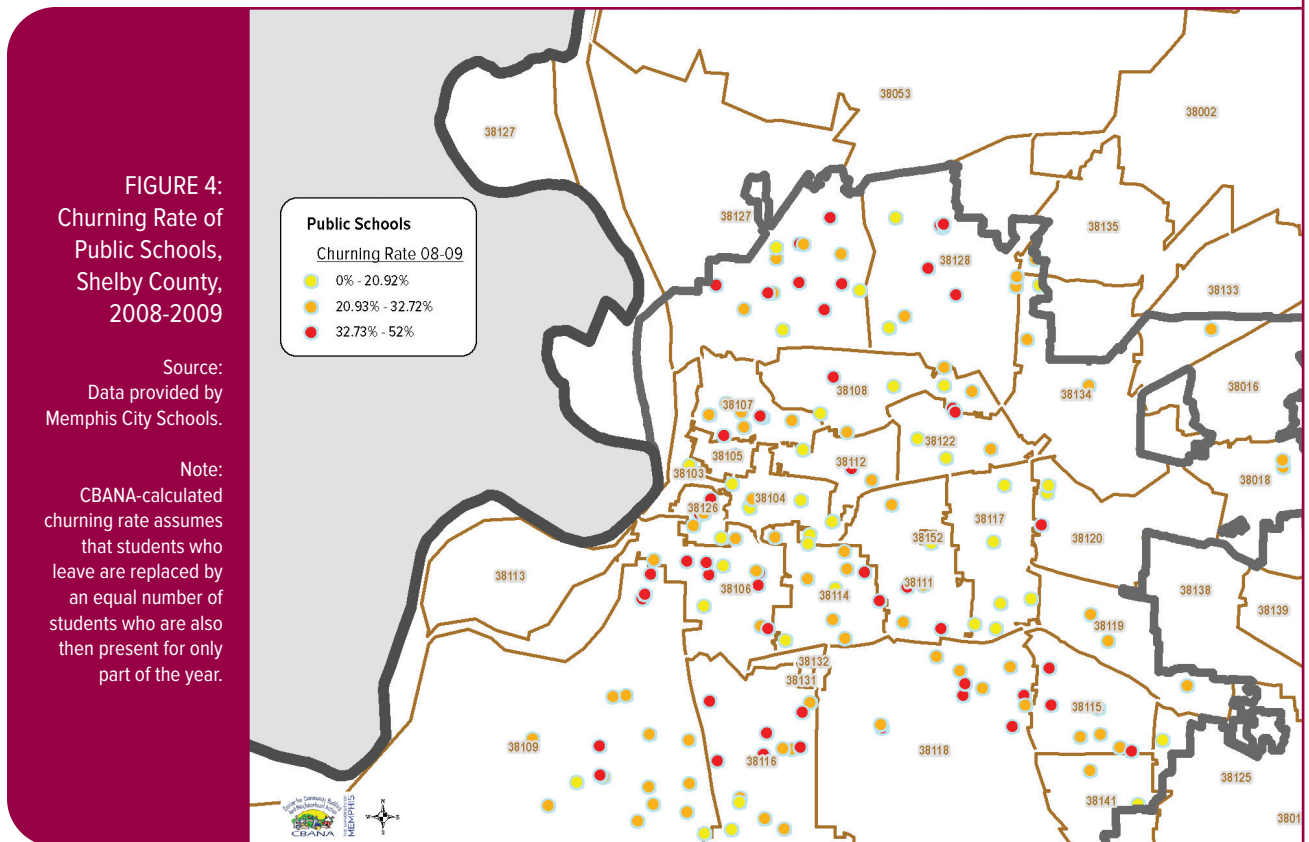
The term churning is used to refer to the movement of children in and out of local schools. A school’s churning rate is the percentage of students enrolled at any time during the school year who are in that school for only part of the year.

For many students, frequent school transfers result in lower achievement, more behavior problems, and higher risk for grade retention and dropout. In schools with high levels of churning, teachers are less able to meet students’ needs and to adhere to the curriculum. In some cases, such schools are an entire grade year behind schools with low churning rates.<sup>14</sup>

Most school churning is a result of families changing residences.<sup>15</sup> Overall, 22 percent of households in Memphis moved in 2009.

Residential mobility is typically much higher among families in poor and low-income neighborhoods.<sup>16</sup> In communities where families move in and out frequently, adults share fewer social ties and are less likely to help each other monitor and supervise children’s behavior. Additionally, neighborhoods with lower social cohesion tend to have higher rates of crime and delinquency.<sup>10,17</sup> School and residential instability, then, represent important and all-too-common risk factors faced by our community’s children .

Figure 4 shows churning rates for Memphis City Schools (MCS). Comparing the distribution of high churning rates to the distribution of poverty in Figure 1 reveals that high churning schools tend to be in high poverty neighborhoods.



## High quality childcare promotes early cognitive and emotional development.

Affordable high-quality childcare benefits children and their families. It can improve low-income children's school readiness, leading to higher achievement later in school.<sup>18</sup> Children of low-income families, however, are more likely than other children to receive low-quality care, especially during their earliest years.<sup>19</sup>

Ready Set Grow is a local initiative to expand the number and geographic reach of quality childcare centers. The gold standard of quality for center-based early care and education is accreditation by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC).

Figure 5 shows the expansion of high-quality childcare to lower-income neighborhoods between 2004 and 2010. The percentage of residents receiving the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) is used as a rough measure of neighborhood socioeconomic status.

- In 2004 when the initiative began, most NAEYC-accredited centers in Shelby County were located in more affluent midtown, east Memphis, and suburban areas.
- By 2010 Ready Set Grow had succeeded in increasing NAEYC accreditation among centers in neighborhoods with growing poverty and child poverty.

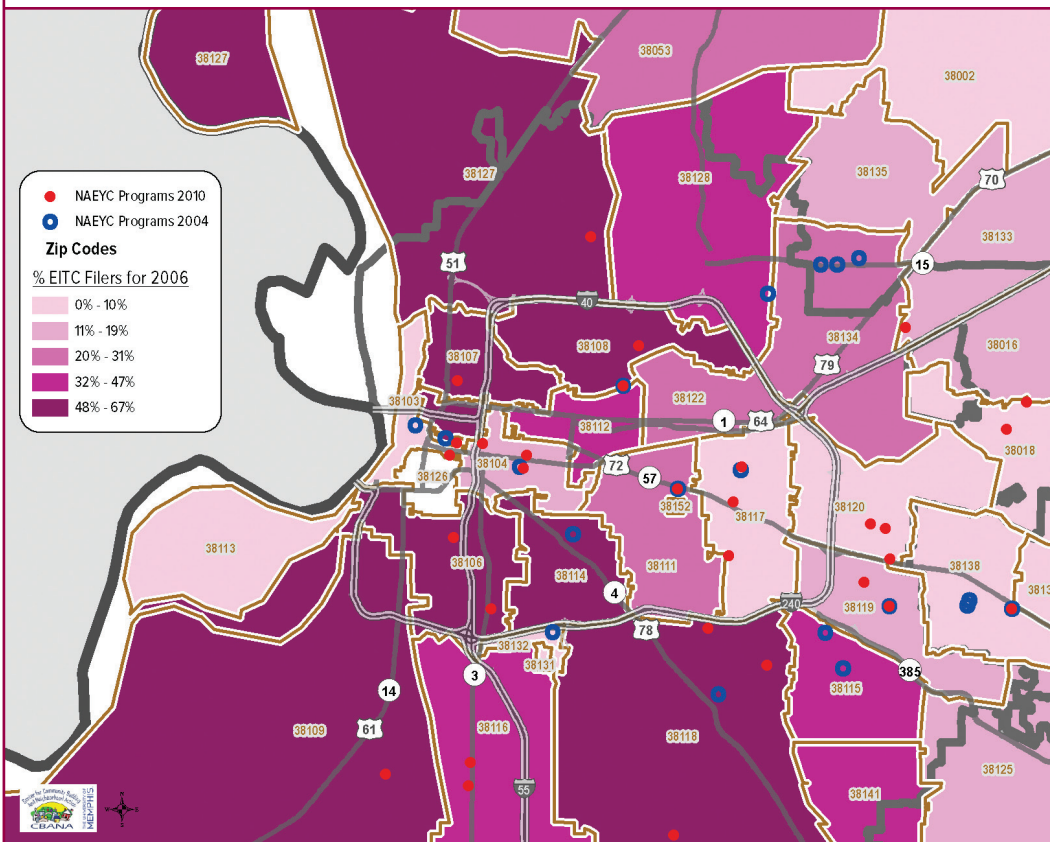


FIGURE 5:  
NAEYC Programs  
and Percent of  
EITC Filers by Zip  
Code

Source: Ready, Set,  
Grow! Initiative, College  
of Education, University  
of Memphis 2010



## Exposure to violence can disrupt children’s behavioral and emotional development.

A child may be affected by violence by being a victim, by witnessing a violent act, or even by hearing about violence suffered by friends or family members. Nationally, more than 60 percent of children reported being exposed to violence, either directly or indirectly, during the past year. In cities like Memphis with high family and neighborhood poverty, the percentage is likely to be even higher.

An evolving body of research reveals the wide array of negative outcomes associated with children’s exposure to community violence. These range from anxiety and depression to aggressive and antisocial behavior.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, witnessing domestic violence can have lifelong effects on a child’s cognitive, emotional, and social development. Young children are more likely than older children to witness domestic violence directly.<sup>21</sup>

Memphis neighborhoods with the most violent crime and domestic violence have a disproportionate share of children.<sup>22</sup>

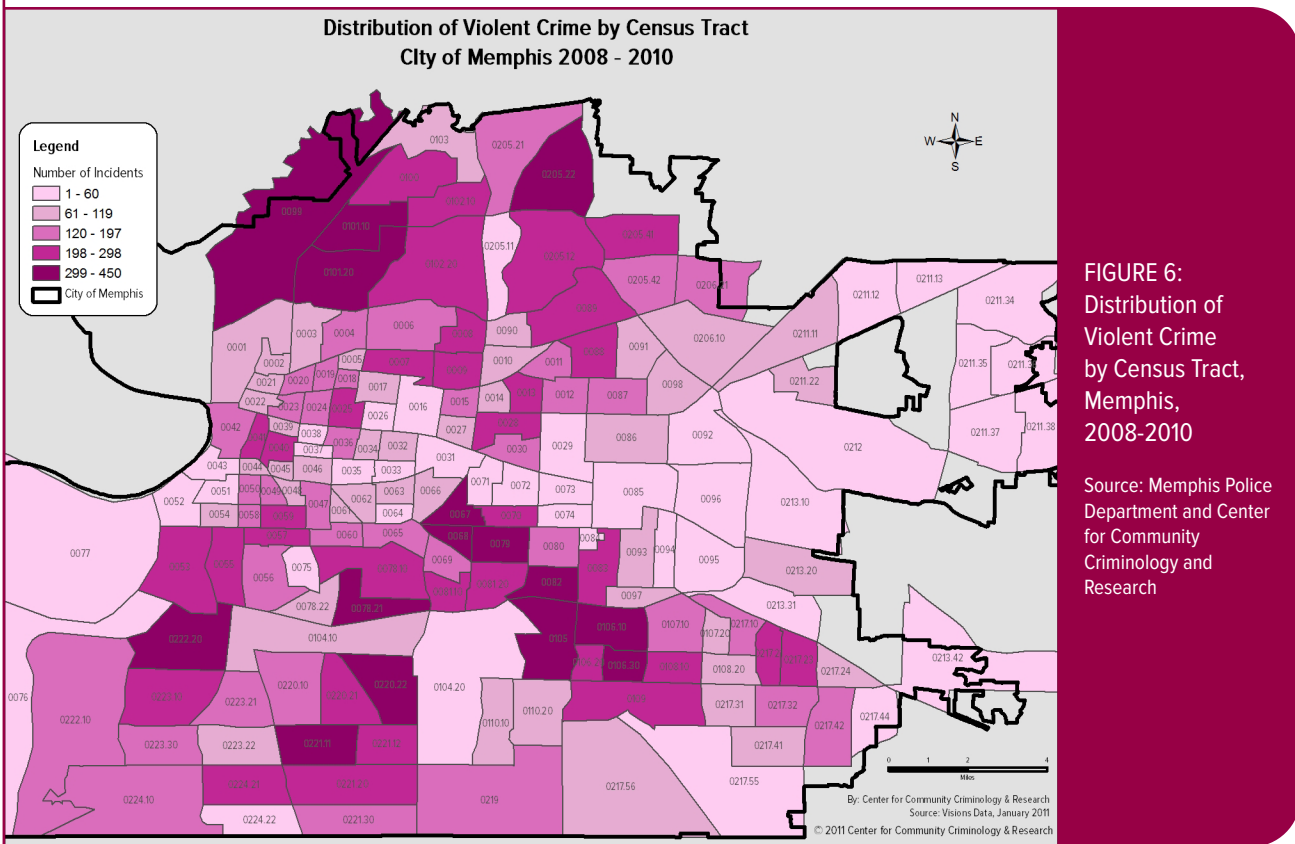
- The top 20 percent of census tracts ranked by prevalence of violent crime are home to 35 percent of children under age 5.
- The top 20 percent of census tracts ranked by prevalence of domestic violence are home to 32 percent of children under age 5.

## Neighborhood interventions should be part of community efforts to improve children’s lives.

The neighborhoods in which children live influence their chances for healthy development and long-term well-being. Community-level interventions can be an important avenue for improving outcomes for at-risk children and families.

One such strategy is Defending Childhood, a new initiative of the U.S. Department of Justice. Defending Childhood will address children’s exposure to violence by supporting community efforts in prevention and treatment. Shelby County is one of eight sites chosen to receive planning funds to improve identification and assessment, increase access to quality services, and develop new programs as needed. Eventually, four of the initial eight demonstration sites will be chosen for full implementation.<sup>23</sup>

Figure 6 shows the distribution of violent crime in Shelby County by census tract. Outlined in black are the three police precincts—Old Allen Station, Mt. Moriah Station, and Ridgeway Station—that are expected to receive funding under the Defending Childhood initiative.



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