

# Behind the Numbers



Go to pages 5, 27, 29, 33, 59, and 60 for more discussion.

## THE GEOGRAPHY OF OPPORTUNITY

Location. Location. Location. That's what a real estate agent says when naming the three factors that determine the price of a house. "The same could be said about the three 'factors' that determine virtually any aspect of the good life and people's access to it in metropolitan America. Place matters. Neighborhood counts. Access to decent housing, safe neighborhoods, good schools, useful contacts and other benefits is largely influenced by the community in which one is born, raised and currently resides."<sup>1</sup>

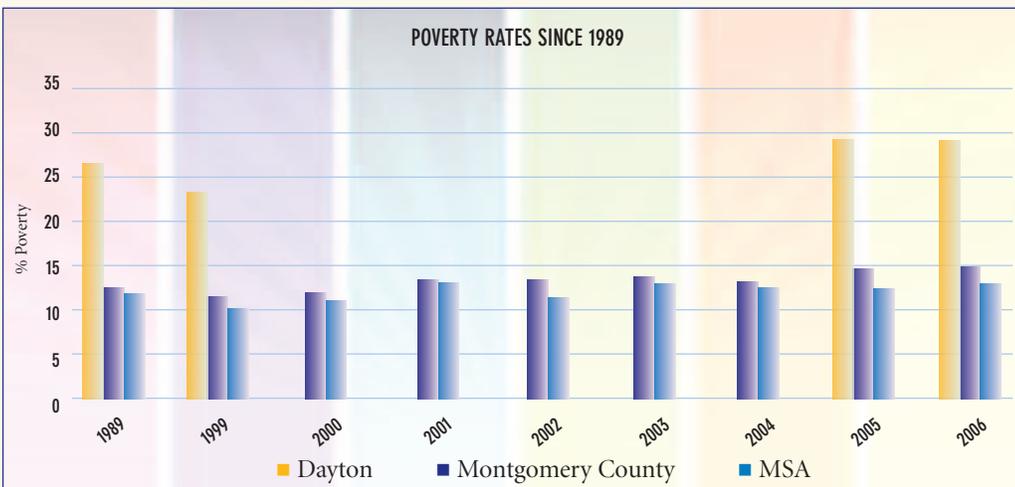
In metropolitan areas such as Dayton and Montgomery County, place is inextricably linked to race and poverty. Race is a defining characteristic of life in America. In last year's Report, the Supportive and Engaged Neighborhoods Outcome Team showed how race has become concentrated in Montgomery County over the last few decades.<sup>2</sup> Demographers have over a dozen ways to calculate measures of residential segregation. One of the most frequently

used measures, the dissimilarity index, when applied to 2000 Census data, reveals that the Dayton Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) was the 25th most segregated MSA in the country out of 331.<sup>3</sup>

Last year's Report, using Census data from 1970 to 2000, also demonstrated how poverty has become concentrated in Dayton and Montgomery County.<sup>2</sup> Since the 2000 Census, the poverty rate has actually edged up. (See Figure 1.) Alarming, Montgomery County's rate has gone from being 9% lower than the national rate in 1999 (the year on which the 2000 Census poverty rates are based) to being 12% higher in 2006. (See Figure 2.)

That poverty and race are significant factors in what some have called the "geography of opportunity" can not be denied. The contours of this geography affect the work of all of the Outcome Teams. To give just three examples:

- <sup>1</sup> Squires, G.D. and Kubrin, C.E. (2005) Privileged Places: Race, Uneven Development and the Geography of Opportunity in Urban America. *Urban Studies*, 42 (1):47-68.
- <sup>2</sup> Montgomery County Family and Children First Council, 2006 Progress Report on Community Outcomes, Indicators and Strategies, p. 53.
- <sup>3</sup> Housing Patterns, U.S. Census Bureau, Housing and Household Economic Statistics Division. [http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/housing/housing\\_patterns/gettable\\_msa.html](http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/housing/housing_patterns/gettable_msa.html). Accessed on Jan. 31, 2008.



**Figure 1.** 1999 was a peak year in the business cycle and is the year on which poverty rates for the 2000 Census are based. Poverty rates for Dayton, Montgomery County and the Dayton Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) have all increased since then. (Census Bureau data; Dayton's poverty rates for the years 2000 – 2004 are not available.)

❁ The Healthy People Outcome Team is responding to the fact that access to health resources varies among neighborhoods, as do various measures of people's health. (See page 5.)

❁ The Stable Families Outcome Team is responding to the fact that poverty—especially chronic poverty—can increase children's exposure to a wide array of other problems. (See page 27.)

❁ The Economic Self-Sufficiency Outcome Team is responding to the fact that ex-offenders are concentrated in neighborhoods already challenged with significant pockets of poverty and high unemployment. (See page 60.)

The FCFC indicator "Avoiding Poverty" is relevant to this discussion of place. This indicator is described elsewhere in this Report (see pages 29 and 33) but briefly a high value for this indicator is good. It means that a high proportion of couples are starting their families under conditions that increase the chances that their children will grow up without experiencing poverty. A look at Figure 3 reveals that this opportunity to give children a fighting chance to avoid poverty is not evenly distributed in our community, just like some of the other things we have considered.

At first glance the implication of this last observation is chilling. Can it really be the case that people born into poor neighborhoods will be forever poor? Are the contours of the

Poverty Rates	1999	2006	% change 1999-2006
Montgomery County	11.3%	14.9%	+ 31.8%
USA	12.4%	13.3%	+ 7.2%

**Figure 2.** Montgomery County's poverty rate has increased dramatically in relation to the national rate since 1999. (1999 data from 2000 Census; 2006 data from American Community Survey.)

geography of opportunity so severe that there is no escape?

Compelling arguments can be made that the answer to these questions does not have to be "Yes." One line of

reasoning, to summarize the thesis of Squires and Rubin, is that existing patterns of uneven metropolitan development are, to a large extent, linked to a complex and interconnected set of decisions – public policy decisions, private institutional and/or market decisions, and decisions made by individual citizens in their roles as homeowners/renters, consumers, employees, and so forth. As such, the potential to reverse those patterns exists if there is sufficient will to "sever the linkages among race, place and privilege."<sup>1</sup>

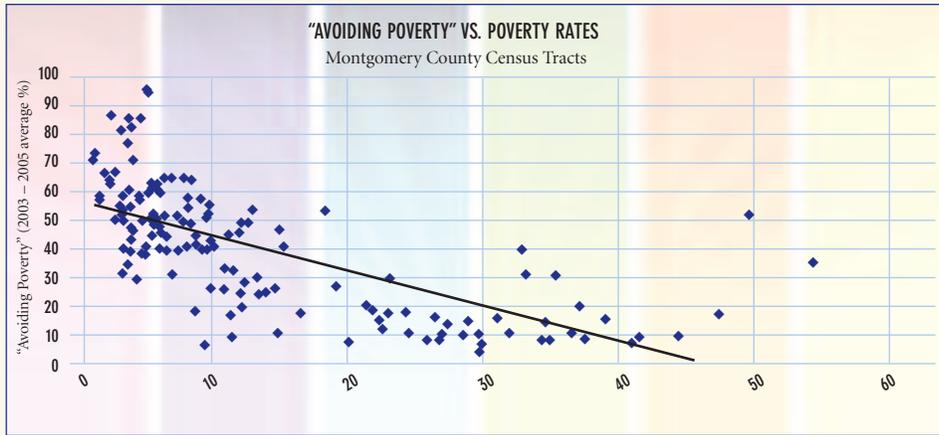
Another line of reasoning can be found in the synthesis done by the (late) research sociologist Ted Bradshaw. He summarizes several decades of theorizing about—and responding to—poverty with hopeful insights. He distills five theories regarding the causes of poverty:<sup>4</sup>

- (1) individual deficiencies;
- (2) cultural belief systems that support subcultures in poverty;
- (3) political-economic distortions;
- (4) geographical disparities; and
- (5) cumulative and circumstantial origins.

While acknowledging that no single theory is sufficient to explain all cases of poverty, his analysis of the theory that poverty is caused by geographical disparities is relevant

because it “directs community developers to look at places and the processes by which (neighborhoods or communities) can become self-sustaining. Interestingly, a few disadvantaged communities around the world are finding their way out of poverty and as such show that it can be done.”

To be successful in helping people achieve self-sufficiency a community development effort must be multi-faceted. This means comprehensive services with lots of support: education (“the most important local institution” in poor communities), employment development, access to healthcare and social



**Figure 3.** For each of Montgomery County’s 145 Census tracts the value of the FCFC indicator “Avoiding Poverty” is plotted against that tract’s poverty rate. Neighborhoods with a high rate of poverty (the dots toward the right) are the very ones where newly starting families lack the characteristics that are associated with successfully avoiding future poverty.

services, and the opportunity to build personal networks and to participate in community programs that increase the ability of neighbors to rely on, to trust, and to care about each other.<sup>4</sup>

Ingredients of a comprehensive community building process include

community visioning, leveraging assets, and building on existing strengths as a way to address the challenges of high poverty neighborhoods. This process is familiar to the FCFC and to its Outcome Teams and can be a source of hope as they tackle this challenge.

<sup>4</sup> Bradshaw, T.K. (2007) Theories of Poverty and Anti-Poverty Programs in Community Development. *Community Development*, 38:7-25.

