From Crisis to Opportunity
Responding to the Growing Economic Crisis
for Knoxville’s Marginalized Children

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The Kirwan Institute
A university-wide interdisciplinary research institute. We generate and support innovative analyses that improve understanding of the dynamics that underlie racial marginality and undermine full and fair democratic practices throughout Ohio, the United States, and the global community. Responsive to real-world needs, our work informs policies and practices that produce equitable changes in those dynamics.

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The extent of child poverty in Knoxville has reached crisis levels. The Kirwan Institute was commissioned to assess the opportunities available to Knoxville’s children, particularly those in concentrated poverty and racially isolated neighborhoods. Because neighborhoods are a critical point of intervention to expand opportunities for economically vulnerable and marginalized kids, they are analyzed and discussed at length. The report incorporates several interviews with local stakeholders to provide on-the-ground context regarding the challenges facing Knoxville’s most vulnerable children. We found that children in the most distressed communities of Knoxville face multiple barriers to opportunity, including safe and stable housing, access to health care, high quality education, viable transportation, healthy food, and encouragement.

There are people ready and willing to help in Knoxville, and some good programs in place. It is time for these people and programs to be aligned to fight the structural causes of generational child poverty, including neighborhood segregation and poor educational outcomes. The structure of poverty in Knoxville matters. Over 85% of Knoxville’s minority children live in high-poverty neighborhoods. These same neighborhoods have the highest-need schools. High-poverty neighborhoods and high-need schools can negatively impact child health and depress student outcomes, regardless of individual promise. The isolation of poor minority children into neighborhoods with multiple risk factors almost guarantees that the “silent crisis” of child poverty, amplified by the current economic recession, will get worse, not better, unless structural interventions are made. What is clear is that the stakes are too high to not do anything. This report represents a critical first step in forging a common agenda to address Knoxville’s most important resource and its literal future--its children.

While the extent of child poverty in Knoxville is deep, interventions do exist. Knoxvillites must come together to create multiple pathways of opportunity for all of their children. Pathways to opportunity—the option to live in a better neighborhood, an engaged mentoring program, an urban garden, a working family car— not only allow Knoxville’s children to reach their full potential, but help secure a sustainable future for the Knoxville region. Small, strategic interventions can lead to transformative change. The Knoxville community is rich in engaged stakeholders. Churches are located throughout the region, with high concentrations in the highest poverty neighborhoods, offering assistance and support for families. Advocacy agencies offer multiple programs and resources for families in need. Together, these institutions represent capacity and expertise, a source for civic engagement, and a foundation for the formation of strategic partnerships. Although the challenges are many, so, too, are the opportunities. The report concludes with several strategies for implementing transformative, positive change for the children of Knoxville.
INTRODUCTION: A GROWING CRISIS AND A WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY FOR CHANGE

The Kirwan Institute was commissioned to review child poverty trends and access to opportunity in the Knoxville region. This report sounds the alarm of growing child vulnerability and marginalization in the Knoxville community, and offers principles and strategies to remedy this growing challenge. Neighborhoods are a critical point of intervention to expand opportunities for economically vulnerable and marginalized kids, and are therefore analyzed and discussed at length. The report incorporates several interviews with local stakeholders as well, to provide on-the-ground context regarding the challenges facing Knoxville’s children in marginalized neighborhoods. Although these interviews do not represent a statistically valid sample, responses provide insight into local constraints and opportunities. The report closes by proposing principles and strategies to open pathways to opportunity for Knoxville’s most vulnerable residents and expand opportunity for the entire region. While this report offers research, data, and best practices for moving forward, it is up to the people of Knoxville to generate, own, and take measure of their own unique “road map” for a sustainable future for their children.

The State of Tennessee and the Knoxville region are on the national top ten and top twenty lists for child poverty among White, Latino and Black children. In the Knoxville metropolitan area, nearly 1 in 5 children and nearly 1 in 2 Black children are living in poverty. This pressing challenge is growing worse as the recession takes hold. One Knoxvillite noted that even feeding Knoxville’s children is an increasing challenge: “we’ve seen an increase in hungry children, so I have increased the “Back Pack” program that sends kids home with food over the weekend…but Friday was the last day of school…and so kids are not sure what they are going to do for food and services.” Without deliberate action, strategic thinking, community engagement and widespread collaboration, children’s opportunities in Knoxville and throughout Tennessee will continue to shrink, not grow.

Communities across the country are struggling with the impacts of the current recession. The restructuring of the auto industry, the subprime lending and foreclosure crisis, and state and federal budget deficits have dominated headlines for months, indicating that we are truly in a time of crisis. As New York Times columnist Bob Herbert recently stated:

“...there is little doubt that poverty and family homelessness are rising, that the quality of public education in many communities is deteriorating and that legions of children are losing access to health care as their parents join the vastly expanding ranks of the unemployed. This is a toxic mix for children, a demoralizing convergence of factors that have long been known to impede the ability of young people to flourish.”

As one pediatrician has warned, “We are seeing the emergence of what amounts to a ‘recession generation.’” Increases in child poverty, homelessness, and temporary relief indicate that children across the U.S. are experiencing “a quiet disaster.” Between 2006 and 2007, 500,000 more children became poor, and the numbers are expected to rise as the impacts of the recession continue.

With crisis, however, comes opportunity: the opportunity to re-think, re-envision, and re-invent our relationships to one another, our priorities, and our idea of a just society. Rather than seeing ourselves in isolation from one another, we can see ourselves in relation to one another. We can reconsider what it means to be connected, all part of the same fabric of humanity. People working together can help connect marginalized communities to mainstream capital and resources, and in doing so, expand opportunity for all. What if all our children could do math at grade level, had reliable access to the internet, could choose between Spanish and Mandarin classes in elementary school, learned green
engineering principles in high school? What if we could close the achievement and the opportunity gaps for our children? We would be leading the way into the new economy, rather than slipping behind.

**NEIGHBORHOODS MATTER FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES**

We all intuitively know the importance of accessing good opportunities — enrolling in college, investing in homeownership, finding a high-quality primary care doctor. Accessing opportunity to improve our lives and our children’s lives motivates us to move across town, across the country, or across the world for better jobs, a quality education, and safety from violence. The ability to learn, dream, invest, and teach is dependent upon the strength and vibrancy of our opportunities. For most of us, we look first and foremost to our neighborhoods for opportunities. And we know that these neighborhood opportunities are not equal. As one Knoxvilleite noted, “for one dollar in East Knoxville you can’t get the same quantity or quality [of groceries] as you could in the North or Northwest sector of Knoxville...a dollar in East Knoxville doesn’t stretch as far.”

Fifty years of social science confirm this intuition, showing that racially isolated and economically poor neighborhoods restrict employment options for young people, contribute to poor health, expose children to extremely high rates of crime and violence, and house some of the least-performing schools. Kids who do not see neighbors leaving for work, who are unchallenged in school, who are afraid to go to their local park, and who can’t find healthy food in their community are exposed to cumulative disadvantages that can be hard to overcome. There is a reason that the old real estate adage is “location, location, location.” Good opportunities (and bad ones) often come bundled together. Location – this bundle of opportunities we can access—is important for everyone, but especially for our children.

A vexing challenge to better opportunity for our children is the increasing racial and economic segregation in our nation’s schools. The number of nearly all-minority schools doubled nationwide between 1993 and 2006. Because racial isolation often corresponds with concentrated poverty, minority-majority schools are often in high poverty areas. Concentrated poverty can depress student achievement regardless of individual promise, so the impact of this educational segregation is severe. As one interviewee observed, “in our minority inner-city, the education isn’t as good quality as it is in the outlying county schools.” New studies are showing that living in a severely disadvantaged neighborhood is equivalent to missing an entire year of school. Meant to be the great engine of equal opportunity, our public education system is instead growing more racially and economically segregated, transferring and expanding inequality across generations. Isolating low-income people of color in low-opportunity neighborhoods, and clustering these higher-need populations in high-poverty schools, places millions of children in double-jeopardy and constrains their life-long potential.

High-poverty communities can negatively impact children’s educational outcomes indirectly as well. Nationwide, children in high-poverty, urban communities have levels of lead in their blood that are nine times above the average, a condition linked to attention deficit disorder and irreversible loss of cognitive functioning. Six million children have lost an average of 7 IQ points as a result. Children growing up in very poor families with low social status can also experience unhealthy levels of stress hormones, which impair neural development. Health problems can deplete a student’s attention span or cause the student to miss school and fall behind. The impact of health status on school achievement is so important that an estimated 25% of the achievement gap in education is attributable to differences in child and maternal health. In short, neighborhood context and access to opportunity—from preventative health care to high-performing schools -- can deeply affect children’s health and safety and their opportunities to learn and grow.
There are many promising ways to open up the pathways of opportunity for more children. Children who are born to mothers who received prenatal care, and children who are under the care of a primary care physician already start out with a distinct advantage. Those who have access to early education and positive, encouraging role models can thrive in spite of depressed material circumstances. Impoverished students do better in school if they live in middle-class neighborhoods or attend more affluent schools. Children who move to lower-poverty areas see reductions in obesity, positive increases in mental health, and improved safety. Students who learn in integrated environments fare better than their segregated peers. For example, students of color in Raleigh’s economically integrated schools have experienced dramatic increases in test scores. In the Minneapolis region, students attending low-poverty schools in the region’s suburbs have shown improved educational outcomes. Attending a desegregated school also translates into higher goals for future educational attainment and occupational choices, and improved social networks. Intergenerational gains also ensue when students of color attend desegregated schools. Diverse educational settings contribute to all students’ ability to participate in a democratic society. Blacks and whites who attend desegregated schools are more likely to attend a desegregated college, live in a desegregated neighborhood, work in a desegregated environment, and possess high career aspirations. Children who live in high-opportunity neighborhoods have more chances to live out their dreams.

RAISING THE ALARM: MARGINALIZED CHILDREN AND COMMUNITIES IN KNOXVILLE

Many communities across the nation struggle with issues of poverty, neighborhood distress, and marginalized and economically isolated children. What is striking about the Knoxville region (and the State of Tennessee) is the severity of child poverty in the region. Knoxville has some of the highest child poverty rates in the U.S., especially among racial and ethnic populations. The findings for Knoxville are stark:

- In 2000, out of Tennessee’s seven metropolitan areas, Knoxville has the highest African American child poverty rate (42.7%) and highest Latino child poverty rate (29.5%) and the highest White child poverty rate (12.1%) in the State (Figure 1).
- Out of all 331 metropolitan areas in the U.S., the Knoxville region ranks 54th in rates of Black child poverty, 102nd for Latino child poverty and 76th for White child poverty in 2000.
- Out of the 100 largest metropolitan areas, the Knoxville region ranks 9th in Black child poverty, 7th in White child poverty and 23rd in Latino child poverty in 2000.

The State of America’s Children 2008, published by the Children’s Defense Fund, analyzed the most recent Census bureau estimates of child poverty across the U.S. In these rankings, the State of Tennessee (like Knoxville) records some of the highest child poverty rates in the nation (Table 1). Nearly 1 in 4 children (23%) in the State lived in poverty in 2007, the 8th highest rate among all 50 states. The state of Tennessee has the 7th highest White child poverty rate, 10th highest Black child poverty rate, and 7th highest Latino child poverty rate in 2007. In addition, more than 1 in 10 children in the State lived in “extreme poverty” in 2007, meaning they were living in families living on incomes 50% lower than the federal poverty thresholds. On this indicator, the State of Tennessee has the 8th highest rate of children living in extreme poverty in the nation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2000 Census Rate</th>
<th>2005-2007 ACS Rate</th>
<th>2007 ACS Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>48%</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>30%</td>
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<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: U.S. Census Bureau; Note: ACS is the Census American Community Survey; Note: N/A represents data not available due to sample size limitations

Figure 1: Child Poverty Rates in the Knoxville Metropolitan Statistical Area

2007 Child Poverty Rates by Race: Ranking of Top 10 States with Highest Rates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>White</th>
<th>2007 Rate</th>
<th>Latino</th>
<th>2007 Rate</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>2007 Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 New Mexico</td>
<td>23.8</td>
<td>1 Rhode Island</td>
<td>41.6</td>
<td>1 Nebraska</td>
<td>52.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 West Virginia</td>
<td>21.9</td>
<td>2 Massachusetts</td>
<td>40.4</td>
<td>2 Arkansas</td>
<td>48.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Kentucky</td>
<td>21.0</td>
<td>3 Pennsylvania</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>3 Mississippi</td>
<td>47.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Texas</td>
<td>20.1</td>
<td>4 Oklahoma</td>
<td>39.6</td>
<td>4 Kentucky</td>
<td>46.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Arkansas</td>
<td>18.5</td>
<td>5 Kentucky</td>
<td>39.1</td>
<td>5 Wisconsin</td>
<td>45.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Oklahoma</td>
<td>18.0</td>
<td>6 Arkansas</td>
<td>38.4</td>
<td>6 Louisiana</td>
<td>45.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Tennessee</td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td>7 Tennessee</td>
<td>34.2</td>
<td>7 Iowa</td>
<td>44.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Arizona</td>
<td>16.5</td>
<td>8 Texas</td>
<td>33.0</td>
<td>8 Ohio</td>
<td>44.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Oregon</td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>9 New York</td>
<td>32.9</td>
<td>9 Michigan</td>
<td>44.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Montana</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>10 Colorado</td>
<td>32.3</td>
<td>10 Tennessee</td>
<td>43.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Children’s Defense Fund and the 2007 American Community Survey

Figure 2: Highest Child Poverty Rates (by Race) among States 2007
A critical finding is not just the scale of child poverty in the Knoxville community, but its disproportionate racial and geographic concentration. Poor and minority students are concentrated into the poorest neighborhoods, and therefore the poorest schools (see Map 1). Schools that have greater than 85% of students receiving free lunch are also almost exclusively located in the census tracts with poverty levels surpassing 40%. Like many places in the U.S., Knoxville has seen these conditions grow worse over the past decade. Child poverty in the Knoxville metro area has increased from 14.9% in 2000 to 17.4% in 2007. For children under 5 years of age, this number is even higher, with more than 1 in 5 living in poverty (21.4%). Racial disparities in employment persist in the State of Tennessee, and unemployment rates for Black workers stand at 10.6% in 2008 (compared to 5.8% for Whites).

Race, poverty and geography intersect to cumulatively restrict opportunities for some of Knoxville’s most vulnerable children. Several interviewees cited concerns over the variable quality of education, lack of healthy food, lack of safety, lack of role models, and unsupervised children. As we noted, children who live in high-poverty neighborhoods can suffer the cumulative effects of a neighborhood at risk, including poorer health and educational outcomes. Many of Knoxville’s children in poverty live in segregated neighborhoods that lack many of the essential services, resources and opportunities to thrive. Several interviewees noted the challenges of even getting to school and after-school programs. For example, one person noted: “Transportation is an issue. We have a mile and a half radius, so some kids have to walk to our schools. So there is not adequate transportation to get to school, and kids have to rely on getting to school on their own.” Another said, “Children don’t have a chance to participate in after school programs, because if they don’t get the bus, then they don’t get home.”

As seen in Figure 2, the average Black household lives in neighborhoods with poverty rates more than 250% higher than the average White household. As seen in Map 1, Black children are most concentrated in Knoxville’s highest poverty neighborhoods. Much of the Knoxville area’s subsidized housing reinforces this concentration of poverty, with most units concentrated in impoverished neighborhoods (Map 2).
Maps 3 and 4 illustrate that this geographic concentration into high poverty neighborhoods also correlates with high rates of vacant property (which can lead to loss of home equity, further flight of families from the neighborhood, and personal and property crimes) and with the area’s highest poverty schools.

However, Knoxville’s poor and minority children are not the only ones at risk. One stakeholder noted that “homelessness is a big problem here in Knoxville...finding adequate places for people to live and finding a stable home base.” Other measures of child and community well-being indicate troubling trends for all children. Knox County had the lowest unemployment rate in the State in 2009, standing at 7.9% in March of 2009, but unemployment in the County has doubled since 2000, when the rate hovered between 3 and 3.5%. Youth unemployment rates in Knox County have jumped from 8.2% in 2002 to 12.8% in 2006. The proportion of students receiving food stamps has increased from 15.2% in 2002 to 21.7% by 2006. The proportion of all people receiving food stamps has doubled from 7.4% in 2002 to 15.7% in 2006. The proportion of school children eligible for free and reduced meals has increased from 31% of all students in 2003 to 41% of students in 2007. These data indicate the increasing impoverishment of Knoxville’s neighborhoods, schools, and children. One interviewee felt that all of Knoxville’s children were falling behind:

“There is] no common sense on what it means to be educated. Even the best white schools are poor; there is not a common value in the education system, that children should be exposed to foreign languages... They teach computers by projections, but not actually using computers! It’s backwards. A lot of the things they do are backwards...and actually there is a great potential within this community, you wouldn’t believe that Oak Ridge is 30 miles away! And here we have science classes and people are teaching children to read science books instead of teaching them to explore and discover...

Knoxvillians we interviewed also expressed concern over the financial, emotional and educational support available from unemployed parents, single-parent homes, and non-literate adults. One interviewee said, “We have a vicious cycle of single-family homes, distressed homes, parents who are sick and lack access to healthcare. I have had [some young students’] parents die since I have been here.” Others noted that with the recession and layoffs, formerly middle-class families were now competing with poorer families for resources. Concern over children’s potentially stressful home lives was mentioned often, i.e.: “[There are] a lot of children in single-family homes, a lot from domestic violent homes. The lack of quality jobs for the parents, so the children can’t be supported emotionally from the parent who is under stress—not just financially but emotionally.” One person observed, “single parent households put incredible demands on the single parent to provide for the family in all aspects of ‘providing’ -- not only the essentials but the social and emotional dimensions of ‘providing’.”

Respondents explicitly made the link between healthy, employed parents and the well-being of children, noting the need for adult job training, and workforce development, especially for technology skills. Adult education programs were also cited as a critical need, not only for enhancing the adult’s potential or opportunity for advancement, but to support their children in their school efforts, and to improve literacy at home.
Map 3: Vacancy and Child Poverty

- Limited Access
- Highway
- Major Road
- Cnty Bnds (detailed, named)

Vacant Residences
- 1 Dot = 75 Residences

Vacant Businesses
- 1 Dot = 50 Businesses

Census Tracts
% of Children in Poverty
- 0% - 5%
- 5.1% - 10%
- 10.1% - 20%
- 20.1% - 40% (High)
- 40.1% - 100% (Concentrated)
Local Perspectives: Input from Child Advocates in Knoxville

Interviewed stakeholders felt that Knoxville had a wealth of resources, committed people, and good programs, but expressed concern over the scale, scope, and outreach of successful programs. One respondent noted that “there is a group of five churches taking on homeless families, a great program; they have a house to help them until they are ready to be on their own, but this is only about five families over a 6-month period...” Another said, “I guess I am so hard on them because they can do better...I feel there is great potential here. There are people in this town who really want to change the system. There are a lot of external programs that do work, the Joy of Music school...they work.” Another respondent noted the increasing level of need:

> Yes, [resources are available] however, the gap is growing and the demand for these services is growing as well. For example, this year we’ve seen a waiting list for public housing, which is a first in our experience. There is a great deal of need, which given current economic circumstances will probably continue to widen the gap for those who have and those who have not. This is unfortunate for Knoxville’s children.

Respondents noted that cooperation and collaboration among agencies was good, but that the approach was perhaps not “unified” enough. As one respondent noted, “I see it as a community with a lot of resources ...maybe not a particularly organized and integrated information system to connect folks with the services.” Several people alluded to the need to be more inclusive in program design, suggesting “[We need] a neighborhood-based action committee to formulate neighborhood development issues” and “there needs to be an honest analysis of the problems with the input from those that have the problems.” People referenced the good work by churches, non-profits, and businesses, but expressed the need to expand, connect, and better fund such programs.

Some interviewees mentioned the continuing effects of racial disparities and class and geography divides in the Knoxville region. Several respondents expressed concern over an “insular” culture, and the general lack of opportunity for the region, even prior to the recession. An important issue was the lack of intentional connection to regional resources and employers, such as Oak Ridge National Laboratory. Several respondents mentioned that the university could be better utilized, and asked, “How do we form strategic partnerships, capitalize on existing assets?”

Others mentioned the challenges of intergenerational poverty and low expectations. As one interviewee noted, “[We need to look at] new standards in terms of education and resources. Change the culture to a ‘can do’ attitude for our kids -- that they can achieve and be successful.” Another noted that “there is a glass-ceiling mentality to the urban community in thinking that you can only go so far.” These challenges include disenfranchisement of the youth from critical support systems, especially the schools. One respondent mentioned the school systems don’t value the youth; a few respondents mentioned a lack of leadership and capacity within the school staff and principals—one noted the “revolving door”: that the best, tenured teachers leave. Every respondent mentioned the need for better educational opportunities for all the children in Knoxville. A key was not only the low expectations placed on the children of Knoxville’s poorest communities, but also the lack of leadership and innovation within the schools to push and challenge the children, and the lack of policies to provide the children with equitable access to quality education and resources, including computers and libraries, found elsewhere in the county.

Several people spoke of the lack of political will to act, the lack of a unified voice or action plan, and a lack of support for children across domains: “A lot of the issues we are trying to address we ‘band aid’ fix
them and don’t address the root problem...we need a unified system to look at all the issues and not just a particular program.” Others mentioned more concrete needs, such as pro-bono services on an on-going basis, such as lawyers, plumbers, mechanics, financial counselors, and the like. Interviewees recognized an increase in immediate, short-term needs, such as food, computers, and short-term cash assistance.

CREATING GOOD NEIGHBORHOODS: OPENING PATHWAYS TO OPPORTUNITY FOR ALL

Despite the myriad of challenges facing Knoxville, the State of Tennessee, and the nation, strategies for combating these challenges exist. All of us want the children in our community to succeed, and we are constantly searching for ways to positively impact their future. We know that parental involvement and family factors mean a lot. But we are learning that the influences on children go far beyond their parents – to their friends, their neighbors, their schools, their churches, and their local opportunities to learn about history, science, and art. Environments matter for kids because what they are exposed to – good and bad – can have lasting effects on their well-being. We try to identify critical intervention points for children trapped in the cycle of poverty, and work to implement school reforms and community programs, because we know that kids who have access to helpful role models, small classrooms with qualified teachers, safe and walkable neighborhoods, grocery stores with fresh food, parks and museums have advantages that last a lifetime. In a recent *New York Times* Op-Ed, Nicholas Kristof reported that kids’ I.Q.s can be expanded or constrained by their attitudes and environments:

> Professor Nisbett strongly advocates intensive early childhood education because of its proven ability to raise I.Q. and improve long-term outcomes...Another proven intervention is to tell junior-high-school students that I.Q. is expandable, and that their intelligence is something they can help shape. Students exposed to that idea work harder and get better grades. 40

Expanding opportunity for all of our children requires that we collaborate and intentionally cultivate diverse engagement from people and community institutions, with a particular emphasis on encouraging civic engagement of marginalized people and communities. People need to be involved in the design and implementation of policies that affect them.

To open up pathways to opportunity for marginalized children, families and communities we must focus on three key elements: **people, places, and linkages**. Supporting people refers to individual and community wealth creation, educational attainment, sustained employment, and political empowerment. In conversations with local stakeholders, increasing the quality of childcare and education opportunities for all children, building on existing workforce development and educational programs, and expanding job training (and cross training) were clear priorities. People are our most valuable resource, and as such, investments in families and children are paramount for the future of the community. Supporting places means investing in neighborhoods so that all families have access to safe housing, fresh and affordable food choices, preventable health care, and living-wage job opportunities. Many interview respondents noted an urgent need for food for better grocery stores that stock affordable, fresh food, and for urban community gardens. Supporting linkages means giving people access to high-quality regional assets, like magnet schools, hospitals, and universities, either through programs and relationships (i.e. structured housing mobility or mentoring programs), or literal linkages, like accessible public transportation.
Early Childhood Initiatives: Investing in People

In today’s economy, it is more important than ever to get a good education, be computer literate, and communicate with people around the world, across our differences of language, culture, and history. Yet across the country, almost six in ten White 4th graders—and more than eight in ten Black and Latino 4th graders—cannot read at grade level. Seven out of ten public school 8th graders cannot read nor do math at grade level. Furthermore, international comparisons of scientific and mathematic literacy, two areas critical to our national progress and economic stability, place U.S. students near the bottom among developed nations. We are not only failing to adequately educate our children, we are failing to realize our full potential as a nation, particularly given the large disparities between the “haves” and the “have-nots.” The ability to open doors for all of Knoxville’s children is impacted by Knoxville’s isolation and racial and class divides:

Knoxville is an isolated community, surrounded by mountains; the physical terrain makes it hard to get to. I imagine that the settlers were the hardy people...so they came with tough spirits. Unfortunately, that isolation has impacted deeply the economic and cultural parts of Knoxville. It’s depressed this part of the world in the sense that they don’t realize...that it is OK to acknowledge that people are different, and this is both white and black... [There is an] exclusion to anyone new to town, anyone that has new ideas...They need to realize that it is OK to acknowledge diversity in their humanity and the worthiness of each other.

Many people in Knoxville are well aware of the challenges facing the Knoxville region and its children. The task before the community now is how to best engage around these issues and develop concrete strategies for change. As one interviewee noted,

Our collective “will” as community partners/leaders/stakeholders is not intentional and sustained – rather, it is reactive and crisis-driven...American ingenuity has always creatively addressed problems we put our minds to...We need a recommitment of our collective will in serving students in urban communities and schools, then we need to keep it top of mind in ways that are intentional and sustained and produce desired results.

Disadvantage accumulates across a person’s lifetime, thus it is critical that intervention strategies begin early. Factors as early as prenatal care can have a notable positive outcome on a person’s lifelong potential. All populations, particularly children, must have access to high quality healthcare throughout their lives. Primary care physicians need to be deliberately sited in high poverty communities, with outreach efforts targeting pregnant mothers, and extended business hours to accommodate working families. Healthcare and education providers must collaborate to ensure children are not suffering from undiagnosed visual or dental problems, and to treat chronic conditions that plague low-income communities and suppress academic achievement, such as lead poisoning and asthma. All schools, particularly those with high proportions of low-income students, should aim to have a nurse in every building. For most low-income students, a school nurse is their first point of medical contact and with a national average of 1 nurse per every 950 students, far too many children are not getting the medical attention they need.

Early education interventions are critical in laying the foundation for academic success and ensuring children are able to escape the cycle of poverty. Education policies look to K-12 schools to single-handedly close the achievement gap; however, by the age of 5, 90% of a child’s brain is already developed. In order to effectively improve the academic performance levels of low-income children
and children of color we must start early, as the achievement gap between low-income and middle-class children is already present by preschool. These early childhood education opportunities need to be accessible to low-income families and families of color; however, they must also be high quality. Preschools serving high-needs students should have low teacher-student ratios, highly skilled teachers, and should provide challenging content.

Early childhood education can give students the foundation they need for lifelong success, but it must also be followed by high quality educational experiences throughout their education. There are a number of in-school initiatives being promoted and implemented nation-wide that promise to substantially narrow the achievement gap. Countless studies support the provision of high-quality teachers, decreasing class sizes, de-tracking, reforming discipline, eradicating racial and economic segregation, and diversifying teaching methods. All of these are critical and must be pursued; however, emergent research suggests that the problem does not solely exist in the education system, but in the opportunities provided to children outside of the school. A significant summer learning gap exists between low-income children and their middle-class peers. In short, over the summer low-income students actually lose achievement, while their middle-class peers generally improve. Over time this summer attrition accumulates, and by the time that student reaches high school those summer losses account for nearly two-thirds of the total achievement gap. Thus high quality, affordable afterschool activities and programs must be available and supported for low-income students, particularly in elementary and middle school.

One of the factors negatively impacting low-income populations and families of color is high rates of student mobility resulting from unstable housing conditions. By kindergarten, over 48% of low-income children have lived in at least three different homes, and students who have moved more than three times over a period of six years can fall a full academic year behind their peers. There are a number of interventions in the educational arena that can address this issue, from implementing a state-wide record tracking system that streamlines student transfers, to implementing a universal curriculum. However, in the long run the issue needs to be addressed at the source. Programs must connect housing to education policy in order to keep children in their homes and curb mobility. One example of how this could be achieved is by modifying the state’s Low Income Housing Tax Credit scoring criteria, to develop affordable family housing in areas with high performing schools. Particularly in light of the economic and housing crisis, a moratorium on foreclosures should be put in place until systematic foreclosure reform (both federal and state) and federal housing relief can mitigate the impact of the foreclosure crisis on families with children.

Building Opportunity-Rich Communities: Investing in Places

Investing in and empowering neighborhood capacity and institutions supports places. This includes equitable neighborhood redevelopment, support of neighborhood anchors, increasing employment opportunities for living-wage jobs, and equal provision of local services, including high-performing schools. Successful programs that could be expanded were mentioned by interviewees, such as the “Project Grad” middle-school program. Efforts at neighborhood upkeep and beautification were recommended as well.

Revitalization is a complex, dynamic and long-term challenge and as such requires a long-term commitment, extensive collaboration, in-depth community engagement, a multi-faceted approach, and the ability to leverage initiatives with public policy and private dollars. Through its neighborhood
consulting work, The Kirwan Institute has found that a shared vision of a success is needed to convene and effectively engage the various stakeholders. Equity, fairness and inclusion must be explicit goals for neighborhood and community revitalization. Without explicitly planning for and maintaining a focus on inclusion in revitalization activities, existing residents could be excluded from the benefits.

Neighborhood distress did not occur overnight in marginalized communities, but represents decades of disinvestment, segregation and decline. Therefore, successful community revitalization will require a long-term approach and strategy. A number of impediments and challenges systematically disadvantage urban neighborhoods and neglected rural communities. Efforts to mitigate these challenges must be multi-faceted as well, including simultaneous support for education, housing and economic development initiatives.

Universities, urban hospitals and major employers have tremendous resources, influence and linkages to nearby communities. The investment of these partners (and the ability to leverage their considerable assets) is critical. Successful initiatives often involve anchor developments in the community. Highly visible and targeted investments can spur nearby private investment and provide a positive physical sign of reinvestment to encourage the private sector. Many small-scale interventions have proven locally effective, but are not producing significant results because of their limited scale or scope. Focus on scaling up and connecting successful programs.

Knoxville’s churches could play a role in many of these revitalization steps – from helping to define a shared vision, to making fairness and inclusion explicit goals of redevelopment, to brokering partnerships among regional anchor institutions like universities, to running small-scale intervention programs.

Building Bridges to Opportunity: Creating Linkages

Linkages are programs or infrastructures that connect people to opportunities, such as housing mobility vouchers or public transit. For example, a specific challenge identified by stakeholders was the lack of access to transportation alternatives. Ideally, public housing policy should deliberately connect affordable or assisted housing to regional opportunities, such as high-performing schools, meaningful employment, viable transportation, quality childcare, responsive health care, and other institutions that facilitate civic and political activity. It is critical to ensure that affordable housing is available throughout the region, and not overly concentrated into low-opportunity, isolated communities. Subsidized housing programs (such as Section VIII or the Low Income Housing Tax Credit Program) can reorient the use of housing vouchers and the location of site-based assisted housing development into areas of opportunity. Mobility programs for subsidized housing recipients have shown that accessing higher opportunity communities improves family social, economic and educational well being.

Relationship linkages are profoundly important as well. We have found that there is a very real need, in communities across the country, for trusted conveners to bring together diverse groups of residents to talk openly and safely about racial isolation, class discrimination, painful histories, success stories, community strengths and points of pride. This set of conversations must happen in order to build trust and collectively develop a vision for a sustainable future. In that spirit, we offer the following community conversation guidelines:
DO:

- In the story you tell, make sure everyone can see themselves in the story (it’s about “all of us,” not just “those people”).
- Underscore shared, deep values (opportunity, connectedness, good health, and a sustainable and productive future).
- Acknowledge that individualism is important, but that the healthiest individual is nurtured by a community invested in everyone’s success.
- Propose policies that are universal and targeted. By this we mean, posit a universal goal -- i.e. “everyone graduates from high school” -- but recognize that individuals and schools will need different types of resources to achieve this.

DON’T:

- Don’t present disparities only and then leave them there. (Contextualize them. Explain how they occurred and why they are harmful to everyone in the community.)
- Don’t frame action as robbing Peter to pay Paul. (Grow the entire pie, don’t fight over tiny pieces.)
- Don’t separate out people in need from “everybody else.” (Everyone, at some point in time, needs help from other people.)
- Don’t glide over real fears, shared suffering, or the fact that people are often internally conflicted.
- Don’t dismiss the importance of individual efforts.

CONCLUSION: MOVING FORWARD

Achieving sustainable, positive change amidst inequality and economic instability is a monumental challenge. At the heart of this challenge is a new vision of an inclusive society – inclusive physically, socially, economically and spiritually. Nobel-Prize winning economist Amartya Sen wrote that we must recognize “the relevance of our shared humanity in making the choices we face.” Although we are often enamored of a rugged individualism, perhaps a healthy individualism – one in which the individual is nurtured by a sustainable, robust and diverse community – is a better indicator of a healthy society.

The many faces of poverty—dilapidated schools, sporadic health care, stress, exclusion and increased exposure to crime—force us to recognize that poverty is more than just a lack of money. In policy terms, this means that interventions that aim to expand opportunity for all of our children and families cannot be limited to one domain. The UN has already moved away from an income measure of well-being to a “Human Development Index” that takes into account the ability of people to live healthily and safely, to build knowledge, and to access resources. The challenge for Knoxville is to move forward on all these domains: health, education, and financial stability. As one interview respondent noted,

There is instability in all the youth support systems: home, community, church, school, internal and intrinsic – that we each need to own. Imagine a hand, tightly grasping a child. If one of the ‘fingers’ is not as strong (or missing) but the others are there, we can still hold on to them. The weaker the grasp, the more likely it is that the child will fall away.
The challenges facing Knoxville’s marginalized communities and marginalized children are complex and multi-faceted. The most disadvantaged of Knoxville’s children face a number of obstacles, and many live in communities which lack resources and the critical pathways to opportunity needed to thrive and survive in our society. Despite the depth of these challenges, strategic interventions to affirmatively connect marginalized children to opportunity can produce transformative change in the lives and future of Knoxville’s children. With an eye towards creating opportunity for all, Knoxville residents can begin with smaller, strategic interventions. These initial interventions can bring various groups to the table to define a shared vision of success, mobilize energy around important issues, build trust among diverse people and organizations, and show that change can indeed happen.

The strategies discussed in this report are a starting point, but these solutions alone are not effective without an organized and engaged community to implement them. Political and public will, collaboration, strategically used resources and extensive civic engagement are a critical foundation to implementing strategies to expand opportunity for Knoxville’s marginalized communities and children. Laying this foundation is the critical starting point and represents the crucial first steps in responding to these systemic challenges. The faith-based community is a tremendous resource to facilitate this foundation, working in communities throughout the Knoxville region and fostering collaboration and civic engagement (See Map 5). Responding to this crisis is not just a response to help communities’ most marginalized children, but a critical investment in the future of the region. By providing the necessary support services and pathways to opportunity for marginalized kids living in poverty, the Knoxville community provides an environment where all kids can flourish and reach their full potential.
Appendix: Interview Questions and References

Interview Questions:

1. What would you describe as the key challenges—the obstacles—facing minority communities in Knoxville?
   a. Talk a bit about the culture, what are community struggles and strengths?
2. How would you describe the key challenges facing children in particular, in Knoxville’s distressed communities?
3. What solutions or initiatives would be helpful in addressing these challenges?
4. Are there programs currently being implemented to address these challenges in the communities?
   a. Are they supported?
5. What resources are available within these communities for children and families in poverty?
   a. Are these well-known?
   b. Are they widely available?
6. Knoxville is struggling as a whole; what should Knoxville be doing to move forward?
References:

4 Recently, people in Seattle found that property values, more than income or education levels, were the best predictor of obesity rates, most likely due to the neighborhood presence or absence of grocery stores in safe walking distance with affordable, healthy food.
5 Children can be harmed by racial disparities even before birth. Black and Hispanic women are more than twice as likely to receive late or no prenatal care as White women. (Prenatal care prevents low birth weight that may lead to mental disabilities, vision problems, and neuromuscular disorders.) Racial health disparities seem to be growing, even as mortality rates overall have decreased. In 1950, a Black child was 1.6 times more likely to die before his or her first birthday than a White child; in 2002, they were 2.4 times as likely.
6 In 2005-2006, 56% of Hispanic students attended a school in which at least half of the student population was Hispanic, and nearly 50% of black students attended a majority Black school. Two-thirds of these schools are located in areas of concentrated poverty with very high levels of racial segregation.
9 For schools consisting of 90%-100% Latino or Black students, 87.7% are poor. Students in minority schools are 16.3 times more likely to be enrolled in a school with high concentrations of poverty. See the report by Orfield et al. “Deepening Segregation in American Public Schools: A Special Report from the Harvard Project on School Desegregation.” Equity and Excellence in Education, 30:2 (1997): pages 11-12.
12 Cookson, Clive. “Poverty mars formation of infant brains.” Financial Times.com 2/16/2008. (The biggest negative effects were found on language and memory.)
13 Asthma, for example, is one of the leading causes of school absenteeism. Low-income children and children of color experience higher rates of asthma than affluent, non-White children. US Environmental Protection Agency. May 2005. Managing Asthma in the School Environment. http://www.epa.gov/iaq/schools/managingasthma.html.


Diversitydata.org (rankings by indicator: child poverty by race/ethnicity 1999). http://diversitydata.sph.harvard.edu

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U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2007 and Census 2000

U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2007


In lower-income communities, renter rates are high and housing stock is less stable. As a result, parents are forced to pick up and move frequently, leaving some schools with student mobility rates higher than 100%. Schools scramble to accommodate incoming students, and teachers struggle to teach to raise their student’s achievement levels despite the challenges inherent with near-constant student turnover. Researchers found that in Texas, for example, nearly 15% of the gap between black and white students can be attributed to high rates of mobility. See Hanushek, Eric A., John F. Kain, and Steven G. Rivkin. 2004. “Disruption Versus Tiebout Improvement: The Costs and Benefits of Switching Schools.” *Journal of Public Economics*. 88(9-10, August): 1721-46.

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Children Defense Fund’s Kids County Database, profile for Knox County, TN. Available on-line at: www.kidscount.org

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Comparisons were made between developed nations belonging to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. See Alliance for Excellent Educatoin. How Does the United States Stack Up? International Comparisons of Academic Achievement. March 2008. [www.all4ed.org/files/IntlComp_FactSheet.pdf](http://www.all4ed.org/files/IntlComp_FactSheet.pdf)


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The index measures of life expectancy, literacy, and GDP per capita.