



How Neighborhoods Affect Children's Well-Being

Just as a child's life is shaped in part by her family, it is also affected by neighborhood conditions. Some neighborhoods are places where parents know their neighbors, where children see positive role models, and where opportunities outnumber risks. In other neighborhoods, crime and violence are common, neighbors avoid each other, and children's home environments are affected by stress and isolation.

Neighborhoods in Memphis and Shelby County are undergoing far-reaching changes. Beginning in the 1990s, the traditional pattern of inner-city disadvantage and suburban affluence unraveled as poverty and its associated risks spread into outlying areas. This process, which is still underway, has important implications for child well-being in our community.

Poverty endangers children's development.

A poor neighborhood is not just an area where poor people live – it is an area that is poor in resources like good schools, quality child care, and safe recreation. Children need these resources in order to thrive. On average, growing up in an area of concentrated poverty means poorer health, lower school achievement, and worse adult outcomes.

- In poor neighborhoods, parents are less likely to have the social support of a network of friends and family. Low levels of social support increase parents' stress and make it more difficult for them to be effective.¹
- In neighborhoods that are unsafe, children watch more television, take part in fewer after-school activities, and are more likely to be overweight than children in safer communities.^{2,3}
- Children who live in high-poverty neighborhoods are less likely than their peers to graduate from high school, and their adult earnings are lower.⁴

The geography of poverty in Memphis has been changing for the past two decades. Before the early 1990s, poverty was situated largely in downtown public housing and in a few older neighborhoods like Orange Mound and Binghampton. Since then, however, market forces and relocation programs have moved many poor Memphians into outlying areas like Frayser, Raleigh, Whitehaven, and Hickory Hill.

The red areas in Figure 1 represent classic distressed neighborhoods, where poverty is long-standing and entrenched. Yellow areas represent vulnerable neighborhoods, where clusters of poverty have become evident in the past 10 to 15 years. Almost half the neighborhoods in Memphis are now affected by poverty. (In this chapter we equate neighborhoods with census tracts, a standard practice in neighborhood studies.)

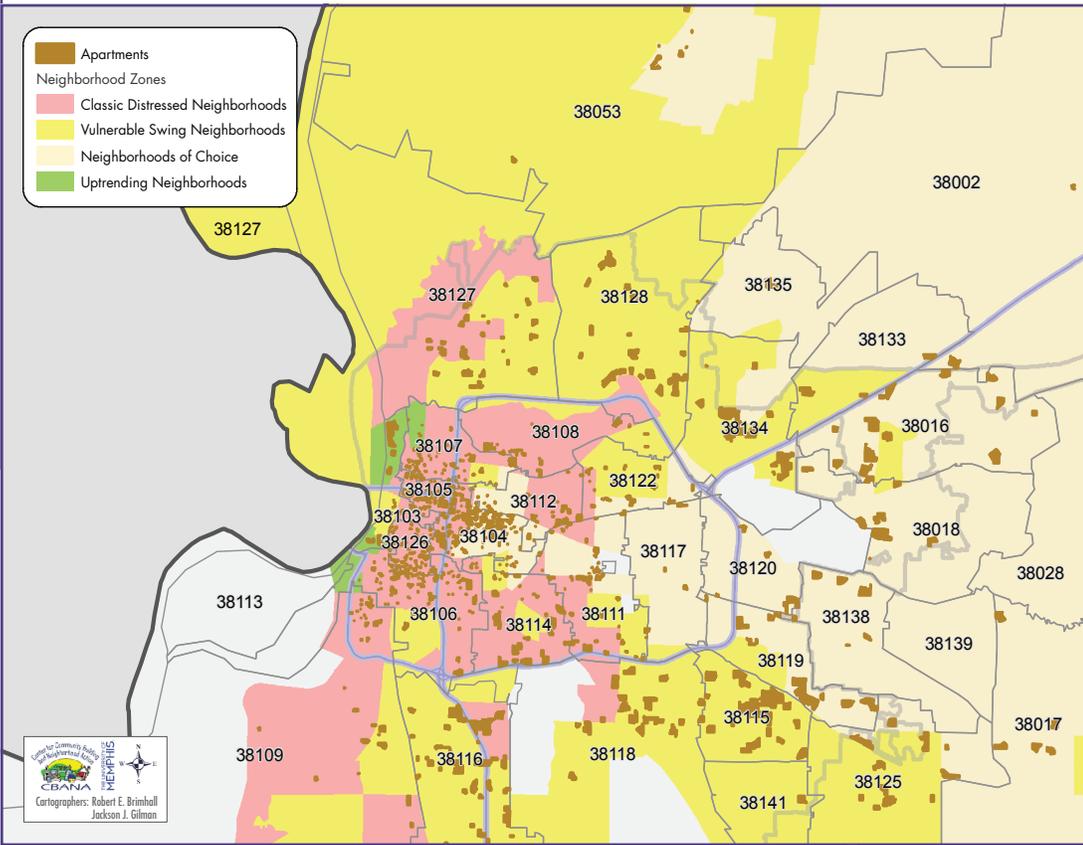


FIGURE 1:
 Neighborhood Zones
 with Zip Codes

Source:
 Center for Community Building and
 Neighborhood Action/InfoWorks
 Memphis Neighborhood Change
 Database from federal data.

Neighborhoods affect childbearing patterns and infant health.

Neighborhoods differ from one another in ways that influence pregnancy and birth. Neighborhood factors affecting childbearing patterns and birth outcomes include access to health care, quality of available food, amount of environmental toxins, and availability of safe places to exercise.⁵

Neighborhoods of concentrated poverty are disproportionately affected by teen childbearing, low birth weight, and infant mortality.

- Young women growing up in high-poverty neighborhoods are more likely to give birth as teens. Children born to teen mothers are at risk for later problems such as antisocial behavior, unemployment, and early parenthood.^{3,6-8}

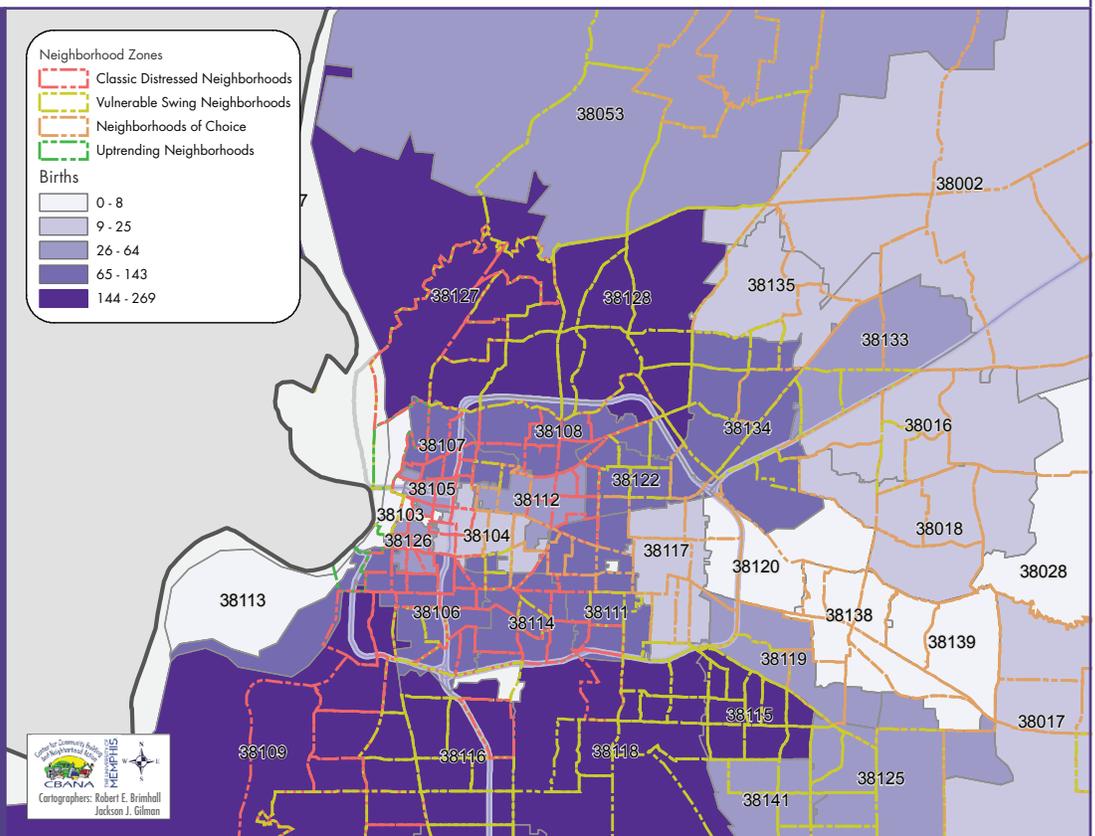
- Babies of mothers who live in high-poverty environments are more likely to be born at low birth weight. Children who were low birth weight infants tend to perform worse on measures of cognitive development, behavioral adjustment, and physical health.⁹⁻¹¹

- Infant mortality is more common in high-poverty areas, a pattern that is only partly explained by related factors like smoking and lack of prenatal care.^{12,13}

Risk factors like teen pregnancy, low birth weight, and infant mortality are prevalent in both distressed neighborhoods and vulnerable neighborhoods (Figures 2, 3 and 4).

FIGURE 2:
Number of Teen
Pregnancies
by Zip Code

Source:
Tennessee Department of Health,
Office of Policy, Planning and
Assessment, Division of Health
Statistics, Birth Certificate Data
2008.



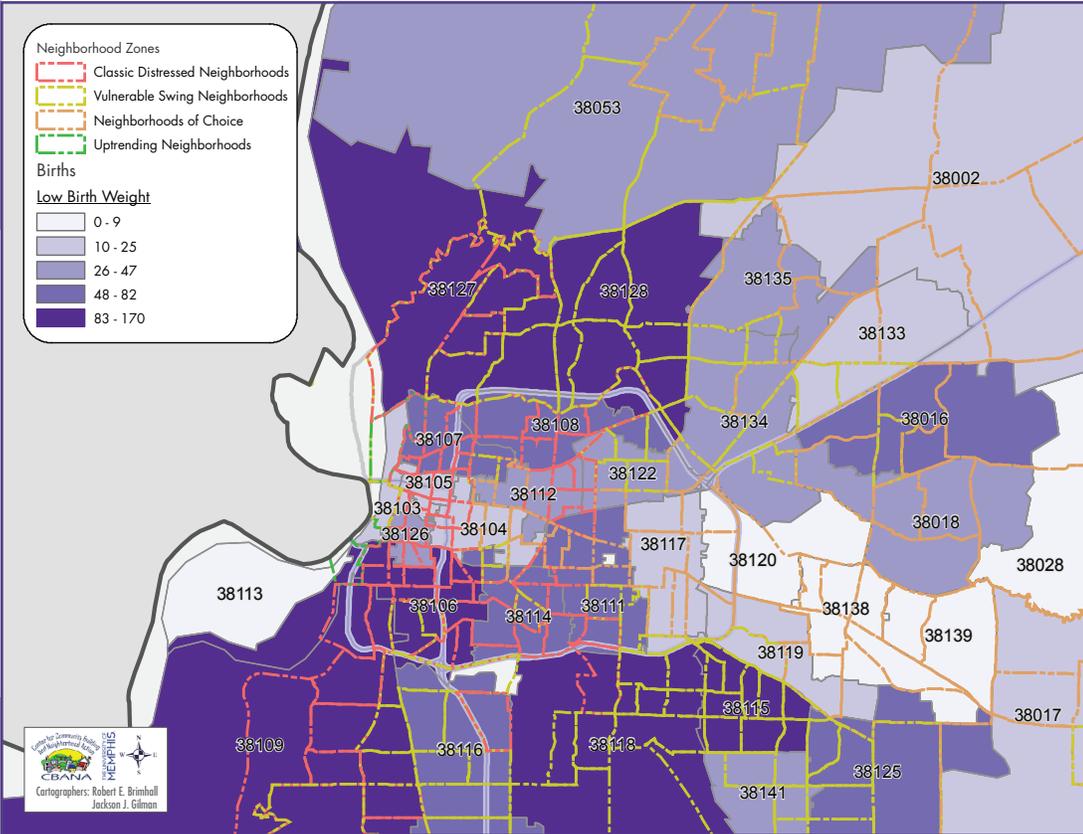


FIGURE 3:
Number of Low Birth Weight Births by Zip Code

Source:
Tennessee Department of Health,
Office of Policy, Planning and
Assessment, Division of Health
Statistics, Birth Certificate Data
2008.

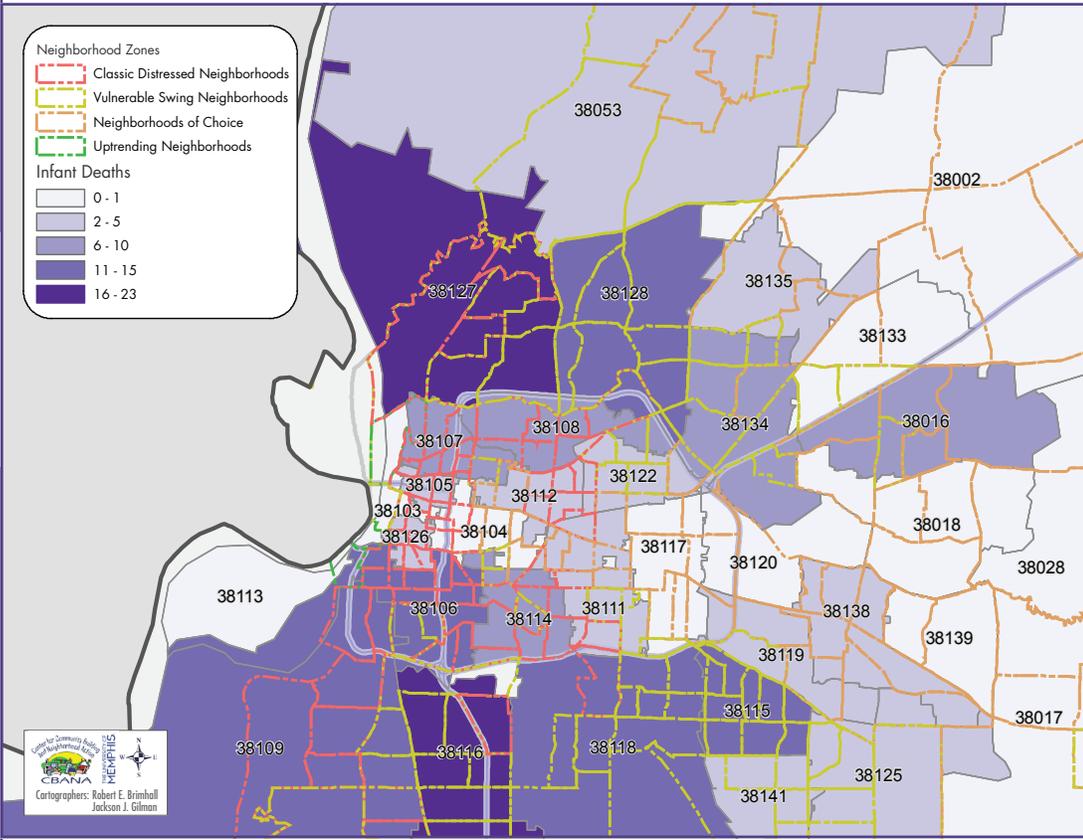


FIGURE 4:
Number of Infant Deaths by Zip Code

Source:
Tennessee Department of Health,
Office of Policy, Planning and
Assessment, Division of Health
Statistics, Birth Certificate Data
2008.

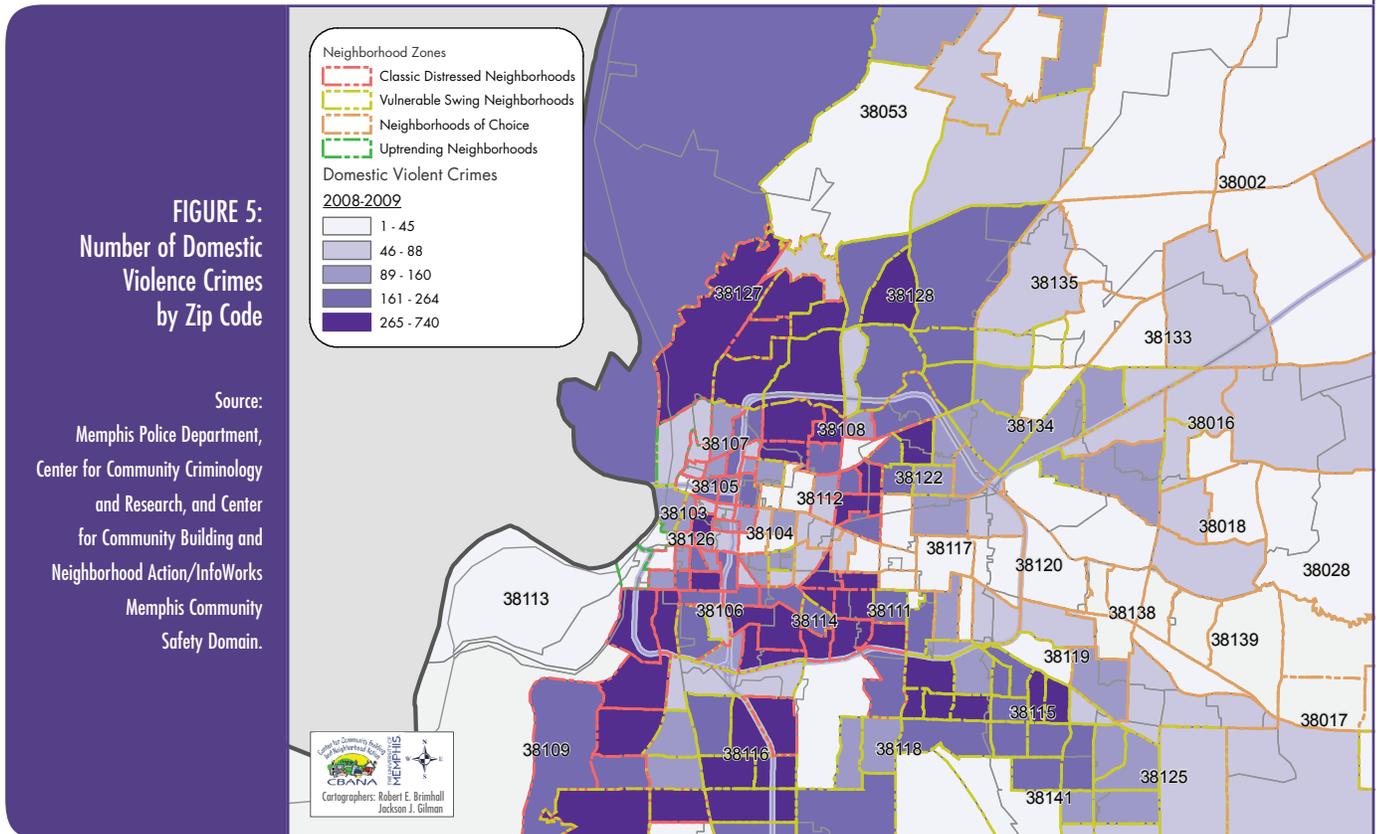
Poverty increases children’s chances of witnessing domestic violence.

Children who live in high-poverty neighborhoods are more likely than other children to witness domestic violence.¹⁴ The fear, stress, and self-blame that often accompany exposure to family violence are traumatic for children and can have long-term consequences.

- The negative effects of exposure to domestic violence include low self-esteem, sleep disturbances, physical symptoms, aggressive behavior, and impaired social development.¹⁵

- Children who are exposed to domestic violence are at increased risk for emotional, physical, and sexual abuse.^{15,16}
- Witnessing domestic violence represents a serious threat to a child’s development regardless of age.¹⁵

Figure 5 shows the number of reported domestic violence crimes by zip code.



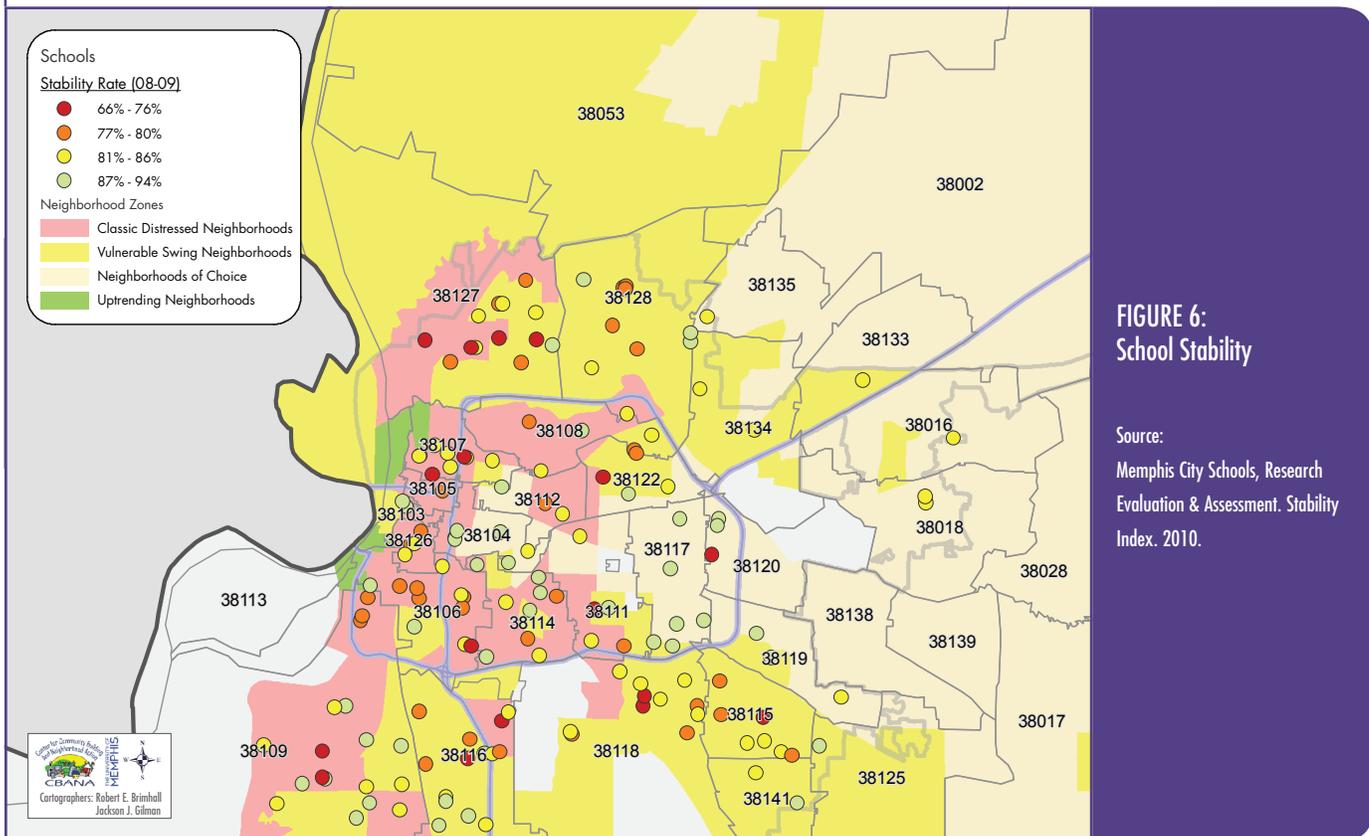
Poor children change schools often.

Poor families tend to move frequently – typically from one high-poverty area to another.¹⁷ Residential mobility is one way that high-poverty neighborhoods affect the children and families who live in them.¹⁸ In areas where families move in and out often, social ties are weak and protecting children from negative influences is more difficult.

High mobility also means that poor children change schools more often than other children – often in mid-year. Frequent school transfers make children vulnerable to academic failure, behavior problems, and high school dropout.¹⁹

For each school in the system, Memphis City Schools calculates a stability rate – essentially the percentage of students who are enrolled in a school for the entire academic year. A stability rate of 80, for example, means that of all the students who enrolled in that school at the start of the year, 80 percent were still enrolled there at the end of the year, and 20 percent changed schools.

Memphis and Shelby County as a whole are characterized by high residential and school instability. Schools with low stability rates are disproportionately located in vulnerable and distressed neighborhoods, as shown in Figure 6.



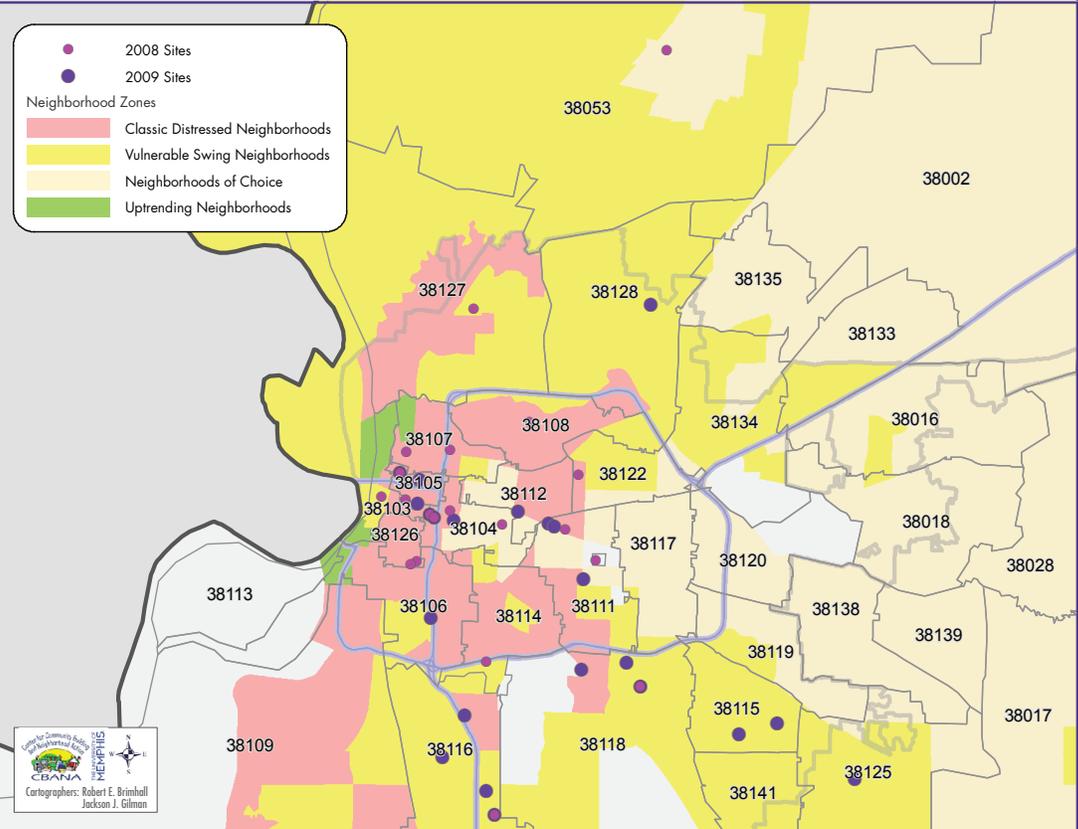
Community services should be near families who need them.

Social services for at-risk families have traditionally been based in distressed neighborhoods, while higher-quality amenities such as nationally accredited child care have most often been found in stable middle-class areas. With poverty and its related risks spreading to vulnerable neighborhoods, there is a need to rethink how we provide social services. Service providers, child advocates, and community stakeholders are increasingly targeting vulnerable neighborhoods in an effort to reach families where they live.

For instance, the Community Voice program – an education/awareness initiative to improve birth outcomes and child health – focused on distressed neighborhoods during its first year. In the following years, recognizing the changing distribution of poverty, Community Voice began to diversify its locations accordingly (Figure 7).

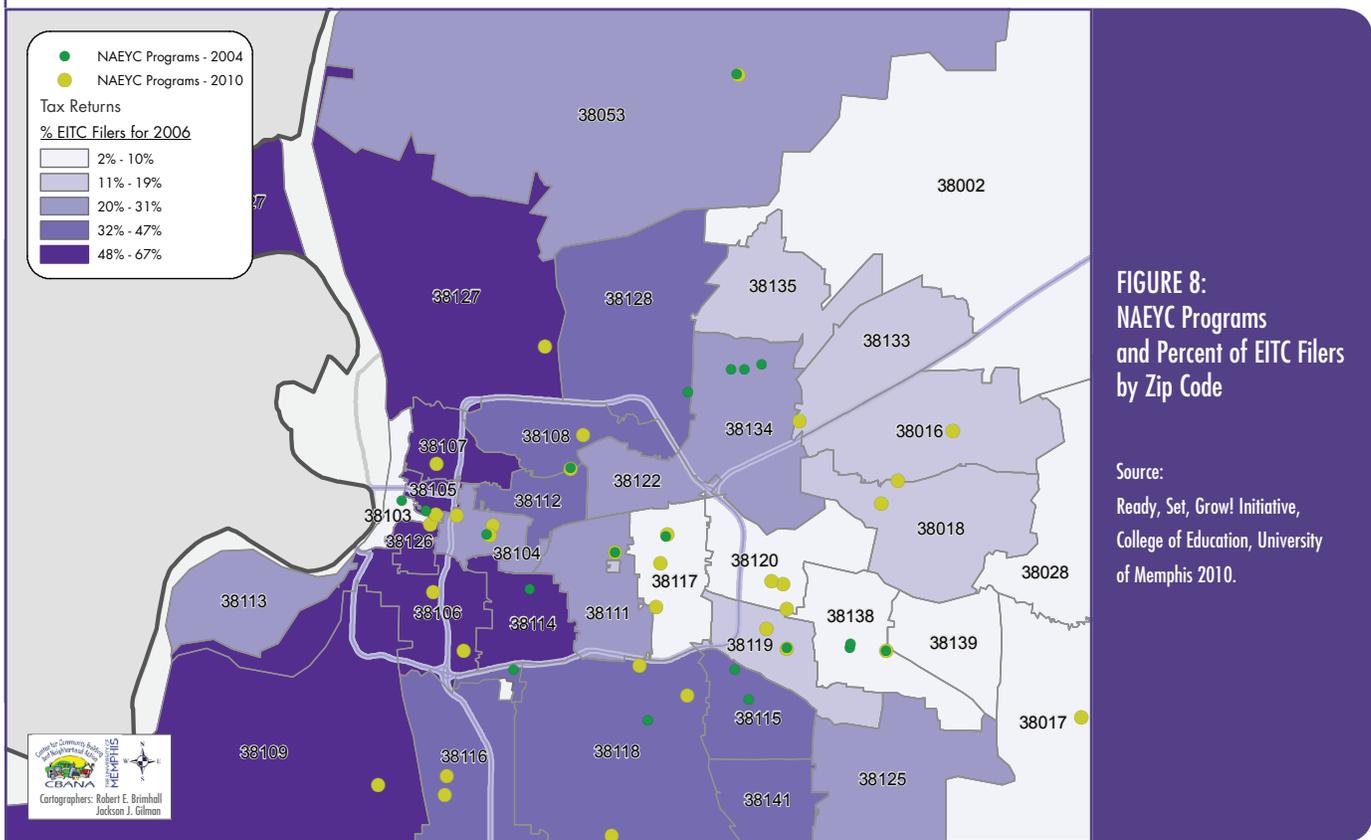
FIGURE 7:
Community Voice Sites

Source:
Community Voice Program
Evaluation. Center for Research on
Women. March 2010.



For many years, the few nationally accredited child care centers in Memphis and Shelby County were concentrated in middle-class neighborhoods. The Ready, Set, Grow initiative, established in 2004, sought to increase the number of centers accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and ensure that accredited centers were located in areas convenient to lower income families.

Figure 8 shows the 2004 and 2010 locations of NAEYC-accredited centers by zip code; the percentage of residents receiving the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) is used as a rough measure of neighborhood socioeconomic status. Comparing center locations for 2010 with locations in 2004 shows that deliberate strategies can increase neighborhood-level resources and may decrease neighborhood risk factors, and reduce disparities between affluent and low-income neighborhoods (Figure 8).



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