MEMPHIS REPARATIVE URBAN PLANNING POLICY BRIEF

OVERVIEW

Memphis, Tennessee, displays some of our country's most commendable qualities alongside significant shortcomings. Memphis is characterized by Black American culture and Black resilience. This resilience has been borne out of violent history, such as the 1866 Memphis massacre and the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.

Prioritizing *reparative* and *thriving*-oriented planning is critical to establishing Memphis as a more just and livable city that residents deserve. Reparative planning centers around the principle of reparations and aims to transform urban planning through intentional changes aimed at redressing historical injustices. While thriving-oriented planning extends this by also implementing policies that move beyond meeting basic life needs. In this brief, I propose policies focusing on *affordability*, *health*, and *safety*. Through these recommendations, urban planning action can serve to fortify the current strengths of Memphis, rectify shortcomings, and envision new approaches to American urban spaces that can serve as a model for the nation.

According to my research, residents identify the culture and community of Memphis as the foremost strengths of the city. Racial inequality, housing affordability, public transportation, and safety are prominent challenges consistently observed across various data sources.

METHODOLOGY

This report draws on a mixed-methods research approach. I utilized primary data from the U.S. Census, the Environmental Protection Agency, and a survey conducted for this report. The survey was distributed through Reddit and Facebook to gather a convenience sample of current Memphis residents. In total, 98 people completed the survey. While the respondents represented a diverse population in terms of their age, gender, and the number of years they have lived in Memphis, the survey failed to reach a proportionate representation of Black residents, renters, and lower-income households. This report also incorporates findings based on a variety of secondary sources.
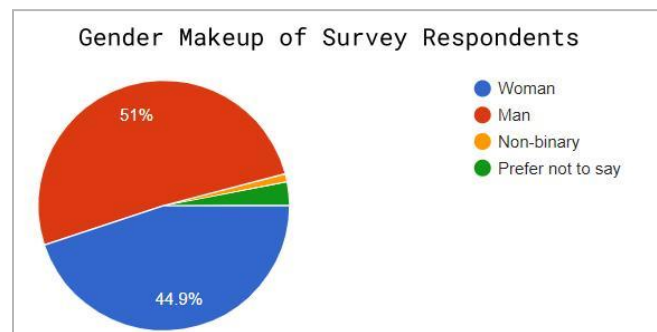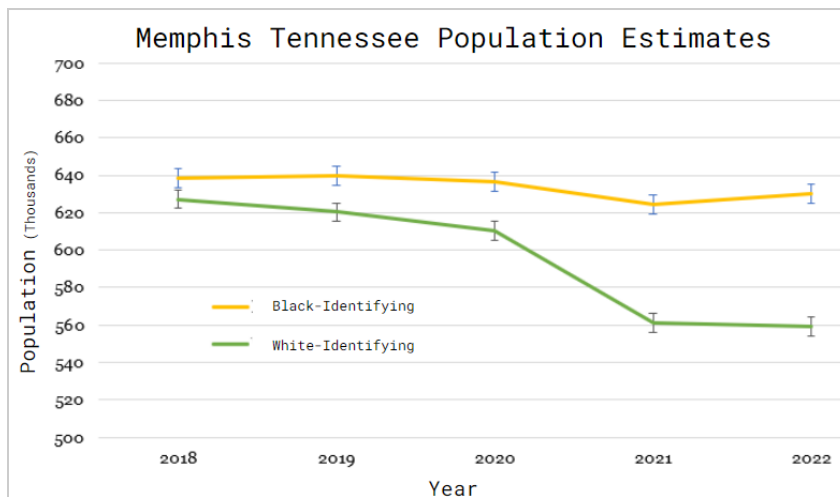

Figure 1. *Pie Chart of Respondent Gender Makeup*

FINDINGS

Among survey respondents, culture, people, history, and diversity were highlighted repeatedly as the positive aspects of what makes Memphis unique. Other specific facets of the city that respondents reported being satisfied with were

restaurants (69%), parks (66%), museums (60%), libraries (60%), and public art (57%)[1].

In 2022, Memphis was home to 621,056 people[2]. Compared to the general United States population, Memphis has a smaller proportion of immigrants and residents that identify as Hispanic, mixed-race, white, Asian, and indigenous, but a higher proportion of Black residents, about 4 times that of the national Figure 2. *Graph of Memphis*

Memphis Tennessee Population Estimates

Population Estimates

mean[3]. Further investigation of the city's demographics also reveals that, in recent years, the population of Black residents has remained consistent, while the white population has declined by about 11%[4].

The majority of Memphis' current housing infrastructure is single-family homes[5], but housing preferences are projected to shift toward townhomes and small lot single-family homes.

Based on the Land Use Scenario Analysis Tool within the Smart Location Database produced by the Environmental Protection Agency, an increase in development of single-family attached and multifamily housing would reduce Memphis' per household annual energy use[6]. Affordable housing is a major concern. Currently, 46% of rental housing and 79% of owner-occupied housing is affordable[7,8]. Most residents who make 35 thousand dollars a year or less spend more than 30% of their income on housing[7]. Generally, Black residents have less wealth and have lower homeownership rates compared to White residents[9].

In addition to housing, transit infrastructure also demands updates to meet resident needs. Eighty-two percent of survey respondents reported being 'very dissatisfied' or 'dissatisfied' with Memphis's current public transportation[10]. The primary forms of transportation offered by the Memphis Area Transit Authority (MATA) are the bus and the trolley system. Overall, MATA currently offers 23 bus routes and 3 trolly lines[11]. In comparison, Athens, Italy, a city with a population of about 637 thousand people[12], offered 322 bus lines, three metro lines, a suburban railway system,

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[1] Schultz, *Memphis Resident Survey*.
[2] U.S. Census Bureau, *Quick Facts*.
[3] U.S. Census Bureau, *ACS Demographic and Housing Estimates United States.*
[4] U.S. Census Bureau, *ACS Demographic and Housing Estimates Memphis Metro Area*.
[5] U.S. Census Bureau, *Tenure by Units in Structure*.

[6] Environmental Protection Agency, *Smart Location Database.*
[7] U.S. Census Bureau, *Gross Rent as a Percentage of Household Income*.
[8] U.S. Census Bureau, *Mortgage Status by Selected Monthly Owner Costs as a Percentage.*
[9] University of Memphis, *2021 Memphis Poverty Fact Sheet.*
[10] Schultz, *Memphis Resident Survey.*
[11] Memphis Area Transit Authority, *Home.*
[12] Wikipedia, *List of cities.*

and tram network in 2017[13]. About 96% of survey respondents reported their personal vehicle as one of their primary modes of transportation, with walking being the second most common mode of transportation at 14.3%[10].

Eighty-nine percent of survey respondents reported being 'very dissatisfied' or 'dissatisfied' with safety[10]. While safety consists of many factors, guns, policing, and prisons are especially crucial to examine. In the state of Tennessee, 51.6% of adults own guns[14], and in 2021, the state passed a law allowing concealed or open carry of loaded handguns[15]. In Memphis, among all Black residents, gun ownership rates recently rose by 58% in Memphis[16]. Black women make up the population with the highest increase in gun ownership rates in recent years[14].

Despite being well-funded and racially representative of the community, the Memphis police still fail to make the community safe. Notably, the Memphis Police Department (MPD) has more officers per population than 86% of American police departments[17]. The Uniform Crime Report also indicates that about 56% of MPD officers are Black[17]. In fiscal year 2020, $273,311,020 was spent on the Memphis Police[18]. The majority of arrests are for non-violent charges[19], and Black people are consistently overrepresented among those arrested. Additionally, among 2,655 complaints filed against

MPD from 2017 to 2021, only 6% were ruled in favor of civilians[19].

Much like concerns around policing, the carceral system within Tennessee is similarly disturbing. The state of Tennessee has a higher rate of incarceration than the United States overall[20]. In addition to over 50 thousand people incarcerated, about 67 thousand Tennessee residents are also on probation and parole. Within Shelby County, where Memphis is located, nearly 4 thousand people are in jail, and in 2019, Shelby County spent $138,824,467 on its jail facilities[21]. In 2017, 15% of the people in the Shelby County Jail had been in jail for more than 500 days pre-trial[22].

Environmental justice is another notable aspect of health and safety challenges in Memphis. Black Memphis residents have been identified as having 6% more cancer risk burden than white residents[23]. Nicknamed "America's Distribution Center," Memphis is a major cargo transit hub within the country[24]. Such high vehicle traffic has led to diminished air quality in the area. South Memphis is an area that has higher rates of Black residents. South Memphis, in particular, has high rates of resident exposure to hazardous industry byproducts due to "fossil fuel burning, steel, refining, and processing industries"[25]. Specifically, the chemicals benzene, formaldehyde, and acrylonitrile were found to have the most dangerous cumulative risk to residents in South Memphis[25].

[13] Wikipedia, *Public transport in Athens.*
[14] Learish and FieldStadt, *Gun map.*
[15] Memphis Police Department, *TN permitless handgun carry.*
[16] Butcher, *Gun ownership.*
[17] Nationwide Police Scorecard, *Memphis Police Department.*
[18] Vera Institute of Justice, *What Policing Costs.*
[19] Nationwide Police Scorecard, *Memphis Police Department.*

[20] Prison Policy Initiative, *Tennessee profile.*
[21] Vera Institute of Justice, *Shelby County.*
[22] Safety and Justice Challenge. *Background.*
[23] Jia et al, *Relationship.*
[24] Memphis Moves, *Location and infrastructure.*
[25] Jia and Foran, *Air Toxics.*

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on my research, I have identified policy recommendations targeting affordability, health, and safety. These areas serve as guides toward reparative and thriving-oriented urban planning action.

Affordability-centered planning policy is crucial as it ensures that housing, services, and resources are accessible for current residents. Labor, education, housing, and food are key areas to address to promote affordability in Memphis. Specifically, I recommend prioritizing a comprehensive shift in housing development, recognizing the projected changes in housing preferences toward townhomes and small lot single-family homes.

Figure 3. *Graph of Shifting Housing Preferences*

Leveraging data from the Smart Location Database, such a plan not only aligns with emerging housing trends but also presents an opportunity to enhance energy efficiency, as demonstrated by the reduction in per household annual energy use in such developments. This plan should be designed with a keen focus on

affordability, targeting the pressing issue where a significant portion of the population, particularly those earning $35,000 or less annually, is burdened by housing costs exceeding 30% of their income. To address racial disparities in homeownership rates, the plan should also incorporate equitable allocation mechanisms to ensure fair access and representation for Black residents.

To implement the Mixed-Income Housing Development Plan, it is imperative to collaborate with local developers, community stakeholders, and affordable housing organizations. Engaging in a participatory planning process that includes input from residents, particularly t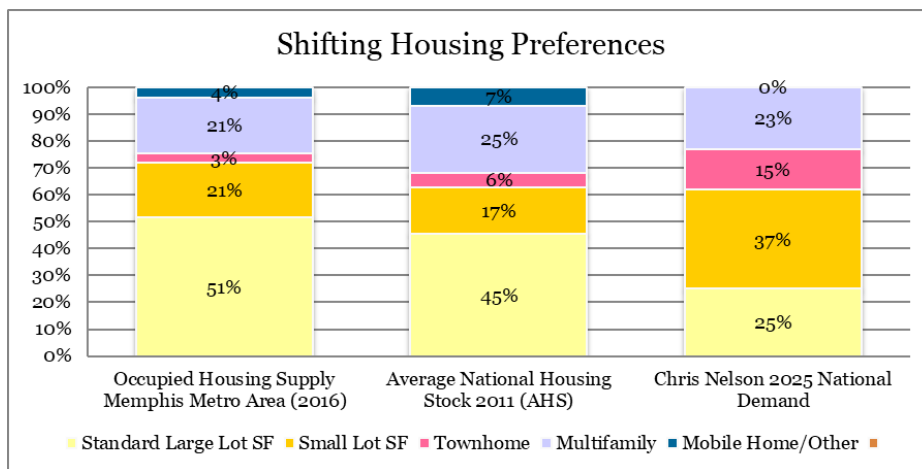hose in the $35,000 or less income bracket, ensures that the plan is reflective of diverse needs and preferences. Additionally, leveraging public-private partnerships and incentivizing developers to adhere to the affordability and diversity goals set by the plan can facilitate the construction of inclusive housing options, promoting both economic diversity and racial equity within Memphis communities.

While policies focused on affordability, health, and safety are inevitably overlapping in their topics and impacts, health-oriented policies can especially be expanded on in areas of physical health and environmental conditions. Specifically, Memphis

should prioritize a comprehensive overhaul of its public transit system, addressing the dissatisfaction expressed by 82% of residents. This should involve creating dedicated bus lanes to alleviate congestion and improve the efficiency of bus routes, implementing Real-Time Information Systems, and upgrading and maintaining bus stops with a strong emphasis on accessibility. Introducing Contactless Payment options further modernizes the transit experience, making it more seamless and efficient. Planners could target grants from the U.S. Department of Transportation, such as the Better Utilizing Investments to Leverage Development grants. Additionally, planners could consider establishing public-private partnerships with major businesses with the city, such as Fedex to fund public transportation. In exchange for funding, planners could ensure public transit routes that have strong coverage to those destinations and the primary neighborhoods where their staff work.

Increasing mixed-using zoning and improving public transportation can both positively impact community safety, but additionally, urban planners can drive a transformative shift in safety paradigms in Memphis by collaborating with the community to develop a comprehensive, long-term plan. One major short-term step that planners can implement is changing zoning to allow for community space designations in all zoning area types. Community spaces are critical environments for neighborhoods to build connections and promote safety through their own measures. In the long term, a safety plan should

also strategically reallocate financial resources from policing and prisons to community-driven initiatives like Restorative Justice Programs, Mental Health Crisis Intervention Teams, and Community Resource Centers. While this may not be politically feasible initially across the city, planners could work to identify if there are specific neighborhoods interested in these changes and create trial periods of alternative safety community resources to inform larger scale change.

Overall, planners must advocate for policy changes, engage with local authorities, and leverage data to demonstrate the effectiveness of community-centric services. Actively involving residents in the decision-making process at every step ensures a culturally sensitive and inclusive approach, contributing to the development of a more just and equitable safety framework for all Memphis residents. Shaping new visions of safety is needed to create a more just and equitable safety framework that truly serves the needs of all Memphis residents.

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