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Race, Class, and Social Justice in Memphis: A Call to Bridge the Great Divide

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THE LONG WAY TO A SAFER MEMPHIS: LOCAL POLICIES FOR CRIME PREVENTION NEED STRUCTURAL CHANGE¹

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INTRODUCTION

In many places in the United States, the coexistence of “poverty, violence, aggressive police oversight, and incarceration erode[s] public life, compromising the capacity of neighborhood residents to achieve social cohesion and community organization” (Friedson, Sharkey 2015, 343). In these places, a public policy oriented toward repression ends up boosting societal and community divisions, a “great divide” that, in turn, creates the pre-conditions for crime. Memphis is no exception.

This policy paper stems from research on local policies regarding public safety and crime prevention in Memphis.² The research uncovers the limitations of the city’s current approach and suggests how policies could be changed. In a nutshell, Memphis, like many other cities, is engaged in a short-sighted and narrow approach to public safety; effective crime prevention needs long-term thinking and broad policy action. This paper presents two main limitations in Memphis’ current strategies.

First, crime and violent crime in U.S. cities are geographically concentrated and stem from many societal disadvantages, including poverty, inequality, and mental illness. That is why improved provision of social services is the best means to improve public safety structurally (Tulumello 2016). However, Memphis has reduced investments in these areas.

Second, there is evidence that aggressive policing tactics such as zero tolerance, massive police presence or stop and frisk barely prevent crime and worsen police-community relationships. Black Lives Matter protests ongoing across the country during the summer of 2016 provide a stark picture of this distrust of law enforcement. However, the Memphis Police Department (MPD) adopts a zero tolerance approach and invests massively in technology rather than community policing. Moreover, the work of MPD is burdened by the political and public expectation to cope with many problems stemming from the absence of other public policies. As such, police officers on patrol, having to

1. This brief stems from the research project “SECURE – Security Examined Critically: Urban planning Explorations,” funded by a Fulbright Research Scholar Grant (US-Italy Commission) and a post-doc grant of the Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia (SFRH/BPD/86394/2012). The author is grateful to Daphene McFerren, Elena Delavega and Charles A. Santo for the feedback on previous versions of the brief.
2. The project was carried out through case study research in 2016 (Jan-Jul). Empirical data were collected from analysis of policy documents; in-depth interviews with key-informants in city government and other agencies; participant observation in Klondike Smokey City in cooperation with the classes held by Antonio Raciti and Laura Saija, assistant professors, City and Regional Planning, University of Memphis; and two focus groups for collaborative discussion of policy reform (in cooperation with University of Memphis Design Collaborative and Livable Memphis). Findings have been compared with outputs from research in Lisbon, Portugal (Tulumello 2014; 2016).



cope with problems that should not be theirs to solve, face increased difficulties and community pushbacks to their work. In other words, local communities and police are, together, the victims of a short-sighted policy approach.

These issues are not exclusive to Memphis and are, in fact, typical of most U.S. cities. The reasons are to be found mainly in the absence of federal, state and metropolitan policies to redistribute wealth from the most affluent to least affluent areas. As a result, inner cities in metropolitan regions such as Memphis, Detroit, Philadelphia, St. Louis, and New Orleans have to take charge of the entire burden of metropolitan and, indeed, national social problems. Memphis could become a trendsetter for a different agenda, reforming its local policies at the same time as advocating change at the federal and state level.

This paper is divided into three sections: First, it examines why changes are needed in social urban policy to reduce crime; second, it discusses Memphis' approach to safety and public policy to highlight what needs reform; and, third, it sets out recommendations for such a reform.

Crime, Inequality and Segregation: What Needs to Be Addressed?

Cities in the U.S. are extremely segregated, economically, socially, ethically, and racially. Many forms of disadvantage, including poverty, low educational attainment or health problems, are concentrated in inner city neighborhoods and among minority households. In 2010, the Memphis metropolitan area ranked 5th (of 101) in poverty (19.4%) and 89th in median household income (Brookings Institution 2010). Wealth and educational attainment are unequally distributed among races, and between the city and the suburbs. Shelby County has the highest inequality score among large U.S. counties (Economic Innovation Group 2016, 34). Memphis ranks 9th for distress score -- which means that the people in Memphis experience some of the highest levels of economic distress -- and it is the 8th most unequal in the U.S. (Economic Innovation Group 2016, 26-29) -- revealing that people in Memphis have some of the greatest disparities in the country.

What is the relationship of these challenges to public safety? Most crimes take place in the cities and neighborhoods with the most socio-economic problems. Crime rates are higher in Memphis than in its suburbs³ (Figure 1) and, within Memphis, they are higher in the poorer, minority-majority neighborhoods (Figure 2). In short, in some places there exists a concentration of socio-economic problems that create the conditions for crime.

Mental health is a case in point. A paper published in 2014 showed that 50 percent of the young African American males incarcerated in Tennessee suffered from mental health disorders. (Washington 2014, 9). This means that universal mental health care could prevent a huge proportion of crimes committed by youth black males more efficiently (and cheaply) than imprisonment. However, health and mental health are neither considered universal rights nor universally delivered in the U.S. The obvious conclusion is that public safety needs to be fostered by attacking the vast inequality and socio-economic problems of American cities. Indeed, violent crime is much lower in

3. Due to the fragmentation of the U.S. law enforcement system, and the varying degrees of reporting among agencies, data in the Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) of the FBI should be compared with caution. With exception of murder, only general trends, and not exact values, should be compared.



European cities, which are not richer overall, but are much less unequal and segregated and, hence, presents lower levels of poverty. Moreover, in European cities, problems such as mental illness and homelessness are dealt with through universal health care and social care services.

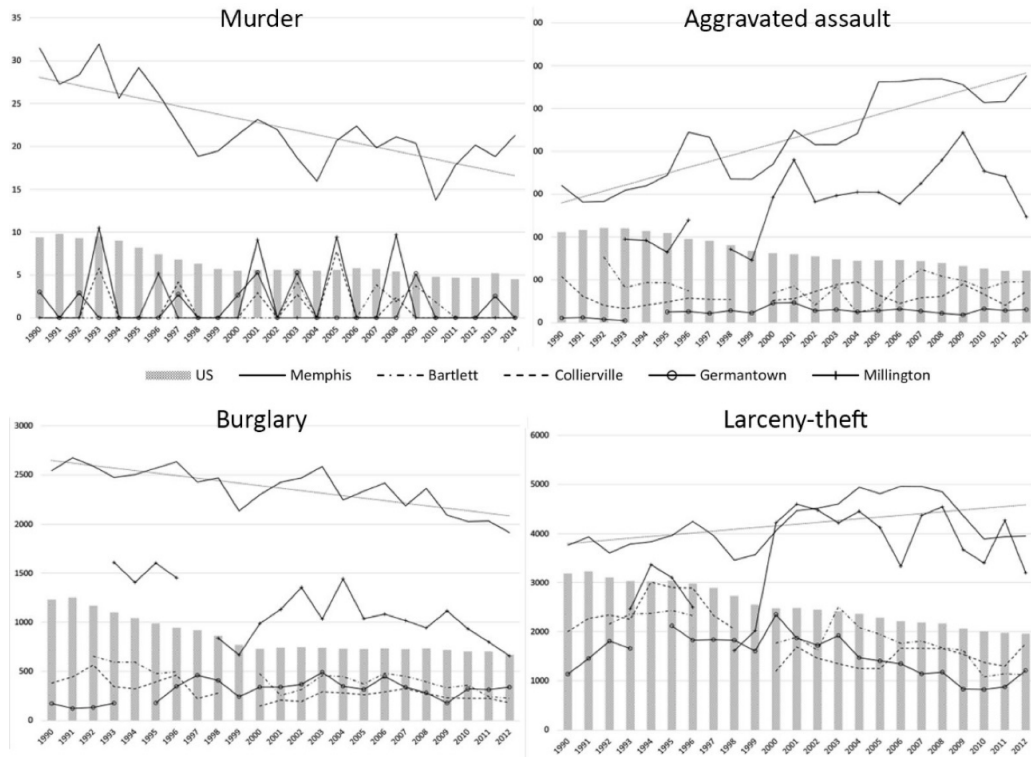


Figure 1. Crime in perspective: long term trends of rates (per 100,000 inhabitants) of selected violent (above) and property (below) crimes. Graphics compiled by author from U.S. Department of Justice data

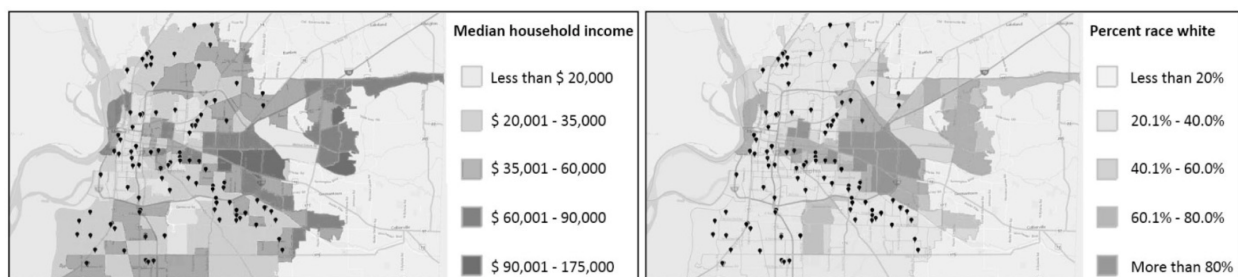


Figure 2. Crime in context: locations of murders (Jan-Jun 2016) compared to distribution of wealth (left) and race (right). Maps compiled by author from data from City of Memphis and The Commercial Appeal

Since the 1970s, public safety policy in the U.S. has been geared towards suppression and mass incarceration, worsening the situation of the most vulnerable people (Wakefield et al. 2016, 17) when in reality, people living in those neighborhoods most affected by intense policing really need policies designed to provide income and social supports. For instance, previous incarceration affects future employment prospects. Property crime, in turn, is higher in neighborhoods where



unemployment is higher and wages are lower (Chalfin, Raphael 2011).

The complex roots of crime mean that trends need to be assessed in the long-term; weekly, monthly and yearly variation are often insignificant. Crime in the U.S. has dropped steadily since the 1990s (Figure 1). There are many explanations, but economic growth and the reduction of neighborhood disadvantages have been the most important drivers (Arvanites, Devina 2006; Friedson, Sharkey 2015). However, at the same time, socio-economic inequality increased (Piketty 2014) among cities, neighborhoods and social groups. Unsurprisingly then, the crime drop has not been equally distributed and not every place and city in the country has benefitted from these national trends. In general, medium-size cities have experienced slower, if any, drops when compared to national average. In Memphis, crime trends since the early 1990s have been rather unstable (Figure 1). Some Memphis crime rates have converged toward national averages and murder dropped by one third. On the contrary, aggravated assault grew until 2005 and then stabilized.

The growth and incidence of aggravated assault, together with the still high rate of murder, are the main concerns for public safety in Memphis. The fact that these crimes are mainly intra-communal confirms that they should be addressed by reducing inequality and socio-economic segregation of many neighborhoods. However, public policy has had very different priorities.

Current Local Conditions

The City of Memphis' governmental action and funding are centered on law enforcement and safety. Police services account for almost 40 percent of the budget and, together with fire services, two thirds of city budget are devoted to safety (Table 1). Since 2005, while city expenditures remained stagnant overall, funding for the Fire and Police Departments has increased (13.4 percent and 11.1 percent) at the expense of all other departments (Figure 3). During that time, for example, funding to Housing and Community Development, the division responsible for community revitalization, was halved.

The Memphis Police Department (MPD) approaches law enforcement with a zero tolerance attitude, which is complemented with some community partnership. This strategy results from the wide discretionary power provided to MPD by the City Charter and Code of Ordinances. For example, police have the discretionary power to detain loosely defined "suspicious persons" without evidence of crimes or misdemeanors. The Code of Ordinances, through the provision for regulation of drug/gang related lingering and loitering, has allowed the MPD to create "safety zones" with massive police presence in "high crime areas." With regards to community partnership, MPD is engaged in a number of programs: Neighborhood Watch; Operation: Safe Community, a partnership among businesses, schools, neighborhoods and others; programs to build trust in the police; and charity programs. In 2011, neighborhood patrols known as Community Action units, or COACT, were replaced by a pilot project of Community Outreach, which is ongoing in three precincts. In Klondike and Smokey City, predominantly African American neighborhoods, the shutting down of COACT is considered a major problem by residents, especially the elderly. Further research should explore whether this is a city-wide concern.

Table 1. Expenditure (general fund) of main city departments, 2016 Adopted Budget.

		% of Total Budget
Police Services	250,476,780	38.06
Fire Services	172,888,782	26.27
Parks and Neighborhoods	51,723,673	7.86
Housing and Community Development	4,486,271	0.68
Public Works	22,441,491	3.41
Grants and Agencies	63,404,976	9.64
<i>of which,</i>		
Planning and Development	1,500,000	0.23

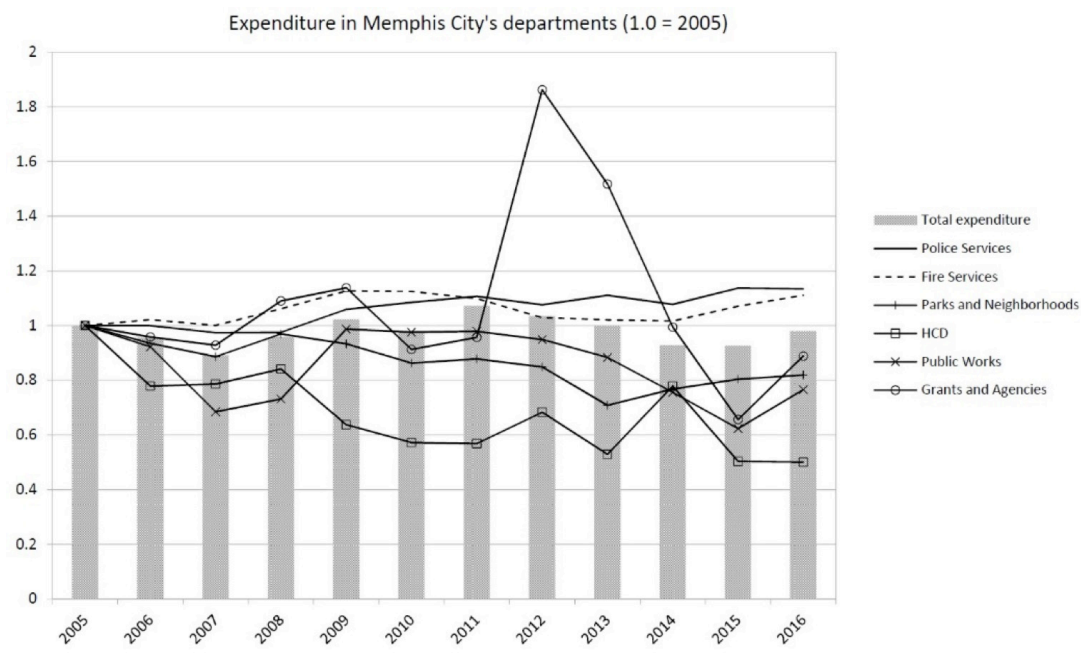


Figure 3. Expenditure (general fund) of Memphis City's departments (1.0 = expenditure in 2005; adjusted for inflation).
 Graphs compiled by author from adopted City of Memphis budgets.

Between 2006 and 2011 the City of Memphis invested massively in hot-spot policing. Sworn officers were increased by one fourth (bringing the total number of officers to approximately 2,450) and the program Blue CRUSH (Crime Reduction Utilizing Statistical History) was launched in 2006 and implemented citywide in 2007. Blue CRUSH analyzes real time data from officers' reports and closed-circuit television to forecast where and when crimes are more likely to occur, and where patrols should be targeted. Media and politicians consider Blue CRUSH a success when considering the decrease of most categories of crime in 2011 when compared to 2006 (Table 2).



However, comparing rates with a year characterized by a peak of crimes is misleading. After stark peaks such as the one in 2006, crime tends to drop naturally. Comparing the five years of full implementation of Blue CRUSH (2007-2011) with the previous five years (2002-2006) provides a different picture. Property crimes decreased, but there is no way to discern what was due to Blue CRUSH and what was due to long-term trends (cf. Figure 1). Importantly, rates of aggravated assault, on average, increased. Interviewees among police officials and policy makers admitted that Blue CRUSH is not, and cannot be, designed to affect aggravated assaults and murders. These crimes are mainly the result of domestic violence and intra-communal disputes, have no statistical pattern and/or happen where police cannot patrol.

After 2011, the number of sworn officers dropped to approximately 2000 in 2015, primarily because of attrition and resignations due to controversies over benefits and pensions. Consequently, hot-spot policing, which needs intensive use of human resources, had to be reduced. Data provided by MPD show the number of cleared violent crimes and traffic tickets decreased but, at the same time, violent crime kept going down: this suggests that police presence is useful to repress crime, but has minimal effects in preventing it. Moreover, there are reasons to believe that massive police presence in deprived neighborhoods, despite efforts for community outreach, has contributed to increased distrust in the police among minority and disadvantaged groups. Blue CRUSH also may increase disparities among neighborhoods. For instance, a recent article in The Commercial Appeal revealed that most cameras have been installed in downtown Memphis and the most affluent neighborhoods (Poe 2016), areas where crime was already lower (see above). This contradicts the stated goal of tackling crime where it is more problematic and seems to suggest that cameras are used as a way to reassure tourists, businesses and affluent citizens.

Table 2. Variations of main crime categories (rates) during full implementation of Blue CRUSH. Compiled by author from U.S. Department of Justice data.

	2006	2011	Variation	Average 2002-2006	Average 2007-2011	Variation
Robbery	780.4	472.3	-39.5%	662.9	606.6	-8.5%
Aggravated assault	1,125.2	1,032.3	-8.3%	959.1	1,089.1	+13.6%
Burglary	2,417.2	2,030.6	-16.0%	2,410.4	2,138.7	-11.3%
Larceny theft	4,962	3,932.3	-20.8%	4,766.3	4,397.1	-7.7%
Motor vehicle theft	989.1	526.1	-46.9%	1,207.3	699.3	-42.1%

The massive investment in a policing program with uncertain and contradictory outputs needs to be reconsidered in light of successful efforts in other city policy areas. For instance, the Operation: Safe Community program focuses on reducing blight and vacant properties, improving the education of youths, providing alternative sentencing for young first offenders and treating drug addiction. The Jericho Project and Shelby County Drug Court have proven to be cheaper and more effective in

reducing recidivism than incarceration. The Department of Housing and Community Development is engaged in community revitalization. The Department of Planning and Development has recently relaunched the comprehensive planning office, which is a first, but critical, step to help support community development.

These efforts, crucial to structurally prevent crime through local development and reduction of recidivism are dramatically underfunded. The departments of Housing and Community Development and Planning and Development, for example, account for less than 1 percent of city expenditures. City government employees interviewed highlighted that the work of these two departments is dependent on external grants, meaning that planning in the long-term is almost impossible and there is no funding flexibility to address topics most relevant locally.

All in all, there seems to be a vicious circle: The basic absence of significant investments impedes urban social policy to affect the inequalities and problems at the root of violent crimes. High crime rates boost public requests for increased government investment in police, which is made through further cuts in social programs. At the same time, the emphasis on law enforcement amplifies the image of danger in the city; the media has a major role in this-hampering the potential for development and local action.

These challenges also have negatively affected the Memphis Police Department and the criminal justice system, which are expected to deal with issues that should be more efficiently addressed through other policy areas. The Crisis Intervention Team (CIT), a partnership led by the MPD with the aim of addressing violent events involving mental health consumers, is a case in point. The CIT has been successful in de-escalating potentially violent events and has become a national model. However, the need itself for the CIT underpins the failure of health and social services in taking care of mental illness and reducing public violent events. In Portugal, with universal health care coverage, such events are almost non-existent. In general, the expectation that law enforcement should handle issues it is not skilled to deal with may also have boosted community mistrust.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY CHANGE

Because of the multiple dimensions connected with crime, a multi-level collaboration of federal, state, metropolitan and city action is necessary to structurally improve public safety. The main priorities should be:

- redistributive policies to reduce regional and metropolitan disparities;
- removal of the causes of inequities among groups and communities;
- reform of criminal justice to overcome mass incarceration;
- universal access to health and mental health care;
- universal provision of housing and public services.

The role of Memphis could be to promote countrywide networks of cities experiencing similar challenges to push for reform at the federal and state levels.



At the same time, Memphis can take forward important action, starting by acknowledging that there are no “silver bullets” or shortcuts for public safety. For instance, Blue CRUSH and more sworn officers have improved enforcement and produced some noteworthy, but small, preventive effect on property crime.⁴ However, Blue CRUSH has had scarce, if any, effect on violent crime.

In short, the core task (and skill) of police is law enforcement; technology and policing cannot structurally attack the causes of crime, let alone provide for the absence of proper social policy. Residents and leaders cannot expect police to be able to do so. Technology should then be used to improve efficiency and free resources for preventive efforts. A less aggressive approach to policing could, however, play a role in improving perceptions of safety and thus support community development.

Moving Toward Solutions

Only through a wide array of efforts will Memphis be able to structurally reduce violent crime. Memphis needs to plan in the long-term, while acting in the short-term to create the conditions for long-term success, becoming a national trend setter for a new, more effective and just approach to crime prevention. A set of recommendations can be set out for actions at the metropolitan, city and neighborhood level.

Public safety:

- overcome zero tolerance and de-emphasize the role of technology in favor of a community approach to policing, creating participatory spaces for co-decision with citizens;
- foster collaboration among metropolitan police agencies and consider consolidation of the metro police departments as a way to redistribute resources in the metro;
- universalize alternative sentencing for minor felonies, youth crimes and non-violent drug crimes;
- affirmatively remove housing and employment barriers for ex-offenders—e.g. remove costs of expungement, prohibit background checks, or, at the very least, for minor and non-violent offenses;
- reform the City Charter and Code of Ordinances, removing provisions that give too much discretionary power to police.

Urban social policy:

- redirect investments from safety toward equality policies;
- negotiate redistributive policies at the metropolitan level: socio-economic disparities halt the development of the entire metro;
- consolidate public spending (reduce agencies and commissions in number and scope) to focus on macro-areas with long-term goals through the implementation of public policy proper-

4. In line with what hot-spot policing attained elsewhere (Braga et al. 2014)



that is, substitute grant-funded and short-term projects with wide-encompassing programs planned and implemented by the city departments;

- increase general, flexible funding of departments responsible for urban development and social policy (Parks and Neighborhoods, Planning and Development, Housing and Community Development) to incentivize long-term planning;
- use co-decisional practices (e.g. participatory budgeting or Agenda 21, a global sustainable development initiative of the UN based on citizen participation) and increase accountability of public offices (e.g. make data available online and not just upon citizen request; remove restrictions for media to access City Hall) to increase policy legitimation and community involvement;
- focus on education and public schools, setting short-term, mid-range, and long-term goals to achieve equal educational expenditure and attainments among all metro-communities;
- support networking among existing grassroots organizations to create a critical mass of action that has a measurable and positive impact on creating vibrant communities that will then enable the city to promote a positive image of itself.

Planning policy:

- set and foster equal standards for services and amenities, including public transit (see the brief by Charles A. Santo in this volume), social services, community centers, green areas, in all parts of the city and metro;
- increase population density to create critical mass for community development, for example strengthening comprehensive planning and zoning to halt new developments in the metro area, so that population growth will be accommodated by increasing density of urbanized areas;
- launch a mid-term plan of investments for public housing integrated in residential neighborhoods and implement the Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing Rule, a regulation by the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development that requests affordable housing to be provided in all communities throughout metro areas;
- invest to improve public spaces to increase a sense of safety and neighborhood attractiveness in distressed areas by refurbishing public spaces, rezoning to allow mix uses and improving walkability.

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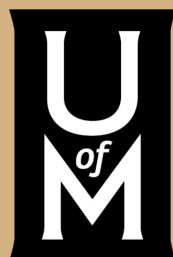
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