

Children's Community Environment



The City of Memphis is fraught with high-risk neighborhoods for children.

Child support systems, peer influences and other external factors are brought to bear at the neighborhood level. Children experience “neighborhood effects” on their health, education and general welfare. Social support and peers can mitigate or aggravate risks such as family poverty and economic hardship. The community environment can undermine or reinforce the effects of parenting on child development. Research has tended to distinguish among high poverty and lower poverty neighborhoods as the best way of gauging neighborhood effects, but new statistical applications are enabling us to identify “high vulnerability” neighborhoods where interventions might be a priority. With more detailed analysis we will be able to identify poor neighborhoods where child outcomes are better than expected. That will enable us to understand better how neighborhoods can counter family-level risks.

Understanding high-risk neighborhood environments and their independent effects.

The significance of concentrated poverty and decentralizing poverty for children and families is difficult to gauge without knowing more about their neighborhoods. It's not enough to assume that poor families moving to neighborhoods that have been less poor historically will result in enhanced opportunities and better outcomes for children.

The Child and Family Research Center, in conjunction with The Urban Institute's Annie E. Casey-supported “Making Connections” initiative, developed an index of neighborhood-level risks for early child development. The index is based on statistical indicators that have been related to neighborhood effects on child outcomes.

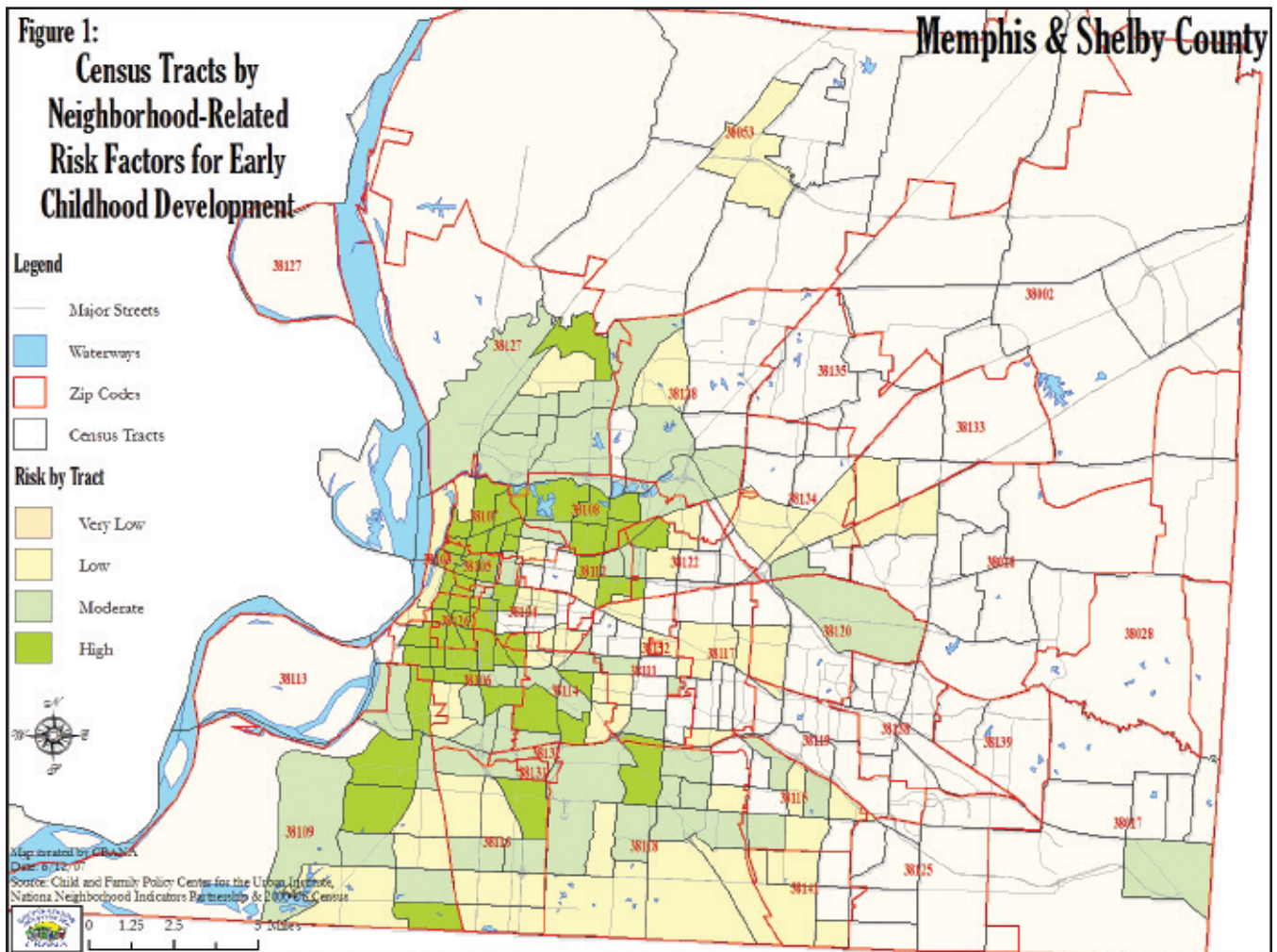
Each of the more than 68,000 U.S. census tracts was coded in comparison to nationwide norms on 10 indicators. “Vulnerable” census tracts vary significantly from the national statistical norms for indicator characteristics.

Poverty is associated with the vulnerability index but was not included as an individual indicator. This enables researchers to grasp better the more specific circumstances that undermine healthy child development in vulnerable neighborhoods.

When we compare the number of neighborhoods with concentrated poverty to neighborhoods high on the Child Vulnerability Index we can narrow the focus locally to 50 percent fewer census tracts including 48,000 children in 48 high-risk tracts.

The highest-risk census tracts represent over one out of every five census tracts in Memphis (22%). This smaller, but nevertheless significant, group of neighborhoods may require more intense supportive interventions than high-poverty neighborhoods in general.

Census Tracts by Neighborhood-Related Risk Factors for Early Childhood Development



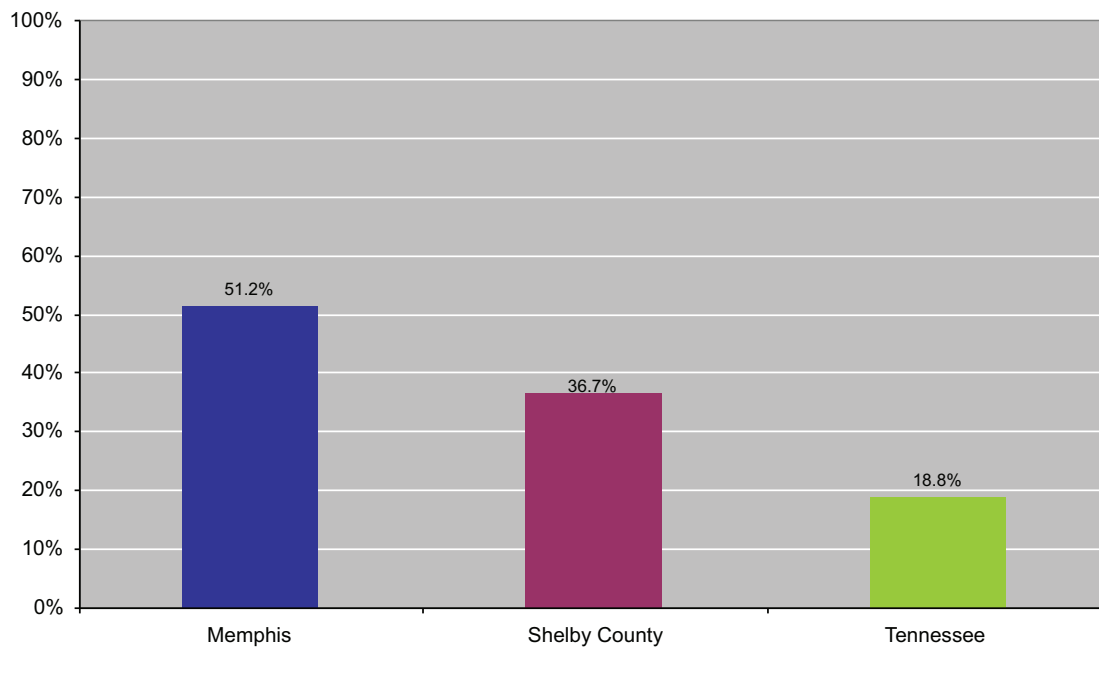
Neighborhoods of concentrated poverty are concentrated in the City of Memphis.

Concentrated neighborhood poverty is defined as a neighborhood (census tract) in which at least 20 percent of households live below the poverty level. As is family poverty, neighborhood poverty also is associated with poor health and developmental outcomes for children.

Jobs and good schools are less likely to be found in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty. This places parents at a disadvantage and lowers the quality of family environment. Additionally, half of the children in high poverty neighborhoods change schools at least once a year. Changing schools is associated with academic under-performance.

- More than half (92,741) of all children in the City of Memphis in 2000 lived in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty. Nearly all Shelby County children who resided in areas of concentrated poverty in 2000 lived in the City of Memphis.

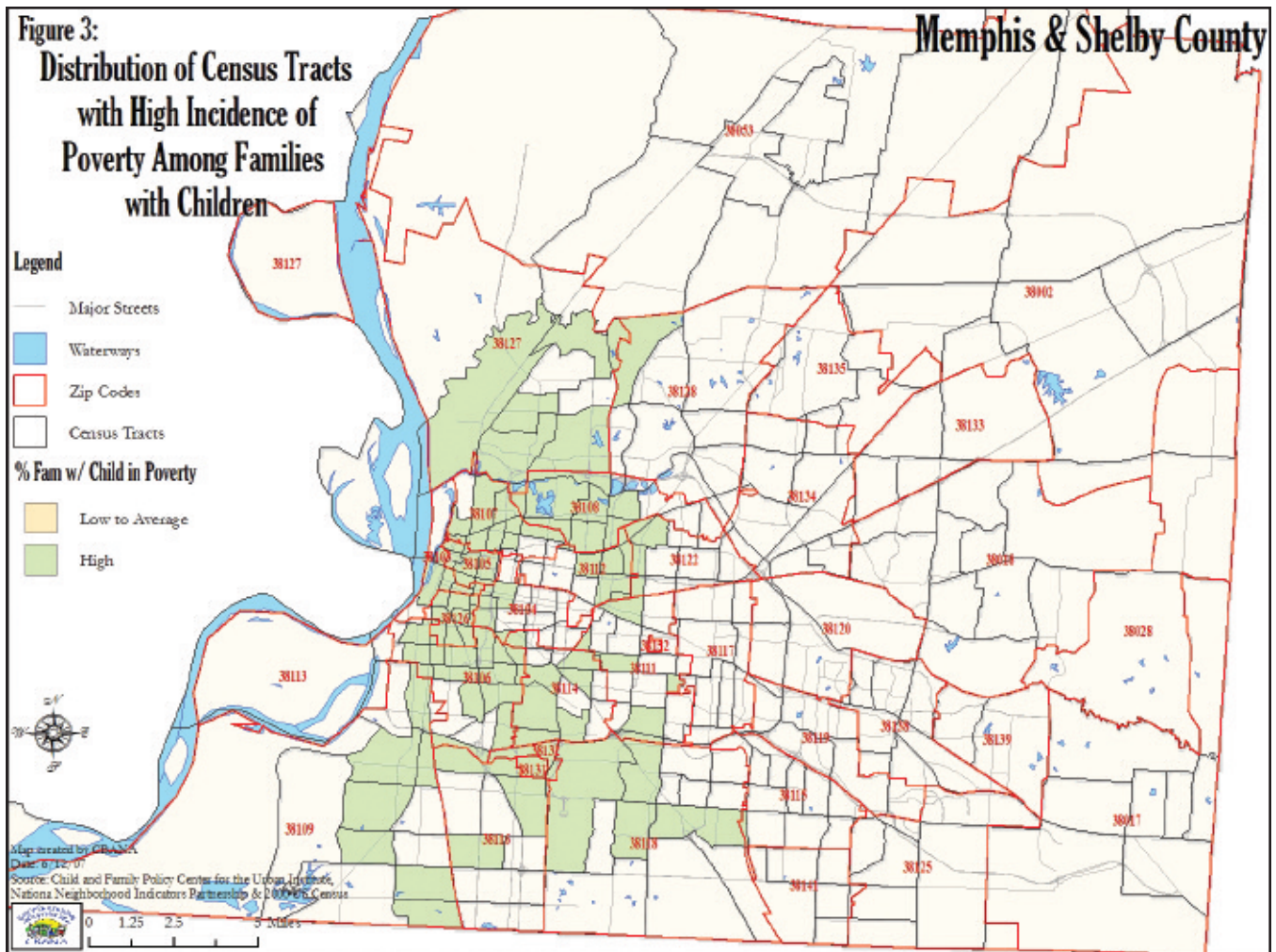
Distribution of Children Living in Neighborhoods of Poverty in the City of Memphis, Shelby County and Tennessee, 2000



Source: Annie E. Casey Foundation Kids Count, 2000

- Nearly half of Memphis census tracts (74 tracts) had a high concentration of poverty among families with children in 2000.

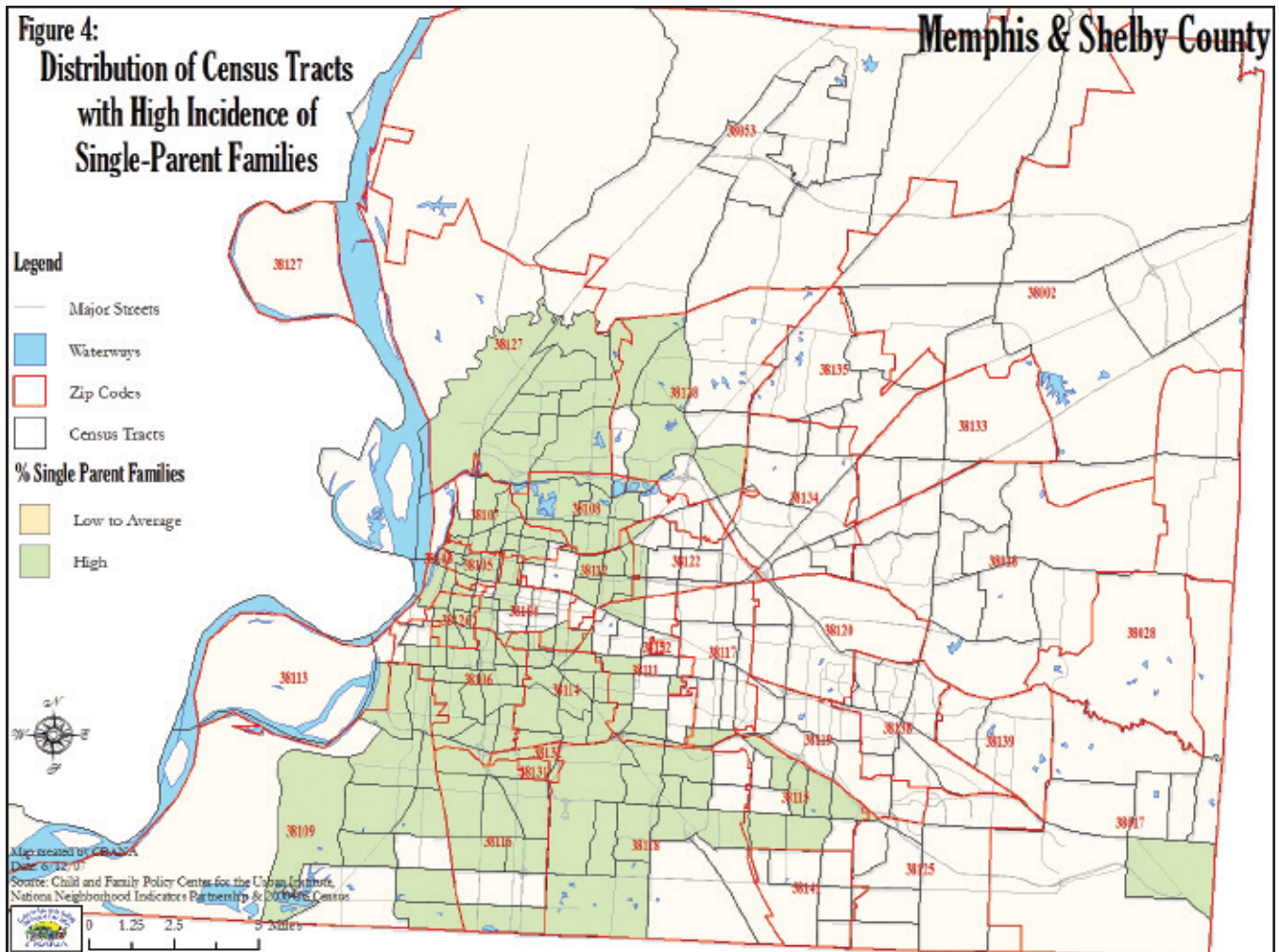
Distribution of Census Tracts with High Incidence of Poverty Among Families with Children



Although this pattern should not be confused with census tracts having large actual numbers of poor and low-income children, it does imply that there is very little variation among families with children in the neighborhood. That is important in terms of peer influences.

In fact, the larger actual numbers of poor and low-income families with children are increasingly outside of these tracts. Yet, they are located in tracts with high proportions of single-parent families that have moved out of the highest-poverty neighborhoods in response to demolition of public housing and other low-cost housing.

Distribution of Census Tracts with High Incidence of Single-Parent Families



- Nearly two out of three Memphis census tracts (106 tracts) and one suburban tract had high incidences of single-parent families in 2000.

When families in poverty leave one neighborhood it appears that they re-concentrate in another.

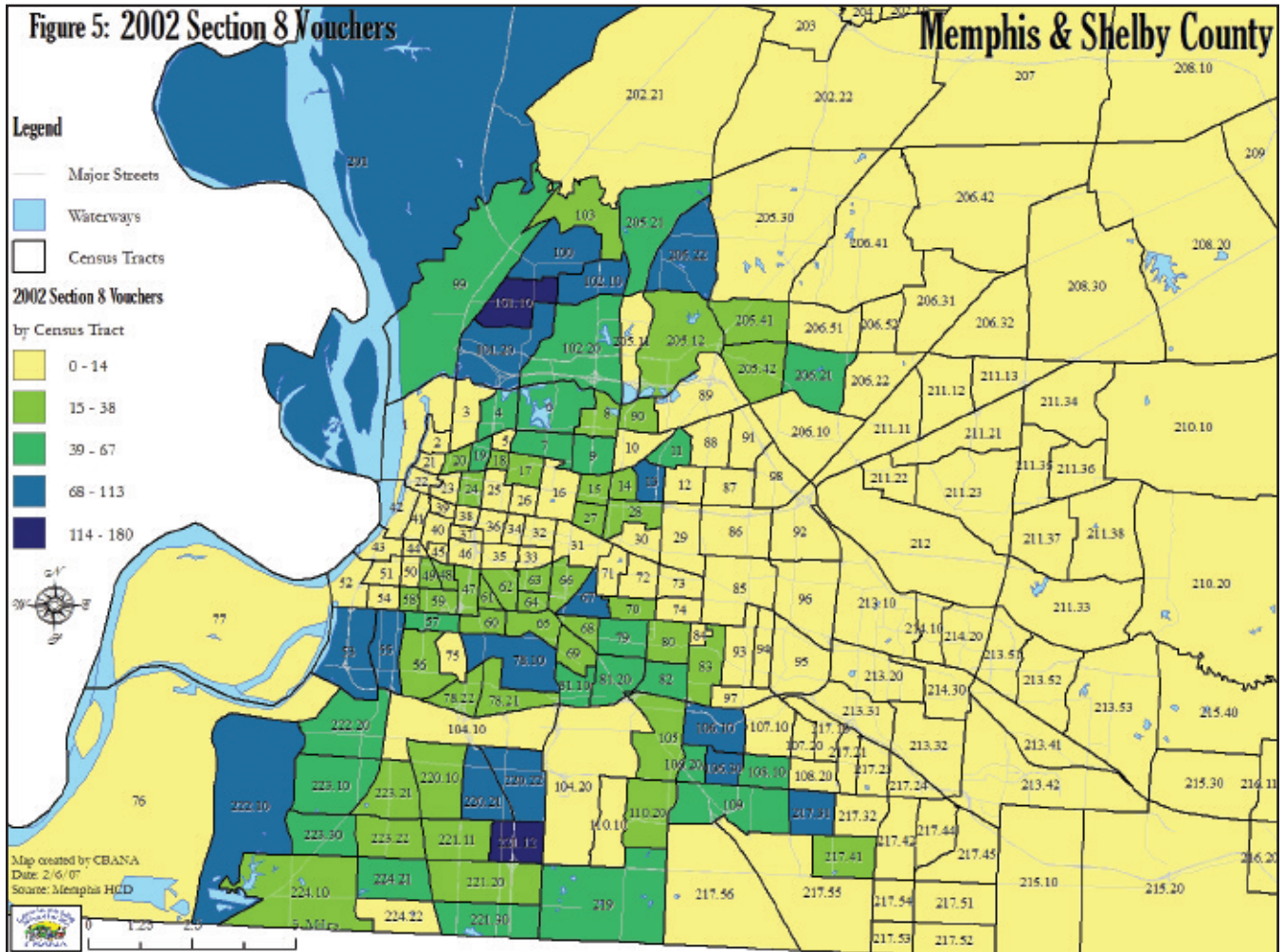
The difference in the appearances of Figure 4 and Figure 3 represents the decentralization of poverty and the changing geographic dynamics of reaching higher-risk families. De-concentration of poverty was encouraged in many cities. Public housing was demolished, and poor families were relocated into neighborhoods with less poverty and greater educational and employment opportunities. This strategy offered promising outcomes for children, according to research from the 1970s.

More recent research, though, shows less favorable outcomes. This may reflect the tendency for poverty pockets to re-cluster within better-off census tracts. It may be evidence that these formerly higher-income census tracts are moving toward concentrated poverty status in Memphis and across the country. (See endnote 2.)

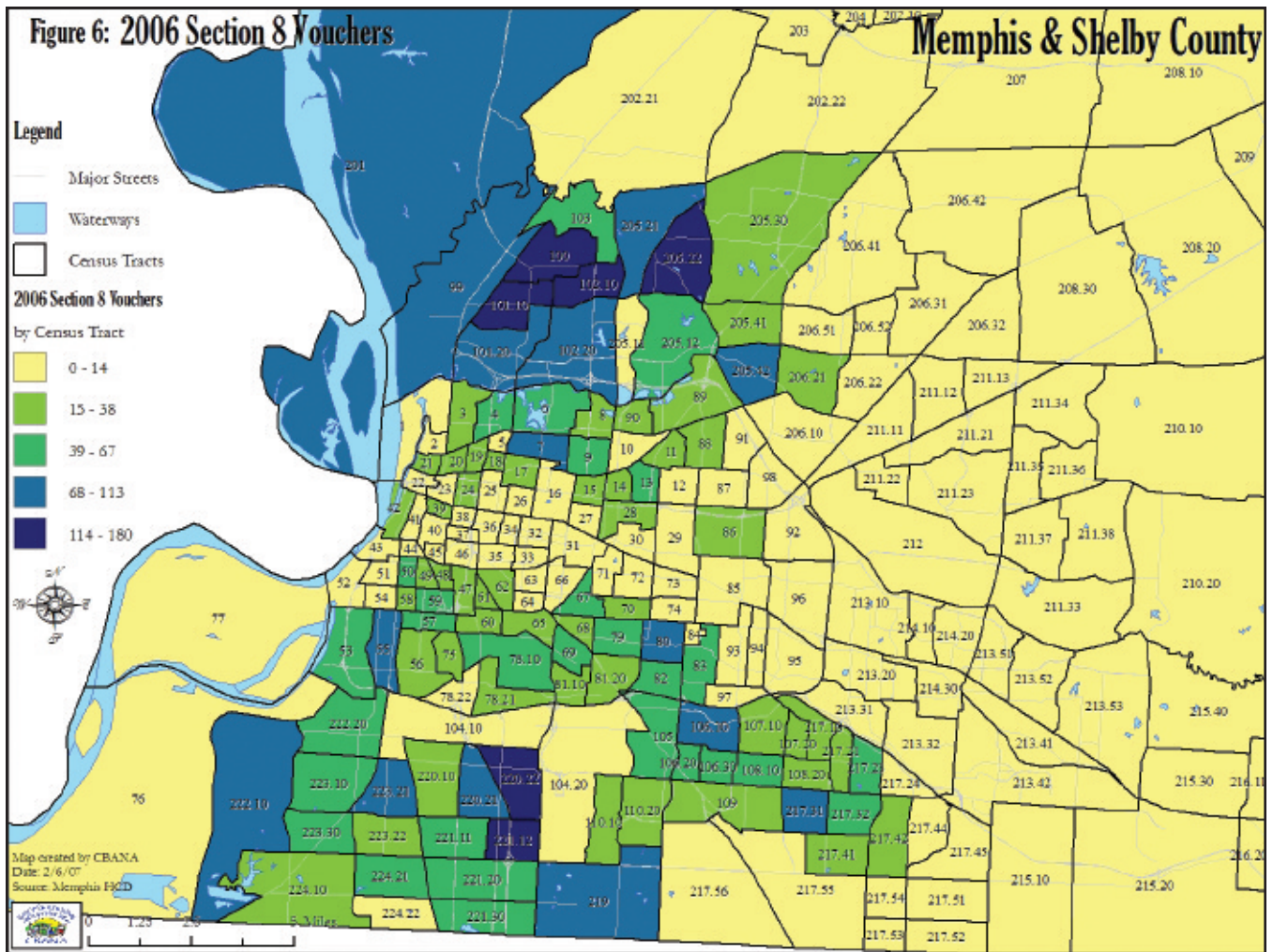
Higher-income neighborhoods that absorb poor-or-low-income families are lower risk overall on the Child Vulnerability Index and generally have greater institutional and organizational resources. However, there may be an absence of support systems, such as child care, for single parents in neighborhoods where traditionally there have been fewer single-parent families.

The decentralization of Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers is evident in the comparison of density maps from 2002 and 2006. When low-income households decentralize by leaving one area they appear to re-concentrate in other neighborhoods.

2002 Section 8 Vouchers



2006 Section 8 Vouchers



Support services for low income families may be less developed in neighborhoods receiving large numbers of new voucher households. For example, the Earned Income Tax Credit is an organized outreach strategy to low-income, working families that are eligible. In Zip Code 38126, an inner-city Zip Code with highly concentrated poverty and well-established channels for outreach, 75 percent of eligible families actually filed for the tax credit. In Zip Codes 38115 and 38118, where labor force participation is much higher (a pre-requisite for getting the tax credit), poverty less concentrated and the number of low-income households increasing, only 50 percent and 59 percent of eligible households, respectively, filed for the tax credit.

Social Capital is a key asset in neighborhood environment.

Neighborhoods that provide a supportive environment to reinforce effective parenting, complementary opportunities for positive child development, surrogate supervision, nurturing and positive stimulation for children, are said to have high “social capital.” Such neighborhoods can counter risks to health and child development that are generally associated with poverty.

Neighborhoods with concentrated poverty and physical blight tend to have low social capital. Poverty is a problem not only because poor families lack personal resources for effective parenting, but also because community support systems in poor neighborhoods may also be lacking. Poverty and blight mean poor living conditions and high rates of residential transience. Neighbors are less likely to know, and look out for, one another than in more stable neighborhoods.

- When neighborhood support systems are strengthened families and children are more likely to overcome challenges associated with poverty.
- Neighborhoods of concentrated poverty suffer often from near-absence of role models that contributes to weak social capital.
- Low labor force participation is associated with absent role models, weak connections to outside resources and anti-social behavior.

We can understand neighborhood-level risk factors better by knowing more about how families perceive their neighborhoods and neighbors in Memphis and Shelby County. Social surveys measure resident perceptions of social capital and threats to social capital using a standard set of questions.

One out of every five-to-six households in Shelby County is in a neighborhood where signs of neglect signal a lack of care and concern. Data from the American Housing Survey for Memphis and Shelby County reveal that blighted neighborhoods are concentrated in the City of Memphis.

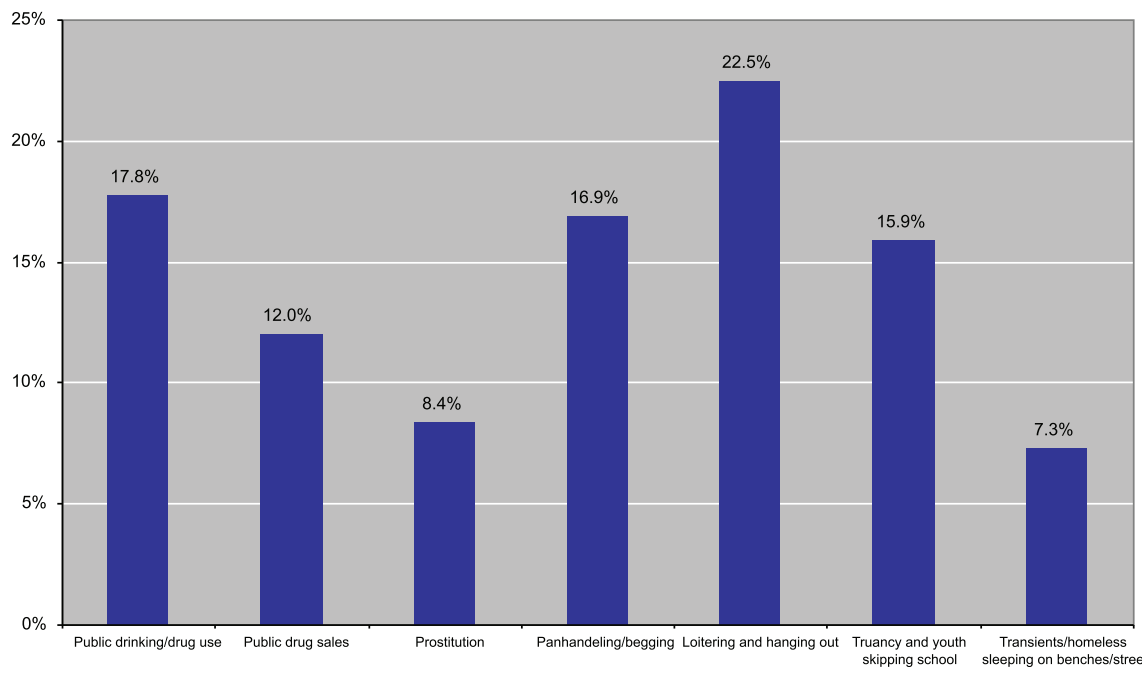
Children can identify assets and liabilities in their neighborhoods.

Asked to describe what they thought of in relation to the terms “healthy” and “unhealthy,” middle school children in a TUCI-sponsored “Health Information Project” in north Memphis focused on neighborhood blight. They described the redeveloped “uptown” neighborhood as healthy, and the neighborhood surrounding Humes Middle School as unhealthy.

National research from the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods documented the relationship between blight and diminished social capital, which in turn appears to be related to parental stress.

- Of all the social disorder surveyed, loitering and hanging out is the most common (22.5%).
- Transience and homelessness is reported the least.
- Overall, one out of every five-to-six households in Shelby County is confronted with social disorder.

Resident Reports of Neighborhood Social Disorder by Problems

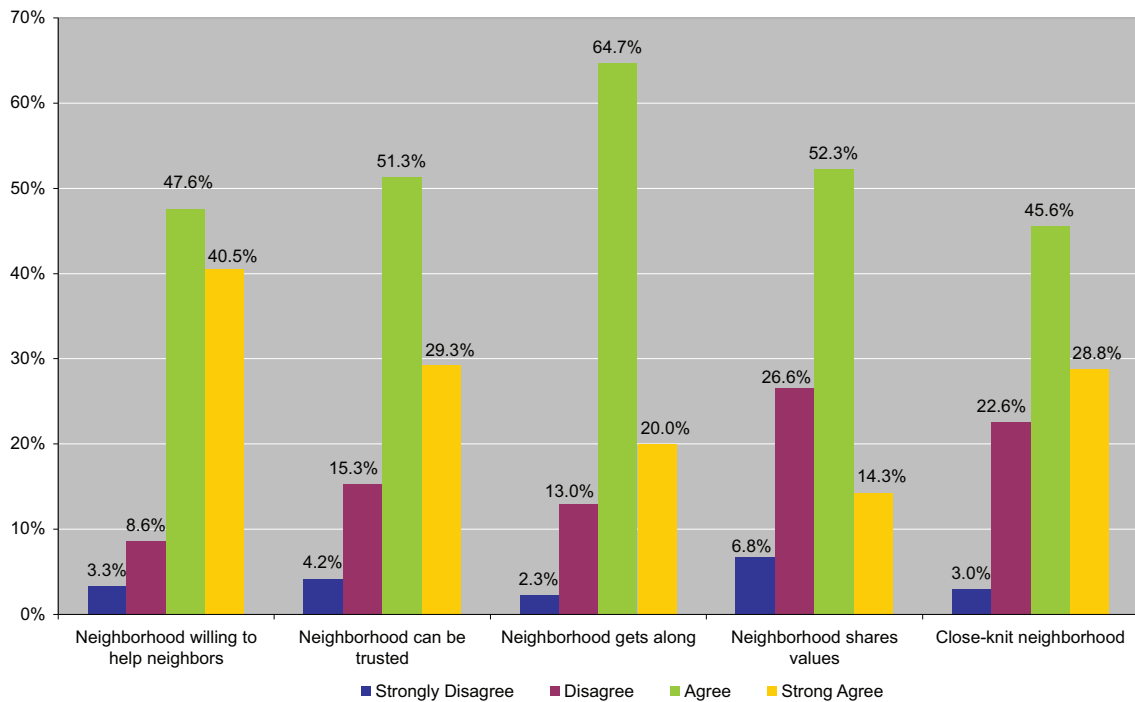


Source: *Mid-South Social Survey: Memphis and Shelby County Criminal Victimization Survey, 2003-2005*

Social support varies widely among neighborhoods. Some parents and families perceive themselves in resource-rich environments while others experience isolation.

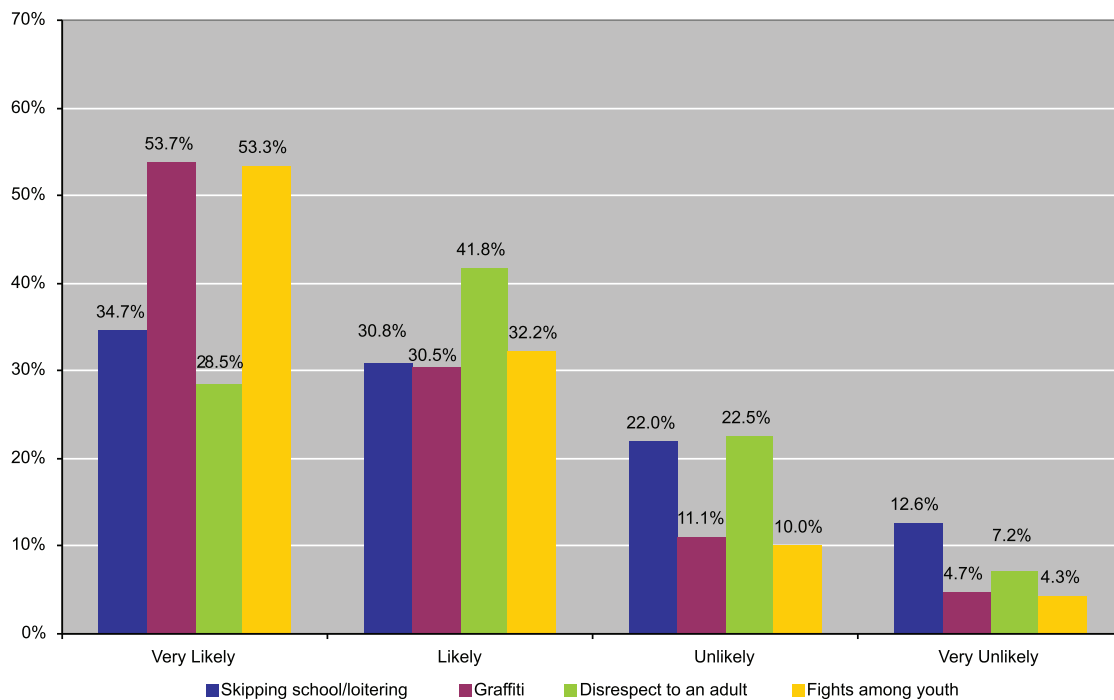
Little more than half of adult respondents envision their neighborhoods as environments where clear standards of behavior are likely to be enforced by neighbors.

Resident Perception of Likelihood of Social Support from Neighbors



Source: Mid-South Social Survey: Memphis and Shelby County Criminal Victimization Survey, 2003-2005

Resident Perception of Likelihood of Neighbors' Willingness to Intervene



Source: Mid-South Social Survey: Memphis and Shelby County Criminal Victimization Survey, 2003-2005

Comparing crime rates will become easier.

Police departments across the country voluntarily submit crime data to the FBI Uniform Crime Reports (UCR). In any given year many departments, including those in the largest and historically highest crime cities, do not report for various reasons. It is also important to understand that different police departments use different standards for classifying and reporting crimes. So comparing data from city to city should be undertaken only with caution.

Memphis and Tennessee are among the first jurisdictions to conform to the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBERS), a new system that eventually will be required for all reporting jurisdictions. NIBERS will have the effect of increasing the number of reported incidents because crimes in which more than one charge is involved (a mugging/aggravated assault associated with a robbery) will be reported as separate incidents. In most non-NIBERS reporting such an event counts as only one crime (the most serious of included offenses).

Risk of victimization is a widely variable factor.

Crime rates typically are calculated in terms of number-of-incidents-per-100,000 residents in a given year. The term “victimization risk” is sometimes used to estimate how likely an individual is to be victimized by a particular crime. For example, if there are 1,000 incidents of violent crime per 100,000 residents, individuals have a one in 100, or one percent, chance of being a victim.

It’s important to remember, however, that true victimization risk depends on a wide variety of risk factors. These include with whom a person interacts, neighborhood conditions and other demographic factors that are associated with social networks and neighborhoods. Low income families in poor neighborhoods are at greatest risk for most types of criminal victimization. For low-income children, neighborhood-associated victimization risk adds to other risks that undermine healthy development.

Community-based crime prevention strategies often focus on changing social networks and neighborhood conditions to reduce victimization risk for children in particular.

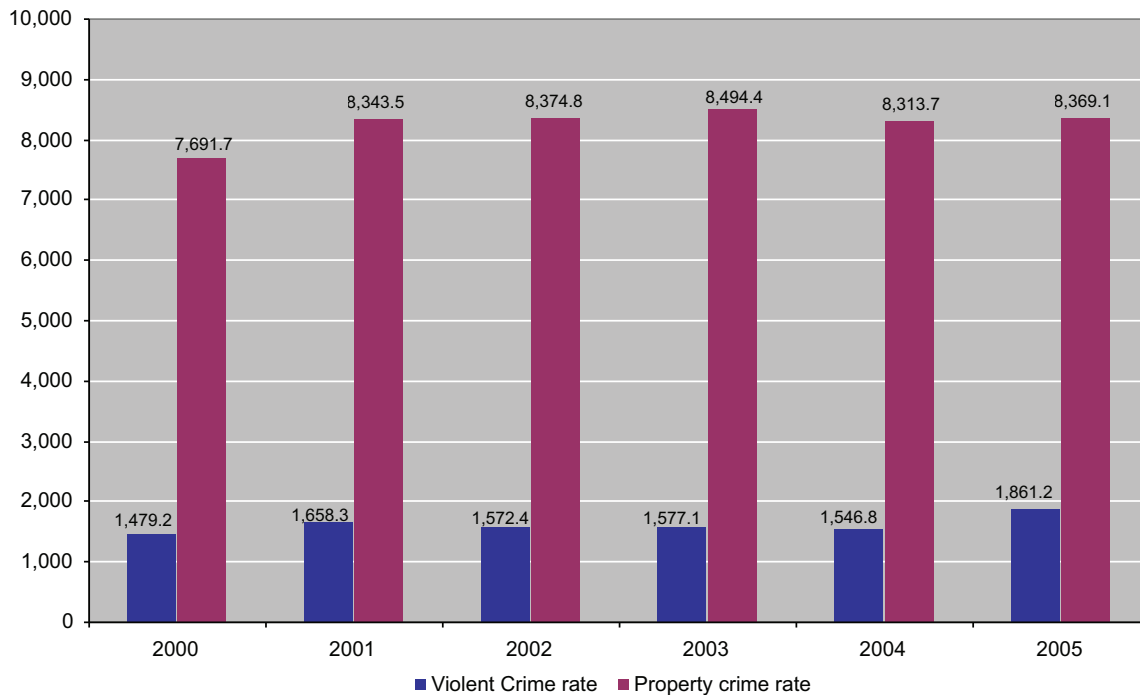
***Blue CRUSH* in Memphis is showing signs of success fighting crime.**

Beginning in 2005 crime escalated across the country, particularly in cities with populations between 500,000 and 1,000,000. This escalation followed more than a decade of declining crime rates after crime had peaked in the early-to-mid-1990s. The decline had been attributed to such factors as the waning “crack” trade, improved economy, the impact of strategic crime-prevention, law enforcement funding and higher incarceration rates. The recent escalation has been attributed to a reversal of those factors, but it is likely that factors differ in different cities.

As other cities Memphis crime escalated in 2005 and 2006. The Memphis Police Department, working with the Center for Community Criminology at the University of Memphis, designed and implemented a so-called “Blue CRUSH” (*Crime Reduction Using Statistical History*) strategy. Blue CRUSH is a strategy to identify and track patterns of criminal incidents and target specialized resources based on these patterns. After successful neighborhood tests Blue CRUSH was implemented city-wide in September, 2006. Shortly thereafter, crime in Memphis began to decrease as it continued to escalate in the rest of the country.

Crime in the City of Memphis decreased in October through December of 2006, and the January, 2007 rate was 12 percent lower than the January, 2006 rate.

Memphis Crime Rate by Violent and Property Crime, 2000–2005



Source: University of Memphis, Center for Community Criminology and Research

Crime in Memphis actually decreased faster in some traditionally high-crime neighborhoods while increasing in traditionally safer, more middle-class neighborhoods. This “decentralization” of crime appears to stimulate greater fear among middle-class citizens who typically have enjoyed higher expectations of neighborhood safety. It may create a perception that nothing is being done or can be done.

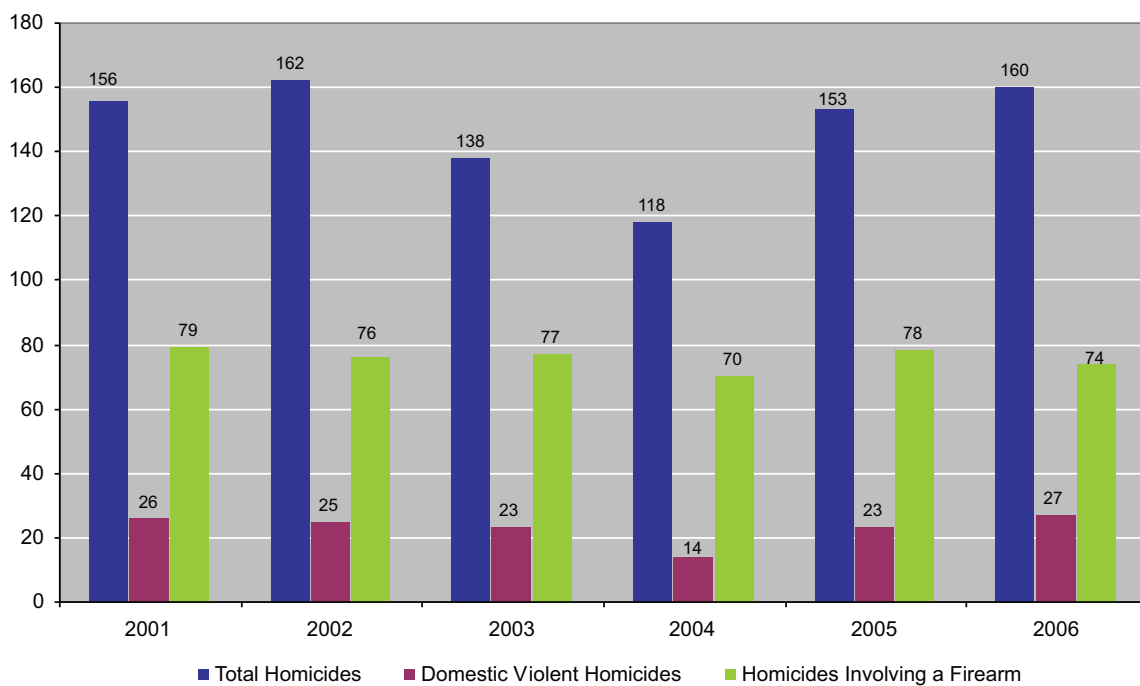
For example, the Hickory Hill area has been associated with increased crime since the mid 1990s, even while the remainder of the city was experiencing decreasing crime. Despite its reputation during that time, however, Hickory Hill’s crime remained lower than inner-city neighborhoods. An exception was the swath of high-density apartment complexes where households moving out of the inner city were likely to re-locate.

By the end of 2006 crime was down substantially in both traditionally higher-crime and lower-crime police precincts. To extend the Hickory Hill example, the number of reported crimes declined 19 percent and 20 percent in the Mt. Moriah and Ridgeway precincts in January, 2007 compared to January, 2006.

Another indication of strategic law enforcement making a difference is evident in an analysis of Memphis homicide data, including domestic-violence-related homicides, from 2002 through 2006. It shows a significant decrease in homicides overall and especially in domestic homicides in 2004.

Analysis by the Center for Community Criminology and Research reveals that the decrease is due almost entirely to a decrease in gun-related deaths. Gun-related deaths may be correlated with the Project Safe Neighborhoods, “Gun Crime is Jail Time,” media campaign. Gun violence and homicides dipped dramatically during, and immediately following periods of media saturation, then rose after the campaign ended.

Distribution of Total Homicides in the City of Memphis Involving Firearms or Domestic Violence, 2001–2006



Source: University of Memphis, Center for Community Criminology and Research

The roles of children as perpetrators and victims

National research is beginning to analyze involvement of children as crime victims and perpetrators. Chicago’s Chapin Hall Center for Children reports that arrests of juveniles for murder increased by 20 percent in 2005 compared to an increase of only six percent for adults. Robbery arrests for juveniles increased 11 percent. We do not yet have comparable reports for Memphis and Shelby County.

Families with children have been moving from higher-crime (poorer) to lower-crime (more middle-class) areas nationally and in Memphis and Shelby County. National data from The Urban Institute's "Moving to Opportunity" research suggests that children moving from higher-crime to lower-crime neighborhoods continue to be at higher-risk of victimization or involvement in crime. It may be that support systems in middle class neighborhoods, such as mentoring programs or meeting places such as Boys and Girls Clubs or Girls, Inc., need to be strengthened. It may be also that old, risky associations follow them into their new neighborhoods.

Preliminary analysis suggests that supportive resources may not have responded to children who are at higher risk for delinquency and neglect when they moved from inner city neighborhoods to mid-city neighborhoods such as Whitehaven, Hickory Hill and Raleigh.

Despite concerns about youth involvement in crime and delinquency in Memphis and Shelby County, juvenile court data reveal a decrease in the number of referrals for delinquency between 2000 and 2004. Actual numbers are down, and they reflect a declining percentage of youth being referred to juvenile court during this period. It is not known, however, how much of the decrease may be associated with the recently publicized diversion programs being operated in Germantown and Bartlett.